TRANSMISSIONS FROM THE BUNKERED:
INSIGHTS INTO EVANGELISM IN A POST-CHRISTIAN ERA
FROM THE SPIRITUAL STORIES OF APATHEIST MEMBERS
OF AN ONLINE COMMUNITY

by
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Abstract

In a Post-Christian era, increasing numbers of people are apathetic to the existence of deity. This project explores the spiritual stories of apatheistic members of an internet community. From their stories, I offer an understanding of evangelism based in community. The church, gathered by the Holy Spirit, is a new household of intentional love and welcome for all whom God gathers to it. Evangelism is not only a practice of the church, but the process by which the Holy Spirit offers an invitation into the loving reign of God as proclaimed by the pilgrim-priests of the gathered church of Christ.

Chapter I:

A Post-Christian Era

Part 1: Introduction

There seems to be little doubt that the state of religion in America, especially the state of the Christian religion, is vastly different in the year 2025 from twenty-five, fifty, or one hundred years ago. Church attendance numbers, steadily shrinking since the 1970s, swiftened their decline in the aftermath of the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. Increasing numbers of people identify themselves with no specific religion or even no belief in deity at all. The religious environment today often is referenced as "Post-Christian"[1], or at the very least increasingly secular. As such, the modern church and its leaders are in the position of responding to a situation that it has not experienced in hundreds of years: a world in which a significant portion of society does not seem to care about it any more. My goal for this paper is to offer a possible response for the church in light of rising apathy about religion, especially Christianity. In this first chapter, I intend to describe the specific question I am researching, how I arrived at this question and its importance to me, and how answering this question will be of help to my pastoral ministry. Following that, I offer a description of the context for this project: an online community which formed around a now-defunct podcast but continues in a biweekly livestream and Discord server. I conclude this chapter by providing an overview of the rest of the paper, summarizing the topics covered in the paper's remaining three chapters.

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1. I discuss what I mean by "Post-Christian" and its connections to secularization and alternative encounters with transcendence in Chapter Two.

In this project, I seek to explore one small aspect of today's Post-Christian era. My research seeks an answer to this question: *What do the spiritual stories shared by apatheistic members of an online community centered around a video-gaming livestream say to the church about its identity as an evangelistic community, especially among people for whom the existence of God is irrelevant to their daily life?* By listening to the stories of people with apatheistic[2] leanings, I expect to find examples of those same people feeling excluded by the Christian church, in part because their questions about God and human life have not been answered in satisfactory or fulfilling ways. I hope to encounter a desire for belonging and purpose, one which the church has not met. In their stories, I also expect to find moments which could be interpreted (through a Christian lens) as the work of the Holy Spirit in their lives, offering them an invitation into the reign of God[3] as lived out by the church. I argue that the work of gathering the church is not primarily the work of the members of the church, but rather is the activity of the Holy Spirit. In response to the stories I heard, I suggest a better way for the church is to view evangelism as part of its identity rather than as a practice. At its core, the church is a community gathered by God to bear witness to a new world inaugurated by the resurrection of Jesus Christ, the reign of God. The church both hopes for the fulfillment of the reign of God and lives out its in-breaking into the present. The church's invitation to enter God's reign is a response to the Holy Spirit's already-present work in the lives of those outside the church, a portion of which is gathering persons into the church. My research will show that understanding evangelism as part of Christian identity, rather than

2. I will define this term more completely in Chapter Two.

3. An explanation for my choice to use "reign of God" in place of "kingdom of God" is presented in Chapter Four, Part One.

a set of practices, respectfully responds to rising apatheism—as Christians bear witness to the reign of God in authentic ways, they offer a desirable alternative community and an encounter with God.

My research question comes from the same community who serves as the question's focus, as well as other interactions with people who do not claim an affiliation with any particular religious group. In these interactions, especially ones in which religion and specifically Christianity were the topic, even those with some level of belief in deity or some other higher power did not express a concern about many of the motivators the church has a tendency to use in evangelistic practice. A message like, "Repent of your sin and be saved!" falls flat—they see no need to change the direction their life is going, do not see themselves as a "sinner" or a "bad person" in need of forgiveness, nor do they see any particular appeal of the salvation that is offered.

When I started in the Missional Leadership Doctor of Ministry program, these thoughts came to mind again. I wondered how the church's understanding of salvation, mission, and evangelism sounds to those who are outside of the church, and I felt unsure if that understanding is effective in a Post-Christian era. At first, my thoughts focused on a congregational context, that of the congregation I was serving as pastor at the time. My original plan for this project was to introduce some kind of practice to the church to shift their focus outward to those in their community rather than being focused inwardly. As I continued to explore these questions of soteriology and missiology, I came to understand that the active agent in missions and evangelism is not the Christian person's practice of evangelism: God is the actor in this work. The role of the Christian person is to create a

space of welcome for those whom God is gathering into the church, even as they live out their own call into the reign of God—evangelism is not just a practice, but is a central part of the church's identity.[4]

In thinking of how to answer these questions of salvation and evangelism, I wondered if attempting to answer them within the church would be the best choice. Certainly much has been written and said within the church about the practice of evangelism, but I had already noticed the ineffectiveness of those practices, at least with regard to this specific community. I realized that the answers to these questions might be better explored by actually talking to people outside of the church about their thoughts on salvation and evangelism. As I already had a strong connection to this community, they seemed to be an excellent environment in which to ask people outside of the church about these questions in order to help the church better respond to a Post-Christian era.

Having decided on the context for my research, I next needed to focus my question into something more manageable. I began with a big idea, "How does one exist as a follower of Jesus in a world in which being a Christian has a negative perception?" As I continued to ponder a research questions, it came to be concentrated around evangelism: How might the church share the good news of Jesus and the reign of God to people who are not interested in what the church offers? As I continued my thinking, I realized that treating evangelism as a specific practice of Christianity might be a part of the disconnect between those inside and outside the church. No one likes to feel objectified, and too often practices of evangelism reduce the target of those practices to someone in need of conversion rather than seeing them as a whole person made in the

4. This discussion is largely the focus of Chapter Four.

image of God. My question now focused on listening to the stories of people outside of the church in hopes of finding an understanding of evangelism which is responsive to the work of God in a Post-Christian era and honors and respects the inherent humanity and autonomy of those outside the church.

This question resonated with me, combining my desire to offer welcome to all people in the reign of God with my concern that the church as it exists today is largely structured to interact with a world that no longer exists. The results of my research will be helpful in leading congregations to respond to the world as it is and the work that God is doing in it, continuing the role of the church as the people whom God has gathered to bear witness to God in its time.

Part 2: Context Description

For this project, I am focusing on a particular group of people who, whether by their own identification or my identification, fit well into this category of apatheism. This is a small, but tightly-knit group of friends collected over almost two decades through various interactions which coalesced around two people: "justSatyr" (usually shortened to "Satyr") and me (using the name "Pastor Recoil").[5] Many members of this community, named "The Bunker" after justSatyr's informal name for his home office and recording studio, met each other through playing online video games together, specifically *World of Warcraft*. Satyr and I first met when our in-game "guilds"[6] merged, and became closer

5. Throughout this paper, I have anonymized all of the participant's names and usernames to protect their privacy. justSatyr's username is the notable exception, which has been kept with his permission because of his particular role in this community.

6. As explained by Robert Geraci, guilds are "a group of players affiliated with one another to assist each other in quests, form the basis of groups for dungeons and raids, to share wealth through a guild bank, and to provide a stream of conversation through a guild chat channel." Robert M. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred: Myth and Meaning in* World of Warcraft *and* Second Life (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 57–58.

when we worked together to create a third, new guild after the merger brought out some latent issues within the prior guilds. The ethics which developed among us while playing that game significantly influenced the current moral rules by which the Bunker functions, especially its informal rule of "Real life comes first," the meaning of which ranges from "Don't play the game if you're supposed to be making dinner" to "If you are struggling, seek out mental health care."

When Satyr and I found ourselves pulled away from *World of Warcraft*, we created a podcast together called *Transmissions from the Bunker*. This podcast ran for seven years, before stopping in 2016. (Part of the legacy of this podcast, in additional to providing the title of this paper, can be found in the name members of this community sometimes call one another: "bunkersluts.") On *Transmissions from the Bunker*, Satyr and I would talk about current events, politics, gaming, and various other topics. Several of the members of our current livestream-based community joined during this podcast era, either by finding us at random or through connections to other podcasts with which we had built relationships. While our public interactions were relatively dormant for several years, during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 Satyr invited me back onto a livestream one evening, which over time became the regular event it is now. The livestream brought other members into the Bunker from associations in the "real world," such as our co-workers, friends, or even family members.

This livestream, and the podcast which preceded it, pairs two individuals who at first glance do not seem like they would be interacting together. I am unabashedly a Christian pastor (as evidenced by both my "Pastor Recoil" username and my avatar: a

stylized portrait created by a community member of me with my clerical collar worn on the outside of my beard for comedic effect.) Satyr, on the other hand, has described himself as a "gnostic agnostic;" he knows that he does not know if a god exists—and has on occasion sought out religions with non-theistic worldviews. The community itself is quite similar demographically. It is predominantly male, and the majority of its members are between the ages of 41 and 55. Most community members have at least some college experience or technical training, with a minority earning a four-year college degree. Members of the community are primarily employed in either technology-related or service-related fields.

The intentional time of community interaction is a biweekly livestream.[7] A typical livestream begins on a Friday evening with audio issues. Even though both of us have a background in live audio reinforcement and studio audio recording, the stream inevitably begins with the viewers unable to hear one or both of us hosts. Several minutes of awkward fumbling follows, as we fix these problems live to the entertainment of our viewers. Once everyone can be seen and heard, the stream proper begins. We start by greeting our viewers, who usually trickle in from their various time zones as they arrive home from work. After the greetings, we often begin by talking about the events of the last two weeks, either in our personal lives or in the world around us. As one might expect, our different backgrounds affect the presentation and discussion. Because of these differences in our personal identifying beliefs, our discussion invites pluralistic understandings and fosters an inclusive environment among our viewers. Through

7. A representative example of one of our livestreams may be found here: *Friday Is for Fantastically Fabricated Faces*, Video (YouTube, 2022), https://youtu.be/EuWs2zeo43c.

YouTube's live chat feature, they join in the discussion and add insights, questions, and jokes. We welcome different perspectives and thoughts, up until the point those perspectives cause harm, lead to the "othering" of fellow humans, or "punch down" on marginalized groups, things Satyr and I both oppose.

These discussions take place over a background of playing video games, talking about pop culture, or any of a number of other seemingly mundane activities. Often members of the community will join us in-game, especially if we are playing a cooperative multiplayer game. The environment created by these more superficial interactions fosters relationships which invite deeper conversations in other situations. Many viewers would prefer not to interact with someone holding Christian faith, let alone a pastor, and if they have had interactions like that before, they are often remembered as negative. The relationship created over years allows room to have "dangerous" conversations, because viewers know I will not judge them harshly for "wrong" beliefs; instead, I will answer their questions as honestly as I can. After several hours of interaction, usually four but sometimes more or less, the stream ends like it begins—awkwardly—as Satyr fumbles to find the "button" to end the stream, and he and I say goodbye several times until one of us is cut off mid-word when the livestream actually ends.

Although the livestream is the main event of this community, it is not its most frequent time of interaction. Most of the community-building and discussion takes place on a Discord server[8] with various channels in which to chat with one another, such "the-

8. More information on what Discord is may be found here: https://discord.com/safety/360044149331-what-is-discord

safe-space" for community members to be honest and vulnerable with the challenges we face, "the-bitching-box" when we feel the need to complain about our jobs or something happening in the world, an announcement channel for things which are relevant to the whole community, and various larger categories for talking about artistic expression, religion and spirituality, and other topics. There is a near-constant conversation going on, often spanning multiple channels, which keep the community connected to one another, where we share things both silly and serious as we help each other navigate our lives together.

While a small community, its already-present valuing of tolerance and its embrace of pluralism makes it a good venue for exploring questions of faith and Christian evangelism. The Bunker reflects the growing number of people with apatheistic attitudes toward belief in America, and comprises members with both theistic and atheistic beliefs. My relationship with this community, and the trust built over fifteen years, lends itself to participants' willingness to answer honestly, knowing that I am not there to convert them to Christianity. Instead, they have already expressed excitement about the possibility of exploring an understanding of evangelism which does not treat them as "lesser" for not believing the "right things" in the "right ways."

Part 3: Project Overview

This paper will be structured in five chapters. Chapter One, provided an introduction to both the paper and the general context I am exploring in it. The next chapter, Chapter Two, describes our current situation of "Post-Christianity," with increasing apathy towards theism in America leading to the development of a new

categorization in addition to “theism” and “atheism,” that of “apatheism.” In Part Two of this discussion, I begin with the work of Charles Taylor, to explore the decline in religious belief which Ryan Burge notes in his study of religious statistics. Taylor argues that Western culture has developed a way of looking at the world which is “disenchanted,” focusing on the things we can see and explain (the immanent) and limiting our interactions with the things we cannot (the transcendent). Responding to Taylor, William Cavanaugh in *The Uses of Idolatry* suggests that rather than a “disenchantment,” a Post-Christian era is “misenchanted.” Cavanaugh sees a shift of what things a person considers sacred and suggests that the encounters with transcendence are still present, but they do not fit neatly into categories of religious or secular. Through the work of Robert Geraci and Budimir Milenko I will continue to explore these encounters with transcendence, and the optionality of belief present in a Post-Christian era.

In Chapter Three, I present the research I performed within the community I described in Chapter One, a community representative of the Post-Christianity discussed in Chapter Two. Part One of this chapter offers a general overview of my research methodology. I explain my reasoning for choosing this particular community to explore apatheism as well as why I selected the research methodology I used for this project. I am using a narrative inquiry method based in large part on the work of Nancy Ammerman in her book, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*, as well as the work of Jean Clanindin and Michael Connelly. Part Two describes this methodology and explains the steps I took to perform my research. I describe the interviews I performed to complete this research, and

the techniques and sensitizing concepts I used to code and analyze the data produced through the interviews. The results of these interviews offer an important message to the church about its identity, one that I explore theologically in Chapter Four and present in a more practical way in Chapter Five.

Chapter Four argues for a community-based understanding of the church and evangelism as a part of the interactions along the edge of the church with the world. I begin with the assertion that the church is the gathered people of God who bear witness to the reign of God as a new household of faith, and Christian evangelism is the intentional acts which invite persons into the reign of God. This perspective on evangelism focuses on the activity of God, and seeks to treat apatheists as fellow humans on a journey rather than as objects to be converted, even while offering an invitation into the alternative community formed to proclaim the reign of God in the world: the church. I propose that evangelism is not a practice of the Christian church, but is part of its identity. This section will clarify my understanding of what the reign of God is, describe the church as a gathered community by work of the Holy Spirit, and restate the centrality of a lovingly invitational posture to the church's identity. Part Two of this chapter looks backwards to Scripture and the early church, describing the Christian life and evangelism in a Pre-Christian era, as the first Christians responded to the work of God they experienced in Jesus' ministry, death, resurrection, and ascension. Then, I briefly share some of the major changes in the time of Christendom, journeying forward into the modern era. Part Three returns to the increasingly Post-Christian present, combing the theological reflection from Part One and the historical examples of Part Two to suggest a way

forward for the church—a new understanding of who the church is as it bears witness to the reign of God in this Post-Christian era.

Chapter Five offers a reflection on the project itself before more clearly connecting the theoretical understanding of evangelism I offer in Chapter Four with the results of my research in Chapter Three. Here I suggest that the work of the church in a Post-Christian era is to be who it is: the gathered people of God who bear witness to the inbreaking reign of God. This chapter reflects on my hypothesis, that evangelism is an invitational response by the church to the Holy Spirit's gathering work, in light of the research findings. I offer insight into how I was correct in my assumptions while also confronting those aspects in which I was wrong. I conclude this paper with some practical suggestions for fostering an evangelistic Christian identity in a Post-Christian era, especially with regard to apatheists, which lovingly respects the boundaries of those who are outside of the Christian church while also offering an invitation into the reign of God by the Holy Spirit through the church.

Chapter II:

Apatheism and the Secular

Part 1: Post-Christianity

One of the significant assumptions which underlie this project is that the Western world is entering a Post-Christian era. This differs from the "Pre-Christian" era, in which the Christian narrative is not well-known, or the "Christendom" era, in which the Christian narrative is presumed as the default of society. Rather, Post-Christianity is characterized by the Christian narrative being both familiar but also largely ignored. Edwin van Driel writes of our Post-Christian era, "It is not only that the culture no longer supports the church, but that the Christian faith is simply losing its relevance and plausibility for a growing group of people in our society."[9] While in Christendom, belief in the Christian God was assumed; in Post-Christianity, unbelief is, if not assumed, often more palatable than belief.

While I grant that our culture is not yet entirely Post-Christian, especially given the outsized influence of Christianity in American politics and government, increasing secularization among residents of the United States is hard to ignore.[10] There is significant evidence from polling for this increased secularization. Ryan Burge, a pastor and social scientist, has performed extensive research on the people he calls the "nones" or "nothing in particulars"—a fast-growing group of people who report no religious

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9. Edwin Chr. van Driel, "Rethinking Church in a Post-Christian Age," in *What Is Jesus Doing?: God's Activity in the Life and Work of the Church*, ed. Edwin Chr. van Driel (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2020), 47–48.

10. David A. Hollinger, *Christianity's American Fate: How Religion Became More Conservative and Society More Secular* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2024), xi.

affiliation. In his work, *The Nones*, Burge uses data from the General Social Survey through 2021 to present a snapshot of the religious landscape of the United States over time. Between 1978 and 2018, Burge notes a significant change: the number of people who report a mainline protestant affiliation and who report no religious affiliation have effectively swapped their share of American adherents.[11] While making up 31 percent of the American population in 1976, by 2016 mainline protestants had shrunk to only 10 percent of the population.[12] Similarly, those with no affiliation rose rapidly, from 6 percent in 1991[13] to 28 percent in 2021.[14] This survey data shows a distinct change in those fifty years, when the question "What church do you attend?" might have been as frequent as "Where do you work?" Instead, a quarter of Americans shared that religion has no importance in their lives.[15]

One might assume from this data that the rise of those with no religious affiliation corresponds with a similar rise in those who identify as atheists, but Burge's data does not support that conclusion. Burge finds the most representative group is not those who self-select atheist or even agnostic for their religious beliefs, but those who identify as "nothing in particular." He writes, "Nothing in particulars are the definition of the nonreligious and they also happen to be one of the largest religious groups in the United States… In the general American population, nearly one in four Americans is a nothing in

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11. Ryan P. Burge, *The Nones: Where They Came from, Who They Are, and Where They Are Going*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2023), 13, fig. 1.1.

12. Burge, 18.

13. Burge, 26, fig. 1.8.

14. Burge, 155.

15. Burge, 168, fig. 5.9.

particular."[16] As Burge describes earlier, "These are people that just don't feel strongly about religion one way or another."[17] Burge's nothing in particulars as a category of people are defined in light of their lack of attention to religious particularity and are not interested in those things which interest religions and religious people. When it comes to belief, they are simply apathetic.

Jonathan Rauch, writing about this state of general disinterest in religion along with his own apathy about the religion in which he was raised, popularized the term "apatheism" (a portmanteau of "apathy" and "theist") in a 2003 article for *The Atlantic*. Rauch describes his own apatheism as "a disinclination to care all that much about one's own religion, and an even stronger disinclination to care about other people's."[18] Rauch views apatheism through the lens of tolerance; for Rauch, it is the logical next step for living in a pluralistic world. While tolerance and an embrace of pluralism are features of apatheism, it is also growing into a distinct philosophical position on its own, though one that is only recently being explored.

Continuing to explore this concept of apatheism, Trevor Hedberg and Jordan Huzarevich write with regard to what they call "existence questions," which they abbreviate as "EQs." Existence questions are those which explore if or not God exists, how we know God does or does not exist, and so forth. Hedberg and Huzarevich describe apatheism as a philosophical position with two key features, both of which express disinterest in the answers to existence questions:

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16. Burge, 114–15.

17. Burge, 114.

18. Jonathan Rauch, "Let It Be," *The Atlantic*, May 2003, https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2003/05/let-it-be/302726/.

> First, as the name suggests, apatheism refers to an attitude of apathy toward God and supernatural beliefs. An apatheist is not particularly concerned about whether her answers to EQs are correct. Second, apatheism is distinct from theism, atheism, and agnosticism. A theist believes that God exists; an atheist believes that God does not exist; an agnostic believes that we cannot know whether God exists; an apatheist believes that we should not care whether God exists. Apatheism is orthogonal to these other positions: whether one is a theist, atheist, or agnostic does not logically entail that one must be an apatheist or an anti-apatheist.[19]

Apatheism is not a separate category of belief from atheism, agnosticism, or theism, but is best understood as an additional descriptor in understanding a person's belief. An apatheist might continue to believe in a god or gods, or might not, but what makes them apatheistic is their holding those beliefs or lack of beliefs weakly enough to not identify themselves with any particular position. This is reminiscent of Burge's description of the nothing in particulars, and I would suspect a good deal of overlap between them and apatheists, though this connection invites further exploration. Apatheism is another way to describe the growing number of people in a Post-Christian era who do not neatly fit into Christendom era categories.

Hedberg and Huzarevich focus on a particular subcategory of apatheists they call "practical apatheists," the same category of people this paper interacts with. These are people who may entertain a conversation about the existence of god or think deeply about deity at times, but it does not affect the way they live their life. Hedberg and Huzarevich describe the practical form of apatheism as distinct from an intellectual form: "Practical apatheism is an attitude of apathy or indifference toward EQs grounded in the belief that their answers lack practical significance. Intellectual apatheism is an attitude of apathy or indifference toward EQs grounded in the belief that there are no compelling intellectual

19. Trevor Hedberg and Jordan Huzarevich, "Appraising Objections to Practical Apatheism," *Philosophia* 45 (March 2017): 259, https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-016-9759-y.

reasons to investigate EQs."[20] Hedberg and Huzarevich are not focused on an apatheism which considers existence questions as a philosophical exercise, but rather the way a person's apatheism is lived out. This is an important distinction, especially with regard to a Post-Christian era. A person could find philosophical discussions of the existence of deity both important and compelling, even as they see the answers to those questions as having no practical expression. Alternatively, a person could quite easily believe in the existence of deity, or even be confident that a god or gods exist, but if that belief has little practical effect on their lives they would find themselves in a category of apatheistic theism.

Adam Kunz continues Hedberg and Huzarevich's description of apatheism in very practical terms, offering a more functional definition: "Apatheism is the philosophical attitude of indifference and reciprocity, both public and private, to (1) the question of the existence of a deity, (2) the interaction of the deity with the universe, and/or (3) the value of loyalty to that deity."[21] Kunz expands on Hedberg and Huzarevich's description of apatheism as distinct from belief. In Kunz's definition, one's belief is the answer to the question, "Do you believe in god?" and one's attitude is answering the question, "How much energy do you dedicate to this belief?"[22] To visualize this idea, Kunz created a chart with two axes, belief and attitude. He uses the belief aspect, from atheism to theism with agnosticism in the middle, as the horizontal axis and the attitude aspect, from zealotry,

20. Hedberg and Huzarevich, 260.

21. Adam Kunz, *To Hell with Heaven: An Introduction to Apatheism* (United Kingdom: Hypatia Press, 2024), 34.

22. Kunz, 53–54.

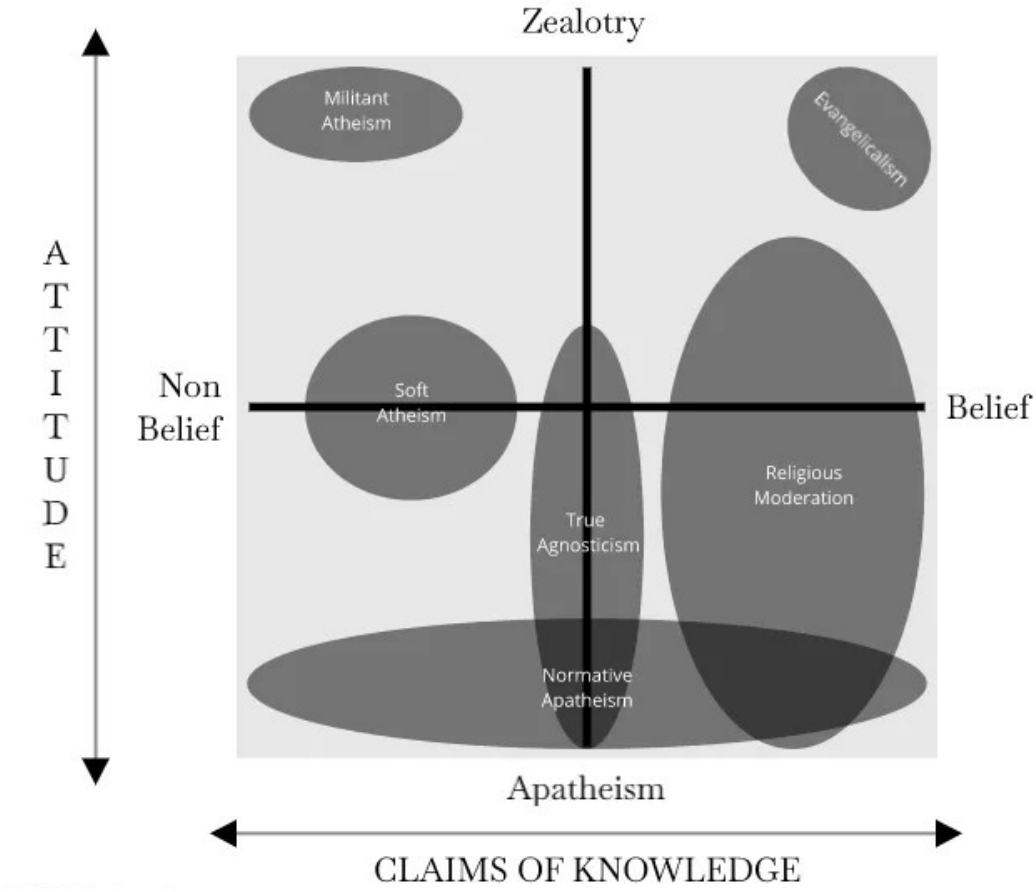

Figure 1. Visualization of apatheism and its relationship to belief. Illustration by Adam Kunz, *To Hell with Heaven: An Introduction to Apatheism* (United Kingdom: Hypatia Press, 2024), 56, fig. 2. "A two-dimensional spectrum of knowledge claims about and attitudes toward deity."

defined as "an attitude of exclusionary intensity with regard to religious beliefs,"[23] to apatheism, on the vertical axis. I have included Kunz's visualization as Figure 1.

I find the concept of apatheism to be a useful one in understanding a Post-Christian era. While all generalizations have their downsides, a model which covers both beliefs and attitudes about belief is helpful for Christians to better respond to the realities of a time in which one in four Americans have sufficient apathy about religious belief that

23. Kunz, 60.

they self-report no particular religious affiliation. While so far I have described the situation facing the church in a Post-Christian era, the question remains: what does this mean for how people experience a transcendent God? In the next section, I explore this question through interactions with the works of Charles Taylor and William Cavanaugh, to seek out how people living in a Post-Christian era encounter things which are beyond themselves, including deity, and how that differs from prior eras.

Part 2: Transcendences

The decline of religious participation in the United States of America is a representation of a greater shift in the way Western culture encounters transcendence. There is a significant increase in those whom Ryan Burge calls "nothing in particulars" and a coincident rise in apathetic attitudes towards religious belief. This section explores the background for rising apatheism in Western culture in general and American culture in particular. I suggest that, in a Post-Christian era, encounters with transcendence have developed an optionality which was implausible in prior eras: the Christian God is but one choice among many transcendent experiences. In this midst of this discussion, I will also describe a framework for understanding different encounters with transcendence, one that is helpful in understanding the ways people in this secular age connect with something larger than themselves.

First, I should offer a working definition for how I am using the terms "transcendence" or "transcendent." In its most straightforward way, something transcendent is outside of human knowledge or experience. An encounter with transcendence exists beyond what Charles Taylor describes as the "immanent frame:" the

rational and natural social space which defines the current world and denies the supernatural and transcendent.[24] In this section, I will explore the Post-Christian experience of transcendence that does not necessarily connect to the Christian God, yet hold distinct meaning for those who experience these transcendences.

Charles Taylor, in his comprehensive work, *A Secular Age*, explores what it means to believe in something larger than oneself in a world that imagines little more than what is in front of one's face. He summarizes his own work as answering the question: "Why was it virtually impossible not to believe in God in, say, 1500 in our Western society, while in 2000 many of us find this not only easy, but even inescapable?"[25] In providing his answer, Taylor develops the term "social imaginary," summarized by James K. A. Smith as "a way of constructing meaning and significance without any reference to the divine or transcendence."[26] The social imaginary is what Taylor is exploring, clarifying those assumptions about the world which most of us in 21st Century Western culture hold but rarely think about.

Taylor begins by describing the makeup of the "1500s" world as an "enchanted" one. People understood that the Christian God was active and involved in the events of the world. In this "medieval imaginary"[27], people assumed God was present in the structures and systems which constitute human society and there were other supernatural forces like spirits and demons which were also present and active in the world. Taylor,

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24. Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 542.

25. Taylor, 25.

26. James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 26.

27. Smith, 27.

however, is less concerned with the actual beliefs of the people of that (and this) age, instead focusing on the believability of an alternative. How possible is it to not believe in the prevailing imaginary? He tells a story of "disenchantment," not as a growth from naivety to wisdom, but as a shift from the medieval imaginary to a modern social imaginary which prefers what is immanent to what is transcendent—a world in which supernatural experiences are discounted in favor of what appears natural.

A significant part of Taylor's framework is the shifting meaning of the word "secular" and the differing ways Western culture understands what it means to be secular. The first secularity Taylor describes, notated as "secular$_1$", is that of the medieval period, in which secular meant "in the world" as opposed to "apart from the world." James Smith summarizes Taylor's thoughts in this way: "The priest, for instance, pursues a 'sacred' vocation, while the butcher, baker, and candlestick maker are engaged in 'secular' pursuits."[28] God is not absent from the butcher's profession; a secular$_1$ understanding is the butcher's work is more involved with the world than that of the priest. This may also be seen in the idea of "secular" priests who served in local parishes as a separate category from "religious" priests who were cloistered in monasteries.

What Taylor calls "secular$_2$" is our more familiar understanding, which refers to something both outside of and separate from the Christian church in particular or any religion in general. In a secular$_2$ understanding, God is now meant to be absent from "public" spaces like government or the butcher shop; God belongs in religious environments alone. Smith alludes to people with no religious affiliation as seeing themselves as secular; he also uses the examples of public, secular schools that do not

28. Smith, 20–21.

encourage belief in a particular religion like parochial schools do.[29] A secular$_2$ definition informs the separation of church and state in the United States: the government, as a secular institution, should not exert influence over churches which exist in the religious sphere.

The third secularity, "secular$_3$", is the one Taylor means in his title, *A Secular Age*. Quoting Smith's summary, "A society is secular$_3$ insofar as religious belief or belief in God is understood to be one option among others, and thus contestable (and contested). At issue here is a shift in the 'conditions of belief.'"[30] In secular$_3$, the social imaginary is situated fully within the immanent frame rather than encounters with transcendence. Though Taylor does not use the term "Post-Christian", this is how Taylor might identify Post-Christianity: an era in which belief in the Christian God is one option among many, one choice on a menu of innumerable options of belief. The existence of the Christian God is no more certain than the claims of any other religion or the claim the there is no transcendent god at all.

The centrality of the immanent frame in secular$_3$ leads to conflicts, though not only a two-sided conflict between those who encounter transcendence and those who do not. Instead, it is a three-way conflict between those who are open to transcendence (Beyonders) and two different expressions within the immanent frame, Exclusive Humanism and Antihumanism. These expressions may be visualized as corners of a triangle, on which movement is possible along the edges of the triangle, as shown in Figure 2.

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29. Smith, 21.

30. Smith, 21–22.

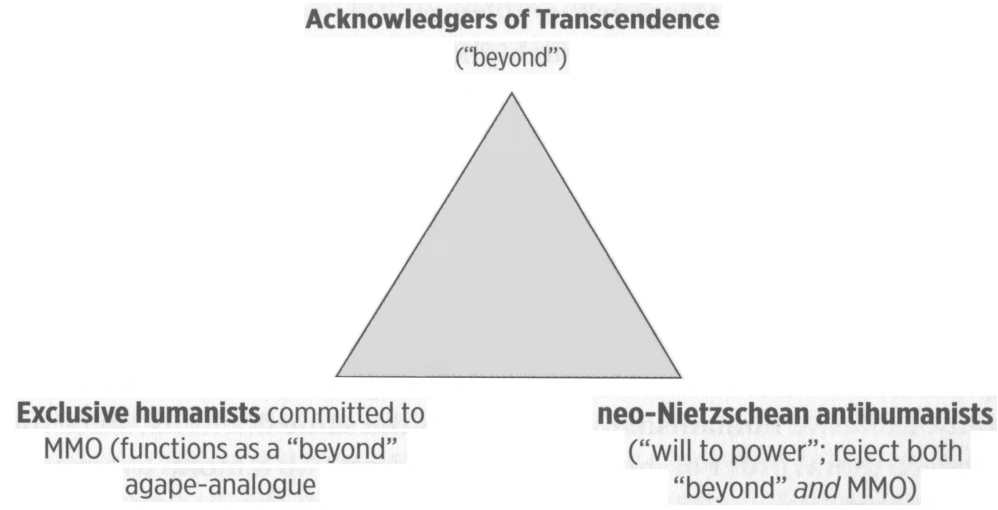

Figure 2. The Taylorian triangle. Illustration by James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 111, fig. 4. "Poles of the counter-Enlightenment."

Andrew Root summarizes Taylor's perspective on these various corners in idealized but helpful ways, while also connecting them to understandings of transcendence present in the work of William Desmond. Root uses the term "mysticisms" to refer to the three corners of this triangle. Root says of the Exclusive Humanists, in the bottom-left corner of the triangle, they are deeply committed to human flourishing and that all human flourishing is worked out by humans. They reject anything that offers a life beyond death (namely the Beyonders, whom Root describes last of these three), seeing anything outside of the immanent as an attempt to draw attention away from human flourishing by offering alternatives the Exclusive Humanists consider non-essential.[31] They are committed to what Taylor calls the "modern moral order," described

31. Andrew Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms: Why Spiritualities Without God Fail to Transform Us* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2023), 86–87.

by Smith as an understanding of morality which focuses on mutual benefit rather than any commitment to a transcendence.[32] To ensure the flourishing of all, society must be tolerant and accepting of whatever each person needs to flourish. Exclusive Humanism is motivated by a mysticism of *inner genius*, which Root describes as "a mysticism that believes that the fullness of flourishing is internal acceptance of your desires as your identity."[33] A person finds their identity and purpose inside of themselves, and on finding it, that identity and purpose should be respected and encouraged by everyone else.

The second corner, in the bottom-right, are those whom Root calls the "Counter-Enlightenment" and Taylor calls "Antihumanists." They reject the Exclusive Humanist support of the modern moral order, and a significant aspect of the Antihumanist identity is connected to this rejection. Root describes Antihumanists as agreeing with the Exclusive Humanists that there is nothing beyond death, but they rejects Exclusive Humanism's commitment to the modern moral order and the tolerance and pluralism inherent to it. For the Antihumanist, the modern moral order is not beneficial; it is seen as a tool for control to keep the strong from being strong and prevents heroes from being heroic.[34] This leads to the mysticism which motivates the Antihumanists, *external heroic action*. Root explains, "To embrace your power to reject what the lemmings are doing and lay hold of your own destiny leads to transcendent euphoria."[35] Decisive individual

32. Smith, *How (Not) to Be Secular*, 142.

33. Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms*, 108.

34. Root, 90.

35. Root, 107.

action which rejects the perceived "norms" of modern moral order is the ideal of Antihumanism.

The final corner of this triangle, at the top, is the Beyonders, who claim that there is something more to life than only human flourishing (frustrating the Exclusive Humanists) and that there is something beyond death (frustrating the Antihumanists and the Exclusive Humanists). According to Root, the mystical motivation of the Beyonders is an encounter with something outside of the self which breaks into and upon the self, the transcendent God. This puts Beyonders in conflict with both Exclusive Humanists and the Antihumanists. For the Beyonders,

> The mystical path is to surrender and stop all performances by confessing the need for the inbreaking encounter with true otherness… This Beyonder mystical path is still walked but not with the traffic of the other two, because it is the path that cannot be walked without an encounter with the living God of becoming. This form of mysticism cannot be done without God, for it must surrender to the fact that the performing self cannot save itself.[36]

In Root's explanation of this triangular conflict of worldviews, the Beyonders interact with transcendence through a mysticism of *inbreaking*, and with it an openness to surrender themselves to something outside of human control. Exclusive Humanists are only interested in immanent human flourishing through the modern moral order, and thus reject any understanding of transcendence beyond that flourishing. The Antihumanist rejects that particular moral order, while remaining solely focused on the immanent frame, also rejecting the transcendence of the Beyonders.

Yet even the Beyonders are affected by the social imaginary of a secular$_3$ age. Taylor highlights the shift of religious experience away from poetic expressions of the

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36. Root, 111.

transcendent to a prosaic application to the immanent frame.[37] In the modern social imaginary, "all order, all meaning comes from us… A race of humans has arisen which has managed to experience its world entirely as immanent."[38] Referring back to the triangle, the Beyonders find themselves pulled, as if by the gravity of the modern social imaginary, away from any inbreaking from beyond the immanent frame towards either of the other corners of the triangle. Root uses the example of American Protestantism in the last century to emphasize this pull:

> Some Protestants became modernists in the 1920s, sliding down and linking up with the E.Hums [Exclusive Humanists]. Their core tenants were as bound in exclusive humanism as they were bound in the sacred tradition. In the 2020s, some Protestants have slid down the other side of the triangle, linking arms with right-wing CEs [Antihumanists/Counter-Enlightenment]. The core of their faith is as much a heroic nationalism as anything else.[39]

In the modern social imaginary, the immanent frame's centrality leaves little room for transcendence. Taylor is firm in this assertion. Andrew Root's description of the motivations of the Exclusive Humanists and Antihumanists follows Taylor, carefully avoiding transcendence by using the term "mysticism" in its place, except when he refers to Desmond's work. In doing so Root stays in Taylor's $secular_3$ framework that the Beyonders are the only ones who choose to experience transcendence. This avoidance raises its own question: is the world completely disenchanted or is there something that Taylor (along with Smith and Root following him) misses in his analysis of the Post-Christian era? I believe there is, as is discussed in the work of William Cavanaugh.

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37. Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 615.

38. Taylor, 376.

39. Root, *The Church in an Age of Secular Mysticisms*, 95.

Cavanaugh, in his book *The Uses of Idolatry*, argues the point that Root dances around: the key feature of the Post-Christian[40] era is not that people no longer connect with any transcendence; instead there has been a change in what transcendences people connect with. The Post-Christian era is not defined by disenchantment and the implausibility of transcendence, as Taylor argues, but by "misenchantment." Cavanaugh agrees with Taylor that Post-Christianity's key feature is optionality, that a transcendent encounter with the Christian God is one choice among many others. Where Taylor sees a disappearance of experiences of transcendence, Cavanaugh sees a shift in those experiences. He writes, "The holy in this case has not simply disappeared from things but has migrated to other kinds of things and taken on different modalities."[41] Cavanaugh goes on to name the primary aspect of his critique of Taylor:

> What has declined in the modern West is not belief in transcendence; what has declined is belief in God. But if Taylor is right that humans have an inherent desire for God, then those longings will appear in all kinds of places, including rock concerts and consumer goods, even if they are misrecognized as such.[42]

For Cavanaugh, Post-Christianity is characterized by people seeking transcendence away from religion, specifically the Christian religion, which is the point Root devotes significant effort to avoid making in his own analysis of Taylor.

To explore this misenchantment, Cavanaugh uses the lens of idolatry, "that human beings are spontaneously worshiping creatures whose devotion alights on all sorts of created things that are not God"[43] and that human worship of these created things is at its

40. Cavanaugh does not use the term "Post-Christian" in his discussion of misenchantment. I am choosing to use Post-Christian for the sake of consistency within this paper.

41. William T. Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2024), 88.

42. Cavanaugh, 93–94.

43. Cavanaugh, 103.

core an exercise in narcissism. This worship of self rather than worship of God connects back to Taylor's triangle, and even gives it renewed usability. The Exclusive Humanists and Antihumanists continue their focus on the self. In their misenchantment, their object of worship is not God, but is either the modern moral order which promotes their own flourishing or the exercise of power. Despite this, through their inner genius in the case of the Exclusive Humanists or heroic action for the Antihumanists, they encounter a kind of transcendence. Even the Beyonders are not exempted; in the experience of God through the modern social imaginary, they create an image of god as a mirror to themselves and the transcendences they connect with, little different from the physical idols of the past.

Cavanaugh offers two overarching examples of the kinds of misenchantment present in Post-Christianity: nationalism and consumerism. In each, he shows the migration of encounters with transcendence from God to something else. In nationalism, as the church's own power declined, the state became the sacred thing to be worshiped. In consumerism, brand loyalty replaced religious identity and trips to Disneyland replaced pilgrimages. Things that once were holy became profane; things that once were secular became sacred.[44]

This is what characterizes Post-Christianity: rather than vanishing from the modern social imaginary, encounters with transcendence occur more frequently outside of their former realm of religion. For Cavanaugh, this misenchantment is idolatrous, as humans shift from worshiping the creator to worshiping something created. In Cavanaugh's response to misenchantment, however, I see a possible point of connection with apatheists. For Cavanaugh, the answer to idolatrous misenchantment is

44. Cavanaugh, 292.

"simultaneously to see God in things and not to make a god of things,"[45] which he proposes is based in Jesus' incarnation, as deity came to be with creation.[46] Though Cavanaugh builds to the sacraments as the means to encounter God, especially the seven-fold sacraments of Roman Catholicism, in making his argument he detours through a discussion of icons and their distinction from idols. He explains that icons are a visible representation of something invisible, not unlike the Incarnation itself. He writes, "The icon thus inverts the mirroring effect of the idol. Whereas the idol is a mirror that reflects back to us our own desires, in the icon we encounter its desires, or rather the desires of God's gaze that come from beyond it."[47] What makes something an icon or an idol is, fundamentally, its viewer and their willingness to surrender to inbreaking transcendence. Cavanaugh continues, "An image is iconic if the person encounters God through it, if it reveals its relation to God, and the person receives that gift and enters into communion with God."[48] Whether a particular transcendence is idolatrous or iconic, one might say, is determined by the attitude of the person encountering it.

This is where I find a connection with apatheism. Apatheists still encounter transcendence, though usually not an inbreaking, divine kind. Milenko Budimir, writing on apatheism, says of these encounters,

> I believe it points to a fundamental shift away from passion for one kind of thing, i.e., passion for religion and the beliefs that stand behind it and the world it represents, and toward passion for things such as products and product brands, the staples of market economies which are the results of free market capitalism and

45. Cavanaugh, 334.

46. Cavanaugh's argument here connects with the work of Samuel Wells that forms a portion of my own argument in Chapter Four.

47. Cavanaugh, *The Uses of Idolatry*, 360.

48. Cavanaugh, 364.

> liberal democratic institutions. Or toward sporting teams and countries which are inevitably bound up with nationalism, ethnocentrism, and with a certain mild form of provincialism.[49]

Budimir sees a very similar shift as Cavanaugh, with passion (or zealotry) about religion shifting to consumerism, nationalism, athletics, or any of a number of other options. What Budimir does not do is connect this shift in passions to encounters with transcendence. He focuses solely on this shift of passion, though his description is similar to the way I have been using transcendence. Cavanaugh would likely see these connections as idolatrous, and yet in them I see the potential to serve as icons. To further this exploration, I look to another example, one that has significance both to myself and the members of the Bunker: the 2004 massively multiplayer online role playing video game, *World of Warcraft*.

In the book *Virtually Sacred*, Robert Geraci explores encounters with transcendence in two online video games, *World of Warcraft* and *Second Life*, though I will focus on his treatment of *World of Warcraft*. Geraci argues that through experiences within the games, players connect with something beyond themselves. Taylor's triangle is useful for identifying some of these connections, recognizing them as a kind of transcendence as understood by Cavanaugh. In one sense, players connect to the Antihumanist transcendence of heroic action: "Every player has the opportunity to *become* a warrior-saint struggling to defend the community and rise above the limits of mortal life."[50] Through their character, the player takes control by defeating the status quo of the world of the game. In another sense, players' social interactions allude to an

49. Milenko Budimir, "Apatheism: The New Face of Religion?," *Proceedings of the XXII World Congress of Philosophy* 45 (2008): 90, https://doi.org/10.5840/wcp22200845254.

50. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred*, 17. Emphasis in original.

Exclusive Humanist transcendence of inner genius. Each character the player creates has an "identity," based around variables such as race, class, and role; and each of those characteristics have value to the gameplay. Flourishing in this context is progressing through the game's content, and each class and role has inherent value in promoting that flourishing, especially as the player grows in realizing their "identity" as their class and role describe. This leads to a complex set of internal ethics, not unlike the modern moral order, which assist in game progression, especially among the more serious guilds.[51] Geraci describes a digital world that is a vehicle for encountering the transcendent in ways that were once accessed through the realm of religion.[52] There even is an aspect of inbreaking, as the player chooses to surrender themselves to the narrative and rules of the game-world itself; rather than deity, the Beyond they encounter is intentional game design.

Transcendent encounters like those in *World of Warcraft* might serve as a gateway to an openness to the inbreaking transcendence of God. Whether those connections act as idols or icons, to use Cavanaugh's distinction, depends on the one who encounters it. Certainly, the "in-game moral order" or the thrill of defeating the latest virtual enemy can be as much of an idol as the modern moral order or strong heroic action, yet one could also see something of God in them. In the modern social imaginary with its disinclination to look beyond the immanent frame, these transcendent encounters foster a broadening of the plausibility of encounters with other transcendences, preparing the way to experience a transcendent God.

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51. Geraci, 39–40.

52. Geraci, 99.

This exploration of encounters with transcendence in a Post-Christian era serves to describe the conditions in which the Christian church today exists. Encounters with something larger than oneself are no longer contained within the sphere of religions. In the Western world this means that Christianity no longer has an exclusive claim on transcendent experiences. Instead, we experience the world in a social imaginary through which people are finding meaning, purpose, and transcendence without any connection to God. People are increasingly apathetic about the claims of Christians to God's existence. This is the environment in which we find ourselves and which this project explores. How might the church respond in a Post-Christian era? To answer that question, I sought those outside of the church, inviting them to share their spiritual stories and experiences with Christians. The results of that exploration are contained in the next chapter, as I ask how the church might best bear witness to the reign of God when belief in God is one option among many.

Chapter III:

Listening to Spiritual Stories

This project explores the question: *What do the spiritual stories shared by apatheistic members of an online community centered around a video-gaming livestream say to the church about its identity as an evangelistic community, especially among people for whom the existence of God is irrelevant to their daily life?* As I was thinking about this project, I took an interest in questions connected to what it means to be the church in an increasingly Post-Christian era. I am specifically exploring the church's possible responses to increasing apathy about religion in general and Christianity in particular, especially with regard to the church's posture to and understanding of evangelism. How does the church authentically bear witness to the reign of God in ways that are authentic and honest without acting inhospitably toward the person with whom we are interacting?

In order to pursue an answer to my research question, I reached out to an online community I participate in whose members are apatheistic; they are not particularly interested in the existence of God, nor does it strongly affect their daily life. Even the members of this community who lean toward theism hold their beliefs about God somewhat loosely. Through interviews, I listened to the stories of their experiences with Christians, finding that while many participants find the expressions of Christianity they encountered unappealing, the descriptions they offered of an ideal community resemble the kind of community Christians are called to be. My research suggests that the Christian church's next most faithful response in this Post-Christian era is to be an

authentic community, bearing witness to the reign of God as a place of belonging to all people.[53]

Part 1: Overview

As I was working toward what became my research question, I felt drawn to finding its answer through this community even before I consciously decided to reach out to them.[54] I admit it took longer than it should have for me to realize that if I am going to explore evangelism in an increasingly Post-Christian era, it would be beneficial to listen to people whose lives and beliefs are more typical of Post-Christianity, rather than asking Christians what they assumed people with an apatheistic attitude towards belief are thinking. As I read popular works on evangelism in our contemporary era, it seemed as though the people outside the church are rarely consulted when it comes to the strategies and tactics Christians want to use on them for their conversion. In this project, I wanted to center their stories, and the Bunker offered several advantages for these conversations. Most significantly the relationships and trust that built over years between the other members of the community and myself created a space for an open conversation. The Bunker's members knew from personal experience that I cared for and respected them, and I would listen to their stories with the intention of learning from them.

The members of this community also fit the category of person I was seeking to interview. Of the nine people I interviewed, all but two claimed no current connections to a church or Christian organization, and the two who had connections to Christian

53. Chapter Four expands on this response, as informed by the stories told in the study.

54. As an example of this, the subject of the first paper I wrote in the Doctor of Ministry program for Dr. Scott Hagley's course Theology of a Missional Congregation was the "Bunker" community. When I reread old papers while preparing this project, I found that many of the ideas presented here had their genesis in that essay.

churches held those affiliations loosely. Even the most atheistic among them did not strongly hold to their atheism, maintaining a tolerance for both the beliefs of others and an openness to new information changing their beliefs. These characteristics match with the definition of apatheism I presented in Chapter Two and I feel they are representative of people with an apatheistic worldview.

Even with this community's apatheistic leanings, they are also very aware that I am a Christian pastor, and I often serve a pastoral-adjacent role to the members of the Bunker. Because of our existing relationship, community members are comfortable asking me questions that they feel other Christians would not respond as well to. Discussions of theology or Christian practice are not uncommon in our community Discord. Members share news articles written by or about Christians and look for my input. Community members have shared concerns for themselves or for others, asking me to add them to congregational prayer lists. Prayers (as well as less specifically religious "good vibes" or well wishes from other community members) are welcomed as an expression of the care the community has for one another. Most important to me for this project, the members of the community are excited to participate in the research. In one sense, they want to support their friend's (my) work and help someone who they know and care for. In a broader sense, they are hopeful that sharing their own stories can lead to better interactions with Christians in the future and encourage Christians to respond to them with less condescension and judgment.

These conversations offer an opportunity to seek an outside perspective on the church, from the people whom the church would seek to evangelize. The research I

perform is similar to that of a local congregation entering into conversations with their immediate neighbors to seek out the work of the Holy Spirit among them. Scott Hagley, writing on the importance of ethnographic fieldwork for congregations says, "The missional church is liberated for God's mission *by* and *through* the neighbor, the stranger, the other in and through the ministry of the Holy Spirit."[55] Going outside the expected places one would encounter God, such as within a church sanctuary, into the neighborhood, where God might be less expected, invites God to reveal Godself in unexpected ways and through unexpected sources. Hagley writes, "Ethnography becomes missional theology at the place of disruption and difference, at the intersection and interaction between congregation and community."[56] God works across the boundaries between the church and the world, speaking to the church through those outside of it to reveal something of God and God's action.

Reaching out to apatheists is a modification of this model. In this online community, the participants in this research are my neighbors. Though this attitude is shifting since the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated congregations' online presence, online communities are not typically seen as places where God is active, forming a boundary in the minds of many Christians. This project seeks to reach across that boundary to listen for the Holy Spirit speaking to the church through the experiences of apatheists, engaging the other (apatheists) to invite some of that disruption and difference so that the church may hear the Holy Spirit speaking through them.

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55. Scott J. Hagley, "Free for Mission: Missional Church and Ethnographic Fieldwork," *Ecclesial Futures* 1, no. 1 (June 1, 2020): 92, https://doi.org/10.54195/ef12054. Emphasis in original.

56. Hagley, 106.

To explore their spiritual stories, especially as they may connect with evangelism, I chose to use a methodology based in narrative inquiry. Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly describe this methodology as seeking to understand a person's experience by listening to their stories, the narrative of their life:

> With narrative as our vantage point, we have a point of reference, a life and a ground to stand on for imagining what experience is and for imagining how it might be studied and represented in researchers' texts. In this view, experience is the stories people live. People live stories, and in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones.[57]

Clandinin and Connelly are educators and their description of narrative inquiry focuses on its application to the classroom, yet their approach is helpful in learning from stories in any context. They offer several methods of constructing field texts while performing this kind of inquiry, and I chose to conduct interviews with the members of this community.

Clandinin and Connelly describe "oral history interviews" as a way of drawing out a person's experiences.[58] They suggest using a set of structured interview questions, allowing space for the conversation to develop, to help draw out the person's story as they share it. These interviews are designed to seek out what individual experiences are saying in response to a research question rather than seeking to solve a problem. For Clandinin and Connelly, "Narrative inquiry carries more of a sense of continual reformulation of an inquiry than it does a sense of problem definition and solution… We

57. D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research*, The Jossey-Bass Education Series (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), xxvi.

58. Clandinin and Connelly, 110–12.

think about responding to the questions: What is your narrative inquiry about? Or What is the experience of interest to you as a narrative inquirer?"[59]

In thinking about the methodology I would use for this project, though I was thinking about evangelism in a Post-Christian era, I was much more focused on the experience of apatheists. I especially did not want to view participants as the solution to a problem—that would be as objectifying as viewing them evangelistically as the targets of conversion. Instead, I sought to pay attention to their experience, listen to their interactions with Christians, and find in those experiences something for the church to learn. Clandinin and Connelly's narrative inquiry methodology centers the participants' experiences rather than the researcher's question, which fits with the spirit of this project and alludes to the kinds of authenticity I believe needs to be present as the church lives out evangelism.

Clandinin and Connelly present a more general form of narrative inquiry; to focus my exploration on participant's spiritual stories I looked to the work of Nancy Ammerman in her book *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes*. Ammerman seeks "to listen for spiritual narratives among the stories people tell about their everyday lives."[60] Ammerman recognizes that people are more focused on the immanent frame, but she is also seeking connections with different transcendences which people encounter as they live their everyday lives. This resembled my goal of listening for connections with transcendence within the stories of my own community's members, however those connections may arise.

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59. Clandinin and Connelly, 124.

60. Nancy Tatom Ammerman, *Sacred Stories, Spiritual Tribes: Finding Religion in Everyday Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 9.

I found Ammerman's appendices particularly helpful, as they offer insight into her methodology. Ammerman describes her coding strategy as "applying multiple and often overlapping thematic codes to whatever portion of text constituted a logical unit."[61] She and her team used a system of codes which caught both general themes as well as specific recollections as they emerged from the stories participants shared. Ammerman offers an example of the tiered coding structure they used with a general category of religious participation containing music, preaching, ritual, administration, and other specific sub-codes.[62] As Ammerman and I are similarly exploring spiritual stories, I found the description of her methodology helpful in forming my own analysis strategy, especially with regard to the tiered coding system and the reminder from both her and Clandinin and Connelly to allow participants' stories to guide my results.

Part 2: Implementation

Having established the community through which I will explore my research question and the general methodology which is most appropriate, I began more concretely establishing the research methodology I would use. Based on the work of Clandinin and Connelly and Ammerman, I decided to conduct lightly structured interviews in order to draw out the stories of the Bunker's members' interactions with religious groups, as well as seeking an understanding of their views on spirituality and community. As this is an online community with members based in various locations across the United States, I chose to conduct these interviews using a video conferencing

61. Ammerman, 309.

62. Ammerman, 311.

software (Google Meet[63]) which provided both video and audio recording, as well as offering automated transcription. In addition to the automated tools, I took manual notes of each interview in order to provide a backup for the automated tools, as well as offering a record of the interview with a human filter. I initially planned for a single sixty to ninety minute interview with each participant, with the potential for a follow-up interview as needed. None of the follow-up interviews proved necessary and each interview was approximately sixty minutes long. Though each interview had a distinct structure, I intended the structure to work as a guide to the conversation rather than following it strictly. I asked follow-up questions as it seemed prudent and modified the wording of the questions based on the direction each individual's story led. The interview structure served as a guide to explore their spiritual stories and, following the reminder from Clandinin and Connelly, I sought to center those stories in the interviews.[64]

Interviews

My first step in performing this research was to offer invitations to participate. I issued two general invitations to community members. The first invitation was text-based: I made an announcement in the Bunker's Discord to all members of the channel. Each member received a notification through the Discord application of that announcement. I shared my desire for volunteers willing to share their spiritual stories, confirmed that it is academic research that had been reviewed by Pittsburgh Theological Seminary's Institutional Review Board and required the signing of an informed consent

63. More information on Google Meet is available at: https://workspace.google.com/products/meet/

64. The interview structure I used is included as Appendix 1 of this paper. This contains all of the questions I asked of each participant, as well as containing the introduction I offered them and the demographic questions I asked to help describe the community itself.

form, and briefly described the purpose of the research with regard to evangelism and apatheism. Secondly, I issued a verbal invitation on the livestream, repeating the same content. I expected to receive approximately five responses to these invitations based on the size of the community and the number of members who are the most active.

I was pleasantly surprised to receive eight responses to these announcements. The most active community members all responded affirmatively, and several more peripheral members saw the invitations and reached out to me to confirm their participation. Additionally, I offered personal invitations to two community members whose perspectives I thought might be informative; one of those invitations was accepted. With nine individuals participating, I began scheduling these interviews for late October and early November of 2024.

As part of the pre-interview scheduling conversations, I asked each participant to bring a sacred artifact with them to tell me about. I described these artifacts to them as something they considered "sacred" or "holy." I chose not to define those terms concretely, instead telling each participant that by sacred or holy I meant whatever those terms meant to them.[65] Discussing this artifact served two purposes. The first purpose was as a conversation starter. For the most part, my interactions with participants had been very one-sided: I (along with justSatyr) would talk to them through the podcast or livestream; the participants' interactions with us were through emails, YouTube's live chat feature, or in the Discord. I sought to provide an opportunity for participants to become more comfortable with a reversed interaction, one in which I would be the

65. A few participants asked for additional clarification. I suggested they think in terms of something important enough to them that they plan to take it with them if confronted with a disaster or that they would clean or restore no matter how disgusting a substance it was in contact with.

listener and they would be the primary speaker. The second purpose was to explore the participants' thinking about transcendence. I hoped to discover more about how each participant understood something beyond themselves in connection with their apatheism. In asking participants to describe something sacred to them, I listened for the presence of something transcendent as they told the story of their artifact.

After discussing their sacred artifact, I moved the conversation to the rest of the interview questions. I sought an understanding of how each participant identified their own religious affiliation or if they feel any connection to a religious group, before asking how they defined spirituality in a general sense. My original intent was to include follow up questions about participants' wonderings about the world in a spiritual sense, and I did so in the first few interviews. As the interviews progressed, that half of the question seemed less important. The earliest interviews contain responses to that effect but in later interviews I found it unnecessary to ask questions about their spiritual wonderings, as the broader questions on spirituality contained those responses.

I then asked a series of questions about participants' particular interactions with Christianity, beginning with childhood and continuing through the present. I knew from my existing relationships with participants that many of them were raised in Christian churches but had since stopped attending regularly. The interview questions explored: positive and negative interactions with church in childhood; what led to their leaving the church; their experiences with Christians since leaving the church; their current impressions of Christianity, both the things which attract them and the things that repulse them; and asking them to reflect on the changing nature of their perception of

Christianity.[66] I sought to word these questions somewhat casually, listening to the participants' stories and asking following questions to seek to get a sense of their full spiritual story. My hope for the interviews was that participants would be able to honestly share their spiritual story with someone who they could trust to listen, and I feel like I accomplished that goal.

The last formal question I asked participants was to share their thoughts on what a perfect spiritual community would look like for them. I chose to end with this question after they had spent time reflecting on their own experiences with the Christian church, both its positive aspects and its negative aspects. I also wanted to get a sense of what is important to participants in an idealized community and to listen for what individual apatheists are seeking. While I anticipated significant data from participants' stories, this question also served as an opportunity for participants to summarize their experiences into one description of what they say they want in a community. After they were done responding, I closed each interview asking participants if there was anything else they wanted to share. That final question was meant to allow room for the participants to talk about anything else on their mind, if there was anything they felt like sharing that I did not specifically ask about, or to say more about something we had already discussed.

Data Analysis

These interviews were constructed with respect to four sensitizing concepts, while balancing my desire to allow the participant's stories to speak for themselves. I had these concepts in mind as I developed the interview structure I described above. Each of these

66. A small number of participants were not raised attending Christian churches. If that was the case, I changed the wording of the questions to reflect their lack of church attendance towards questions which more generally reflected encounters with Christians in early life.

sensitizing concepts connected to something about Post-Christianity and were meant as a beginning to my analysis.

The first of these sensitizing concepts is the *triangle of transcendence* I described in Chapter Two. I paid attention to moments of connection with the transcendences of heroic action, inner genius, and inbreaking. Finding these connections helps to explore each participant's experiences with transcendence, especially those moments outside of an encounter with the Christian God. A related second sensitizing concept is each participant's *attitude toward belief*. I listened for events and ways of thinking that led to each participants' apatheism, seeking out commonalities within the stories. I especially paid attention to shifts from zealotry to apatheism, and those times when the amount of energy participants expended on questions related to God might have been higher than it currently is.

A third sensitizing concept is encounters with *hospitality or inhospitality*, especially those encounters involving Christians. I listened for connections between those times when a person felt welcomed or unwelcomed by Christians and participants' understanding of deity. I suspected that a lack of hospitality by a Christian would make the participant less likely to want to be part of a Christian community. The fourth sensitizing concept is that of an *alternative community*. I sought to pay attention to participants' desires for a community which expresses values that differ from the "American dream" and its emphasis on individualism and capitalism. If the church is God's gathered community which bears witness to the reign of God, I hoped to find

places of connection between their desires and the features and values of the reign of God as lived out by the church.

After completing the interviews, I began analyzing and coding each using the transcripts as my primary data source. I first collated the demographic data to give a general idea of the makeup of this community. I asked each participant for their gender identity, age range, education, and a general description of their occupation. I did not find any particular significance to the results of the research from this demographic information, though the information is valuable on its own in understanding the community in which I performed the research.

Next, I created a brief summary of each participant's responses to the interview questions. These were short, simple phrases which briefly stated participant responses in an easy-to-review manner to easily present broad themes in those responses. I created a Google Sheets spreadsheet which allowed me to quickly view all nine participants' responses to interview questions at once, which helped me to see any recurring themes in a "zoomed out" way. This wider view helped to remind me of the overall themes each participant mentioned even as I focused on more specific themes later in the analysis.

I imported each interview's transcript into a coding software, Taguette,[67] for further analysis. Throughout the coding process, I referred back to the video recordings and my live notes to ensure the transcripts were consistent with what participants actually said. In preparation for coding each interview, I preselected a series of codes based on my sensitizing concepts, which I am referring to as "Extrinsic Codes" as they came from

67. Taguette is an online, open-source data analysis tool for qualitative research. For more information see https://www.taguette.org/about.html

outside of the interviews. I left these codes intentionally vague, as I wanted to leave room for other themes to come out of each interview in subsequent passes through the data. This is in line with my desire to center participant's stories rather than my own research question. A list of those codes, as well as a selection of those which arose more naturally from the interviews, which I refer to as "Intrinsic Codes," are contained in Table 1. Following Ammerman, I used a nested series of codes formatted to the standards of Taguette. In this case, the broadest code comes first; additional subcodes are listed after a period. For example, the "Transcendence" code is the more broad one; "Transcendence.Heroic Action" refers to Heroic Action as a subcode under the broader Transcendence code.

Table 1. Significant Data Analysis Codes.

"Extrinsic" Codes	"Intrinsic" Codes
Alternative Community	Authenticity
Apatheism	Ethics
Hospitality	Ethics.Service
Inhospitality	Hypocrisy
Transcendence	Out of Touch
Transcendence.Heroic Action	Questioning
Transcendence.Inbreaking	Voluntary
Transcendence.Inner Genius	Zealotry.Self-Righteousness
Zealotry	Zealotry.Rules

When coding the transcripts, I performed three passes the interviews, each time refining the coding scheme and finding more data. The first pass focused on the extrinsic codes, looking for connection with the sensitizing concepts I had chosen. While I added several new codes at this stage in response to participants' responses, there was little organization in the codes at this point. "Self-Righteousness," as an example, began as its

own code from this process. Other significant codes to arise at this time were "Authenticity," "Hypocrisy," "Ethics," and "Service."

For my second pass, I focused on listening for those themes which were not as obviously connected to the sensitizing concepts. In this reading of the transcripts, I liberally added new codes based on participant responses. I wanted to leave myself open to wherever the conversation was leading rather than focusing on a few concepts. This led to a lot of additional codes which proved less relevant to my research question as my analysis continued, but I did not want to miss something potentially important in someone's spiritual story. As an example, three participants mentioned visiting churches because of someone they pursued a romantic relationship with, leading to a "Dating" code. This did not connect with any of the broader themes I was exploring, yet I included it in my analysis at this time. An example of something with more relevance that arose from this pass is the "Unquestioning" code, as two-thirds of participants mentioned feeling like their childhood questions about the practices and ideas they were encountering at church were discouraged.

Before beginning on my third pass through the data, I modified the coding scheme based on the new codes which came from the second pass, leading my final list of codes. I reorganized several codes into broader themes, drawing connections between codes and creating a better picture of what participants were saying. (The final list of codes, as well their frequency and a brief description of each, is included as Appendix 2.) This step involved a lot of categorization. An example of this is in the "Zealotry" code, which came to include several other codes: "Brainwashing," "Easy Answers," "Rules," "Self-

Righteousness," "Selfishness," and "Unquestioning." These codes all fit under the broader umbrella of examples of Zealotry, even as those codes included distinct features which I found important. These tiered codes helped in categorization, as well as leaving room for specific interactions under each large category.

With the revised coding scheme in place, the third pass ensured each highlighted statement reflected the code or codes it was assigned. While a few new codes were added at this stage, much of the work in this pass consisted of recoding a statement if one of the new codes was more accurate than its original one. As examples, I split the "Participation.Music" code from "Participation.Aesthetics" in response to the prevalence of music on its own and added an "Ubiquity" code to reflect participant statements regarding the overwhelming presence of Christianity in American culture. This led to a number of categories of participant responses from which I could draw information. With the analysis complete, the data was ready for presentation; I offer the results of my research in the following section.

Part 3: Results

Demographic Information

Before presenting the results of my analysis as it pertains to my research question, I share here a brief summary of the demographic information of this community. As the participants in this research comprise the most active members of the community, I believe they are representative of the Bunker as a whole. This demographic information is summarized in Table 2. A supermajority of the Bunker's members identify as male with ages between 41 and 54 years old. Almost all participants have attended college or trade

schools, with a third of participants completing a four-year college degree. A plurality of participants are employed in information technology or related fields, with the next most prevalent occupation being customer or food service.

Table 2. Demographic Information.

Gender		Age		Education		Occupation	
Male	7	18–30	0	Less than High School	0	Information Technology	4
Female	2	31–40	2	High School	1	Medical	1
Other	0	41–54	6	Some College or Trade School	5	Sales	1
		55–70	1	4-year College	3	Service	3
		Over 71	0	Graduate School	0		

I include this demographic information as a reminder that, while I would consider all members of this community as holding apatheistic attitudes toward belief, this research cannot be representative of the whole group of apatheists. Certainly the male experience differs from the female experience, and this research includes significantly more male participants than female participants. The lack of inclusion of anyone with a non-binary gender identity also reduces the amount of extrapolation I am confident in doing to all apatheists. Furthermore, the relatively narrow age range of participants also contributes to a more narrow focus for this study. Recognizing these limitations, I believe their spiritual stories are valuable as a reflection of a common experience of apatheists in a Post-Christian era, especially as it regards interactions with Christians and the Christian church. The purpose of this research is not to provide a comprehensive summary of the entire category of people with apatheistic attitudes toward belief. Instead, I am seeking to

learn from this particular community how their experiences may inform the Christian church as it seeks to fulfill its evangelistic identity and bear witness to the reign of God.

Significant Themes

When looking at the frequency of various codes I used to analyze the interviews, two themes stood out as occurring significantly more often: Inhospitality (my third sensitizing concept) and Questioning. In this context, I described inhospitality as a lack of care, welcome, and respect for others. The particular code related to inhospitality appeared eighty-six times, the most out of all of the codes I used for this project. (Questioning, which I will describe next, appeared second-most, with eighty-two occurrences.) Every participant shared a story of an encounter with Christians not responding to them with welcome but instead pushing them away. One example comes from a participant's story of a conversation around his grandfather's funeral. The participant's grandfather was a professed agnostic, and when the participant was talking with a co-worker who was also a pastor, the pastor replied, "Well, I hope he ends up where he should because he's agnostic." The participant shared that in that moment, "it took every bit of willpower not to explode on that guy."[68]

Another participant shared about an interaction with their coworker who saw them reading a Book of Mormon that had been left for them. When that coworker saw him reading it she said, "You're going to go straight to hell for reading that. That's just full of lies!" to which this participant responded sarcastically, "You just sound so happy. Why [wouldn't] I want to go to your church?"[69] The same participant shared another

68. Participant 2, interview by author, October 26, 2024. All participant names have been withheld by mutual agreement to ensure participant confidentiality.

69. Participant 6, interview by author, October 30, 2024.

story of feeling objectified when an older female customer they encountered at that job claimed him as a target of evangelism. They remember the customer as being nice, but also somewhat "pushy" as she offered repeated invitations to go with her to her church. "She was very insistent on trying to get me to come to church, because she believed that if I went to church I would see they were right and I would instantly want to because we had talked."[70] Despite her pushiness, the participant joked that they remembered it as one of the better experiences because she was nice about it, unlike in the story of their coworker who told them they were damned.

Every participant had at least one story of being made to feel unwelcome, feeling condescended to, or otherwise made to feel less like a full human in the other person's estimation for not being a Christian, or even not being the right kind of Christian. Many of these inhospitable behaviors connected with the attitude of zealotry with regard to their beliefs on the part of the Christian with whom they interacted. Participants were especially struck by the disconnect between their own understandings of Christian teaching with the way they encountered Christians living. One participant described this experience in general terms, saying,

> "My idea of Christianity was [that] it should be very accepting of people and I think if you look at Christianity as a whole…I would not say that's the reputation that it necessarily has. And so I think…why would I join this thing that supposedly is…about accepting people but then doesn't seem to. That's a problem."[71]

This was not an uncommon feeling among participants, sufficiently so that I included inhospitality under the larger code of "Hypocrisy." Participants noted that the teachings

70. Participant 6, interview.

71. Participant 7, interview by author, October 31, 2024.

of Jesus reflected love and welcome for all people but the people who claimed to follow Jesus whom they encountered had a different practice. They found the disconnect between Christian's stated beliefs and their behaviors a discouragement to participation. While I was not surprised by the inhospitality participants experienced from Christians, as it was one of the sensitizing concepts I had chosen to pay attention to, I did not expect it to be the most significant response.

The second-most significant theme is "Questioning," which refers to participants' asking questions about spirituality and religion and seeking understanding when they did not understand. This was related to another theme that was present in the interviews: the habit of more zealous communities to discourage questioning. In two thirds of the interviews, participants mentioned a time when they began to wonder about things beyond what they were learning at church and church-related programs. One participant shared, "I got old enough that I started asking questions and learned very quickly that that was not acceptable… I think a lot of my experiences when I was young were just, every time I tried to reach out to understand, it was basically shut up and get in your place."[72] Another participant saw these actions as intentional, describing themselves as being open-minded and wanting to welcome other perspectives but said of the Christianity in which they were raised, "religion stops you from [doing that] because they give you a perspective and they don't want you looking outside of that."[73] Not having their questions answered led to participants realizing they didn't want to be a part of the Christian

72. Participant 1, interview by author, October 25, 2024.

73. Participant 3, interview by author, October 28, 2024.

communities they were in and found themselves either seeking the answers to their questions elsewhere or losing interest in the questions entirely.

A few of the participants shared that their questioning was a part of their journey from a more zealous attitude of belief to a more apathetic one, connecting with my second sensitizing concept. While most participants were never particularly zealous, those that were described their exposure to different answers to their questions as part of their journey toward apatheism. This example from one participant describing their childhood participation is typical:

> I was a very accepting child. So I just believed whatever people would tell me; I didn't question hardly anything. So, I lived all of it. I believed every bit of it. pretty much up until I started getting into high school… There was no question in my mind that every bit of it was accurate and [I] went to church every Sunday.[74]

Continuing from later in this interview, in response to what led to their no longer participating in church, they shared that their exposure to different denominations' beliefs started their questioning, something that was cemented after exposure to secular philosophy in college, which culminated in an acceptance that some questions don't have answers:

> I wish I could say there was a moment when I realized it, but there was very much a period where all of a sudden I realized I don't have to answer all the questions that religion seems to answer. I don't need to know all the whys if the actual reasons aren't there… That's when I started to turn around my perspective on it… Religion seems to just be forcing answers when…it's okay to just say I don't know or there's not an answer yet. I don't need a "why" for every little thing. And that's kind of when my perspective on organized religion itself kind of started to change.[75]

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74. Participant 5, interview by author, October 29, 2024.

75. Participant 5, interview.

For this participant, their shift from more zealous belief to apathy came when they realized their questions did not necessarily need the answers provided by religion. This is reflected in other participants' answers as well, as the questions they were seeking answers to through their church communities became less significant to them over time, especially as those questions were no longer being answered in satisfactory ways—or their questions were being actively discouraged by their communities.

In the participant stories, related to a journey from zealotry to apatheism, is a sense of never connecting with Christianity or having a weak connection, which led participants to stop attending church when it was no longer required of them by their parents. This was expressed most clearly by one participant, "I don't think the entire time that I called myself a Christian I ever understood what being a Christian actually was."[76] This participant did not have an encounter with deity, and now sees Christianity as more of a tool that people use to get through their life—they rather bluntly equated Christianity with drugs and alcohol. For them, there was little meaning in the Christianity they experienced and they continue to see little meaning in it. Another participant's experience growing up in the Catholic church was similar: "I do remember even as young as second grade when we were doing first communion stuff, I didn't want to. I had no desire to… I was always bored by church and didn't want to be involved in it."[77] Their experience of going to church was something that they were forced to do by their parents or by the catholic school they attended; they felt like they had no choice but to do the thing they

76. Participant 1, interview.

77. Participant 9, interview by author, November 2, 2024.

found insufferably boring. So when this participant was old enough, they chose not to continue doing the thing that held no meaning for them:

> I couldn't wait until the day I turned eighteen and I could just say absolutely not to [getting] dragged to church… I tried to [believe] when I was a child… I had the cross necklace and "What Would Jesus Do" bracelets and things like that and I tried really hard to believe for a really long time… As I grew up it became harder and harder until one day, and I don't even know how old I was at that point, I just realized I don't believe this.[78]

For this person, like the other participant, they never had a zealous belief to lose. This participant shared later in the interview that they wondered if they had seen the teachings of Christianity lived out by those who claim belief they may have been more committed to Christianity, although the things they shared about their childhood experiences suggest their lack of significant connection to God would not have changed. These were fairly common sentiments. One participant remembered the worship services they attended as a child as "drudgery" and "agony" that they couldn't wait to be over.[79] One of the participants who once believed shared that their reason for not attending church anymore was simply that, "I didn't find a reason to go anymore. There wasn't anything that I was getting out of it;… there wasn't anything new that I thought that I was getting enriched [with]."[80] Even a participant who identified as a theist found it hard to find motivation to actually go to a church service.[81] Regular attendance in a Christian community did not hold meaning to the people I interviewed, even if it once did.

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78. Participant 9, interview.

79. Participant 8, interview by author, October 26, 2024.

80. Participant 5, interview.

81. Participant 2, interview.

This sense of meaninglessness also connected with participant encounters to transcendence, my first sensitizing concept. While participants expressed a connection through their sacred artifacts to something larger than themselves, especially when describing their sacred artifacts, the connection was firmly rooted in the immanent frame. The most frequently expressed transcendence of the three in the triangle was the "inner genius" transcendence of Exclusive Humanism. I recorded three times as many connections to the inner genius transcendence as to the next most frequent, inbreaking. Participants summarized their values and the things they found most important along the lines of, as expressed by one participant, "the whole core premise [is] just be a better person and make the world a better place."[82] Another participant offered a similar reflection, "I think a religion that doesn't center a god or deity but a religion that centers the people in it is important."[83] A third participant recounted a visit to a Universal Unitarian church: "These people are cool, but this is not for me… It gave me an opportunity to check out a different side of things and it still wasn't for me."[84] They enjoyed the experience and appreciated the values of the church, but they had no inbreaking transcendent encounter there.

The times participants made any reference to the inbreaking transcendence were from remembrances rather than experiences in the present, often connected with music. One participant shared, "Singing…in praise of God is something I kind of miss. And the whole being able to close your eyes and get into that worship space…that's probably the

82. Participant 6, interview.

83. Participant 1, interview.

84. Participant 9, interview.

thing I miss most about Christianity."[85] Yet for that participant, the connection with deity was something remembered from their past that they are not currently seeking after. Like the others, they were more focused on living in accord with something like Taylor's Modern Moral Order, focusing on human flourishing rather than finding a connection to deity.

There was another significant connection to transcendence present in the participant's descriptions of their sacred artifacts—two thirds of participants artifact's were sacred to them because of its connection to another person or persons. One participant's artifact connected them to their family,[86] another's to their spouse,[87] and a third's to their children.[88] For one participant, their sacred artifact was a gift from a deceased friend. They shared,

> "It's a book…And it is a gift that my late friend…gave to me. And the reason that it is sacred to me is she wrote in it and it's the last thing that I have of her before she died earlier this year…[She] is really important to me. She's my best friend. Getting a gift from her that has her handwriting in it, that is kind of the last thing that I have of her…makes it way more important to me than…anything else that I have. If there is a fire in this house, I'm grabbing the cats and this book."

The book from their friend held a lot of meaning for this participant. They were emotional in talking about it, and the connection to their friend through this book is a kind of transcendence—the book is more than a book. Another participant shared a similar connection with their photography. "Some of my favorite photographs I have don't have a lot of artistic merit to them, but they are my favorites because they're tied to

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85. Participant 8, interview.

86. Participant 2, interview.

87. Participant 5, interview.

88. Participant 3, interview.

a very specific memory, that as soon as I look at the photos, I remember that moment, even if it was 30 years ago."[89] A photo of their dog and ex-spouse had a transcendence to it that went beyond the image and connected them to the moment in which he took it. Their sacred artifacts were sacred because of the connection to other people in their lives who are important to them. They found transcendence in communion with other humans.

This leads into discussion of my fourth sensitizing concept, that of an alternative community. The responses which came out of my final scripted question, when participants were asked to describe their ideal spiritual community, consistently reflected ideals similar to those of what Christianity professes to practice, something a few participants pointed out. One even said so explicitly, "My perfect idea isn't too far off of what a perfect…Christian community would be:... being accepting to all peoples, helping out the people who need help, feeding the poor, trying to make the world a better place… but actually people doing it and not just saying they're doing it."[90] One participant described their perfect spiritual community as similar to the Bunker, saying, "It would simply be like a community of people looking out for each other... Kind of a larger version of this little community that we have that is here for each other when we need one another, but also knows to leave us alone when we need to be left alone… Having our own non-blood family."[91]

Participants also expressed that, even if a Christian community did these things, they doubt they would be willing to become a part of it. The same participant who shared

89. Participant 4, interview by author, October 29, 2024.

90. Participant 6, interview.

91. Participant 1, interview.

that their idea of a perfect spiritual community would be like a perfect Christian community also said, “With some changes I would be willing to go to a church, but as of right now…just what I've seen in the media and stuff, it doesn't make me want to go to a church.”[92] They continued to explain that even when they might read something that sounds optimistic about a church or denomination, their experience tells them that it is likely not what they will experience. This sentiment was echoed by another participant. In a conversation which developed out of my asking if there was anything else they wanted to talk about, they asked me about my thinking about a Christian community. As I described it, they shared an openness to what I hoped would develop for Christian churches but that openness was tempered with apprehension, given their prior experiences with Christians:

> I appreciate your openness and your desire to make Christianity a better place than it currently is because people like me, I would love for my kids to have something like that. But unfortunately, I have not seen something that doesn't damn them as well. So, I will be letting them know that there's a lot of options, but I won't be pointing them into any kind of direction at this point, because I'm not confident in what that could lead to for them. So, I think if in 20 years I could see Christianity in a place that was more like what we talked about, the world would be a better place. And I'm down with that.[93]

This participant expressed a hope that their children could participate in a Christian community someday, but their experience meant they were also not expecting it to happen. Even when they and other participants expressed an openness to the things Christianity teaches, their expectation based on what they had experienced is that Christians do not live out those teachings. The community that Christianity says it ought

92. Participant 6, interview.

93. Participant 3, interview.

to be, following the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth, is appealing; yet the manner in which it is lived out by the Christians they have come into contact with is not.

One of the themes which arose in this research which I did not anticipate when designing this study was a perceived disconnect between things that Christians find important and what the participants found important. Participants saw Christianity as being out of touch from the problems in the world. One participant's perspective was the most direct. They were raised as a Jehovah's Witness, and were frustrated by a focus on small things when there were larger issues which they felt that organization was not addressing. They shared, "It's like this lack of perspective because to me with the Witnesses especially…they just now started [to] allow men to have beards. I'm like, listen y'all,...you care about facial hair. You've got child molesters left and right. Are you kidding me?"[94] They did not understand how an organization which claimed to follow Christian teaching could be so focused on male grooming standards yet ignore harms done to vulnerable people. While this is the most explicit example, other participants shared similar observations. Another saw church buildings largely disused outside of Sunday gatherings and saw that lack of use as an example of the church's lack of awareness. "So many things involved with a church nowadays just goes to paying for things… I see so many church buildings sitting empty so many days out of the week not being used and it doesn't make sense."[95] They went on to share that funding for church buildings could be better used to provide housing or become centers of community

94. Participant 3, interview.

95. Participant 4, interview.

resource sharing, meeting needs in the community rather than existing for the sake of existing.

This sentiment was also expressed in the more inward focus of the Christian communities they encountered. A participant shared a story around their father's funeral. They noticed the connections that their father had with their faith community, and while the participant didn't experience a particularly negative experience with their father's church, it was also clear to them that they were not a part of the community:

> My dad passed away here recently and he was a big church person, and going back to his services and seeing…his church people that he interacted with. They were all super polite and super nice and super welcoming, and it was obvious that he was a part of their family. It was obvious I was not, but they were at least polite.[96]

While the participant appreciated the more surface-level kindness they experienced surrounding their time of loss, they also were very aware that they were not a part of the group. Seeing the connection their father had with the community made their exclusion more pronounced. Another participant, who recently started attending a Presbyterian church regularly, realized that even though they are regular attendees, they still feel separate from the rest of the church community, many of whom have family at the church:

> I attend, but it doesn't necessarily mean [I'm] part of it… This church always has a "greetings of peace" period of time. Sometimes I end up talking to people. It's very surface level. Sometimes I end up not talking to anybody… You see all these people and you clearly see some people are like, they very much know them and talk to them and have these conversations and it's like catching up, and then with me it's like you're that guy who's here. You kind of feel that, right?[97]

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96. Participant 1, interview.

97. Participant 7, interview.

Though this person had been attending the church for around a year and a half, they still feel like an outsider within the community. This persisted even after joining a small group Bible study in the last several months. Despite their participation, they felt excluded from the broader community and continued to feel out of place within their small group, a group they joined in hopes of finding a space for more authentic community.

Even with these predominantly negative interactions, there was a sense that when Christians did live out the teachings they held, it was received well by participants. Two participants shared stories of pastors who did not condescend to the children in their children's sermons; each pastor was remembered fondly by the participants.[98] Another participant, though they had difficulty remembering an experience with a Christian, had not difficulty sharing a set of positive encounters with a Jewish coworker who never tried to convert the people he worked with or force his beliefs on them, but lived out his faith and invited his coworkers to participate in the various feasts he celebrated.[99] That participant appreciated the authenticity with which their coworker practiced their faith, and later shared a few less memorable times when they encountered Christians doing the same. Participants appreciated the authenticity of someone doing the things they said they ought to do according to their faith. When someone authentically lived out the welcome, hospitality, and care that participants thought was supposed to be present in the Christian faith, it gave the participants the sense that there is something worthwhile within Christianity, even as in general their negative experiences far outweighed their positive ones. The "good ones" as one participant called them, were so overwhelmed by the "bad

98. Participant 2, interview. and Participant 6, interview.

99. Participant 4, interview.

ones" that it made them very apprehensive of any Christians until shown otherwise by their actions.

Part 4: Summary

The data encountered through the spiritual stories of apatheistic members of this online community show people who are open to the general teachings of Christianity, and appreciative of the community Christianity can be, but apprehensive as a result of many negative experiences with people who profess to be Christians. Their stories show people who, generally, encountered Christianity when they were younger, but either never developed a connection to the God of Christianity or over time that connection lost its meaning to them. Participation in Christian community felt more like something they were required to do, either by the rules of Christianity or the intention of their parents. When they did participate, with a few notable exceptions, the experience seemed to be intended for someone else and the things they were hearing and doing were disconnected from their own lived experience. While some of them continued to attend church, for all but one participant the positive experiences they had were eventually overshadowed by either their negative experiences or a general lack of interest. As their stories continued, especially when their beliefs shifted away from theism toward agnosticism or atheism, participants had a number of negative encounters with Christians who offered inhospitality, damnation, and a lack of care for them. They were viewed as targets to evangelize, often using tactics which relied on a fear of eternal punishment. They felt excluded, marginalized, and othered even when trying to be part of Christian community.

These experiences pushed them farther away from theism. In spite of these negative experiences, they still appreciated what they considered the central tenets of Christianity: loving one's neighbor and caring for people in need. They remembered positive encounters with Christians living authentically—people who did not impose their beliefs but lived them out without pressuring others to believe and act as they do. Participants expressed an appreciation for the community Christianity could be in promoting human flourishing and providing a space to support one another in successful and difficult times. Some even showed hope that a Christian community could exist that they would be interested in, if that community acted out the things they said they believed were important.

My research question sought to hear exactly the kinds of spiritual stories I have summarized above. I hoped to create a space for people with apatheistic attitudes toward belief to tell their story in an open way, and I believe I succeeded in creating that space. The telling of the stories is only the first half of my question, however. I am exploring the impacts of these spiritual stories on how the church acts evangelistically. What does the church do with the themes and challenges raised by the stories from this community of apatheists? How does it affect the context and content of the church's invitation into its community? This will be a focus of Chapter Four, as I draw connections between these spiritual stories and the practical aspects of evangelism, as well as suggesting a next most faithful step for congregations to live into their evangelistic identity.

In a broad sense, participants' spiritual stories suggest a desire for authenticity and community. They view the more humanistic practices of Christianity as a positive

influence on the world, as it welcomes and accepts people regardless of who they are. They have a longing for a group of people who welcomes and accepts them, offering hospitality and even familial love without pressure to be a part of the community. They are interested in actions which serve others, especially opportunities for those who have more to share with those who have less. Yet their desires for all these things are tempered by caution because of their series of encounters with Christians who do not do them. They have been disappointed by Christian communities before, and even when they tried to participate in Christian communities, they never connected with the divine through them.

These results also show a group of people who are representative of the Post-Christian era I describe in Chapter Two. For them, the positive aspects of Christianity are those which connect to the "Inner Genius" transcendence of Exclusive Humanism: serving the poor and needy; an openness to difference, both cultural differences and ideological differences; and an emphasis on human flourishing. Despite their familiarity with Christianity and the claims Christians make about God, they are skeptical of a deity that comes from outside the immanent frame—the apatheists of the Bunker have little interest in an encounter with a transcendent god. Instead, they are interested in community. The connections they made with other people have a transcendent quality, and they find a measure of enchantment in the sacredness of those connections.

Taking these things together, I suggest that one of the most important aspects of an evangelistic identity is to be an authentic, loving community. It is not enough for Christians to force participation in service events or to say that it is important to care for

others—these things must be consistently put into practice for people to see them as authentic. I do not suggest that this comes from the addition of practices to the work of the church or adding a Christian veneer to secular community service. Through the authentic community of the church, as new persons are welcomed and find belonging they may, as the Holy Spirit works in and through the community, have an experience of the inbreaking God. Evangelism exists at the boundary between the church and the world, the intentional invitation into participation in the reign of God to those who have not yet encountered it. The practices of the church which are appealing to apatheists are those actions which also bear witness to the reign of God. They even encounter something transcendent in community, as they form connections with other humans. Perhaps the next most faithful step for the church is to live into their calling as a new household of witnesses and proclaimers, standing between God and the world.

Chapter IV:

Post-Christian Church

When outlining this paper, I gave significant thought to where this chapter belongs in the overall structure. I was unsure if it belonged before the results of my research, introducing some of the concepts which I have already mentioned, such as the church bearing witness to the reign of God, or after the results. Because my intent in this paper is to listen and respond to the spiritual stories of people outside the church, I decided to set this section here, after the presentation of my research data. The "transmissions from the bunkered" I heard also informed my theology as I explore how the church is called to bear witness to the reign of God in a Post-Christian era. For this era, I offer an understanding of the church as a new household of intentional love and welcome for all whom the Holy Spirit gathers to it. I begin this chapter by clarifying some of the assumptions which underlie this understanding, after which I look backward to the church in a Pre-Christian era for guidance on how to respond to a Post-Christian era. Finally, I turn my focus to evangelism itself, offering a definition of evangelism which positions it as those actions taken by the church which happen at the boundary of the church and the world in which it bears witness.

Part 1: Witnesses of the Reign of God

Twice in the opening to this chapter, I used a phrase like, "the gathered church of God bears witness to the reign of God." Here I offer a theological definition of this phrases as I understand them, briefly clarifying the ecclesiology and missiology which underlies this paper and the research it presents. I begin with the most expansive concept,

the reign of God, before narrowing onto Christ's church as the community gathered by God to bear witness to God's reign.

The Reign of God

In discussing the reign of God, I should first address the language I am using using to reference it. Throughout this paper, I preferred to use "reign of God" rather than "kingdom of God." While these terms are somewhat interchangeable (and when quoting Scripture or other sources I will use them so, unless I am making a specific point), I have been following the logic of Scott Jones in preferring "reign of God" language.[100] In an increasingly Post-Christian era, the word "kingdom" carries with it Christendom-related baggage, perhaps made more explicit alongside rising levels of Christian nationalism in America. It also implies an image of God as a stereotypically masculine king, adding additional distance from God for half of humanity that the incarnation event refutes. "Reign of God" focuses on God's sovereignty separate from human institutions, while also clearly defining an alternative to those human institutions established in and through Jesus Christ.

In its most basic sense, the reign of God is the promised perfect future of God which began at the resurrection of Jesus and will be fulfilled in the new creation. In this future, humanity and God are with each other and everything which is not as it should be in this world is remade in the fullness of God's presence. This is how Jesus of Nazareth began his ministry, with the proclamation of the reign of God: "The time is fulfilled, and

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100. For Jones' own reasons, to which I allude above and with which I agree, see Scott J. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor: A Theology of Discipleship and Witness* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2003), 18.

the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news" (Mark 1:15).[101] In his teaching and preaching, Jesus described the reign of God as welcome for those on the margins of 1st Century Judean society (Matthew 21:31, Mark 10:14, Luke 6:20–23). The reign of God is food for the hungry, drink for the thirsty, welcome for the stranger, clothing for the naked, care and healing for the sick, and companionship and freedom for those in bondage (Matthew 25:34–36, Luke 4:18–19). The reign of God is also a warning to those who are rich or powerful (Mark 10:17–27, Luke 6:24–26) even as it comforts the poor and powerless. God's reign is something small and hidden in the world that is growing into something large and joyous (Mark 4:21–32, Luke 15).

In the messianic hopefulness of Judea in the 1st Century CE, one of Jesus' hearers might not be faulted for hearing a "rebellious" tone in that message: the "kingdom" of God is quite unlike the "kingdom" of Rome. But Jesus is not starting a revolution. Instead, Jesus announces a transcendent kingdom that is outside of this world (John 18:36), one which is, according to Mortimer Arias, for people—specifically for the whole person:

> Jesus points to a holistic ministry of good news as the sign of his divine mission. In response to John the Baptist's question, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to expect some other?" (Luke 7:20, NEB), Jesus said to John's disciples: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have good news preached to them."[102]

In the teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, the reign of God is not a replacement for the kingdoms of the world with another worldly kingdom. It is something different, in which

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101. All Scripture references from the New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition.

102. Mortimer Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God: Evangelization and the Subversive Memory of Jesus* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1984), 3.

many of the norms that humans understand are reversed. The reign of God is not found in a rebellion or revolution, but in healing and liberation.

Walter Brueggemann collects these various aspects of the reign of God into the term "alternative community," which he sets against the status quo of the world, "totalism."[103] He offers the example of Moses in the wilderness; through whom God sets up a religion of freedom, justice, and compassion; against the oppression the Hebrews experienced in Egypt.[104] As God led them out of oppression, the community of Israel is the physical expression of God's freedom. In the Incarnation, Jesus continued forming an alternative community. When Jesus stood in the synagogue in Nazareth and announced his mission to the people gathered there (Luke 4:16–21), he expressed two aspects of Brueggemann's alternative community. First, it carries a criticism of the present social order. In giving hope to the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed; Jesus declares that the reign of God is against those who benefit from others' poverty and blindness, who hold others captive, and who cause oppression.[105] Second, the reign of God is not only a dismantling of the old but an invitation to something new. The reign of God is a community in which no one is poor, captive, blind, or oppressed. It invites hope in a new future in the face of a present which offers no hope.[106]

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103. Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 127. In the main text of the book, Brueggemann uses the term "royal consciousness;" however, in the afterword he suggests "totalism" as a better expression of the concept he is describing, making more clear the application to the current sociopolitical environment.

104. Brueggemann, 6–7.

105. Brueggemann, 84.

106. Brueggemann, 102.

In the cross of Jesus, God announces the ending of the hopeless present order. Brueggemann says, "The crucifixion articulates God's odd freedom, his strange justice, and his peculiar power. It is this freedom,… justice,… and power…that break the power of the old age and bring it to death."[107] This announcement is not God's last word on the matter—the alternative community is more than a criticism of the present order, it is also the promise of something new. The promise is secured in the resurrection of Jesus. Brueggemann writes, "The resurrection can only be received and affirmed and celebrated as the new action of God, whose province it is to create new futures for people and to let them be amazed in the midst of despair."[108] The old order dies as it kills Jesus on the cross; in its place, God raises a new order, the reign of God, which breaks into our present world as Jesus is resurrected.

When Jesus ascends to heaven, the promise of his return is also the promise of the fulfillment of the reign of God. As the promise was proclaimed by the two men in white robes at the ascension—"This Jesus, who has been taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven" (Acts 1:11b)—it continues in the life and writings of the apostles. The story of Jesus' disciples shows that the reign of God is present in the world even as its fulfillment with Jesus' return is still hoped-for. Paul writes to the church in Rome of the hope for a more perfect future in the midst of decidedly imperfect present the early church experiences (Romans 8:18–25). The book of Revelation inspires Christians with a vision of that perfect future, in which "Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed

107. Brueggemann, 99.

108. Brueggemann, 112.

away" (Revelation 21:4). The reign of God has begun, and it is not complete until the new world to come, but God has promised its fulfillment.

Jürgen Moltmann describes the promise of the reign of God's fulfillment as, "a declaration which announces the coming of a reality that does not yet exist."[109] When God the Son, incarnate as Jesus of Nazareth, announces that the reign of God is near, he is asserting a promise. The reign of God is coming near, even and especially when it seems absent or distant. Because God promises it, the reign of God stands in opposition to the world as it is and brings hope for the world as it will be. At the center of God's promised future reign is the death and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus' resurrection is the first of the promised resurrection for all, and it is the culmination of his proclamation of the reign of God.

The fullness of the incarnation of the Son of God in the human Jesus of Nazareth is certainly opposed to Post-Christianity. The incarnation is the ultimate inbreaking, and it conflicts with both Exclusive Humanism and Antihumanism. N. T. Wright alludes to this, presenting the non-Beyonder understandings of the incarnation without saying so explicitly. Jesus' story is not only one of loving care for one another that ended tragically (a story of "inner genius" which appeals to the Exclusive Humanists), nor is it the story of the redemption of humanity with a largely insignificant introduction (a "heroic action" which appeals to the Antihumanists). The proclamation of the reign of God which began Jesus' ministry and teaching expressed fully in his death and resurrection is something else entirely. Wright says,

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109. Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology*, trans. James W. Leitch (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 103.

> It is the story of God's kingdom being launched in heaven and on earth, generating a new state of affairs in which the power of evil has been decisively defeated, the new creation has been decisively launched, and Jesus' followers have been commissioned and equipped to put that victory and that inaugurated new world into practice.[110]

The announcement of promise that began with Jesus' proclamation of the nearness of the reign of God became a world-changing shout with Jesus' resurrection. The reign of God was not only near, it was here—proclaimed through the Holy Spirit in the words and actions of those whom the Holy Spirit gathered as the church. What Jesus described and exemplified in his ministry, his followers continued in the empowerment of the Spirit.

The Gathered Church

After Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit carries Jesus' presence to humanity (John 14:16–18) and forms a community which bears witness to the reign of God: the church. The church lives out the reign of God as an alternative to and an indictment of the world around it. As soon as Jesus began proclaiming God's reign, he called followers around him to learn from him how to continue the work of proclamation. These followers, after his ascension, became the church, gathered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the reign of God. As Lesslie Newbigin so succinctly puts it, "The church lives in the midst of history as a sign, instrument, and foretaste of the reign of God."[111]

Mortimer Arias talks about the work of the Holy Spirit in reminding the church of the "subversive memory of Jesus," a concept similar to Brueggemann's alternative community. Arias discusses two ways in which God helps the church remember Jesus:

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110. N. T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (New York: HarperOne, 2008), 204.

111. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Open Secret: An Introduction to the Theology of Mission*, Revised Edition (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995), 110.

the Scriptures and the Holy Spirit. Scripture, itself a work of the Spirit, retells the story of Jesus, identifying the critique and newness in the reign of God, but as Brueggemann warns, a static remembrance of an alternative community can be used to introduce its own totalistic counter-movement.[112] For Arias, the work of the Holy Spirit is to keep Jesus at the center of the church. He writes, "The Holy Spirit is the other 'subverter' promised by Jesus, whose ministry is specifically to awaken us, to help us *to remember*, not to forget the message that has been entrusted to us in Jesus Christ."[113] The Holy Spirit points to Jesus Christ as the proclaimer and presence of the reign of God, reminding the church that it lives the reign of God as a community which offers criticism and hope of the present age, a community built on the eschatological promises of God.

Bringing about a remembrance of Jesus and Jesus' proclamation is not the only work of the Spirit—the Holy Spirit is also the primary agent in gathering the church. This differs from the more common understanding of the church in American society as an organization one chooses to join. This understanding is heavily influenced by the philosophy of John Locke, who writes, "A church…is a free and voluntary society… No man by nature is bound unto any particular church or sect, but everyone joins himself voluntarily to that society in which he believes he has found that profession and worship which is truly acceptable to God."[114] One's religion is separate from anything outside of

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112. Brueggemann offers the example of the shift from the alternative community of Moses to Solomon's totalism in chapter 2, "Royal Consciousness: Countering the Counterculture," in *The Prophetic Imagination*, by Walter Brueggemann, 40th Anniversary Edition (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018), 21–37.

113. Arias, *Announcing the Reign of God*, 67. Emphasis in original.

114. John Locke, "A Letter Concerning Toleration," in *The Portable Enlightenment Reader*, ed. Isaac Kramnick (New York: Penguin Books, 1995), 85.

themselves and God (representative of Locke's secular$_2$ imaginary), and it is only up to them which religion to choose to belong.

This way of looking at religion as a voluntary association is also at home in Taylor's secular$_3$, even though Locke is writing in an earlier era. Rather than opting into a church through which one will regularly experience transcendence, as in secular$_2$, in secular$_3$ encountering transcendence at all is optional. Responding to these changes, Edwin van Driel offers another perspective, centering the work of building the church on God's action rather than human action. The church, expressed in local congregations, is a community God gathers together. He writes:

> For many North Americans the church is a voluntary organization that we join or leave at will. Congregations are communities held together by shared convictions, practices, and programs… We see churches as players in a religious marketplace…
>
> I invite you to think of your church…the church of which you are a part or which you serve, as being *as such* a community gathered together by the ascended Christ.[115]

van Driel builds his argument on Ephesians 1, especially verse 10 and the statement of God's plan "to gather up all things in him [Christ], things in heaven and things on earth." For van Driel, the church is more than just a response to the work of God in the world through Jesus Christ—it is gathered and constituted by the work of God as a new, concrete community which exists in the world.[116]

While van Driel assigns the work of gathering the church primarily to Jesus Christ, I see this as an action of the Holy Spirit, one that is discussed by Michael Welker. Welker describes the Holy Spirit as the working of God's power in the world:

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115. van Driel, "Rethinking Church in a Post-Christian Age," 48–49. Emphasis in original.

116. van Driel, 53.

> God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is not only a power by which God once upon a time intervened in past worlds and made Godself knowable. God's Spirit, the Holy Spirit, is also the power and the force by which God intervenes in constantly new ways in the present world and makes Godself knowable to people living in the present and in the future.[117]

To present his argument, Welker applies the metaphor of a "force-field" to the work of the Spirit, connecting with the theory of electromagnetics, something I studied extensively for my undergraduate degree in Electrical Engineering.[118] While a thorough discussion of electromagnetics is outside the scope of this paper, there are several important characteristics of electromagnetic fields that have relevance in light of Welker's treatment of the Holy Spirit. When two or more fields interact with one another, they cause interference; the fields are affected by one another. Depending on the specific properties of these fields, they may interfere constructively: the two fields add together to create a larger effect than each individually. Alternatively, they may interfere destructively: the two fields subtract from one another creating a smaller mutual effect. While interference in practice is much more complex, these complex interactions generally fall into these two categories of interference: constructive or destructive; addition or subtraction. These interacting fields may constructively interfere at some points and destructively interfere in others.[119]

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117. Michael Welker, *God the Spirit*, trans. John F. Hoffmeyer (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 4.

118. Welker's discussion involving the action of the Spirit as a force-field may be found in Chapter 5, "The Pouring Out of the Spirit: Its Action of Liberation and of Overcoming the World," in *God the Spirit*, by Michael Welker (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2013), 228–78.

119. One relatively easy to perceive example of this phenomenon is the interaction of sound waves between two loudspeakers. When two loudspeakers are placed at a distance from one another and the same music is played through both, as one walks at a distance from one speaker to the other, the bass frequencies of the music will sound louder or quieter depending on one's position and the distance from each speaker. The moments when the bass frequencies sound louder are points of constructive interference; the moments when the bass frequencies are quieter are points of destructive interference.

As the Holy Spirit works in the world, a part of the Spirit's gathering work is bringing people into constructive interference with herself. As Welker phrases it, the Spirit, among other activities, "transforms and renews people and orders, and opens people to God's creative action."[120] The Spirit brings the presence of Christ to humans and in doing so grows them to be more like Christ. As the Spirit works, it moves people from destructive interference—acting in ways that are against the reign of God—into constructive interference. The Spirit brings them into an encounter with the transcendent God as they experience this interference. The encounter leads people to become proclaimers of the reign of God and witnesses to Jesus Christ and his work. Welker states, "People who receive the Spirit are enabled to bear *witness*; it is the Spirit who, through those human beings whose services have been enlisted, bears witness to Christ."[121] Welker is quite clear, though, that this work of the Spirit is not only an individual activity—the Spirit works in community. In Welker's view, "[The] fullness of salvation…is mediated in and through the community of testimony of people who have been 'washed…sanctified…justified' by the name of Jesus Christ and the Spirit of God."[122] The Spirit gathers those who constructively interfere with her into a church; the same community who bears witness to the future reign of God in the present.

This shift in thinking, from the church as a voluntary association to a community gathered by the Holy Spirit brings that communal aspect of the church to the forefront. Returning to the work of Edwin van Driel, "to be saved, is for the gathering work of

120. Welker, *God the Spirit*, 221.

121. Welker, 224. Emphasis in original.

122. Welker, 237–38.

Christ to reach *you*. It is to be knitted into the new humanity, the new household of God."[123] From this understanding of the church as a gathered people, there are several consequences, which I will discuss at various points in the remainder of this chapter. If strangers are gathered to a local congregation as part of God's activity, their welcome by the congregation is now a response to a work of the Holy Spirit. As such, hospitality becomes an essential part of the ministry of the church. Secondly, this view empowers the church to shift its focus from ensuring one's salvation to being a new community. The Holy Spirit brings people to the community and develops their faith; the church lives into its own call to bear witness to the reign of God. Those who were gathered as strangers are discipled by the church as the church lives out who it has been previously discipled to be. Finally, the gathering of the church is to bear witness. As van Driel writes in another work, "We are sent exactly in being gathered. In being gathered, we are being saved; we are knitted into the new community established by Christ… In this community, Christ makes already visible what the future looks like."[124] By remembering the gathering work of the Holy Spirit in forming the church, the church is free to be who it is: an alternative community who proclaims of the good news of the reign of God by its very existence.

Witness Bearers

As the Spirit gathers the church, it is empowered to be people who bear witness to Christ and the reign of God. The church represents God in the world as it proclaims

123. van Driel, "Rethinking Church in a Post-Christian Age," 58. Emphasis in original. My own discussion of the church as a new household is in the next part of this chapter

124. Edwin Chr. van Driel, "To Be Gathered Is to Be Sent," in *Essays on the New Worshiping Communities Movement*, ed. Mark D. Hinds (Louisville, KY: Witherspoon Press, 2018), 50.

God's promises. It is gathered by the Spirit to live out that promise. Jürgen Moltmann says of the church:

> The church as the community of justified sinners, the fellowship of those liberated by Christ, who experience salvation and live in thanksgiving, is on the way to fulfilling the meaning of the history of Christ. With its eyes fixed on Christ, it lives in the Holy Spirit and thus is itself the beginning and earnest of the future of the new creation.[125]

Moltmann shifts from the establishment of the church to its mission. In the church, the Spirit proclaims the perfect reign of God as the promised new creation now breaking into the present. For Moltmann, the church is the anticipation of what will be, the perfect future under Christ's reign: "Christendom and Christianity witness to the kingdom of God as the goal of history in the midst of history. In this sense the church of Jesus Christ is *the people of the kingdom of God*."[126] By the Holy Spirit's gathering a community of people who constructively interfere with her activity, the breaking-in of the reign of God which began at Jesus' resurrection continues, through the church, so that the world may see a better future in their lives and actions.

This gathered church is, by its nature, a community of persons in relationship with God and one another. Samuel Wells focuses on the communal aspect of the reign of God by insisting on God's purpose in *being with* humanity and humanity's call within the reign of God to *be with* one another. Wells refers to Luke 4:16–21 as Jesus' "Nazareth Manifesto." For Wells, the invitation Jesus presents, especially when Jesus mentions the reading's fulfillment, is a promise to be with humanity. Like Brueggemann's view, it is an invitation into newness and a critique of the old, but Wells adds another dimension: "It is

125. Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit: A Contribution to Messianic Ecclesiology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 33.

126. Moltmann, 196. Emphasis in original.

a proclamation of the hope that lies in the words, 'God is with us.'"[127] For Wells, Jesus does not only proclaim the reign of God, in his person he *is* the reign of God. On the cross, Jesus is with humans in the midst of the suffering brought on by the old order; in the resurrection, Jesus is with humans in the promise of the new.

In the Spirit's gathering work, the "with-sens" of Jesus and humans is reciprocal. At Jesus' baptism by John, the Son of God became connected to humanity;[128] in turn, humans are connected with Jesus' death and resurrection through their own baptism (Romans 6:3–5ff). Jürgen Moltmann writes about this reciprocity in baptism:

> Baptism is the means of participation in the Christ event of the crucifixion and death of Christ. Fellowship with Christ is fellowship in suffering with the crucified Christ. The baptized are dead with Christ, if they are baptized into his death. But they are not already risen with him and translated into heaven… They attain participation in the resurrection of Christ by new obedience, which unfolds itself in the realm of the hope of resurrection… Thus resurrection is present to them in hope and as promise. This is an eschatological presentness of the future.[129]

The connection of the newly baptized to the death of Jesus speaks to the promise of the future resurrection of the believer with Jesus, and with it the full expression of the reign of God. The Spirit gathers people to the church and initiates them into the reign of God through baptism. Baptism connects them to the inbreaking of the transcendent God, that they may be witnesses to God's reign in the world.

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127. Samuel Wells, *A Nazareth Manifesto: Being with God* (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2015), 152.

128. Anna Case-Winters, *Matthew*, First edition, Belief: A Theological Commentary on the Bible (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 50.

129. Moltmann, *Theology of Hope*, 161.

Part 2: Households of Proclamation

As humans are transformed by their encounter with God, they are empowered by the Spirit them to bear witness to the promised reign of God. Eckhard Schnabel, in his survey of the practices and motivations of early Christian mission in the 1st Century Roman world, writes:

> The effective origins of the early Christian missionary activity lie in the Easter events, in the encounter of the disciples with the risen Christ, and in the events at Pentecost in A.D. 30… In the encounter with the risen Lord, who forgave their failure and opened their eyes regarding the true nature of his messianic dignity, the early commission for the disciples was renewed: they are envoys of the crucified and risen Messiah.[130]

The early disciples, who earlier had been sent out by Jesus under his supervision (Mark 6:7–13), are now sent out without Jesus' physical presence but with the empowerment of the Holy Spirit. As Jesus was sent by the Father, the disciples are sent by Jesus to continue his work after his ascension and the sending of the Holy Spirit on Pentecost.[131] They bear witness to the reign of God that was proclaimed by Jesus in his life and breaks into the world in his resurrection as they are empowered by the Holy Spirit after his ascension.

As a continuation of the work that Jesus began, the early church was with one another in community. The church functioned as a new household, a living counter-example to the traditional Roman household, reconciled to God and one another in Christ (Mark 3:31–35, Ephesians 2:13–20). The community of Christians being with one another is as much a part of their bearing witness as the more obviously evangelistic

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130. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Jesus and the Twelve*, vol. 1 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 389.

131. Schnabel, 1:381.

practices. The book of Acts describes this kind of community in Acts 2:37–47 and 4:32–5:16. After the events of Pentecost, the earliest believers formed a community of prayer and resource-sharing, a community that Acts says grew swiftly. Schnabel reflects on this as well, as he describes Christian communities which formed after the missionary work of the early church:

> The Christian churches were not clubs of like-minded people who had common interests; they consisted of Jews and Gentiles of different religious convictions and divergent ethical traditions who were united in their faith in the eschatological revelation of Israel's God in Jesus the Messiah and Savior, and who were called to align their everyday life and behavior in accordance with these new convictions.[132]

Transformed by the Holy Spirit and their encounter with the risen Jesus, the everyday life of Christians in their communities was evangelistic.[133] The interactions of the new household of God in their being with one another proclaims the reign of God inaugurated in Jesus.

The work of Nijay Gupta describes notable differences between the early church and its Roman neighbors. Gupta writes, "The person of Christ, the work of the Spirit, and the fundamental dynamics of the gospel themselves changed their [early Christians'] orientation toward God, God's world, God's creatures, and God's good end."[134] Gupta goes on to describe (referenced in the subtitle of his book, "How the first Christians were weird, dangerous, and compelling") a Christian church who, as it experienced the transformation that came from the Holy Spirit, did not fit with the social or religious

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132. Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission: Paul and the Early Church*, vol. 2 (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2004), 1451.

133. Schnabel, 2:1484–85.

134. Nijay K. Gupta, *Strange Religion: How the First Christians Were Weird, Dangerous, and Compelling* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2024), 3.

norms of the Roman Empire; rather, it was weird and dangerous. The same things which made it weird, however, made them compelling and attractive.[135] As the Holy Spirit gathers new people to the church as they encounter the reign of God through the already-transformed Christians in the church, the church in turn offers an invitation into the reign of God and welcome into the new community which lives it out.

Gupta further explores the familial nature of early Christianity, a community connected by Jesus Christ in which all members are afforded dignity and all people are welcomed. This is the kind of community described by Paul in Galatians 3:

> For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek; there is no longer slave or free; there is no longer male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus" (Galatians 3:26–28).

As members of this new household, the early Christians were committed to one another, worked for each other's benefit, shared resources, and loved one another.[136] An invitation to Christianity was an invitation into this new family relationship and the community it forms, one that continues to follow Jesus through his teaching and example. As Bryan Stone, in his work *Evangelism after Christendom* notes, "Apostolic evangelism is an invitation to be formed socially by the Holy Spirit into the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus through incorporation into his body [the church]."[137] In these early centuries of Christianity, the invitation by the church is to join this new household of Christ's body—

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135. Gupta, 214–15.

136. Gupta, 133–37.

137. Bryan P. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom: The Theology and Practice of Christian Witness* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2007), 110.

those gathered people who live out their eschatological hope in the reign of God in their present.

This invitation on the part of the church is a response to the work of the Holy Spirit. Someone outside the church first shows an interest in what God is doing through the church—the Holy Spirit offers her invitation before the church offers its own. In Acts 2, on the day of Pentecost, many people join the church, but Peter invites the gathered crowd to be baptized and join the Christian community only after they ask about the things they were seeing and hearing. Lesslie Newbigin notes this theme in the book of Acts:

> It is a striking fact, moreover, that almost all the proclamations of the gospel which are described in Acts are in response to the questions asked by those outside the Church. This is so in the case of Peter's sermon on the day of Pentecost, of the testimonies given by the apostles and by Stephen under interrogation, of the encounter of Philip with the Ethiopian, of Peter's meeting with the household of Cornelius, and of the preaching of Paul in the synagogue at Antioch of Pisidia. In every case there is something present, a new reality, which calls for explanation and so prompts the question to which the preaching of the gospel is the answer.[138]

Newbigin continues using the day of Pentecost as an example of this. When the people see the disciples speaking in tongues, with what looks like fire on their heads and the sounds of rushing wind, they ask "What does this mean?" (Acts 2:12) and Peter responds, retelling the story of Jesus. When Peter had finished, the crowd asks another question, "What should we do?" (Acts 2:37). It is at this point that Peter tells them to "Repent and be baptized … in the name of Jesus Christ" (Acts 2:38). The invitation comes after they ask their questions, and many people join this new community in the world centered

138. Lesslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 116–17.

around the proclamation of the reign of God. The Holy Spirit had already begun her work in gathering them to the church when the church invited them into the new household of God.

Part 3: Evangelism at the Edges

In discussing the invitation of the church to those whom the Spirit gathers and their initiation into the reign of God through baptism, a boundary becomes obvious between those inside the church and those outside of it. Evangelism happens at this boundary. I see evangelism as the process by which the Holy Spirit works at the edges of the church and the world, gathering people to the church, who responds to the Spirit's work with an invitation to be initiated into the reign of God. In this last section of Chapter Four, I work through this understanding of evangelism. First, I will address the church's work at these boundaries. Then, I discuss the process of invitation and initiation into the church, ending this section with a discussion of the importance of hospitality and radical welcome to this reframed understanding of evangelism.

Edgy Pilgrim-Priests

In the prior section, I mentioned Eckhard Schnabel's understanding of the early Christians as envoys sent by Jesus in the same way that Jesus was sent by the Father.[139] Christians bear witness to Jesus and the reign of God in their every day behaviors, which are distinct from the world in which they live due to the transformation worked by the Holy Spirit. This bearing witness is not something the church does as much as it is something the church is, as witnesses of what God has done and is doing in the world. The church represents God to the world, and the world to God.

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139. Schnabel, *Early Christian Mission. 1*, 1:389.

Bearing witness is not anything new for the church, but in a Post-Christian era the environment into which the church bears witness is new. Stefan Paas uses the language of exile and diaspora to describe this state of the church. In a secular$_3$ social imaginary with its focus on the immanent, it is difficult for us to see God moving in our everyday.[140] To respond to Post-Christianity, Paas looks to the role of "priest," a mediator between deity and humanity, as performed by "pilgrims," strangers and foreigners in the world.

Paas' understanding of priesthood has several layers. The whole of humanity was created with a mediating role between God and creation in Genesis 1. After the effect of sin on humanity and creation, the mediator between God and creation gets more specific, culminating at the incarnation. The incarnate Christ is the ultimate mediator between God and humanity, and after his ascension the gathered church is empowered to mediate between creation and God.[141] Paas connects this with the pilgrim nature of the church as strangers in the world described in 1 Peter. The church does not belong to the world, it belongs to the reign of God.[142] Summarizing his use of these metaphors of priest and pilgrim, Paas writes:

> The priest metaphor defines the missionary nature of the church as a dual movement: the Church represents the world before God and she represents God before the world. She comes into the presence of God as a worshiping, praising, liturgical community and she engages with the world in a witnessing, inviting, friendly way. In short, while passing through the world as pilgrims, Christians bless God on behalf of the world, and they bless the world on behalf of God.[143]

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140. Stefan Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests: Christian Mission in a Post-Christian Society* (London: SCM Press, 2019), 165.

141. Paas, 173.

142. Paas, 168–73.

143. Paas, 182.

In a Post-Christian era, as the church continues to lose influence and membership, Paas' metaphors are apt. In thinking of itself as pilgrims, traveling through the world but not belonging to the world, the church can accept and mourn its losses, putting their trust in the promise of the fulfillment of God's reign. This pilgrim metaphor is balanced with the priest metaphor, lest the church fall into escapism and neglect its role as priest to the world. As a priesthood, the church is intimately connected to the ones they mediate between. The priestly nature of the church counters any impulse to escape world by building relationships, as Paas explains:

> Priests can drop by their neighbours or the city council, and ask them if they can pray for them in the Sunday worship celebration. Priests can praise God on behalf of their non-churched relatives for all the beauty they have received in each other. They can offer the guilt of the world, the neighbourhood and their family to God in the ministry of reconciliation… Christians worship God in the name of God's world that does not recognize God.[144]

The priesthood aspect of this metaphor builds relationships with people outside the church, even as the church recognizes that it was gathered into the reign of God and are now pilgrims in the world.

These interactions happen at the edges between the priestly community of the church and the world it is a stranger to. As Bryan Stone writes, "Evangelism...is performed at the boundaries and along the edges of difference."[145] Evangelism, as the process by which the Holy Spirit gathers people into the reign of God, by necessity situated at the border between the "kingdom" of the world and the "kingdom" of God. A person outside the church is offered an invitation to cross the border, be initiated into the reign of God in baptism, and become another pilgrim-priest.

144. Paas, 216.

145. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 172.

Edwin van Driel describes a national church who has adopted this way of thinking, the Protestant Church of the Netherlands. Responding to drastic secularization, churches there function as pilgrim-priests on these edges. van Driel describes a softening of the boundary between church and world, with worship services led by non-Christians and pastors acknowledging the appeal of secularization. "Living with porous boundaries," van Driel writes, "is not just a matter of being hospitable to the stranger in our midst, but also to allow for the otherness in ourselves."[146] Softening these boundaries and welcoming life at the edge of the church and the world is the place of a pilgrim-priest and the realm of evangelism. As the Holy Spirit works in and around these edges to offer an invitation into the reign of God, the church also exists at these edges, responding to the Spirit's work and welcoming those whom the Spirit gathers into the reign of God.

Loving Invitation

The church takes loving care regarding the manner of its invitation to those the Spirit has gathered. In Post-Christianity, not only are the claims of the church to an inbreaking transcendence hard to accept, but the kind of Christianity many have experienced—like the members of the Bunker—has not been a positive experience. With evangelism happening at the edges of the church and the world, the church must remember its primary identifier is its love for God and its neighbor. Before addressing the church's invitation to the people whom the Spirit gathers to it, it is important to first center love in those interactions.

146. Edwin Chr. van Driel, "Ministering to the Grand-Children of the Lost Son: Being Church in Dutch Post-Christian Society," *The Presbyterian Outlook*, September 13, 2018, 33.

I already mentioned in a prior section that the invitation the church makes, as described in Scripture, responds to questions from the person outside the church. This is one aspect of how love informs the invitation into the reign of God. Elaine Heath continues the emphasis on God's love as it relates to evangelism. Love, for Heath, makes the difference between the message being good news or bad news. She writes,

> When we believe in and experience love as God's meaning, love becomes our meaning, for we become like the God we worship. When love becomes our meaning, the ramifications for evangelism are immense. We are cleansed of legalism, judgmentalism, coercion, and exploitation. We are liberated so that we can now see the "total fact" of others, which is so much more than their guilt and sin, or their wounds. This is not a sentimental, soft love. It is a tungsten power that respects others, says "no" to injustice, and unflinchingly involves itself in the muck and mire of broken lives.[147]

Ensuring that evangelism is rooted in love keeps evangelism rooted in the reign of the God who is love. This also emphasizes that evangelism is more than a practice. Just as love is the identifier of those who follow Jesus, the invitation to follow must also be rooted in love. Heath connects with Jesus' words in Matthew 25 that he is found among the "least" of the world (Matthew 25:40,45), and in her words there are echoes of Welker's view of the Spirit as the force-field of God's action.

> The hermeneutic of love is grounded in the belief that Jesus really does live in the people around us, that Jesus thirsts in our actual neighbors. Jesus is bound with eternal love to every person I encounter. This is the starting point. When I see people that way, everything changes. How I evangelize changes. My ecclesiology changes. Now I see people already being called by the Holy Spirit, already being loved and known by Jesus before I ever met them.[148]

Evangelism is as much an aspect of the identity of the church as love is, and the two are inextricably related. Evangelism without love becomes hostile, turning people into

147. Elaine A. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism: A Contemplative Vision for Christian Outreach*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 48.

148. Heath, 115.

objects rather than bearers of the divine image. Love without evangelism leaves aside the promise and fulfillment of the reign of God. Evangelism expressed in love both recognizes the humanity of others and offers an invitation to be with the loving God.

I have described evangelism as the process by which the Holy Spirit works at the edges of the church and the world, gathering people to the church, who responds to the Spirit's work with an invitation to be initiated into the reign of God. While I see evangelism as primarily the activity of the Holy Spirit, the church is not passive in this process: as pilgrim-priests, the church at the boundary of the world and itself extends a loving invitation to those whom the Spirit gathers to it.

In his own exploration of evangelism, William Abraham strikes a balance between the work of the Holy Spirit in evangelism and the church's role in bearing witness. He defines evangelism "as the set of intentional activities which is governed by the goal of initiating people into the kingdom of God for the first time."[149] Even as defining evangelism this way, seemingly as an action of the church, he also clearly positions the action of God as the primary agent in evangelism.[150] If the church does not take God and God's action expressed in the reign of God seriously, then the thing into which they are initiated is no longer the reign of God. For Abraham, the duty of the church is to "lead the candidate for its membership into a full encounter with the dawning of the rule of God."[151] The Holy Spirit gathers; the church invites.

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149. William J. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1989), 95.

150. Abraham, 168.

151. Abraham, 179.

Scott Jones, building on Abraham's work, further describes the church's role in evangelism. After establishing that God's actions are good news that God is actively working to solve humanity's problems, and indeed those problems have been overcome in the death and resurrection of Jesus, he focuses on the invitational nature of God's actions: "These actions are invitational, because God is continually working in the world to invite and encourage persons to participate in the reign of God… God is always inviting the world to embrace God's reign and return to the set of relationships God intends for it."[152] Jones connects this with the activities of discipleship, which he describes as living obediently to God's will and participating in God's mission.[153] (In the language of this paper, I would say that discipleship happens as the Holy Spirit brings people into more constructive interference with herself.) For Jones, evangelism is the way through which people enter into discipleship in particular communities in particular places. One is not initiated into the reign of God through an abstract universal church, "They are evangelized by individuals in communities of faith called congregations."[154] This connects with van Driel's conception of the church—the local congregation itself—as a gathered community. Local congregations are the primary location where evangelism which leads to discipleship happens. They are the new households of God who bear witness to God's reign.

This occurs as local congregations do the things that local congregations do. The priestly acts of local congregations—gathering for worship, hearing Scripture, and

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152. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, 43.

153. Jones, 65.

154. Jones, 75.

sharing the eucharistic meal; acts of loving service; Christian education; and more—all may bear witness to the reign of God and offer an invitation to discipleship, responding to the Holy Spirit. The practices of the church become evangelistic when they are done with the intention of responding to the work of the Holy Spirit in gathering people to the church. This is where Abraham's definition of evangelism is helpful, as it recognizes that the intention of the church when it comes to its everyday practices is important. Abraham warns:

> Preaching an evangelistic sermon on television is not in itself evangelism; nor is baptizing twenty people on a Sunday morning in church; nor is sending a consignment of Bibles to a tribe that has never seen the Bible before; nor is teaching someone the basic doctrines of the Christian faith; nor is inviting someone to walk the aisle and repent; nor is leading someone in a prayer of personal commitment. Unless such acts are intimately related to a process that intentionally brings people into the kingdom of God, they are something other than or something less than evangelism.[155]

The everyday practices of the church, when done with the intention of responding to the Spirit's gathering work, are evangelism. This is why, as Bryan Stone writes, "The church does not really need an evangelistic strategy. The church *is* the evangelistic strategy."[156] Evangelism is not simply something the church does; evangelism is what the church is. It is the primary locale in which people grow to bear witness to the reign of God.

Here, I turn to an important addition that Jones makes to Abraham's definition of evangelism. Jones construes evangelism as "that set of *loving*, intentional activities governed by the goal of initiating persons into Christian discipleship in response to the reign of God."[157] The addition of love reflects Jesus' own statement on the nature of his

155. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 105.

156. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 15. Emphasis in original.

157. Jones, *The Evangelistic Love of God and Neighbor*, 114. Emphasis mine.

disciples: “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35). Jones makes clear that, for evangelism to be authentic it must be rooted in the same love that God has for the world.[158] This honors the personhood and agency of the person outside of the community of the church while also respecting the call to offer an invitation into the reign of God.

Being With Everyone

In order to live this out, evangelism must take on characteristics of radical hospitality and welcome. To paraphrase the Bryan Stone quote I shared in the prior section, evangelism happens at a boundary, at the border of the church and the world. These boundary encounters also come with encounters with difference, connecting to the pilgrim nature of the church.[159] Softening these boundaries is a part of the church’s priestly role and requires what Leanna Fuller describes as a vulnerability to the differences one will inevitably encounter. Fuller suggests that one of the primary aspects of a posture of hospitality, especially within congregations, is this vulnerability to difference.[160] Though Fuller’s work is focused on conflict and systemic anxiety within congregations, being edgy pilgrim-priests also requires this openness to experiences with someone whose experiences, beliefs, and values differ from one’s own. With a vulnerability to difference, diversity, the things that make humans different from one another, is a positive, intentional aspect of creation. Fuller writes, “Diversity lies at the

158. Jones, 115–16.

159. Stone, *Evangelism After Christendom*, 172.

160. Leanna K. Fuller, *When Christ’s Body Is Broken: Anxiety, Identity, and Conflict in Congregations* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2016), 140.

heart of God's good creation; without difference, there would be no creation at all."[161] Developing a vulnerability to these differences and maintaining an openness to the diversity which exists in all of creation, is the foundation for community, especially the loving community that Christ's church is meant to be.

Extending from the vulnerability to difference which invites diversity is hospitality, the radical welcome of those who are different from us. In terms of the local congregation, this means an openness to extend an invitation to anyone whom God the Holy Spirit would gather to that local congregation. Invitation and welcome go hand in hand. The work of Amos Yong is helpful in expressing the importance of hospitality to evangelism. Yong offers a "stranger-centered" evangelism which reflects the work of Jesus:

> The Son of God became a stranger, coming into a far country, even to the point of death. Here, Christian mission is the embodiment of divine hospitality that loves strangers…, to the point of giving up our lives on behalf of others as to be reconciled to them, that they might in turn be reconciled to God."[162]

In other words, as God became a pilgrim among humans in the incarnation, humans are pilgrims in the world as they bear witness to the reign of God.

Yong encourages a posture of listening, welcome, and servanthood to live into this kind of hospitality. Local congregations become willing to be vulnerable to the differences and diversity brought by those others in the everyday activities of the congregation. "Evangelistic hospitality is something we do not in addition to but in and through our worship, liturgical, or sacramental practices. Or put another way, it is in and

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161. Fuller, 147.

162. Amos Yong, *Hospitality and the Other: Pentecost, Christian Practices, and the Neighbor*, Faith Meets Faith Series (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2008), 131.

through these ecclesial practices that the redemptive hospitality of God is accomplished by the powerful works…of the Spirit."[163] Hospitality is one of the ways the church lives out its identity as a new household, the gathered community of pilgrim-priests which bears witness to the reign of God. If people are gathered to the church by the Holy Spirit, welcoming them is the church responding to the action of God.

The pattern I suggest for the church as it lives out this understanding of evangelism may be summarized through the work of Diana Butler Bass. Bass suggests that in the modern, enlightenment church, coming to faith was ordered in a particular way: "belief came first, behavior came next, and finally belonging resulted, depending on how you answered the first two questions."[164] In order to belong to a faith community, one needed to accept and espouse their particular statements of faith and practice their particular sets of important behaviors. Bass suggests that in a Post-Christian era, the first and most important aspect of being in a spiritual community is belonging, followed by behaving, then believing.[165]

To put it in the language of this paper, the first experience of one gathered by the Spirit to a local congregation is to encounter the radical, loving welcome of God through the people already gathered to that congregation. Then, in the midst of this community, just as Jones and Abraham argue, the new person is invited into the reign of God. They learn to bear witness to the God's reign through participation in the community as the Holy Spirit works to bring them into constructive interference with herself. Finally, after

163. Yong, 137.

164. Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity After Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: HarperOne, 2012), 201.

165. Bass, 204.

being with the community and the work of the Spirit, the new person comes to experience the transcendent God who gathered them into the community, and they are initiated into the new household in baptism. Beginning with the gathering of the Holy Spirit, radically welcomed into community by the church, through the continued work of the Holy Spirit, a person experiences the transformative inbreaking of God, so that they may bear witness to another. In the final chapter of this paper, I will explore what this might look like in light of the experiences of the Bunker's apatheists, and suggest a way forward for the church in a Post-Christian era.

Chapter V:

Bearing Witness in a Post-Christian Era

When taken together, the data I collected from this research on the spiritual stories of this group of apatheists contains several similarities. Many of the participants had experienced a rejection of the questions they had about spirituality and religion from Christians, which led to them seeking their answers elsewhere. That decision, either in the moment or later in their life, caused them to encounter hostility and a lack of hospitality from Christians, denying them community even when they sought it out. Though at times they might consider different expressions of Christian community from what they had experienced and that offered something appealing to them, their prior experiences made them wary. They especially distrusted Christians for their inauthenticity, showing an unwillingness to believe what Christians said until it was consistently supported by their actions, which it usually was not.

My goal for this project is to present, through the stories told by apatheists, a different way of understanding evangelism. By listening to them, I sought a way for Christians to stay true to Christianity's invitational nature while also offering love and welcome to those outside the Christian church in a Post-Christian era. Through sharing their desire for community, the apatheists I interviewed offer an invitation back to the church: to be itself. They asked for a community that supports one another, respects one another, and functions as a chosen family.

The group of apatheists in interviewed has experienced many things from Christians, most of them negative, yet they are still drawn to the ideals of Christianity,

especially those of service to others both inside and outside the community. They have some interest in what Christianity and the Christian church has to offer them, but that interest is tempered with an abundance of caution. While they want to connect with a community larger than themselves, they are not sure if Christianity today is capable of being the kind of community Christians are called to be; to use Christian language they would not use, they are not optimistic that the church can actually bear witness to the reign of God.

This chapter offers my closing thoughts on the project. Part One reflects on its mechanics, and wonders about what I might do similarly or differently if I were to perform this research again. Part Two connects the theological exploration in Chapter Four more directly to the data revealed in Chapter Three, understanding community as a kind of transcendence through which one might connect with an otherworldly God. Part Three concludes this paper with an acknowledgment of the tensions inherent in evangelism, especially in a Post-Christian era with its disinterest in a transcendent God.

Part 1: Project Evaluation

In looking back on this research project, I am satisfied with the amount and content of the data I collected through the interviews I conducted. An hour with each participant provided for a focused conversation that also allowed enough space for tangential branches from the planned interview structure. This unofficial time limit encouraged me to not stray too far off topic while still providing for freedom for the conversation to develop. Participants and I spent more time on questions that were more

important to each participant and less time on questions that participants had straightforward answers to or were less interested in sharing about.

These interviews provided me with approximately nine hours of interviews to review and analyze, which was daunting at first but, once I began analysis, was not an overwhelming amount of data. My most significant challenge was adapting to a different kind of research methodology. Due to my engineering background, all my prior training had been in quantitative research rather than qualitative. I feel much more confident in qualitative research now, so that if I perform additional studies like this in the future, I will be more capable in the analysis process.[166] If I were to perform this project again, I would like to have cultivated a lengthier set of possible codes when I began analysis, drawn from better-defined sensitizing concepts. While I was pleasantly surprised by the general importance of community which came out of this research, looking for a more general kind of community would have been easier if I had not focused on an alternative to the individualism and materialism of American culture.

One disappointment in the project as a whole is the lack of diversity in the pool of participants. As the overwhelming majority of participants identified as males and inhabited a particular age range, there was a generally narrow set of experiences to draw on. Most participants stories were of growing up around churches in the 1990s, a very particular time, and leaving those churches during the 2000s, another very particular time. While much can be universalized from their experiences, and while the study had some participants outside the male and younger Generation X or older Millennial

166. I offer my thanks in this regard to Rev. Dr. Mary Sue Dreier for a class assignment in which I performed very similar research. That assignment bolstered my confidence when I approached the research for this project, and I am grateful for both the assignment and her feedback on it.

experience,[167] only a small minority of participants fell outside of one of those categories. Having a larger set of participants might have created opportunities for generalization with more confidence; however, that would have also meant broadening the research beyond the community whose stories I explored. Even if the set of participants is not reflective of the general American population, it is certainly representative of the particular community whose stories I sought.

The most surprising data to come out of this project was how closely participant descriptions of an ideal spiritual community resembled the kind of community that is described in the Christian New Testament as how the church ought to be. When I began this project, I expected a connection to community. I hypothesized that in participant's stories I would find a desire for belonging and purpose, and I looked for examples of the invitation of the Holy Spirit into the reign of God. Through the project, obvious examples of the Holy Spirit's work did not surface. I see this as a positive; with that formulation of my hypothesis, I had inadvertently put myself in the position of making judgments on the experiences of others. Not finding these examples freed me to let go of my presuppositions and actually listen to the content of participants' stories.

By releasing my assumptions regarding others' experiences of the Spirit, I found the desire for community that I had expected, though not in the way I planned. As I mentioned above, I expected participants to want something more "counter-cultural," and while some participants expressed that desire, it was certainly not the norm. Across all participant interviews, my research suggests that participants are interested in a

167. Participants largely identified within the age range of 41–54. In Fall 2024 when I was performing these interviews, Generation X was between ages of 44 and 59 and Millennial were between 28 and 43.

community which is welcoming to outsiders and expresses care through words and actions to insiders and outsiders alike.

The connection between participants' ideal community and the church presents an opportunity for evangelism in an increasingly Post-Christian era. Creating a community in which people find belonging reflects what apatheists are searching for in a spiritual community. As they are gathered into the church community, they learn the behaviors and practices which characterize the reign of God and, through the continued work of the Holy Spirit in and through the community, come to faith and trust in Jesus Christ and themselves become proclaimers and witnesses of the reign of God.

Part 2: Applied Theology

The yearning for community expressed through participants' spiritual stories is firmly situated within a Post-Christian era. Even as participants shared some interest in a spiritual community, they did not share any particular desire for an encounter with a transcendent god. Transcendence was overshadowed by the concerns of the immanent frame. As is typical and expected of apatheists, God held little importance to participants, even those who claimed a belief in the Christian God. In their secular$_3$ understanding, aside from some more intellectual wonderings about spirituality or the nature of potential deities, the practical ways a person lived their lives was seen as most important. The participant's shared stories expressed a dissatisfaction and disappointment with any kind of focus on their individual salvation, especially those which announced their pending damnation or treated them as having less full lives for not being part of the Christian "club."

Where I found potential connections to Christianity did not involve transcendence, but were through the immanent frame. Participants showed cautious interest in the radical welcome, hospitality, and acts of loving service which a congregation who bears witness to the reign of God lives out; however, this interest did not extend to the inbreaking reign of God itself, only to its immanent frame practices. Most participants had an understanding of what they thought Christianity is "supposed" to be, either through Christianity's ubiquity and position of privilege within American culture or their own religious explorations or experiences. When thinking about that idealized form of Christianity, they saw its appeal, even as they did not think Christianity was able to be it. In one sense, I agree with them. When one's primary way of conceiving the world is through the immanent frame, as in secular$_3$, I also have little hope for Christianity to be who it ought to be. Without transcendence, Christianity is just shiny coating on a community service organization or social club. With a connection to and experience of the transcendent God—in particular, a transformative interaction with the Holy Spirit who brings to memory the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ—the Christian is empowered to bear witness to the not-yet-fulfilled future reign of God in the present in the alternative community of the church.

There are two significant questions remaining in this project. First, what does bearing witness to the inbreaking reign of God look like in the Post-Christian immanent frame? Second, how might an openness to transcendence develop in an apatheist whose social imaginary is firmly secular$_3$? These questions are popular ones today, as they relate to questions of the church's relevance in light of increased secularization. One suggested

answer is to encourage a return to traditional beliefs and practices,[168] though this answer does not address the modern social imaginary, instead presenting one particular set of beliefs as the best option among all the others. A response closer to my own comes from Greg Finke, who invites congregations to seek the work of God already present outside the church and invites the church to join.[169] Yet Finke still structures the work of evangelism as something the church does so that individuals may be saved. He misses the communal aspect of the church, except as a vehicle for facilitating individual conversion.

A third model, from Kyle Beshears, is one of the few who directly address evangelism to apatheists. Beshears suggests a modification to what he views as the typical apologetic model of making a reasoned argument for Christianity, responding to the "skeptic's" objections, then sharing the good news of Jesus with them.[170] When interacting with apatheists, Beshears suggests to create doubt in their currently-held beliefs in order to present a Christianity that is not only reasonable, but desirable.[171] Yet in creating this doubt, what Beshears suggests causes destabilization in an individual. In making an intellectual argument, Beshears is not showing the reign of God as an alternative community proclaiming God's promised future; the church is still a "club" to join once one believes the right beliefs.

168. A denominationally-specific example from Gene Veith, Jr and Trevor Sutton asserts that the answer to rising relativism and apatheism is to be more conservatively Lutheran, emphasizing "the nearness of God, the justifying peace of the cross, the mysterious hiddenness and presence of God in the Sacraments, and the divine purpose found in vocation." Gene Edward Veith Jr. and A. Trevor Sutton, *Authentic Christianity: How Lutheran Theology Speaks to a Postmodern World* (Saint Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 2017), 231.

169. Greg Finke, *Joining Jesus on His Mission: How to Be an Everyday Missionary* (Elgin, IL: Tenth Power, 2014), 27. Emphasis in original.

170. Kyle Beshears, *Apatheism: How to Share When They Don't Care* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2021), 87.

171. Beshears, 91.

Instead of these models, the practical expression of evangelism I suggest may be encountered in Elaine Heath's fictional story of "Sam."[172] Sam is an accountant and three-time divorcee and father, and over time he shared with his coworker Bill his loneliness, worries, and frustrations. After a while, Bill invited Sam to join him for church, and Sam agreed. When he attended with Bill, he was surprised by Bill's church, which was very different from the kind of churches Sam had attended before. He found a diverse congregation with a number of recovery groups meeting during the week, including one for divorce recovery which appealed to Sam. He connected with the pastor's message, and when Sam mentioned to Bill that the pastor, Clark, preached with compassion, Bill replied, "First Church is all about being made new in Christ."[173]

Sam continued to attend First Church, and over the next few months he encountered one surprise after another. He noticed that First Church was authentic; they lived out the things they preached about. First Church was different from anything Sam had experienced before. After some more time, Sam decided to attend a retreat on contemplative prayer, though he was unsure what to expect from it. At this point, Sam did not consider himself a Christian, but he felt a connection to the new household of God found at First Church. At this retreat, in the midst of this community, he had an encounter where he "for the first time in his life, clearly heard God speak to him through the Bible about the details of his own life."[174] When he was leaving the retreat, Sam realized that First Church did not talk about membership very much, but the retreat leader had said

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172. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, 116-121,127-136,140-149,153-160,165-170. Heath uses Sam's narrative in the second half of her book to exemplify her understanding of evangelism.

173. Heath, 121.

174. Heath, 144.

that the retreat they had participated in was a part of the membership covenant for First Church. He was surprised at both things, but Sam wanted to know more.

Sam continued to attend First Church and his involvement grew. He deepened his connections with other members of First Church, learning something about what it is to bear witness to the reign of God in the process. After a year at the church, he had taken part in a number of the church's ministries, experienced and offered hospitality, and through the relationships with members of the church saw what it looked like to be transformed by God. He realized, reflecting on the past year, that he had also been transformed. He was a different person from when he started attending First Church and he realized that he was someone new. He called the pastor who preached the first time he visited, Clark, and said, "I finally get it!… Clark, I just had to tell you, I want to be baptized. I am a Christian."[175]

While this story is fictional, it shows the kind of bearing witness I am proposing. First Church did not put Sam in a set of programs designed to make him a member. He did not have to profess faith in Jesus, pray a particular prayer, or make a commitment of membership to be part of the life of First Church. From when he first attended with Bill to his profession of faith, the members of First Church treated him with hospitality and respect for where Sam was on his faith journey. The members of First Church acted authentically as witnesses of the reign of God. They did the immanent frame practices which apatheists are looking for—serving the poor, helping those who need help, and being with to one another in community. Yet those practices did not feel like something required to Sam; instead, they happened out of the transformative encounter with God

175. Heath, 170.

that First Church's members had experienced and the alternative community God called them to be.

When it comes to bearing witness to the reign of God in a Post-Christian era, these actions are essential in connecting with apatheists. The stories shared by the members of the Bunker show that they are looking for ways to connect with a community who authentically live their faith. A local congregation can be that sort of community, but it must be done with openness and hospitality. Hospitality, more perhaps more accurately a lack of hospitality, was the most prevalent theme in my data. Several participants recounted a lack of welcome and other ill-treatment from Christians as a significant factor in their negative perceptions of Christianity. Diana Butler Bass's description of the "belief-behavior-belonging" model[176] is appropriate: belief is the most important factor in Christendom-based expressions of Christianity. Participants did not believe the right way in the perception of the Christians they encountered, and their lack of belief was reflected in their "unChristian" behaviors; therefore, they were not afforded the opportunity to belong. Instead, participants would be more likely to respond to a community which acted in the reversed form Bass offers: a place to belong, through which they can learn by participation the behaviors which proclaim God's reign, and may result in a transformative encounter with God.[177] This is the same kind of model which Sam experienced in Heath's story.

The understanding of individual congregations as people whom the Holy Spirit has gathered together, as suggested by Edwin van Driel, is also helpful in shaping this

176. Bass, *Christianity After Religion*, 201.

177. Bass, 204–9.

kind of community. If everyone who comes to a congregation is brought to it through the work of the Holy Spirit, then they ought to be welcomed into it as fellow gathered persons. Wherever they are in their walk in life, the Holy Spirit brought them to that place; be it a public worship service, community service opportunity, small group, or whatever else. This understanding serves as a reminder to, as one participant alluded to in the study, view people outside the group no differently from those who are already inside, welcoming them as new insiders rather than excluding them as outsiders.[178] Hospitality is encouraged when the people who might otherwise be seen as outsiders are understood to be brought to that place by the Holy Spirit.

Sam's story also suggests an answer to the second question raised by my research. Experiencing the transcendence found in community may help someone entrenched in the modern social imaginary to experience and be transformed by the transcendent God. Sam's first encounter with God, while a deeply personal experience, happened in community: at a prayer retreat while doing a spiritual practice with other members.[179] At the same retreat, Sam recognized that he felt a sense of belonging to the group;[180] First Church was something beyond himself with which he had developed a connection.

Robert Geraci, writing about guilds in *World of Warcraft*, recognizes that the communities formed in the game are more than just gamers doing gaming together. They are their own entity beyond the players themselves. Geraci notes this through participation statistics: players with guild memberships were less likely to stop playing

178. Participant 6, interview.

179. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, 144.

180. Heath, 149.

the game and players in guilds saw guild membership as essential to having a positive gaming experience.[181] In my own experiences playing *World of Warcraft* in a more casual guild, the fear of letting down my guildmates while engaging content together was a significant motivator to my performance. My guild served as something larger than just myself—it was transcendent. Geraci continues, discussing a way these communities influenced their members lives both inside and outside of the game.

> Something as a raiding calendar [a schedule of when which players will engage which content] can ensure that players perceive themselves as integral members of a community; indeed it forces them to see themselves that way because it reminds them of when they must be available to other players and forces itself into the organization of the players' time outside of the game.[182]

The guild I was a member in did not go quite so far as to have raiding calendars (it would have violated our "real life comes first" rule) but the sense is there. Community is its own transcendence, as people form connections to a group that is outside of themselves.

This connection is also present in the stories from the Bunker's members. At times, it was in the negative. The stories of two participants of attending churches spoke of no transcendent connection to those communities. They could tell others felt that connection, but they continued to be outsiders. Yet they did feel that connection to the Bunker itself. As one participant noted, the Bunker is his "non-blood family."[183] For others this connection was less explicitly stated, but can be seen in the frequency of their interactions. The most active members, all of whom participated in this research, give up a Friday evening every other week to spend time with one another and interact daily in

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181. Geraci, *Virtually Sacred*, 37.

182. Geraci, 39.

183. Participant 1, interview.

the community Discord—the Bunker is its own transcendent community, more significant than its individual members because of its significance to those individual members.

A person's initial encounter with the church can bring about the same kind of encounter with transcendence. Returning to Heath's story, on Sam's first visit, he realized there was something different about First Church and felt drawn to it.[184] He had not yet made any connection to God—God is too far beyond for the social imaginary—but he could tell something beyond himself was happening at First Church, even as he saw its expression in the immanent frame. The transcendence of community extends in more experienceable ways into the immanent, and serves as a beginning for further connection with the less experienceable transcendence of God.

As people are gathered to local congregations by the Holy Spirit, and as they are welcomed with hospitality and find belonging there, connection to community is the starting point for openness to develop to God's transcendence. Even for a person who is not yet open to God, in community—the transcendence they are open to—they may see the work of God in the people who have already experienced the inbreaking, transformative transcendence of God. To paraphrase William Abraham, they see the reign of God in the midst of the community even as they are puzzled and intrigued by what they see happening there. Abraham continues, "Evangelism [is] rooted in a corporate experience of the rule of God...[that] signified the active presence of God in their midst."[185] This is how Sam, in Heath's story, experienced evangelism. The Spirit gathered

184. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, 121.

185. Abraham, *The Logic of Evangelism*, 38.

him to First Church through the invitation of his coworker, Bill. He developed a transcendent connection to the community as he was welcomed by it and built relationships with the members there. In the midst of community, he learned the practices of First Church. His openness to a transcendent God grew, culminating in an experience with God during a retreat; and, ultimately, his recognition of being transformed by his experiences with God, profession of faith, and his full initiation into the reign of God in baptism.

First Church also represented an alternative community. This is something Sam noticed early on. He tells one of the pastors, "I've never experienced anything like First Church… I went to church a while after my first divorce, but it wasn't like your church at all. It was more normal."[186] He noticed that there was something very different about the way the members of First Church lived. One family had achieved and then given up the "American dream" of a big house and multiple vehicles in order to better serve their community. The members of First Church welcomed people whom broader society would rather ignore, such as survivors of abuse and violence. They stood out as pilgrims who didn't quite fit in the world, yet Sam was interested in the things they bore witness to in the lives as priests.

Sam's story, while it centers the outsider coming into a local congregation, also highlights the role of Christians in this process. After experiencing welcome and hospitality in the Christian community, the community teaches new members the community's values as proclaimers of the reign of God—values which, at least in their immanent frame expressions, the outsiders likely already hold. The central ethics through

186. Heath, *The Mystic Way of Evangelism*, 130.

which Christians bear witness to the reign of God as an alternative community, especially the call to be with other humans in suffering and to share resources so that human needs are met, are already valued by the participants in this study. Nearly all participants included taking care of people in need and ensuring their well-being in their descriptions of an ideal spiritual community. These behaviors would be easy to learn from a Christian community, as participants in the study already found them important.

This also assists in the evangelistic process. Centering the work of the Holy Spirit as the active agent in evangelism means the Christian does not need to act to convince someone about the correctness of Christian belief or to try and encourage that belief through a logical argument. Allowing the work of evangelism to remain the work of the Holy Spirit shifts the Christian's priority onto their own actions, not the actions of others. The Christian's role is to proclaim the reign of God authentically to a world, like the members of First Church, as encouraged by the Holy Spirit. What this means practically, as connected to the data, is to discourage behaviors which make people who do not profess faith in Jesus feel like objects to be converted or "heathens" to be belittled and excluded. Remembering the Holy Spirit's work in bringing a person to faith encourages a Christian to function as a pilgrim-priest, in the understanding of Stefan Paas, representing God to the world and worshiping God on behalf of an unbelieving world.[187]

This is not dissimilar to the role I have within the Bunker community, as I described it in Chapter One. My presence and actions bear witness to God as we are with one another in community. Though they would likely not use this language, I am a pilgrim-priest to them. When the more theistic members (and sometimes even the less

187. Paas, *Pilgrims and Priests*, 216.

theistic ones) are struggling or have concerns for an other, as the one who represents God to them they ask me for prayers or guidance. In this community, my role reflects the larger role of the church in the world, representing God and the world to one another as a priesthood. The spiritual stories of these particular apatheists teach the Christian church to be itself: the people gathered by God who bear witness to God's reign against all that is wrong in the world. Connection with community through a local congregation, encountering a transcendence there that is familiar even in the modern social imaginary, serves as the beginning of a developing openness to a transcendent God, in which a person may be transformed by their own encounter with God and bear witness to God's reign in a local congregation, just as others bore witness to them in community.

Part 3: Tension and Transcendence

Throughout my reading and study for the Doctor of Ministry program and this paper, I had a recurring frustration expressed in the questions I raised for each author in my class assignments and my own notes. At some point in each work I read, the author seemed to shrug their shoulders and say, "It's all up to God!" Over and over again, I read this statement. Sometimes it was phrased in more academic language, other times it was that blunt, but my notes are full of exasperation every time it is mentioned. I was looking for something concrete to implement in a congregation and did not find it, so my frustration grew. And yet, here I am in my own work saying the exact same thing: the work of evangelism is all up to God. Yes, there are practical things a congregation can (and should) do to foster an environment in which God's action is more likely to be recognized, both by the members of the congregation and the "outsiders" the Holy Spirit

gathers to it, but when looked at in its simplest form, evangelism is God's work—Christians must trust that God will do what God has promised to do.

This is the tension inherent in evangelism, especially in a Post-Christian era. The critical moment in which a person has a transformative encounter with the God who raised Jesus by the Holy Spirit does not come about through human action. No amount of convincing, cajoling, or proselytizing; or even loving service, hospitality, and welcome can force a person to encounter the transcendent God, especially in the secular$_3$ social imaginary and the immanent frame. Yet, as the spiritual stories I explored show, human action can certainly make that encounter more or less likely. Christian communities which are objectifying, inhospitable, and inauthentic push people away, especially those people who have a conception of Christianity that emphasizes authenticity, radical welcome, and loving service. A Christian community who lives out those more positive features can foster a transcendence of belonging to that community, even for people who are outsiders to it, that serves as a beginning of further openness to God.

In a Post-Christian era, I can understand the ease with which one might lose hope for the future of the church, as one reads about ever-decreasing church attendance in America even as a totalistic Christian nationalism grows in popularity. The modern social imaginary has little room for a transcendent god, even as it actively seeks transcendence outside of the Christian religion. An apatheist sees little practical benefit to any deity and does not care about what that deity might require of them. It certainly seems like a hopeless situation facing the church, except God gives hope for even the most hopeless situation.

Roger Owens and Anthony Robinson write of a dark night of the church, alluding to the poem by St. John of the Cross. In this time of uncertainty as the church with all its Christendom era systems is faced with a Post-Christian era, the way forward is hard to see. The programs and practices that the church has relied on are increasingly ineffective when apathy about God is commonplace. Owens and Robinson invite the church to remember a simple truth: "God is doing something."[188] For God is active in the world and in the church. The Holy Spirit is bringing humans into constructive interference with herself, gathering them to a congregation, and transforming them to bear witness as to the reign of God as pilgrim-priests.

I set out in this project to answer a question which formed through my interactions with people outside of the church: *What do the spiritual stories shared by apatheistic members of an online community centered around a video-gaming livestream say to the church about its identity as an evangelistic community, especially among people for whom the existence of God is irrelevant to their daily life?* The answer I found was surprising in its straightforwardness: the stories of the apatheists I interviewed invite the church to be a welcoming alternative community—a place to belong and share life together, to care for one another and meet the needs of others, and to live authentically as people who proclaim the reign of God as pilgrim-priests. This calls the church to trust the work of the Holy Spirit in gathering Christ's church rather than relying on their own efforts. Centering the work of the Holy Spirit frees the church to live at the edge of itself. As pilgrim-priests, the church is transformed and empowered by the Spirit to bear witness

188. L. Roger Owens and Robinson, "Dark Night of the Church: Relearning the Essentials," *The Christian Century*, December 26, 2012, https://www.christiancentury.org/article/2012-12/dark-night-church.

to God and God's reign to those outside the church in local congregations. In response to the gathering work of the Holy Spirit, the church invites and welcomes those outsiders into a community in which they experience transcendence through belonging, while also being with them and representing them to God. As they continue to be with one another in community, the Holy Spirit continues her work in the outsider, that they also might be transformed by an encounter with God to be witnesses and pilgrim-priests of God to the world.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Interview Structure

Outline of Interview

- Thank the participant for their willingness to have this conversation.
- Briefly describe…
  - the purpose of the interview (to listen to the participant's story of interactions with religion and spirituality, especially Christianity)
  - the purpose of the project (to help the Christian church better understand its own identity and its relationship to those outside of its community.)
  - how the interview will relate to the project (to hear in their encounters with "transcendence" how those encounters inform the church's relationship with those outside of its community.)
- Explain to each participant that the interview is being recorded and transcribed and I am taking separate notes.
- Remind each participant that at any point they may choose to not answer a question or end the interview.

Demographic Questions

1. Gender: Male / Female / Other
2. Age: 18–30 / 31–45 / 41–55 / 55–70 / Over 71
3. What is the highest level of education completed? Less than High School / High School / Some College / 4-year College Degree / Graduate Degree
4. In what field would you describe your occupation?

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the "sacred artifact" you brought with you. What makes it feel "sacred" to you?
2. Describe your current religious affiliation, if any. Or, more generally, your current connections to religious groups.
3. What does spirituality mean to you? What do you wonder about the world in a broad sense? Are you satisfied with the answers to those wonderings?
4. Tell me about your early experiences with a church or religion. What was the worship service like? Sunday School? What else do you remember?
5. Tell me what led you to leave that church? Did you go somewhere else? Was there one event or many events?
6. Tell me about your experiences with Christians since leaving a church.
7. With what you know of Christianity, are there aspects of it that still attract you? Are there aspects that repulse you?
8. How has your impression of Christianity changed over the years?
9. Imagine the perfect "church" or "spiritual community." What are some of its aspects? What is it for? What is it against? How does it behave?
10. Is there anything I haven't asked that you'd like to add?

Appendix 2: Data Analysis Codes

Code	Description	Freq.
Afterlife	Thoughts about what happens after death.	24
Angry at God	Anger directed at deity, if deity is thought to exist.	5
Apatheism	Less committed attitude towards belief.	39
Apatheism.Tolerance	Vulnerability to difference, as a feature of apatheism.	24
Authenticity	Saying what you do and doing what you say.	37
Authenticity.Hospitality	An attitude of respect, care, and welcome for others.	38
Community	A group of people interacting together.	34
Community.Lack	Looking for, but not finding, community.	6
Community.Third Space	A specific expression of place separate from work and home.	12
Dating	Interactions that have to do with personal romantic relationships.	3
Difference	Exposure with something different from what you're used to in a neutral sense.	5
Difference.Alternative	Something that is different from the norm, in a positive sense.	14
Difference.Weird	An encounter with something different, but in a negative way.	20
Ethics	The rules and behaviors which govern human interaction.	38
Ethics.Service	As a subset of ethics, acts which are done for the benefit of others.	25
Hypocrisy	Saying one thing and doing another.	34
Hypocrisy.Cherry Picking	Following some rules and ignoring others.	10
Hypocrisy.Divisions	Splits within Christianity, seen as a negative.	16
Hypocrisy.Inhospitality	A lack of care, welcome, and respect for others.	86

Code	Description	Freq.
Hypocrisy. Lack of Accountability	Thinking that nothing is someone's fault or otherwise not acknowledging responsibility.	10
Hypocrisy.Transactional	Actions seen as a quid pro quo; I'll do X for you if you do Y for me.	14
Immanence	The concrete, observable things in the world.	14
Individual Salvation	Emphasis on a personal relationship with Jesus.	10
Meaningless	There was no perceived value in the particular thing being discussed.	17
Out of Touch	There is a disconnect between how something is valued and what is actually important.	38
Participation	The connection of the individual and the church.	1
Participation.Aesthetics	A connection to the beauty or artistic character of something in church.	4
Participation.Discussion	Having a more participatory discussion instead of a sermon in worship.	1
Participation.Forced	The act of participation was not by the participant's choice.	23
Participation. Grew up in Church	The individual was raised going to church.	12
Participation.Music	A connection with the musical aspects of church.	12
Participation. No Church Growing Up	Didn't have a connection to a church in early childhood.	3
Participation.Ritual	The regular habits of the church, such as liturgy and other practices.	16
Participation.School	A connection with either pre-schools, parochial schools, or Sunday School.	8
Participation. Sharing Peace	A particular ritual that involves greeting most of the other church participants within the worship service.	3

Code	Description	Freq.
Participation.Voluntary	The act of participation was by the participant's choice.	27
Personal Connection	The relationship to the church was affected by a personal connection with another individual.	18
Personal Connection. Jesus	Not a connection to an individual, but to Jesus of Nazareth as a person—though not necessarily in a "personal relationship" way. Often used as a respect for Jesus' teachings.	8
Politics	Christianity's interaction with politics in a general sense.	3
Politics.Conservative	Christianity's interaction with conservative politics.	12
Politics.Progressive	Christianity's interaction with progressive politics	7
Questioning	A desire to have one's questions answered.	82
Transcendence	General expressions of transcendence.	33
Transcendence. Heroic Action	Antihumanist / "Heroic Action" transcendence.	4
Transcendence. Inbreaking	Beyonder / Inbreaking, Surrender transcendence.	17
Transcendence. Inner Genius	Exclusive Humanist / Inner Genius transcendence.	47
Ubiquity	Encountering Christianity even if you don't seek it out. Christianity's presence in American culture.	10
Voluntary Association	Individual congregations as participants in a "church marketplace" and competing for members between their "clubs."	10
Zealotry	An attitude of belief with a high level of commitment.	35
Zealotry.Brainwashing	Things meant to encourage belief when the participant is not aware of it.	19

Code	Description	Freq.
Zealotry.Easy Answers	Discouraging questions by providing simplistic answers to complex questions.	24
Zealotry.Rules	Behaviors are required in order to belong to the community.	39
Zealotry. Self-Righteousness	Arrogance, sense of being "better than."	51
Zealotry.Selfishness	A focus on the self instead of on others.	19
Zealotry.Unquestioning	Active discouragement of questions.	21

Glossary

alternative community. The gathered people of God who bear witness to the reign of God against the status quo of the world and proclaims good news for the poor, captive, blind, and oppressed.

anti-humanism. A connection to transcendence which rejects both the modern moral order and anything beyond the immanent frame, instead embracing inner strength and heroic action.

apatheism. An attitude of belief reflecting an indifference to the existence of deity or deities, the actions of deity in the world, or the value of following a deity.

beyonders. Those who connect with transcendence and claim there is more to life than only human flourishing and that there exists a life after death. Beyonders find their motivation in something transcendent breaking into the immanent and surrendering to it.

church. God's alternative community and new household of faith, gathered by the Holy Spirit to bear witness to the future reign of God breaking into the present.

evangelism. The process by which the Holy Spirit works at the edges of the church and the world, gathering people to the church, who responds to the Spirit's work with an invitation to be initiated into the reign of God.

exclusive humanism. A connection to transcendence which embraces the modern moral order and rejects anything beyond the immanent frame.

immanent frame. The experienceable rational and natural space, without a connection to the supernatural or transcendent.

modern moral order. An understanding of morality which holds human flourishing and mutual benefit as its highest value. In order to ensure the flourishing of all, society ought be tolerant and accepting of whatever each individual needs to flourish.

reign of God. The promised perfect future of God, breaking into the world through the resurrection of Jesus and to be fulfilled in the new creation, in which God and humanity are perfectly "with" one another.

post-Christianity. An era characterized by the Christian narrative being both familiar but also largely ignored. In this era, unbelief in God seems more plausible than belief in God.

secular$_1$. The primary Medieval understanding of secular as "of the world," distinct from the more spiritual or religious separateness of, for example, monastics.

secular$_2$. The primary Modern understanding of secular, meaning something distinct from religion in general and the Christian church in particular.

secular$_3$. The primary Post-Christian understanding of secular, in which belief in Christianity or religion is experienced as one option of belief among many.

social imaginary. The underlying assumptions through which meaning and significance is constructed without a reference to transcendence.

transcendence. Something "bigger than" or outside of the immanent frame of human knowledge or experience.

zealotry. An attitude of belief characterized by its intensity and exclusivity with regard to those beliefs.

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