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Words That Move the Spirit: A Comparative Study of Language in Christian and Unitarian Universalist Sermons

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Abstract

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By Ella Morgen

Language and religion are two essential components of culture and identity that intersect in profound ways. In Unitarian Universalist and Protestant denominations, religion serves as a foundational aspect of how individuals experience the world and language is an instrument through which they share and preserve their beliefs. This thesis aims to investigate the similarities and differences in language between Unitarian Universalist and theologically conservative and liberal Protestant religious traditions. By examining the rhetorical and linguistic function of written sermonic language, this paper seeks to gain insight into the ways language shapes religious identity and contributes to the formation of community.

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Chapter One: Introduction

Purpose

Language and religion are two intrinsic expressions of culture and identity. For the vast

majority of societies, religion is foundational to experiencing the world and language is the

means by which that may be shared and preserved. In the American Protestant and Unitarian

Universalist religious traditions, a major intersection of these two phenomena is the sermon, a

form of religious discourse and oratory by a preacher. The purpose of this thesis is to approach

the form and function of sermonic language as it is used by theologically conservative and liberal

Christian preachers and Unitarian Universalist preachers to create their own communities with

defined values and goals.

My personal relationship with the study of religion stems from growing up in a Unitarian

Universalist congregation. As a creedless religious identity, the responsibility to decide what I

believe in was my own. Much of my childhood religious education involved exploring my faith

by studying various religious identities, visiting their spaces, and learning to articulate what I

found useful from their beliefs. Personally, I see the most important part of belonging to a faith

as access to a supportive and curious community. Spirituality and the sacred are finding ways to

make deep connections and then exploring outlets to practice those connections.

When approaching my thesis, I sought to investigate how language in Christian spaces

differs from what I grew up, with but remains fundamental to the development of a religious

community. Preaching plays a crucial role in the worship lives of both faiths, but why does it

matter and what are its purposes? Although there may not be a unanimous agreement, there are

several guiding questions that shaped my research: (1) How does a preacher create their

audience? (2) How do preachers use their sources to create a single sacred space and ascribe

values and goals to their community? (3) Why does the audience perceive the preacher and community's values and goals as worthwhile?

<p style="text-align:center">The Genre of the Sermon</p>

Sermons as text and preaching as oral performance are central aspects of many religious traditions with a highly recognizable but variable character. In his book, *A History of Preaching*, O.C. Edwards Jr. asserts that "most Christian bodies consider the proclamation of the Word of God to be the constitutive act of the church. No other major religion gives preaching quite the central role that it has in Christianity" (Edwards). Especially in the history of the United States, sermons have evolved into one of the most ubiquitous forms of American oratory. From the 17th and 18th centuries, the sermon genre was the dominant literary device and a significant force in American culture. The weekly address served a variety of civic functions, particularly at a time when information and public speeches were not as easily accessible as they are today. This is especially true of Protestant Christian communities where sermons function as the worship services' primary focus and establishes a space to build shared identity and discourse. As a form of religious discourse and rhetorical exercise, sermons offer a valuable opportunity for interreligious and cross-cultural comparisons, illustrating how religious practices intersect with daily life.

The sermon genre can be better understood through Genre Theory, a classification approach employed in various fields such as literature, film, and linguistics. Genres are dependent on various factors, most importantly the interactions between the audience expectations and the fluidity of the performance. By recognizing the genre, preachers can define the expectations for a category. Worship services and sermons, as a genre, are made up of oscillations between the recognizable formula and the unique mode of their performance. The

formula of each defines the boundaries and expectations of its performance. These are features or criteria that without which the audience would feel dissatisfied. The mode is a broader term used to encompass elements that extend beyond the standard formula (Attebery).

Within the entirety of a Protestant service's genre performance, liturgy is the formula and the sermon acts as the mode that prevents each week's program from being almost identical. This is evident when contrasting liturgical and sermonic discourse. Within these two events, the intended audience is a primary reason for this difference. In liturgical discourse, the implied audience is God and encompasses individual and communal appeals to God with varying levels of private or personalized language. This can be prayer, confession, or ritual. Liturgical language's appeal to a high authority is characterized by more formal and ritualized language that would be avoided in conversational settings. A sermon's implied audience is the congregation so personalized and conversational language is more appropriate. The preacher is free to act as a figure of authority and counsel to seek a more personal relationship with their audience.

Within the genre of the sermon, there is both formula and unique modes of its performance. For instance, Christian sermons are conventionally experienced ritually within a familiar sacred space at a clearly defined date and time. They include the interaction of biblical text alongside modern cultural context. They are performed to an implicit audience of similarly minded individuals of the same religion and denomination by a recognized figure of authority and member of its community. Typically, sermons appeal to the emotional and intellectual needs of the congregation. Additionally, their topic and purpose are restricted to invite both individual and communal interpretation and analysis of the sacred and contribute to the collective growth of knowledge.

The mode is less easily identifiable and differs between denominations, preachers, and audiences. Within a sermon, the preacher is free to weekly modify the thematic topics, use references to pop culture or non-religious events, and express personal feelings. Compared to liturgy where there is little room to alter ritual, different preachers in the same faith also preach stylistically very different sermons. Sermons become a space to express the denominational and congregational personality. A preacher's opportunity to employ different rhetorical techniques and delivery helps them escape from purely formulaic performances and engage and inform their audiences.

One way to think about the Christian sermon genre is as an unpredictable divine creation. The speaker of a sermon can be seen as a messenger of God, articulating a divine message. The mode of the sermon, therefore, can be seen as a creative means of conveying that message in a way that is accessible and engaging to the audience. The mode offers a capacity for humans to imagine almost anything, strengthened by the formula that balances those impulses with expectations.

These transitions between the formula and mode are intentional acts and uniquely contribute to building the sermonic genre. As the central focus of a Protestant service, sermons have a powerful authority to exert a cohesive force expressing identity and legitimacy. By understanding the formula and mode of its genre, preachers and audience members can better value the works within that genre. By recognizing genre expectations, congregants build an understanding of how a sermon fits into that genre while different modes can help audience members to appreciate the diversity and creativity of works within that genre.

Frames of Language

Language itself also has a formula that linguists classify as its frame. That frame contributes to the underlying meaning of words and allows linguists to learn about a culture from the way people use words and the emotions that words carry. Everyone uses language differently and more is communicated than what may seem obvious to a casual listener. Features like accents, vocabulary, patterns of intonation, and choices in grammar help build a linguistic biography that reveals unconscious and unintentional core beliefs and worldviews.

The OED defines language as "the system of spoken or written communication used by a particular country, people, community, etc., typically consisting of words used within a regular grammatical and syntactic structure" (Language, n. and int.). Isolating the word *particular* highlights that language is inherently local and embedded. George Lakoff, a professor of linguistics and cognitive science best known for his work on conceptual metaphors, emphasizes that we understand every word by its frame and as he describes them:

> "Frames are mental structures that shape the way we see the world. As a result, they shape the goals we seek, the plans we make, the way we act, and what counts as a good or bad outcome… You can't see or hear frames. They are part of what cognitive scientists call the "cognitive unconscious"—structures in our brains that we cannot consciously access."

These frames are the basis of how we reason and what counts as common sense. All words are defined relative to their conceptual frame. When the brain hears a word, its frame is physiologically activated in our brain. Even when the frame is negated, it is evoked. Every word, sermon*,* for instance, elicits a frame that can take the form of an image, knowledge, or something else. The word *sermon* invokes different images for people dependent on their background but is nonetheless defined relative to its familiar frame. When a word devolves from its frame it becomes a marked construction. Framing can be used in a highly political manner as careful

word choice will push an underlying worldview. The ideas are primary, and the language carries them.

American Protestantism

Christianity is an Abrahamic monotheistic religion with roughly 2.8 billion adherents worldwide. Today, Christianity is broadly split between three branches: Catholic, Protestant, and Eastern Orthodox. While sermons are part of a Catholic and Eastern Orthodox mass, there is a greater emphasis on prayer and worship with the central act being the liturgy of the Eucharist. For the purposes of this research, I isolated Protestantism which began as a reform movement within the Catholic church in the 16th century.

In the United States, Protestants are the primary audience of pulpit oratory and enable common biblical interpretations to spread across the country. According to the Pew Research Center's most recent Religious Landscape Study in 2014, approximately 36% of Americans attend a religious service at least once a week and an additional 33% once a month to a few times a year. Of those who attend weekly, 58% were evangelical Protestants and 33% were mainline Protestants. Among those groups that were polled, 89% say that religion is "very important" in their life. In summary, the study found that religion as a whole has a lasting influence on American life, and Protestantism's majority has a proportionate influence (Pew Research Center).

Sermons and their performance are not unique to a Protestant context, but they have been bestowed a special centrality within the service. Sermons are perceived as "one of the crown jewels of the Reformation" and a major differentiator between Protestant and Catholic worship (De Leede 45). For Protestants, a sermon can even be defined as a sacrament). In part, their status can be attributed to the belief that the Bible is the sole source of religious truth. However,

this does not prevent a difference in biblical interpretation. In fact, the centrality of the sermon allows an individual preacher's own interpretation of the Bible's message to function as a community interpretation creating divisions. Over time, these divisions developed out of differences in doctrine, liturgy, and geography and resulted in the significant number of denominations that exist today.

Since Protestantism is a religious tradition that includes a wide range of theological beliefs and practices, research focusing on theological beliefs has a propensity toward scaling community identity in response to views on biblical interpretation. Denominations and individuals that choose to interpret the Bible literally showcase an overlap with theologically conservative and traditional ideals. Theologically liberal and moderate Protestant believers are thought to be more theologically liberal as indicated by non-literal views. They are more open to new interpretations of the Bible and are willing to consider alternative viewpoints.

Theological conservatism and liberalism often reflect the way practitioners approach socio-political issues, as well as their beliefs about the role of the church in society. While it is impossible to claim that viewpoints originate solely from exposure to a weekly sermon, sermons should be acknowledged as a contributing factor that shapes the consciousness of its listeners. Politically, literalism correlates with strong conservative political beliefs. while non-literalists have less clearly defined politics. Ultimately, the degree of theological conservatism or liberalism within Protestantism can vary greatly from one denomination to another, and from one individual believer to another. Some Protestants may be more conservative in some areas and more liberal in others, reflecting the diversity and complexity of this religious tradition.

Liberal Protestantism

Liberal Protestantism originated in the 19th and early 20th centuries as a response to the challenges posed by the Enlightenment and the rise of modernity. In contrast to more conservative Protestant denominations, liberal Protestants embraced a more individualistic and rational approach to faith. The movement was committed to bridging the gap between Christianity and modern knowledge and thus required some level of reconstruction of belief to replace supernaturalism with varieties of rationalism. Where traditional interpretations of scripture interfere, they were either discarded or reinterpreted to affirm qualities that aligned with the modern world.

While the Bible is still central to worship, it is simultaneously perceived as an authority and a historical document of its time that requires changing how it is interpreted to account for changing circumstances. The symbols that were compelling for early Christians must be reinterpreted for the modern listener creating both an original and an interpretation of events. This separation enforces an approach to knowledge that is culturally relative. Instead of applying that interpretation literally and centering biblical inerrancy, liberal Protestants center the deeper intended message of scripture as the primary authority for faith (McGrath 196).

Today, liberal Protestantism is a broad term that refers to a diverse range of denominations and movements that prioritize a progressive and inclusive approach to theology and church practices. These congregations often place a strong emphasis on the use of critical thinking and personal experience as ways to understand and relate to Christianity, rather than adhering strictly to a particular set of traditional interpretations or teachings. In lieu of interpreting these texts as literally true and unchanging, liberal Protestants view them as products

of their historical and cultural contexts, containing both timeless truths as well as specific cultural or historical details.

The non-literal approach to the Bible takes the form of engaging with scripture as didactic parables. Didactic parables are a type of story or allegory that is used to teach a moral lesson or provide instruction on a particular subject. The moral lessons contained in the Bible can be useful to people whether or not they believe in the literal truth of the Bible. Many of the teachings in the Bible are based on values that are widely accepted as beneficial, such as love, compassion, honesty, and fairness. These values are often seen as universally applicable, regardless of whether or not the stories attached to them are literally accurate. Liberal Christians approach scripture by identifying central themes of the Bible and considering how these might apply to their own lives and contemporary society. They also examine different interpretations and how these different viewpoints might enrich their understanding of the story and its message. This non-literal approach is often rooted in the belief that the Bible and other religious texts should be interpreted in light of modern science, critical scholarship, and personal experience.

For the purposes of this research, the nonliteral liberal and moderate sermons I have collected are part of the Lutheran and Methodist denominations. While their theological backing differs significantly, their non-literalist approach to community building through language overlaps.

Lutheranism is one of the largest branches of Protestant tradition that originated in the 16th century with Martin Luther, a German monk and theologian who challenged the authority of the Roman Catholic Church and is considered the father of the Protestant Reformation. Their primary distinction is their belief in the concept of "justification by faith alone," meaning that salvation is a gift of God's grace received through faith in Jesus Christ alone, and not by any

works or merits of our own. The specific sermons are from the blog of Rev. Jon Marxhausen from Grace of God Lutheran Church, a liberal community in Minnesota (Pastor Jon's Sermon Blog).

Methodists originated in the 18th century with John Wesley, a theologian and evangelist, who sought to reform the Church of England from within. The movement spread rapidly throughout the British Isles and eventually to the United States, where it split into several different denominations. Methodists place a strong emphasis on the idea of "grace," which refers to the unmerited favor and love of God. They also acknowledge personal spiritual growth and the idea of "sanctification," which refers to the process of becoming more like Christ (The Churches: Book of Discipline). The specific sermons are from Rev. David Moser at Salado United Methodist Church (Salado Written Sermons). Their current minister, Rev. Tommy Prud'homme, identifies the congregation's beliefs as a moderate take on Wesleyan theology, focusing on God's grace and how it manifests (Prud'homme Interview).

In terms of worship, Lutherans tend to have a more formal liturgy, with an emphasis on hymns, prayers, and readings from the Bible. Methodists also have a structured liturgy, but it tends to be more flexible and adaptable to different settings and contexts. The specific format of services may vary depending on the particular denomination or local congregation, but a typical service centers the sermon while including the following elements: a call to worship, which may include the singing of hymns and the lighting of candles as the congregation gathers; the reading of scripture; prayers; hymns oriented around the sermon; a time for offerings; sharing of announcements; and the dismissal of the congregation. The service typically runs approximately an hour long with a sermon that accounts for ten to fifteen minutes.

Conservative Protestantism

Conservative Protestantism is a term that is often used to describe a subgroup within Protestant Christianity that tends to hold more traditional and conservative beliefs and practices. Conservative Protestants generally believe in the authority and inerrancy of the Bible and they tend to follow a more literal interpretation of scripture. In other words, conservative Christian preaching emphasizes the supernatural aspects of biblical passages such as the miraculous displays of spiritual power demonstrated by Jesus. They may also be identifiable by their belief that reading the Bible provides all necessary knowledge in order to achieve salvation, individual responsibility for one's own salvation, and an emphasis on tangible accomplishments such as health and wealth as a sign of spiritual maturity.

The category of conservative Christian manifests within various Christian identities such as "evangelical," "fundamentalist," "traditional," or "puritan," and includes a wide variety of denominations. These denominations often have a strong emphasis on evangelism and spreading the Gospel to others.

While conservative Christian values have an extensive history and exist separate from liberal values, the rise of modern attitudes towards biblical interpretation and the increasing polarization between the two systems of beliefs are closely linked to the increase of fundamentalism in America. The fundamentalist movement emerged in the early 20th century as a response to modernist theology and exploded following World War I and the perceived erosion of traditional Christian beliefs (Marsden 6). Fundamentalists argued for the inerrancy and literal truth of the Bible, and they rejected the idea that the Bible should be interpreted in a symbolic or allegorical manner. They also were often regarded "as anti-scientific and anti-intellectual," rejecting the teaching of evolution and emphasizing the importance of personal faith. The rise of

conservative Christianity in the 20th century was also influenced by the rise of Evangelicalism, which split from Fundamentalism as a distinct movement in the 1940s and 1950s (Marsden 233). Evangelicals placed a strong emphasis on evangelism and the spread of the Gospel, and they often sought to engage with contemporary culture and society. These movements continue to be influential within conservative Christianity today.

The conservative sermons included as part of my research come exclusively from one Southern Baptist congregation, Summerville Baptist Church in Summerville, South Carolina led by Rev. Randy Harling. Southern Baptist congregations are part of the Southern Baptist Convention, a Protestant Christian denomination that originated in the United States in the early 19th century. Southern Baptist churches are autonomous, meaning that each individual congregation is self-governed and responsible for its own affairs. As a result, beliefs and practices may vary somewhat from one Southern Baptist church to another. Generally, they believe in the authority of the Bible, personal faith in Jesus, the autonomy of the local church, and evangelism. In terms of liturgy, Southern Baptist congregations may follow a variety of worship styles, ranging from traditional to contemporary. However, all Southern Baptist worship services include standard elements that coalesce around the sermon such as hymns, prayers, and the offering.

In my interview with Rev. Harling, he describes his community as a theologically conservative and evangelical collective. His sermons are approximately 30 to 45 minutes long and constitute over half of the entire service. Compared to the liberal congregations, his sermons are much longer and include more moments for prayer and announcements contained within the sermon (Harling Interview).

<u>Unitarian Universalism</u>

Unitarian Universalism is a modern religion that developed in America during the 1960s. The roots of Unitarian Universalism are in liberal Protestant Christianity, specifically the denominations of Unitarianism, represented by the American Unitarian Association, and Universalism, connected to the Universalist Church of America. The consolidation of these faiths developed into the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) in 1961 and provided the basis for the modern approach to religion that now exists today.

In its rejection of the orthodox Christian approach and creedless approach, Unitarian Universalists have sometimes been seen negatively as bad Christians or as a pseudo-religious faith. While Unitarian Universalists are typically fairly comfortable in their nonconformity, they are indicative of space between tradition and heresy. This relationship must be further explored to fully grasp Unitarian Universalist identities.

<u>Unitarianism and Universalism</u>

Unitarianism and Universalism have roots in the Protestant Reformation, which swept across Europe in 16th-century Europe. This period was marked by significant theological and political movements, including the division between Catholics and Protestants. In the midst of this cultural and religious diversity, several Protestant groups emerged, such as Quakers, Anglicans, and Presbyterians. Some of these groups experienced increasing levels of religious tolerance, which aided the independent development of Unitarianism and Universalism in the early 16th century (Buehrens and Church 62).

By mid-17th century English Puritans had settled in Massachusetts and the New England area developed into a hotspot for Calvinist theology and the congregations that sought to compete against it. Calvinists base themselves on predestination, supporting that salvation is an

act of God and no human action holds power in achieving that salvation. Calvinism was the first theological opponent of Unitarians whose theology is a liberal humanistic view of religion that centers on "God's benevolence, humankind's free will, and the dignity rather than the depravity of human nature" (Robinson 3). The label "Unitarian" was approved in 1819 as the refute of the Trinitarian doctrine became a leading principle within the community (Robinson 17). Like Unitarians, Universalist theology was in direct contrast with Calvinism. Universalists believed in universal salvation, the rejection of "permanent damnation to an everlasting hell," as no loving God would impose that on their creation (Buehrens and Church 30). This period of theological reformation established a moral approach to human's free-will, an extension of natural theology and rationalism, and enhanced access to individual interpretation of scripture.

The Unitarians were considered intellectual elites and social activists. Liberal control of Harvard College and Divinity School, the sole source for ministry training in New England, led to the growth of Unitarian communities and encouraged them to seek institutional development (Robinson 34). Harvard played a large role in enabling Unitarian growth as its status as an educational institution led to greater denominational organization and by 1825, the American Unitarian Association. By the mid-nineteenth century, Transcendentalist literature, primarily that of Ralph Waldo Emerson, developed into a movement among Unitarians seeking a "highly individualistic version of Unitarianism, disposed against ecclesiastical organization, and more reformist in its political outlook, within the limit of its individualism" (Robinson 5).

Although Unitarians were recognized for their status as intellectual leaders, Harvard adjacent, and upper-middle-class communities, Universalist congregations were primarily made up of the working class or small artisans (Buehrens and Church 33). Regardless, they experienced similar Transcendentalist influence which fully altered the denomination's path. The

result was that both denominations' trajectory was directed towards humanistic faith and inclusivity. By the 20th century, Universalists were closely aligned with social justice initiatives. They were known for political activism in anti-slavery causes and championing causes related to land division, women's rights, and social insurance. In fact, a Universalist minister was one of the first women in the United States to receive ordination as early as 1863, with 88 women ministers by the 1920s (Robinson 7). This shift marks the period as a swing towards liberal humanism and Unitarian transcendentalist religious movements.

<div align="center">Unitarian Universalism</div>

At the start of the twentieth century, Unitarian and Universalist denominations recognized their power as a collective and made increasing attempts to meet and corporate with one another. Eventually, this led to the denominations allying themselves and considering a united organization. This was a logical step as both denominations promoted similar humanistic messages and pluralistic religious views. The merger became official in 1961 after years of debate and the Unitarian Universalist Association was established (Robinson 168). Today, the organization still exists and directs the identity of practicing congregations. According to data compiled by the UUA in 2018, the US is home to over 1,000 congregations, 150,000 adult congregants, and 40,000 children (Walton).

Before the consolidation, Unitarians and Universalists were influential because they engaged with religious and social reformation and were vocal in opposition to early Orthodox Christianity. From its merger, Unitarian Universalism has continued this legacy associating with religious reformation as a creedless religion that integrates world religious and philosophical traditions. The denomination's identity as an American post-traditional religious movement is described by historian David Robinson who believes that Unitarian Universalists' primary feature

is its ability "to break the creedal and institutional boundaries that traditionally defined religion and the church and to embody the religious sense in the secular world itself" (Robinson 25). When Unitarian Universalists claim the absence of a creed, they mean that they do not require adherence to a specific set of beliefs in order to be part of their religious community. Unlike many other religious traditions, which have a clearly defined set of doctrines that must be accepted by their members, Unitarian Universalists often have an individual creed to describe their own system of beliefs. In place of a congregation-wide creed, Unitarian Universalists are unified by a congregational convent and the Seven Principles that support "a free and responsible search for truth and meaning" (Principles and Sources). They are:

1. The inherent worth and dignity of every person,
2. Justice, equity, and compassion in human relations,
3. Acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth in our congregations,
4. A free and responsible search for truth and meaning,
5. The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large,
6. The goal of world community with peace, liberty, and justice for all,
7. Respect for the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part.

Unitarian Universalists developed the principles to embrace pluralism and host many spiritualities simultaneously. Congregants are welcome to claim their own religious traditions while also recognizing their Unitarian Universalist identity. There is no expressed bias towards one source or origin. Unitarian Universalist sources require uncertainty, and not just that, but individual explorations of what parts of a tradition are impactful, regardless of belief in their deities or traditions. Unitarian Universalists are not competing with institutions that offer firm answers to life questions, rather, it is an identity for people comfortable with uncertainty and sharing the values of many faith traditions.

From its roots in Christianity, Unitarian Universalism services share many commonalities with a Protestant Christian church. Each Sunday, at a defined time and space, the congregation participates in a shared ritual performance of faith led by a minister. The minister primarily directs the service, though members, visitors, and youth are also expected to perform supporting roles. The physical space is unique to the congregation with some consistencies such as the central pulpit and the physical symbol in the form of a chalice. A typical service begins with the call to worship and words to welcome the audience from their individual lives into a shared community grounded in the common time and place of worship. The service includes a ritual of inviting a member, often a youth, to light the chalice. Afterward, children participate in the story of wisdom, often in the form of a children's book, and concluded with a hymn that marks their exit towards youth programming. From there, a short reading or reflection that forecasts the sermon is given by a member of the congregation followed by the sermon itself. Several other rituals take place such as time for sharing joys and concerns, hymns, meditation, offerings, announcements, and the benediction. Typically, there is also a concluding coffee hour in the lobby.

Often, where the service diverges from a Christian structure is to align with the broader spread of beliefs and needs of the congregation. The congregants are still made up of an implicit audience of similarly minded individuals, but this also stretches to include people with various levels of faith in a higher power, fluctuating relationships to faith due to religious trauma, or even a simultaneous affiliation with another religious tradition. The wide array of beliefs often leads to an eclectic collection of borrowed rituals, especially from paganism (Tomaleh 51).

The sermon's content is another aspect that appears to diverge while still using a similar persuasive rhetorical style. The sermon remains restricted in its topic and purpose, yet the Bible

is not present as a central authority. The occasional reference to biblical text is as a historical

document, literary piece, or opportunity to encourage biblical literacy. Ministers may choose to

instead discuss a variety of topics. Most themes fall within the categories of spiritual growth,

social justice, building community, and public occasions and holidays. Through my comparison

of Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons, I hope to shed further light on what unifies

Unitarian Universalist communities and the space they embody within the current American

religious and cultural environment.

Methodology

This thesis employs a contrastive analysis of scripted sermons while focusing on the

persuasive and rhetorical strategies employed by preachers. Compiling data involved two main

parts: preparing a corpus of sermons and interviewing the preacher.

The first step was to compile a corpus of sermons from congregations' and preachers'

websites which are publicly available to any reader. In order to make the analysis cohesive, I

chose to focus on contemporary American Protestant and Unitarian Universalist sermons from

the last decade. For the analysis of Christian sermons, I chose to differentiate between literal

interpretations of the Bible, classified as theologically conservative communities, and those with

non-literal interpretations which range from moderate to liberal congregations. The conservative

sermons were sourced from a Southern Baptist church while the liberal sermons' incorporate

wider denominational origins including Methodist and Lutheran congregations. Their

approximate membership size is comparable. Additionally, the sermons were collected from

various states in America but in the analysis, the regional differences were not explored.

One challenge in compiling this corpus was that many conservative preachers do not post

fully scripted sermons for their congregation instead enjoying a level of spontaneity on the

pulpit. As a result, while the liberal Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons are fully scripted before being delivered to an audience, the conservative Christian sermons are transcripts of the actual service. One weakness of this approach is that the liberal and Unitarian Universalist sermons appear more formal with less spontaneous conversational aspects. Generally, written sermons also do not fully capture the nuance of a performative genre that would be expanded by observing audio recordings.

As the secondary part of the research, I conducted interviews to provide a more holistic understanding of the sermons I had read. The interviews were held over the phone with the majority of the ministers and consisted of a set of questions regarding the beliefs and practices of their particular religious community, their own experiences and perspectives, and their process of writing and performing sermons. While the prepared questions guided the interview the interviews were flexible with no specific order or quota of questions.

Included as part of the interview were Rev. Randy Harling and Rev. Molly Housh Gordon. Unfortunately, I was unable to get in contact with Rev. Marxhausen from the Lutheran congregation or Rev. David Mosser, who has since retired, in enough time. Instead, I incorporated data from interviews with Rev. Christina Cataldo from the Winthrop United Church of Christ and Rev. Tommy Prud'homme, the new minister at SUMC, though their sermons were not used as part of my analysis. Overall, using interviews as a data collection method can provide rich and detailed and helps to contextualize the data collected directly from sermons. While the sermons themselves provide a window into the persuasive and rhetorical strategies used by preachers, interviews allowed for an exploration of the intentions and motivations behind these strategies. By asking about the process of sermon writing and performance, interviews can

provide a more nuanced understanding of how and why particular strategies are used in different religious contexts.

  Another possible methodological issue faced in this study was personal bias. Growing up Unitarian Universalist, I noticed a preference for the Unitarian Universalist sermons as well as those performed by the liberal congregations. While I did not seek to make judgments concerning *correct* or *the best* rhetorical strategies, my bias did still impact my reading of the sermons.

Chapter Two: Audience Design

Audience design refers to the process by which a speaker adapts their language use to suit the needs and expectations of their audience. When a preacher performs a sermon, one of the core components is defining an implicit audience for the message they wish to promote and recognizing to whom the sermon is not relevant. For a preacher to achieve their desired effect, choosing the message, content, and method of imparting knowledge is vital if it is to be understood and appreciated.

Preachers roughly define the in-group as those who share the same religious beliefs and values. This includes those who regularly attend religious services, participate in religious activities, and follow the teachings and traditions of the religion. Often, there are suggested guidelines and beliefs that are socially enforced by the collective. In certain cases, the primary audience is expanded to include an implicit audience of good faith listeners who may not currently belong to the in-group but are interested in learning more or potentially joining the in-group in the future.

On the other hand, aligning yourself with a closed community will always result in the simultaneous creation of an out-group. The preacher typically excludes people who do not share the same religious beliefs or values and emphasizes the need for them to convert or change their ways to become part of the in-group. It is important to note that while the exclusion of non-believers may be inherent in the sermon genre, it can also perpetuate a sense of religious superiority and reinforce social and cultural boundaries. This can create an "us vs. them" mentality that may even lead to hostility towards those outside of the in-group.

In pulpit oratory, interaction generally occurs between one speaker and many desired listeners. Due to the defined roles of speaker and listener in the sermon genre, audience

responses are limited compared to the context of a conversation between two individuals. Regardless, the audience coordinates with each other and responds as a collective through affirmations in the moment or following the performance. Their displays of approval for the sermon's content and support of the preacher manifest in collective participation in the community through attendance, participation in activities, or financial support. The degree of participation serves as an indicator not only of the level of engagement and agreement towards the sermon but also as a measure of the preacher's popularity among the congregation.

The performance of a sermon requires consideration as an audience-centered activity. In stipulating a shared set of values and beliefs, preachers engage in language designed specifically for their implicit audience as well as language that instructs their actions, directly or indirectly.

<u>Defining an In-Group and Out-Group</u>

The diverse dimensions of demographics found in a religious community are extensive. It is the preacher's responsibility to recognize and respond to that diversity, using information collected in their analysis of the audience to help formulate their speech content. Through their language preachers create social categories that can be labeled as the in-groups and out-groups.

A well-known experiment "blue eyes brown eyes" conducted in elementary classrooms offers a tangible example of *linguistic intergroup bias*. Linguistic intergroup bias refers to a phenomenon that indicates that the "ways people talk about in-groups and out-groups are subtly but significantly different" (Kinzler 185). The teacher, Jane Elliot's, goal was to introduce prejudice by assigning arbitrary values relative to the children's eye color. On different days, the preferred eye color shifted but the behavior of the privileged group remained steady. The children were quick to enforce a social order that even negatively impacted that day's less

privileged group's academic performance because of their own perceived inferiority (Kinzler 178).

While arbitrary, the use of speech to create categories that encompass groups of people makes those categories functionally real. As that social category is fleshed out, communities are stuck in feedback loops that cycle between generic language to describe groups and further believing that the group is culturally distinct. Even subtle and indirect language over long periods can continue to strengthen a unified identity or intergroup animosity (Kinzler 181). Simply using language that is "marking a social category that [people] have access to" instills cultural stereotypes and makes that language real. (Kinzler 183).

Conservative Christian communities tend to have a more exclusive view of their faith, believing that their interpretation of Christianity is the only correct one. At Summerville Baptist, Rev. Harling uses the label *Christ follower* to refer to his desired audience.

> "<u>Our job is to be in community preferably with other Christ followers</u>. Not because we all want to be indoctrinated, but because we all want to challenge each other and inspire each other to continue to grow in what? Following Christ" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

> "If you're a <u>Christ follower</u>, we have this, I'll call it a <u>supernatural ministry</u> and it is why your heart is still beating and why you are still breathing. <u>It is in fact who you are</u>, but also it is the <u>expression of what you do relating to who you are</u>. We call that being on mission for God" (5 June 2022, emphasis mine).

> "And for some reason, you have <u>called us into the arena that we call being a Christ follower</u>. And that means not just here today. That means for the next six days too, and <u>that means in every situation we find ourselves</u>" (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

For Christ followers, there is a clear demarcation between first excluding first people who belong outside of the community and second, an indistinct but widespread group of Christians who do not follow Christianity 'correctly.' While these groups are acknowledged it is made clear that they will not be accepted until they alter their own identity in order to join the collective:

"So, <u>if you're not a follower of Jesus, I just invite you to be in this moment with </u>us and to <u>maybe consider what it would look like for you if you chose to surrender to Jesus</u>, to have access like that to the Father in heaven, and to know a hope and a peace and a grace, a mercy that is beyond anything this world has to offer because Jesus is the hope of the world" (29 May 2022, emphasis mine).

"<u>I stopped identifying me and you as Christians a long time ago</u>. I'd rather say, <u>let's be a Christ follower</u>. Because if you're following, you're actively desiring to obey the teachings of Christ and the behavior of Christ" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

"<u>It's easy to identify as a Christian</u>…So I'm just acknowledging <u>if you are in that camp, I'm not trying to pick a fight with you</u>…All I'm asking you to do today is have a very open mind and heart to the whole expanse of the scripture, especially the whole teachings of Jesus Christ" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

Everything has a name that shapes how we think and how we assess and value its referent. Summerville Baptist Church self-identifies as Christ followers to differentiate themselves from Christians and non-Christians with opposing worldviews or biblical interpretations. The act of naming can have a significant impact on the perception of individuals and groups. When a group names themselves or others, they are essentially creating a label or category that can shape people's expectations. The deletion of an article or use of an indefinite article preceding the group name further contributes to the sense that the speaker is creating a group in a generic sense, as a unified entity rather than as a specific, individualized entity. For example, "it's easy to identify as a Christian," is a generic reference to all Christians in the same way "our job is to be in community preferably with other Christ followers, does not specify a reference to any particular Christ follower (15 May 2022)". As a self-reference, this instance of naming gives power to those performing the naming, themselves. The label they use for others, most notably, *Christians*, diminishes the community's perception of outsiders.

The act of naming creates a frame that enforces the expectations of the group. When a community chooses to identify itself in a certain way, they are essentially creating a set of values

and beliefs that are associated with that identity. In the case of Summerville Baptist Church, identifying as Christ followers may imply certain beliefs about the nature of Christ and the importance of following his teachings. The existence of a name adds to their responsibilities to their faith practice and creates a greater sense of commitment and responsibility to their community. When individuals identify themselves as part of a particular group, they are taking on a duty to uphold the values and beliefs associated with that identity. Identifying as Christ followers may create a sense of pride and connection to their faith and their community. It may also help to reinforce their commitment to their beliefs and their sense of responsibility to their fellow church members.

Sometimes, even when directly addressing their own community, preachers include moments in the sermon where the congregation is not part of the in-group. Typically, these are rhetorical moves where the sincerity and commitment of the audience are momentarily questioned.

> "You're sitting here and maybe you're like, "Well, my life doesn't look like I think God would've wanted it to look" (29 May 2022).

By placing the community on the outskirts of the community and God's expectations, the preacher reminds the congregation of their shared beliefs and values. In this example, the preacher is acknowledging the possibility that members of the congregation feel like they are not living up to God's expectations. The preacher then welcomes those people back into the in-group, reinforcing the idea that their presence in the church reflects their commitment to God.

This is a case of an interesting feature of linguistic intergroup bias. When talking about the positive actions of Christ followers, Rev. Harling is more likely to use concrete examples such as "actively desiring to obey the teachings of Christ and the behavior of Christ" (15 May

3033). On the other hand, When members of the in-group do not perform in a manner consistent with being in the in-group, language tends to be more generic such as suggesting "my life doesn't look like I think God would've wanted" (29 May 2022). As suggested by Kinzler, this does not hold true when those acting incorrectly are members of the out-group. In those cases, language is used to explicitly frame their language allowing the in-group to communicate to other members of their community what they heard (Kinzler 185).

Alternatively, the preacher excludes only part of the congregation in order to talk directly to the included group. This most typically occurred as a divide along the conservative gender expectation or to create an aside from visitors:

> "And I think who gets caught in the middle of that, so often too, is the father, the man of the home. And so guys, we especially want to lean into encouraging you, and at times actually challenge you…And that's our challenge as males…And by the way, we're having our first ever marriage retreat…Guys, we'll just pretend your wives are not listening right now…Now, I know guys, because I've been there too, you don't really want to go on a marriage retreat" (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

In this example, the preacher is addressing specifically the men in the congregation, encouraging and challenging them to become or remain leaders in the community of Christ followers. Additionally, by introducing the marriage retreat to the men, those presumed less likely to want to go, they enforce an expectation that they will be more active in registering. This exclusion can be effective in creating a sense of connection and solidarity among the male members of the congregation. In this example, it is highly unlikely that the women felt excluded despite the use of exclusionary language.

> "Now, if you're watching out there, or you're in the room, and you're not a Christ follower, I'm not talking to you. I'm not trying to throw advice to you that you don't believe in. We're super glad that you're here, and we are really, really encouraging you to

continue to kind of investigate things, <u>but I'm talking to people now who already are</u>" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).

In the second example, the preacher is excluding visitors to their community from their message, instead speaking directly to those who already identify as Christ followers. This can be an effective way to reinforce shared beliefs and values among the members of the congregation while also acknowledging the presence of non-members in the service. While exclusionary language can be effective in certain contexts, this is an example where the preacher must not inadvertently alienate visitors to the point that they will not return. By subtly excluding visitors, Rev. Harling seeks to create an environment where those placed in the out-group desire to join the larger community and feel welcomed.

In contrast, liberal Christian communities tend to have a more inclusive view of their faith, recognizing that there are different interpretations of Christianity and that people may practice their faith in different ways. At the more extreme end of the liberal spectrum, communities will describe their in-group in greater detail and only reference an out-group in select instances. Effectively, this still excludes people who do not fit the description of an in-group, but it is more subtle.

> "Most of the people in this room are relatively softhearted and helpful sorts of people. Many of us go out of our way often to help other people. We support good causes like the American Heart Association, the March of Dimes, and the American Cancer Society—and a host of other charitable causes" (10 July 2022).

> "The rule of God is evident in our lives when there is love and peace and joy and justice and forgiveness and healing. That doesn't happen in just one particular place or to one particular group of people. But it comes to us – to everyone" (20 June 2018).

Again, following the logic of the conservative Christian congregation's use of language, as the community acts in ways that support their message, it is communicated vividly to the congregation. Still, the desire to not explicitly exclude manifests as a stronger hesitancy in

naming an outsider and not giving their own community a specific name. At times easy

distinctions are made by using exclusionary language, typically in reference to historical and

secular figures or practitioners of other faiths. Even then, limited active language implies that

those outside their community are practicing faith incorrectly. The preacher's language stays

generic, grouping their positive or neutral acts to reinforce their collective identity.

> "Yet if we don't understand Judaism, we might see both these characters as selfish. They probably saw the man in the ditch and assumed he was dead. Any touching of a corpse would make a person ritually unclean according to Jewish religious practices…Would you fail to help someone in order to maintain ritual purity?" (27 June 2021, emphasis mine).

As the preacher characterizes their own congregation, explaining whom in the story of

the Good Samaritan they should identify with, he touches on the Jewish characters in the

scripture. In the entirety of the sermon, this is one of the few examples of the word *they* even

being used and is the only time it is not referring to historical Christian communities. Pronouns

in all of the sermons skew towards inclusive languages such as *we*, *us*, or *our*, talking directly to

the audience present.

This quote is also one of the few examples where non-Christians are criticized, something

that is probably easier to direct to people of a different faith who are unlikely to be present and

feel attacked. Asking if the Christian congregation would "fail to help someone in order to

maintain ritual purity" seems to aggressively and unnecessarily critique Jewish practices to

reinforce the idea that their Christian community would not identify with the Jewish community

in scripture. It also showcases how the perceived negative actions of an out-group are detailed.

More commonly, liberal Christians direct their attention to similarly excluding

conservative Christians:

> "And when you feel uncertain, do you begin to hear those accusatory voices from those who feel very certain about things – never had a doubt – always believed it – saying

something like this: 'If you don't feel certain about the resurrection of Jesus or at least as certain as you SHOULD or at least as certain about this as I do you better open up your BIBLE and reread the story' (4 April 2021).

The farther to the left the church is, the easier it is to criticize conservative communities' biblical inerrancy. This is because liberal Christians tend to interpret the Bible more metaphorically and contextually, recognizing that it was written by humans with cultural biases and historical limitations.

However, not all liberal Christians exclude conservative Christians. Especially in more moderate communities, preachers are in a challenging position of welcoming a wider range of religious and political identities. This can result in the least defined requirements to be in-group and even more minimal reference to an out-group. The only explicit out-group found in the Methodist sermons I included was related to those who left the community or faith:

> "I run into people who quit worship because they got mad at someone or at me. I recently encountered someone who stopped worshipping in our own church because of an incident in the 1980s, when Georgia Adamson was pastor. Is 34 years long enough to hold a grudge, or should we go ahead and milk it to its Golden Anniversary?" (4 Sept 2022, emphasis mine).

Moderate communities do not have as strong a sense of identity or boundary maintenance as more extreme groups. They may be more fluid and adaptable, allowing for a broader range of perspectives and practices within the community. This can make it more difficult to draw clear lines between insiders and outsiders and to enforce strict rules or norms. Even as the preacher teases those who left Christianity or their church out of anger and held grudges for 34 years, there is still an invitation to return.

Approaching Unitarian Universalism as an escalation of liberal Christian behaviors, communities typically have a unified political identity as a religion that strongly self-identifies as

a progressive and social-justice-oriented faith. Because of this, there is a very well-defined in-group that is based on following the principles of the denomination.

> "I am so thankful <u>for OUR faith tradition</u> which calls us to set aside shame in all of our natural humanness with all the needs and desires that come along with it" (19 April 2020, emphasis mine).

> "<u>Our Unitarian Universalist theology</u> of desire proclaims that we are created Good, and we are created wanting and longing for Good. <u>Our theology of desire</u> calls us to live out that which is deepest, and strongest, and richest within us. <u>It calls us</u> to fall in lust with the world, in love with the holy" (3 Feb. 2013, emphasis mine).

Also like the liberal Christians, the strict expectations of being part of the in-group allow for publicly excluding identities that don't align with their goals and values. Preachers still employ a similar resistance to an explicitly defined out-group though subtle resistance to undesirable identities, such as politically conservative members, is heavily implied through the causes that are promoted and the themes of the sermon.

> "I'm pretty sure <u>I'd get my ordination revoked if I compared Unitarian Universalism to Monsanto, Philip Morris, Exxon Mobil, or Smith and Wesson</u>. If you or a family member work at any of those, I understand you've got to keep a roof over your head and that it's possible to work for change from the inside. <u>A more favorable comparison might be Beyond Meat</u>, the company that makes delicious vegetarian fake meat that…has its eye on where the world is going in terms of the well-being of people and planet. <u>We could compare ourselves with longtime LGBT equality leader Home Depot</u>" (3 March 2017, emphasis mine).

> "I grew up Unitarian Universalist with no concept of the relevance of religious confession, at the communal or the individual level. Indeed, growing up in a religiously conservative town, <u>I saw some of the pitfalls of religious confession from my friends, mostly of the Catholic or Protestant variety</u>" (11 Jan. 2015, emphasis mine).

As a community that sees itself as liberal, non-creedal, and widely secular, it should be safe to assume that most Unitarian Universalists would categorize an out-group that includes conservative identities. When discussing people of other faiths there is a larger grey area as lots

of Unitarian Universalists have backgrounds and ties to other religions. It is not uncommon for a service to host people including, but not limited to, those who also practice Christianity, Judaism, Paganism, or Humanism in their own way. As a community that originates in Christianity, invites many people with religious trauma from Christianity, and practices in a country where Christian ideals are widespread, the most common communities to be critiqued are Protestant Christian.

Unlike the Christian communities, Unitarian Universalist congregations are more likely to frequently and explicitly state their wrongs as a collective while still identifying as part of the in-group.

> "I also want to caution those of us who are white folks against evaluating our anti-racism work by how many friends we have who are People of Color, or what percentage of our congregation is non-white" (7 Oct. 2018, emphasis mine).

> "Just a few years ago, here at Northwest, a dinner theater play by our Youth Group featured racist impersonations of different ethnic groups, an event that led to the resignation of the Music Director" (7 Oct. 2018, emphasis mine).

Of course, confessional moments are common in all of the Christian communities observed in this study, however, Unitarian Universalists' confession is not inherently religious or placed far enough into the past to remove direct culpability. Additionally, while the Christian preachers may include explicit confessions, they are not commonly representative of the collective.

> "I want to offer a couple of important caveats before delving further in here. The first is that I acknowledge that in this sermon, I will center whiteness more than one should while doing good anti-racism work. I am going to share with you my personal experiences with racial bias in our movement, and that will inherently come from my perspective as a white person. In organizing for racial justice, it is the experiences and needs of people of color that should be centered" (7 Oct. 2018, emphasis mine).

At times, these moments of self-reflection and critique occur by placing the preacher and community as part of the problem. This is different from being part of the out-group but is reflective of recognizing their place on the outside of anti-racism work. Compared to the other congregations, Unitarian Universalists tend to be more descriptive when it comes to defining negative behaviors of their in-group that violate the principles. In moments where Rev. Rodgers acknowledges his whiteness and how it is centered in his sermon asks the congregation's permission to remain a proactive member of the ingroup. While welcoming any involvement in their social activism campaigns, Unitarian Universalists encourage their members to participate in the world enthusiastically but cautiously.

Generally, in-groups are built on the foundational values and goals that construct a religious community of like-minded individuals. Preachers seek to verbally reward the in-group for their active participation and attendance by building a collective identity or even through a frame of naming. However, the existence of an in-group requires an out-group which is approached differently by the congregations. More moderate communities are likely to resist verbally diminishing outsiders or relaying what qualities may exclude people. On the other hand, communities that don't take the middle path, namely the conservative and liberal Christians as well as Unitarian Universalists, have a stronger perception of their out-groups and are more likely to use generic language that critiques them as a collective.

Speech Acts

When performing from the pulpit, preachers address their audience with intention, purpose, and a desired effect. This appertains to a concept known *speech acts*, the use of language that goes beyond sharing information and that can be classified as an action. Speech acts are important because they extend the literal meaning of the words being used to convey

social and interpersonal meanings. For example, if someone says " Our offering this morning and this month will go to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism (7 Oct. 2018)" they are not simply communicating information about future plans but are also making a commitment to fulfill those plans reliably. The contemporary use of the term can be traced to J.L. Austin's 1955 lecture series, published as *How to Do Things With Words* (1962), but has since been widely adopted and expanded throughout the fields of philosophy and linguistics and by other disciplines, namely psychology, literary theory, gender construction, and feminist thought among others (Searle 1969, Searle 1975, Derrida 1982, Felman 1983, Butler 1990, Gorman 1999, Miller 2001).

John Searle is a prominent philosopher of language and student of Austin who made significant contributions to the study of speech acts. He argued that when we use language, we are not only expressing beliefs or making statements about the world but also performing actions that have social and interpersonal consequences. According to Searle, "talking is performing according to rules" (Searle 1969, 22). Searle's theory of speech acts distinguishes between three components of any communicative act: the propositional content, the illocutionary force, and the perlocutionary effect. The propositional content is the literal meaning of the words being used, while the illocutionary force is the intended function or effect of the speech act, such as making a promise or giving an order. The perlocutionary effect is the actual effect the speech act has on the listener or audience. Understanding the illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect of a speech act requires knowledge of the social and cultural context gained through experience (Searle 1969).

Searle 1975 also identified five main types of illocutionary acts: directives for orders, requests, or advice (355); assertives for making claims or providing information (354); commissives to commit the speaker to future action, such as promises (365); expressives

communicating feelings or attitudes (365); and finally, declarations that change the world by being uttered, such as "I now pronounce you man and wife" (358). Every speech act contains an illocutionary force and may contain more than one. Understanding the different types of speech acts and their functions can help us to better understand how language is used to achieve various social and interpersonal goals.

Sermons as a genre can be approached as a culmination of these acts, communicated both directly and indirectly. Direct speech acts are straightforward and explicit in their illocutionary force, meaning that the speaker's intended meaning is directly conveyed by the words they use. For example, the sentence "Pass me the salt" is a direct directive speech act, as it explicitly conveys the speaker's request for the listener to pass them the salt (Searle 1975, 60). Indirect speech acts, on the other hand, are more complex and rely on the listener's ability to infer the speaker's intended meaning from context and social cues. For example, the sentence "Can you pass the salt?" can function as an indirect directive speech act, in which the speaker is actually requesting the listener to pass the salt and not questioning their ability to do so (Searle 1975, 73).

When it comes to audience design, speakers may use direct or indirect speech acts depending on the social and cultural expectations of their audience. For Christian communities, there are two audiences that affect how an utterance is communicated. While the audience of the sermon is primarily the congregation, there are also moments where the audience is actually a supernatural power in both conservative and liberal sermons, respectively:

> "Lord, would you just cover the room, and cover all the viewing points in this community or even 3, 4, 5 states away. We acknowledge that we need you. We acknowledge our families need you. Our church family needs you. So please come, Holy Spirit" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).

> "The people you came to save? They struggle, Jesus. They really do. And they have to walk through this wilderness – often alone. And deal with things they don't understand

— things that are often MORE than they can handle. These people out here in this wilderness — they are YOUR people. And they don't need someone to teach them how to do it better. They need hope. They need faith. They need comfort and encouragement. They need to be free. And they need to remember who they are. They need you" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).

While this interaction with the supernatural mostly occurs in moments of prayer or liturgy, both can be recognized as the preacher asking for something from a higher power. The language used in these moments often reflects the communal nature of Christian worship, where believers gather to share in their faith and seek guidance and comfort from a higher power. In the conservative Christian instance, the speaker uses direct speech acts to address God and communicate with the congregation simultaneously. Rather than an indicative statement, the imperative is used, though structured more like a request than a demand, asking if God "would you just cover the room" and "please come". Simultaneously, the conservative preacher has moments of indirect appeals where he asserts "we acknowledge that we need you" which performs a supportive role in the prayer.

While the function of the liberal Christian example remains the same, asking for Jesus's presence in the congregation's life, the language is not as direct. Essentially, the preacher establishes that Jesus's people struggle and require hope and faith through Jesus's guidance without directly requesting or demanding aid. The closest utterance that implies the ask is "they need you," which assumes the ability of Jesus to infer their intention.

Direct and indirect appeals continue as the audience shifts to the congregation. Directives in the form of requests and demands are illocutionary acts performed by preachers. Generally, the conservative sermons included more direct demands than the liberal sermons :

"So grab your Bible and turn the New Testament" (5 May 2022, emphasis mine).

"I'm going to challenge you to do one more thing for this invitation time. Personally, start with what is in me that doesn't need to be in me (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

"Just submit your life to Christ, flat out, no questions, no conditions, no holds barred. Just give him what he wants, which is everything about you. He will give it back to you, transformed and powerful" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).

Demands are a normal aspect of the conservative sermons, though they noticeably are often very achievable, such as telling the congregation to grab their Bible. The same can be said of the challenge to self-reflect. The biggest demand made by the preacher was for his audience to "submit your life to Christ" but it is not hard to assume that his audience believes in the value and truth in this statement.

Like the conservative sermons, Unitarian Universalists sometimes make demands of their congregation as long as they are minor, appear relevant, and align with the principles of the community.

"Think about your ticket and cast your eyes toward the horizon, and beyond. May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it so" (6 January 2019).

While these more minor demands also exist in the liberal sermons, more often, bigger demands are not given through the preacher:

"So Jesus parable today sounds a warning of sorts for his people waiting on his promises: Be prepared. Don't give up hope. Expect a delay" (8 Nov. 2018).

In this example, the preacher uses Jesus as a mouthpiece when giving demands rather than the preacher themselves. This can also be done through other tools such as scripture or even God. By moving responsibility to a higher authority, the preacher is able to avoid directly confronting their audience and coming off as authoritative.

Instead of direct language, the preachers preferred to make requests to frame demands in a polite manner. One of the more obvious applications of requests is when it comes to asking the

congregation for a financial contribution. While none of the liberal sermons included in this study made references to offerings within their publicly available sermons, both the conservative Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons, respectively, did:

> "That's a good number but compared to where we were last year with that number, we are a little behind. So my encouragement is if you can see fit, and if you can, above and beyond your tithes and offerings, just make out a little separate gift to go to the Unified Mission Fund" (5 June 2022).

> "One way we demonstrate our commitment to this work is financially. Our offering this morning and this month will go to Black Lives of Unitarian Universalism…Our UUA has made a commitment of over five million dollars to Black Lives of UU, and it is up to all of us to make sure we do not repeat the mistakes of the past. Supporting courageous and liberatory organizations is how we build up the structures in our movement needed for becoming beloved community" (7 Oct. 2018).

By combining the illocutionary force of assertives and expressives, which assert the need for financial support and express gratitude for contributions, the preachers can frame their demands in a more polite and persuasive manner for their audience to hear. This can be an effective strategy to encourage support and engagement from the congregation, while also demonstrating respect and appreciation for their contribution.

Another indirect way to make requests are by using interrogatives. Interrogatives are versatile forms of language that primarily function as either a directive or an assertive, depending on the context and the speaker's intention:

> "When you pray, are you more interested in the results? Are you more interested in God changing your heart? I think if we're a result oriented only, and there's nothing wrong with that, but if that's our only agenda for prayer, we're going to miss out" (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

In this conservative Christian example, the question "When you pray, are you more interested in the results?" by itself is an interrogative speech act, which seeks information from

the listener about their motivations for prayer. However, the question is followed by a critique of an approach that focuses solely on results. Instead, this quote could be reclassified as an indirect directive speech act. In this case, the speaker is not giving a direct command, but they are suggesting that the listener should consider a different approach to prayer that is not solely focused on achieving specific results. The critique could be seen as an implicit request for the listener to reflect on their motivations and goals for prayer and consider a more holistic approach.

Interrogatives can also be used to make a statement or assert a particular point of view, such as in the case of some rhetorical questions. For example, the question posed by the conservative Christian preacher:

"Why does he wait until midnight? That's a little bit unprepared. <u>Don't you think?"</u> (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

The context of this quote refers to a man in a parable who asks Jesus for bread late in the night. The preacher wrestles with the question of if he was unprepared since it was late into the night. Instead of a directive, the final question, "don't you think?" is an assertion that the speaker, and by extension the congregation, believes it is true that he was unprepared.

Assertives are not always in the form of a question and are often statements of facts or assumptions about the audience. Direct assertives in sermons refer to messages that are communicated in a straightforward and explicit manner. These messages often use clear and direct language to express an idea or demand. For example, a direct assertive in a Unitarian Universalist sermon might be a statement like:

"There are issues of systemic injustice in our movement, and we need to take them seriously" (7 Oct. 2018).

Direct speech acts are generally uncommon because they increase the distance between the speaker and the audience, establishing a clear marker of power differential. The direct aspect of this assertive is establishing the idea that there is systemic injustice and it is a serious problem. The indirect demand is the call to action.

Indirect assertives, on the other hand, refer to messages that are communicated in a more subtle or indirect manner. Like rhetorical questions, these messages often rely on suggestion, implication, or metaphor to convey an idea or demand. An indirect assertive in a sermon might be a story or parable that illustrates the importance of forgiveness without explicitly stating it. It may also appear through making statements about a topic that assumes a mutual audience identity. In one conservative sermon:

> "67% of pre-born babies who have been diagnosed with down syndrome never are born, they're aborted, 67%. Now in Europe, it's 90-something percent. [Satan] is the father of lies and he's also a murderer, coldblooded murderer" (15 May 2022).

It is implied by this statement that the audience is pro-life. While it is not directly stated, it is fairly obvious as the preacher asserts that abortion is the work of Satan. In doing so, the preacher makes an assumption about his audience and uses it to create indirect illocutionary acts that will be understood. Indirect statements operate on a level that assumes an in-group identity. Both direct and indirect moments can be useful in sermons, depending on the context and audience. To be most effective, preachers must take the time to understand the needs and values of their congregations and tailor their messages accordingly.

Assertives are speech acts that are intended to convey information that is believed to be true. The illocutionary force of an assertive is to make a claim about the world and to assert its truthfulness. The listener is expected to evaluate the truth of the assertion based on their own beliefs and experiences. When someone makes a declaration, on the other hand, they are

asserting something to be true or valid. The illocutionary force of a declaration is not merely to assert the truth of a statement, but to bring about a new reality or situation. The listener is expected to recognize and accept the new state of affairs that has been brought about by the declaration. Christian examples may be directions such as "let's pray" or "let's stand up and let's worship together". The Unitarian Universalist sermons often end with the statement "May it be so, and may we be the ones to make it so".

Another form of declarations are statements that is intended to motivate the listener into action used in Unitarian Universalist and liberal Christian sermons, respectively:

> "We <u>must</u> stay focused on the goals of equity and justice during this pandemic" (31 May 2020, emphasis mine).

> "But here's what we <u>must</u> never forget. . .we can rely on God's love for us" (1 March 2020, emphasis mine).

Words like *must* are indicative of declarations, communicating to the audience that it is true they should be compelled to do something. Unitarian Universalists "*must* stay focused on the goals of equity and justice" while liberal Christians "*must* never forget" God's love. These are directly communicated to the audience so that they align their behavior with the expectations of the community. Often, direct declarations are uttered in contexts that feel urgent enough to necessitate a higher degree of strength.

The purpose of expressives as an illocutionary act in sermons is to express the preacher's emotions, attitudes, and feelings towards a particular topic or issue. On some level, the genre of a sermon is an expressive style of speech. In a sermon context, preachers may use expressives to convey their emotional connection to a particular scripture, story, or message, to express their gratitude towards the congregation, or to share their personal struggles and challenges. Expressives can be a powerful tool for establishing a rapport with the congregation, by

demonstrating the preacher's authenticity, vulnerability, and empathy to their audience. Additionally, expressives can be used to create a sense of shared emotional experience with the congregation. By expressing their emotions openly and honestly, the preacher can create a sense of unity and solidarity with their audience and can inspire a collective sense of passion and commitment towards their faith and values.

Finally, commissives are illocutionary acts in sermons that commit the preacher to a future course of action by making promises, vows, or pledges. In a sermon's context, preachers may use commissives to express their commitment, to make a promise to their congregation to act in a certain way, to express their intention to do something in the future, and in select Christian contexts, to articulate God's promises.

A common Christian example may be a familiar statement such as "I will pray for you." For people who share the religious beliefs of the speaker, the statement is a supportive and compassionate gesture that can offer a sense of comfort, assurance, and connection with the divine. It can also signal that the speaker is willing to offer support through prayer, which can be seen as a powerful and meaningful act of kindness.

Another is that "God's word promises that Jesus himself IS our peace" (20 June 2021) which was a statement made in a liberal Christian congregation. Commissives can be used to establish a sense of trust and accountability between the preacher, God, and the congregation. By making promises or pledges, the preacher is characterizing themselves, or even God, as a trustworthy and reliable leader and is creating a sense of mutual responsibility and commitment with the congregation. In order to make the correct promises, preachers must cater to the expectations of their congregation.

Preachers have specific goals in mind when delivering a sermon, and one of those goals is to achieve the desired perlocutionary effect. The perlocutionary effect refers to the impact that a communication has on the listener, including any emotional or behavioral response that it may generate. To achieve the desired perlocutionary effect, preachers must shape their communicative strategies around their community and audience. This means considering how their language is interpreted directly and indirectly. Ultimately, the goal is to deliver a message that resonates with the audience and has the desired impact, whether that is to inspire, educate, or persuade.

Chapter Conclusion

Audience design is a crucial aspect of effective communication that cannot be ignored. Understanding one's audience and tailoring the message to their needs, expectations, and preferences can greatly enhance the impact of communication. In today's world, where people have access to an overwhelming amount of information and are bombarded with messages from various sources, thoughtful communication is more important than ever. If a message is not crafted with the in-group in mind, it is likely to be overlooked or ignored.

Effective audience design requires a deep understanding of the audience, including their demographics, values, beliefs, and interests, and an ability to extend beyond differences to build a unanimous group identity. The language used to describe the community may include specific naming, generic language to create a common congregant identity, or placing them in opposition to an out-group. Additionally, while praise for the in-group may include specific moments of positive behavior, the language used to describe their mistakes is vague or placed in the past to avoid blame. This pattern is then reversed for an out-group, where specific critiques are welcomed to place their own community as better in some way.

A skilled communicator should also be able to anticipate the audience's reactions and adjust the message accordingly. The effect of speech acts extends a preacher's language to affect the world around them, creating an intentional impact on the audience's life. Through indirect and direct language, preachers shape their illocutionary force to create the correct perlocutionary response from the audience.

Chapter Three: The Creation of a Single Sacred Space

In the vast majority of Christian services, a biblical text serves as the core and backbone of a preacher's desired message. The sermon communicates its message, ideally through explaining, interpreting, and applying biblical concepts. Regardless of the argument being made, preachers are responsible for carefully selecting and understanding passages that make up a comprehensive thematic unit. The passages selected must be relevant and meaningful to the audience and communicated in a way that is clear and perceived as faithful to the overall message of the Bible. When facing their congregation in the pulpit, preachers also assume the critical role of a bridge between scripture, God, and the congregation. They are responsible for aiding the listeners to understand and connect with the chosen passage. This involves offering guidance and advice on how to live according to God's principles, using examples from their own life or world events to illustrate relevance, and fostering a sense of community for people to meaningfully engage in discussion of faith.

According to Thomas Long, Bandy Professor Emeritus of Preaching at Candler School of Theology, sermons "characteristically result from the interaction of a biblical text and the social and cultural contexts in which the sermon is created and into which it is spoken" (Long 169). Acting as a bridge between the two voices, namely the text and the present, preachers have a responsibility to recognize and treat scripture as a living document, building a sermon that resembles a conversation. While a sermon "may seem like monologues, [the] two voices are in fact speaking back and forth, calling and responding, interrogating and being interrogated" (Long 171). It is through two-person dialogue that preachers establish a sacred space that mediates between two time periods millennia apart. In addition, treating scripture as a living document means viewing it as a source of ongoing guidance and inspiration, rather than as a static set of

rules or principles or out of purely historical interest. In this regard, a biblical passage is capable of providing multiple different messages and a preacher's choice in insight reflects the shift in chosen guidance according to the needs of the audience.

As a creedless faith, Unitarian Universalism represents a major departure from an origin-centric approach. With no one scripture, Unitarian Universalists are unable to claim a unified conceptualization of which sources are considered sacred. Sources can be defined as anything that sparks wisdom, from a religious text, poem, podcast, or scientific study. Even as scripture is used as a source, it is not considered as an origin or fundamentally different from a reference to contemporary media. The variety of sources distributes the weight of understanding how the world works, other faith traditions, and the rational and scientific. They require uncertainty, and not just that, but individual explorations of what parts of a tradition are impactful, regardless of belief in specific deities or traditions. It is also this distinction that makes Unitarian Universalism hard to define while identities are in flux as congregants learn and grow. While less concerned with bridging a gap between the Bible specifically and today, there is still similar hermeneutics that calls for the creation of the sacred by bridging gaps between today and a larger canon of sources.

As faiths appeal to their implied community through shared values, they also must define the sacred space in which their traditions exist. In the sourced sermons, preachers exercised a defined temporal and special dimension to negotiate what are sacred, non-scriptural references to enhance their message, and a contemporary crisis to present listeners with the skills to recognize the modern relevancy of their religious faith. Ultimately, in Christian communities, regardless of how literally they interpret the Bible, this rhetorical device aims to facilitate dialogue between God's words and the congregation. Similar to Christian sermons, the use of Unitarian

Universalist sources should be recognized as a tool for teaching community values and characterizing the sacred even if there lacks a return to a scriptural origin.

Merging Temporal and Spatial Dimension

A sermon's content and language depend on values based on the speaker's orientation in time and space as well as their social and cultural context. However, preaching a Christian sermon goes beyond individual expressions of religious belief. Long characterizes Christian preaching as "a form of intentional double-speech in that it attempts to broker a two-voiced encounter between an ancient text of Scripture and the contemporary listener context" (Long 170). One role, if not the most important, that preachers play is to facilitate the dialogue between the two voices and subsequently provide dynamic linguistic equivalents that are in a form of accessible speech to their audience. This rhetorical technique employed by preachers is the creation of a single sacred space that breaks the churchgoer's perception of the temporal and spatial separation.

According to Rudolf Otto, the definition of the sacred, and with it, the religious, is placed in opposition to the profane and represents a *sui generis* category. In both Christian and Unitarian Universalist traditions, the concept of the sacred generally refers to that which is holy, divine, or worthy of reverence and respect. However, there are some differences in how each tradition conceptualizes the sacred. In Christianity, the sacred is often associated with the figure of God and the teachings and scriptures of the Bible. Christian theology emphasizes the sacredness of human life and the belief that all people are created in the image of God. In Unitarian Universalism, the concept of the sacred is more broadly defined and encompasses different religious and spiritual traditions. Unitarian Universalists believe that there are many

paths to truth and meaning and that the sacred can be found in diverse sources, such as nature, music, art, and human relationships.

Both faiths explore the sacred as something that is beyond the limits of human understanding and transcendent of the material world. And yet, this concept of the sacred that exists outside of time is frequently associated with both spatial and temporal dimensions. There is tension between timeless and universal sacred and particular locations and times, both the there and then and the here and now. In fact, Christianity hinges on the belief that the message of the gospel, the central message of their faith, is timeless and relevant to people of all times and places.

Within the spatial frame, the sacred is associated with specific locations where the divine is present or where spiritual experiences are more likely to occur. For the modern practice of Christianity, sacred space is primarily in the physical space of a church and what is represents. The spaces in Unitarian Universalist congregations often mimic their Protestant roots by maintaining many of the special features of a Christian church. Not only does a church building offer a space for worship, but it also serves as a symbol of community and stability for people to develop their faith. The architecture, orientation, decoration, and layout of the building create a sense of separation from the secular world and emphasize the importance of the sacred. When entering a church, there is often a sense of expectation and reverence that can lead to a change in behavior. People tend to act differently in church than in other spaces, speaking in hushed tones and being more respectful of the space. Most religious buildings and communities also enjoy a tax-exception status with the expectation that they contribute back to their communities. This legal status also grants churches certain protections and privileges, such as the ability to perform marriages and other religious ceremonies.

Another defining feature of sacred spaces is their use of iconography or visual symbols that communicate religious beliefs. Some of these symbols also mark the spatial frame as separate from the profane world through their use in rituals and ceremonies performed by the community. Through their visibility, worship spaces make the past physically present and sacred. These symbols, such as Christian crosses, sacred objects and artifacts, stained-glass windows, or the Unitarian Universalist chalice serve as a reminder of the presence of the divine and a visual representation of the stories and teachings of the faith. The use of iconography can also help to create a sense of community among believers who share common beliefs and traditions.

The weekly gathering of bodies in a church is a key aspect of the spatial frame. This gathering serves as a time for believers to come together, share their experiences, and strengthen their faith. The arrangement of bodies, with congregants sitting or standing in specific locations, is often structured to create a sense of order and hierarchy, with the clergy and other leaders occupying prominent positions. The preacher is often located centrally on a pulpit or stage that places them in a position of authority. During a Christian service, the preacher joins the congregation facing God while in a sermon, the preacher, alongside God, faces the congregation. Additionally, in Christian communities, the preacher is typically found directly beneath a cross or the crucifix providing a visual connection to their mediation between God and the church. A Unitarian Universalist preacher is generally found next to or behind a central chalice lit by a candle.

In terms of time, the concept of the sacred transcends the boundaries of the present as it connects to both the past and future. In the present, the Christian and Unitarian Universalist calendars structure a modern practitioner's year of worship. Within these calendars, specific days occupy a level of sacredness. For Christians, Sundays are designated as the Lord's Day with a

church's specific schedule prescribed as the time for worship. This is also mimicked by Unitarian Universalist congregations. Within the attendee's Sunday, only part of that day is reserved for the service, including the sermon and liturgy. Afterward, social time, coffee hours, organized meetings, and even post-church rituals may take place, such as brunch.

Also included in the Christian calendar are holidays such as Advent, Christmas, Lent, Holy Week, Easter, and Pentecost that structure the year. While the "big" holidays in Unitarian Universalist congregations are primarily Christmas and Easter they also recognize holidays from other traditions, secular origins, and their own including the Flower Communion and Water Communion. For Christians, these times celebrate the sacred past, particularly the events and traditions recorded in scripture. Yet, these celebrations are not simply reflections of the past, they are reenactments that align with the present and shape the reality and future for the modern practitioner of Christianity. Although Jesus was not born and killed in the same year, the ritual calendar is a compressed biography that relates to key moments in his life. Thus, the calendar serves to correlate his life with the life of the audience members. For liberal and conservative Christians these periods of communal worship reflect past, present, and future through a performance of the scripture. For Unitarian Universalists, the big holidays are the main points of biography which perform a similar, although minimized, version of the Christian calendar.

Throughout a sermon, preachers bring the voice of the Bible to the listeners, interpreting and explaining its teachings and applying them to contemporary life. The sermon helps to create a dynamic and interactive encounter between the Bible and the congregation, fostering growth and understanding for both. While any old text has the potential to experience a merger between past and present when brought to a contemporary context, it plays an especially strong role when considering the Bible. For example, Plato is still relevant, but the Bible *must* be relevant with

soteriology at stake. As a living document, the performance of a sermon "brings to life" the

biblical language and the interactions with modern issues and circumstances absent from its

original conception (Long 177). The sermon's retelling and redescription of ancient text projects

a message that carries over to future generations and shapes how Christianity is perceived. The

congregation, in turn, brings their own experiences, questions, and insights to the sermon,

engaging with the message and considering how they might personally relate. In this way,

sermons can serve as a bridge between the Bible and the congregation, helping people

understand and connect with the Bible's teachings and apply them to their own lives.

The merger of past and present can manifest in several different ways, yet consistently,

the listener is imagined to "return" to the sacred biblical times (Abdulameer 322). In one liberal

sermon, the minister imagines how their own congregation would react in the same situation as

some of the first disciples in Acts 1:15-26:

> "The 120 followers of Jesus were all smooshed together in one space when, all of the
> sudden, a terrible wind kicked up. It is wise for us to remember that the wind described
> here probably wasn't all that fun. If we were in a room, say, like this sanctuary, and a
> forceful, violent wind suddenly blew open our doors, rattled these stained-glass windows,
> made our papers fly everywhere, and knocked over the zoom camera, we'd more likely
> be frightened than amused. These disciples, all 120 of them, are probably more frightened
> than amused by what was happening" (4 June 2022, emphasis mine).

Beginning with the narrative provided by scripture, the minister dictates how the 120

followers experienced an encounter with the divine. Translated to modern-day, their experiences

could surmount to the congregations own doors blowing open or their zoom camera falling

down. The inclusion of the zoom camera, a distinctly modern addition to a service, is especially

telling of the temporal location. Equally, the emotional state of the disciples and contemporary

Christians, "more frightened than amused," are paralleled in the sermon. The reverend's focus on

the emotional states of the disciples highlights the power of biblical narratives to evoke emotions

in listeners. By assuming the experiences of past believers, contemporary Christians can find connection and meaning in their faith. This emotional resonance is a crucial aspect of religious discourse and can shape the way people understand and practice their faith.

Alternatively, the past is a part of the present to alter the churchgoer's experience. In one conservative sermon:

> "Angels are sent to communicate with and to minister to those who are Christ followers, or those who are going to become Christ followers (1 February 2015)."

Rev. Harling suggests that angels are still present and active in the lives of the congregation of Christ followers, communicating with them and ministering to them. This suggests that the past is not a distant memory but rather an ongoing reality that is intertwined with the present. Notably, the sermon aims to reinforce the belief that the spiritual world is not a separate realm but rather a part of everyday life. The idea that angels are still present and active in the lives of Christ followers suggests that the preacher is not bridging a distance, he is assuming there is no difference and communicating that to his audience.

In a liberal sermon, the minister has to actively collapses the distance by leading the historical Jesus to the present by stating:

> "Jesus <u>went</u> into the wilderness – he <u>was</u> led there — because this is where he would <u>find us</u>" (1 March 2020, emphasis mine).

The preacher's words are an explicit hinge statement of then and now. As Jesus, in the past tense, was in the wilderness his intention, also in the past, was to lead him to "where he would find us" in the present. This statement by the minister suggests that the historical Jesus is not just a distant figure from the past but is relevant to contemporary experiences and can be used to shape present-day beliefs and practices. They also imply that Jesus is not just an abstract

figure but through the minister can be personally led in the present lives of believers. This idea of

a personal relationship with Jesus is central to many Christian traditions and is often seen as a

source of comfort and guidance. The invocation of the wilderness is also relevant to this hinge.

Described as a space of transformation, both for Jesus in the past and for contemporary

individuals in the present, the preacher suggests that the wilderness can be a place where

individuals can confront their own inner struggles and find deeper meaning and purpose in their

lives.

In the same sermon, the past and present are simply contrasted with each other,

collapsing the distance without specifically defining a setting for the two parties to meet:

> "[Jesus] did it for: A blind man waiting for him in Jericho who had resorted to begging;
> A woman in Capernaum struggling with an illness for 12 years who had given up and
> was ready to grab onto anything; A leper in Jerusalem who was ostracized from his
> community and from his family crying out for mercy; A man in Galilee lost in grief when
> his daughter died; A man crucified next to him on Golgotha racked with guilt and regret
> and asking for someone to remember him
> He did it for: the guy who would be facing temptations too big to resist; the mom who
> spent herself on being a mom and doesn't know what her purpose is; the high school
> student wrestling with who he is; the college graduate trying to figure out what her next
> step will be; the 30-year-old cancer patient whose options are gone; the 93-year-old
> woman feeling her last days slip away" (1 March 2020).

These two paired groups, one biblical and the other modern, face suffering. However, the

biblical group encounters physical suffering – blindness, illness, leprosy, and death – that Jesus

canonically cures with supernatural means. The imaginary contemporary figures, excluding the

cancer patient and the elderly woman, are not contending with physical suffering. They are

forced to confront emotional challenges – temptations, a lack of purpose, and uncertainty

following graduation. Also, regardless of the physicality of any of their personal struggles, Jesus

is not expected to be a cure. Actual miracles happened in the past, yet the liberal Christian

preacher stops short of saying that it is possible for them to happen now. This marks a limit to the temporal collapse between the past and the present. Even if these are hypothetical people, members of the congregation are expected to see themselves on the list ranging from youth to elders. Even with Jesus's presence in the congregation's life, their eventual suffering is inevitable, but the message promoted by the sermon is that Jesus can offer comfort and guidance, a psychological "miracle," even if incomparable to biblical miracles. In a modern context, the sermon itself is essentially a continuation of the comfort, bringing Jesus's message to the congregation.

As the preacher places the two lists parallel to one another the gap between them closes and they are brought together. This occurs even without the transportation of one temporal and spatial dimension to another. Since both groups' experiences still exist in their own time, this quote may be better explained as the identification of timeless themes in the Bible and showing how they are relevant to modern-day challenges. The preacher uses the current crises faced by the congregation and attempts to use biblical examples to highlight solutions, namely the closeness to Jesus experienced by attending Church regularly.

This is closer to a Unitarian Universalist approach where a source and the actual experiences of a congregation are placed side by side. Like pulling a pop culture reference into a sermon, a source, regardless of how far in the past is always contextualized because it is not as familiar as a religion's own scripture. Sometimes it is scripture such as this Unitarian Universalist sermon:

> "What you've just heard is a passage from the Song of Songs, also called the Song of Solomon – in the Hebrew Bible. It's a glorious love song, beautiful and sensual and earthy, which the ancient Jews read as a love story between humans and God, which contemporary scholars read as an erotic encounter between two people, and which I'd like to read as both, because how can we separate our experience of the holy from our

experience of one another and this world: this world that caresses our skin through wind and water and earth and other skin?" (3 Feb. 2013, emphasis mine).

Rev. Housh Gordon asks the question "how can we separate our experience of the holy from our experience of one another and this world?" For Unitarian Universalists, the sacred is everywhere and there is no clear distinction between what is sacred and what is profane. The distance between scripture and now is the same as the distance between a podcast a preacher listened to and its inclusion in their sermon. Both are relevant and sacred, an approach that could be defined as an extremely dispersed sacramentality. Rev. Housh Gordon continues by asking the congregation about their first crush and then how that feeling of adoration teaches us "to fall in lust with the world, in love with the holy" (3 Feb. 2013). The scripture is a teacher calling on the congregation to recognize the value in what it has to say but it lacks the voice of God who is explicitly experienced by its Christian audience. *Holy* is simply a marker of the sacredness of the text, lacking the authority of a Christian approach to the Bible.

So far, I have primarily addressed sermons in isolation. While an individual sermon and message exist at a particular moment and the audience experiences a new sermon every week, a preacher's collective sermons build a nonlinear narrative defined as the theology of the congregation. Over time, a preacher's sermons can shape the theological landscape of a congregation, influencing how members understand and interpret religious teachings and guiding their spiritual development.

Conservative sermons, more so than their liberal and Unitarian Universalist counterpart, apply significant pressure toward defining the sermon's position within the church's narrative as a whole or its position in the calendar. I also observed the majority of their weekly services are structured around a series, which consists of a set of sermons with an overarching theme, or they

work chronologically through a set of stories in the Bible. This calendar is explicitly expressed to the congregation periodically throughout the sermon:

> "Well, <u>we continue on with the series</u>. The series title is *Seriously*, because in our day, in our culture today, there's a lot of skepticism, a lot of cynicism in a lot of areas"(8 May 2022, emphasis mine).
> "And <u>the one we'll talk about next week</u> will get what he's coming" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).
> "And then there's the day coming and <u>that's what next week is about</u>" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

Defining the sermon temporally serves the purpose of establishing the church as an objective reference point in time for the congregants. The church then becomes intertwined with the churchgoers' routines and contributes to the development of weekly patterns, like donations that churches rely on to sustain themselves. Unfortunately, this temporal emphasis also shifts the pressure of understanding the context of a sermon onto the congregants as the in-group. Instead of the preacher, the burden of feeling included in the community and continuing the work of the church relies on the listeners' weekly attendance and participation.

This is not a feature exclusive to conservative communities. Both the liberal Christians and Unitarian Universalists congregations use temporal markers, however, with less frequency and with more contextual features. The liberal Christian and Unitarian Universalist examples, respectively, include:

> "Our Gospel today takes place at the beginning of Jesus' ministry which may seem a bit <u>out of place today this far into the church year</u>. Our Epiphany season began with Jesus' baptism — his first public appearance as an adult. The past couple months we have focused on events during Jesus' ministry in Galilee as recorded in the Gospels. So <u>it may seem like a step backwards in the chronology</u> to hear about Jesus' 40 days in the desert. This event actually took place immediately after Jesus' baptism—right at the outset — but Epiphany skipped over this event and brought us a Jesus who was revealed as God's beloved Son – shining with the presence of God's glory" (1 March 2020, emphasis mine).

"Today is our Outgathering. The Sunday that, back when Unitarian Universalists traditionally closed up church completely for the summer, would have been our final Sunday together of the church year" (31 May 2020).

Both quotes highlight how temporal markers can be used to situate sermons and community events within a broader context, connecting them to a larger narrative or theme. The liberal Christian preacher acknowledges the potential confusion or disorientation that may arise from the non-linear presentation of biblical events throughout the church year but is also emphasizing the significance of this particular moment in Jesus' ministry. In the case of Unitarian Universalism, the speaker acknowledges the historical tradition of closing churches for the summer and how their current Outgathering event marks the end of the church year. This temporal reference point not only helps to frame the current event but also connects the present-day congregation to the historical context of Unitarian Universalism. It emphasizes the continuity of the church and its traditions, even as they evolve and adapt to changing times. Additionally, by using the term "our" Outgathering, the speaker reinforces a sense of community ownership and participation in the event. This use of temporal markers is more contextual and less prescriptive than in conservative communities and allows for a more flexible interpretation and understanding of religious teachings.

Through their sermons, preachers can help members make sense of their experiences and connect them to larger theological concepts and ideas. They can challenge and inspire their listeners, encouraging them to reflect on their own beliefs and values and to deepen their spiritual practices. At the same time, the theology of a congregation is not static, but rather is constantly evolving and changing over time. As new members join the community and as the broader cultural and social context shifts, the theology of the congregation may adapt and change as well.

A preacher's sermons can play a key role in shaping this evolution, helping the congregation to navigate new challenges and to find new ways of expressing their faith.

<u>Non-Scriptural References</u>

The use of storytelling, especially through pop culture and current events, represents an important style shift in preaching etiquette. The shift from doctrine to narrative sermons occurred gradually during the late eighteenth and throughout the nineteenth centuries and coexists with the preference towards a looser and fluctuating sermonic structure. While the use of non-scriptural elements in a religious setting does not transpose them into timeless truths, it does offer an opportunity for the audience to feel their contemporary lives are part of their religion's narrative.

The period saw a significant religious movement known as Revivalism, characterized by a series of religious revivals. One of the most significant events in this movement was the Camp Meeting, a large outdoor gathering often in rural areas attended by thousands of people listening to preachers speak about sin, repentance, and the need for salvation. At these events, preachers would often use emotional appeals and dramatic stories to encourage people to turn away from their sinful ways and embrace a life of faith. This accentuation on personal experience with God was a departure from traditional church teachings, which emphasized ritual and doctrine over personal experience. The Revivalism movement had a profound impact on American society, shaping the country's religious and cultural landscape. Ted Smith, a Charles Howard Candler Professor of Divinity and author of *The New Measures: A Theological History of Democratic Practice* suggests Revivalism challenged traditional hierarchies and structures of authority and paved the way for new forms of democratic participation and engagement. Furthermore, Smith suggests that Revivalism contributed to the emergence of a distinctively American theology, one that emphasized the importance of individual freedom, the value of democratic participation, and

the transformative power of personal religious experience. He also notes that Revivalism's emphasis on personal morality and responsibility had a profound impact on American political culture, shaping debates over issues such as slavery, civil rights, and social justice (Smith 67).

Simultaneously, in the early 19th century, American religious movements began to move away from the neoclassical ideals of the 18th century and towards a new aesthetic known as Romanticism. This shift was influenced by a number of factors, including the growing sense of national identity and pride in the wake of the Revolutionary War as well as the increasing industrialization and urbanization of American society. The shift towards Romanticism significantly impacted religious attitudes and rhetoric in sermons. Prior to the Romantic era, sermons were often heavily influenced by the Enlightenment and focused on reason and logic. However, with the rise of Romanticism, there was a renewed emphasis on emotion and personal experience in religious contexts (Reynolds 481). A parallel development in philosophy toward experience, specifically phenomenology simultaneously occurred. Otto contrasts the sacred and profane and engages the non-rational as the essence of religion.

While traditional and modern sermons still regularly reference biblical passages, more modern examples are more likely to also include secular illustrations and personal examples to engage and expand on the chosen theme. Today, almost every Protestant Christian preacher employs some level of pulpit storytelling and pop culture has become normalized and even expected. When interviewing Rev. Cataldo, she cited Fred Craddock, a former professor at Emory's Divinity School, who developed a heavily storytelling-based homiletic. Dr. Craddock described sermons as a product of the relationship the preacher has with the congregation and the world. A key assumption made by this model is that the preachers and listeners share a universal experience. By pulling in sources from current events and popular culture that are assumed to be

common knowledge, preachers can illustrate and bring to life the teachings of the Bible for their

listeners. For example, a preacher might use an analogy from a movie to explain a biblical story

or use a reference to a popular song to make a point about faith. The goal of this technique is to

make the Bible, and by extension the sermon, more relatable and relevant to people's lives

(Cataldo Interview).

In one liberal sermon, the preacher focuses on storytelling as a means to see one's own

world through the lens of the gospel.

> "Everyone loves a good story. Perhaps this is a reason that Jesus' stories never seem to lose their luster. We know that good stories have good characters. Characters are what Americans identify with when we see films or read books or watch television. Many times, when the medium that has arrested our attention does its best creative work, it captures us and helps us identify with a particular character" (10 July 2022, emphasis mine).

As the sermon progresses, the preacher tells the story of the *Parable of the Good*

Samaritan, stopping periodically to tell personal anecdotes, point towards volunteer efforts, and

directly ask the congregation "With which character in the parable do you most closely

identify?" Before this question is even brought to the table the preacher expresses his love of

stories and names *Cold Mountain* (2003) by Charles Frazier and the Super Bowl of 1995. In the

sermon that follows, the congregation is given a synopsis of each reference's plot followed by

the preacher's own interpretation and message.

In *Cold Mountain*, the preacher identifies with the main character, Inman, as he

experiences "rogues and outlaws, Good Samaritans and vigilantes, people who help and others

who hinder" on his path home to his wife. He identifies with Inman because, "like preachers, he

was always on the go, but never seemed to get anywhere." This is closely followed by the real

story of a football game as it plays out and peoples' emotional responses to the result. Instead of

the preacher's personal connection, it is the community that sees itself in the Super Bowl heroes:

> "People were relieved that John Elway finally won a Super Bowl as the long-suffering
> Denver quarterback. In the summer of 1995, many hoped for a victory for Ben Crenshaw
> during the week that he served as a pall bearer for his longtime mentor Harvey Pennick.
> We all, if the stories are worthy, identify with one of the characters. I think this was what
> Jesus counted on when he told his parables" (10 July 2022, emphasis mine).

The preacher utilizes both stories, despite their different mediums to delve into how

popular culture can aid in understanding the Bible and its analysis, while also teaching the

congregation how to recognize and engage with the world in a manner that aligns with biblical

principles. By relating to characters from a familiar medium, the congregation learns to identify

with them before identifying the parallel of their Christian community within Luke 10:25-37.

This step is critical as it determines the interpretation and significance assigned to the parable.

Pop culture not only equips individuals with the necessary skills for biblical analysis but also

serves as a means of communication between the present and the Bible.

The use of pop culture references in conservative Christian congregations serves a

specific purpose in reinforcing the evangelical nature of their message. Compared to the liberal

sermons, they also range widely from specific to general and outdated to current in order to reach

their audience. In one example, Rev. Harling introduces the movie *The Usual Suspects* (1995):

> "[Kevin Spacey]'s talking about this potentially evil person. He says, 'Can people be
> influenced by Satan if you believe in Satan?' And he says, 'believe in the devil.' Then he
> says, he's talking about this guy, 'The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing
> the world that he did not exist.' And I thought, how great of a lead into today?" (15 May
> 2022, emphasis mine).

The name of this sermon series is *Seriously* and questions the skeptics in the world. In

order to emphasize his point and extend the theme to address the week's topic of Satan the

preacher references a famous quote: "the greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world that he did not exist". By invoking a popular movie alongside quoting scripture, the preacher is able to hold the attention of his congregation and make his message more relatable and accessible. Furthermore, by referencing a specific quote from the movie, the preacher is able to provide a concrete and memorable example of his message. This can help to reinforce the ideas and concepts presented in the sermon and make them more impactful for the audience. Sermons contribute to a listener's canon and the inclusion of illustrations, pop culture or otherwise, is part of how the preacher's message is internalized by their audience.

When planning for this series, Rev. Harling also regularly referenced secular sources, especially scientific authorities:

> "We know from sociology and psychology studies, that there are three great needs in our society. There is the need for purpose, the need for meaning, and the need for community" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

Rev. Harling does not actively cite the sources he uses, but regardless, they are not typically his areas of expertise. Preachers may be familiar with many disciplines but that does not make them experts. In order to include these references, Rev. Harling relies on discussions with actual experts in his church community and his own personal research. Functionally, when including secular sources, especially scientific ones, the preacher borrows the authority of that field and expertise, bringing it to the pulpit to increase their own authority. On the other hand, without the level of credibility towards non-expert concepts, there is the potential to lose what they are really an authority on, biblical interpretation. One of the biggest benefits of scientific evidence as opposed to other fields is that preachers can use fields that rely on testable and tangible evidence to support religious perspectives that depend on faith. By speaking with confidence as a trusted provider of information, ministers can increase their own authority and

merge the Bible with a modern understanding of how the world works with evidence that backs it.

There is a difference between accepted and rejected sources. Conservative sermons show a clear preference for scientific, historical, political, or Christian media sources. While the same can generally be said of the liberal sermons, the liberal ones do include a wider range of accepted sources. In my discussion with Rev. Harling, he is actively concerned about the rise of some media, specifically social media and other social platforms. Rev. Harling believes that social media can be a double-edged sword for preachers who want to incorporate secular sources into their sermons. On one hand, social media can provide a wealth of information and perspectives from various sources that can enrich the preacher's message. On the other hand, his primary worry is the oversaturation and accessibility of "inauthentic and inaccurate" doctrines (Harling Interview). While social media is a controversial example, it serves as an example of how ministers pick and choose the medium and content of sources in order to achieve their desired results.

Ultimately, the primary difference in the two Christian sources is that the conservative Christians value an evangelical purpose, by holding the attention of the audience and coming off at current and relatable, while the liberal sermons were more active in their use of outside sources as a teaching moment. Spurred from Romanticism, the Transcendentalist movement that originated Unitarian Universalism significantly impacted religious rhetoric in liberal Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons. Transcendentalists, such as Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau, emphasized the value of intuition and personal experience, often using imagery from nature and nature-centric language to convey spiritual truths (Tomaleh 12).

For modern Unitarian Universalists, the inclusion of pop culture is not qualitatively different from scriptural sources, but like liberal Christian sermons it is still often seen as a learning moment:

> "This morning we heard the story of a biblical character famous for his limp. The Hebrew Bible story of Jacob wrestling with… someone – tradition has it that Jacob wrestled an angel or God himself. The text just says, "a man." <u>Approaching the story metaphorically, as Unitarian Universalists do, perhaps we could consider</u> that Jacob struggled with the sorrows and hopes and fears of life itself – that he fought whatever it is that each of us may be seen to wrestle throughout sleepless nights or in the world of dreams" (1 February 2015, emphasis mine).

The message of this sermon is based on the Bible, but it is simply one type of illustration that may be found. Sources themselves are sacred and while that may include the Bible, other sources are not valued on the basis of their position parallel to the Bible. Unitarian Universalists do not consider the scripture to hold the same authority and as a result, choose to communicate their message differently from Christian preachers. More importantly, there is no goal to create a sacred space that communicates between one specific past and present. Instead, what counts as the past is a much larger, different canon. Another example from a non-biblical source includes:

> "Griffin McElroy's ultimate goal was blowing a kiss to the most powerful player in [World of Warcraft]…Griffin went all over the world, and he documented his journey in a series of videos entitled "*Peacecraft* (2017)"…Over and over again on his journey, <u>Griffin found strangers who were willing to help him just because he asked</u>" (5 May 2019, emphasis mine).

Like the biblical example, the goal of using this source is for the preacher to eventually settle on a message to extend to the congregation. Unlike the biblical example, this approach to the sacred is as an ethical and humanistic sense common in Unitarian Universalist sermons. The example feels almost like a professor engaging with a question and working through possibilities with the use of illustrations. The message reinforces a positive view of human nature and is not

unique to Griffin McElroy's situation, but the use of an example to defend that position strengthens the claim.

Unitarian Universalist sermons' sources used are often diverse and wide-ranging, drawing on fields such as literature, philosophy, and social science, in addition to religious and spiritual texts. The goal is not necessarily to provide a modern interpretation of biblical teachings, but rather to engage with the world around us in a meaningful and thoughtful way. Generally, Unitarian Universalist sermons structurally mimic Protestant Christian sermons but differ in content and approach. The way sources are used is a defining distinction in the genre. While Christian sermons approach secular sources as a tool to teach a modern biblical interpretation and application and appear relevant to a contemporary audience, Unitarian Universalist sermons use sources to illustrate and respond to the chosen theme.

 In conclusion, while both Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons may share similar structural elements, the approach, and use of sources sets them apart. Whether drawing on biblical teachings or a diverse array of secular sources, the goal of any sermon is to engage with the world in a thoughtful and meaningful way and to provide insight and guidance to those who seek it. By using sources effectively, preachers can enhance their message and deepen their connection with their congregation, ultimately helping to foster a greater sense of understanding and community.

Defining a Modern Crisis

In practicing their faith, religious communities coalesce around a set of shared sacred values that shape how they respond to the world around them. In order to create a fixed point of reference, preachers vocalize their vision of what accounts for the modern crisis faced by humanity and how their community should use their approved values and sources in order to

counter it. In effect, the different beliefs and practices held by Christianity and Unitarian Universalism alter their concept of a modern crisis in distinct ways.

Christianity, as a diverse religion, has a variety of interpretations of what constitutes a modern crisis. Christians might view the crisis as a moral decline in society or a lack of faith and connection with God which materialize in sermons as an address to the threatening rise of secularism and atheism. Conservative Christians may define a modern crisis as an erosion of traditional values and family structure. By drawing on conservative interpretations of scripture, conservative Christians argue for strict adherence to traditional gender roles, sexual morality, and religious practices and advocate for policies that prioritize the preservation of traditional social structures:

> "[Satan] doesn't want to mess up your life. He wants to end your life. Quick question. It is actually attached. When's the last time you saw an adult with down syndrome around? Might be recently for most of us. I bet you it's been quite a while. Hasn't it? 67% of pre-born babies who have been diagnosed with down syndrome never are born, they're aborted, 67%. Now in Europe, it's 90-something percent. He is the father of lies and he's also a murderer, coldblooded murderer" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

In a sermon addressing Satan, Rev. Harling refers to abortion in the United States and Europe as a sign of Satan's influence. The figure of Satan moves beyond scripture in order to address this presumed attack on morality. This view is often held by conservative Christians who emphasize the importance of protecting the sanctity of life based on the belief that life begins at conception. In addition, the reverend invokes the effect it has on the listener as an individual by stating that Satan's goal is to end your own life and directly joining Satan's effects and the listener's own experience in the world through statements such as "for most of us," "I bet you," and direct questions like "When was the last time you." By invoking a biblical cause to the problem, Rev. Harling also must provide a biblical solution:

"But the good news is, even way back in Mark 1:13, Jesus comes into the Jordan river, he's baptized…So Jesus gives us so many models all through the Bible of how to deal with him" (15 May 2022, emphasis mine).

The Bible offers a model to respond to the effects of Satan, demonstrating how the Bible is relevant and necessary in order to address evil in the world. The community and minister, by themselves, are essentially powerless against the effects of Satan and require aid in the form of divine intervention and spiritual guidance.

Liberal Christians lean more on progressive interpretations of scripture to argue for greater equality and inclusivity in society and advocate for policies prioritizing marginalized communities' needs. For them, a crisis is more likely to include references to social inequality, environmental degradation, political polarization, and the erosion of civil liberties. In sermons, preachers respond to these communal values, drawing on long-established religious teachings and scripture to offer guidance and comfort to their congregations:

"In the world we know, bigger is better and more is never enough. And happiness comes from having it all. But the second parable of the mustard seed…reminds us that things that give life and shelter and healing are often based on things that seem small and insignificant" (20 June 2018).

In general, the liberal sermons prefer to address congregants' personal crises that lead to obstacles in their faith practice. However, the cause of any hardship is a result of larger socio-political or environmental challenges rather than a biblical force such as Satan. In this sermon, the preacher references the parable of the mustard seed to remind their congregation that the "things that give life and shelter and healing" are often seen as insignificant. This message emphasizes the importance of looking beyond material wealth and success to find true happiness and fulfillment.

While conservative and liberal Christians may have different interpretations of the Bible and how it should be applied in modern times, they share a common belief in the power of scripture to provide answers. Both conservative and liberal Christian sermons draw heavily on the Bible as the primary source of guidance and inspiration. While the specific interpretations and applications of scripture may differ, the Bible remains central to Christian worship and teaching. The Bible offers a framework for understanding the world and provides answers to life's most pressing questions, including how to respond to personal and societal crises. In both conservative and liberal sermons, outside sources or proof texts never originate an answer or serve as the primary instigator of community action. This is because Christians view the Bible as the word of God and the ultimate source of truth and wisdom.

Unitarian Universalism, on the other hand, is a non-creedal religion that emphasizes individual freedom and responsibility, reason and rationality, and social justice. Weekly, preachers reference the seven principles of the faith to call for greater respect for the interdependent web of all existence and the inherent worth and dignity of every person. In general, Unitarian Universalists do not see a single modern crisis, but rather a complex set of interconnected problems facing humanity, including issues like climate change, inequality, and social injustice. Rather than relying on faith or tradition, Unitarian Universalists often prioritize using reason and evidence as well as personal and communal action through social justice efforts:

> "Although I had intended to make our virtual Outgathering a time of great joy and celebration… just like COVID-19 didn't care about our plans, another deadly virus in our nation didn't care, either. That deadly virus is Racism" (31 May 2020).

For many people, their individual origin in the Unitarian Universalist faith lies in their desire to explore social activism movements, embrace pluralism, and host many spiritualities

simultaneously. Sources frequently manifest in defense of spiritual communities as relevant to this central purpose. In the wake of the murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests that followed, many religious institutions publicly released statements pushing for change. The Unitarian Universalists in Metro Atlanta:

> "Commit to do the work of interrogating and condemning white supremacy within our institutions, our communities, and our hearts. We believe none of us are truly free until all of us are free. We work, pray and fight for the liberation of all, and the vitality of each" (31 May 2020).

In this statement, the focus is on addressing and condemning white supremacy, rather than on citing a specific source for the problem or a particular solution. At no part in the larger statement is a source invoked despite symbolic and metaphorical religious language such as "the forces of evil" and "reservoirs in the soul" being referenced (31 May 2020). This religious language reflects that white supremacy is not just a physical or structural problem, but also a deeply ingrained and systemic issue that affects both individuals and communities.

Instead of relying on a particular source or theory to explain the cause of white supremacy, this statement emphasizes the need for action to combat it. The call to "commit to do the work" suggests a recognition that addressing this issue will require ongoing effort and dedication, rather than a single solution or quick fix. This statement also reflects a belief in the power of individuals and communities to effect change through collective action and a commitment to confronting and dismantling systemic injustices like white supremacy. While specific sources or theories may be cited, the focus is on the need for action and a commitment to justice and equality.

As an alternative, the Southern Baptist Convention President J.D. Greear gave an address via Facebook Live where he states that:

"Southern Baptists, we need to say it clearly as a <u>gospel issue</u>: Black lives matter. Of course, Black lives matter. Our black brothers and sisters are <u>made in the image of God</u>. Black lives matter <u>because Jesus died for them</u>" (Greear, emphasis mine).

While Greear condemns statements such as "defund the police" and clearly draws a boundary between Southern Baptists and the BLM organization, he still highlights the experiences of African Americans in the United States as a gospel issue. Compared to the Unitarian Universalist example, God and scripture are brought to the forefront of the conflict as the reason that Black lives in America should be valued.

Ultimately, when creating a community, preachers are responsible for addressing the world around them and creating pathways for their community to understand the point of origin of the crisis and response. Christianity converges on biblical scripture and builds a conversation between the past and the present. By defining their motivations through their biblical interpretation, different communities and denominations diversify their values. Unitarian Universalists lack a single origin and instead, use the values encouraged in the seven principles.

<u>Chapter Conclusion</u>

Building a strong and cohesive religious community requires a clear understanding and articulation of its sources and definition of the sacred. These elements help to create common values that guide the community's behavior and decision-making, and ultimately frame their interactions with the wider world.

The sources of the sacred can be diverse, ranging from holy texts to cultural practices to individual experiences of the divine. However, by defining and celebrating these sources, a faith community is able to establish a shared identity and sense of purpose. For instance, Christianity is based primarily on the Bible as the source of its values and guiding principles. A preacher's

message is traced back to scriptural teachings, although non-scriptural examples can also find their way into the pulpit. In contrast, Unitarian Universalists engage with a wider canon of sources, drawing from a variety of religious and philosophical traditions without specifying a singular origin of the sacred. Regardless, preachers are responsible for brokering a conversation between the sources and the contemporary world, regardless of and temporal or spatial distance.

By identifying their values, faith communities are able to create a shared vision of what they stand for, what they hope to achieve, and where they turn to for guidance. In summary, these building blocks of identity help to create a modern relevance for each faith. By bridging the gap between sources and the modern world, preachers create a shared sense of purpose in a religious community.

Chapter Four: Appeals to Authenticity

In the United States, the religious landscape has seen a growing number of people reporting no religious affiliation, or the "Nones". Pew reports that 60% of the Nones surveyed claimed that their dissatisfaction stems from suspicion concerning religious teachings while 49% express opposition towards religious institutions' stances on political and cultural matters (Pew Research Center). The None's loss of confidence and participation in conventional religious groups has led religious leaders to adopt a number of strategies to reclaim the Nones population. One strategy has been to respond to the Nones' suspicion of traditional religious authority by emphasizing preaching styles that embody an appeal to the personal authenticity of the preacher in their sermons in order to further connect with their audience.

In the context of sermons, authenticity is a complex term that is built and assessed through the expectations enforced by the community. John McClure, the past president of the Academy of Homiletics, includes "authenticity" as an entry in his guide to contemporary preaching words. He asserts that the appeal of authenticity is a new development, emerging in recent decades among worshippers. McClure describes this appeal as the desire to communicate an "openly human, searching, and accessible persona" in a preacher's conveyance of self. According to McClure:

> "Authentic preachers do not represent themselves as removed, perfect, or on a pedestal, but through various forms of self-disclosure and identification, attempt to communicate a genuine desire for self-awareness and self-knowledge. The goal is to achieve the relational authority of one who with listeners is on a search for their real humanity" (McClure 5).

A preacher's style of speech, including the register of a sermon, is often tailored to their audience and the social domain in which they operate. The preacher may adjust their language,

tone, and delivery based on the demographics of their audience as well as the social norms and expectations of the community in which they are speaking. To be considered an authentic speaker within this framework is to be able to signal one's identity within a community as locally oriented. In a religious institution, this could be adherence to doctrine and ritual, the acceptance of key beliefs, or more personal spiritual demonstration as evidence. In regard to sermons specifically, preachers must also convince their congregation of the authenticity of themselves and their message. For religious practitioners, sermons, as a collection of interpretations and stances taken by a preacher, are vital in representing a preacher's authentic self.

As recently as the 21st century, the performance of authenticity in the pulpit has become a convention in the evolution of the sermonic genre. In a contemporary review of the 19th century, sincerity was identified as one of the six "new measures" for effective preaching by Ted Smith. Smith argues that while sincerity and authenticity are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between the two concepts. According to Smith, sincerity is a subjective experience that is rooted in personal beliefs and values. It involves a sense of genuineness and honesty in one's intentions and actions. Authenticity is more of an objective quality that is based on external standards or criteria. Authenticity is distinguished as an extension of sincerity because while sincerity seeks to reveal a private self, authenticity aims to communicate a relational transparency that discloses no difference between a public and private self. This can be further defined by the focus shift between a preacher's experience exhibiting sincerity in their delivery and their audience's perception of their authenticity (Smith 215).

Smith argues that in the 19th century, an expression of sincerity was tied to a preacher's ability to communicate their own beliefs effectively in ways that would move listeners to accept their message and earn salvation. The revivalist minister Charles G. Finney asserted, "Ministers

should be chosen not on the basis of whether they are popular or learned but on that of whether they are wise to win souls" (Miller 105). As a preacher's personality becomes equivalent to their theological truth, they must also balance orthodoxy and sincerity. Merely repeating their institution's creed without personal conviction may lead to suspicions of insincerity, while being sincere about heresy is not an option for preachers who are paid to represent their institution's beliefs. Therefore, successful ministry demands the performance of sincerity which requires expertise to move people to interpret the gospel earnestly while also maintaining the preacher's credibility and charismatic authority. By doing so, preachers can bridge the gap between their private selves and public personas and minimize the power hierarchy that often exists between religious leaders and their followers.

However, Finney found that achieving success and authority while performing sincerity requires more than an ability to "present his private self in public" suggesting a need for revision (Smith 215). In colloquial use, one's authentic self is sometimes defined as an internal phenomenon demonstrating a commitment to being true to oneself. Yet, for a preacher, authenticity is a set of qualities that are communicated to an audience with the goal to achieve a public sense of trustworthiness. By merging public and private, preachers could expand their purposeful use of their private self into the public order to accomplish their end (Smith 193, 215). Weekly, preachers face the challenge of authenticating their place on the pulpit as faith leaders. At its peak performance, authenticity permits congregants to conclude an interaction far more convinced in a preacher's justification for their beliefs and interpretations. In order to achieve this result, preachers may employ various techniques to create a sense of individuality and build trust with their congregation.

Previous chapters have observed how preachers define their audience and prescribe goals and values through their use of sacred sources. The appeal to authenticity answers how preachers persuade the audience to see merit in the message the preacher spreads. One technique is through public confessionals, where preachers share their own personal struggles and experiences, demonstrating vulnerability and humility to connect with their audience on a personal level. Another is by sharing personal anecdotes and beliefs, which may enhance the sense of authenticity by demonstrating that the preacher is not simply reciting scripture or prescribed beliefs but has personally grappled with and arrived at their convictions. The final technique included is the juxtaposition between formal and informal language to balance a persona of authority and approachability. Through their language, preachers can demonstrate that they are genuine in their faith and committed to their congregation's spiritual growth. This, in turn, can increase congregants' engagement and commitment to the religious institution, creating a more vibrant and connected community.

<div align="center">Confessional Preaching</div>

In an age of authenticity, preachers who are often seen as role models and leaders in their communities are expected to satisfy high moral and ethical standards imposed by the perception of their congregation. However, the expectation of righteousness and the expectation of authenticity can create tension for preachers. On one hand, their role as leaders demands that they uphold high standards and behave in ways that are consistent with the teachings of their faith. On the other, there is a high demand for leaders to be genuine, transparent, and honest about their struggles and imperfections. In some instances, this manifests in a formulaic confessional where they engage in a public admission of weakness or wrongdoings. Whether performed by a preacher or celebrity, a confession reveals vulnerability and willingness to be

transparent. Confessions can demonstrate humility and a desire for growth and can serve as a means of connecting with others and building trust.

In the history of American preaching, the notion of a confessional sermon was most profoundly articulated and advocated by John R. Claypool. His journey started with the death of his 12-year-old daughter Laura to leukemia. Four weeks later, he preached "The Gift of Life," vocalizing his struggle with the question of why a loving God would allow such a tragedy to occur. He found himself wrestling with doubts and questions about his faith that he had never faced before. In "The Gift of Life," Claypool decided to share his personal struggle with his congregation in a confessional sermon. He spoke openly and honestly about his doubts and fears, and he shared the ways in which he was trying to come to terms with his daughter's death. Following the emotional turmoil of his daughter's death, Claypool underwent a transformation and gained a fresh understanding of what he believed to be God's purpose for his life. He came to the realization that "life is a gift," bestowed freely by God at birth, and not something that can be acquired or claimed as one's own possession (Claypool). The response to Claypool's sermon was overwhelming. Many people in the congregation found comfort and solace in his words, and they appreciated his honesty and vulnerability. Claypool continued to preach and write about his personal experiences and struggles throughout his career. He believed that by sharing his own struggles with faith and doubt, he could help others who were going through similar experiences (Episcopal Archives).

From the pulpit, many leaders choose to acknowledge their own personal struggles with their relationship to their faith, the pressure of leading, or the impact this can have on themselves and loved ones. However, a confession is a genre that follows a formula rooted in maintaining the authority of the preacher, making it important to consider the motives and sincerity behind

the admission. In Protestantism, sin is an accepted aspect of existence, and the implication that any human is without sin is heresy. While more impactful to admit to weighty issues such as fraud, sexual misconduct, depression, alcoholism, or marital problems, it also comes with a higher risk of ostracization. Occasionally, these types of confessionals are used, primarily when placed in the past with evidence of change, though more often than not preachers recognize weakness consistent with what is expected by their community.

In the liberal Christian sermons, confession plays a role in the manifestation of unity. Most flaws are experienced as a collective and disconnected from a preacher's individual experience. For example:

> "We each present obstacles to Jesus: our own personal baggage, our lack of faith, our doubts, our fears. The way we see ourselves prevents us from seeing Jesus and his help. The way others see us can keep us from receiving his love (27 June 2021, emphasis mine)."

While this is still a confession and the preacher is certainly not immune from these obstacles, they are common generalizations concerning difficulties with faith. Nothing expressed by the preachers reveals anything about challenges to their own beliefs. Instead, the subject matter is *we*, *our*, *ourselves*, and *us*. Authenticity is found in communal experience and rejection of the individual. In this example, the preacher is not hiding behind *we* to diminish their own sins or trying to avoid opposition, instead, they conceal a minor reprimand that accuses the listener. One possible motivation for this pattern is that in practicing confession, congregants are exposing or recognizing private information and breaking from a position of isolation towards communal consciousness. This is possible regardless of how personal, general, or even scripted the confession may be.

In some more moderate communities, there is even a confessional prayer. What stands out in this moment is that the confession is a group experience that is ritualized. These are the scripted words taken from the *United Methodist Book of Worship* (1992) and repeated every week by members of the Methodist congregation:

> "Merciful God, we confess that we have not loved you with our whole heart. <u>We have failed to be an obedient church</u>. We have not done your will, we have broken your law, we have rebelled against your love, we have not loved our neighbors, and we have not heard the cry of the needy. Forgive us, we pray. Free us for joyful obedience, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Salado SUMC 76571, emphasis mine)."

The congregants are invited to join the minister in a moment of confession that seeks blanket forgiveness and acceptance. The scripted nature of the prayer does not exclude honest emotion, but it does not allow for specifics that move away from generic confessions. Statements such as "failed to be an obedient church" mean very little and can be applied to almost anything. The following religious and social sins could equally apply in some way to anyone's life. While this may still be considered a moment of humility and transparency, it exists as part of the service's expected familiar frame and does not require active mental participation by the speaker. One thing to consider is if this collective *we* removes the responsibility from the individual *I* under the assumption that others in the community will take responsibility. Regardless, the confessional prayer still reflects the effect of authenticity in a community.

Even in a sermon where the subject centers on the preacher, the flaws exposed by the sermon are those that are perceived as shared:

> "<u>Because I don't know about you</u>, but I often feel pretty unprepared when unexpected things come my way. I can relate to those who did not have enough oil for their lamps. I don't usually feel ready for things that I don't anticipate. When God is at work, I often don't recognize him. Even when good things come, I'm often unprepared to receive them. And when bad things happen, <u>I think most of feel like we</u> didn't see it coming.

Repeated warnings about being alert and prepared when life drags on don't seem to help (8 Nov. 2020, emphasis mine)."

Coming from a minister holding some level of authority, admitting to not recognizing God at work or feeling unprepared for the good, bad, and unexpected is structured as a substantial admission. Yet, this weak confession involves minimal sin or explicit apology. Notably, this preacher is guiding his community through self-reflection in order to encourage personal growth rather than seeking personal absolution for sin or encouraging a strong emotional response. At the end of the day, a preacher can preach from a particularity that can be opened to a universality. Acting as a spiritual leader, the preacher is modeling how to grapple with uncertainties in life in front of their community. When they ask "because I don't know about you" there is an implicit invitation to replace the preacher's *I* with the audience's own. While communities are working together to acknowledge these struggles, it is functionally a personal confessional. Each aspect of this confession centers personal relations to their faith and denotes a small part of a healthy and holistic Christian life that's purpose is to encourage individuals to take responsibility for their shortfalls and pursue growth.

This closely parallels how Unitarian Universalists hold each other accountable through the recognition of times when they failed to live up to their principles:

> "Theodore Parker, a 19th-century Unitarian minister, is famous for taking great personal risks in opposing the Fugitive Slave Act passed <u>in 1850</u>. However, he also believed that there was a hierarchy of different races, and that Anglo-Saxons were at the top of it…<u>in 1948</u>… <u>in 1969</u>, … <u>Just a few years ago, here at Northwest,</u> a dinner theater play by our Youth Group featured racist impersonations of different ethnic groups, an event that led to the resignation of the Music Director. (7 Oct. 2018, emphasis mine)"

This confession is more specific than the liberal examples, although it is set in the past which implies historical culpability rather than a more contemporary responsibility. To claim no racism would invite suspicion, but by positioning the accusation in the past, the preacher comes

off as less accusatory to the audience. In Unitarian Universalist sermons, the past is frequently invoked as central to convincing authenticity. These statements are precisely calibrated to confess and educate while also positioning the speaker as distant from the event and committed to living up to the principles in the present and future.

When talking with a Unitarian Universalist minister, Rev. Housh Gordon, she informed me that the goal of their congregation's liturgy and sermons is to "wrestle with beautiful questions in front of people so that they may find inspiration" (Interview). While not a personal confession, the preacher's sermon questions the failures experienced within their community and how they have changed in order to continue communal growth. As a core tenet of Unitarian Universalism, everyone can change, is changing, and is capable of embodying the good in the world.

Like the Christian communities, Unitarian Universalists believe in the power of community and the importance of relationships in nurturing personal growth and promoting social justice. This is reflected in their emphasis on covenantal relationships, which are based on shared values and commitments rather than a set of fixed beliefs or doctrines. By coming together around a covenant, Unitarian Universalists seek to create a supportive and inclusive community where people can explore their own beliefs and identities, while also working together to create a more just and compassionate world. In sharing a covenant, it is also the responsibility of their members to hold each other accountable for their personal responsivities and mistakes. As a display of authenticity, mistakes are inevitable but recognized as moments to learn in grow. In the words of Rev. Housh Gordon:

> "I'm not sure exactly how we begin to implement such a vision of confession in our
> Unitarian Universalist communities. But I think it will begin with building a community
> where we meet each other with love, no matter what… Where we hold each other

accountable to the good as we discern it, recalling every person's inherent worth…
Where we remind each other every week, and know without a doubt, that we are not
alone (11 Jan. 2015)."

In accordance with liberal Christian confessionals, confessional styles are done in community without seeking direct forgiveness from each other or from God. Instead, recognition is seen as a powerful expression of one's true self, maintained through accessing personal stories and emotional experiences. By valuing the performance of authenticity, personal responsibility, and mutual support, liberal communities create a space where confession can be a meaningful and transformative aspect of spiritual life.

Moreso than their liberal counterparts, conservative preachers create authenticity through the acknowledgment of sin and the implementation of the authority of religious scripture. Conservative Christians recognize themselves as broken, afflicted with sin, impacted by the fall, and corrupted (Romans 3:23). It is a basic Protestant theological conviction that all attempts to earn one's salvation through good works and human effort, called "works righteousness," are futile. Conservative Protestants believe that all people sin, responsibly but inevitably, and therefore need redemption. Even the perception that one doesn't sin is a sin in and of itself. The belief in Jesus as a means of renewal stems from the teaching that came to Earth to save humanity from its sins. Christians believe that through his death and resurrection, Jesus offered salvation to all people and made them reconciled to God. Only through faith in Jesus Christ can we be justified before God and receive forgiveness for our sins (Harling Interview). As a result, the goal for conservative Christians is not to be authentic in the sense of "being themselves." In fact, "being yourself," within their Christian worldview, only works if the "self" is reflecting Jesus. In a sermonic context, a weekly acknowledgment of personal weakness is crucial to eschew visitors' defensiveness and minimize a preacher's moral elitism.

When interviewing the writer of the conservative sermons, Rev. Harling, I asked what it meant to be authentic. In response, the first thing he expressed was the word *sinful*. From his perspective, if you "can't define who you are as imperfect and broken, you aren't authentic" (Interview). Especially within the context of visitors to the congregation, Rev. Harling notes that "so many people come to church looking for a reason to strike you off the list" and disengage with the message. Confessing one's shortcomings helps to break down defensiveness and foster humility and openness (Interview). Within one sermon, Rev. Harling expressed:

> "Our job is to follow the Shepherd. Now, am I here to be the model for that? I ought to get at the back of the line some days for that. I've been known to do a poor job for a long time of that, but I'm just encouraging you that I finally, in my stupidity, realized [that] the less lip he gets with me, and the more obedience he gets from me, then the better we both are (8 May 2022, emphasis mine)."

The preacher's primary role is as a guide to his congregation, leading their interpretation and understanding of the Gospel. To not only declare that he is executing a "poor job" as a model for his community but explicitly indicate his own "stupidity" should be considered shocking language. In upsetting the equilibrium, the preacher leads his congregation down a path toward questioning his commitment to faith and position as an authority. The sins expressed here are still unspecific and his guidance comes in the form of "I'm just encouraging you," which offers an invitation to recognize that as the listener you have also sinned like him. However, Rev. Harling also leads them to question if he actually means the things he's saying. By transitioning to a statement that places this confession in the past and clearly indicates a path forward from this sin as he "finally…realized" how to better benefit himself and his community, the reverend resolves the tension he builds and concludes with an increased level of authenticity.

The concept of breaking down defensive boundaries in a religious community is important in the effort to reach and include individuals who may not have been previously

engaged or accepting of the community's beliefs and practices. Breaking defensiveness also goes beyond the acceptance of an individual preacher. It is also relevant to the welcoming of Christianity as a whole. Conservative Christian communities are seeking to appeal to those who literally interpret the Bible, those whom Rev. Harling identifies as Christ followers. In addition to his personal confessions, the reverend acknowledges an outsider's perceived flaws in Christian theology as "a lot of mysticism and hocus pocus … and ritualistic stuff" (8 May 2022). This blunt admission of a perceived imperfection is accepted as something believed by a non-member of their faith. While unclear in the context of the sermon, *ritualistic stuff* may refer to a Catholic service. Protestantism sometimes has strong rhetoric against Catholic worship where the ritual is the primary practice of faith. Because of the scripted non-personal nature of their confession and worship, it inspires less authenticity. Still, in general, the confession of negative perceptions from outsiders serves as a marker for the unity inside a community.

By acknowledging and even addressing these perceived flaws or misunderstandings, the congregation can appear willing to engage in an open and honest dialogue. The admission of imperfections in Christian theology by the reverend can help to build trust and establish a sense of unity within the community, as it shows that the community is not just focused on promoting their own beliefs, but also actively seeking to understand and acknowledge the perspectives of those outside of the community. However, this is not the same as encouraging doubt. In conservative space, doubt is in contrast with faith and while acknowledged as universal, is not a virtue. The teachings of the reverend are intended to remove doubt by pushing against the existing perceived flaws.

Another goal of confession in sermons is to minimize the preacher's moral elitism, effectively building distance between speaking through God and the preacher's own words and

interpretation. The public format of the confessional helps present a stronger sense of relatability and group identity. Naming oneself as flawed, or more dramatically in my conversation with Rev. Harling, "the king of brokenness," is an effective renunciation of power. Foucault describes confession as a disempowerment where demoting self lends credibility to the speaker. His reasoning is that confessions appear as a neutral act where there is nothing to be gained from admitting wrongs. Those with no motive should theoretically be telling the truth, even though something that is authentic is not necessarily true (Chow 141). Alternatively, promoting self-causes skepticism. As a rhetorical technique, self-promotion could align with indicators that the preacher is speaking God's words:

> "The Lord has told me to say (Harling Interview)"
> "The spirit sometimes guides me to a scripture (Harling Interview)"
> "We have the Holy Spirit in us, the direct presence and voice of God in us to direct us (8 May 2022)"
> "I think God is calling me to the New Hebrides Islands (8 May 2022) "
> "You feel like God is telling you, 'This is it.' This is great time to come forward (8 May 2022)"
> "You have called us into the arena that we call being a Christ follower (12 June 2022)"
> "We're just inviting you to come do what God's told you to do at the end of that (12 June 2022)"

Conservative preachers often use phrases that indicate that they are relaying God's words or that others in their community are acting on instructions from God, a kind of "usurpatory ventriloquism" that renounces agency to gain authority (Bourdieu 211). While discussing the Oracle Effect, Bourdieu defines the splitting of personality between the individual which "abolishes itself in favor of a transcendent moral person." In using priests as an example, Bourdieu explains that "it is in abolishing himself completely in favor of God or the People that the priest turns himself into God or the People. It is when I become Nothing ... that I become Everything" (Bourdieu 211). This is also supported by frequent imperative and declarative

speech styles. Despite authority's importance in the pulpit, it is not usable if the congregation

feels too distant from the preacher. By presenting a false image of themselves as flawless or

creating an unrealistic expectation that God is always speaking through them, they may alienate

their community. Instead, confession works to balance this experience by offering moments of

humility that place the entirety of the community on the same level provides increased

transparency.

The desire to identify as moral equals extends to liberal Christian and Unitarian

Universalist communities. The clearest example is a Unitarian Universalist sermon by Rev.

Sanders in response to the Black Lives Matter protests in May 2020:

> "It says "Sermon"…but this isn't really a sermon. I just want to talk to you about several
> things … We are not physically together… I even planned to wear this new Georgia
> Peach stole…[remove stole]… It is why …[I] will not conduct business as usual, even on
> Outgathering Sunday… Pentecost Sunday…[and] the one year anniversary of the day
> you called me (31 May 2020, emphasis mine)."

Before reading the joint statement made by Unitarian Universalist Atlanta-area

congregations in response to the protests, the preacher removes her vestments symbolic of

religious identity and authority: the normality of a sermon, the physical space and in-person

community, the stole, and even the ritual calendar. By performatively renouncing the

institutional trapping that constitutes identity, Rev. Sanders speaks from her position in space

and time on the pulpit while also seemingly placing herself on the same level as her community.

The manner of speech is also quite different than their other sermons, stepping away from the

persona of a preacher and teacher to reveal intimate thoughts and struggles regarding the state of

the world. As she shifts towards the more personal and symbolically gives up her power of

authority, she appears more authentic and in tune with the community. As a minister and

chaplain, Rev. Sanders was called to her community to reflect and encourage the value of the

congregation. In order to build authenticity for herself and the people whom she represents, contributing to political activism and proclaiming a stance holds move value when she is not seen as an untouchable moral superior.

Instead of the emphasis on sin found in more conservative denominations, the liberal sermons also looked toward doubt as an architect of authenticity. While doubt is acknowledged as authentic in conservative communities, it is almost a type of sin expressing of lack of trust in God, rather than a virtue to be encouraged. Below is a sample of a liberal Christian sermon exploring the resurrection of Jesus:

> "There are those who find great comfort in the proofs of the resurrection that are intended to erase all doubts so that we can rest assured that our faith is based on rock-solid facts. But are you certain? Have you always been certain? <u>Be honest</u>: are there times when you are not so sure? Do you ever find that things you once felt very sure about feel less certain now? And when you feel uncertain, do you begin to hear those <u>accusatory voices from those who feel very certain</u> about things – never had a doubt – always believed it – saying something like this: "If you don't feel certain about the resurrection of Jesus or at least as certain as you SHOULD or at least as certain about this as I do you better open up your BIBLE and reread the story (4 April 2021, emphasis mine)."

For the liberal Christians, doubt offers pathways for personal growth, critical thinking, and even spiritual reflection. For congregants seeking a more nuanced and personal understanding of their identity, accepting and exploring doubts can lead to meaningful faith experiences and in some cases, a stronger conviction of one's personal faith and practices. In this quote, the preacher is not attempting to convince the congregation to deny Jesus's resurrection. After all, that is a core tenet of the Christian faith. What they are asking is that the audience recognizes that certainty is not always possible and not always useful.

The preacher goes on to observe how additional chapters were added to Mark's Gospel to offer a higher level of scriptural proof. But these additional chapters were not part of the

authentic message of Mark and the original, as told by the reverend, "gives us more than certainty; it gives us possibility." This means that the story of Easter as told by Mark encourages exploration and interpretation, rather than strict and unchangeable "rock solid facts". When the reverend asks his community to "be honest," he is asking them to confess their honesty. This is in contrast to the "accusatory voices from those who feel very certain" and their displays of confidence. The reverend sees this confidence as dishonest because doubt is universal and useful because through doubt, congregants "heard and could understand something new about God." This openness to interpretation and the embrace of uncertainty is seen as a valuable aspect of the Easter story, as it provides space for individuals to form their own connections, rather than being given them, with the narrative and to find meaning and inspiration within it.

There are still limits to what can be accepted as useful forms of doubt. In certain instances, the sermons did characterize doubt as a sin or something to be cautious of:

> "That's what Satan did to Adam and Eve in the garden! He caused them to doubt God's love and question God's promises."

In core teachings of Christianity such as the accuracy of the Bible, the divinity of Jesus, or the existence of God, doubt is often acceptable. However, excessive doubt can be a sign of spiritual turmoil or lack of faith that requires exercising caution. The reason that this example infringes on an accepted doubt is that Adam and Eve doubt God's love and promises to the end result of letting go of their commitment to God. Extended to the preacher's modern audience, it is not simply personal doubt about overall religious accuracy or an even more encouraged questioning of the preacher's interpretations, authority, or authenticity. It is the equivalent of fully abandoning their established relationship with the higher power.

In Unitarian Universalist communities, doubt is also seen as a necessary aspect of religious exploration, however, it is not used as a marker of authenticity. Unitarian Universalists are known for the encouragement of individual expression of belief, and as a result, many members currently or have previously struggled with questions of spirituality. Rather than shying away from doubt, UU sermons often encourage individuals to embrace their questions and to use them as opportunities for personal discovery. In this way, doubt is seen not as a hindrance, but as a key component of a thriving spiritual life. For this reason, confession in UU sermons does not center sin or doubt and instead holds a more complex space in the community.

In conclusion, engaging in a confessional manner of preaching has the ability to unify the sermon's audience, regardless of their personal beliefs. Even witnessing the tritest confession made by a celebrity, humans are often sympathetic to someone willing to disclose personal failure. For liberal Christian and Unitarian Universalist communities, confessions center a communal narrative regardless of whether it is supported by a preacher's individual experience or expressions of community action. For conservative Christians, an acknowledgment of sin contributes to the dominant form of authenticity appeals seeking primarily to subvert apprehension and minimize the appearance of moral support. In order to achieve these same goals, progressive communities rely on personal and emotional disclosures and doubt, making a virtue of necessity.

The Preacher as the Subject

It is generally accepted that sermons require the use of examples in order to illustrate their message. A sermon is usually delivered by one person and while it is shared communally, the preacher's own life and outlook play an important role in the performance of their sermon. Being able to invoke private experiences, opinions, and feelings in order to articulate an

autobiographical voice builds a community's emotional investment in a preacher and engages people to return. Especially in a space where a preacher's authentic personality is akin to the validity of their message, their personal narrative is required to reach their audience.

It's important to note that while some preachers may rely heavily on personal experiences and opinions, others may place a greater emphasis on a text-based approach. It is, however, a mistake to classify a subjective sermonic voice as the opposite experience of a text-based sermon. Many preachers will use a combination of both subjective and text-based elements in their sermons, depending on the context and audience. For example, a preacher may begin with a personal anecdote to introduce the theme of the sermon and then draw upon relevant biblical passages or other texts to provide additional support for their message. In other cases, a preacher may primarily rely on text-based sources such as the Bible but use personal examples or stories to illustrate or contextualize the message. I observed this to predominantly be a stylistic difference and while certain preachers had obvious preferences, it was not always conducive to generalizations across conservative, liberal, or Unitarian Universalist boundaries.

In the liberal and Unitarian Universalist sermons, anecdotes mark the beginning of many of the sermons. Primarily, these anecdotes are used as hooks that connect loosely to the overall theme. The main difference seen between the two was that in the liberal sermons, the anecdotes were often dropped quickly and were infrequently referenced at later points. The Unitarian Universalist sermons were more likely to use much longer personal narratives and regularly return to them as a source. One example of a hook used by the Lutheran congregation follows a trip taken by the reverend and his wife:

> "Dawn and I just got back from spending a week and a half in the Pacific Northwest witnessing the epic power of two elemental forces the tamer versions of which we all encounter every day. Wind and water… …In our Gospel today we find Jesus and his

> disciles facing the threats of wind and water as they journey out on the Sea of Galilee"
> (20 June 2021, emphasis mine).

While acting as a hook, this personal anecdote plays two major roles: it allows the preacher to share personal information and it gives the audience insight into the theme of the sermon. In the chosen quote, the preacher assumes that his community will already recognize "Dawn" as his wife. This implies that the congregation is familiar with the preacher's personal life and reinforces the idea that they are part of a shared community with shared experiences. It also introduces presumed new personal information, the recent trip this preacher took. This insight into their life strengthens the connection between the preacher and congregation as it sets a tone of familiarity and comfortability blurring the line between the preacher's private life and public role.

Once the audience is hooked, the preacher transitions from the description of their vacation to introducing the theme: the power of wind and water. This theme is then further connected to the scriptural source, the biblical story of Jesus and the threat of wind and water on the Sea of Galilee. By anchoring a theme or scripture into something personal and relatable, the preacher captures the attention of the audience and invites them to reflect on how a chosen topic can seem more accessible when connected to concrete experiences. When preachers begin with scripture, there are additional concerns related to maintaining a feeling of relatability to the audience's own life.

The Unitarian Universalist anecdotes often begin as a hook and are then interwoven throughout the sermon. As Rev. Housh Gordon starts her sermon she begins by introducing herself as a dancer even if:

> "I was on crutches for six weeks after that [skating] incident, and I loved every minute of
> it. I had never felt more graceful, swinging around on those crutches like a monkey

leaping through the trees. And so I was, crutches and all… Graceful as anyone else, and just as clumsy, too" (1 February 2015).

Rev. Housh Gordon includes her narrative as a dancer that begins from birth until her discovery of ballet classes, even though "when I wasn't dancing, I was… not… the picture of grace." Transition to the question that is being grappled with the reverend invokes Rev. William Sloane Coffin, a 20th-century faith leader and civil rights and peace activist who remarked that "It is often said that the Church is a crutch. Of course it's a crutch. What makes you think you don't limp?" In the following sermon, Rev. Housh Gordon grapples with the question "What makes us think we don't limp?" as it applies to her faith community. She concludes:

> "Our community is indeed a <u>holy, beloved crutch</u>, and we are all limping together toward our dream of love made real. How beautiful it is. How hopeful. How full of grace! (1 February 2015, emphasis mine)"

Rev. Housh Gordon's anecdote is entwined with both the concept of grace and how it may be found even limping on crutches. She paints a picture of Unitarian Universalist communities as a "holy, beloved crutch" that supports and helps people as they navigate the challenges of life. The idea of limping is also significant because it implies a sense of humility and self-awareness. It acknowledges that by embracing our limps, the community is able to move towards a shared goal of love and acceptance. The use of the crutch metaphor, which is often used in a negative way to describe the church, is turned on its head, and the idea of being supported by a community is reframed as a positive and necessary part of life.

In the conservative sermons, the reverend's personal style initially seems to shift away from anecdotes in favor of historical and pop culture references. In instances where he does use his private experiences, he seems to ask permission by expressing that "I've tried to stay away from the antidotal. [But] I'm going to break out a couple" (8 May 2022) in another moment he

states that "I'm trying to stay away from the anecdotal stories because there's so many of them and stick to the scripture" (8 May 2022). Additionally, when he does choose to use anecdotes, they tend to be relatively long compared to other non-scriptural sources that are used. The clearest example, measuring approximately 500 words, details one summer when Rev. Harling believes he witnessed the protection of an angel for a young special needs child, Charlie:

> "What we didn't know was right above our heads was a huge hornet's nest. So we become aware. Oh man, we're getting nailed. So my other friend and I, we take off, and we're running for the door, and we get out of there finally. Along the way, we get nailed several times. We turn around, and oh my goodness, Charlie is still in there … Everyone in that hive of hornets bypassed him, the closest one, and they jumped me and my friend. Now, that's my case as it is for possibly there are guardian angels, especially for the vulnerable, especially for the weak, especially for the young" (8 May 2022, emphasis mine).

In many ways, this anecdote seeks a similar response to the other examples. It is personal and connected to the topic of the sermon in a way that engages the audience and retains their interest. The major difference is that this experience is being used as evidence of the supernatural. The liberal Christian and Unitarian Universalist sermons I read did not use anecdotes as evidence of the validity of their faith in this way. It is likely that this type of argument is more commonly found in conservative Christian sermons, which tend to place a greater emphasis on divine intervention in everyday life. The focus is often on the idea that God or other supernatural entities are actively involved in the world, and that individuals can rely on this intervention to guide and protect them.

In my interview with Rev. Harling, he explained that anecdotes have become increasingly useful to his ministry throughout the Covid pandemic, especially while services were held exclusively online. In accordance, he has also spent more time on the introduction in an attempt to arouse attention. Scripture is almost a requirement in a Christian service, but it is also something expected. This familiarity can pose a challenge to the preacher as their congregation

knows what to expect to the point where they stop listening. Personal stories, like pop culture and historical references, benefit from existing outside of a strictly Christian frame and pulling the unexpected into Christian truths that are repeated weekly. This creative use of language allows the preacher to refashion their truths and expand on them in a way that keeps people engaged.

There is also an ongoing worry when engaging multi-generational audiences. According to Rev. Harling, older members of his congregation who have been attending the same church for decades expect a depth to his interpretation or they will tune him out and question "why they came for surface-level truths." On the other hand, if he "digs too deep, I'll lose some people who came for salvation" (Interview). One answer to this dilemma has been to pull anecdotal experience or personal opinion which keeps the interpretation feeling new while also allowing Rev. Harling to teach theology that some may not be familiar with.

In other instances, the preacher's personal experience was tied to community action. This manifests as a persuasive technique for encouraging community or social justice involvement. As the preacher highlights their own participation in the event, they also appear authentically Christian or Unitarian Universalist. As examples of conservative anecdotes that achieve this goal, I have selected two, which follow:

> "Now, I know guys, <u>because I've been there too</u>, you don't really want to go on a marriage retreat. That's really not what you have on your list typically, but I'll make you a promise, <u>because I went to too many of those before ministry days</u> that were either cheesy or put me in a position I thought was the most awkward in the world" (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

This first example follows a direct request for the men in the congregation to ask their wives to attend a marriage retreat hosted by the church for "brownie points" despite a presumed disinterest. In order to make this point, Rev. Harling uses an anecdote to encourage other men in

the congregation to commit to the retreat. By acknowledging that he has been in their position as

an attendee and layperson, his goal is to strengthen the connection he has with his community.

He also invokes strong gender stereotypes that assign value or "brownie point" by acquiescing to

the call for action.

> "And I think this week … a hundred and something of you around the 400 kids that were here…On my way up here to start greeting people out front on Monday morning, I was following a lady [and] …on her own initiative, she's praying for everybody who would be going through those doors…<u>I wish that everybody could have seen what we saw</u> on Wednesday morning when the challenge was given to those children, and they just start <u>streaming to come to Christ</u>" (12 June 2022, emphasis mine).

The second example shows how Rev. Harling reports on an event he witnessed to

highlight the positive impact of his ministry and community on people's lives. He shares a story

of a successful event that drew in many children and resulted in a significant response of people

"streaming to come to Christ" and expresses a desire that everyone could have experienced it. By

describing the scene and the emotions he felt, he creates a vivid image of a transformative

experience that people who were absent may also want to experience in the future. Moreover, the

way Rev. Harling calls out and praises the woman who prayed for people entering the church is a

powerful way of affirming the Christian values of the community. He reinforces the idea that

genuine acts of kindness and faith are essential to the church's mission and that they should be

recognized and celebrated. By doing so, he appears invested and aware of the people in his

community and also reinforces his own authority as a minister and the authority of the church as

a whole.

In both examples, personal stories are used to connect the individual experiences of the

preacher with the broader mission and values of the church. This helps to create a sense of unity

and purpose, and it reinforces the idea that the church is not just a place for worship, but a

community that supports and empowers its members. Conservative sermons generally stress the influence of community and fellowship, often with a focus on the church as a central part of an individual's life. Their sermons also emphasize the importance of maintaining a strong and committed relationship with God and the church community. The preacher's role is both to provide an example for practicing this pursuit but also to encourage it in their listener. In Rev. Harling's use of anecdotes, the primary goal seems to be strengthening the connection between himself and his church by sharing personal experiences and connecting them to the larger community. By doing so, he aims to inspire others to act, whether it is by attending a marriage retreat or participating in a community event. Additionally, Rev. Harling reinforces the idea that the preacher is someone who has a genuine interest in the well-being of their congregation.

A call for action is also true in Unitarian Universalist sermons. As a minister, taking part in community activism plays a significant role in the practice of their faith through the seventh pillar to respect "the interdependent web of all existence of which we are a part" (UUA). Practicing a faith tradition requires being in community with others and for Unitarian Universalists, it is often emphasized that the minister is there to serve as a representation of the community's values. At the height of the 2020 Black Lives Matter protests Rev. Sanders stated:

> "Thinking about the sacredness of your yes vote on calling me to serve with you is a big part of why I was in the streets of Atlanta bearing your name this weekend. I was not there to declare myself an ally to the black lives that matter, because ally is not an honor I can bestow upon myself, it is earned and accepted from the people in the margins, not me. But I was there because YOU, Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation, called me to be there. Not here. Not in this empty building we all love. You didn't call me to a building or a location. You called me to a mission, a set of principles, and a covenant with you." (31 May 2020, emphasis mine).

One of the noticeable aspects of this statement is the emphasis on "YOU," the community, expounding Rev. Sander's argument that the minister is a role that acts only on the

basis of the explicit desires and principles of their congregation. Not only does Rev. Sanders defend ministry as a position that will take action, but she sees that act as tangible proof of dedication. By framing her participation in the Atlanta protests as an extension of the community's mission and values, she underscores the idea that the minister's role is to serve the congregation rather than impose their own agenda. At the same time, the minister still holds a position of power within the community. In this moment of personal reflection, Rev. Sanders engages in a ritual divestment of authority. She emphasizes the empty building and the absence of the trappings of a minister. In this rhetorical move towards authenticity, it is the shared experiences and values that tie the community together instead of symbols.

While this may register as the dismissal of authority, realistically the reverend is still in a position of power in her ministry and location on the pulpit as speaker. One aspect of that authority is the ability to generalize about the community. Unitarian Universalists base their mission on shared principles and a covenant. Many Christian churches also recognize a covenant whose content and form vary depending on the goals of its community. A preacher's authority is a shared relationship that is invoked by that community. When Rev. Sanders expresses that they were "bearing [Northwest Unitarian Universalist Congregation's] name," they were presenting themselves as a representative for the entirety of the community. The preacher has a responsibility to recognize the voices of their audience but also is forced to strike a delicate balance between listening to and representing the needs of their congregation while also exercising leadership and guidance.

Often times a preacher will communicate their own opinion in a way that asks the community if they are willing to agree:

"I know that Unitarian Universalists are non-creedal and we don't take kindly to people handing us a list of rules, but this is one I think most of us could get on board with if we added it to our list of principles right about now, couldn't we? We affirm and promote our right and responsibility to REST! (19 April 2020, emphasis mine)"

Through Rev. Sander's sermonic messages, community involvement, and other ministries, she builds an implied consensus that allows for tastes to become shared and sacred. This is also the case in Christian communities such as the Rev. Harling's belief in angels:

"My personal belief is I have no doubt. I know for sure that angels on occasions have, and probably still do, step into the invisible realm to protect us or protect others, and we most likely never know about that. (8 May 2022, emphasis mine)"

Rev. Harling's example shows that his authority as a minister sometimes allows his personal opinion to encourage the group. He uses language such as "I have no doubt" and "I know for sure" which, while personal, are likely widely accepted beliefs within the community as more controversial opinions would be met with less strong language. By presenting his personal belief as a widely held truth, Rev. Harling is leveraging his position as a religious authority to shape the beliefs and attitudes of the congregation.

Preachers often seek to guide their congregation on a path of spiritual and moral growth, and in doing so, they may draw from their own experiences to make the message more relatable. By sharing personal anecdotes and opinions, the preacher can establish a sense of authenticity and build emotional investment among the congregation. When the preacher demonstrates how the sermon's theme has played out in their own life, it also becomes more tangible and easier to understand. The preacher's own life and opinions become a model for the community, as they balance connection and action with a personal investment in growth. Moving from personal experience to a model in a community, preachers balance community connection and action as someone with an invested interest in growth. Finally, acting as a representative of the values

shared by the community, preachers make decisions with permission that hinges on authenticity to shared principles. Through their sermons, community involvement, and other ministries, preachers make decisions that are authentic to the shared principles and values of the community.

<div align="center">Informality and Formality</div>

Tonally, a religious service is made up of serious moments of liturgy, so the contrasting prominence of informality in sermons may seem initially surprising. Religious communities often call for authenticity without recognizing what they mean. When some ask for authenticity, they mean the dismissal of formality. Formal requirements are posed as indicators of fakeness and intellectualism while informality is a benchmark for honesty and openness. Casual attire, colloquial or humorous language, and looser structure denote that everyone is practicing an 'authentic' religion. However, it is problematic to simplify anything that feels formal, and conceivably unfamiliar, as unsuitable for authentic worship. The existence of these two tones, the informal and the formal, each have a place but must be balanced carefully.

A formal language is a polished form of expression that is commonly used in religious services to convey respect, reverence, and solemnity. It is characterized by the use of sophisticated vocabulary or jargon and syntax and tends to adopt an impersonal tone, using fewer personal pronouns. Formal language also tends to avoid the use of contractions and slang and instead relies on standardized expressions. While formal language is expected in liturgy, moments of prayer, or when quoting scripture, its main defining characteristic is its tonal contrast with informal language. It is not uncommon for liturgy or prayer to maintain a level of conversational word choice or uncomplex sentence production, however, the invocation of

formal language during these moments serves to add an element of gravity to the proceedings. An example from a Methodist sermon is as follows:

> "So today, instead of maligning those who do not live up to their vows of discipleship, <u>may we come</u> to this table in thanksgiving for those who have, and want to continue, to be <u>disciples of our Lord Jesus</u> Christ. Let us pray: <u>O living God</u>, <u>send your Holy Spirit upon your people</u>…<u>All this we ask in thanks and praise</u> of your Messiah, Jesus Christ. Amen" (4 September 2022, emphasis mine).

Informal language is distinguished by a more relaxed and casual tone, its use of everyday vocabulary, and its emphasis on personal connection and relatability. Informal language can take various forms, including colloquialisms, slang, contractions, abbreviations, personal pronouns, simpler vocabulary, and less complex sentence structure. In American preaching, informality can be traced as another legacy of Finney's profound impact on American culture. Today, informality is frequently used by religious leaders in more contemporary religious spaces where a personal connection between the speaker and the audience is desired. Often, informal language is seen as an important tool for connecting with younger or less traditional members of the community and can help to make the religious experience accessible to a wider audience. The Southern Baptist sermons frequently use informal language such as the example below:

> "You want to hear my favorite? I love the story where an angel or two go in in the wee hours of the morning before the sun comes up, and this huge boulder, maybe two tons. We don't know. They take it, and just like a Lego toy they roll it away from this tomb, so that a king can emerge. That is my favorite" (8 May 2022).

Within the whole of a service, sermons often appear as a marked moment of informality. While much of the genre is made of standardized ritual or communal action, a sermon is an opportunity for the speaker to address the congregation directly and share their thoughts or insights on a particular topic. One argument is that the recipient of that liturgical language is a higher power and thus requires more formal acknowledgment. Features such as "flippancy,

carelessness in speech and colloquialism are not appropriate" (Crystal 150). Another is that events that occur at a higher frequency, especially ritualized actions, are more likely to maintain a conservative structure because the reoccurrence strengthens the memory of the event as a whole.

The second argument observes a pattern that explains the purpose of formulaic clustering and the absence of liturgical and formal language from the everyday. By those familiar with it, the formal register of religious utterances is commonly recognized within its string of familiar contexts but is nonsense outside of a religious space. The predictive ability makes the vocative prefix "O" prior to "living God" and other antiquated language like 'thy', 'art', behold', 'praise be', 'whom' accessible. Even familiar words may occur syntactically in more formal positions. In the liberal examples, the revered uses "disciples of our Lord" rather than "our Lord's disciples". He also states, "All this we ask in thanks and praise of" instead of "we ask all of this in thanks and praise of" (4 September 2022). Unlike modern language, antiquated language is performed as a series of small closely knit clusters that by virtue of repetition seem to equate to a single, largely unalterable, unit that amounts to a complete meaning.

Lower frequency events showcase an opposite pattern where they must adapt to the present at a higher consistency in order for its participants to understand. In a sermon, where there is a new topic, theme, and source application every week, modern language and examples are required to hold people's attention and comprehension. In the Christian sermons, moments of formality where scripture or prayer are invoked are often followed directly by a joke or explanation expressed in a reduced manner. Below is an example from a conservative sermon:

> "Mark 1:13…We don't understand all the implications of that, but God decides then to say, "Hey, if you're having your way down there, how do you explain Job?" (15 May 2022).

A similar event occurs in Unitarian Universalist sermons where the source must be explained to the audience.

> "As Emily Dickinson wrote:
> *Hope is the thing with feathers –*
> *That perches in the soul –*
> *And sings the tune without the words –*
> *And never stops – at all…*
> But what is Hope?...We are talking here about spiritual Hope – the one with a capital H. We are not talking about lower case hope – I hope I get that job, I hope I get a pair of ice skates for Christmas, I hope Jimmy asks me to the prom. Those are wishes, desires, that will or will not be fulfilled. It is fine to use the word hope for them, as long as we don't get them mixed up with our spirituality, with our way of being in the world" (6 January 2019).

Communities that rely on significant amounts of formal elements also employ a sharper contrast between the formal and informal. Figure (1) demonstrates that the conservative communities frequently used shorter words and sentences. Using an online word counter, it was also determined that in combination, these features reflect an assigned lower reading level.

1. Figure One: Lexical and syntactic complexity in sermons

Lexical and Syntactic Complexity in Sermons
Conservative   Liberal   Unitarian Universalist
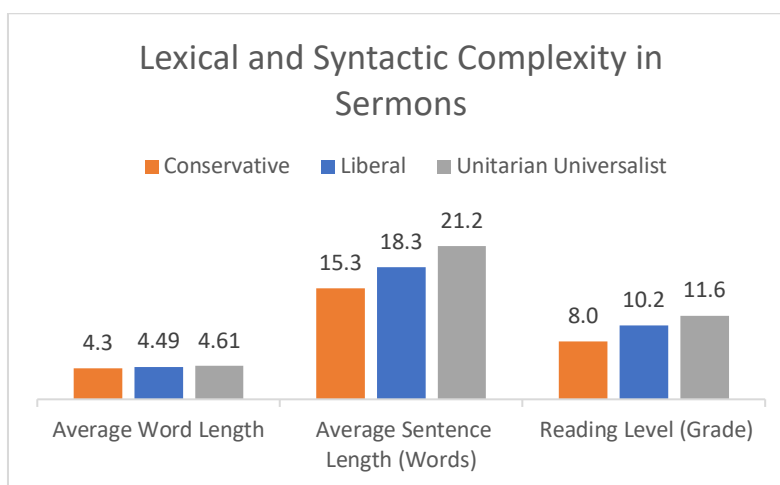
Tonally, informality bridges the gap between source and the modern world by closing the distance between more formal elements of the service and the personal connection that the speaker is trying to establish. This contrast between formal and informal language can be an effective way to create a dynamic and engaging service that resonates with the audience, while also conveying the gravity and reverence that is appropriate in a religious context.

Chapter Conclusion

Functionally, a sermon's value is relative to the preacher's ability to convince their audience that their message is worth listening to. Authenticity is an effect that can be created by preachers as they meet their congregation where they are.

By demonstrating vulnerability and humility through public confessionals, preachers create an environment of openness and honesty that encourages congregants to engage with their faith on a deeper level. However, confession is empty if it is not being used for something productive. Simply connecting on a level of sin is an incomplete relationship and can reinforce negative self-image and self-doubt. Confessing or acknowledging flaws without taking steps toward growth and change can be unproductive and ultimately harmful. Personal and communal growth requires an active commitment to change, and a willingness to work towards specific goals and objectives. Each community is responsible for deciding what techniques and strategies work best for them in their personal growth journey. Nevertheless, it's important to keep in mind the potential downsides of focusing too much on sin and flaws and to strive for a well-rounded and productive approach to self-improvement and personal relationships.

Sharing personal anecdotes and beliefs can increase the listener's perception of the preacher's authenticity by demonstrating that their convictions are not simply recited from a script but are based on personal experiences and contemplation. This can help to build tighter

bonds with the congregation as it creates a sense of shared understanding and empathy. Although personal anecdotes may play a more sacred role in Unitarian Universalist sermons, their primary use is to connect the sources employed by a community, such as scripture or other texts, to real-life experiences and challenges. By drawing on personal anecdotes and beliefs, preachers can create a more engaging and relevant message for their congregation, making their teachings more relatable and applicable to everyday life. Overall, sharing personal anecdotes and beliefs is a valuable tool for preachers seeking to increase their authenticity and connect with their congregation on a more personal level.

Finally, mixing formal and informal language creates an approachable persona that fosters a sense of community and belonging within the religious institution. Formal language can be used to convey the seriousness and depth of the message being delivered, while informal language can be used to make the message more accessible and relatable to the congregation. Juxtaposing language styles can also create a sense of balance and nuance in the message being delivered. Too much formality can create a sense of distance and separation between the preacher and the congregation, while too much informality can undermine the seriousness and importance of the message. This mix of language styles can create a more approachable and personable preacher, which can help to build stronger bonds with the congregation and provides a balance that creates an environment of authenticity and engagement.

In conclusion, the use of a mix of formal and informal language, personal anecdotes and beliefs, and public confessionals can all contribute to a preacher's ability to build authenticity and connect with their congregation on a personal level. By using these techniques effectively in combination, preachers can create an environment of openness, honesty, and community that encourages congregants to engage with their faith on a deeper level.

<u>Chapter Five: Conclusion</u>

Whether through spoken word or written text, language is a powerful tool that enables spiritual leaders to engage with their faith and inspire others to do the same. Sermons, among other forms of expression, play a significant role in establishing a mindful and shared community, enabling leaders to convey important messages and inspire others. This paper began with three guiding questions: (1) How does a preacher create their audience? (2) How do preachers use their sources to create a single sacred space and ascribe values and goals to their community? (3) Why does the audience perceive the preacher and community's values and goals as worthwhile? While this paper is not an exhaustive analysis of sermons, these three chapters do reveal rhetorical and linguistic techniques that contribute to a shared sense of community, identity, and values established regardless of temporal or spatial distance, generational differences, or cultural diversity.

As an audience-centered performance, I first observed how preachers connect to their in-group and implicitly build an out-group from the pulpit. Their language shapes the audience's identity and through illocutionary force in their speech acts, alters their communal response. Preachers also draw from a range of sources, including religious texts, personal experience, and non-scriptural tools, to create a sacred space that resonates with their audience. In doing so, they attach values and goals to their community that reflect their beliefs and serve as a source of guidance and inspiration. Finally, the audience perceives the preacher's performance as worthwhile because they characterize themselves as authentic and approachable.

Future research should focus on expanding the sample size in order to strengthen generalizations and enhance the validity and reliability of the findings. A larger sample size can increase the statistical power of the analysis and reduce the likelihood of chance findings. With a

larger sample size, researchers can also identify patterns and relationships between different variables. This can help to better understand the impact of different factors on the content and delivery of sermons, such as the preacher's denomination, gender, age, location, as well as the size and demographics of the congregation.

Another source for expansion could also occur by including more performative aspects of religious language. While written sermons provide valuable insights into the content and structure of religious discourse, they do not capture the full range of communicative cues that are present. Factors such as physical movement, intonation, and tonal variation can all contribute to how the preacher is perceived by the audience and can significantly impact the effectiveness of the message. Future research can therefore benefit from observing video recordings or audio recordings of live sermons in order to capture these nonverbal cues. By analyzing these additional aspects of religious discourse, researchers can gain a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of religious communication and how they shape the audience's experience and interpretation of the message. Incorporating more performative aspects of religious language can also help researchers to better understand the relationship between the preacher and the audience, and how this relationship impacts the delivery and reception of the message.

Religious language has a unique ability to convey meaning and create a sense of shared experience, particularly in the context of a spiritual community. By studying the techniques that preachers use to communicate with their audience, we can develop a better understanding of the power of language to shape our beliefs and perceptions. By listening carefully to preachers and other spiritual leaders, I found a deeper appreciation for the values and beliefs that guide their communities and gained insights into my own spiritual journey. Moreover, a better understanding of religious language can help us to be more effective communicators and build

stronger, more connected communities in all areas of our lives. Moving forward, I aspire to always strive to continuously enhance my listening skills and deeply appreciate the intricate power and subtlety of language.

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