

Maintaining Difference:

Testimony from the Cambridge Christian Fellowship

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“When I kept silent,
my bones wasted away
through my groaning all day long.
For day and night
Your hand was heavy upon me;
my strength was sapped
as in the heat of the summer.
Then I acknowledged my sin to you
and did not cover up my iniquity. I said “I will confess
my transgressions to the Lord –
and you forgave
the guilt of my sin” (Psalm 32)

Thank you, God.

Introduction

It is a Monday evening in November and I walk through the hallways of the divinity school following the paper sheets taped to the floor that read “Cambridge Christian Fellowship.” I am thinking about a conversation I had with my friend about how often we think. He had insisted that he has very few thoughts throughout the day. He put the number at 6, maybe, on the most thoughtful day. I always think – and ponder, and wonder and question and worry. I walk down the stairs to the basement level of the Divinity School and think about how he’s able to think so little. I vigorously think, “I want that!” But then I think, do I, really? I mean, I wouldn’t be thinking this right now if I only had six thoughts per day. I’d have to reserve those thoughts for the six most important things that happen in my day, and thinking about whether or not to think couldn’t come before, “should I wake up, eat, make dinner plans, go to class, talk to a friend, and go to sleep.” A question burns in my head: am I capable of such peaceful simplicity? As I ask this, I can feel the twinge of a headache. I take a breath and it eases slightly. I have reached my destination and I walk into the room where Cambridge has their Monday Night Live sessions. I nod hello to a couple of people as the music plays in the background:

“You gave your life for me...”

I walk around to the side and take a seat near the back.

“I lay my life down, at your feet,

Have your way in me...”

I wonder whether it would be ok to record the music. I am concerned because I have not asked permission to record their group sessions yet and I am thinking that it would be rude to ask now, as the songs are a part of active worship. People stand and sway, or sit with eyes closed, or kneel and put their hands to the ceiling. I decide not to record the songs. I sit with my arms crossed and try, unsuccessfully, to think about nothing.

The song is over and several students get up to give announcements. The announcements are about community activism prayer meetings and other opportunities for Christians to get involved on campus. As the announcements are made, the feeling in the room sways slightly towards the secular. I feel less engaged in the lyricism of Christ-inspired language. Several other “housekeeping” announcements are made before Charles Kiefer, the campus minister at King’s Park at UNC-Chapel Hill, is introduced and, amid clapping, laughter and lots of smiles, he takes the podium. Charles begins his sermon with some friendly jokes and a message of love and support for Reggie Roberson, Duke’s campus minister, whose wife has just had a baby. Charles then asks the audience to turn to Romans, Chapter 7, to introduce the topic for the day, which is “The Greatest Law of All.” Charles interrupts this topic in order to start with a collective prayer. I bow my head because I think I should. I start to think what it would be like to bow my head in submission to God. I don’t do it but I think about it. I continue to think and ignore the prayer until Charles’ language pushes the thoughts out of my head:

“Your word, Lord, still lives in our hearts, your word became flesh, you dwelled among us and died, your word raised from the dead, your word, Lord, still is changing people all over the world and we thank you for your word and we ask that these words we speak

tonight will shape us and free us and liberate us and encourage us; God be here with these students in your name we pray, Amen.” (Emphasis in Speech)

He speaks quickly, as if the words are running from his mouth, and each time he says “word” my body shudders somewhere. I hear “word, word, word, word...God, amen.” My emotions reverberate through my body as if Charles had played a chord on the piano and left the pedal down. But eventually the dampers fall, the music stops and I’ve forgotten the chord. What is an ongoing song to some is just a note to me. After the prayer, I returned to my thoughts and Charles to his sermon.

The time I have spent with the Cambridge Christian Fellowship has introduced me not only to the language of evangelism, but also to the experience of that language. When my analytical thoughts were replaced with “words” inspired by God, I felt the presence of God through language. The fact that I was moved by the “word” fits nicely as a metaphor for how evangelical language can grab an outsider and bring him closer to God. The lyricism of the language, or the way the words are said, produced a feeling that was then associated with spirituality because of the content of the language. As my thought pattern shows, I selectively heard “word...” linked with “...God” and experienced it physically.

I wrote this story in December, about a month after the event occurred. My intention was to use the story to show how my fieldwork was being done from a position between disbelief and belief. I entered this liminal space not by choice, but by being tossed into it, when my body responded to the lyricism of the words. Despite my best efforts to think my way out of experiencing the Gospel emotionally and corporeally, the

words of prayer grabbed me and destabilized my ideological center. This experience led me to conceptualize conversion as the point of division between insider and outsider, belief and disbelief. What I did not understand at the time was the way in which the hand of God was working through my research and writing. As I read this text now, I see that it heavily foreshadows my conversion, which would take place in March, three months after I wrote the story. The story is not a representation of a neat in-group/out-group division, but rather a very complicated testimony about the power of words and the presence of God. I find that these two notions are uniquely embedded in my conversion experience, and I would like to take a moment to explain them in conjunction with the two foundational sources for this thesis.

Susan Harding has written about a similar process of entering the liminal space between belief and disbelief. The difference, of course, is that Harding did not convert. The fact that she did not experience God in this way has important implications for the framing of argument. Harding argues in The Book of Jerry Falwell that “it is the Word of God, the gospel, and, believers would add, the Holy Spirit, God himself, that converts” (Harding 36). She qualifies the comment about the Holy Spirit by saying that “believers would add,” structurally separating the believers’ point of view from her conception of the process of conversion. She implies that the Holy Spirit is an addition, or side note, to the converting power of the Word of God. The Cambridge ministers proclaim that the words of the Gospel are derived directly from God, but add that no amount of preaching or evangelism can change a person’s heart. *Only God can do that.* While I do not plan to analyze God, I would like to note that His presence has important implications for the way that the Cambridge community conceptualizes agency.

In his book, Christian Moderns, Webb Keane problematizes the relationship between words and God's presence. He sees a tension between the articulation of God's "grander plan or design" and the notion that the individual has the agency to choose to accept Christ. Keane notes that "if social transformation is more than the aggregation of discrete individual changes [i.e. God's plan], it depends on some forms of mediation" (Keane 149). What are the forms of mediation? Keane argues that the "publicly circulating semiotic forms" are the "point of articulation between individuals and larger orders of change" (Keane 149). He goes on to argue that the conversion of one man was articulated by stripping agency from the public semiotic forms. He supports this argument with evidence that words are separated from things. In contrast with this notion, I have found not only that words are articulated as things, but that they also produce a physical manifestation of God's love when listened to. The point of uncertainty about agency at Cambridge seems not to be that words lack power, but that they are given so much, in conjunction with the notion that only God can convert. This brings us back to Harding's argument, in which she claims that language "converts by degrees" (Harding 36).

I find that there is an opportunity to combine some of Harding's notions of the speaker/listener with Keane's model of semiotics and agency. In so doing, I hope to paint a picture of the way that I experienced the presence of God at Cambridge. The problem that I see in applying Harding's argument about conversion is that it appears to give too much agency to language and leaves out the presence of God. In contrast, Keane's model of the use of public semiotics in conversion stories seems to give too much agency to the individual, who is able to strip words of agency. My conversion experience has been

marked by an acute awareness of the power of words to affect my body and consciousness. But I have also become aware of the guiding hand of God, whose presence I have come to acknowledge as pre-existing my conversion. I use my experience to inform my thesis that difference (or the articulation that a worldview shift has occurred) is maintained by both the experience of language (which is spoken and listened to) and the “thing” that the language is meant to represent, which is God.

Study Site: The Cambridge Christian Fellowship

I first arrived at Cambridge in October of 2008, when a classmate took an interest in my project and offered to bring me to the Monday Night Live (MNL) event. This event occurs every Monday night, beginning at 7:30pm and continuing formally until 9pm, but often later into the evening. The event begins with half an hour of song and prayer. The lyrics to the songs are posted on a slideshow and a live band, made up of Cambridge members, performs for the congregation. The songs are followed by a sermon, which lasts about an hour. After the sermon, the minister leads a prayer and the congregation is dismissed. Socializing follows, along with individual prayer with the ministers. At the end of the MNL event, I would meet up with students after the sermon and talk. Using this social setting as a starting off point, I began asking people for off-site interviews.

In my interviews, I asked students and ministers for their conversion story or testimony. I assumed that the testimonies would be a reflection of what was talked about in the sermons and that I could link the stories back to the community by comparing transcriptions. As I later found out, the sermons do not ultimately provide a space for confirmation of the power of the testimony. The space of confirmation is not the literal meeting place of Monday Night Live, but rather the web relationships that are built

through this weekly meeting. Testimony is shared over lunch or in the halls or after class. Likewise, it may also be shared after the sermon; but the Monday Night Live event was just another location in this space-shifting community.

I was able to obtain access to and “receive” the testimony because I was incorporated in the community. The process was one of simultaneous incorporation. I was a part of the community because I “received” testimonies and I had access to testimonies because I was a part of the community. I have put the term “receive” in quotes because it carries a specific meaning at Cambridge. When someone receives testimony, he not only listens to it, but also *hears it with his heart*.¹ My engagement with the field site, the space in which testimony is shared, was marked by a series of radical changes in my identity as God began to reveal the meaning of the testimony to me.

In my literature review, I will discuss what it means to say that one has “beliefs.” While the term is problematic, I will use it tentatively here because it is used on the Cambridge website. Here is how they describe themselves formally:

“We Believe:

The Bible to be the inspired, the only infallible, authoritative Word of God.

In the deity of our Lord Jesus Christ, in His virgin birth, in His sinless life, in His miracles, in His vicarious and atoning death through His shed blood, in His bodily resurrection, in His ascension to the right hand of the Father, and in His personal return

¹ I believe that if I had not been emotionally open, people still would have given me their testimonies, because sharing is part of the purpose of evangelism. However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 1, approaching the testimony from a hard-fast position of disbelief and secularism would have yielded a different kind of testimony.

in power and glory.

In the present ministry of the Holy Spirit by whose indwelling the Christian is enabled to live a godly life.”²

These beliefs qualify Cambridge for the label “fundamentalist,” for their strict adherence to Biblical Truth and their literal interpretation of the miracles in the New Testament (Harding xv). Other words that might describe Cambridge are “Pentecostal,” or “charismatic” for their reference to the indwelling of the Holy Spirit and their practice of speaking in tongues as a regular activity in prayer. Cambridge may also be considered “evangelical” for their views about spreading the Gospel.

Cambridge is run by a group of six ministers, one of whom is a 2008 graduate of Duke and is in training. The other five are ordained ministers from various Divinity Schools around the country. The ministers are in charge of giving sermons, administering prayer, evangelizing and directing the program.³ Students also take on some leadership responsibilities and hold offices such as President, Secretary, Treasurer, etc. They help to plan events, such as barbeques, group prayer and Bible studies.

Methods

I interviewed eight Cambridge members, three of whom are ministers. The other five interviews were with students. My first interview subject was Reggie Roberson, who

² This information was gathered from the Cambridge website. Also note that I have elected to use a different format for quoting this part. Please see my terminology section for a full explanation.

³ The Director of the Campus Ministry, Reggie Roberson, is employed independently of Duke University. His revenue comes from donations from former Duke Students who give monthly donations directly to him. This allows for Cambridge to be a free service (there are no membership fees) for the Duke community. Although I have not confirmed this, I think, like other student religious groups, Cambridge has a charter from the university to use school property.

is the head minister, or “campus director” (Cambridge website). This was the only interview that was not tape recorded. Notes were taken during and after the interview. After my interview with Reggie, the focus of my project shifted, and I began to focus more on linguistics than on direct interaction between evangelicals and non-evangelicals. I next interviewed Christian Pikaart, who is a friend of a friend. I received his testimony, which was about forty-five minutes long. By “receive,” I mean both in the sense of “listened to” and also in the Christian sense, in that the testimony had an effect on my approach to Christianity. From here on out, each testimony would further change both the way I approached the project and the way I approached faith. I proceeded to interview four more Cambridge students, two males and two females. I also interviewed two of the other campus ministers, Kenesha and James.

Each of these interviews was between forty and fifty minutes. My opening question was some variation of, “Could you tell me your conversion story or how you came to Christ?” or, “Could you tell me your testimony?” After that, I only intervened to nod or ask for clarification about something in the story. On average, the interviewees would share stories for about twenty minutes. In the earlier interviews, I would ask for a definition of terms. In the later interviews, I asked only for the testimony. The final two interviews I conducted asked for a different kind of testimony: the story of witnessing a miracle. These two interviews were with Osagie and Larissa, both of whom I had known before the research project. I sought out testimony about miracles because I found that it provided an important contrast with the “formal” testimony, or the conversion story.

The idea that testimony may also be shared in informal settings needs to be discussed here because I made a methodological choice to focus on the “formal”

testimony. I say “formal” because the story of conversion is what is implied if one asks for a “testimony.” However, people can also “testify” about miracles or other acts of God. The difference in the terms largely has to do with the setting and the time available. The testimony can only be shared if there is ample time and intimacy. Either the speaker must be sharing the story of conversion with a congregation or the speaker must share in a one-on-one setting. I chose to study the testimony in the one-on-one setting for two reasons. First, it was the only form of testimony I was aware of as a secular student, because I did not yet understand what it meant to “testify” to an act of God. At that point in my research, I was looking for “conversion stories.” Second, the one-on-one setting provides a narrative that is much more worked over and complete, with a beginning, middle and end.

This structure of the formal testimony is determined in part by an annual workshop that is put on during the Monday Night Live event. Reggie counseled students to develop a testimony that could be shared in the span of a conversation.⁴ The purpose of the testimony, says Reggie, is to show how Christ is working in your life. Looking at the testimony as a whole, the speaker sets up a narrative of difference that is cached as self-transformation. The first part of the testimony talks about what it was like before conversion, then the middle part speaks to the moment of conversion and then the final part reiterates life after conversion, when the individual *walks with Jesus*. This structure is not something that is imagined, or observed or universal; it is taught and practiced among the congregation.

⁴ See Appendix A. This document was handed out during a sermon titled “The Power of Testimony.” This sermon involved an interactive session of writing down a testimony using this sheet as a reference. The written testimonies were then shared in groups. I analyze this document to show how the testimony is a planned, edited, re-presentation of the change in ones life through Christ.

My methods for analysis have been determined by the course that my project has taken. As the focus of the study changed over time, I adjusted my methods accordingly. I began my project by setting up a binary between “evangelical” students and “secular” students. However, I found that these two groups could not be specifically defined. I decided that I would focus on differences in language and locate the space of interaction between evangelical and non-evangelical through comparing the narrative structure of testimonies. This focus ended up falling short of providing me with a real platform for analysis. As I started doing interviews, I found that the testimonies were specific, not only to the person sharing them, but also to me, as a secular listener.

The focus of my study had direct effects on the results of my interviews for several reasons. When I interviewed Kenesha, I told her that my project was about the testimony and identity. I said this partly because I had decided that was the direction I wanted to take the project, but also because I was personally curious about how the individual, her identity and Christ all fit together. The result was that Kenesha’s testimony is specifically about identity, while none of the other testimonies mention identity directly.

I changed the driving question behind my thesis because of my experience with Kenesha and my growing interest in the way that my identity was changing as a result of listening (and *hearing*) testimony. The question that I am answering for my thesis is as follows: what is the role of the testimony in relation to identity? In my analysis, I have attempted to answer this question with the knowledge that most of my interviews were conducted with a different aim. While my position as an interviewer does affect the outcome of the testimony, there are also emergent themes because the basic structure of

the testimony as a story about how God has changed an individual requires an articulation of the relationship between self and God.

The analysis of the testimonies has also been guided both by the literature (primarily Harding and Keane) and by participant observation at Monday Night Live events. Susan Harding has informed my analysis of the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Webb Keane has informed my analysis of semiotics in testimony. The participant observation at Monday Night Live has informed my understanding of the testimony as a rehearsed text that is practiced by the congregation and guided by the ministers. Perhaps most importantly, though, the participant observation has allowed me to experience the healing powers of the testimony and to understand the way in which language encourages the presence of God.

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore the role of testimony in relation to identity among members of the Cambridge Christian Fellowship. The project began as a study of in group and out group interaction, that is, the interaction between evangelical and non-evangelical students on campus. While this question is no longer central to the project, it is still important to address because of my conversion experience took me across the dividing line of in/out group belief as I did my fieldwork in the uncertain space in between. In this literature review I will summarize how authors have conceptualized the in/out belief paradigm in the anthropology of Christianity. I will then discuss how language breaks down this barrier and promotes incorporation into the belief system of evangelical Christians.

In his Aquinas Lecture, E.E. Evans-Pritchard frames out group analysis of belief as a problem in the anthropology of Christianity. He argues that anthropology has historically produced distorted representations of religion because of the out-group beliefs of most anthropologists. Evans-Pritchard's Aquinas Lecture was delivered in 1959, shortly after his conversion to Catholicism (Cannell 4). Pritchard's lecture is framed as a critique of functionalism and specifically, of Durkheim. He notes that Durkheim and most British anthropologists are either agnostics or secular humanists and that their (lack of) faith is an important bias in their analysis of religion. Pritchard's primary qualm with Durkheim's approach to religion is that it treats religion as a socially useful invention of man. Pritchard claims that finding the social utility of belief will not uncover hidden truths about the religion, but rather hides from the anthropologist any meaning that exists in belief (Evans-Pritchard 41). The social utility argument avoids answering the important question, "How do people convince others to believe?" Pritchard calls for anthropologists to make this question central to their research. The question is particularly important for modern Protestantism because the construction of a Christian identity through evangelism hinges on convincing others to believe. Pritchard ends with a call for more faith-based analysis of religion in anthropology.

Despite Pritchard's call for more in-group analysis of religion, relatively few exist even today in the field of anthropology. The lack of believing researchers in the field is perhaps due to the taboo of conversion. In her essay, "Dreams from a Saint: Anthropological Atheism and the Temptation to Believe," Katherine Ewing argues that a certain anxiety exists for the researcher who enters a community in which conversion is a possibility. The anthropologist is incorporated into "the nets of significance cast by the

people among whom they conduct research [but] a doctrine of cultural relativism [...] prevents anthropologists from taking seriously the beliefs and ideas of the people they come to know” (Ewing 578). The anthropologist enters as a researcher (informed by cultural relativism) and as a member of society (able to understand spiritual significance). Where these two interests collide, the anthropologist faces difficult choices about his or her position of belief. Belief is a temptation when the significance of the research subjects is taken at face value, which may or may not be done in the analysis of research, but is done all the time in the *process* of research. Analysis of belief from an outside (secular) perspective can be read as a response to the anxiety about the place and role of the researcher.

The concept of belief itself is problematic. In his essay, “Christians as Believers,” Malcolm Ruel argues that the Christian understanding of belief in the context of religion has led anthropologists to individualize communal understandings of the supernatural in non-Christian communities. Ruel attempts to deconstruct a simplistic and universal understanding of belief by showing through etymology that the word is not easily defined even in Western society. The history of the word 'belief' shows that it is uniquely applied in Christianity. When applied to other cultures with different histories the complexity of the word is lost, it becomes dis-located and leads to incorrect assumptions about the nature of religion.

Using Ruel’s logic, a similar argument may be made about the differences between popular culture understandings of belief and the Christian understanding of the term. Ruel problematizes the "distinction [...] between 'belief in' (trust in) and 'belief that' (propositional belief). The “distinction [...] confuses history, for the point about Christian

belief, reiterated by theologians, is that it was both at once" (Ruel 103) The Born-again conceptualization of language shows how the Christian identity is forged by this dual belief. Christians "believe in" the Bible, and the words of God, which are internalized and inspire the Christian to "speak out" with propositional belief. The relationship between belief in (listening) and belief that (speaking) is part of a model that takes "belief" beyond the individual into the community. The in-group/out-group boundary is crossed because of the listening/speaking structure of the testimony, which is shared through evangelism.

In his essay, "The Construction of Religion as an Anthropological Category," Talal Asad argues that trends in the discourse of the anthropology of religion must be contextualized in analysis. He makes this argument as part of a critique of Clifford Geertz's essay, "Religion as a Cultural Category." His call for historical contextualization is part of a larger argument that a universal definition of religion is insupportable "not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive process" (Asad 116). The historical contextualization of the factors that shape Christian authority is tied down in anthropological trends concerning the treatment of symbols. Asad's call for historical contextualization involves using genealogy to ground arguments about the relationship between history, narrative and power.

The foundational source for this project is Susan Harding's *The Book of Jerry Falwell*. In it, she argues that spoken words are the mechanism for conversion in Baptist proselytizing work. Words are chosen by the believer as a way of speaking about material things. The way of speaking is bare and even "unsensational," yet the "rhetorical

techniques for converting others” are so formalized that evangelical language is immediately recognizable (Harding 35, 37). The rhetorical techniques ‘prepare the soul’ of a person who is coming under conviction, as Harding herself is when she listens to the words of the preacher she is interviewing. The preparation of the soul through words, Harding argues, is a process that converts by degrees, before the moment of salvation.

I have already talked about the problem of removing the agency of God in Harding’s argument about the conversion process. I find that Harding’s text is perhaps most problematic in its central focus on Jerry Falwell, without producing the type of genealogy that Asad calls for in his critique of Geertz. The focus of the character of Falwell is a weakness because many of Harding’s arguments make inextricable links between his political infamy and fundamentalism. She devotes the majority of her book to a metaphorical reading of his life history, which she links to her experience as an ethnographer. These links prevent her from critiquing her theories or analyzing the relationship between discourse (evangelical language) and power (Falwell’s ‘Moral Majority’). It is important to note that Harding met with Falwell only once during her fieldwork. She spent the majority of her time researching with other pastors in Falwell’s church. In Harding’s book, though, the life of Falwell, the facts of which are largely gathered from secondary sources, becomes a parable for the entire fundamentalist movement. In so doing, she links her argument and all of her analysis to the character of Falwell, who is well known as a polemic. This would be less of a problem if Harding’s arguments were about Falwell, but they are not. Harding makes arguments about the

discourse of fundamentalism and evangelism and chooses not to delineate her generalizations from her metaphors about Falwell.⁵

Harding has been criticized for other aspects of her ethnographic conclusions as well. In his essay, “Charismatic Protestant Identity,” Simon Coleman argues that words in evangelical speech should be considered a material force. The physical effects of words on the body exemplify how words are conceived of as things in evangelical communities. Coleman also argues that Harding does not give credit to the power of words to reconstitute not only the listener but also the speaker (the one witnessing) because “an attempt to convert the other through linguistic means is not merely an attempt to save a soul; it is also an attempt to convince, or even constitute, the spiritual persona of the self” (Cannell 175). While I agree with Coleman’s assertion, I find that Harding discusses this phenomenon thoroughly with her analysis of Jerry Falwell’s life as a series of biblical allegories.

In her essay titled “Metakinesis,” Tanya Lurhmann proposes that while the language of coming under conviction may prepare the soul, it is the physical display of emotion during prayer that teaches the convert how to be a member of the faith. Lurhmann argues that Harding has left out the link that allows believers to have a personal relationship with God. She proposes that this relationship is created by incorporating emotion and movement into prayer. Lurhmann has proposed a very appropriate model for the way that the body and God are interrelated. Her model mirrors

⁵ The problem that this causes was made particularly clear when Osagie, a member of Cambridge and a student in the thesis class asked why I had chosen to compare Cambridge members to Jerry Falwell. I was a little taken aback by the accusation, because I had not intended to compare anyone in Cambridge to Falwell (especially considering that the Cambridge population is more than half black). I wanted to use Harding’s analysis of Falwell to inform my analysis of Cambridge members. What ended up being communicated was that Cambridge members are ideologically linked to the character of Falwell, when, in fact, there are many differences between the ideology of Cambridge and that of this politically infamous man.

my conversion process closely, as I came to accept Christ based on the physical effects of prayer.

Despite the thorough discussion of the “evangelical” experience among these sources, I find that Harding, Lurhmann and Coleman do not take the time to satisfactorily discuss the power of God in the conversion process. Harding argues that the “language of conversion divides,” which I believe I have shown in the opening story about my experience of differentiating between “thinking” and the feeling of “words” hitting me physically. What I think is missing in Harding’s understanding of language as divisive is that the story I have told is itself a productive force for conversion and bringing on the presence of God. Another way to phrase this idea is that God is working through my story in ways that I cannot see or understand, but as a Christian, I accept that there is a certain kind of agency that God has to *speak through believers*. This notion, reiterated by Cambridge members, is central to the way that God manifests Himself through language.

Arguments: Maintaining Difference

The first day at Cambridge, I met Justin, who is one of the campus ministers. I did not formally interview him, but over the course of my time there, I had several conversations with him. When I told him about my research, he was excited and proclaimed that I would find Cambridge “different” from other Christian organizations at Duke or elsewhere. He said that as a minister, and as a member of Christian student groups during his college days, Cambridge stood out as particularly different in the way it encourages the presence of God. I interpreted his monologue as a conversion tactic; in one sense, it is, because the point about evangelism is that one is always sharing the glory of God. Looking back on it, though, I think that he was also more pointedly trying to help

me with my research by giving it direction. He was asking himself, “What is Cambridge?” His answer to the question was, “Cambridge is different.”

Differentiation occurs in the context of testimonies when the Christian demarcates the identity of the self from the identity of the Other. The self is saved in relation to the sins of the Other. In some cases, the speaker differentiates himself from external Others, either non-believers or members of “*dead churches*.” A lot of the time, though, the speaker is splitting the self, and differentiates between the past Other identity and the present “true” identity in Christ. In both cases, the person is defining the self through the detour of the Other.

The testimony plays a key role in explaining assertions of difference. Another way to put this is that the testimony attempts to answer the question “how has the Gospel changed me?” The assumption, of course, is that a true encounter with God will result in a changed worldview. This assumption is supported with examples of Biblically induced change from personal narrative. The crucial point about testimony is what Simon Coleman calls its dual purpose: to constitute the identity of the listener (through conversion), but also to confirm the identity of the speaker (Coleman 143). In my experience with the Gospel, this purpose is not dual but singular: the listener and the speaker, while retaining the agency of free will, are ultimately guided by the Holy Spirit. The presence of God in during the articulation of the self in relation to the Gospel is what allows Christians to both believe in (listen and *hear*) and believe that (speak out), as Malcolm Ruel has put it.

Much of this thesis will focus on the products of God’s manifestations, which are articulated as narratives of transformation through Christ. I argue that an identity in

Christ is maintained both by the rhetorical techniques present in the testimony and by God himself. Kenesha summed this sentiment up nicely when I asked her if she felt Christ brought out her true identity. She smiled and said that her “true identity” and Christ’s identity are one in the same because He lives inside her. Her conceptualization of the language that she speaks is not merely a metaphor; it is “lived” physically.

Chapter One:

Language and Terminology

Since this project deals with the power of language in the Christian community, I think that it is important to acknowledge the links between language and terminology. In her book, The Book of Jerry Falwell, Susan Harding addresses some of these issues. Harding is careful to point out that “Fundamentalist” is a term that “outsiders, especially liberal Protestants, academics and journalists” have used to describe all Christians “who believe that the supernatural claims of the Bible are true” (Harding xv). However, she does not step outside of the “scholarly and popular discourse on American religion” nor does she pay much analytical attention to the fact that members of her study group prefer to be called “simply Christians” (Harding xv). The concept that the term “Christian” is “simple” is significant anthropological data and should be taken seriously, especially if you are going to argue, as Harding does, that “speaking is believing” (Harding 60). Her attitude towards the significance of terminology is summed up when she says, “I use ‘born-again’ and ‘Bible-believing’ Christianity more or less interchangeably to refer to pentecostal and charismatic as well as fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants who mobilized politically and culturally in the 1980’s” (Harding xvi). I think that her model of speaking/listening combined with the agency she gives words to convert requires more careful attention to the meaning of these descriptors. As I will demonstrate, the meaning and intention that believers read into these words has real effects on the content of their testimony. In other words, indicating via terminology can indicate ideology, which has determines how the speaker tells his story of conversion. In the following pages I will make a case for why I will carefully consider the use of terminology in my analysis.

The “evangelical” is easily spotted in the Duke community. People unfamiliar with the tenets of Christianity, but who have encountered the body language and spoken language of evangelicals, can identify Christian themes immediately in the speech, even if Christ or God is never mentioned by name. Members of Cambridge not only recognize that their language is widely known, they interpret the secular characterizations as a testament to the power of God’s Word.

“When you get the revelation of Jesus inside your heart ... the glory of God starts to flow through your life. And it’s not – the glory is a tangible thing that people can feel and sense – it’s something that causes them to say, you’re different, what is that?”

The secular community, which is indicated simply as “them,” recognizes what Reggie has termed a “difference” in behavior. The cause of this “tangible” difference is the “*revelation of Jesus.*” Reggie links the revelation with changes not only for the individual (“*the glory of God starts to flow through your life*”), but also for the outside community (“*it causes them to say*”). This conceptualization of propositional belief (both for the speaker, but also for the person listening, who is prompted to respond) parallels my understanding of the way that the testimony functions to produce physical effects beyond merely re-presenting the speakers experience with the Gospel.

Secular members of Duke’s community do not always respond well to the Cambridge effort to effect change in the name of Christ. One example comes from an agnostic student who lived next door to an “evangelical” Christian. The two students are friends. Each night, the evangelical student would come by his door to say goodnight.

And every night they would exchange pleasantries, such as “Have a good night’s sleep” or “Sweet dreams.” While the words used were never specifically religious, the agnostic student felt that her friend was pressuring her with Christian evangelism. The agnostic student said that she felt like the evangelical student was suggesting that Jesus would come to her in her dreams. She sensed this, yet noted that there was no specific reference to Christ or religion. All that the Christian student had said was, “sweet dreams.”

The secular recognition of “difference” and the Christian interpretation of the recognition show how a basic social phenomenon is understood differently depending upon one’s faith. In the story above, the secular student felt that the connotation in the words was aggressive, proselytizing and distinctly “evangelical.” Her interpretation of the event is largely negative and she sees the story as evidence for what is wrong with the evangelical model. For confidentiality reasons, I have not asked the Christian student about the story. Still, from the Cambridge perspective, I imagine that the interpretation would be starkly different. The truth of the matter is that the evangelical student probably was praying that Jesus would be revealed to the secular student. The secular student sensed Christ’s presence in the words of her Christian friend. In this way Jesus was revealed to her, but when she was confronted with the power of His love, she struggled against it and found stigmatized terms such as proselytizing and evangelical to describe the feeling. Using a Cambridge lens, this story could be read as a testament to the different way of speaking that comes when one has Jesus’ love in his heart.

This story shows how the significance of difference depends upon who is interpreting it. For the secular student, the difference is an indicator of aggression. For Cambridge members, and perhaps for the person in the story, difference is a result of the

“glory of God [flowing] through your life.” The difference in the interpretation of difference leads to a problem of terminology. I had originally planned to do a study of evangelical Christians on Duke’s campus. I quickly found out, though, Cambridge members do not self-identify with this term. Members of Cambridge identify themselves as “Christian” but do not describe or introduce themselves as “evangelical.” When writing the anthropology of Christianity, researchers have used the term “evangelical” as a blanket descriptor for Born-again Christians, Charismatic Protestants, and Fundamentalists even though these terms have nuanced histories and different origins. These terms are useful for identifying the group of study, but their use (or misuse) indicates that the author approaches the Christian population as a secular individual. The outsider terminology is a problem for research because the anthropologist has to enter the liminal space between belief and disbelief in order to do fieldwork. Terminology then becomes a way to buffer between hostility and conversion. The problem with using terminology to buffer is that it can prevent important realizations about the significance of language, such as using “simply Christian” to describe oneself.

I have found that the term “evangelical” does not accurately describe the population I am studying. First and foremost, people at the Cambridge Fellowship have unanimously agreed that the term is not something they use to describe themselves. I started out asking my interview subjects to define evangelical, but I found that they were reluctant to acknowledge the term as a legitimate descriptor. When I asked James about it, he said, *“I might believe that, I might believe the same way that you call evangelicals do, I just don’t know what an evangelical is, you know what I mean?”* I hadn’t thought of it that way. James wasn’t saying that the act of out-group definition was inherently

incorrect. He speaks from his own experience and finds the term lacking in meaning for him.

Kenesha found the term equally inapplicable. When I told her about my struggles to define the group, she offered a way to describe herself, “I just say I love Jesus.” Obviously I cannot write out “Jesus loving Christians” every time I want a synonym for “members of the Cambridge Christian Fellowship.” Her definition does not provide a practical way to categorize the group. Her offer to define herself this way demonstrates not only that “evangelical” does not describe her faith but also that perhaps any qualifying adjective is inadequate. I interviewed Christian Richman about a month later and by that point I had decided to do away with the use of “evangelical.” I told him about my decision and I added that I suspected the term carried notions of academic condescension. He agreed vehemently and asked “What’s that other term? Caring?” I asked if he was referring to “Charismatic Protestantism.” “Yeah!” he exclaimed, “I hate that term.”

Simply choosing not to define Cambridge as “evangelical” or “charismatic” does not solve the problem of terminology. Choice of terminology sets up identity “barriers” between in group and out group belief. The difficulty with choosing words to describe the subject population is indicative of structured narratives that use a specific vocabulary to create the identity of the speaker. These narratives are present both in the Cambridge population, but also in secular populations, and even in academic discourse. There isn’t one “language” that the anthropologist can choose that will make his work neutral or most accurate. At the same time, it is almost impossible to speak about the church community without sometimes engaging in the language of evangelism. This last

sentence, for example, would be more communicative if it referred to *worship community* instead of “church community” and *Gospel preaching* instead of “the language of evangelism.”

The problem with terminology is that Christian and secular terms become mixed when writing about testimony. Certain emotional experiences are best communicated using Christian terminology. At the same time, anthropological discourse and the tools of analysis of the discipline often cannot be carried out using the Word of God. I find that I cannot use entirely Christian terms nor can I rely entirely on anthropological terms. I have therefore adopted a hybrid way of writing that will mix the terminology. I have decided to *italicize* words or phrases that I have identified as “evangelical.” The method for identifying when I am speaking in these terms is not clear cut. I have based it on a gut instinct and on my participant observation and recognition of the evangelical lexicon. The content of the paper will have blocks of normal text with isolated italicized phrases. The isolated italicized phrases are written using terminology that is close to that of Cambridge ministers and students. The blocks of italicized text will be quotes from testimonies or sermons given by Cambridge members. Block quotes and in-line quotes that are from literary sources or that are referring to historical situations will be presented in normal font and according to MLA format.

The decision to differentiate visually between terms was both practical and metaphorical. I think that it has helped with the analysis process because it has forced me to continue to do anthropological analysis of the testimonies when my instinct has been to comment on them in Christian terms. It also allows the reader to understand that there is a Christian way of speaking at Cambridge that sounds different from the majority of

discourse that I am engaging in the paper. The italicization also serves as a metaphor for the process of research and analysis that prevented me from merely analyzing the testimony. As I was exposed to Christian stories I began to internalize them and pick up Christian ways of speaking about the world. I plan on bringing the italicization to a personal level during the self-ethnography, in which I will primarily use the Christian lens and supplement it with the anthropological lens. This part of the paper will be mostly italicized text while the earlier parts which will be mostly normal text. This visual change from normal text to italicized text will symbolize the internalization of my research and how it has led me to see the world differently.

Evangelism Defined

After doing interviews and talking informally with other people at Cambridge, I decided to stop asking for a definition of “evangelical” in my interviews. In some ways, this was unfortunate because I realized that evangelism is important to the Cambridge Fellowship. In retrospect, I wish I had continued to ask the questions, because it turns out that several of my interview subjects were providing valuable information about the nature of terminology.

Evangelism is a term used by members of Cambridge to describe the process of testifying to non-believers. I will define evangelism as it has been explained to me at Cambridge. I was first introduced to the term when I interviewed Campus minister Reggie Roberson in November. At that time, I was asking my subjects to define “evangelical.” Reggie defined the term by giving an anecdotal history of discourse. He said that evangelical is derived from the term “evangelism,” which is “something that we try to do.” In this example, Reggie was correcting my use of an outside term by providing

a brief history of the discourse in order to switch the focus to a term that he could define. Reggie defines evangelism as the sharing of God's glory by bringing Christ's message to everyone.

Later, when I asked Christian Pikaart to define "evangelical," he elected to use my outside terminology. He was perhaps a little hesitant to use the term, but what is of real value is the way he defines an out group term using Christian themes: "*Evangelical to me [pause] means wanting to share, in terms of faith, wanting to share what I know to be true or what I have experienced and wanting to share that with other people.*" His definition closely parallels Reggie's definition of evangelism, and yet, Christian never mentions Christ or God specifically. Later in the interview, he defines the term by comparing an evangelist leading people to faith with a career counselor finding the perfect job for students. Even if the logic of this allegory is flawed (there are many professions, but only one "correct" faith), the important point is that Christian read my use of the term "evangelical" as a signal of my belief system, and elected to give a definition that would use terms I could relate to. The language that I used indicated my position as a secular anthropologist which in turn influenced the content of Christian's definition. The overall narrative is the same, that is, Christian is talking about "sharing truth," but he puts it in terms that are secular, because these are the terms I have indicated are appropriate by the word choice in my question. This experience, more than any other, showed how terminology affects the outcome of data in this particular research project. Perhaps the best explanation for my decision to stop using the term "evangelical," is that my position in relation to the faith was beginning to change, and indicating a secular identity was no longer an accurate way to represent myself.

The Cross

The first time I really questioned the possibility of conversion was after a particular Monday Night Live event. I was listening to a sermon by James Starr and I was becoming uncomfortable with what he was preaching. He was making sweeping generalizations about other religions (such as Islam) that brought my anthropological training to the fore of my thoughts. I remember thinking, “this is wrong.” It was at this point that I decided to stop listening, because I felt that his rhetoric had already offended my post-colonial sensibilities; anything more that he said might cause me to rudely get up and leave the building. Shortly after this decision, though, I was overcome with a warm feeling in my stomach. I was not even listening to the words consciously, but somehow, my spirit was being awakened. A very faint voice said, ‘listen’ and then louder, ‘Listen’ and finally it was shouting in my ear, ‘LISTEN!’ I took heed and *heard* what James had to say.

I realized that he had switched topics and was now talking about Christ’s sacrifice on the cross. The more he spoke about the love of Christ, the warmer my stomach got. I started feeling this faint pulsing between my eyebrows. I tried to make the pulsing stop because it seemed as though my body were going to split in half if it continued. At this point I could no longer make out the content of the James’ words. What I was hearing was more like annunciations of syllables, which were not being understood as words. My brain had stopped computing, it was out of service, as the words went directly to my soul, fed to me by the Holy Spirit. After a few minutes the pulsing had gotten strong enough that it had taken over my forehead. I was suddenly aware that the pulsing had taken the shape of a cross and was burning into my face. I knew about the cross and I knew its

significance spiritually, but this was the first time that I experienced its ability to *mark my body*. When I realized the metaphor associated with the feeling, my body shuddered and cast off its pain. I felt free, in a very literal sense, from the burdens of back pain, hip pain and shoulder pain that usually accompanied any prolonged sitting. And yet, all the while, I was still conscious of the fact that this was all completely impossible. None of this could be real according to my logic or epistemology or identity. But it was real, in a very physical sense, and it was experiences such as these that allowed me to *hear* what my informants were saying when they claimed, “*Jesus set me free.*”

Chapter Two: Change

In order to introduce this chapter, I would like to return to a quote from Charles Keifer that I used at the start of the introduction. I used this quote the first time to talk about how I associated the “word” with God and how it affected me physically. For this chapter, I use part of his prayer in order to introduce two themes of the way that discussion of change functions in testimony:

“Your word, Lord, still lives in our hearts, your word became flesh, you dwelled among us and died, your word raised from the dead, your word, Lord, still is changing people all over the world”

In his prayer, Charles broadly summarizes the events of the Gospel. The general points in New Testament history (Jesus was born, died and raised from the grave) are attributed to the word of God. His prayer bridges the time gap between these Biblical events and the modern moment, when the word “still is changing people all over the world.” This prayer represents two key ways that Cambridge members articulate change. When read literally, the prayer exemplifies how change is conceptualized as a moment of collective conversion; that people are *getting saved all over the world by the Gospel*. If the read the prayer metaphorically, we can see how change also occurs within the self in terms of a spiritual battle between good and evil, salvation and damnation. Both of these articulations of change are often interwoven with broadly interpreted biblical allegory, as is present in Charles’ prayer.

The conversion of others through the word is one example of what I will categorically term external change. Cambridge members articulate this type of change as a testimony to the power of the Gospel that they preach. The act of conversion, then, is important not only for the person who is listening and coming under conviction, but also for the speaker, whose identity is affirmed when he “changes” someone by convincing him to believe. The change has occurred as a direct result of the word, which “still lives in our hearts.” In his prayer, Charles affirms the collective identities of the congregation by asserting that change has occurred. Affirmation of the self through the conversion of others is not the only form of change present in Cambridge testimonies. Interviewees have also focused on how self-transformation affirms their identity in Christ.

The concept of internal change has important implications for the temporal structure of the testimony. The Gospel “*still is changing*” the Christian, because parts of the person are converted over time. In one of his sermons, Reggie asked the congregation to get together in small groups and identify parts of each person’s life that were not given over to Christ. As an example, he suggested that perhaps you spend hours surfing the web with no aim in mind, or play sports for competition’s sake rather than to glorify the Lord. What this exercise implies is that once an activity is claimed for Christ, its purpose will fundamentally change. The way in which the activity has been performed suddenly becomes part of the past while the present and future are marked for salvation. This is important for the way that the testimony is told because the markers for temporality – past, present and future – can change at any moment. At Cambridge, the Christian will “*continue to overcome hardship with defining moments where God steps in and changes us.*” It is these markers or defining moments of salvation that set up the temporal

structure of the testimony. The temporal structure collapses the chronological timeline of a person's life history and gives rhetorical significance to certain moments in one's life that mark the period before revelation (sin) and the period after (salvation).

In the first part of this chapter, I will describe internal changes that people have chosen to share with me during interviews. The internal changes include thoughts and perceptions of the world. In the second part, I will describe external changes that the speaker has relayed to me through testimony. The external changes include changes in actions and changes in physical appearance. In both the external and internal change sections I will analyze how the testimony of change affirms Christian identity. I will also analyze the temporal shifts in the life history of the speaker. My temporality discussion will be useful for certain examples, but for others, it will not be relevant or necessary.

In her testimony, Kenesha tells several stories about how she was changed by God as her relationship with the Lord strengthened. In one particular story, she described a supernatural trip to heaven, in which she was talking to God. In the story she traveled from earth to heaven and back several times in a row. All the while she was aware of the fact that she was crying in a restroom, calling out, "God, why do you love me?" Kenesha describes her outlook on life after this out of body experience:

Those things that are put in us at birth that are of this world – I came back free from that.

I was like, I don't have to be that person anymore that was imposed upon me by the world, you know? I don't have to walk around feeling guilty about these things that I'm doing or – or have to walk around focusing on the fact I might have just hurt that person and I'll probably never say sorry to them because I'm too prideful to. [Laughs] You know

what I mean? That's the way we live our lives; I wasn't bound by that anymore, I was free from it, I was able to really love without embarrassment without feeling like, oh I just did – like that person is going to think I'm weird."

This excerpt follows a similar format to Charles' prayer. The first part of the paragraph, which states that Kenesha is freed from worldly burdens, is affirmed by the specificity of change in the second part of it. She says: "I don't have to be that person anymore that was imposed upon me by the world." She then affirms the identity change with examples of changes in her thoughts: "I don't have to walk around feeling guilty." Her changed thoughts and changed identity are inextricably linked in her testimony. She is saying that she is a new person because she thinks differently than she did before her experience with God.

Kenesha communicates the significance of change by differentiating between the present from the past. She splits her sentence into two parts: in her past, there is the burdensome world while in the present there is freedom. She does not actually indicate that worldly inheritance is necessarily sinful or bad. The listener learns this by way of deduction from the second part of her sentence. Here she separates her new identity from the things of the world: "I came back free from that." By invoking the concept of freedom, she implies that before, she was not free, but rather bound by "those things that are put in us at birth that are of this world."

Her reference to the sin at birth can be interpreted as a definition for original sin. In this very general sense, Kenesha is making her identity in Christ by talking about her

life history in terms of large thematic Biblical stories.⁶ In the Old Testament, there is the story of Original Sin, which is forgiven only by God. In the New Testament, Jesus comes to earth so that sins may be forgiven and people can be free from them. In her testimony, sin binds Kenesha until she speaks to God and he forgives her and sets her free. This general interpretation of the Gospel informs her understanding of specific experiences in her life: “I’ll probably never say sorry to them because I’m too prideful to.” The specificity of the pain in her life is set within her definition of Original Sin and an implicit understanding that the Bible is directly applicable to the psychological trials of life.

The idea that Jesus can solve psychological problems is preached often at Cambridge. Campus minister James Starr talks about how God solved his psychological problems:

“And I could use terms like He set me free, but He really did. I wasn’t depressed anymore. And although I had –I did mourn the loss of my friends and stuff it was like, all of a sudden... I was just at peace and I truly –I can honestly say, like... I miss them, sometimes I wish they were here, [but] I haven’t had any grief, since I met God.”

When James encountered God for the first time, he was cured of his depression and grief. The terms ‘depression’ and ‘grief’ have specific connotations in psychological discourse. In James’ testimony the terms are used much more generally. In fact, the terms are used so loosely that their meaning becomes unhinged from the story that James is telling.

⁶ It might be important to note here that during one sermon, Kenesha defined the testimony as “*sharing your personal experience of the Gospel in a nutshell.*” Sweeping Biblical allegories, such as original sin, are a standard part of testimony at Cambridge.

About a minute after he said, “I did mourn the loss of [his] friends,” he returns to the subject, saying, “*I don’t mourn the loss anymore because I’ll be living in eternity forever.*” In the block quote, James does mourn the loss of his friends, but God has saved him from grieving them. In the second quote, he does not mourn because of his place in Heaven. What is the explanation for this contradiction of terms?

One way to explain James’ claim that he no longer mourns is to analyze his conceptualization of the relationship between time and emotional truth. For this analysis, I will turn to Vincent Crapanzano’s commentary which compares evangelical Christians to stock market analysts. In his commentary, Crapanzano says of his Christian study group, “They do not evacuate their present and near future but devalue them with respect to the distant future” (Crapanzano 424). James has followed this model exactly when he says that he does not mourn the death of his friend because he will live in eternity forever. The event has not been erased, but the emotional negativity formerly associated with it has been eclipsed by the joy associated with the knowledge of his distant future in the Kingdom of Heaven. When James testifies about his life in eternity, his present pain is devalued. This is one explanation for why he says he does not mourn the loss of his friend, but it does not fully explain why James has elected to change terminology. In other words, to say that James has devalued emotion is to apply Crapanzano’s theory too narrowly.

A more complex temporal model emerges when comparing the first remark about mourning with the remark about eternity. We can read his contradiction of terms as a matter of re-creating the emotion he experienced during two separate encounters with the Lord. The change from grief to mourning is not such a great difference, but temporally,

this is just after James “met God.” Once he builds a relationship with God, the difference between his terms –mourning and eternal salvation –is much greater because the emotion he feels for the Lord is greater. This interpretation assumes that James is sharing only part of the story and that there are temporal gaps between when he mourns but doesn’t grieve and when he lives in eternity and doesn’t mourn. When he testifies to his eternal salvation, he is perhaps referring to a more mature Christian identity, which he could have acquired months or even years after the first time he “met God.” What has taken place is not an erasure of the event –the death of his friend –but an erasure of time in his re-telling of the event.

I will now discuss a second way that testimony internally affirms Christian identity. In addition to changes in thoughts, emotional truths about Christ are also communicated by talking about changes in perception. James talks about how the change in his heart was manifested in his ability to read and understand the Bible. He frames this ability to understand as a difference and implies, without explicitly stating, that he used to be confused by the Word.

“Even though I was still on the ship, I was still in school [...] everything was just different. And I feel like I met Him and I started to read the Bible and that’s when, it was like a different book. . I felt like the Bible was written in code and only the people that truly had the spirit of God can understand it, like, God started, it was like I opened the Bible and He started teaching it to me, like it became alive, it was like he breathed on it and it became alive on the inside of me and... I just started to, you know, I started hearing God kind of talk to me. I’d read the Bible and he would –it was like he was –like

I would read it, but it was like He was talking on the inside of me. I could feel his voice vibrating in me, you know? And so I just, I knew that my life was different and that's how I came to Christ."

James makes a direct link between his perception of difference and his conversion. He decided to accept Christ because he "knew that [his] life was different." He discovers that his life is different through sensory perception. James' vision, hearing and touch are all changed. These senses are different in a manifest physical way. When reading the Bible, he can hear the voice of God. When God taught him the Bible, the Word "became alive." James' perception and conceptualization of the words contained in the Bible are different. The difference is experienced physically, because he can pinpoint new feelings such as God's voice "vibrating in [him]." The idea that God made the words of the Bible come alive can serve as a model for all speech delivered in the name of Jesus. While it is possible to understand this speech as being investing with power by certain rhetorical techniques (as described by Harding and Keane), I think that we have to give credence to the idea that God has agency to inspire people to speak together *as a community*.

James' faith in this excerpt takes on the role of recognizing that God has the power to change people and testifying about it in a relatively short interview format. James highlights the difference in order to give testimony to the glory of God. There are many reasons why James could omit the details of how God changed his life. For one, he does not know me very well and providing all the details would require a more intimate relationship and setting. Perhaps most importantly, though, the details would make the message of his testimony more complex and less focused on the Word of God because

James would have to spend a good amount of time explaining the details of his life. He edits out these details to focus on what is most important, which is the power of Christ's love to change people.

The ministry recognizes the shortcomings of eliminating details of narrative. For a four week series of sermons in March, campus minister Reggie talked about the practice of Christianity and how the born-again faith tended to focus too much on the moment of transformation. When I talked with him privately about it, he told me that he wanted to get the message out to the congregation that devotion to God will improve your quality of life *in a tangible way*. He wanted to discuss how and why the transformation takes place and what results will come from *living in the presence of God*. Here is what he said about God's power to change in his sermon:

“A lot of times we focus on that first part where the power of God comes in and it transforms people's hearts and their minds. But very rarely do we focus on the fact that they started devoting themselves to the Word of God: to prayer and the breaking of bread and spending time with each other. And what goes even further unnoticed is the fact that something happens so deep in their hearts that causes revival to break out all over the city and what it was, is that they went from a place of being selfish and thinking about themselves to being generous. They started giving. [...] And they displayed the love of God in very practical ways.”

This sermon is referring to a particular passage in Acts, which explains his reference to “revival.” His interpretation of this passage is what is relevant here. Reggie highlights the role of prayer and congregation (“breaking of bread”) in the causality of external change. External change includes “revival,” which can be interpreted as mass conversion, but it also includes the actions of individuals. The heart of the individual is inspired by the congregation, and then the individual “[displays] the love of God in very practical ways.”

The testimony is not just about making the distinction between past and present, selfishness and generosity, disillusionment and salvation; it is also about the real changes that occur once God comes into one’s life. These changes include the power of testimony to convince others to believe, the adoption and internalization of Christ’s teachings, and the way that God’s love affects and saves not just yourself but also others.

One way that testimony affirms Christian identity externally is through actual physical changes and changes in mannerisms that are noticeable to everyone. In other words, Cambridge members interpret a perception of difference as an acknowledgement of the *manifestation of God’s love* when behavior and physical makeup change.

The change in physical appearance may be noticed by the person giving his testimony, but it is the fact that others notice it that confirms that the external change has occurred. In her testimony, Kenesha says, “*if you met me my junior year you probably wouldn’t recognize me as I am now.*” Here she is making a proclamation. She expects others to find the difference so stark that she actually *looks different* and is unrecognizable now that she is saved. What she proclaims to be true is not that she is different, because she already knows it in her heart and mind, but that other people can

see the difference. This proclamation enlarges the scope of change because it testifies that the difference is external as well as internal.

The act of giving is also an important testament to the power of God's love to change. In the following passage, Kenesha speaks about the way that she internalized the message of Christ so that she gives out of joy. It may be important to recall that Kenesha was raised in a Pentecostal church. When she speaks of duty, she is talking about the same kinds of good works. The good work has not changed. What has changed is here attitude towards doing it:

“when we do things out of a sense of duty sometimes you start to begrudge what you're doing and you're like, ‘ugh I gotta do this’ instead of, ‘wow, I wanna do this.’ It's a gift for me to be able to do something for someone now. Like, it blesses me. And people are like, ‘really, like, thank you’ and I'm like, ‘no, thank you for letting me do it because it –it because I feel so free in being able to give and-and to love others.”

The change in her actions comes from a change in her heart. Once she accepts the love of Christ, she is compelled to give to others. Kenesha affirms her identity by noting the difference in her actions. She offers the hypothetical, “thank you for letting me do it,” acknowledging that her act of giving constitutes her Christian identity (“it blesses me”).

Testifying about changes in actions is perhaps the powerful way to affirm that a Christian identity is different from other (past) identity. Changes in action are a testament to the manifestation of God's love beyond internal self-improvement and into the exterior world. Following in the line of Freudian semiotics and the definition of the “id” as

unconscious, changes in actions through good works or abstinence from sin are not described as conscious choices, except for the choice to follow God. From there, everything flows naturally. In the following testimony from John, we will see how he makes his decision to stop abusing drugs a choice to follow God. After this choice is made, he no longer has the desire to engage in the self-destructive behavior.

In his testimony, John describes how God was able to break a pattern of drinking and sin that was ruining his academic and spiritual life. Christian first sets up the cycle of drinking and drug use as a negative thing that he wants to break, but cannot find the will power:

“I continued to smoke weed, I was like, ‘oh I need to stop; I know I need to stop.’ And sometimes I’d tell my friends, ‘hey I’m going to stop’ and they’re like, ‘oh, ok.’ Two weeks later I’d be on it. ‘Hey I’m gonna stop doing this...’ two weeks later I’m on it. So I said these things but never really carried through in my actions.”

The pattern is that he tells his friends that he’s going to quit and then he starts up again a little while later. He establishes that the pattern is all talk: “I said these things but never really carried through in my actions.” What John has set up in his story is a cycle that must be broken, because the cycle is not that he is always stoned, but that he is always trying not to be stoned. What I mean here is that John’s cycle is not one of constant abuse, but of constantly trying to break the abuse and failing. There is no way to determine whether he realized that he was unsatisfied with the partying lifestyle after he had a radical encounter with God or whether he was always unsatisfied in his past. What

is important is that the way that John sets up his narrative makes room for God to come in and break the cycle. John is admitting that he is unable to break the cycle alone: he needs God. Once he accepts Christ, his actions change. God can break a pattern that couldn't be broken by people.

“So I left that meeting and I was like, ‘man, God does have me here for a reason, he really is doing something, this is exciting.’ Still, after that, I didn’t cut off the smoking weed or anything or, the drinking hard, but I was like, ‘God is still –he’s doing something and I’m real excited about it.’ Next thing I know, another highlighting moment where one of my really good friends, she speaks to me, ‘John, you need to do this.’ [...] When she said that to me, again, it was God speaking through her, and I was like, ‘you’re right, I do need to go.’ It wasn’t like she convinced me. It was like, ‘no, no, not only –I need to go. This is God saying I need to go.’ So I decided to go [...] and that is my changing weekend. That’s the time when things permanently change in my life.”

The highlighting moment is “the time when things permanently change in [his] life.” After he tells the story of being “moved in the Spirit” at Cambridge, John admits that his behavior doesn’t change. The next part of his life story is not worth telling in his testimony because it doesn’t glorify God. So John moves on to the “next thing I know.” This statement, taken literally, introduces a story about the next thing that he knows. What this implies in terms of temporality is that he spent a certain amount of time drinking and not knowing. John elects not to include this period of his life in his

testimony. What John wants to speak about is the “highlighting moment” that glorifies God and turns his life into a testimony.

The Holy Spirit did not break John’s cycle of substance abuse. It took another act of God, when his friend tells him to go on the retreat, in order for the change to become an option:

One of the nights there, during a worship service, God was speaking to me. He said to me, ‘John, you have all this muck, all this junk, here...’ and I’m just going to use my left hand figuratively to kinda think about it... ‘But you have the girls, the alcohol, the weed, you know, just the sin in you life that is detestable. You have all those things or you have me. And with me comes love, joy, peace, comfort, security, life. What are you going to choose?’

While on the retreat, John faces this stripped down question between good and evil. This is what John has chosen to share in his testimony. In other conversations with members of Cambridge I have asked what the retreats are like. People have responded with positive stories about a weekend full of prayer, Bible study, speaking in tongues and *being in the Spirit*. John doesn’t discuss the particulars of his three day retreat. Rather he elects to describe and build up the story of the question between metaphorical life (with God) and death (wallowing in sin).

And in that moment, you know, there’s a verse the Bible that says, ‘He who grieves the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven’ and it’s like Jesus was able to forgive you of all your sins

but He, pretty much if you dissed the Holy Spirit, that's not forgivable, and the Holy Spirit was speaking to me in that moment, and there was such seriousness and such finality in that decision, because I had gotten a little taste of God, I had started to encounter his love a little bit, so if I was to go back to the things of the world, all that muck, that'd be like a dog returning to his vomit, you know what I mean? That'd be returning to stuff that didn't bring life, when I'd tasted true life. But by that time, God had really nursed me by moving me in the Spirit, it was like, 'God, it's not even a question, I choose you.'

John references the passage in Matthew, “Anyone who speaks a word against the Son of Man will be forgiven, but anyone who speaks against the Holy Spirit will not be forgiven, either in this age or in the age to come” (Matthew 12:32). This is an example of how the Bible is applied very specifically to testimony. While certain details of John’s life are vague or left out entirely, his interpretation of this passage is literal and specific. By suggesting that the use of scripture to protect the sanctity of the Holy Spirit is a conversion ploy is counterproductive. It is the simple choice between good and evil that leads to change in his life. He chooses to live with God.

Another way of conceptualizing change is to talk about the way that difference is maintained between other churches and denominations. This way of thinking may suggest that the church is a type of living thing that, like the person, can attach its “id” to the “entity” of God, forming an identity that is epistemologically separate from the individual. Perhaps the best evidence for this separate identity is the opening story that I used in the arguments section in which the minister says, “Cambridge is different.”

Arielle is a freshman who came to Cambridge starting in September. In her testimony, she talks about the difference between her church background growing up and the atmosphere at Cambridge:

“But somehow, I ended up at Cambridge and, Ok, my Church –my religious background –is very conservative, I’m from the Church of Christ and, like, they don’t dance, there’s no music, just very, very conservative [...] so, to me, Cambridge is polar opposite of what I’m used to in terms of religion.”

Arielle sets up the concept of difference among churches through change of belief systems. While I have already talked about the problems with the term, “belief,” I think that it is important to reiterate those points here because Arielle affirms the identity of the Church by stating what the church believes:

“So Cambridge is like polar opposite from what I’d seen. So that really, really freaked me out, like seeing people... I remember I went to Kings Park International Church and I saw people dancing in the front and the music was really loud and I was confused and scared and, Oh! They were speaking in tongues, oh my gosh! [Laughs] I had an experience from –I went to all night prayer there and um they called us up to the front to put our hands upon those who were asking for prayer, basically, and everyone around me was speaking in tongues and I was flipping out. I was like praying to God, I was like, help me, I was scared out of my mind. So, to me, Cambridge is polar opposite of what I’m used to in terms of religion, so I guess in this past semester I’ve been struggling a lot with

their beliefs versus what I've grown up with. But what helped me along was, in particular I had a bible study with Reggie about speaking in tongues and he showed me everything –he showed me tons of verses about it and how like every time someone was baptized in the Holy Spirit it was followed by them speaking in tongues. It was really interesting that he backed everything up with scripture, so that kinda surprised me. Yeah, and that's probably one of the main reasons I keep coming back 'cause everything's backed by scripture and you really feel the presence of God there, basically."

The difference between her church at home and Cambridge initially prevented her from wanting to be a part of Cambridge because she was "scared." Ultimately she was convinced to become a part of the community because "everything's backed by scripture." This reasoning shows the Protestant roots of both Cambridge and Arielle's church. She assumes that ultimate for question about "belief" is answered by what is written in the New Testament.

Another concept that Arielle has perhaps internalized is one that I heard in passing conversation at Cambridge. The idea is that speaking in tongues and *being filled with the Holy Spirit* is something that is rooted in Biblical history, but most churches choose to ignore it. I first heard this concept during a casual conversation with my friend Larissa. James Starr has repeated similar sentiments when he has spoken to me about what he calls "dead churches." These churches discourage the presence of the Holy Spirit and joyousness in God. Arielle has crossed over from this type of "very, very conservative" church and has begun to "*welcome the fullness of God*" as Christian Pikaart says Cambridge has done for him. The ministry at Cambridge encourages its members to

accept the narrative that the fullness of God comes from internalizing the fullness of the Bible, or the Word of God. This is what Arielle has begun to do, and although she has only been at Duke for one semester, she already has a testament to the effectiveness of this narrative, because she says that she, “*really feels the presence of God there.*” In other words, Arielle testifies that the community has successfully established that God is active and real. This difference is the marker of her change; she has internalized the church’s message of difference which is inextricably tied to the reality (or physical presence) of God.

So far in this chapter, I have written primarily about the relationship between agency (of change) and identity. However, there are other important aspects of change in the Cambridge community that should not be overlooked. One important aspect of change in the Cambridge community is the “re-capturing” of secular semiotic forms. The symbols and language commonly found in the public discourse (I will term this “public semiotics”), are incorporated into a narrative about the Gospel and infused with church specific language. In his book, Christian Moderns, Webb Keane engages the debate about individualism, the community and agency (Coleman 143). While most of his project is specific to concepts of “modernity,” he makes an assertion about the nature of public semiotics:

“But if social transformation is more than the aggregation of discrete individual changes, it depends on some forms of mediation. One crucial point of articulation between individuals and larger orders of change lies in the publicly circulating semiotic forms available to them” (Keane 149).

So while the theology of Cambridge brings a semiotics of its own, the meaning is also powerfully communicated when “the publicly circulating semiotic forms” are brought in to convey the message of Christ.

An excellent example of this incorporation is the use of psychology terms in testimony. As I have already noted, both James and Kenesha talk about how they felt “depressed” before they *came to Christ*. The juxtaposition of the publicly recognized word with a phrase that is specific to Protestant religious traditions creates a semiotic break in the language. The speaker is talking explicitly about a change, but he is also representing that change with his choice of terms. This linguistic structure has powerful implications for the listener. Susan Harding explains how the language of Born-again Preachers affects the listener subconsciously, before she can interpret it:

“His language was so intense and strange, yet deceptively plain and familiar, full of complex nuances and pushes and pulls, that I had no time, no spare inner speech, to interpret him consciously, to rework what he said into my own words as he talked” (Harding 57).

One possible explanation for her reaction is that she is subconsciously dealing with the semiotic dichotomy in choice of terms. Harding says that the language is “intense and strange, yet deceptively plain and familiar.” Harding finds the phrases that reference Jesus “intense and strange,” but she finds the phrases that use “publicly circulating semiotic forms” to be “plain and familiar.” The language being spoken about change represents the dichotomy between sin and salvation in the structure of the linguistics, because the speaker uses these different forms simultaneously in speech.

Language is not the only way to represent change through semiotic dichotomy. The Monday Night Live graphic, which is displayed on the projector before every sermon, is an example of how public semiotics can be re-captured visually:



⁷ Thanks to Jonathan Mikkelson for the image.

The name for the event, “Monday Night Live” is clearly a reference to the comedy show, but in this case, the ministers and student leaders decided to make the connection more direct by creating a graphic to reinforce the theme of *claiming secular symbols for Christ*. Notice that the text in both pictures is identical color and size. The Cambridge graphic has copied the look, but given it an entirely new context. In the SNL graphic, the background is of the lights of the city. In the Cambridge graphic, the background is the light of the chapel. The change in context is what produces meaning. In other words, the graphic produced by Cambridge is only significant because it is reminiscent of, but different from, the popular culture symbol for the comedy show. We can read a greater significance into the Cambridge graphic by interpreting the difference between the graphics to mean that their congregation spends nights illuminated by the light of Christ, while the rest of the world spends nights illuminated by the sins of the city.

This notion of difference between Cambridge and the world has strong parallels with other movements of social transformation. One particularly interesting comparison comes from Dick Hebdige’s book, Subculture: The Meaning of Style, in which he discusses the semiotics of the punk movement in Britain in the late 1970’s. Hebdige argues that meaning is communicated through changing the function of the signified object. I have already touched on this topic with the Monday Night Live graphic. In this case, the meaning of the graphic is derived principally from its changed function: from the introduction to a secular comedy show to a slide background for sermons.

There is a deeper parallel between subculture and the Cambridge community. This chapter has chronicled how individuals conceptualize how change through Christ occurs in their life. Perhaps more importantly, when talking about change, people

contract and expand time, so as to change the very concept of history. Webb Keane notes that “if conversion has historical implications, then history has moral implications” (Keane 115). In the context of this study, history becomes moral because the past is serving as a screen for the present. Difference is maintained by testifying to the present state of salvation in relation to the past state of damnation. We see this model applied very directly in John’s testimony, when he describes the metaphor of the left hand (sin, lust, past) and the right (God, life, salvation). Given that the Christian has implicated his past in maintaining his current morality “we may expect to find parallel dilemmas facing other people who are committed to exercising historical agency in quite different, nonreligious, contexts” (Keane 115). The late 1970’s punk movement, which began as a pointed attempt to give agency to social outcasts, is a perfect example of the parallels that Keane expects.

Punks take a “mundane object,” such as the safety pin, and remove it from its normal functional domain (that of sewing) to the body where the object is displayed as a fashion item. Simon Coleman talks about how words as “things” can make the speaker “subject to the language emerging from her Spirit” (Coleman 168). The words are similar to the safety pin, in that the object becomes a symbol that creates the identity of the subject. In both cases, the subject claims agency over the meaning of the object (safety pin, words). A minister at Cambridge said in one sermon that the Word must be listened to and internalized, (as he points to the stomach) like spiritual food. The creation of identity through internalizing objects and making the self subject to their symbolism is a conscious act, both for the punks and for Christians at Cambridge.

Another striking parallel between Hebdige's theory about the semiotics of the punk movement and my argument about difference is the relationship between the in-group and the out-group. For the punks, the iconic object becomes a "[source] of value" while for the mainstream, it becomes a sign of the "presence of difference" (Hebdige 1066). This interpretation relates back to the story about the secular student who understood the words of her Christian friend to indicate the presence of (negative) difference. In the case of Cambridge, the community interprets their language (objects) as a marker of positive difference, while the outside community interprets it as a marker of negative difference. The most interesting part of this comparison is that in both cases, the outsider interprets the intention of the use of the object correctly. Punks intend to offend people by changing the function of household items and using them for fashion. Christians intend to convert people by evangelizing with words that are inflected with the joy of Christ. The intention of the action is clearly communicated to the outside population in both cases. However, the object, whether it is a punk's icon or Christ-inspired language, takes on different interpretations depending on where one stands in the cultural playing field.

The overall implication of comparing Hebdige's analysis of punk subculture and the Cambridge community is not to associate Christians with behavior that they would consider sinful. The comparison is strongest because both of these groups make a concerted effort to change the world. Furthermore, and perhaps most importantly, the status of being marginalized and marked for difference means that we should take seriously the claim that Cambridge is a subculture. This peripheral status is an important part of the narrative about transformation through self-actualization (like when God says

to John, “*What are you going to choose?*”) because it allows for a dichotomy between the self and the world. This dichotomy allows for the semiotic representation of dualities (sin and salvation) in language to be reified in the real world when the individual begins to break from society as he internalizes the Word and speaks the Gospel through testimony.

I would like to end the chapter with a quote from Reggie, who was able to capture the nuance of what I am trying to say much more precisely than I have presented it in this chapter. The following excerpt from one of his sermons shows how consciously the Cambridge community directs the crafting of individual identity:

“Your identity no longer is tied to the earth, it’s tied to heaven [...] So now your reference point is no longer what is happening here, but what is happening there and how it is and how things are conducted there. Then we can establish – then we can start the flow in relationships that impact the entire world where people will say, ‘My God, you guys must be disciples of Christ. You must be Christians, because you look different; your relationships don’t seem like the rest of the world, they look like heavenly relationships.’”

Change is a matter of seeing identity in Christ. All changes in thoughts, perception, appearance and actions are a result of the decision to accept Jesus as Lord. The decision is always conceived of as a singular moment, but these moments will continue to occur in the future as the individual is saved again and again. These many salvations, taken as one decision to live by Christ’s teachings lead the person to effect change and “impact the entire world.” This impact, which Reggie ties back to personal identity in Christ, is then

associated with and outside recognition of difference. The recognition of difference is re-interpreted by the Cambridge community to indicate that their identity is indeed confirmed in Christ.

In this chapter I have primarily talked about individualism within the testimony. While individualism is certainly tied to the type of agency that is talked about in testimony, the community also plays an important role in the reification of change (Keane 149). In the following chapter, I will discuss how the testimony functions within the community. This discussion will be facilitated by my research into testimonies of miracles, which I conducted alongside my interviews about conversion stories.

Chapter Three: Sharing (Confirming) Testimony

In Chapter One, I talked about how the testimony “affirms” one’s identity in Christ. This model works well for analyzing block quotes and selected stories from a person’s testimony. However, there is a quality of the testimony as a whole that may be lost when we are talking about how it “affirms” identity. Analysis of “affirmation of identity” implies that testimony is an individually created and verified product. The etymological history of the word, “affirm,” follows along this vein of individualism. Affirm comes from the Latin “ad,” meaning to, and “firmare,” which means to strengthen or make firm. The strengthening is specific “ad hoc,” or “to this” person that I am analyzing. The following quote from Corinthians exposed me to a new way of thinking about the testimony, when I noticed the use of the word “confirm” in a place where I have been using the word “affirm.”

“For in him you have been enriched in every way –in all your speaking and in all your knowledge
–because our testimony about Christ was confirmed in you” (1 Corinthians, 1:5)

The use of the word “con-firm” suggests a communal “strengthening” of identity by the etymology of the prefix “con.” This prefix gives the action a sense of being done jointly or together. It is derived from the Latin “cum” which means “with.” The difference in meaning between “ad” and “cum” led me to broaden my overall argument and think about the role of the testimony in the community. Webb Keane talks about this very issue: “to the extent that words and things circulate among, and require acceptance

by, persons, the very conditions for people's objectification, self-knowledge, and identity necessarily involve other people" (Engelke and Tomlinson 42). Keane touches on the idea that an identity crafted out of words-as-objects and requires con-firmation, which requires that the analysis of discourse be rooted in the community. In my experience, it is also important to locate the testimony because this is the space in which God intervenes and identities are changed. What (or where) is this community?

At its inception, the community includes the speaker, the listener and God. At first I did not understand how God could be included in this community. When I say that God is included, I do not refer to the Episcopalian notion that He is always listening. I am referring to God as an active member of the community, as if there were a third person in the room with me and my interviewee. How can this be? I learned how to interpret this when I sent an email to Christian Pikaart asking for him to comment on my analysis of his testimony. Christian wrote back to me and declined the offer: *"I just got to pray that God uses that kind of sharing in a way that I can't understand."* What he means is that once he has given testimony, he cannot worry about how I and others will interpret his rhetoric and narrative because his testimony has already taken on a new meaning when I listened to it. In the course of my fieldwork, I have summarized, picked apart and internalized his testimony in ways that he could not have imagined. Knowing that he cannot ultimately control the process of editing, he cedes control over his testimony to God. *I recognized this presence of God just recently, but Christian acknowledged it before. When Christian gave his testimony to me, God was present, because Christian was ceding control to him at that time also.*⁸

⁸ This is italicized because of the scriptural references (John 1:2) to Jesus' presence with God at the inception of Creation. Kenesha gave a sermon about the topic of Jesus being with God before he came to

Still, we cannot study or theorize about God's plan for a person's testimony. There are ways to touch at this type of knowledge through prayer, but it cannot be reached through anthropological discourse. For this reason, I will turn my attention to the part of the community that can be studied: the listener and the speaker. The way that they interact with the testimony determines its role in the community. The speaker and the listener can both affect not only what is said in the testimony, but also the fundamental "role" of the testimony. In his essay about Christian modernity in Papua New Guinea, Joel Robbins argues that locally specific understandings of linguistic ideology have influenced the Urapmin community to adopt a form of modernity in which the speaker has more authority than the listener (Robbins 905). Cambridge members employ a similar ideology of modern linguistics, but the power dynamics between speaker and listener are labeled as incomprehensible and are ceded to the hand of God, as Christian Pikaart showed in his email. In other words, both the speaker and the listener enter the community as equals in terms of agency; God will ultimately decide how each person is changed by the experience of giving testimony and witnessing.

I came to understand the relationship between the listener and the speaker through roundabout means. During my participant observation I became interested in stories of miracles. Out of curiosity, I began ask people about their experience with miracles. What I found was that I had stumbled upon another form of testimony. Perhaps most importantly, I began to see how testimony is shared within the community and how the listener has an equal power to determine the meaning by confirming the reality of the testimony.

earth and after he rose to heaven. I am interpreting this event Biblically and implying that Christ lives in Christian.

Cambridge members testify about miracles under a different set of circumstance than their testimonies of conversion. In each case, I asked the interviewee about miracles as a separate question. No interviewee offered a miracle story in response to the question, what is your testimony? However, miracles are still a central part of the Cambridge community. James says in his testimony about the time before he was born again in Christ:

“God was never real to me. I believed that he existed but I had no idea what he was like, where he was, I had never heard of miracles, I never saw a miracle. I never heard of—I never even heard—like you’re hearing me now—I never heard anyone talk about how God changed their life.”

Here James identifies the testimony as a story of “how God changed [his] life.” The same themes that I have discussed in Chapter One are present here. What is striking about this quote, though, is that the miracle is central to the most important narrative functions of the testimony – first, that God is real, and second, that God changes people. James does not go on to tell a story of a miracle until I ask him to, after he has already given his testimony.

I had not planned to write about miracles in this project. Indeed, no one directly referenced a miracle during testimony. However, as I began to speak with people at the Monday Night Live events, I started to understand that miracles provide important insight into the function of the testimony. James said in one conversation: “you have to claim your miracles for Christ, and you do that by talking with people about it.” In other words,

the testimony does not always have to be about the conversion process. This is the common form that testimony takes, and colloquially at Cambridge, “giving testimony” means sharing your conversion story. However, people also testify about miracles or other ways that *God is working in your life*. When a person testifies about a miracle, the subject that is being confirmed is not the self, but rather the event. Stories of miracles testify to the truth that a supernatural event has occurred by the active hand of God. The narrative does not focus on how God changes people, but rather on how He inspires wonder and amazement in people.

I came to understand the testimony in a new way through my research into stories of miracles. I found that miracles are propagated through storytelling. In his testimony, James says, “I never heard of miracles, I never saw a miracle.” The link between these concepts is literal, and reading the words, one can almost feel the causality there, “I never saw a miracle because I never heard of miracles.” As people share stories of miracles, new miracles can occur.

The following story is from an interview I did with Osagie, a member of Cambridge and also a classmate for the thesis project. He speaks from an interesting position because he is aware both of the direction I am taking my project and of the sources that I am engaging. While he was giving testimony, he was able to do some anthropological analysis of his own story. What he presented was a text that is highly exposed with regards to the intentions of its author:

Osagie was having financial trouble and he owed the university money. He had scrambled to get seven thousand dollars the semester before. He was able to get that money, but this semester he was faced with a larger sum. The University told him that he

had to come up with twenty thousand or they weren't going to let him graduate. So he decided to pray and ask God for the money. In his prayer he first said that he needed the money and then he paused, and asked God for the money to not be a loan. He said that he started applying for loans in January, but that he got turned down by several student-loan companies. He said that he was not dejected when his applications weren't accepted because it was consistent with his prayer that he wouldn't get the money through a loan. Then in late February, he got an email from a family friend. Osagie noted that didn't know the man personally. The email pledged twenty thousand dollars as an interest free loan. He was ecstatic that this man he barely knew was so generous to offer the loan. However, he didn't know whether to start testifying that it was a miracle. After several days of praying and asking God, he reasoned that since the money was interest free, it wasn't really a loan and that therefore it was an answer to his prayer. So he started testifying to people at Cambridge and telling his friends that God had given him a miracle. He didn't know whether what happened was a miracle until he decided to start claiming it. He then said that, as a Christian, you have to claim your miracles before they become real. After a week had passed, he got another email from the family friend saying that the money was a gift and that he did not expect him to pay it back. He says that he was so overjoyed that he wrote the man, who is also a Christian, and told him that he had answered his prayers. Osagie said that the man was very gracious and was happy to hear about Osagie's Christian interpretation of the gift.

First, I will look at the way that Osagie determines that his story is a miracle. He indicates the presence of a miracle by labeling his story as such. This part may seem mundane, but it represents an important part of testifying. The speaker attempts to

constitute truth by making a definitive statement. The listener knows that a miracle has occurred before the story is even shared. Osagie then describes a problem that seems both dire and insurmountable. He sets up his narrative by telling us that his monetary situation goes from bad to worse when he finds out he needs to come up with twenty thousand dollars to attend Duke. It is at this point that he turns to prayer. Prayer is an absolute necessity for a miracle to occur. As some of my other cases will show, the person receiving the miracle does not always need to be the one praying, but someone needs to ask Jesus for the problem to be solved. Not all answered prayers are miracles, though. Some prayers, such as asking God for peace and relief from stress, are about communication with the Lord. Relief from stress through prayer is a “supernatural” event, but it is not a miracle. The miracle must be a supernatural answer to a prayer, but it must also solve a major problem. The solution then must be displayed in a way that glorifies God. Sometimes a miracle will be on display for a lot of people to see, but most of the time, the miracle is “displayed” when it is shared through testimony.

Osagie says that he has to claim his miracle for it to become real. There are no degrees of miracles. The event either is or is not a miracle. This is determined by sharing the story and receiving confirmation from the community that a miracle has occurred. As the miracle is shared through testimony and more people confirm it, it grows in strength and becomes larger than a mere event. In Osagie’s case, he said that he was at first uncertain about whether to claim the interest free loan as a miracle, but once he started claiming it at Cambridge, his peers encouraged him and told him that he had received a miracle of Christ. At that point, Osagie says, “I started testifying and really claiming the miracle for God.” Then, when he received the money as a gift, he knew that the miracle

was even greater than he had previously thought and he says, “I started testifying to a lot more people.” The act of testifying makes the miracle bigger. As Osagie hears more confirmation his miracle grows in strength and becomes a greater supernatural event.

The most significant part of my interview with Osagie was the way in which I was able to directly affect the story as a listener. After he shared his story, I noted that it sounded to me like the prayer was answered exactly as it was prayed. When he asked for the money he first said he wanted the twenty thousand dollar sum and then paused and asked for it to not be a loan. When the prayer was answered, first he has given the money interest free and then he was given the money outright. The timing was drawn out, it happened over a week, whereas in the prayer it happened over a few seconds, but the underlying structure of timing was the same. When I told Osagie my interpretation, his eyes lit up and he praised God. He said he’d never thought of it that way. This is an example of how the act of claiming a miracle both confirms that the event is a miracle and allows for the miracle to become bigger than it was before. When I shared my wonder at the miracle with Osagie, he was struck by a new greatness about it. Perhaps when he testifies about it next, he will include this part in the story, thereby incorporating a piece of my interpretation and understanding of significance.

The same process applies for the sharing of testimony. As the speaker incorporates the confirmations of the listeners in the community, his testimony becomes truer. If the speaker testifies that God changed him and made him a more giving person, his identity as a giving person will be solidified. The reality and truth of the testimony is based in the act of sharing with the community.

Another way that hearing testimony about miracles increased my understanding of the definition of the testimony was my experience listening to a story that was not directly witnessed. What I learned from this experience is that there are many forms of “witnessing.” Once the miracle story enters the community, anyone in the community, whether a speaker or a listener, can claim the miracle for herself. The following story was told to me by Larissa several years ago in her dorm room. When I interviewed her, I reminded her of the conversation we had sophomore year. She tells a story of how a miracle was performed in the name of Jesus by her friend Ryan, who she describes as “*a wonderful man of God.*” Here is the story she re-iterated, as we shall see, in more ways than one:

“On one of our outreaches we were going around [inaudible] to Mexican villages and talking to people and Ryan, like we had a group of high schoolers, a high school youth group team with us. I heard this story afterwards, I just heard everyone cheering and I looked around and I was like, what just happened? And so afterwards he had been – there were these two Mexican guys in this car and their car wasn’t starting, it was just clicking when they were trying the key and it wasn’t actually starting. They thought maybe, like, the belt was wet or something was wrong with the car and so Ryan talked a lot about putting our faith into action and so he looked at the guys and said, do you believe that God could start your car? And they were like, “uhhh, I guess” and he was like “ok, I’m going to pray and I’m going to ask God to start your car.” So he put his hand on the hood and he was like, “God we believe that you can do this and we ask that if you are real right now that you come and dry the belt or do whatever you need to right

now.” And as he was praying, the car just started. And they just looked at him as if they had just seen a ghost, they were just totally freaked out by Ryan, like, what power did he have that he could do this. And Ryan had this wo-hoo-hoo way of cheering when he got excited and he did it and all the high schoolers who were watching this happen were just cheering and the guys just looked at him and drove off all freaked out. It was cool, it was cool to see the way that God isn’t limited by realities all the time and there’s lots of other miracles that I saw, like people who couldn’t see being able to see and lots of things like that where you have faith that that’s what actually happened and it’s a miracle. And it’s something so small too, it’s almost –the beauty of it is in how insignificant it was. Did they really need their car to start; not really. They would have been ok if that hadn’t happened, it’s just like God’s way of being like, “I still move in this world” and if you have the faith to be dumb enough to look at someone and say, do you believe that God can start this car and I’m going to pray that he going to, then God is going to show up.”

Larissa’s testimony about the car miracle is an important example of what it means to “witness.” In the interview, I asked her to tell me about any miracles she had seen. Even though she admits that she *“heard this story afterwards,”* Larissa associates her experience of listening and witnessing with a form of seeing. What she saw was Biblical Truth: that God “still [moves] in this world” and that when people call on him in the name of Christ, he will perform miracles. Ultimately, this is what (and where) the testimony is: the sharing of Biblical Truths that make action a reality when the words of the speaker are heard and seen. Larissa’s story of witnessing coupled with Osagie’s observation that miracles must be claimed, have informed my theory that the listener and

the speaker contribute equally to the formation of testimony. This theory implicates the community as an important aspect of sharing testimony, because reality and truth, while ultimately mediated by God, also have their roots in the congregation.

Chapter Four: Crafting Testimony

At one Monday Night Live event, the campus ministry provided a forum for practicing evangelism. An important flyer⁹ was handed out as part of a “*testimony workshop*.” The program for the evening started out with three students sharing their testimony with the whole congregation. After the students shared publicly, the rest of the congregation got into pairs and shared their testimony, using the sheet as a guideline. The ministers have outlined the model testimony: first the speaker will provide personal narrative about what life was like Before Conversion.¹⁰ Then she will talk about the Conversion moment or process and how the Gospel changed her. Finally, the speaker will describe his life After Conversion. This is the overall narrative structure that the testimony takes.

In addition to the overall narrative, the ministers also establish a precedent for a certain type of power that is vested in language. The flyer first provides Biblical references to the term “testimony” which appear in Revelations Chapters 12 and 19. Using these passages as a reference point, the authors of this text make arguments for the “*Power of a Testimony*.” Their arguments are “*rooted in scripture*,” as Arielle noted in her testimony, but they also draw heavily on modern linguistic ideology. Joel Robbins defines modern linguistic ideology as the “tight coupling of intention and meaning that is grounded in the postulation of a speaker who has both the ability and an inclination to tell the truth” (Robbins 905). Members of the Cambridge community are encouraged by campus ministers to engage in this type of sincerity by sharing “*the Gospel based on your*

⁹ See Appendix A

¹⁰ Notice that Before Conversion is “BC” or Before Christ.

personal story.” The Gospel, or truth, is associated with personal narrative, which anyone has the agency to share. Not only that, the flyer states that while people may dispute philosophical and theological interpretations of the Bible, they cannot dispute the personal narrative about the way the Gospel changes the speaker. In this line of argument, the campus ministers are confirming the ability of the speaker to tell infallible truth. The ministers also tightly couple the intention and meaning of the testimony. On the flyer, the stated intention of the testimony is to “*empower us to overcome.*” When Kenesha was going over the sheet, she summarized the meaning of the testimony: “*when we share our story, we share the Gospel, which is that you live in death and sin and then you have life in Christ.*” The meaning of the testimony is victory over sin. The intention and meaning are the same.

Robbins’ model of modern linguistic ideology is applied during the creation of the testimony. However, once the testimony is shared, and the listener is included, his model becomes too narrow to account for the complexities introduced by a certain kind of temporality. The meaning and intention of the testimony can change once they are heard by and begin to affect the listener. The words of the testimony themselves are fixed in time (in particular, by my act of tape recording), but their meaning may be interpreted differently by the listener as he recycles them and uses in them in his own testimony. This process of internalization over time is where we see the community expand beyond the original speaker-listener relationship, in which the listener now creates his testimony and includes the testimony of other Christians. I came to understand the significance of the “testimony within a testimony” through a series of conversations with a member of Cambridge.

In my analysis, I will identify two other narrative structures that have appeared in testimony. In chapter one, I talked about how the testimony is a highly edited text. In chapter two, I moved on to explore other forms of testimony. In this chapter, I return to the “formal” testimony – the story of conversion and explore how it is edited and crafted. Part of the editing may be attributed to the way that testimony circulates through the community. I have already discussed the listener’s role in miracle confirmation, but here I will turn to the speaker. The speaker is in the position of crafting his testimony while being crafted by the listener. The listener crafts the speaker both by providing confirmation of identity in Christ, but also by internalizing the speaker’s testimony and talking about the speaker as a testament to Christ whose actions guide the listener. The speaker becomes the object of the testimony when she is referred to as a guide.

Speaker as Object

I noticed that one Cambridge member would often make a distinction between a person who “has a great testimony” and a person who “is a great testimony.” At first I did not pay much attention to the distinction, but I came to find out, after many informal conversations, that the different ways of talking about testimony had personal significance for her. A person who “has a great testimony” is someone she has a friendly relationship, but not someone who has played a major role in her formation as a Christian. A person who “is a great testimony” has either served as a guide in the early process of her salvation, or has changed her view of God in some way.

The distinction provides insight into the way that a person’s life can be linguistically objectified in the process of giving testimony. What I mean by linguistic objectification is that a person’s identity and testimony are welded into one. In many

ways, this is a great compliment because it indicates that the person is so accomplished, so gracious, so generous, and so much *like Christ*, that his life is no longer a story about God's power, but a *manifestation* of God's power. Talking about someone else as a testimony is a way of confirming his success in the process of salvation. In secular terms, people who are viewed as "a testimony" provide an ideal for the convert to attain: the ideal is to have such a close relationship with God that his power and will flow through you. This ideal is achieved through complex model of linguistic semiotics, in which the subject is represented using objectified words.

As I mentioned earlier in my comparison of subcultures (the punk movement and Cambridge) the speaker of Christ-inspired language can be seen as the subject, while his words are conceptualized as objects. In the case of the "Subject as Object" the speaker is referencing another person as an object, or instrument or God. This person may be thought of as a guide or mentor who helps to reveal the power of the Gospel to the listener. As the listener comes under conviction, he internalizes the words of the guide and begins to claim them as part of his own identity in Christ. The community of the testimony, then, includes as many people as have heard and internalized the words of the speaker, because every listener has the agency to become a speaker as well. During this process, the object and subject become interchangeable.

The first type of story that I will analyze here is that of the guide or role model. The guide is a testimony to God in two ways. First, he or she is external to the person who is speaking, so the testimony is seen and talked about from a perspective outside the self. Second, the testimony of the other person is internalized by the speaker and

presented as a testimony of its own by way of showing how another person's life brought the speaker closer to God.

The Guide: People as Words

The process of salvation is never achieved alone. Everyone I have interviewed at least gives group credit by acknowledging that *“coming to Cambridge had a big impact”* on his or her relationship with God. Most people went further and named people who played a major role in the conversion process. In his testimony Christian identifies three guides who influenced his faith. They are Iris, Brennan and Peter. The guides provide two main services: testimony and prayer. However, at least in the case of Iris and Brennan, Christian did not initially recognize their role because he had yet to establish his identity in Christ.

Christian says that he was hanging out with Iris and Brennan, who were in his theology class and he began *“to really enjoy hanging out with them, you know, like you meet people in a class and do that.”* Iris and Brennan were just like any other friends to Christian at that point in his life. It was only afterward that he saw them as influential guides in his journey to faith. Christian chooses to use secular terminology to describe the beginning of his relationship with Iris and Brennan. He says they were “hanging out” and then verifies that the behavior is a normal practice for all students with the phrase, “like you meet people in a class and do that.” This is an example of the use of public semiotics juxtaposed with Christian ideology. While the difference here is not as stark as James' reference to depression and salvation, it is an important example of how overall narrative structure mirrors what Harding has called the “turn of a phrase” (Harding 40). When he met Iris and Brennan he thought it was just like his other relationships, until he

experienced conversion and realized in hindsight that they facilitated that process through prayer. The language he chooses mirrors this story exactly. Christian uses the term “hanging out,” which is meant to signify common secular behavior. However, the phrase “like you meet people in a class and do that,” while not overtly religious, indicates that a change has occurred. All of the terms are secular, but their use in narrative performs the same function as juxtaposing secular and religious language. That is, the general narrative of Before Conversion and After Conversion is represented in shifts of the semiotics of language.

One specific role that the guide will fulfill is that of prayer. The convert will not find this out until after he has completed the conversion process, when he will re-visit his conversion and interpret prayer differently. He says that he had “*come to find out, like, after the fact, from that time that they had met me, in the class, they had started to pray for me and stuff like that. They were both in this Christian fellowship called Cambridge, which I would join in the spring of my sophomore year.*” Here Christian links the actions of guiding prayer with his decision to join Cambridge. It is not only the guide’s symbolic status as a (Wo)man of God, but also the ability to use prayer practices effectively to help open the heart of the guided individual. It is important that they began praying for him the moment they met in class as opposed to once they started to know each other. The initial bold step of prayer shows that Christ works through the guides in order prepare the convert to receive Him. Prayer is an important part of affirming that a person is a testimony to God because it shows how God works through him or her in order to aid the process of conversion.

In addition to Iris and Brennan, Christian also identified Peter Blair as a guide in his conversion narrative. Peter's role in his testimony was "objectified" so that Peter's accomplishments and character are a direct manifestation of God's glory. The first thing that Christian notes is that that Peter is different from other people he had met:

"I had seen him walking around East Campus, I'm like, who is this guy [...] he is just way too bubbly and I mean, what is going on with him?"

Christian is speaking about his experience as a secular student, before he became involved in Cambridge, and how Peter stood out to him. The recognition of difference is another example of how the speaker seeks to recreate his conversion experience using the juxtaposition of public and theological semiotics in the overall narrative structure of "Before Conversion" and "After Conversion." The recognition of difference is also a testament to the fact that Peter, as an individual, walks with God in his life, and is visibly different and joyful because of it. Peter's countenance, which is described as always joyful, is seen as an extension of God. Christian also notes that the testimony of Peter's life extends into all material and historical categories.

"So I ran into him one day in the marketplace [...] it was like the first time I'm actually talking to Peter, but I was just so taken by, you know, his kinda testimony of the way that God had been working in his life and the presence of god had been, um, you know, he had felt the presence of God near to him, in real manifest ways, you know his testimonies

of academics, of how he got to college, of finances, of his kinda upbringing in the Bahamas...”

The “real manifest ways” that God has manifested himself in Peter’s life are an amalgamation of “testimonies” that together make Peter a role model for Christian. In addition to manifesting joy, Peter also accomplished goals in life with apparent ease. Christian associated his worldly accomplishments with God perhaps because Peter himself gave credit to God for them. Recalling Robbins’ model of modern linguistic ideology, it is important to note that Peter’s intention and meaning behind giving testimony to Christian is irrelevant now that Christian is the speaker. Peter was giving his testimony to Christian as part of a conversion process, and then Christian was giving me his testimony, which contained Peter’s story.

“Peter started, you know, bringing me around to some of the Cambridge events in the spring; I went to an event; they had a breakfast or something with the ministry, you know some things I did in the spring, but, um, he graduated that spring and I was really sad to see him go, but that next fall, the fall of my sophomore year I ended up joining Cambridge and becoming more active [...] there.”

In this part of his testimony, Christian directly links a “guide” to his decision to join Cambridge. It is almost like he becomes a Christian in honor of what Peter shared with him. This makes sense on a number of levels. First, he is honoring the Glory of God, because that is what Peter shared. At the same time, he is also honoring the guide by

validating that the manifestations of Christ in Peter's life are great enough to warrant conversion.

When talking about his guiding influences, Christian engages in a re-presentation of the facts of his life for the sake of testimony. Susan Harding gives several examples of how and why this re-presentation takes place. She talks about famous examples of Jerry Falwell's 'public lies' that were exposed and picked up by members of the secular community as examples of his ineptitude. Falwell had claimed in 1980 that he had questioned President Jimmy Carter about the presence of homosexuals on white house staff. Tapes released after the fact showed that Falwell never asked the question. Falwell claimed that his "lie" was a "parable" (Harding 26). Harding casts his factually untrue remarks in a new light by explaining that Falwell intends them to speak to a higher Truth, even though they do not accurately represent the past. Falwell would tell these stories, Harding explains, as part of his ongoing process to make Christian the history and narrative of his life. I do not want to compare Christian to Jerry Falwell personally, but instead approach Christian's re-presentations with a similar analytical lens to Harding's explanation of Falwell's re-presentations.

When Christian talks about his relationship with Iris and Brennan, he says that he *"would join [Cambridge] in the spring of [his] sophomore year."* A few minutes later, Christian says, *"[Peter] graduated that spring and I was really sad to see him go, but that next fall, the fall of my sophomore year I ended up joining Cambridge and becoming more active [...] there."* These two statements are clearly contradictory in terms of timing. Christian probably sees his attrition to the Cambridge community as a process, especially since there is no protocol for officially "joining" the group. However, in his

testimony, Christian marks a clear time period for his joining of Cambridge. The time period then changes depending on who he is talking about. When he is talking about Iris and Brennan he says that he joined in the spring, but when he is talking about Peter he says that he joined several months earlier. This may seem like splitting hairs, but I think that the very idea that Christian would put a time frame on his membership to Cambridge is telling about how he conceptualizes the role of the guide's testimony. I propose that Christian gave different time frames because he wanted to give credit to the power of each guide's testimony. While Christian may not have been fully active in Cambridge until the spring of his sophomore year, he saw Peter as a testimony to God's power and wanted to honor that by crediting him with his newfound faith. This example is similar to James' change of terms that I talked about in the previous chapter. In this example, though, the two re-presentations differ not in choice of terms, but in basic narrative details. The whole time frame for the story shifts. This example shows how the patterns present in language are also present in the larger narrative structure.

Loss: Breaking the Pattern (Renewal)

In the most basic sense, the narrative about loss speaks to relying on God during hard times. Christian's story of loss focuses on the process of building a relationship with God through loss. In other words, the loss of a friend forces Christian to face God and choose whether or not to trust in Him completely. Christian tells a story about his experience with the Duke in Beijing program. He says there were a few Christians there and that he became close friends with one girl named Shaena:

“We had an awesome time together, she was a believer, talking about God and how He was working in our lives, and kinda reading the Word together [...] it was wonderful”

Christian’s relationship with Shaena was based explicitly on their shared faith. He says that they were reveling in God together by encouraging each other through conversation and reading the Bible. He uses the first person plural (“we” and “our”) showing that the experience he was having with God at this time was shared. This part of his testimony shows how a Christian community can confirm God’s presence by sharing stories of how “He was working in our lives.” What Christian and Shaena are doing is sharing testimony. They are engaging in a circular process of belief that is particularly common at Cambridge: the Word becomes real because other people speak it and affirm it by sharing it through testimony. This is the basis for the congregation.

However, to treat the Cambridge experience as merely a linguistically created reality eclipses the meaning of sharing testimony because it leaves out God and the Holy Spirit. God does not become real by giving testimony; a testimony is only a statement about God’s reality, which pre-exists everything. It took me a very long time to grasp this concept and I don’t think that I fully understood it when Christian was sharing his testimony with me. Looking back, though, he has set up a powerful story that speaks to the difference between the linguistic – or congregation – confirmed God and the Lord Himself.

Christian’s story of loss tears down the model that God is made real through the communal sharing of testimony. He explains how confirmation of God through other people can hide God’s true plan for the individual. Christian turns the logic on its head by

attributing real spiritual transformation to the experience of Shaena's departure and his resulting loneliness. It was through the loss of his friend, and the Christian community that she supplied, that he comes to find a closer relationship with God:

“There comes a time in August where she has to leave, she has to get on a two day train from Kunming, where we were to go back to Beijing, and she was going to get a flight back to the states. Um, and, yeah, I was just beside myself, so sad to see her go both because I just enjoyed her presence so much and her friendship; but also because I hadn't really established deep connections with the organization we'd found in Kunming that I was interested in working in. They were ex-pats at this organization, but even so, like I just didn't have any friends there so I felt so [pause] alone and isolated in China. So that morning we got in a cab [and] took it across Kunming to the train station, and I set her off there and I was really upset but she went in the terminal and got on the train and left and I kinda took the long bus route back, like an hour bus back to the hostel where we were staying at kinda northwest side of town and there was a park that we had been walking through a bunch of times and so I went there by myself and I had my Bible with me and I was crying, like, I was so upset that she was gone; that I didn't know what was going to happen over the next couple months; that I didn't really have any friends; that I felt lonely; like, in this hostel people pass through like every couple of days and people just turn over and turn over there's no one really regular that you can establish a deep-deep relationship with. And it just struck me as I was in the park and I was just sobbing, that if I believe God to be who I think he is, then whether Shaena is here in Kunming with me or not; whether I'm really well established here or not, whether I know

exactly what is going to happen over the next couple of months or not, that's not going to prevent God being present here with me, um so I felt like at that moment that I had it really, um, it was a very clear decision that I had to make; I could either give into the self pity that I had for myself just being in a terribly lonely situation not really knowing what's going to happen, or I could begin to trust God in this new way that I had never been pushed to trust God in; to say, "No God, I believe that you are arranging things for me, that your presence is here with me that you want me here, I feel like you really led me here and to take faith in that but not to concede to that self pity, you know? It was about trusting in God, and it was about independence in a sense because throughout my experience at Cambridge there had always been this Christian community and people talking about God and the different ways they're interacting with God, experiencing God, hearing things through reading the Word, but that wasn't all completely real for me [...]

Here I was in China by myself and didn't have that kind of community or friendships, which are definitely very helpful for me and encouraging me, but also could be at times kind of a crutch."

Christian's loss leads to a closer relationship with God. The road that he takes to get there is organized in a directional, linear fashion. First, Christian is subjected to a period of pain through the departure of his friend. We know that Christian is in pain because of his self-described loneliness. The feeling of loss is heightened when he goes for a walk in the park and revisits the place that he associates with his friend. His loneliness is intense enough to bring him to tears. But while he is wallowing in self-pity, Christian says that "it just struck [him]" that he had to make a choice between self-pity and God. When he

chooses God, he gets a *revelation*. His revelation is that whether or not he has friends to support him, he will always be able to rely on God.

Christian's revelation is immediately manifested with a new understanding of society. Christian realizes that "community or friendships [...are] very helpful for [him...] but also could be at times kind of a crutch." The observation that relationships with people are circumstantial is a *practical manifestation of God's revelation* to Christian because he learns something about humanity through God. Manifestation is another way of saying that God is real.

Another way that Christian's revelation is manifested is through the act of giving testimony. When Christian talks about his choice between self-pity and God, he creates a simple dichotomy between what is good and bad. Even though the self-pity is characterized as bad or unholy, Christian appears to honestly and sincerely capture his selfish feelings without being self-deprecating. He speaks without reservation and discloses information about his sadness that makes me wonder at his ability to make himself vulnerable. Christian is able to talk about his pain without experiencing it because he has re-captured his loneliness and self-pity for the purpose of *sharing God's glory*. The act of giving testimony, as he was doing with me, makes his negative experience an instrument for a positive outcome. This is another way that the revelation manifests itself: Christian is able to talk openly about his painful experience without reliving it. The negative experience becomes a positive thing. He re-claims the negative experience for Christ. Using this narrative device, Christian crafts a story that is a testimony to God's power.

James' story is an example of how the narrative of breaking a pattern is employed as a testament to God. The two instances he talks about highlight adolescent understandings of fairness: that his friend's death from cancer was unfair and incomprehensible, and that the childhood relocation of another friend was too much for a ten year old to be able to process. Both of these stories led James to realize that his privileged life was, in fact, harsh and unfulfilling. That realization in turn led to his radical encounter with Christ, when he realized that a relationship with God could quell the sadness he felt from loss. The following is how James begins his testimony after I asked him the direct question, how did you come to Christ?

“I was in a family that was pretty well off, normal middle class, but pretty much had everything I always wanted or needed, played sports my whole life and I got to the point where ... it all kinda started like in elementary school my best friend, like, he was like my best friend, man, we did everything in elementary school together, he moved away to Colorado, and that was a hard time in my life at that point I was just in elementary school, you know?”

James begins his testimony by saying that it “all started” with loss. From the way he pauses after the first sentence it appears that he was about to launch into how his life “got to a point where” it wasn't so fulfilling, but he chose to interrupt this part of the story, which he elaborates on later, in order to talk about loss. He chose to highlight the story from elementary school but he does not elaborate on it or come back to it. This story was placed early in the testimony in order to establish a pattern that will repeat itself

over his life testimony. He is adjusting the timing of his narrative as he is telling it. He cuts himself off and injects the story of loss from a much earlier time in his life for narrative effect.

The experience in elementary school did not cause him to seek God, but a similar and more dramatic loss of a best friend in high school did. Before I interviewed him, James had told me that he had this trauma in his life of losing both of his best friends and that the experience is what led him to seek Christ. I was struck by his willingness to share such a personal story of loss. I was also a little taken aback because I didn't quite know how to respond when James broached the topic out of the blue: "*Anyway, in high school, my best friend Jared, he died of a brain tumor.*" I already knew about the loss of his friend, but I did not expect him to bring it up in such stark terms. Susan Harding speaks about a similar experience in an interview when her subject, Reverend Campbell, tells her how he accidentally killed his son. Harding notes how the injection of disruptive narrative "startles the listener [...] but before it is absorbed, Campbell shifts to the real point – his conversion with God" (Harding 53). This is, of course, one explanation for James' narrative techniques. The language is meant to strike the listener, in order to spark a rush of emotion that is immediately associated with the topic of giving one's life to the Lord.

Another way to interpret this narrative tactic is to assign its lyricism to an attempt to mirror the past with language. James says of the traumatic loss of his friend: "*[Doctors] have no idea how it got there, just all of a sudden. And I pretty much, I just watched him die.*" The death was sudden and horrifying, and James re-presents the event in much the same way. His language hits me and incurs an emotional response, in much

the same way that James is saying that he felt at the time, *just all of a sudden*. In this explanation, the language is chosen on a subconscious level, in which the speaker looks back at the past and re-presents the emotional truth. In this case, the emotional truth was that James was shocked by the death of his friend. He goes on to talk about how his shock and lack of understanding led him to look for answers to deeper questions in life:

I think it took six months or so, I can't really remember, but I pretty much just watched him deteriorate and one thing that kinda got me is that I remember a lot of Christians that I was around would talk and the way they talked was kinda like, 'well I guess it was just God's timing, you know? That he was taken,' and stuff like that. And to be honest there was something in that, that didn't really sit right with me. I didn't claim to know God, I didn't claim to disbelieve God either, because I grew up in a home where my parents did, you know, they say they believed in Jesus. I didn't claim to disbelieve Christ, but whenever I heard that it was just God's time to take someone like that, there was something in me that was like, 'I don't agree with that. There's something wrong... it wasn't that I knew something was wrong, it was that I was just like, I want to find out. I want to find out what the truth really is.' And I got this, I started to think about eternity a lot, obviously, my friend died, I didn't know where he went. I go to his funeral and I see his body lying there and I'm just in high school. It's like, well, where is he?

Despite the being older, James' reaction looking back at his loss is the same as his reaction back in elementary school. When his friend moved to Colorado, he said that he didn't know what to think because, *"I was just in elementary school."* The two instances

of loss are different in terms of substance and in terms of time. They are separated by a long time period. However, the underlying emotional question is the same for James. He reacts in exactly the same way, because he does not have the tools to cope with loss.

James associates his depression with the loss of his friends. His depression may have been caused by many factors, but for the purpose of his testimony, James sets up a pattern that is devastating him then that God can break. The complexity of his depression is simplified into a story of loss that is intended to be universally relatable:

You know what I mean; everyone goes through that I think. I just started thinking about it a lot. Then I started, one of my other best friends was really, he was Baptist and really into the Bible and stuff like that, so I started hanging out with him and I would talk to him about it, he would kinda talk about heaven and Jesus and being saved and stuff like that so I started just kinda getting interested in it. Right after I graduated high school he actually passed away, he actually died in a car accident. And from that point on, I was just like, I got to the point where I was depressed, I hated life. The only thing I liked was sports and even that sometimes was dry and boring, not boring, but I did that for so many years and it kinda became a job to me. I played basketball in college. It got to the point in college where I was a freshman and I started to pray, I started to read the Bible, and I didn't really understand the Bible. I would open it up and be like, man this is just weird, this is boring, I don't get it, I don't understand it."

James collapses the timeline of his life in order to establish a pattern of negative things that God was able to break. If James were to fill in more details of his life between

elementary school and the end of high school, especially if those stories included other close friends, then the effect of his testimony would be lessened. I had even experienced this lessening of narrative power when the story had gone from a casual two minute conversation to a forty-five minute testimony. As I understood more of how the timeline worked, I was less shocked by his loss. This sliding scale of “shock-value” is important because the intensity of the manifestation of God’s power rests on the severity of the loss.

James’ story of loss is about how God broke a negative pattern in his life. This pattern is established by a collapse of time. The sentiment behind the story may actually be more nuanced than a gradation of information shared that diminishes the power of the testimony. It is also possible that the collapse of time takes place because James finds the loss of each best friend to be the two most significant emotional traumas in his life. As he gets older and becomes dissatisfied with his life, he focuses on these two incidences and associates his pain with the sadness he felt.

He wants it to be as powerful as possible, because he knows my identity as a secular listener. He could start off by talking about how his life was unfulfilled and God was able to fill that hole. In the timeline of his life, this event is more recent because it continues to happen every day. James talks about how he must submit to God’s will every day.

“And I could use terms like He set me free, but He really did. I-I wasn’t depressed anymore. And although I had –I did mourn the loss of my friends and stuff, it was like all of a sudden... I was just at peace and I truly –I can honestly say, like... I miss them, like,

*you know, sometimes I wish they were here... but I haven't had any grief, since I met
God"*

At this point in his testimony, James returns to his pattern of loss and ties the stories together. While the loss of his two best friends may have been far apart in time, they were placed next to each other in his heart and weighed heavily on him. After he has told both stories of loss, James brings them full circle in a story about being saved. The moment of salvation is about a return to a new subject. Just like Christian is able to talk about pain freely and use it in a story about God's glory, James says he is able to miss his friends without having grief, "since [he] met God." Not only is this a story about loss, it is also an example of how James views the past and present and how his relationship with God has changed his outlook on life.

Epilogue: My Testimony

In this chapter, I will share my testimony, which is a highly edited type of auto-ethnography. This story spans a time of nearly two years and includes major spiritual moments as markers for my journey to faith. Why am I sharing it? Over the time that I have spent at Cambridge, I have learned about most of what I have written in this thesis through spiritual experiences. I am not saying that God spoke to me and gave me my argument. What I am saying is that I would have an experience in Christ and only then would I be able to relate to what my subjects were talking about. In early drafts of my auto-ethnography, I included all of these stories and analyzed them using the same methods I employed for my subjects. However, I found that as *I grew in Christ*, my spiritual interpretation of the events continued to change. The analysis of these events began to take on meaning in a larger context: that of testifying about my radical encounter with Christ.

Susan Harding has noted that social scientists on the whole have not gotten close enough to belief to see it for what it is (Harding 36). While I commend her attempt to provide a perspective that does not treat religion with atheist hostility, I find her justification of her position somewhat problematic. Does the amount of belief she has correlate to her understanding of religion? Does my conversion give me more authority to speak Christian linguistics than Harding? Or can understanding only come when someone gets close to belief and then backs away, in order to maintain “objectivity?” I think that Harding has spoken too soon in claiming that one has to believe in order to understand fundamentalist Christians, because it begs the question, what kind of understanding?

At this point in the paper, I am moving away from academic forms of discourse and expressing myself by sharing testimony. There are two reasons that I have chosen to leave the anthropological discourse behind. First, the change between this chapter and the previous chapters represents the unique periphery-center relationship between me and my subject population during the course of my research. In Susan Harding's case, and in the case of most anthropological work, the researcher approaches the community from the periphery and is slowly assimilated before the project ends, at which point the researcher returns to the periphery to write. In my case, the center reached out and grabbed me from the periphery. I was sitting in my seat, trying to research when Charles' prayer invaded my privacy and hit my body and pulled me into the Spirit world of the Holy Ghost. Charles struck one chord for me and I lamented my inability to hear the song of which he sang. Since then, I have heard many others. Now I can put together a song and sing the praises of the Lord with the congregation. As my story will show, God was pulling me in before I even began my research. I have chosen to write this testimony to spread the Gospel as I have experienced it. I write this with full knowledge of its status as an act of evangelism.

On a day in the early spring of my senior year of high school, I remember sitting around with my best friend at the lunch tables, talking about our day at school. I had spent the day in class, studying Virgil's Aeneid. My friend had ditched his morning schedule and gone surfing. In my four years of high school I had never ditched once. I longed for the freedom my friend had made for himself. Surfing was my first love, and from age nine onwards, I spent all my summers and most of my weekends during the

school year out in the waters around Malibu, California. I built my identity around the ocean and I always felt like I was held back by my scholarly responsibilities.

My friend knew this about me, and as I sat there grilling him about the conditions from the morning session, he turned and said to me, “You know, you are just so lucky that you have surfing. I mean, I like to surf, don’t get me wrong, but it will never match your passion.” I agreed, but he went on, “It’s like, you’ll never be depressed, because no matter how low you get, you’ll always be able to find your identity in surfing.” And as soon as he said it, I knew I was doomed. While he was talking, I was thinking, please, God, don’t let him say it. But God already knew, and I knew, that surfing would one day be taken from me.

That day came during my sophomore year at Duke. After several years of physical therapy and doctors visits, it was determined that the pain in my hip joint would require surgery. I thought it was no big deal, but it turned out that I couldn’t do any physical activity for over a year after that. In the meantime, I had developed shoulder and back pain in place of the pain in the hip. Despite these setbacks, I was determined to surf again, so I decided to find the best study abroad program location for surfing. I chose the School for International Training’s Samoa Program entitled “Pacific Island Studies.” I would be arriving in Samoa one year after my surgery, which was the absolute latest time frame doctors had given me for full recovery. To my disappointment, though, I still couldn’t surf once I got there.

The unfortunate situation of being unable to enjoy perfect waves combined with “culture shock” led me to begin soul searching. When I looked, I did not like what I found. I realized that I had spent much of my life suppressing my emotions and directing

anger against myself. I felt powerless to express myself, as if layers upon layers of stammering, nervous laughter, and self-repudiation had formed a shell around my body and were preventing me from speaking from the heart. I saw that my body was written on by the hand of my self-hatred; and I saw my clinical pain as a product of my worry and anxiety.

One rainy evening, towards the end of monsoon season, I told the Fijian student living next to me about the pain in my shoulder and my back. He had recently come to Christ and said that he would pray for me. He came into my room and put coconut oil on the painful areas and spoke of the love of Jesus that would come over me and relieve my pain. My shoulder immediately relaxed and I felt it drop into its normal place. That night, I could sense a fire burning inside my body. It was like the volcano of emotional pain had erupted and new lava was pouring into the cold, scarred places covering them over and solidifying. The changes terrified me because they felt somehow permanent. It was that week, in early April, that I drafted my thesis proposal and sent it to Orin Starn, who was the Director of Undergraduate Studies at the time. My plan was to write a thesis about evangelical Christians at Duke and somehow prove that my experience with Christ in Samoa was simply a product of linguistics. But God has incredible patience, and my refusal to accept the one thing that had helped to heal me turned out to be a great blessing because I encountered a form of healing at Cambridge that I never dreamed possible.

When I arrived at Cambridge in the fall of my senior year I was delighted to see my friend Larissa there. She is my closest friend at Duke who had talked with me about faith. We had met in a photography class in the fall of my sophomore year, just before my

surgery. It was shortly after I met her that Larissa facilitated the first spiritual awakening of my life, in the spring of sophomore year. For reasons unknown to me, I had decided to go to Church for Easter with my aunt. What I did not know at the time is that Larissa had been praying and writing in her journal asking for God to reveal Christ to me during that time. Her prayers were answered.

The Easter service was a social affair for me because my mother's family is from Durham. A lot of family friends would come by to say hello. Between conversations I gazed around the church. The members of the choir were casually making their way up to the pulpit and I watched them order themselves along the wooden structure. I glanced from them to the middle of the room where the cross stood, adorned with flowers. Suddenly I lost focus of everything in the room but the cross. Its flowers seemed to grow larger and pop out, blazing with color. A passion stirred within me and suddenly the entire metaphor of Christ's sacrifice was laid bare in a series of uncontrollable thoughts. I had no concept of what was going on around me. The metaphor of Easter Sunday had consumed me and I sat in awe.

In that moment I understood for the first time that Jesus had died for the sins of humanity and that in so doing his death had given life. When I saw the cross adorned with flowers, I did not see the dead wood underneath. I knew of its existence, but all that I could see was the life that burst forth from the colors of spring. The spring is resurrection, or renewal of life after death; the cross is the human death of Christ. When I realized this, it was not by way of reasoning or logic. I did not think to myself, how do these symbols fit together? Rather, the meaning and the symbolism came simultaneously;

the message was all that I saw and understood. The incidence lasted for a split second, and then it was gone.

I almost completely forgot about this experience, I think because, again, I was afraid of the power of God's love. I did not understand that the power isn't dangerous, but life giving. Two years passed, and I saw Larissa occasionally, but that whole time, she was praying for me. When I saw her the first day I arrived at Cambridge and I told her about my research she said to me, "Chris, I don't mean to scare you, but I think God has you here for a reason." She didn't know about my experience in Samoa, but she could sense that I was still afraid to approach Christ. Through her guiding prayers I have been kept assured of her well-meaning intentions during my process of transformation.

In my project, I started collecting the testimonies of people at Cambridge. I did not know what I was receiving, but I continued to ask people for their conversion stories. I would record them and transcribe them at home. Slowly, I started to incorporate the emotions of these stories into my heart, and I began to hear how God changed the lives of the people I was studying. Once I started to understand the love they were testifying about, the sermons at Monday Night Live started to touch me in supernatural ways.

During one sermon in late November, when campus minister James Starr was speaking, I felt a pang in the space between my eyes. The more he spoke about the love of Christ, the stronger the sensation became, until a full cross was pulsing on my forehead. Again, I was scared by the feeling, but I gathered the courage to go up to James and ask him about it. He prayed for me and my body shook as my nervous system re-aligned itself and the pain in all my joints disappeared. The pain would come back, but each week, James or Reggie would pray for me, and I would be overcome with the Joy of life in

Christ. The Holy Spirit would knock against my rib cage calling for me to acknowledge the Lord.

These powerful encounters with Christ were happening to me on a weekly basis, and each time, I would see deeper into my spirit. Additionally, I started to read the Bible, and that's when I started having revelations from God on my own, without ministers calling on Jesus, because I was beginning to learn to call on Him through prayer. One particular revelation occurred over spring break when I was at home. I was having a great time with my friends and family and I found the courage to testify to them, telling them about my new found faith. On Saturday, the last day before I was flying back to Durham, a big swell hit Malibu, so I decided to go surfing with my dad and my best friend. I had surfed a little bit, but I knew that this was going to be the first real test on my body. It was great. I was surfing really well, the waves were fun and I had my family and friends all out there with me. However, after surfing for about an hour, my body was aching in all the old places, and my vision was blurry. I cried out to God, asking, "Am I cursed to love the thing that kills me?" And God said, "love me first, and everything else will follow."

I realized all at once that I had been placing my identity in being a "good surfer" and I was always falling short to the other people in the water. I felt like I was constantly being judged by the other surfers. I had turned the greatest thing in my life into a prideful and covetous act, because I tried to reify my identity in my performance. This realization came simultaneously with warm relief from my hip pain as my vision cleared and I could see clearly, in a very literal sense. Ultimately, my revelation and its manifestation in

healing are really just musings, because, like the revelations themselves, all I have to do is love God first, and everything else will follow.

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Appendix A

[This document was handed out during a Monday Night Live event as part of a workshop on evangelism and giving testimony. The students wrote down their testimonies using this sheet as a guide and then shared them with each other.]

The Power & Art of a Testimony

Power of a Testimony

“And I fell at his feet to worship him. But he said to me, “See that you do not do that! I am your fellow servant, and of your brethren who have the testimony of Jesus. Worship God! For the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy.” Revelation 19:10 (NKJV)

- The story of Jesus in your life will prophecy and encourage anyone that hears it.
- The power that you experience in your experiences with Christ can be felt by the hearers of your personal testimony.

“And they overcame him (the evil one) by the blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony, and they did not love their lives to the death.” Revelation 12:11

- The Gospel is most effectively shared through your testimony.
- More people will likely get saved through hearing your personal story.
- People may dispute with you about theology and philosophy of the Gospel, but they will not and cannot dispute you on the practical implications of the Gospel based on your personal testimony. (John 9)
- Testimonies empower us to overcome.
- Testimonies instruct people on how to be victorious.

Art of a Testimony

Aspects of a Good Testimony

B (Before Conversion)

How was your life before you gave your life to Christ? What things did you think that represented the kingdom of darkness? What things did you do and say that represented the kingdom of darkness? What feelings did you have as a result of this?

Etc.

C (Conversion Experience)

Was there a moment when you gave your life to Christ? What happened to provoke you to make a decision (please describe in detail)? How did you respond? (Was it a process? How did that process look in detail?) What were you thinking and feeling at the time? Is there a scripture that comes to mind to describe what happened to you? What happened spiritually to you? How did you think and feel after the moment?

A (After Conversion)

What is different about you after your conversion experience that can be linked to before conversion (i.e. your thinking, feeling, words, actions, priorities, view of the world, people and life)?

How do you encourage people to respond to your testimony based upon what God did for you?