

# God in a House of Mirrors

The many faces of Protestant Christianity at a secular university

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# Abstract

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This thesis is intended to serve as a subjective, comparative analysis of the worship styles among Christian students at a public university, focusing exclusively on Protestant student groups at The University of Texas. Relying in large part on interviews, group visits, and other personal interaction, I sketch out many of the trends that unite and distinguish these different types of organizations.

I begin the thesis by summarizing the psychological and social attractions of Christianity for young students, then move on to three case studies of different group types at UT: “mainstream” groups, charismatic groups, and stigmatized groups. (The latter is a study of a single organization, Christians on Campus, which is often labeled as cultist by UT students.) Then, in order, I break down the phenomena of evangelism, prayer, and dimensions of belief as they relate to this particular demographic.

Among each Christian group I document problematic characteristics, as well as positive aspects, of their belief and worship patterns. I have made little attempt to evaluate or judge these patterns on a theological level, and so most of the difficulties I describe deal with their effects on college students in particular.

This study is unique among other Christian surveys in three respects: the state of emotional and spiritual flux that most college students are in; the fascinating combination of diversity and proximity that characterizes groups on a college campus; and the inherent pressure that the larger secular culture of the university inflicts on Christianity. This is an area of religious studies that is surprisingly underrepresented in mainstream research, and so I hope that my observations will survey many of the areas that need more rigorous investigation in the future.

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# Introduction

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*Truth.*

For most young college students, entering and experiencing the university for the first time, this five-letter word is an enigma—flickering in and out of their classes and their lives like St. Elmo’s Fire. Truth has been the de facto goal of most philosophers for millenia, taken for granted by many of them, only to be upended by social relativism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. And today, almost two thousand years after the death of Jesus, many of us feel we are further than ever from this shadowy goal.

An engraving on the Main Building of The University of Texas at Austin promises that “Ye shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you free”—but it seems that few passerbys have any idea what this means. What is Truth, anyway? Simply a sense of confidence in one’s own convictions? Or something more concrete, that a person can touch and then say to himself, “I found it”?

Probably the dominant feature of Christian fundamentalists—coming even before their doctrinal strictures and spiritual messages—is that they are well familiar with the Truth. Truth is a one-sided, simplistic sort of thing; it is written for them in a particular book without ambiguity, and is repeated in church services week in and week out. As I will discuss later, a person with a certain notion of Truth in which he

has absolute trust will invariably see it reinforced everywhere. The Truth does not describe reality—it becomes reality.

This can be quite appealing for adolescents who are usually not as far along in their emotional development as they like to think they are. UT-Austin is the country's largest university as of 2000, with over 50,000 students stretching its borders. Each August over seven thousand freshmen are dropped into the middle of the storm and ordered to swim. That so many do so successfully is almost miraculous.

No matter how varied the student body is, the means for finding personal balance is invariably the same: a student must develop his own "niche" to maintain a community. This niche can assume various forms, such as a student organization, political affiliation, or Internet discussion group. Of course, it can be a religion. And this option—which challenges participants' intellect and psyche, but also their "spirit"—is definitely the most fascinating.

I intend to draft a subjectively written thesis that comparatively analyzes the religious experience of students at UT-Austin, focusing on one religion in particular—Protestant Christianity. This is an especially appealing topic because the belief system itself is at least as diverse as the students who subscribe to it. A person can swerve quite radically from the faith he was raised with and still call himself a Protestant. In fact, many students have done just that.

## The Psychology of Christian Students

Why do young people become Christian? This is a more difficult question than it might seem. On the one hand, philosophers such as Karl Jung and William James have been asking it for centuries, theorizing what kind of unconscious forces might be at work “converting” us in and out of faith in God. But on the other hand, most of my subjects would take great offense at such a dry evaluation. Their simple self-evaluation is that they became Christian because they found it to be true. The evidence, both intellectual and spiritual, reveals that Jesus of Nazareth was and is the Son of God, sent from heaven to serve as a moral leader and sacrificial lamb for us all.

But it is not necessarily reductive of that motivation to ask what psychological benefits a person gains by being a Christian. For example, a Christian feels like he is part of something larger than himself. This is an emotionally beneficial belief, quite independently of whether or not it is a true one. In fact we could easily point out that God’s purpose is to give us that sense of community—in other words, the reason we feel fulfilled in religious fellowship is that we were designed to.

Social and mental stability is a more pertinent, if inconstant, benefit that we might point out. It is pertinent because of the drifting feeling that so many college students develop upon leaving home for the first time—after all, they have come to the university to find a touchstone of certainty, and when it does not immediately appear in the classroom they will inevitably look elsewhere. And the benefit is inconstant

because the students deal with these feelings in such varied ways. Most notably, some students find greater comfort in leaving Christianity, having been raised with it and found it an inadequate response to the new spiritual challenges that they face.

To add to this point, Christianity can often *destabilize* a person when it is perverted or misapplied to his needs. At various points during my research I saw the Christian faith being used as an ill-fitting stand-in for rational argument; an inappropriate substitute for physical human support; and (disastrously) a mask for deep-seeded personal prejudices. Though my findings were by and large positive ones, I will explore these problems as they come up during my analyses.

An additional benefit, in addition to a sense of belonging and stability, is that Christianity gives its believers a particular feeling of certainty. This topic requires some discussion. Though the Bible is a rambling, widely sourced, and often conflicting document, it has assumed the role of perfect historical and philosophical inerrancy for millions of Christians. (I do not pretend to understand this conclusion, but it would be outside my area of research—for this project, anyway—to pursue the matter very far.) At any rate, most who profess a belief in Christ do so with a glimmer of assurance that an agnostic is likely to envy.

I will use a certain, unusual example to illustrate this point further. Early in my research, I realized that Asian students—many of them children of immigrants—represented the largest minority, by a clear margin, in most every group that I visited.

It was a fascinating mystery at first, until I visited a Christians on Campus meeting and discussed the Christian faith generally with two Chinese men. One of them gave me quite powerful testimony in his broken English:

All my life I've been told about atheism, that there is nothing here that you cannot see. And I did not mind this, but I always thought...how do we know this [atheism] is real? And I'd been talking to some Christians that were in my town, and they gave me a Bible. And I read this, and...I don't think a human can write this. The logic is so complete. All the answers to my questions are there.

Atheism and Buddhism, the two historically (and politically) dominant faiths in mainland China, do not give the sort of concrete solutions that Christianity offers. For a person accustomed to dry academia or spiritual vagaries, the idea that a single book could hold all of life's answers is quite seductive. I did not carry out enough research to hypothesize whether this is the main reason for Christianity's popularity among young Asians, but it will suffice for now to point out that the Chinese Bible Study group on the UT campus boasts over 500 active members. There is obviously some sort of sensuous attraction between Asians and Jesus Christ.

Let me conclude this point with a word of caution: we should not, as many Christian students do, mistake this high level of certainty in one's beliefs for an indicator of truth. Instead we are seeing symptoms of moral absolutism: a person is just as sure that Jesus died for his sins as he is sure that one should not commit murder. This may be an admirable trait to have, but (as most Christians would agree) a person is not necessarily right just because he has "got it all figured out."



Though all of these advantages are excellent reasons to become a Christian, it is a matter of fact that most Christian college students believe the way they believe because they were raised to do so. I am not, however, attempting to be incisive; for in my research I discovered that, almost universally, college-age Christians have reached a point in their personal growth where they question everything they had been brought up to understand. My first few interviews included the question, “How did you become a Christian?” But as time went on, I learned that it was more intriguing to ask, informally, “When did you re-become a Christian?” Very few students were confused by this unusual prompt.

As I mentioned already, a Christian can land quite on the far side of his original belief system upon recommitting to his faith and still describe himself as a Christian. The case studies I am about to present should dramatically prove this point: Protestantism is a pluralist religion, even among groups that meet just across campus from each other. I will examine three distinct types of student Christian organizations: “mainstream” groups; charismatic (or Pentecostal) groups; and a stigmatized group, Christians on Campus, which was frequently described to me as “culty” prior to and during my research of them. Following these case studies, I will summarize the worship and belief patterns that emerged through my personal experiences with each. We begin with a discussion of mainline Protestantism and several groups that fit the mold of “typical” Christianity.

# Mainstream Christian Groups

*InterVarsity, Campus Cru, ECHO, Covenant, etc.*

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*This section includes most Christian student groups on campus—charismatic groups actually fall under the definition of being “mainstream,” in many respects. Christians on Campus is the only group I visited, out of a dozen or more, that had no relation to at least some of the worship patterns I will explore here. This section focuses in particular on the debate over contemporary vs. traditional worship.*

After having planned to visit so many Christian groups in my research, I had thought I would find it difficult to characterize which among them should be described as “mainstream.” Surprisingly, this was not the case. Even at such a diverse place as The University of Texas, Christianity among Protestants does have many notable conventions that carry over from group to group.

To begin, music is an essential part of every college worship service, just as it is within virtually every religious community in the world. But, even more so than in the local Austin churches, students in UT college worship seem to reach their highest spiritual peaks while singing. The charismatic groups are an extreme example of this power, since their members make a dedicated effort to express praise with their bodies (as I will describe in the appropriate section below). But singing could also become quite energetic in a small, traditional group such as the Covenant Presbyterian group, with a single guitar and less than 20 students—even when trying a new song that nobody knew. On at least one occasion it occurred to me that many students feel closer

to God the more forcefully they sing, to the point that they sometimes seem to compete with each other.

A “mainstream” group<sup>1</sup> always features a band at the front of the room. Though one or two guitars are sufficient, it is very common for the setups to become much more elaborate. They might include drums, bass, and even a bongo drum (InterVarsity Christian Fellowship) or brass section and violin (ECHO). One of the more surprising instances of this was Baptist Student Ministries, which on the night I visited featured five people onstage performing for eight people on the floor!

The guitarist typically leads the songs, with a designated person ready to post lyrics on an overhead—I once commented that the overhead projector was surely the single greatest contribution to young Christian worship this century. Most in the room know the music by heart, of course; several times I even realized that a group would vary a song’s lyrics from what was on the screen so as to follow the guitarist’s lead—they had sung it enough times to be ready for the incongruity.

A lengthy musical set begins the evening, interspersed with spontaneous prayers by the song leader: “Father God, we just want to come to you tonight in a worshipful mood, and just—release everything we’ve been worried about and focus on you...” (Campus Cru, Jan. 18) The music is usually followed by group announcements of upcoming events. Then (in approximate order) come a brief Bible study, an informal

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<sup>1</sup> I will continue to use the phrase cautiously, since any two groups with similar worship styles are still likely to differ in other dimensions—most importantly, in the actual beliefs of their members.

sermon from a guest speaker, perhaps another Bible verse for good measure, and a musical conclusion. It is not at all different from a normal Protestant church service, albeit with a younger, hipper tone. The name of the game is making a visitor feel comfortable.

Leaders of these groups, by necessity, are very in-tune with what's cool among the young adults present. Jeff, the youth leader of Hope Student Life, is a quintessential example. With his skater-style clothing and wild, six-inch goatee he could easily pass for a student worshipper (as he was by me the first time I visited that group). Even his manner of speaking is disarmingly familiar to a young person: "We've just gotta, you know, free ourselves, and radically submit to God's mercy..." But I met few people more sincere in their faith, or more willing to share it with others.

The best-organized example I found of the catchy group formula was Campus Crusade for Christ (Campus Cru or CCC), a nonaffiliated national group that turns Christianity into an absolutely fun thing to do, even for a visitor who is completely foreign to the church (which I was not). The 100-odd students who gather in an auditorium every Thursday night are clearly there to "party for the Lord," as one attendee says jokingly—everyone greets their friends enthusiastically, chattering about everything from the UT basketball game to social gatherings over the weekend. Worship leaders with cordless mikes take the stage and literally "warm up the crowd," not for Christian worship but to have a good time.

For example, one week in early February, two young men rattled off a hilarious “Top Ten List of Things Not to Say on Valentine’s Day.” (Number six: “Honey, I got the movie last week, could you pay for tonight?”) The crowd responded with appropriately boisterous laughter, which struck me because a scene like this could have been from any student meeting on campus. Saint Valentine was nowhere on the list—to say nothing of Jesus. It was a secularized moment through and through.

I should immediately clarify that I personally found nothing wrong with this practice, since college churches should arguably make it a priority to avoid alienating newcomers. But there are some valid criticisms of this sort of informality that I will address shortly.

The party does not last the whole evening. A slower song, usually quite passionate and beautiful, is employed before prayers and spoken messages begin, to encourage a worshipful mood (in the restrained, meditative sense of the word). Here is where the sincerity of the members becomes evident. To set aside their out-of-church behavior for the moment, I have the sense that most of the regular visitors to Campus Cru genuinely care about their worship and are probably not attending out of habit. The students are respectful and attentive during the sermons. It is behavior that is hard to come by among youth only a few years younger at churches across America. The hypothesis that informal worship automatically makes for disrespectful worship does not seem to hold up.

But skepticism of “contemporary” worship such as this lingers in some Christian students. Proponents of “traditional” services—seated more in the fundamentalist Protestant traditions of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century—decry elements of the newer worship style that, they claim, adulterate a person’s relationship with God.<sup>2</sup> Among many other issues, the rock-inspired music sparks the most controversy. Students do not usually find it flagrantly sinful, but it is occasionally deemed “simplistic” compared to standard hymns: rhythm is emphasized over harmony, and energy over content. Most alarming to these students is the realization that the worshippers are deliberately breaking with the past by rejecting hymns.<sup>3</sup> Based on the evidence thus far, we could accuse these groups of “watering down” the Christian worship experience with their laid-back attitudes.

Criticism often falls on the groups’ insufficient study of Scripture. Jake, an engineering senior who attended Covenant Presbyterian, reported on his experience:

At my church in San Antonio, I didn’t really learn anything about what it was to be a Christian...I sort of considered that church weak. [Since then] I’ve learned that it is important to study the Word of God.

This sentiment was echoed among other members of the Covenant college ministry, which is one of the most worshipful—and least animated—groups that I visited. Their average group service includes twenty minutes or more of concentrated Bible study,

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<sup>2</sup> This is ironic, since supporters of contemporary-style worship are likely to accuse dogmatic traditionalism of doing exactly the same thing.

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to Geoff Thomas, “Contemporary Worship Music: A Biblical Defense” ([www.banneroftruth.co.uk/articles/contemporary\\_worship\\_music.htm](http://www.banneroftruth.co.uk/articles/contemporary_worship_music.htm)).

which is not segregated into a separate, smaller group as InterVarsity and Campus Cru make a practice of doing. The Bible is central to their understanding of being Christian, a sure sign of legalist conservatism. As two students asked me on separate occasions, “Without the Bible, how can we know that Jesus died for us?”<sup>4</sup>

Few mainstream Christians would argue with this, of course; the Bible study groups within IVCF and Campus Cru are in fact very well attended. I encountered few active Christian students who did not make time for Scripture reading in their daily or weekly routine. But it is true that, as a whole, the Scriptures are not stressed as much in contemporary campus worship—even a casual religious conversation with a member of Covenant will produce many more Biblical citations. A personal experience of God seems to be the more important focus for Campus Cru and IVCF.<sup>5</sup>

A further, related criticism of contemporary worship bears mention. It was mentioned by none of my interviewees and was underemphasized in many of the books that I read, but is something I noted upon my initial visits to student groups: contemporary, nonlegalistic worship has a tendency to actually *decrease* the energy level of its participants. That is, a religion stripped of dogma and rigid moral constraints—even to the benefit of its participants—can quickly become a lackluster affair.

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<sup>4</sup> Even this question, which highlights Jesus’ death as the primary tenet of Christianity (rather than, for instance, God’s love for humanity), reinforces these students’ conservative viewpoints.

<sup>5</sup> An interesting side note can be made here: in my experience, I found that I could often gauge a person’s conservatism by whether he referred more often to Jesus (the physical, tangible manifestation) or to God (a transcendent being) when in prayer and testimony. I will elaborate on this tendency later.

IVCF is an example of this phenomenon. There is nothing dysfunctional about the group itself: fifty or more students come to the weekly group meeting, and the smaller prayer and Bible study groups draw at least that many. They receive support from a national organization, several full-time staffers, and a casual social network among the students. The IVCF listserv is frequently used for prayer and worship announcements—not to mention extensive advertisement for the group's Ultimate Frisbee team. In a word, InterVarsity is successful.

Yet for all its activity, and the sincere enthusiasm of its members, the IVCF large-group meetings every Thursday night are sometimes less than inspiring. All the ingredients are in place: the requisite slide projector for lyrics, the band at the front (complete with bongo drum), and a sizable membership that chatters like mad before and after the service. But when the music begins, the energy level is often noticeably flat. During an up-tempo song a few students might start clapping, and others will usually join in, only to trail off after a verse or two. Many songs end with a silence that somehow seems awkward; at least once I heard a quiet voice in the crowd say "Woohoo..." in a way ironic enough to painfully accentuate the quiet.

This is somewhat contradictory to my conclusions thus far, since one of the apparent strengths that a contemporary group offers is excited, modernized worship. Why, then, does InterVarsity need a shot in the arm? The problem is not in the



students, who are all friendly and outgoing, and perhaps less cliquish than those in Campus Cru.

Two aspects, I think, keep IVCF in this sort of holding pattern rather than reaching the high energy levels that it tries to engender. First, the group is in need of a truly compelling worship leader—the current worship team does a fine job, but no one seems to hold the group accountable for its own enthusiasm. They might learn something from Christians on Campus, whose members are not afraid to ask, “Can we sing that again with some more spirit?” Once inertia such as this is initiated, the group creates excitement for itself—Campus Cru, though not substantially different from IVCF, carries it from week to week quite well.

And second, the fact that IVCF does not contain large amounts of dogma—preferring rather that each member encounter Christ with relative freedom—removes a rallying point for members. Fundamentalist congregations, in all religions, manage to attract new members because they supply a tangible, logically airtight (if not sound) worldview—their numbers have been swelling for decades. Esoteric and transcendent perceptions of God do not as work well in drawing average Americans to church.

Hope and Christians on Campus—two groups that focus minimally on dogma—are exceptions to this rule because a concrete belief system is substituted for by extremely tangible worship styles (to be described shortly). In any case, a church group that does not aim for perfect spiritual clarity can become what Jake described as a

“weak” church without truly gifted leaders to spur its members on to continuous introspection.

This is not to undermine the sincere devotion of the students I encountered, however! They are among the friendliest group of Christian students with whom I interacted, and they all seem to share a sincere faith that is manifested both in prayer and in person. In truth, I do not believe *at all* that IVCF is a “weak” group, or even that it is in need of change. It proved, however, to be an excellent case study for some of the potential problems with contemporary groups.

In the end, I am ill equipped to judge whether one emphasis (contemporary vs. traditional) is in any way superior to the other from a theological standpoint. But in the time I spent with each type of group, I perceived genuine spiritual growth in almost all the involved students—there is not as much theological difference between a “traditional” and “contemporary” student as it might seem anecdotally. And disagreements over worship styles will seldom lead to genuine animosity or schism from one Christian to the next. But the contemporary-traditional debate in worship is an important dimension to the general picture of college Christianity.

# Charismatic Groups

*Hope 242, Hope Student Life*

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*I now focus on the practices of Pentecostal, or charismatic, student groups—for though they share much in common with the mainstream groups, their worship patterns are quite distinct. I will address some of the major criticisms that are leveled against charismatic groups by other Christian denominations, especially as they apply to college worship.*

Charismatic Christianity has a troublesome past with the mainstream church in present-day America, perhaps more than anything because it does not qualify as a “sect” of Christianity. Rather it is a particular (if hard-to-define) worship style that began in Pentecostal churches in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, rapidly spread to Catholicism, and subsequently to most other Christian denominations. Its appeal is the same sort of promise that Protestantism offered believers in the 16<sup>th</sup> century: a “personal relationship with Christ” unmarred by the intercessions of dogma and formal worship.

Of course, Christianity today is merely a shade of what it was to Martin Luther in these areas. And charismatic Christians do not advocate a splitting off from the church in any way—indeed they do not view their practices as being radical at all. Charismatics frequently maintain participation in the church they are used to attending, simply incorporating the “new style” of praising that I will describe below. But the unusual nature of the worship behavior has led to much derision by mainstream (especially conservative) Christian authorities.

My introduction to charismatic (or Pentecostal) groups came as quite a surprise, early in the year when I was simply exploring various Christian groups to identify trends. I received information on a group with the unusual name of “Hope 242,”<sup>6</sup> which met every Friday night at the UT Athletics complex, and I went to visit with very few expectations. (I did joke with my friends, beforehand, that Hope would surely be “a weird one” because they congregated at such an unusual location and such an unlikely time—most college students are headed out to parties at 7:30 on Friday nights.)

I must stress that, after repeated visits to Hope 242 and its sister group, Hope Student Life, I have developed a much more moderate opinion of the charismatic worship style as college students practice it. In short, my first visit to Hope 242 turned out to be an aberration from the norm. But I made the decision to print my initial experience with the group anyway, as written the day after my visit, to accurately depict my first impressions and to demonstrate how excessive some Christian worship styles can become.

As I walk in to the lecture hall where Hope meets, right on time but obviously quite early, I see a cluster of six or seven students crouched over chairs in the upper corner, praying out loud to themselves. I assume these are the group’s student leaders, but it does strike me as strange that their spoken prayers last for at least ten minutes.

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<sup>6</sup> Named after Acts 2:42—“They devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers” (NRSV).

Meanwhile, a band arranges its equipment on the smallish stage and students slowly trickle in.

Hope is a cliquish group; they are not unwelcoming to visitors such as me, but everyone seems to know each other already, greeting and hugging as though they haven't seen each other in months. I go unnoticed until one of the adult leaders, Paul, walks up to introduce himself. I tell him I am researching a thesis, at which he laughs good-naturedly and says "Well, feel free to study us any time." He surprises me by informing me that the service will last until 10:30, perhaps 11:00 at night—three hours!—"until everybody decides to go home." My pretensions about attending a Friday-night group are reinforced, but I am also encouraged that these meetings seem to be such a total spiritual experience for those present. This is the social event of the evening for these students—certainly preferable to drunken debauchery.

Fashionably late, at around 7:50, the band finally finishes tuning and a quite healthy group of 70 or 80 students has congregated. The ubiquitous overhead projector is turned on for song lyrics, and the singing commences.

Songs are standard, contemporary Christian fare; the first tune, "God's Romance," could be a Top 40 hit off the radio, complete with an instrumental bridge. The lead guitarist onstage, an energetic singer in his late 20s, directs the audience as we belt out song after song. Repetition of choruses, verses, and even entire songs proves popular, especially for the most moving and romantic lyrics:

We will run, we will fly, we will be together;  
We will laugh, we will cry, we will be together...

It becomes a marathon: *75 minutes later* the songs are still continuing, and the energy level has only increased. The projector seems unnecessary, judging by how well the crowd appears to know the lyrics.

The most unique aspect of this service, compared to others that I have visited, is the varying ways that students in the auditorium are worshipping. Along the back of the room a few are dancing, sometimes hopping up and down the aisles, with eyes closed. Meanwhile, a few others are sitting quietly in their seats, not even singing, from what I can tell. Most of the crowd is standing, clapping, and raising hands in praise. Several students are forcefully pounding the floor with their feet in time to the music.

After eighty minutes, the songs finally stop, and the evening's speaker—a handsome Latino named Art—goes to the microphone. (He has been standing in the row behind me, praying aloud for a number of minutes with two friends: “give me the ability to share Your love tonight, Lord, show these people your light....”) This is a man certainly “on fire for the Lord”—after taking the stage he spends several minutes telling us about his sordid, vice-filled past, before describing his conversion experience and his “new life in Christ.” I have heard similar stories at many other Christian groups.

Suddenly, his testimony takes an unexpected turn: “I felt myself just—just so filled with the Lord, man, and I just collapsed, and my friends were standing over me

and praying, and I was—you know, shaking and bouncing on the ground!...” He is excited to be telling the story, and the audience laughs with him, causing me to wonder if such behavior is standard for this group.

Art is, of course, describing charismatic Christianity. As a worship style it was originally characterized by *glossolalia*—literally, “speaking in tongues”—but is now also known for *jubilation*, or physical “manifestations of the spirit.” As I mentioned, jubilation can be exceedingly difficult to define. What Art experienced certainly qualifies, but so might the odd interpretive dancing that I have been observing in the back row, or some students I had seen at other meetings who were waving their arms in the air with strange, unnatural motions. Despite the early cues, I have seen little thus far that would lead me to assume Hope 242 is a charismatic group.

However, immediately after Art finishes his testimony, Jeff—the youth pastor from the group’s affiliated church, Hope in the City—gets onstage to lead the room in prayer. Almost on cue, every one of the regular members raises their hands skyward; I notice that even the quiet students, who might well have been sleeping this whole time, have suddenly risen to participate. Jeff begins praying into the microphone: “Lord, come down to us now...enter our spirits and cleanse us...let this be a night of praise only for you...” The audience begins to respond verbally, much as I have heard from Christians on Campus or even the mainstream groups: “Yes Lord...God, that’s right...Lord Jesus...” But slowly, the prayers become more fervent; the whispers are

spoken louder; and suddenly, a girl in the front row collapses to the ground and begins to cry uncontrollably.

As an outside observer, I am alarmed to notice that no one goes to help the young woman, even as she gasps for breath between her sobs. For several minutes I am fixated on this poor, crying girl—and finally, unable to endure it, I squeeze my way past the praying students on my row and run down front to comfort her. I am the only one who does so.

From this vantage point, stroking the girl's red hair as her crying continues, I look around and realize how much the tempo of the worship has increased. A person cries out on the far end of the room, in a sort of ecstasy that sounds pained. One man hops onto the stage and begins to walk aimlessly across, virtually unnoticed by the youth pastor, before collapsing to the floor and remaining there the rest of the session. Immediately to our left, a girl leans her head against the seat in front of her, eyes shut, and begins squealing in pleasure—what could only be described as a spiritual orgasm. Art has grabbed a man by the torso and is praying out loud, almost speaking into his heart.

Onstage, Jeff continues to pray into the microphone. Presently he says something that seems rather pointed: “Lord, let's not worry about what's happening to those around us...we just want to focus on you, Lord.” Being the only one present that has done anything *other* than jubilate, I feel as though he has subtly singled me out. I



am actually quite offended that the pastor would discourage my compassion like this—I say to myself, quite angry at the moment, that by reaching out to someone else I’m being more Christian than anyone in the room.

But then I realize that my redheaded friend, still wailing after almost ten minutes, is probably not crying about a personal problem, as I have seen happen before at church services. She is experiencing a raw emotional output unlike any level of despair a person would be likely to reach under normal circumstances. I do not suspect Janna (as her name turns out to be) of being emotionally unstable—but I do think that she is undergoing a sort of catharsis for all of the emotional stressors in her life.

Two more girls have finally come down to help comfort Janna—but with a start, I realize that they have laid hands on her and begun speaking in tongues over her. Their postures are significantly more impersonal than mine, with palms planted flat on her back. The strange, nonsense language comes pouring out of their mouths for another seven or eight minutes. Though I was raised in the church, I feel completely alien to what is going on around me. I feel both fascinated and terrified.

Finally, after some twenty minutes, the screaming, shaking, and squealing dies down; Janna stops crying and weakly sits up; the lead musician hops back onstage and begins singing again. Within another ten minutes, the group is “back to normal,” as though the intervening jubilation had never occurred. Janna, her eyes still filled with tears, turns to look at me for the first time and says, “Thank you for praying for me.”

Thank you for *praying* for me? I had been lending emotional support by placing my hands on her, but I am unnerved that she thought I was invoking God to work in her, rather than expressing compassion myself. It feels oddly impersonal.<sup>7</sup> The girls behind me seemed to be summoning the Holy Spirit to work its magic within her—I had simply been wishing that she would calm down. I realize that, by Hope 242’s rules, I probably should have been *encouraging* her instead. This completely disturbs me, for perhaps the first time in the course of my research thus far.

Of course, the immediate response by one of the participants would be that each of them was filled, supernaturally, with the Holy Spirit and moved to such behavior by forces beyond their control. As an outside observer I am obliged to carefully consider this viewpoint, but that does not excuse me from seeking a rational explanation, especially as haunted as I am by Janna’s persistent wailing. She seemed to be seriously troubled, to the point that she found it difficult to stand afterwards. Yet immediately after the service, she, like everyone else in the room, was carrying on a normal conversation, actually discussing her plans for the weekend!

My informal catharsis theory seems to gain more credence. These students around me have said repeatedly how Jesus can wash away all of their problems, literally “cleansing their souls,” in the words of one song. With this jubilation, the act is

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<sup>7</sup> This was one, subtle example of how many Christian students seem to believe in an external locus of control for their lives—that is, they feel that God, rather than themselves, is responsible for much that happens to them. I will revisit this topic below.

played out in much more tangible terms, to an alarming effect. My thoughts go back to the girl experiencing the “orgasm” in her seat, and I wonder if her repressed sexual tension might have been released in a sudden outburst as I watched. Does she repeat this feat every week?

Some time later in the semester, I was surprised to discover that Hope 242 is only one of two charismatic student groups on campus, each of which meets every Friday night. With some interest I attended Hope Student Life and was pleasantly surprised to find a group that seemed less prone to such spiritual mood swings. In an odd repetition of the previous visit, this group’s youth pastor—another fellow named Jeff—was the first to greet me, just as they began their own singing marathon. This time the schedule was compacted: songs for around 40 minutes, announcements, a lengthy Bible-based sermon, and then a time of prayer that did not come close to the fervency that the last group exhibited.

To be sure, all the ingredients were present for another jubilation: the themes of prayer stressed the “personal experience” of Christ, and there was quite a bit of dancing and hand waving during the more exciting songs. Jeff and his adult associates took the opportunity to pray for some students, using the same intimate gesture of placing hands on the recipient’s torso and back and invoking the Holy Spirit. But as a whole, HSL was a good bit tamer. It was an expression of charismatic Christianity that was much more palatable to an average off-the-street visitor such as myself.

And, as I indicated previously, Hope 242 turned out on repeated visits to be a group also accustomed to more “normal” levels of energy. The jubilation that I witnessed in such excess was a rare occurrence, and it is perhaps unfortunate that this tainted my opinion of the group from the beginning.

On the other hand, what I witnessed that first night was a perfect example of how the “personal experience of Christ” can be taken to absurd, even disturbing extremes. It is true that, outside the Bible, there is no established code of behavior for how a Christian might choose to worship. Nonetheless, I could not help but wonder if the outbursts I witnessed on that night (and others, to a lesser degree) might hint at latent psychological issues within the worshippers that they solve through spiritual rather than cognitive means. To pursue such a hypothesis would be far beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is a topic that begs study, particularly given the often fragile emotional states of college students who join groups like Hope.

I do not mean to indict Hope 242, Hope Student Life, or any other charismatic organization in its own right—even on my first (and most energetic) visit, the majority of students were not exhibiting the extreme behavior that I have described, but simply experiencing God in a physically (and vocally) expressive way. All in all, these groups offer the same innate benefits to their participants that most any other religious group does. But they might inadvertently lead members to use charismatic worship

experiences as catharses by which they can artificially “purge” themselves of their problems, rather than working them out in a healthier, more natural way.<sup>8</sup>

The ability to “cleanse” oneself is not the primary attraction to a charismatic group—college students are generally not so guilt-ridden. Members of charismatic church groups, both within and without the university, consistently describe the appeal of the worship as “something new” which affords a “deeper spirituality” than liturgical worship could provide (Synan 228). A slim majority of charismatic students were new to this worship style upon entering college. One member, speaking informally at a Friday night gathering, said “these people were just so genuine, you know, they came up to you and said hi, and they were just ...so *into* their worship.” Such expressiveness could easily be a turn-off, of course, but at least one member reported that her opinion gradually changed after exposure to the group for long enough. Elizabeth, now a group leader, was raised in a traditionally conservative Baptist church

When I first came to Hope, I didn’t actually like it; I was very turned off by it. I thought it was very...fake...you know, like all the hand raising? I was like, people are just...doing it for show. I didn’t personally like it. ...But I started to get to know people that went there; they were just normal people, and I fell in love with them. And when I fell in love with them, I fell in love with the church; and God has just changed my heart, and helped me realize that it really is sincere.

As is usually the case, getting to know people in a foreign group improved the visitor’s impression of the group. And it is a powerful testimony to the potential of these groups that they garner such passionate members (rivaled only by Christians on

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<sup>8</sup> I suspect that some readers might object that “purging is enough,” in deference to God’s ability to transform lives; but this smacks of superstitious belief in “faith healing,” and other indications that humans are not capable of solving their own problems. Yet again, I will touch on this topic below.

Campus). At the expense of repetition, I should emphasize how impressive I found it that nearly 150 people would give up virtually every Friday night of their busy college weekends to praise God with their like-minded friends.

The groups did carry the detriment of informality, though in a subtly different way than we might observe among contemporary mainstream groups. Secularized entertainment defined the welcoming sections of Campus Cru meetings; within Hope, however, the informality meant that students might be chatting casually during a song, a prayer session, or any other part of the service. *Unfocused* was the first descriptive term that I thought of, but this is not quite accurate: once students get “into their element” they are extremely worshipful. The remarkable phenomenon is not necessarily the casual behavior they exhibit, but how effortlessly they appear able to switch from worship mode to social mode. (Please consult the “Dimensions of College Christianity” section for more on this topic.) Despite this, the students at Hope 242 or HSL are keenly spiritual individuals whose primary focus is their relationship with Christ. Their worship defies description—even the lengthy effort I have made—but so does their commitment to God.

In summary, charismatic groups present a unique and fulfilling option to college students that is nowhere near the vagaries of “chaotic ecumenism” that some Christian conservatives have accused it of (MacArthur 358). But (though I am probably underqualified to make a generalization) it seems to present gross opportunities for

worship methods that are informal to the point of dilution, and excited to the point of hysterics. Careful moderation is needed, and should be continually encouraged by the adult leaders of these groups.

# Stigmatized Groups

*Christians on Campus (The Local Church)*

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Christians on Campus is perhaps the most mysterious group in UT's Christian community, which unfortunately adds to the stigma that it carries among other groups. A student's typical reaction, when I listed Christians on Campus among the organizations I was visiting, was awkward laughter—"Well, don't get sucked in!" said one girl.

The Christian Council, an informal governing body among UT groups, has refused to officially recognize them. Their folding card table was conspicuously absent at the Christian Student Expo on the Main Mall in early September, and one student leader informed me that they were literally "unwelcome." Quite a chilly reception! Needless to say, I had a few presuppositions upon meeting with Raymond Young, one of the group's nonstudent members, early in the year.

Raymond, a Chinese man from Australia, became my primary contact with the group. He did, at first, seem shifty when describing Christians on Campus, behavior to which I was highly attentive after hearing the "culty" label<sup>9</sup> from so many Christian students. Just asking for a simple description of the group yielded a vague answer: "Well, we are basically Christians, who work on campus," he explained. It was also

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<sup>9</sup> Cultist, I learned, is the proper word. Thank you, Samuel Webster.



strange that none of the three men with whom I initially met were students, though they repeatedly told me that CoC is “mostly a student organization.” I remained unsure what any of these adults did for their livelihood. Raymond told me that he had been “called by the Lord” while in Australia to come serve Christ in Austin, which struck me as quite odd, since I did not yet perceive CoC as part of a larger organization.

This initial mystery was compounded and amplified by my first visit to a CoC meeting, at the south Austin home of Tom and Linda Dieball. The Dieballs are a happy couple in their fifties who have been hosting church meetings in their living room for over a decade. I visited in early October, accompanied by Joseph, one of Raymond’s associates.

As we walk in the door, we are greeted by Linda, a kind white-haired woman in a long dress who greets us with a hug. “Welcome, Kevin!” “Thank you,” I respond. “Lord Jesus!” she says, seemingly out of nowhere.<sup>10</sup> A bit off guard, I again say “Thank you!” and step into the back of the house.

In the living room, which is crammed with chairs, three men are already strumming guitars and singing loudly out of small blue hymnals. Joseph and I take our seats next to them, grab hymnals for ourselves, and join in the quite lengthy song:

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<sup>10</sup> Something that I have noticed before, with some amusement, is the familiar way that conservative Christians tend to throw around the name “Jesus”—a Mennonite friend of mine once, on rappelling off a cliff, yelled out “Jesus Christ!” as he fell. He was being quite unblasphemous.

O Lord, Thou art in me as life  
And everything to me!  
Subjective and available,  
Thus I experience Thee.

By the time the song is over, four more people have arrived and taken up seats of their own. And then, as soon as the guitars stop playing:

“Ay-meennnnn...” recites every person in the room but myself. “Ay-mennnn, Lord Jeeesus...” Not quite in unison, but with the trance-like quality of a chant, the participants around me enter an astonishing sort of spiritual state. “Lord Jesus, we love you...” says one man, and the room responds “Amen...” “Lord, Thou art in me as life,” says another—“Ay-mennnn...” —“and everything to me!” “Ay-mennn!” They are quoting the song we just finished singing. “Subjective and available,” begins still another member, and almost on cue, the room joins in unison: “Thus I experience Thee!” All of a sudden, I feel I have discovered the root of CoC’s reputation among students. Rudely, perhaps, I begin scribbling excitedly in my notebook.

Before long, a crowd of around 20 (mostly men) has settled into the room, and the worship becomes that much more energetic (or perhaps *forceful* would be a better word). Most of the songs come out of the cheaply bound, small-print hymnals, which I suspect have been published specifically for this church. Two or three men play guitar as everyone sings, usually at the top of his or her lungs.

And what songs! Mostly folk-music fare, the tunes are very simplistic, with virtually no attempted harmony. Lyrics are equally simple:

If you wish to find the Lord, do not seek him in the world,  
For the world is not the place in which he dwells,  
In which he dwells, in which he dwells, in which he dwells.

It is the least ornamented music I have encountered in my research, though it does seem to take on a life of its own simply by the passion of those singing it. We repeat lines, choruses, and entire songs, often up to three times in a row, and never half-heartedly. Members request songs by number, which is impressive in itself since the hymnal contains over 1300 titles.

And after the singing of each song, the true worship begins: this odd, mantra-like repetition of the song lyrics (called "pray-reading"), as every member descends into a sort of spiritual trance. The chief mantra is the phrase "O Lord Jesus," which the brothers repeat incessantly. A single member will volunteer a bit of lyrics aloud, followed by a resounding "Ay-meennnnn!..." from the entire group. As an example, below is a hymn that we sang, followed by a rough (and abbreviated) transcription of the subsequent meditation:

Who can wash away my sin?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus;  
Who can make me whole again?  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

Oh! Precious is the flow  
That makes me white as snow;  
No other fount I know,  
Nothing but the blood of Jesus.

"Oh Lord Jesus...Lord Jesus...precious is the flow...[Ay-mennn!]...that **makes me white as snow!**...Lord Jesus, only you can make us whole again...[Ay-mennn!]...only you can wash away my sin...[Ay-mennn!]...Lord Jesus, nothing but your blood...[Ay-mennn!]...can **make me white as snow!** Ay-mennn, Lord Jesus!...Oh Lord Jesus!"

(The lyrics in bold were spontaneously recited, in unison, by the entire group.)

Each song ends in this way, and will often be sung yet another time to still more meditative pray-reading. The trance-like state that the members reach while meditating is, again, quite unexpected for a first-time visitor, especially given my initial impressions of the songs themselves—for basic musical quality, they were among the least passion-inducing tunes I had encountered.

Which is not to disparage the group; if anything, they should be admired for singing such basic hymns and extracting the fundamental spiritual meaning out of them. “Christianity is a simple thing,” one of the brothers once told me. Their worship style exhibited this to quite an extreme. It focused on a purely emotional and spiritual connection to God. As another song put it: “I don’t care now how I feel/I just know that this is real/And I know I’ve got Jesus in my heart.”

I gradually became accustomed to this peculiar group and its worship style, and my pretensions that I had stumbled my way into an actual “cult” quickly vanished. No one attempted to brainwash me, and apart from their fascinating means of praising God, the members were quite normally behaving people. The Dieballs would serve enormous amounts of food after each service, and I would chat with the “brothers” (as they called themselves) about everything from grocery shopping to football.

However they did remain quite secretive about themselves. Throughout further visits and interviews, I continued my attempts to figure out how, for example,

Raymond and other adult leaders managed to live in Austin, “spread the Gospel” as a full-time job, and support themselves financially. Obviously, a single student group could not sustain such organization, but whenever I ventured to ask about the larger structure, Raymond and other members were reluctant to yield information, usually insisting something like:

We’re not part of a larger church. We are the church, because we are all Christian. Every city has its own church, and we all support each other. But we’re not a denomination. ...Christians are Christians.

When I asked Raymond to elaborate on what it meant to be a Christian, he produced one of the many small tracts that they hand out around campus, this one bearing a “Statement of Faith.” “This is what we believe,” he explained patiently, “and anyone who believes these things is a Christian.” They were typical assertions: the Triune God, divine inspiration of the Scriptures, and incarnation of Christ, among others. I did not venture to point out that many self-described Christians would not subscribe to all these criteria, but with this objection aside, Raymond was being very generous in describing Christianity. The “cult” label seemed further unfounded, though the enigma remained.

It was not until early December—three months after first meeting with Raymond—that I gained valuable context to understanding this group better. Shortly before returning to Australia with his two young daughters (“I’m kind of surprised, but

I really feel the Lord calling me back”), he sat me down to finally give me the full story about CoC’s origins and internal structure.

“The church,” as it turned out, referred to the so-called Local Church of Witness Lee, a relatively small sect of Christianity that sprouted between 1920 and 1952 through the evangelical efforts of a Chinaman named Watchman Nee. (Witness Lee was his successor as head of the organization.) Church members all contribute generously to their own organization, which allows missionaries such as Raymond (and many others whom I met) to live in other cities and spread the Gospel full-time. Also, their secrecy with me was as it turned out a bit justified. The church gained a great deal of infamy in 1977 when a self-described Christian watchdog group, the Spiritual Counterfeits Project (SCP), published two works that accused it (probably for the first time) of being a brainwashing cult.

The details of the case are worth reviewing. In two books published simultaneously—*The God-Men* and *The Mindbenders*—members of the SCP (numbering less than a dozen) made sweeping accusations that the Local Church was a Christian heresy responsible for “sucking members in” to a perverse lifestyle. After some attempts at arbitration, the Local Church finally sued the SCP for libel in 1980, subpoenaing six religious scholars to visit the church and testify about their practices. The Superior Court of California ruled overwhelmingly in the church’s favor in 1985,

though the bankrupt SCP declared itself unable to pay the damages. The publisher soon withdrew the books from publication with a public apology to the Local Church.

The fact that each SCP article, drawn from the same manuscript, is rife with generalizations and propagandistic stories proved to be almost beside the point, as did the Church's victory in court. The accusations had been made, and thanks to a late 70's American culture made paranoid following the Jim Jones tragedy, the Church suddenly found itself very unwelcome.

Not surprisingly, Raymond began questioning me quite early about his group's strange reputation, with an innocent curiosity. "It bewilders me," he said, "because...why can't they can't just let [fellow] Christians be Christians?" He showed me the twelfth chapter of Matthew, among other passages, wherein Jesus rebukes the Pharisees for their judgment and derision—"I mean, the Pharisees were church officials," Raymond points out. It is somewhat touching to realize that this group has a great deal of confidence thanks to their persecution. It makes them feel as though they are being proper Christians. And it is neither the first nor the last time that I will encounter such an attitude.

In actuality, I found the Local Church (i.e., Christians on Campus) to be a highly spiritual group, similar to the charismatic groups I visited in some respects. The suggestions that they were a brainwashing cult had virtually no merit, for two clear reasons: first, their organization is specifically designed to avoid authoritative control,

and everyone (myself included) was enthusiastically encouraged to contribute to the worship. Church members are expected to contribute monetarily as well, but no more than they are able.

Second, though they were certainly “in the Spirit” while pray-reading, the brothers’ state of mind was never literally altered, as far as I could observe. My earlier comparison of “O Lord Jesus” to a mantra was merely superficial; the latter might be intended to raise a Hindu worshipper to a higher “state of being,” but the former is not. As one of the expert witnesses testified in the SCP trial, pray-reading is more closely related to Catholic monastic practices, wherein a reader meditates on the meaning of Scripture by repeating it to himself dozens of times over (*Experts* 109). At any rate, the brothers did not leave their normal state of mind during any part of this process, and “mindbending” was never shown to be one of their priorities.

I should not underemphasize the disconcerting effect that CoC worship can have on almost any young student who is familiar with more conventional worship styles—its esoteric nature comes without warning. And as I discovered, this style is key to understanding the group as a whole—in fact, it hints at a more viable reason for the group’s stigmatization.

The reason the Local Church worship style is so important (and so distinctive) is because they regard it as the only true means of worship. Pray-reading is their best interpretation of how the New Testament instructs us to glorify God. Church members



voraciously reference the letters of Paul, who gave many hints as to the structure and behavior of Christian congregations in the second century; the group today is a simulation of that sort of community. And among the interpretations that they accept is Paul's suggestion that each city can have only one church. As they told me countless times, "There is only one church. Why do these people foster all this division?"

An unfortunate implication of this idealism is the fact that, for all their open talk and desire to reconcile, the Local Church does in fact believe that only those who are a part of their church—the one church, which worships in the correct, Pauline way—are to be saved. Raymond was quite sincere in telling me that all persons who believe that Jesus died for their sins are indeed Christians. But "all these denominations," he told me, "are getting in the way of what's real." A member of a Baptist, Lutheran, or Catholic church is weighing down his relationship with Christ with a load of bureaucracy, false authority, and (as he put it) "idolatry." His earlier question, "Why can't they just let Christians be Christians?" suddenly bears a large asterisk.

The Local Church strips all this distraction away, and focuses on a purely spiritual connection to Jesus Christ. One evening, a student's prayer was particularly evident of this view: "Lord Jesus, you are not about doctrine (Ay-mennn)...you are not about religion (Ay-mennn)...all we want tonight is to feel your spirit...." On another occasion a brother told the group excitedly about a T-shirt he had seen a person

wearing: “Reject Religion – Embrace Jesus.” These might be held as admirable views, but not at the expense of all other worship styles.

The Local Church (and, by extension, Christians on Campus) is a problematic sect in that they offer a visitor one of the freest, least complicated relationships to God, but do so at a high price of exclusivism, based on a singular interpretation of Scripture. The fact that pray-reading—a structureless, esoteric means of worship—is so “weird” (to quote several non-member students) does not help their position; but they remain a misunderstood and rather demonized group.

Are there Christian sects around the UT campus that can properly be labeled “cults”? Most certainly—but I did not encounter any, and was not inclined to pursue doing so, for fear of straying from my research’s focus. True Christian cults—the sort that strip students of their friends, money, and spiritual center—deserve a complete study of their own. CoC members do tend to reorient their social lives toward fellow Church members, and can alienate or intimidate other students by encouraging them to do the same. But no brainwashing occurs, nor does coercion to enter a destructive lifestyle. And so calling Christians on Campus a cult—even by the dictionary definition of the term, which is still considered to be a demeaning label (*Experts* 32-33, 90-91)—is ill-advised.

# Evangelism

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Though Biblical inerrancy (along with related topics such as evolution and homosexuality) is what drew me to this study, I found that evangelism was a topic even more problematic than these hot-button issues. Its presence was tangible within most groups: a leader at Hope 242 once prayed, “Lord we believe your promise to us, your promise to make this campus saved.” And regardless of whether a student wishes to evangelize, he must deal with the multiculturalism around him. Even a person raised in a diverse environment, as many UT students have been, finds a new level of interaction with different worldviews when he steps onto a college campus.

Almost every student whom I interviewed recognized the difficulty with this interaction. Their responses to my prompt, “Describe your contact with non-Christian acquaintances,” ranged from conflicted to noncommittal. One student insisted, “I would be less than honest if I wasn’t straight with people about my faith.” But, he acknowledged, “You can’t just embarrass yourself and expect to change people’s minds.” That is, there is a certain level of social decorum that even an evangelizing Christian should respect to avoid alienating people. Those who do not respect this line can quickly be labeled fanatics who are not interested in respecting other views in deference to their own.

Of course the line is ill defined. Since Jesus instructed his followers to “go forth and make disciples of all nations” (Matt. 28:19), most students feel the need to take steps toward evangelism, though often hesitantly. At Baptist Student Ministries, a student once asked the group leader, “How can I just go up to someone I don’t even know and begin sharing my faith?”

BSM hosted a seminar in late February meant to answer this question, which I will discuss below. The short answer, however, is that this sort of “cold calling” rarely happens among mainstream Christian students without some sort of official support. InterVarsity, for instance, conducted an evening seminar called “The Core,” where non-Christians could visit the group in an informal “coffee shop” type setting and ask questions. And with the backing of their churches, Christian groups make quite a visible presence on South Padre Island during Spring Break, a time and place combination that is perhaps the most “sinful” in the state of Texas.

Park Hills Baptist, a local Austin church, was one such group. As I vacationed with friends on the island in mid-March, this project quite out of mind, we were accosted on the street by a girl who asked, “Are you guys hungry?”

Perhaps it was my extensive experience with evangelical Christians to that point, but instinctively I knew this stranger’s motivation, even going so far as to ask myself whether she asked the question in a literal or metaphorical sense. I was the only one of my group who stopped to respond.

“Sure,” I played along, “what do you guys have?”

“We’ve got pancakes right over there,” she said, “it’s all free.”

“Cool! ...But I’ve gotta run with my friends, sorry.”

“It’s alright,” she said cheerfully as I kept walking. “Peer pressure’s an evil thing.”

What an odd statement! To this moment I’m unsure whether this girl was being sarcastic or not. We walked past the actual “operation” and saw what the Christian groups were doing: feeding revelers plates of pancakes out of a trailer, then loading them onto church vans for a free trip back to the mainland. The students were surely ministered to all the way home, though I imagine the primary objective was not conversion but physical removal from an “immoral” environment. At any rate, the girl’s statement about my friends (assuming she meant it seriously) struck me as a tad judgmental and presumptuous.

This was, of course, a unique situation—no such operation exists (or needs to) on the UT campus. Without official support such as Park Hills Baptist provided, an average Christian student would take a much less aggressive stance toward evangelism. He might have non-Christian acquaintances, or even good friends—it is somewhat difficult at a university so large to completely exclude non-Christians from one’s own social circle. Colin, a computer science senior, gave a common response when he said,

“I’ve got to balance respect for their [non-Christian] beliefs with the need to share my beliefs.”

Jen, a marketing junior and member of InterVarsity, was actually “wary” of opening up to non-Christians due to her past experience:

My seventh-grade church camp was [affiliated with] the Southern Baptist church, and their goal was to get a bunch of numbers. And so if you handed [someone] a pamphlet, showed the little cross diagram, and told a little testimony, you got them into heaven. ...That really kind of offended me. Since then I’ve tried to...lead by example, and I think that’s partly good. But I usually only talk to people about God when I’m really comfortable with the person.

I was a bit surprised to learn that some students do manage to maintain an almost entirely Christian social circle, by dedicating their social lives to Christian groups. “Most of my interaction with non-Christians,” said Colin, “is inside the classroom, so there’s not really much chance to talk about religion.” This is unfortunate in that a person might remain uneducated in other beliefs, as is true for most anyone with a homogenous set of friends—Jen called it her “Christian bubble.” (In fact, a lack of knowledge about other religions is often what cripples evangelism, as I will illustrate shortly.) But, of course, maintaining such a stable social existence is also quite beneficial to a person’s psyche.

Some, however, think that emotional and social balance is a sign of spiritual weakness—that is, unwillingness to stick one’s neck on the line for Christianity. Manuel, a prominent young leader at Christians on Campus, described to the group an encounter with a fellow church member on a city bus:

She got on and saw me and was like, “Manuel! Lord Jesus, how are you doing today?” And everybody starts looking around at this crazy lady [here the group began to laugh good-naturedly] – and I’m all embarrassed...I’m like “I’m fine, sister, having a good day,” and she says “PRAISE the LOOOOORD!” And I’m...pulling the cord, just trying to get off the bus [more laughter] – finally we got to my stop, and I stepped off the bus...and the Lord rebuked me! [Here the room affirmed the event, saying “Amen” aloud in a chorus.] He said “You are ashamed of me!” Well I’m here now to say, No, I am not ashamed!

His implication was that in the future, such extravagant behavior on a crowded city bus would not be embarrassing for him, since after all it was a perfect opportunity to exhibit his faith to the strangers around him. Christians on Campus is a group with a particularly strong evangelistic focus—once I witnessed a member hand a printed tract to a postal worker immediately after mailing a package. And, of course, the social conventions in place to discourage such fervent “sharing” were established by a secular society that erroneously regards everyone’s beliefs as their own business.

Before directing my attention on the characteristics of evangelism, I would like to point out one more difficulty with evangelizing: students who yearn for a campus (not to mention a world) full of Christians can easily be accused of discouraging diversity by their attitude. This is not their primary motivation—most UT students are in fact quite proud that they attend a large institution with such wide diversity. But doesn’t the ideal of a one-religion campus somehow compromise the value of a diverse student population?

Responses to this question were varied, as we might predict. Elizabeth was unapologetic: “I desire for the whole campus to be saved—not that I am against diversity or dislike the chance to talk with people of other religious beliefs, but I believe

Christ is the only way.” But others were more reflective on how religion and culture can intertwine. Said Jen, via e-mail:

Different cultures worship the same God in many different ways. Native Americans can still dance the same dances honoring their history and culture, but they can augment their purpose to praise God (I've seen a group that find incredible joy in doing just that).

She hopes that the beauty inherent in each culture can be adapted to fit the “perfect picture” of God’s salvation through Christ. This is somewhat idealistic, since one of the hallmarks of multiculturalism is that some aspects of culture are simply incompatible across groups. However it at least recognizes the value of religion as the expression of a society’s identity—not just its beliefs.

The Baptist Student Ministries lecture series was organized so that ordinary UT students could be taught how to properly “spread the Good News” to their irreligious friends and neighbors. A middle-aged man named Dave Geisler, lecturing to a group of seven or eight, presented four “Helpful principles in evangelism for a post-modern world”:

- I. Take a new perspective on where to begin evangelism—not just proving Christianity’s truth, but proving the broader existence of a moral good.
- II. Show Jesus’ uniqueness: “He was the only major religious leader that ever claimed to be God and then proved it.”
- III. Balance between objective and subjective evidence.
- IV. Use combinations of prayer, example, and evidence in your “formula.”

These principles will help to highlight a few fundamental issues regarding student evangelism that many or most young Christians cope with.

First, the fact that Christians view their evangelism as a fight for moral truth is critical to our understanding of the evangelical phenomenon. Christianity is not only a



superior moral choice, but is the very bastion of moral thought in the face of postmodern relativism. Dave Geisler suggests a common question for discussing Christianity with a nonbeliever: “Do you believe that all religions are correct?” This is, of course, a cleverly laid trap question—no one would answer this question in the affirmative without qualifying themselves. Once a person answers no, the automatic response becomes: “Well in that case, then some religions must be incorrect, right?” [Yes] “Could more than one religion be correct?” [No] “Then one of them must be the true one, right?”

This is a simplistic logical progression, most notably in that it assumes that religions are simply either correct or incorrect, as though life is a multiple-choice question rather than an essay test. It is indicative of a larger, more disturbing trend: the condemnation of non-Christian religions that most evangelical Christians know nothing about.

For example, one night at a Hope meeting, a group leader made a reference to “other, so-called gods” and then went on to denounce them briefly: “When you think about other so-called religions...they’re trying to gain mercy. Christians know that there’s no way we can gain mercy! Someone has to give it to us freely.”

Describing Allah et al. as a bunch of “so-called gods” struck me as distinctly Old Testament, and seemed to belie a very immanent conception of God—surprising for a profoundly spiritual group such as Hope. Even more intriguing, however, is the way

the man condensed the doctrine of *hundreds* of other religions into a five-word summary (“They’re trying to gain mercy”). Many Christians would defend this, asserting that fundamentally all religions come down to the question of God’s grace—which is, in itself, a dubious statement, since the question of God’s grace is a distinctly Christian issue.

Such simplicity can, in fact, only work to the detriment of the “Jesus movement” (to borrow a phrase from church history) if its members make so little attempt to become well-versed in different religions *from each religion’s unique angle*. One of the biggest mistakes colonial missionaries made was to presume that Christianity would perfectly fit the spiritual needs of every culture. Such a mistake can only be perpetuated as long as there are Christians who treat their worldview as a pair of rose-colored glasses, rather than a specific spiritual and moral decision that they have made.

Furthermore, the mindset of a non-Christian peer is as important to comprehend as the doctrine. Dave Geisler, conducting his seminar, said that “the average non-Christian doesn’t want anyone to reach him [spiritually],” so comfortable is he in his own worldview. This may be true, but no more so than of the average Christian who might be approached by a Buddhist on the street. Too often, non-Christians are stereotyped as being irreligious, immoral, and (a favorite term) “confused.” This is unfortunate to hear, especially from a group that is itself constantly stereotyped and stigmatized.

It is possible to show compassion and understanding for another religion without being well-versed in the entire thing; Elizabeth displayed an excellent viewpoint when she told me, “What I’ve experienced is people looking for love...No matter what religion, everyone just wants somebody to love them.” This transcends the dogma of the other religions, and notably, of Christianity as well, to find the common ground between faiths. Elizabeth’s attitude, which I found echoed in many other students, is what Christianity needs to minister to the unconverted without becoming patronizing.

The second of Dave’s principles reads that Jesus was the only “major religious leader that ever claimed to be God and then proved it.” The problem is that this declaration is not likely to have much impact on a non-Christian. First, Jesus was not actually a “major religious leader” in his life, but rather the prophet of a tiny Jewish sect in the first century CE.

And more important, the suggestion that he proved himself to be God requires Biblical evidence to be confirmed. Non-Christian students are invariably skeptical of any assertion that includes the phrase, “because the Bible says so.” Though some Christians I encountered were inspired to their faith by Bible-reading, as a whole it is a book infinitely more useful to guide an existing faith than to jump-start a new one.

What, then, is a simple way to demonstrate why Christianity stands alone among faiths? Jen supplied a common rationale: “Jesus rose from the dead. The tombs of other

religious founders are not empty.” Of course, Muhammad (as an example) never claimed to be superhuman, and so it should not surprise us that he remains buried—but if Jesus did rise from the dead, he has some sort of special status under God. Then again the Bible remains our best source for this historical assertion.

A better angle, perhaps, is to use “subjective evidence”—something of a contradiction in terms—in the attempt to convince skeptics. This leads us to Geisler’s third principle. He told the audience, quite correctly, “Often a person’s problem with Christianity is not in their head, but in their heart.”

Ask a person, If I could answer all of your questions about Christianity to your satisfaction...would you be willing to consider becoming a Christian? If they answer no, then their problem is probably not an academic one and you need to take a different angle.

Even Jen seemed to understand this point in describing her evangelical approach: “I don’t know the right facts to tell someone...all I know is how I feel.”

This is an extremely important point to make, especially in an age that claims to thrive on rationality: religion is essentially a *subjective* experience that is supported by rational evidence, which is beyond the mindset of many agnostic or atheistic college students. An agnostic friend once asked me, “If you can’t prove the existence of God, what’s the point in believing in it?” The point, of course, is that God is beyond proof to a religious person. Such a perspective is surprisingly underemphasized in religious debates.

Finally, says Mr. Geisler, evidence<sup>11</sup> must go hand-in-hand with prayer and example in evangelical efforts. Put another way, we cannot expect to make progress in witnessing to the unsaved simply by preaching *at* them. Having faith in God's power to change lives, and living the sort of life whereby you might impress others with your forthrightness, are two ingredients that can prove just as potent for a Christian, and involve less embarrassment. Whether or not social conventions were established by a sinful culture, they still exist and must be reckoned with, lest Christianity return to its fringe-group origins.

Capitol City Baptist Church, perhaps the most radically fundamentalist church in Austin, sometimes sends a delegation to visit the UT campus on weeknights. Women hand out tracts titled "WHERE WILL YOU SPEND ETERNITY?" while men wave banners and yell Bible verses near the top of their lungs. It is a practice unlikely to win any Christian converts, excepting the person motivated more by fear of hell than love of God. But the church members do not seem to mind this; the important act for them is simply talking at passers-by.

Most UT students with whom I spoke view their interfaith relationships in a more pragmatic way. Example is, indeed, a powerful thing; Christian hypocrisy is devastating to the religion's reputation, but Christian uprightness can be equally emboldening. Even here there is a balance, since another stigma exists for arrogant,

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<sup>11</sup> Mr. Geisler's definition for evidence seemed to suggest that it included both rational argument and personal testimony.

judgmental Christians—“Bible-thumpers,” in common parlance. But young Christians usually strike the balance rather well.

And prayer—direct appeal to God—is of course necessary because, to most Christians, a person will only open his heart to Christ under the sanction of God’s will. Which raises a new question: how do Christian students tackle the age-old question of their own free will countered against God’s omniscience? I will address this issue by looking at students’ prayer practices, which are strongly indicative of their underlying belief systems.

# Student Prayer Practices

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In early summer 2000, I served as an adult volunteer at Glen Lake Methodist Camp, the retreat south of Fort Worth where I spent summers throughout my childhood. The night before the campers were due to arrive, we all gathered on the steps by the lake for prayer and meditation, and the deans passed out strips of paper to all the adults. Each of them was printed with eight or nine names—names of campers who were due to arrive the next morning. Jennifer, one of the deans, asked us to pray over each name throughout the week, whether or not we ever actually met any of them. She then led a short prayer to end the evening: “Let us show these kids Your love,” she prayed, then backtracked a little: “And let us understand that we are not showing them Your love; You are showing them Your love through us.” She reassured us, “These kids are gonna be on fire for the Lord,” a phrase so familiar as to be clichéd. The service ended and we went to bed.

Back in the cabin, I turned the strip of paper over and over in my hands, quite unsure what to do with it, wondering if I was missing the point somehow. What did it mean to pray over a name on a piece of paper? How was I to pray for “Cindy Wilkinson” if I knew nothing about who she was or what her needs were? I did gain some comfort in silently meditating on each name, reflecting on the person represented there who would arrive the next morning. But I even felt somewhat insincere in

wishing safe travel for each boy and girl, though it seemed like a nice, safe prayer. I viewed prayer as a form of meditation, having decided long ago that my desire for something concrete (like world peace or a new car) was probably insignificant next to God's will. But, as I began to realize then, the notion of praying has almost as many meanings within Protestantism as it does across religions.

One of the hallmarks of a typical Christian group, either within or without the college environment, is its firm belief in "the power of prayer." InterVarsity Christian Fellowship started a "virtual prayer chain" on its listserv in mid-September, asking recipients to reply to their e-mail with "general or specific" prayer requests. The message carried a bubbly excitement from its author, Sarah: "I can't wait to see how God answers our prayers!"

Three days later a follow-up e-mail bearing the subject line "Prayer Works!" arrived: "Just wanted to let you know that you were prayed for." I had not sent any prayer requests, but apparently, I received one of the "general" nods from the group. My feeling about this was not cynical, but rather curious: what kind of attention did I receive from the IVCF prayer group? Was my name read off a list? Perhaps simply my e-mail address? And if so what did that signify? I was revisiting my problem from Glen Lake Camp, this time from the receiving end.

A third message from IVCF arrived three days after the second, subject line "WOW!" The same author, Sarah, had this to share:



Anne S----- gave me permission to share this with everyone...I think you will be amazed at it! sarah

Actually, the night of the prayer meeting a lot of stuff got resolved within my family. Your prayers truly did something. Thank you.  
Love in Him,  
Anne

It did not strike me as an outrageous coincidence that at least one prayer recipient saw results from the group's efforts, but obviously at least Sarah and Anne found it to be something supernatural. This raises questions about what prayer means to any modern Christian, let alone one in college.

Most of the students whom I interviewed, no matter what their group, viewed prayer as something of a "communion" or "conversation" with God. But the ways they applied this common belief were quite varied. I found it useful to informally define two styles of prayer (which I will call *meditative* and *supplicant*)<sup>12</sup> which most Christians practice.

Christians on Campus is a perfect example of a group characterized by meditative prayer, focusing less on prayer content and more on the spiritual connection it provides. I never heard a CoC member pray for a specific goal, though they were still prone to appeal to God in times of crisis. One member, for instance, told me that he

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<sup>12</sup> Gallup and Poloma made reference to *verbal* and *meditative* prayer, of which the former could be divided arbitrarily (thanksgiving, petition, intercession, and adoration were their suggested subdivisions). By this system, I am analyzing "petition" and "meditative" prayer, and grouping the other types into worship practices (Poloma 6).

might whisper the group's "O Lord Jesus" mantra over and over to invoke God's presence when he was in need of guidance, or "even just when I'm in a bad mood."

But no one seemed inclined to pray for good health or other tangible goals. They were not opposed to such a practice, as far as I could tell, but they believe that a constant interface with God/Jesus is much more important than any day-to-day need they might have. This is actually one of the ways that CoC seemed subtly similar to the charismatic student groups; though Hope might use prayer in a more mainstream way, as I will describe below, its practice is meant to stir a deeper spiritual connection within the participants that manifests itself quite visibly. Content, at best, shares the spotlight with meditation when Hope gathers for prayer.

At the other end of the spectrum, some of the largest, most mainstream groups often used prayer as a supplication to God for very specific things to happen. Several students reported that they had prayed to affect the outcome of a test (and one told me excitedly about his success with this tactic). More often, they had prayed for others' well-being, such as a safe trip for a traveling friend.

How specific does supplicant prayer get? A flyer handed out at an ECHO service in March proved an almost humorous example when it asked attendees to pray in the following week for those joining the Alternative Spring Break<sup>13</sup>:

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<sup>13</sup> A weeklong mission trip, sponsored by numerous campus ministries, that allowed dozens of UT students to travel to Monterrey, Mexico for Spring Break and build homes for needy families. Most major universities now feature an alternative spring break such as this one.

Sat, 3/10: Pray for safety in air and bus travels.  
Sun, 3/11: Pray for sensitivity to the community.  
Mon, 3/12: Pray for boldness in sharing the Gospel.  
Tues, 3/13: Pray that God would multiply the students' Spanish speaking ability.  
Wed, 3/14: Pray that God would reach children through the children's programs.  
Thurs, 3/15: Pray for physical safety and health for our students.  
Fri, 3/16: Pray that the teams will ultimately be a blessing to the people of Mexico.

Spanish speaking ability? The writer of this schedule clearly viewed prayer as something that can act quite concretely in the world, even more so than most of my interviewees claimed to believe. There is a fundamental conflict at issue over whether young Christians believe that they can alter God's will through their prayers. Many times, I heard two contradictory bits of testimony: that God has a plan for our lives that is beyond our ability to understand, and that prayer has the power to change our lives.

The standard means of reconciling this paradox was expressed by Elizabeth, of Hope Student Life: "Most of the time I pray that I would want God's will, and that he would make it clear when I am straying from His desires. ...I believe that God uses us to carry out His desires." This has something of a Calvinist bent to it; Elizabeth's best form of prayer, perhaps, would not be asking for things, but focusing on God and trying to gain a sense of what he wants to happen.

Jen, an InterVarsity member, supplied the immediate objection herself: "But what happens when a sick friend [whom I had prayed for] isn't healed? I have to trust that God truly knows what's best, and that he used the good and the hard times to teach us and love us." Disappointment, then, is not unusual; but we must react to this with trust rather than anger.

Tiffany, of Covenant, was optimistic. "I always pray that God's will be done...but I think our prayers do affect God, that we can persuade him, so I pray for things I think he would want me to pray for, and things that are on my heart personally." The contradiction remains, to an extent—we might ask, for instance, why God would want us to pray to him about something.

But on the other hand, even Jesus prayed to God, begging that he save him from crucifixion. And though his wish was not granted, God's larger will was employed in a much grander way (by using Jesus as a redemptive force for all humanity). It is futile to ask God's motivation behind such matters.

And how could we possibly persuade God? One of my colleagues described this worldview as "arrogant," but on further reflection I suspect that it has to do with the different mental pictures of God that we juggle. On one hand, perhaps by definition, God is omnipotent and always follows His will; on the other, he is a loving parent to us all, and would never deny us our needs. Jen quoted Matthew 7 to me: "Ask, and it will be given you; ...is there anyone among you who, if your child asks for bread, will give a stone? Or if the child asks for a fish, will give a snake?" These two perceptions of God are difficult to reconcile, and it seems that most Christians form an ambiguous balance between the two, or vacillate between them.

## Ways of Prayer

Another angle that deserves mention is the different ways that students engage in the physical practice of praying. As a control group, I would establish Campus Crusade for Christ—this is a somewhat arbitrary selection, picked only because they most resemble the sort of prayer I grew up with. But I will simply use their features as a basis of comparison and contrast with other groups.

First, personal and private prayer are underemphasized at Campus Cru and other mainstream worship groups. Though there may be time set aside for quiet reflection, it usually lasts for less than one minute—barely enough time for God to get a word in—and then music, or a student-led prayer, will lead the transition back to normal worship. This is not objectionable, since (as I noted above) students find themselves closest to God while singing and worshipping out loud. Personal prayer can happen at any time, day or night; prayer in groups, and other forms of praise, demand the limited time of the group services.

And so a student at a microphone directs most prayer at Campus Cru, while the room waits silently with eyes closed and focuses on his or her words. To repeat an example from earlier:

Father God, we just want to come to you tonight in a worshipful mood, and just—release everything we've been worried about and focus on you...Lord, come fill this place with your presence...Help us to live only for you...

Certain bits of vocabulary (“Father God”) and phrases (“fill this place with your presence”) are standard prayer terms. I have never heard a student refer to God as “Father God” in everyday language, but it is virtually a cliché while praying.

Another notable feature of mainstream prayer language is the word “just”: adolescent prayers employ it incessantly. The reason is rather unclear, though Paul Bramadat also made note of it within his group. He hypothesized that it “seem[ed] to muffle the students’ demands somewhat...without ‘just,’ their prayers would be comparatively bold” (Bramadat 67-68). This is a valid point, but I might add another hypothesis: students are usually not the best at public speaking, and frequently are simply at a loss for words. A student stumbles through the standard phrases to assemble a prayer, customizing it to the particular situation, but not often saying anything radically new.

I am not detracting from this practice—student-led prayer is an integral part of college worship—but merely making a distinction. Repeating certain key phrases signifies meditative rather than supplicant prayer: “Open us up, Lord, and just...shine Your light in us...” It serves at least as important a function as content-focused prayer, and perhaps more so, since it affords an opportunity for students to “tune in” to God and be ready for the message he wants to send them through the worship.

Otherwise, as I mentioned, members of mainstream groups such as Campus Cru are likely to ask God for specific “favours.” They will gladly defer that God’s plan

supersedes their own, but (in a peculiar paradox) they believe that His plan may include hearing their prayers and answering them.

Charismatic groups emphasized one behavior in prayer that I was particularly impressed with: silence. “Moments of silence” are familiar to virtually every American, but usually for times of personal introspection. Jeff of Hope Student Life referred to silence as “listening to the Lord.” It was touching because it implied a personal connection to God that many worship services lack—as though prayer is a true conversation, and not a one-sided laundry list of issues in a person’s life. Of course, more Christians than those in the charismatic groups employ prayer in this way—Mother Teresa herself once said that she began every prayer in silence so that God could speak to her first. But, perhaps in an unconscious attempt to cater to students’ need for stimuli, most worship groups at UT don’t take full advantage of this opportunity. Silent prayer lasts for thirty seconds instead of ten minutes.

And a final charismatic influence merits discussion, if only because of its ubiquity during the course of my research. Many students have a particular fondness for raising one or both hands into the air while praying and/or singing. Typically the arms are held outward, in a submissive posture as though the worshipper were to be crucified. Another frequently used position is to hold both hands together and forward, shaped into a cup, as though receiving communion or making an offering. Worshippers accustomed to this method of physical expression will begin using it in the

middle of a song or prayer, spontaneously, usually with a passionate facial expression that shows that their whole being is going into their worship. "Praising" is the best term I could come up with for this practice.

"Lifting up one's hands" to the Lord is mentioned at least six times in the book of Psalms. But what is the significance of this action? Though I found it strange at first, I gradually became accustomed to seeing it at almost every group. Hope, of course, exercises it almost constantly; others, such as InterVarsity, might feature three or four students (out of 50-60) practicing it. Only Covenant, the most conservative group that I visited, and Christians on Campus failed completely to "praise."

Simply to look at, I thought amusedly that students were attempting to "tune in" to God's spirit, adjusting their postures as they might adjust a TV antenna for better reception. I suggested this gently to a few charismatic worshippers, fearing I would offend them, but they were amused by my metaphor: "That's about right," said one supportively. In truth, the best explanation that a worshipper gave was that they were "experiencing God with our bodies as well as our minds." A group's charismatic tendencies might informally be judged by how many of its members participate in "praising" throughout an average service.



# Dimensions of College Christianity

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There is no way to bring this thesis together with a summary of the “common” or “typical” features of Christian college students, any more than we might describe typical Americans—the population is simply too disparate to draw conclusions from simply by tracing demographic trends. I was well aware of this when I began my research, though I initially planned to select one of the Christian classifications (fundamentalism) and focus primarily on it. As it turned out, a broader study proved more engaging and educational, but also much more difficult to analyze from a “big picture” perspective.

Instead, I will briefly summarize some of the dimensions along which Christian students typically fall. That is, I will highlight the areas of their faith where they tend to disagree (though *diverge* might be a more appropriate word—these dimensions do not necessarily suggest differences in actual belief).

Certain elements were, of course, the same for the overwhelming majority of Christian students whom I met. Though from different backgrounds, they all viewed Christianity as a uniting force for believers. They all believed in God, and believed that in some sense—whether literal or metaphorical—Jesus Christ was a unique moral leader who “died for our sins.” What this familiar phrase means to the students will be the first point that I analyze.

## The Significance of Jesus Christ

To be academically correct, Jesus Christ should be referred to as Jesus of Nazareth, since the title of “Christ” only holds spiritual meaning for Christians; but no student whom I talked to considered this to be an issue. The fact that he was the Christ is relatively self-evident, though what this title means is quite an open door, especially among Protestants<sup>14</sup>. It will suffice to generalize that the Christ was a historically real human who shared a unique relationship with God that held ramifications for all of humanity, even to this day.

When we ask what those ramifications are, though, the answers begin to splinter. Students who were raised in a more conservative, legalist setting are likely to believe that Jesus played a literal role in their personal spiritual life. In other words, his most important action came not in his life, but in his death, whereby he actually placed himself in the stead of humanity to face God’s wrathful judgment and spare all humans from hell for their original sin. Legalist literature is full of messages to this effect, and although this theological doctrine is not limited to conservative Christians, their worship and evangelism tend to point in this direction.

More spiritually minded groups, such as the charismatic Christians in Hope or the “brothers” and “sisters” in the Local Church, do not disagree with the atonement

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<sup>14</sup> Students trained and confirmed in Catholicism, or other rigorous religious sects such as Eastern Orthodoxy, give relatively homogenous responses to the question of just what Christ is and does. I did not pursue this angle to a large extent, in the interests of narrowing my thesis topic; I will discuss this decision below.

aspect of Christianity. But they are not as likely to emphasize it in their personal experience. Jesus came for all humanity, they assert, but he also made a connection with each individual person, allowing a single man or woman to fully “experience God’s grace”<sup>15</sup> in a way that hearkens back to the beginnings of Protestantism.

An interesting side note to this discussion, which I referred to earlier, is that a person’s vision of his relationship to God can informally be gauged by whether he refers to “Jesus” more or less than “God” in his typical worship practices. Though based on anecdotal evidence, this aspect belies a bit about the person’s thinking behind his terminology: Jesus is a concrete, historical character in our minds, while God is an abstract spiritual construct.

All the more interesting is the apparent contradiction that we are presented with—though the charismatic and meditative groups savor a direct connection with the divine (hence their reference to “Jesus”), they also think of him in more abstract and impersonal terms when it comes to his personal effect on the worshippers. Contrariwise, legalist and traditional groups refer to “God,” making for an indirect relationship, but their worship styles are more likely to reflect a personal and immanent deity.

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<sup>15</sup> I mark this particular phrase with quotes not only because it is a widely-used description, but because the term “grace” is a frequently-used synonym for the presence of God in one’s spirit, which is not quite accurate to its dictionary definition: “The love and favor of God towards man” (Webster’s New World).

It is risky and probably futile to draw conclusions from this paradox, considering the diversity that exists among individual members of any of these groups. We are probably simply witnessing a symptom of this assortment, and it would not be productive to nitpick the vocabulary that students use in describing their faith. But if nothing else, this example stands as clear (if unscientific) evidence that college Christianity cannot be reduced to a common denominator.

### **The conflict between faith and the classroom**

The academic arena is one of the areas where I was surprised to find much less controversy than I had been expecting, particularly since this thesis originally was meant to focus on the pressures of being a Christian at a secular university. But students were surprisingly open to argument from their professors, and fellow students, even when they avidly disagreed with their views. This was for one—sometimes both—of two reasons: they were genuinely more open to religious and scientific argument than students in homogenous Christian environments; or they did not view classroom attacks (such as defense of homosexuality) as a direct assault on their belief system.

In either case, Christian students at UT in particular were much more prone to deflect secular arguments than they were to confront them. At the evangelical talk given by Dave Geisler (p. 47), I asked a pointed question about how a Christian intent

on testifying might counter claims of evolution (the most convenient and prevalent point of contention in the public educational system). Mr. Geisler gave me a few pointers and popular arguments: “Ask the person, which is more reasonable, mind coming from mind, or mind coming from matter? ...[For example] if you look at the complexity of DNA, it’s obviously from an intelligent source.”

These two bite-size contentions are very similar in that they appeal to the listener’s common sense—one of the favorite tools of Christian fundamentalism thanks to its roots in Baconian realism (Armstrong 140-141). Common sense, however, can be quite a misleading indicator, especially when discussing such sophisticated topics as zoology or microbiology. Mr. Geisler did not seem to think that any more explanation or argument was necessary on this topic. We might accuse him of anti-intellectualism: some of the graphics he used during his slide show listed buzzwords such as “evolution” and “Higher Criticism” as barriers to spiritual enlightenment. But, at least in the minds of the students whom I met, intellectualism was a side issue, not directly relevant to the spiritual communion available with God.

Homosexuality is a trickier issue, since it is much more visible than evolution on the UT campus (after all, there was not an “Darwinism Pride Week” during my research). But the students’ reaction to the topic was quite similar: resort to common sense (“Homosexuality is obviously not something nature intended,” one student opined) and take refuge in the clear-cut words of the Bible.

I did not, in my interviews, pursue the typical, incisive criticisms that are often directed at conservative views of homosexuality.<sup>16</sup> The reason I was not more aggressive is three-fold: first, my effort was never to argue with students so much as understand them, and I did not wish to become alienated; second, neither I nor my subjects were well-equipped to carry out a high-level argument on this topic; third, and most importantly, it was rather tangential to the focus of this paper.

At this point, it is quite important to stress that not all Christian students disagreed with evolution and/or homosexual practices. In fact only a slim majority (if that) believed the Bible to be inerrant. This may have been a much more direct reason for students' lack of disdain for their classroom learning. But without an objective, scientific analysis of students' belief patterns—which, I will probably repeat, is a much-needed addition to this field of research—we cannot be sure where the barometer actually lies on such issues.

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<sup>16</sup> Among them, perhaps the most popular is to point out the other moral directives that are consistently ignored: Paul, for instance, demanded that women refrain from cutting their hair or wearing makeup.

## The “Seriousness” of Worship

Earlier I described the peculiar informality inherent to charismatic group worship, which seemed different than the secular familiarity that characterizes contemporary groups. Christians on Campus, too, frequently exhibited this sort of behavior, which is only logical since their entire worship mode rids the participant’s mind and spirit of dogmatic formality. Perhaps it belies a larger, common attitude that the students bear toward worship. Two hypotheses might be suggested: either the members do not take worship as seriously as they should, and dedication to God battles for time with their “normal” daily lives; or they find that the experience of worshipping God is inextricably intertwined with the experiences of talking to friends, studying for class, and driving to work—thus making the transition from one state to another virtually seamless.

I would like to think that this second hypothesis is the correct one, and given the passionate love of God that so many church members exhibited, I believe that it is. On the other hand, however, informality can indeed count as unfocused worship if a student does not commit himself fully to it. ECHO, the college worship service at First Evangelical Free Church, often fell victim to this liability; the chitchat between student worshippers did not appear so seamless, and the opportunity for church to be a social event seemed to weaken its primary role as a religious exercise. This was likely a consequence of its immense popularity: close to 500 students pack the church gym at

every service, and so personal accountability is harder to come by. But the leaders of ECHO might be well suited to refocus its energies in a more traditional direction. At the expense of reduced popularity, they can reap the benefit of worship that is thoroughly and wholly God-focused.

Despite these criticisms, the services for most groups nevertheless seem to be quite stable, spiritually centered, and definitely suited to the casual tastes of college students reared on MTV. Given the choice between visitor alienation and increased traditionalism, most groups have erred on the side of openness, and this is an honorable (if arguable) decision.

### **God's role in students' lives**

Much like the Jesus-God disparity, but with greater certainty, I was able to document students' psychological *locus of control*<sup>17</sup> as it relates to God. Though Calvinism and other Christian belief systems have solved this question in problematic ways, it surely remains a function of a person's own psychology whether he truly believes that he or God drives his own actions, and other events in life.

"God's plan" for things is referred to with incredible frequency among Protestant groups, though the nature of the phrase (literal or symbolic) is probably unknown even to the individual students. Some, of course, take this phrase quite literally; Janna, my

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<sup>17</sup> The personality construct that defines whether a person believes that he causes things to happen, or that things happen to him (in this case, due to God's action) (McCombs).



friend from Hope 242, “felt the Lord leading” her to a new job. This belies an immanent God-view, since God is obviously acting directly in the world rather than reflecting Himself in it. But even so she admitted, in reference to her job: “I didn’t interview with a whole bunch of places, of course that’s my fault for being stupid...” So free will does significantly factor in to her life.

On the same topic, I experienced a rather humorous moment—as usual, unintentionally so—when I asked my CoC contact, Raymond, what brought him from Australia to Texas. “Well, the Lord called me.”

“Err, that’s nice—how exactly did he do that?”

“I’d been praying a lot about the direction my life was taking, and I just really felt this was where He wanted me to be.”

“Okay, great, that’s great. Um...was there any particular instance where you heard about Austin as a good place to go?” If he starts referring to a voice in his head I’m going to worry.

“Some of my friends had been telling me about the wonderful things that were happening in Austin, and I just felt the Lord calling to me.”

Aha. His friends. That’s a good enough answer. I then turn to Joseph, who has said he’s from California.

“Joseph, what about you, how’d you end up here from out west?”

“Well, the Lord called me.” I laugh. Joseph does not.

They might have gone even further and claimed that the Lord “brought” them to Austin—though a subtle grammatical shift, it would reveal an even more dramatic immanence, as though their actions were those of puppets on a string.

This “puppet worldview” (my own term) is a rare one among Christians, and especially college students, who are relatively egocentric and like to think that they have some measure of control over their lives. So they strike a subtle and often contradictory balance, which is particularly convenient in that they can credit events beyond their control to “God’s will.” This is not necessarily the best outlook to have, since some unfortunate events call for outrage rather than complacency—but young Christians are highly adaptable, and their personal philosophy can adapt as well.

# Conclusions

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It is a valid question to ask why, of all the possible student demographics to be studied, I chose Protestant Christianity. The first reason is straightforward: I have reams of personal experience with Protestantism, as the son of two ordained Methodist ministers. I have traveled down many of the spiritual paths described in this thesis, and it has certainly been an undertaking with some selfish intent: to come to terms with the enigmatic, many-headed phenomenon that is Christianity in America.

A second reason is that I find Protestantism, the historically dominant faith in the United States, to be a fascinating catalyst for the personal and spiritual turmoil that every college student undergoes. It is particularly interesting because in this case, the catalyst actually changes as much as the reactant; Christianity grows, adapts, and evolves as students cope with their radical new environment.

The worship styles (and even the dogma) inherent to Protestantism have shifted upon entering new environments for thousands of years. Within a university, however, two circumstances are unique: first, these new breeds of Christianity are constantly mingling with each other, producing new combinations among a young and fickle population.<sup>18</sup> And second, the university itself—usually a liberal and irreligious environment—presents an unusual set of challenges with which Christianity must deal.

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<sup>18</sup> For example, Morning Star Church is a local Austin upstart that combines features of the newer, more secularized “megachurches” (as described by Bruce Bawer) with a traditional fundamentalist message.

Christian students are often accused of being closed-minded and judgmental, but they seem to be judged themselves far more often. And many who were raised in a Christian “bubble” find upon entering college that their stock Bible verses and arguments no longer work. (“Just Say No” always proved much more effective in the classroom than on the playground.) The fact that few students are sophisticated enough to vigorously answer these challenges makes for an even more erratic growth pattern within the faith. It is the primary reason that so many Christian students need to “rediscover” their religion after crossing into the college world.

On a personal note, however, I ended up being remarkably impressed by the students’ defense of Christianity—they had a willingness to “stand up for Christ” that was born of their genuine convictions, and not simply stubbornness. One of the most memorable moments in my interviews came when I asked Colin my standard question: “How does attending a large, secular university like UT create different challenges than, say, a small Bible college or a more intensely religious environment?” Most student responses discussed the pressures of maintaining one’s spiritual center with so many outside secular influences. But Colin was surprisingly optimistic:

A few of my friends go to Baylor [a conservative Baptist school in Waco]—and at Baylor you can get away with saying you’re a Christian and not really doing anything about it. Whereas here...I think that you can say it [that is, speak your faith], but I think you’re more likely to be pushed about it by non-Christians. ...I feel like I have a higher calling; like, I don’t think a lot of the questions that I’m dealing with now would have come up there. ...I’m incredibly thankful to be here.

Indeed, virtually none of the students I interviewed expressed dissatisfaction with their place at UT. They might have been a bit envious of their brothers and sisters in more “comfortable” spiritual locations. But, as Colin pointed out, the challenge is not something to shy away from. And the opportunity to minister to the unsaved<sup>19</sup> is orders of magnitude greater.

Manuel, one of the young leaders of Christians on Campus, in many ways exemplified the potential of young Christians that I grew to appreciate more and more as my research continued. During our interaction he never made a direct attempt to proselytize me, such as I had grown to expect; instead he lived quite admirably by example, speaking eloquently and passionately of his own conversion experience. I hope the reader will forgive me if I quote liberally from our interview:

April of '96, I remember I come home one night...Juan and Joaquin [his two Christian housemates] aren't home, and I'm sitting on the couch, and I'm full of energy, but I don't want to do anything! I've gotta do something, and I can't do anything! I remember...sitting on the floor and thinking these words – “Man, what is going on?” <laughs> Then I looked on the right and there was this Bible, and I said You know, I've never read that thing on my own.

And so I picked it up and started reading through it...and I'm reading it with a genuine heart. First time in my life, I want to know, is it real? And as I'm reading, it was like this veil was taken away from my eyes...I realized that I was not poor in spirit; I was not pure in heart; I didn't hunger and thirst for righteousness; and for the first time in my life I realized I was a sinner! I'd never thought about it before!

...The Word of God, sown in my heart, began to sprout. And I just remember speaking back what was in my being; saying Lord, you died for me. Forgive me. Wash me of my sins. ...And to me, the more I apply his blood [that is, forgiveness], the more I am free! ...Rivers of living water started to flow out of my being.

I'm sitting there, and tears are rolling out of my eyes; and I have this huge smile of my face; ...and I got up, and started jumping up and down, and the words just came

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<sup>19</sup> “Unsaved”: Yet another vocabulary word that I use cautiously. In this case, many UT Christians are hesitant to use it because they prefer not to think in terms of hellfire and brimstone. “Those who do not yet know the Lord” is a wordier but less aggressive synonym.

back to me, “Man, what is going on?” <laughs> I saw him! I saw him! I...I saw him! For the first time in my life, he was real to me! I touched him! I was just praying Lord, I love you, Lord. I give my life to you. I open wide to you. ...And since then he has become more and more real, and fresher.

...Nothing has ever been my experience like this. Everything grows old. Nothing is new. Everything goes in cycles. But the more I go on with the Lord, the more I know him—the more he is new to me; the fresher he is...that has been my experience. And he has yet to stop touching me. And he never will.

Though simply a personal anecdote, this testimony summarizes some of the best inherent benefits of religious belief that are available to college students. Many students are yearning for a basic, essential meaning to life in this age of relativism, and Christianity supplies that in a package not so illogical or old-fashioned as many would like to believe. Jeff, the leader of Hope Student Life, described his daily routine: “Every Monday morning I wake up and say Lord, I love you. I’m here, I’m starting the grind...but I’m here for you.”

It is all too easy for a student to become obsessed with unimportant aspects of his life—grades, social relationships, and substance abuse are widely varying pursuits that all share this risk. Christians (like many religious followers) should regard all these things as essentially meaningless. They might still be worth pursuing, but at least they are placed properly in perspective; God is an excellent, personalized symbol for the “grand scheme of things.” Tiffany, an accounting senior, illustrated this for me.

Every class I’m in it amazes me how much the world is run by money. And that’s really kind of scary, it’s kind of...interesting being in the business classes; everyone wants to be partner in this big accounting firm and make all this money. And I’m like hmm, I’ll work there for a while and then I’ll probably go work for a missions agency somewhere. <laughs> They all need accountants really bad.

This was a quite refreshing mission statement to hear from a business major who could expect to pull in a high salary in her first year out of college. The force of God's love, for Tiffany, supersedes anything she might earn for herself.

Like most good things, religion can, of course, be distorted into a justification for irrational and immoral behavior—I witnessed this too during my research, though thankfully not as much as I had feared. I am reminded of a student who once stood in front of my Film class to pitch his screenplay idea. Instead he talked, rather disjointedly, for over ten minutes about how everyone in the room needed Jesus in their lives. Needless to say, he failed his screenplay pitch magnificently, and likely did not care, since he felt he was serving a higher cause by forfeiting his time to God. In reality, though, he was soiling Christianity's reputation. By and large, my fellow students (and I myself) did not see a martyr before them—merely a kook.

My anonymous classmate was a minority, but one that should sound warning bells for worship leaders everywhere. He proved to be a perfect example of how Christianity can gradually, but dramatically, become a negative component of one's personal growth. If a person focuses too much on the idealistic figure of Jesus, then life in the world becomes meaningless, and he can cease to be a part of the world. Even as I write that sentence I realize that many might read it in a positive way; but no person—Christian or not, student or not—should be excused from his everyday pragmatism. No student came to college merely to prepare himself for heaven.

We might cynically suggest that, without objective proof of the Christian faith, its emotional support structures could very well be fabrications within the believers' own minds. But any Christian student would insist that rational reduction of their religious belief is counterproductive. That is, religion by its very nature encompasses something beyond the realm of science and observation. Psychology and sociology can be used to study the *effects* of religious belief, they might argue, but the *causes* can never be fully explained in logical terms.

I do not fully agree with this—after all, even our divinely inspired actions are probably rooted in real-world causes—but it is an important distinction to make in differentiating my work from that of anthropologists. In short, I believe—due to observation as much as personal conviction—that there is a supernatural element to being a college Christian that cannot be cleanly removed or filtered from the experience. This is not to discount the value of contemporary psychology as a tool for understanding Christianity (or other religious populations), but rather to suggest that there is a point beyond which an outside observer cannot venture without donning a great deal of spiritual sympathy.

I do not carry—and am not capable of—the ethnographer's mandated objectivity when among young Christian students. It might make me acutely ill-suited for a project such as this, since I do in fact share many of their beliefs and could never attempt a purely psychosocial analysis. But in fact, I would argue that I am uniquely



suiting to this study, since so little of what I witnessed during my research would be meaningful in dry academic terms. From the outset, I did not intend to draft an ethnography of a population, so much as explore the gray area within the spiritual “box” of a college Christian.

Personally, I found myself growing by leaps and bounds as I surveyed these populations, interviewed students not very different from myself, and discovered just how widely Christianity has extended itself across a single diverse population. I became much less cynical about the effects of religion on young minds, particularly in my initial failure to find the radical fundamentalist groups that I had originally hoped to focus on. (“These people are all so nice and fun!” I joked to a friend, early in the year. “They’re useless to me!”) This is not to say that rabidly closed-minded students are nowhere to be found—but the institutions they attend are, with some reservations, quite positive spiritual breeding grounds.

And so my thesis topic shifted to a broader view of student Christianity, thanks not only to my preliminary discoveries but also to the dearth of topical information I found in this subject. I was quite surprised to find that this region of knowledge—in religious studies, sociology, and even psychology—is quite unexplored! This is all the more surprising since the university is such a fascinating natural laboratory in which to study religious development. With some trepidation, I read Paul Bramadat’s closing words to his own study, published only last year: “As far as I can tell, this project is the

first full-length academic study of *any* contemporary evangelical university student group” (Bramadat 148). Thus making mine a candidate for the second.

With that in mind, I feel quite humbled, and a little dismayed that this topic is too broad—this project has merely skimmed the surface of a deep sea of information like a skipping stone. I did not visit most of the groups as often as I would have liked; others, such as Christian fraternities/sororities (e.g., Brothers Under Christ) and high-minority groups (Chinese Bible Study), I was forced by time to exclude altogether. The fact that I interacted with almost a dozen groups doesn’t sound quite so impressive in context: there are between fifty and a hundred such groups scattered across the UT campus. This thesis has a very “tip-of-the-iceberg” feel to it.

On the other hand, I prefer to consider it to be a survey of topics that each deserves further exploration by better-qualified academic professionals. Charismatic worship; the evangelistic efforts on South Padre Island; and the Asian attraction to Christianity are just a few example topics that I feel could fill full-length theses of their own. With that in mind, I am proud to have ventured (however briefly) into these new territories with a subjective outlook. It paved the way for future studies, and allowed me to witness the quiet miracle that is religion at a secular college.

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# About the Author

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Kevin Michael Miller was born in 1978 to a pair of Methodist ministers in Brownwood, Texas. He owes his irrational love of football and long road trips to his childhood, growing up in the middle of nowhere near Waco. He has a younger sister, Margaret, and counts Glen Lake Methodist Camp (Glen Rose, TX) as his spiritual home.

Kevin graduated from Grapevine High School in 1996 and entered the Plan II Honors Program at The University of Texas at Austin. He will graduate in May 2001, earning a dual degree in Plan II and Radio-Television-Film. He plans to stay in Austin for the near future, working as a technical writer and waiting for the rest of his friends to graduate. Kevin can be reached at [corelli@alumni.utexas.net](mailto:corelli@alumni.utexas.net).