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SECTS AND GENDER: REACTION AND RESISTANCE TO CULTURAL CHANGE

The 2015 Winifred E. Weter Faculty Award Lecture

Seattle Pacific University

April 14, 2015



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by

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Introduction: A Tale of Two Baptists

Throughout American history, gender theologies have been used to signify a religious organization's level of tension to the surrounding culture. As a result, religious organizations have changed their gender theologies in response to cultural change. This process can be illustrated by a tale of two Baptists. Invigorated by the First Great Awakening of the 1740s, a robust American tradition of female piety was born. Revivalists broke with Puritan orthodoxy that equated Christianity to a hierarchical family—men in leadership over subordinate women. The revivalists, instead, envisioned a new covenant—one that emphasized individual rebirth within a community that was related, not by biological ties, but by the grace of the saved. Within the bond of spiritual fellowship, the revivalists affirmed that men and women, rich and poor, lettered and ignorant (Juster 1994), were as capable as ordained clergy of discerning spiritual truth, leading to communities of relative egalitarianism.

The revivalist spirit had significant implications for Colonial Baptists. Rejecting the hierarchical Puritan ideals of gender, Baptist women in the mid- to late-eighteenth century served along with men in unprecedented access to the formal and informal channels of Baptist governance and authority. Women participated in all major decisions of collective governance, including the election and dismissal of ministers, the admitting and excluding of members, the vociferous theological debates regarding the nature of conversion and the qualifications for membership (Juster 1994). In the mid- to late-eighteenth century, Baptist women's religious authority posed a challenge to the hierarchical mainline denominations—the Anglicans, Presbyterians, and Congregationalists.

More than 200 years later, the largest Baptist organization in the United States, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), made headlines when they changed their Statement of Faith

and Message for the first time in their history. The SBC “overwhelmingly voted against having women serve as pastors, despite the fact that many women were already serving as pastors” in SBC congregations (Ingersoll 2003:47). Their new faith statement was revised to say, “While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor is limited to men as qualified by Scripture” (Southern Baptist Convention 2000).

This shift in Baptist theology represents the ways in which gender has come to symbolize an ideological divide within American Protestantism. The divide rests on the idea of *tension* between the denominations and the culture. Both Colonial and twentieth-century Baptist movements stood in opposition to the secular and established religious cultures. Both used gender as a measure of orthodoxy. Yet the outcomes were very different. Reacting to the cultural norm of patriarchy, Colonial-era Baptists *adopted egalitarian gender ideals*, putting them in *higher tension* to the culture. Reacting to the cultural norm of equality, twentieth-century Baptists *adopted hierarchical gender ideals*, putting them in *higher tension* to the culture.

The theological shifts represented by these Baptist movements illustrate the *social* nature of religious organization, exemplified by sect-church theory. Sect-church theory explains that religious organizations “range along a continuum from complete rejection to complete acceptance” of the cultural environment (Johnson 1963:542). Sect-like religious organizations reject the social environment in which they exist, placing them in *higher* tension with their environment. Church-like organizations accept the social environment in which they exist, placing them in *lower* tension with their environment (Finke and Stark 2005, Johnson 1963, Niebuhr 1929, Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Stark and Finke 2000). In rejecting cultural gender norms sect-like religious bodies often maintain higher tension to the society by adopting strict gender beliefs and practices. Because they are extensive, exclusive, and expensive, strict

religious groups often enjoy higher levels of growth, strong member commitment, and high member satisfaction.

This lecture will proceed in four parts. Part I clarifies the two general narratives of American Protestant gender theologies and sect-church theory. Part II describes historic shifts in gender theologies as a response to cultural change, explaining how Christian groups increase or decrease their level of tension with the larger culture. Part III reviews a contemporary example of a sect-like congregation, illustrating what happens when a strict gender theology does not shift in the midst of significant social change. I then conclude with some thoughts on sociology and faith.

Sex and Gender

Before reviewing gender shifts in American Christianity, it's important to clearly delineate gender from sex. Social scientists¹ distinguish between “sex” and “gender” as concepts. “Sex” refers to the biological characteristics that distinguish females and males, emphasizing anatomy, physiology, hormones, and reproductive systems (the use of “male” and “female” are the appropriate words when referring to sex differences). Sex differences, because they are rooted in biology, are universal across time and place. “Gender” refers to the social, cultural, and psychological traits linked to females and males (“women” and “men” are the appropriate terms when discussing gender). Gender differences vary significantly across time and place because they are socially constructed . Distinguishing these concepts allows us to measure the differences between biological characteristics of males and females and the cultural characteristics of women and men (McKinney and Neuhouser 2013).

¹ Biologists, geneticists, neuroscientists, and others who study sex and/or gender also define these concepts as distinctive.

PART I: GENDER THEOLOGIES AND SECT-CHURCH THEORY

Gender Theologies

Throughout Christian history two narratives have been articulated regarding gender. The most well-documented, and perhaps criticized, is the “tradition in which gender relations are organized by the principles of hierarchy and subordination” (Gallagher 2004:218). Gallagher (2004) illustrates this strain of belief citing early church fathers (Augustine, Ignatius, Tertullian, Aquinas) who mirrored their own Greco-Roman culture which was predisposed to misogyny. These church fathers stated that women did not bear the full image of God (Augustine), that women were the means through which Adam was deceived (Ignatius), that women were the devil’s gateway (Tertullian), or that women were misbegotten men (Aquinas). This narrative is the root from which today’s conservative Christians adopt gender essentialism (the idea that women and men were created differently in essence) and hierarchy (men are the head and women are subordinate). Today, this narrative relies on the apostle Paul’s teachings stating that women should keep silent in the churches (1 Corinthians 14:34), that man is the head of the woman (1 Corinthians 11:3), and “Let the woman learn in silence with all subjection. But I suffer not a woman to teach, nor to usurp authority over the man, but to be in silence” (1 Timothy 2:11-12) (Brekus 2009).

A second narrative may be less well-known, but also enjoys a long history. This narrative emphasizes partnership and mutuality between women and men (Gallagher 2004), and relies on the apostle Paul’s teaching that “in Christ there is neither Jew nor Greek; male nor female; slave nor free” (Galatians 3:28). Proponents cite heroines who spread the good news of Christ, like Mary Magdalene, Philip’s four daughters, Priscilla, and Phoebe (Brekus 2009). They also point out Paul’s inconsistencies, arguing that if women were forbidden from preaching, Paul would not have instructed them to cover their heads when praying or prophesying in public (1 Corinthians

11:5) (Brekus 2009), nor would he have given spiritual authority to Priscilla in the teaching of Apollos (Acts 18:24-26). Church fathers like Tertullian (the same who taught “woman is the devil’s gateway”) are also cited for challenging authoritarian models of marriage by urging mutuality between husbands and wives (Gallagher 2004).²

The question most often asked is which narrative is the correct one, that is, which is the true biblical perspective. That’s a theological and hermeneutical question. As a sociologist, I ask different question: “Why do Christian groups change their gender theologies?” this question is critical because the fact that Christians do change their gender interpretations over time strongly suggests that they are responding to changes outside of the scriptures. Underneath these narratives lies an often overlooked element of the *social* nature of religion—how religious groups function in regard to the larger culture. At any given moment in time, religious groups are negotiating their beliefs and actions as a reaction against, or as an accommodation to, the secular culture. Today we see the same phenomenon within American Christianity, where mainline and liberal denominations adopt increasingly *egalitarian* gender ideals and fundamentalist and evangelical (“conservative”) Christian groups adopt increasingly *hierarchical* gender ideals. The aim of sociology is to see social patterns and structures at work in order to critique them—why do the patterns look this way, how are they sustained, how and why do they change? To answer these questions, I turn to an explanation of sect-church theory.

Sect-Church Theory: Tension, Strictness, and Limits to Strictness

According to economist Larry Iannaccone (1988:S268), “Few concepts in the sociology of religion have engendered as much fascination or frustration as those of church and sect.” As concepts that underpin the classification of religious bodies, sect and church—in how they are

² Notice that proponents of both Christian gender narratives draw from the same sources. The first narrative draws on specific statements made by church fathers for gender prescriptions. The second narrative draws from statements from the same church fathers that contradict prescriptions for gender.

defined, applied, and interpreted—have generated significant controversy. Over time definitions of sect and church had devolved into increasingly elaborate typologies that no longer accurately described most real-world religions (Iannaccone 1988, 1994; Johnson 1957, 1963, 1971; Knudsen, Earle, and Shriver 1978).³

By the end of the twentieth century researchers clarified sect and church by using the concepts of *tension* and *strictness*. Stark and Finke (2000:143) proposed that the acceptance or rejection of the surrounding socio-cultural environment could be characterized by the amount of *tension* between religious bodies and the larger culture: “the degree of distinctiveness, separation, and antagonism between a religious group and the ‘outside’ world.” Thus, sect-like bodies exist in relatively higher tension with the surrounding culture and church-like bodies exist in lower tension with the surrounding culture (Stark and Finke 2000).⁴

While the concept of tension gives a clear explication of how sect-like and church-like bodies are arrayed in regard to the larger culture, the pluralistic religious marketplace of the United States requires more definition. At some point, competing religious organizations within the religious market have to differentiate themselves, not only from the larger culture, but from other religious organizations offering similar goods. To account for the success of sectarian movements Iannaccone refined sect-church theory using an additional characteristic: strictness.

For sectarian groups, tension creates strong in-group boundaries, because the group sustains norms and values that are significantly different from those of the surrounding culture (Stark and Bainbridge 1985, Stark and Finke 2000). These distinctive group norms influence all aspects of the lives of the sect’s adherents, creating strict groups, or groups that are extensive, exclusive, and expensive.

³ See Appendix A for an example of the characteristics ascribed to sectarian groups 1910-1978.

⁴ Sect and church as organizational designations operate as “ideal types.” Ideal types function as abstract descriptions of characteristics of a phenomenon. Rarely will a phenomenon perfectly correspond to an ideal type. For example, no religious body can completely reject or completely assimilate to the social environment (see Max Weber, *Economy and Society, Volume I* pages 20-21).

Extensive: The higher the tension between the group and its surrounding environment, the more extensive the *commitment* to the group, allowing doctrine (the collective teachings of the group) to impinge on everything from defining who members associate with to how they spend their leisure time (Stark and Finke 2000).

Exclusive: Protestant religious organizations claim exclusive *beliefs*, worshipping the same god, yet differing greatly regarding what God is like and what is required to be a good Christian. Exclusive Protestant groups recognize only one road to salvation and require a life-changing ‘conversion’ experience for membership (Stark and Finke 2000).

Expensive: Groups impose nonnegotiable demands on members’ behavior (Stark and Finke 2000). In meeting these demands, members pay a high social cost to belong to the group.

Extensive, exclusive, and expensive groups generate higher levels of commitment, solidifying the truth of the group’s doctrine, practices, and promises. Strict groups have higher personal costs that are balanced by the higher personal satisfaction of belonging to a strong religious body—higher costs screen out those whose participation would otherwise be low, while simultaneously increasing participation among those who join (Iannaccone 1994). Members of strict religious groups contribute more money to congregations, attend more services, have stronger beliefs, and are less involved in secular activities/organizations (Iannaccone 1994, Stark and Finke 2000). Strictness does more to explain individual rates of religious participation than any other individual-level characteristic, including age, sex, race, region, income, education, marital status, or even personal beliefs (Iannaccone 1994). This “strict churches are strong” argument has proven to be a powerful predictor of congregational growth, as well as a powerful predictor of the role of gender within a religious group.

Religious organizations do not always benefit from increased strictness, however.

Organizational strictness can result in diminishing returns: increased strictness adds to the attractiveness of a church only because its benefits outweigh its costs. These benefits can take the form of greater group participation, commitment, or solidarity (Iannaccone 1994). While the benefits of a strict group can be significant, they are not infinite. The benefits of strict groups must be set against their costs, which can include stigma, self-sacrifice, and/or social isolation (Iannaccone 1994). Groups can “eventually reach a point beyond which the benefits of increased strictness are outweighed by the costs,” driving away virtually all current and potential members (Iannaccone 1994:1202). Yet maintaining an optimal level of strictness is tricky. To remain strong sect-like groups must maintain a certain tension with society “adjusting to social change so as not to become too deviant, but not embracing change so fully as to lose all distinctiveness” (Iannaccone 1994:1203). Here is where gender plays a critical role.

PART II: GENDER AND SECT-CHURCH THEORY IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY

Gender and Social Structure

One of the most powerful mechanisms through which sect-like groups maintain tension to the larger culture is by adhering to a gender theology that stands in higher tension with the prevailing cultural ideal. Gender has long been a dividing line between sect-like and church-like groups (Gallagher 2003, 2004; Ingersoll 2003), functioning as a central, salient, and effective element of boundary work (Gallagher 2004). For sect-like groups, higher tension is explained as an extension of the apostle Paul’s teaching to be in, but not of the world (Romans 12:2).

Rather than being static, gender ideals are fluid because culture is fluid. As economic, political, or social structures change, gender ideals change, with religious groups rejecting or accepting new ideals. For example, the most powerful predictor of gender—both secular and

religious—is changing economic conditions. When the U.S. shifted from an agrarian to an industrial economy, American gender ideals substantially changed, ushering in the first wave of feminist movement as a protest to increasingly restrictive roles for women. The second wave of feminist movement, the Women’s Liberation movement of the 1970s, resulted in the shift from manufacturing to service economy. During both periods religious groups responded by shifting their gender ideals to maintain a particular level of tension to the culture. A historical perspective allows us to see how sect-like groups versus church-like groups maintain their tension to the culture by rejecting or embracing secular gender ideals. Therefore it is important to understand the tension between religious organizations and culture to see how gender is harnessed as an important boundary marker.

A review of American Christian history demonstrates how and when sect-like groups reacted against the prevailing culture by shifting gender ideals to maintain higher tension with the culture, whereas church-like groups accommodated to new gender ideals remaining in low tension with the culture. This historical perspective is crucial to understanding how gender gets constructed by social forces that lead to Christian groups’ rejection or acceptance of the culture’s gender ideals in order to increase or decrease their tension to the culture. The following review clarifies the social nature of the shifts in American Christian gender ideals by looking at six historical periods highlighting religious groups’ sect-like or church-like response to the culture. These historical periods include the Revolutionary-era, Industrialization, the Progressive-era, the Great Depression, the “long decade” of post-World War II, and the late-twentieth century. The paper then examines a contemporary case study of how gender theologies that maintain higher tension with the culture can create too much tension for members, becoming too strict for the group to survive.

The Upstart Sects: Revolutionary-era Gender Equality, 1790-1840

Throughout American history Christian understandings and practices of gender theologies have shifted as changes have occurred in the larger culture. The largest, most influential denominations of the early-nineteenth century, the Episcopal, Congregationalist, and Presbyterian denominations, restricted women's religious speech and forbade them to preach (Brekus 2009). In fact, in 1832 the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church declared that "to teach and exhort, or to lead in prayer, in public...is clearly forbidden to women in the Holy Oracles" (cited by Brekus 2009:21).

Inspired by the populist rhetoric of the American Revolution "upstart" religious groups rejected the established religious denomination's restrictions on women. Increasing their tension to the larger religious and secular cultures, these upstart Methodists and Baptists supported women in leadership and preaching (Brekus 2009). The "upstart sects"⁵ believed that religious authority came from heartfelt experience (Hatch 1987, Finke and Stark 2005, Brekus 2009). Since God communicated directly to believers, it was just as likely that God could inspire women as well as men to proclaim the gospel (Brekus 2009).⁶ Women participated in governance, as well as preaching at meetings⁷ and exercising their full rights as members of the body (Brekus 2009, Juster 1994). Nothing, however, symbolized the upstart sects' counter-cultural identity more "than their willingness to allow large numbers of women into the pulpit" (Brekus 2009:22). This widening of women's authority drew strident criticism from Episcopal, Congregational, and Presbyterian ministers, many of whom argued for the continued silence of women at religious gatherings (Brekus 2009, Juster 1994). Maintaining strict standards of

⁵ "Upstart sects" describes the sectarian groups that formed in the early republic. They are "upstarts" because they turned the established rules of religion upside down (see Finke and Stark 2005).

⁶ Baptists, for example, were considered "back-country" egalitarians whose meetings recognized no racial, class, or gender distinctions, where "Rich and poor, men and women, black and white all communed together in the presence of the Lord" (Juster 1994:19).

⁷ Members of the sects drew from texts in Joel (2:28) and Acts (2:17) that "Your sons and daughters will prophesy," to support women's equality in the pulpit.

behavior (for example, no drinking, no gambling, no swearing) and emphasizing the natural equality of all believers, the Methodists and Baptists created high tension to the established religious and secular cultures—by being less restrictive on women.

Some may equate strictness with restriction; however, strictness does not necessarily mean greater restrictions on women. Strictness is about beliefs and practices that create a higher level of tension with the surrounding culture. The established denominations in the Revolutionary era were very restrictive for women, meaning that in order to increase tension with the culture, the upstart sects adopted more egalitarian theologies—but still had significantly strict beliefs (the right of all believers to discern God’s teachings apart from an established clergy) and practices (no drinking, no gambling, no frivolity). Thus they were strict religious groups in higher tension with the patriarchal culture.

The upstart sects’ egalitarian bent and focus on persuasion, rather than coercion, for conversion⁸ resulted in the groups becoming larger and more powerful (Brekus 2009, Finke and Stark 2005). By the 1830s and 1840s, these flourishing groups had become established denominations. During this shift from sect-like to church-like, the denominations purposely turned away from their more radical roots, decreasing tension with the culture to blend in with the Episcopalians, Congregationalists, and Presbyterians (Finke and Stark 2005). Denominations like the Methodists that had once been open to women in leadership were now restricting women—going so far as to excommunicate one preacher when she refused to stop holding meetings (Brekus 2009). The decreasing of tension of the upstart sects coincided with the significant economic shift to industrial capitalism. This economic shift would prescribe denominational gender roles for several decades.

⁸ The disestablishment of religion in the U.S. Constitution gave everyone equal footing in pursuing adherents. Whereas established state churches coerced members by law and taxes to support their organizations, the lack of regulation made persuasion the best tactic for converting new members to a religious organization.

The Cult of True Womanhood and the Cult of the Self-Made Man, 1840-1880

In the nineteenth century America's agrarian economy gave way for the wage-based industrial economy, where not only did the nature of work change, gender ideals changed, as well. By the mid-nineteenth century industrialization had created a "separate spheres" gender ideology. As men moved away from the family farm and home production and into wage-based urban factory work, women carried on with the traditional home production of the rural economy. The separation of families—women still engaged in home production and men leaving the homestead to work in factories—created a gender ideology that constituted women and men as opposites. This ideal awarded some human traits to men and others to women, creating what we now call the Cult of True Womanhood and the Cult of the Self-Made Man. True Women were pious, sexually pure, submissive, and domestic (Coontz 1992, 1997; Landry 2000). Self-Made Men were economically successful, independent, self-controlled, and responsible (Kimmel 2006). This gender dichotomy shifted the institution of religion into the female sphere, defining women as the naturally religious sex. Defining men as the naturally productive sex shifted work/business into the male sphere (Bederman 1989, Bendroth 1992, Coontz 1992, Landry 2000).

American Christian denominations quickly adapted to these gender ideals, legitimating them through scripture and stipulating that women and men were created by God to hold these particular gendered traits and roles—even though praxis and history illustrated otherwise. The white middle class⁹ denominations that accepted the gender theology of True Women and Self-made Men were often the same denominations that had previously existed in higher tension with

⁹ While Cult of True Womanhood and Cult of Self-Made Man pervaded American culture, only the economic elite could afford to forgo the economic contributions of women to the household. White working class and immigrant women who could not afford this gender ideal masked their economic status by working inside the home for wages by taking in laundry, doing clothes repair, and supplying boarders with their cooking and cleaning needs.

the culture—the old upstart sects were now church-like in their acceptance of the cultural gender ideals.

Not all white Protestants acceded to the upstart sects' slide toward church-like denominations and their acceptance of restrictive gender theologies. The holiness movement served as a protest to denominations decreasing their tension to the culture. Phoebe Palmer, one of the foremost leaders of the holiness movement, wanted a stricter religion with higher tension to the culture, including the right of women to preach. When denominations like the Methodists criticized the women preaching in the holiness movement, Palmer responded with a spirited defense of their right to preach in her 1859 book, *The Promise of the Father*.

At the same moment that most white denominations were adapting to the Cult of True Womanhood and the Cult of the Self-made Man, an alternative gender theology was created by black Christians. Traditionally designated as “laborers,” a category that cast them as less than fully human, black women and men were excluded by the dominant gender theology. Developing an alternative theology, black families rejected “separate spheres” defining women (like men) by their resourcefulness, independence, and intelligence (Landry 2000). For white women to openly be and/or use their intelligence was not considered acceptable, as it was equated exclusively with masculinity (Landry 2000). For black women, not using their God-given intelligence was to dishonor God and their families. Black feminist Maggie Walker declared in a 1912 speech to the Federation of Colored Woman’s Clubs that, “every woman was by Divine Providence created...not for some man to marry, take home and support, but for the purpose of using her powers, ability, health and strength to forward the financial...success of the partnership into which she may go, if she will” (Landry 2000:73). Therefore, white Protestant denominations decreased their tension with the culture, adopting the Cults of True Woman and

Self-made Man, while black Protestant denominations increased their tension to the culture, rejecting the Cults of True Womanhood and Self-made Man.

The cults of True Womanhood and Self-Made Man segregated women and men into separate spheres; men inhabited the competitive economic world of business, while women inhabited a world of religion and piety. But as industrialization and the market economy it spawned grew, people worried about the moral dangers of unrestrained capitalism (Bederman 1989). To minimize these dangers, while maximizing the potential rewards, Protestants married morality to productivity—literally—by coupling productive men to pious women, to create a moral capitalist order. Together pious women and productive men formed Godly homes—“the epitome of Christian progress” (Bederman 1989:436).

Muscular Christianity, 1880-1920

By the end of the nineteenth century the changing relationship between religion and business, however, called for a new gender theology. Protestant men began to see religion as effeminate and moved to recodify it as masculine (Bederman 1989).¹⁰ As one proponent of Muscular Christianity stated, “The women have had charge of the church work long enough” (Bederman 1989:432). In the words of Muscular Christianity star, Billy Sunday, “The Lord save us from off-handed, flabby-cheeked, brittle-boned, weak-kneed, thin-skinned, pliable, plastic, spineless, effeminate, ossified, three-carat Christianity” (cited by Bendroth 2004). The Muscular Christianity movement was an effort to counteract the attachment of women to religion (Bendroth 1992, Kimmel 2006, Messner 1997), bringing congruence to Protestantism and twentieth-century business and politics (Bederman 1989).

¹⁰ These movements were organized around the practices of white, native-born Protestants, not immigrants, blacks, or Catholics, the latter finding movements like the Men and Religion Forward Movement unappealing (Bederman 1989).

Muscular Christians successfully realigned the relation between religion and commerce by reshaping constructions of gender (Bederman 1989), reducing tension between the established Protestant denominations and the economic culture. Women, who had been considered the purveyors of religious faith for home, church, and society during industrialization, lost their influence in Protestant denominational life. In fact, by the end of the 1920s, the vibrant women's missionary associations, which had been organized and run entirely by women, had all been taken over by male denominational leaders (Beaver 1980, Hill 1985). By decreasing tension with the larger culture the established Protestant denominations significantly restricted religious women.

Fundamentalism and Modernism, 1920-1942

Muscular Christianity peaked in the 1920s, precisely the time that American Protestantism fractured into fundamentalist (sect) and modernist (church) factions (Bendroth 1992). Fundamentalist Protestantism "was born in an era of anxiety over gender roles" (Bendroth 1992:6). The Great Depression made women's economic contributions to the family crucial for all but the very wealthy. As women moved more and more into paid labor, mainline denominations decreased their tension with society. These denominations relaxed their restrictions on women and gradually gave them a larger role within their congregations, mirroring the culture's new economic realities and gender ideals. Fundamentalists increased tension with society in a "decisive reaction" against the conventional Victorian piety that had elevated women as the "keepers of morality" (Bendroth 1992:3). Reversing Victorian ideals fundamentalism asserted that men had a natural aptitude for religion and were divinely equipped to defend Christian orthodoxy (Bendroth 1992). Women, on the other hand, were defined as the psychologically vulnerable sex (Bendroth 1992).

Because fundamentalism claimed a monopoly on Protestant orthodoxy, by adhering to five fundamental doctrines¹¹ of the Christian faith, their emerging tradition conflates gender theology with orthodoxy. In the wake of fundamentalism's success at defining orthodoxy through a strict gender theology, and increasing their tension with society, the Protestant modernists (mainline) lowered tension by adopting increasingly egalitarian gender theologies—to blend in more with the culture, but also to separate themselves from the fundamentalists.

Mainline denominations defended gender equality and inclusion primarily through a Wesleyan perfectionist doctrine that required a “nonliteral, thematic reading of the Pauline prescriptions used to silence women” (Bendroth 1992:6). This egalitarian argument relied on the idea that biblical restrictions on women's leadership in the church were temporary, swept away by the atoning death and resurrection of Christ (Bendroth 1992, Gallagher 2003, 2004). Fundamentalists rejected cultural and historical readings of the New Testament, especially as it regarded women and women's roles (Bendroth 1992, Gallagher 2004).¹² Fundamentalists increased their tension to the secular and religious establishment, by rejecting arguments for gender equality in both home and denominations.

In the 1930s and 40s a group of men within fundamentalism sought to bridge the chasm between fundamentalist and “moderate” Protestantism with “neo-evangelicalism” (Bendroth 1992, Gallagher 2003, Smith 1998). What we refer to today as “evangelical” comes from this fundamentalist fracture. The evangelical movement was an attempt to bring fundamentalism out of its intellectual isolation in order to broaden its appeal (Bendroth 1992). These evangelicals (e.g., Billy Graham, Charles Fuller, Harold Ockenga) wanted to combine the scriptural

¹¹ The five ‘fundamentals’ of fundamentalist doctrine include: the virgin birth of Christ, substitutionary atonement, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the supernatural reality of miracles, and the inerrancy of Scripture (see Bendroth 1992).

¹² As dispensational premillennialists, fundamentalists believed that women were under the curse in Genesis, which placed them in a subordinate position to men until Christ's Second Coming could lift their curse and the penalty of sin produced by the fall (Bendroth 1992).

orthodoxy of fundamentalism with the social engagement of liberalism, creating a Protestant movement of engaged orthodoxy (Smith 1998). Conflating gender theology with orthodoxy, the evangelicals adopted gender hierarchy as the naturally ordered creation of masculine authority and strength, and subsequently feminine weakness. As America came out of World War II, fundamentalist and evangelical gender theologies would set the stage for the gender controversies that would consume Protestants from the end of the twentieth through the beginning of the twenty-first centuries.

The Long Decade of the Breadwinner/Homemaker, 1946-1965

Having adopted the gender hierarchy of fundamentalist Protestantism, the fledgling evangelical movement of the 1950s lowered tension to society by reinforcing the ideal of a husband as provider, leader, and decision-maker and wives as helpmates and mothers—ideals perfectly suited to the post-War family life of the breadwinner/homemaker cultural ideal (Bendroth 2002, Gallagher 2003). Fundamentalists and evangelicals saw the breadwinner/homemaker roles as the self-evident God-ordained roles for women and men. Their ability to practice these roles was a result of the post-War economic boom that enabled an unprecedented number of white, middle class families to live on the wages of one earner (Coontz 1992, 1997; Landry 2000; Wilcox 2004).¹³ Fundamentalist and evangelical Protestants decreased their tension with society aligning with the breadwinner/homemaker gender ideal—as did mainline Protestants.

While the breadwinner/homemaker gender ideal remains the most iconic standard of American and Christian gender ideals, it began to fray by the late-1960s. With higher levels of education for women, compressed child bearing and rearing, and an expanding service market, middle-class white women re-entered the labor force in striking numbers (Coontz 1992, Landry

¹³ Largely excluded from the breadwinner/homemaker were the working class, poor, and communities of color, who continued to have dual-earner households.

2000). As real wages began to fall for men, working wives became critical for families trying to maintain a middle class lifestyle. Responding to these changing social and economic conditions and with a push toward equality for women dominating discourses of the larger culture, mainline denominations adjusted their practices, decreased tension with the culture, and adopted more egalitarian gender theologies. Conservative Protestants (fundamentalists and evangelicals) reacted harshly to changes in women's roles (Wilcox 2004) blaming working women for rising divorce rates, out-of-wedlock births, declining marriage rates, and the destruction of the American family (Coontz 1992, Gallagher 2003, Griffin 1997). Conservative Protestants increased tension with society in order to maintain a strict breadwinner/homemaker gender theology.

Fundamentalist and evangelical Christians rejected equality and feminism outright, making the case that "gender hierarchy and difference were not only the clear message of the bible but unavoidably reflected in the physiological and psychological differences between women and men" (Gallagher 2004:225). Unable to dismiss the spread of feminism in the culture and the mainline churches, conservatives worked to discredit it. One tactic was to claim that egalitarianism undermined the authority of the bible by treating texts related to gender as culturally relative truths when they were clearly timeless truths. Moreover, according to conservative Christians, when egalitarians treated texts on gender as culturally relative, they were distorting God's ordained hierarchy, erasing the clear differences between women and men in both function and authority (Gallagher 2004). The result would be utter social chaos (Lockhart 2000).

Headship/Submission vs. Egalitarianism/Christian Feminism, 1970-1990

By the end of the 1970s the word "feminism" had become conservative Christianity's true "F-word." Conservative Christians embraced a "gender essentialist" ideology, where God's

primary design for men is as economic providers and for women as homemakers and nurturers. In the mid-1990s, researchers focusing on conservative Christianity and gender found that although gender essentialists still espoused a gender hierarchy, the rhetoric and practice had shifted. Noting that much of their audience were dual-working families, conservative Christians decreased tension to society, somewhat, by redefining hierarchy as a headship/submission hierarchy rather than breadwinner/homemaker. Even this was mostly symbolic (Gallagher 2003, Gallagher and Wood 2005, Griffith 1997, Wilcox 2004). The “headship/submission” gender ideology preserved hierarchical gender roles, while allowing dual-earner families to align themselves with a religiously legitimated gender ideology. The mostly symbolic nature of the headship/submission gender ideal decreased tension and muted hierarchy while maintaining a semblance of conservative Christianity’s orthodox core (Gallagher 2003, Griffith 1997, Wilcox 2004). Mainline churches responded to the cultural movement toward women’s equality accommodating egalitarianism, decreasing their tension with the culture.

Yet by the end of the twentieth century, social scientists and historians specializing in the study of gender and religion found that conservative Christian hierarchy had yielded to pragmatism (Bartkowski 2004; Gallagher 2003, 2004; Griffin 1997; Wilcox 2003). Most conservative Christians affirmed two ideals, the ideal of husbands’ headship—including men being the spiritual leaders of the household and having the final authority in decision-making—and the ideal of partnership in marriage (Gallagher 2003). The latter ideal gave way to a wider acceptable range of gendered experience, particularly for men (Bartkowski 2004, Gallagher 2003, 2004). Hierarchy is still used by conservative Christians as a baseline understanding of gender relations, resulting in a higher level of tension with society. Hierarchy is softened, however, by “complementarianism,” which argues that women and men are *equal in essence*, but different in role (Gallagher 2004 emphasis added).

In spite of the fact that most conservative Christians are pragmatically egalitarian, they retain the ideal of headship and submission. Because they are pragmatic egalitarians, the salience of the husbands' headship takes on even greater significance as a mark of conservative Christian identity. Abandoning the ideal of husbands' headship would remove a primary way in which evangelicals identify themselves as distinct from the secular culture (Gallagher 2004): "What is the benefit, after all, if arguing that God calls men and women to share responsibility and authority within the household when the broader culture espouses the same ideal?"¹⁴ (Gallagher 2004:231).

Promise Keepers, 1990s

The Promise Keepers movement of the 1990s came as a response to the softening of conservative Christian gender ideals through symbolic headship and pragmatic egalitarianism. The movement initially sought to increase tension with the society by exhorting men to "take back" leadership within their homes and congregations. With the economic necessity of dual-earner families, the movement also tried to decrease tension by broadening men's gender roles, making them practical in light of the changing social and economic realities of home life (Lockhart 2000). Drawing from practical egalitarianism, some in the movement advocated men take leadership by helping their wives with the unpaid household labor.

The Promise Keepers movement initially appealed to both conservative and mainline men, growing rapidly. But the movement was ambivalent in regard to gender. Started by conservative Protestants who tried to increase tension to the culture using a message of male headship/leadership, the movement eventually decreased tension with a message of practical egalitarianism. Bartkowski (2004:41) writes that, "Although many Promise Keepers would

¹⁴ Unless, of course, conservative Christians demonstrated more egalitarianism than the culture in the sharing of paid and unpaid family labor (Gallagher 2004).

probably not see themselves as heirs to the egalitarian legacy of evangelical feminism...much PK rhetoric has clearly been informed by biblical feminist critiques waged against ‘unchristian’ forms of domination and exclusion.” This ambivalence between gender hierarchy and egalitarianism partially explains the movement’s quick demise; the Promise Keepers did not create enough tension with the culture to satisfy sect-like groups, but created too much tension for church-like groups. The rapid rise and fall of the Promise Keepers illustrates that by the end of the twentieth century the rhetoric of strict gender roles had given way to a less aggressive and more ambivalent division of gender (Bartkowski 2004, Gallagher 2003, Griffith 1997, Lockhart 2000, Putney 2001, Wilcox 2004). Conservatives and mainliners had both decreased tension to survive in the economic climate, by keeping the symbolism of headship, conservatives were able to remain in higher tension to the larger culture.

Neo-Muscular Christianity, 2000-present

As headship/submission became mostly symbolic and practical egalitarianism reigned in conservative Christian homes, this caused a crisis for sect-like groups who contested the church-like accommodation of symbolic headship and practical egalitarianism. In response to the softening of strict gender ideals and praxis and the ambivalence about gender within Protestant culture, a competing sectarian gender ideology seeking to raise tension with the culture emerged—neo-Muscular Christianity.

Neo-Muscular Christianity focuses on adopting more masculine styles and developing programs that teach men to be manly, casting Jesus as a “religious Rambo” and portraying the Christian life as a “heroic quest” of spiritual manhood (Kimmel 2006). Books like John Eldredge's *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* state that men are hardwired by God to be wild and dangerous creatures—that all men need to live out three essential desires: the

desire to fight a battle, to live an adventurous life, and to rescue a beauty.¹⁵ Men are adjured to reappropriate traits like action, leadership, courage, and economic prowess as exclusively male by biological and divine design in order to reclaim Christianity from women, who have feminized the church (Kimmel 2006, Messner 1997). In this milieu Christian theology and doctrine are interpreted to validate the norms of hegemonic masculinity, while being billed as “counter-cultural,” creating a strict gender theology in significant tension to the secular norm of gender equality.

PART III: STRICTNESS AND GENDER AT MARS HILL CHURCH

The rise and fall of Mars Hill Church emphasizes the social nature of sect-like movements and the importance of gender theologies as a boundary marker. Nondenominational megachurch pastor Mark Driscoll received international attention for his rhetoric of Christian masculinity. Driscoll’s strident masculine focus helped Seattle’s Mars Hill Church become one of the fastest growing congregations in the country. Similar to other sect-like movements Driscoll’s gender theology was a reaction to the softening of sect-like gender ideals, increasing the tension between his congregation, the local Seattle culture, and other Christian groups.

Driscoll’s theology reverted to a strict gender essentialist ideology. In an online forum from December 2000, Driscoll outlines his perspective on gender. Posting as William Wallace II (a nod to Mel Gibson’s character in the movie *Braveheart* and apparently an exemplar of a true Christian man), Driscoll writes:

“We live in a pussified nation. We could get every real man as opposed to pussified James Dobson knock-off crying Promise Keeping homoerotic worship loving mama’s boy sensitive emasculated neutered exact male replica evagellyfish, and have a conference in a phone booth. It all began with Adam, the

¹⁵ Conversely, in their follow-up book, *Captivating: Unveiling the Mystery of a Woman’s Soul*, John and Stasi Eldredge write that women are designed by God to watch a man’s battle, facilitate his adventure, and be rescued by a man.

first of the pussified nation, who kept his mouth shut and watched everything fall headlong down the slippery slide of hell/feminism when he shut his mouth and listened to his wife who thought Satan was a good theologian when he should have lead [sic] her and exercised his delegated authority as king of the planet...

And so the culture and families and churches sprint to hell because the men aren't doing their job and the feminists continue their rant that it's all our fault and we should just let them be pastors and heads of homes and run the show. And the more we do, the more hell looks like a good place because at least a man is in charge, has a bit of order and let's men spit and scratch as needed."

Driscoll's gender theology created significantly more tension to the culture than the "soft patriarchy" of symbolic headship and practical egalitarianism. But Driscoll is no rogue itinerant teaching increasingly strict gender theologies—he is one of many (though he stands alone in his flamboyant language and caricatures of women and men).

Driscoll teaches strict gender essentialism and complementarianism: "God made men and women equally important, but gave them distinct roles in the church and home" (Mars Hill Church 2013). These roles are hierarchical with the man as the head and the woman as his helper, as Driscoll describes:

[The Bible] lays out authority and respect for authority and submission to authority. God the Father, and then who? Jesus Christ, and then who? The husband or the man, and then what? The woman or the wife. That's the order of authority...A lot of you women will say, "I don't need to submit to any authority." Well, you're not any better than Jesus, and if it was good for him it's good for you (CGW25).¹⁶

While Driscoll draws clear lines between women and men, his focus is on *men*: "Mars Hill is about men...We see Mars Hill as a man factory; boys come in, men go out. Period. That's what we're about" (CGW33). Driscoll upholds Jesus as the ideal man: "Before I was a Christian, I was very disinterested in Jesus because I thought, 'Why give your life to a man you can beat up?!' That's what I thought. Because the pictures I'd all seen of Jesus—he had feathered hair,

¹⁶ Sermon quotes come from two sermon series, Christians Gone Wild (CGW) and Vintage Jesus (VJ). The number attached to the sermon is the number for that sermon within the series (which is how Mars Hill Church denoted them on their website).

was wearing a dress, listening to a lot of Elton John” (VJ5). Luckily for his followers, Driscoll found a Jesus he could worship:

Now, this guy right here, I can't take Him, right? He's got a robe dipped in blood. Any guy who has blood as an accessory is tough, right? And it ain't His blood, that's another point... On His robe and on His thigh He has this name written, 'King of Kings, Lord of Lords,' tattooed down the leg of Jesus, right? This is tattooed-up, white-horse-riding, blazing-eyes, all-seeing, sword-coming-to-slaughter-the-nations, robe-dipped-in-blood Jesus. Love that guy. (VJ5)

Christian men need to emulate this robed-dipped-in-blood Jesus. Driscoll emphasizes gender essentialism—men and women, by God’s design, have different traits and roles. Like other neo-Muscular Christian proponents, Driscoll blurs the line between sex and gender, proclaiming that gender is fixed, unchanging across time and place. In his words: “Men should be masculine, women should be feminine...chicks should be chicks, dudes should be dudes. That’s the way it is [because] gender roles are not subject to change and preference” (CGW25). Yet he is also telling his audience that men have forgotten how to be men and they must learn how to be masculine—like Jesus.¹⁷ Driscoll uses the apostle Paul as an example of how to learn true Christian manhood from Jesus:

So, Jesus comes down out of heaven and basically beats [Paul] up, which I love that, I love that about Jesus... Paul was out making trouble, [Jesus] comes down from heaven and smacks Paul around, kind of like an Ultimate Fighter. I love that about Jesus, because you never know when he might show up and just knock you around a little bit...Jesus comes down from heaven knocks [Paul] on the ground and blinds him for three days... Yeah, if Jesus came down and like punched you in the mouth and then made you blind for three days and said you’re gonna be a Christian now, and you’re gonna be a missionary—after three days you’d be like, “Yeah, that’s what I’m doin’ now that I’m blind, and I would like not to be blind.” So that’s what Jesus does to him. (CGW2)

Once Driscoll established Jesus’ largely misunderstood masculine nature and Paul’s new masculinity, he casts a hypermasculine lens over the interpretations of other biblical characters:

¹⁷ See Schrock and Schwalbe 2009 for a review on the practices and processes through which men learn and perform manhood acts as part of the socially constructed category of “man.”

You got around Paul when he was a young guy, you got around John the Baptist, or Elijah, I mean these dudes seem pretty rough to me. You know, they don't look like church guys... walking around in sweater vests singing love songs to Jesus. I mean guys like David are well known for their ability to slaughter other men. I've got to think these guys were dudes: heterosexual, win a fight, punch you in the nose, dudes. (Church Needs Dudes 2006).

Another important component of neo-Muscular Christianity is a man's ability to be the sole economic provider for his family. Again, likening true men to Jesus the carpenter, who was "a normal working guy with a lunch box and a tool belt," (VJ1), being the breadwinner is an essential trait for Christian men. Driscoll tells his audience: "Paul says if a man does not provide for the needs of his family, he's denied the faith; he's worse than an unbeliever" (CGW1).¹⁸ While Driscoll's rhetoric harkens back to the iconic breadwinner/homemaker ideal, he takes it a step further, telling men who don't fully provide for their families that they are neither real men, nor real Christians.¹⁹

Boundary Keeping: Beware of Wolves in Sheep's Clothing

For pastors like Driscoll, neo-Muscular Christianity creates strict boundaries between a congregation and the culture at large, helping congregations to thrive, because sect-movements thrive on distinction, tension, conflict, and threat (Smith 1998). While Driscoll successfully created high tension between his congregation and the larger culture, he did more than that. Driscoll created a religious group with all of the hallmarks of strictness; Mars Hill Church was extensive, exclusive, and expensive.

Recall that strict religious bodies proclaim an exclusive, comprehensive, and eternal doctrine, demanding adherence to a distinctive faith, morality, and lifestyle (Iannaccone 1994). Sect-like groups distinguish two classes of people. The group's members comprise the true

¹⁸ Here Driscoll refers to 1 Timothy 5:8.

¹⁹ Women who want to work once they are married with children are told they are denying God's call; they are deceived idolaters who are in sin. For a compelling example of this, see Elizabeth Pek's post, "A Desperate Housewife Comes Clean" on the Reforming the Feminine blog, <http://reefem.wordpress.com/category/professional>.

believers. The non-members—the heathen or heretics—reject the sect and their doctrines, and are in turn, rejected by the sect (Iannaccone 1988). Being a true believer is exclusive, creating not only tension between the sectarian group and the larger culture, but tension between the group and other sect-like and church-like groups.

Mars Hill Church created clear boundaries around who was a true believer, cementing the collective identity of the Mars Hill family.

There's a lot of people who say they're a Christian and they're not... Well, we're not all Christians. Some of us are lying or deceived. Just like when you look at Jesus and his twelve disciples, there was Judas on the team who looked like he was on the team but was ripping off Jesus and didn't love him. There's always a few Judases in the bunch....In this church, there are people who love God and are living new lives; there are people who aren't living new lives, which indicates that they don't love God. (CGW12)

Mars Hill Church created a very expensive group. Mars Hill not only put boundaries between the congregation and outsiders, but also generated boundaries within the congregation. Driscoll describes the threat from within:

So the question becomes if [Mars Hill is]... constantly under attack from within by people that are deceived and claim to be Christians... How in the world does a church like Mars Hill defend, protect itself from this kind of deception coming in, leading to the destruction of the church, getting completely off track, and thus becoming yet another church that had a great start and a tragic end? (CGW5)

Mars Hill members understood that the biggest threat to the congregation came from within—the wolves in sheep's clothing.²⁰ One woman articulated to me in an interview how she interpreted this dynamic at Mars Hill:

The core mission of Mars Hill Church is to give you direct ways to get to Jesus—and it may cost you friends, loved ones, family members, [and] lovers, because loving Jesus is the core mission. But that breeds a distrust between the people in the pews and that distrust has to occur for someone to be on board with Mars Hill Church. When Mark

²⁰ See Appendix B for an example of a security flyer from Mars Hill recruiting men to serve on the security team in order to protect members from “wolves.”

Driscoll talks, there's a divide between those who are Christian and those who aren't. You are never sure who's next to you in the pew—if it's a believer or not. So you better watch out because there's a responsibility that comes with being a Christian. There's never a settling in; you're always on guard.

Costs were high for those who could not or did not conform to group doctrine. The ever-present threat of being defined by the community as a wolf, kept members adhering to the complementarian gender theology. A strict gender theology, however, is not always a successful strategy for groups. Shifts in the economy and other social conditions impact the ability of members to maintain the theology.

Mars Hill Church's gender theology was successful in setting the congregation apart from the larger culture. In 2013 the group claimed more than 12,000 members across fourteen campuses in four states (Mars Hill Church 2013). But things were changing for Mars Hill. While sect-church theory can explain the growth of religious groups through strictness, the theory can also explain the decline of groups that are too strict. How strict is too strict? How extensive, exclusive and expensive can groups be and still survive?

Gender in Hindsight

Mars Hill Church thrived under Driscoll's leadership, taking strictness to new levels. For nearly 20 years Mars Hill sustained an optimal level of strictness, resulting in explosive growth. There are, however, limits to strictness: "As a group becomes progressively more strict, it *eventually reaches a point beyond which the additional benefits of increased strictness are outweighed by additional costs* (Iannaccone 1994:1201 emphasis added). At some point too much strictness will drive away virtually all current and potential members, causing just as much harm as too little (Iannaccone 1994). There is a balance; adjusting enough to social change in order to maintain tension with society, but not adjusting too much, driving the tension beyond an acceptable level.

In the wake of the economic recession, Mars Hill Church exceeded the acceptable level of strictness. As Mars Hill fell apart over the summer of 2014, many stories emerged linking the congregation's strict gender theology to the disillusionment of members who found they could no longer practice the doctrines. The result of this shift often resulted in these members being shunned by the larger congregation. These former members describe their initial acceptance of the strict gender theology at Mars Hill:²¹

Kyle: "Mark set a high bar for men: a mix of 'hardline' complementarianism...I and many others in MHC mirrored much of what Mark taught. We'd get together to watch UFC fights... We'd take our brothers to task when we saw them not looking like the cultural version of 'men' Mark pressed us to look like.

Chandin: "At Mars Hill I felt like women were occasionally brushed aside in favor of men. I even felt that Mark gave permission to objectify women as long as the woman was their wife. But I never felt like it was misogynistic. That seemed too strong, too extreme.

Economic shifts in the culture significantly altered the costs of complementarianism. Even for those who followed the prescribed complementarian path, at some point, circumstances changed and the costs of maintaining strict gender ideals became too high:

Sara: "Over time, we were influenced by the pressure we heard from the pulpit on how we need to have children because they are a blessing (not saying they aren't) and it is biblical to not use birth control...The more we went to church the more we thought about having children and so we changed our plans and got pregnant..."

But during the recession, when Sara's husband lost his job she was told by congregation leaders that her husband

"wasn't doing enough and wasn't fit to be a father or husband since he had no job. As if all his other Godly qualities are worthless because of the economy! Unfortunately, I agreed with the church and started to resent my husband for not having a job."

Like Sara, others from Mars Hill noted that watching their spouses struggle with the the gender ideals, made them question the ideals.

²¹ These data come from the website WeLoveMarsHill.com, a forum for former members to tell their stories.

Autumn: “I want to share how harmful Mark’s preaching was to my husband because I love him so dearly but that is his story to share. What I can say is that my husband is the most humble man I know and I am still sad about what he went through for years as a result of being told almost every Sunday; how he’s not man enough, how he needs to live up to unrealistic expectations, and how to live by the gospel of hard work and shame instead of the gospel of grace and love.”

Mike: “Misogyny. There, I said it. I stood idly by and willingly participated in a culture of misogyny. There could probably be books and sociological studies on the details of this, but I’d prefer to just admit one of the biggest things that I did wrong. During this time I made some huge mistakes. I pressured my brilliant and hard-working wife to give up her dream of law school and have a baby and be a stay-at-home mom as soon as possible.”

As they began to see gender ideals differently, some of the women and men expressed concerns about the impact of the group’s strict complementarian ideals and their complicity in the system.

Amanda: “People were afraid to question the severe complementarian theology Pastor Mark encouraged... What was more difficult to see were the ways in which the chauvinistic culture was negatively impacting the marriages of people I knew and loved. I knew women who were afraid to deny sex to their husbands, women who were afraid to pursue passions outside the home, and women who were afraid to speak about the neglect they experienced from husbands who were absorbed in ministry. These women thought that any unhappiness they felt was because they weren’t praying hard enough, didn’t know how to submit to their husbands well enough, didn’t have hearts that were right enough.”

Whereas women were concerned about how other women were impacted by gender ideals, men were more likely to express how they had participated in the shaming of other men for not being “man enough.”

Kyle: “Over the past few months I’ve sought forgiveness from several men I sat across from and shamed: I yelled at them and intimidated them for failing to ‘stand up as men’ and not ‘having their shit together.’

The hardest thing for me as I process my time at Mars Hill Church has been my response to Mark’s shaming of men—shaming of me—from the pulpit.”

For others, the consequences of following the strict complementarian theology were more severe.

Christine: I took what I was being fed and foolishly believed it because it was disguised so well with scripture. I believed what was preached numerous times over the years about how a woman should look, so much to the extent that I

thought I was being a good wife by starving myself so that I'd be pleasing for my husband to look at almost to the point of my death..."

Mars Hill's gender theology did not change, but economic conditions did. Mars Hill's gender theology became too strict. Mars Hill's strategy to set themselves apart from the culture and from other religious groups made it impossible for them to accommodate to changing social conditions. Adhering to a strict complementarian theology became too expensive for many members.

Conclusion

American Christians have regularly shifted their gender ideologies in response to cultural changes. Sect-church theory explains *how* and *why* Christian gender theologies develop in certain groups at particular points in time: groups change their gender theologies in order to maintain a particular level of tension to the society. The current secular cultural ideal of gender is egalitarianism. Therefore sect-like groups adopt headship/submission gender theologies, to be in greater tension with the culture, while church-like groups adopt egalitarian theologies, to be in lower tension to the culture. For sectarian groups like Mars Hill Church, increasing tension by adopting strict essentialist or complementarian theologies may initially produce high levels of commitment. In the midst of changing cultural conditions—for example, a significant economic recession—strict gender theologies may impose demands that become too costly for members.

American Christians often have trouble seeing the impact of social and cultural forces on our religious institutions and belief structures. Unfortunately, that leaves us vulnerable to adapting to a status quo that shapes, and may even subvert, Christian ideals. The apostle Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect"

(Romans 12:2). Sect-church theory states that religious groups shift their gender theologies *as a reaction or accommodation to the culture*. The reference point for Christian gender theologies becomes the culture—or the world. What if constantly shifting our gender theologies by reacting to or accommodating to the world is making us lose sight of what the passage asks us to do: be transformed by the renewing of our minds to test and approve God’s will?

One of the gifts of the liberal arts is giving us a framework for the renewing of our minds. As one of the disciplines in the liberal arts, sociology gives us tools to critically assess the gender theologies we take for granted. In critically thinking about the social forces that may constrain our faith and hurt our ability to live in and bring about the kingdom of God, sociology helps us become aware of how or if we are being transformed by the gospel message. My hope is that this review of Christian gender theologies across time and within one contemporary case will help us more critically engage our religious culture, to make sure we are being transformed by the message of Christ.

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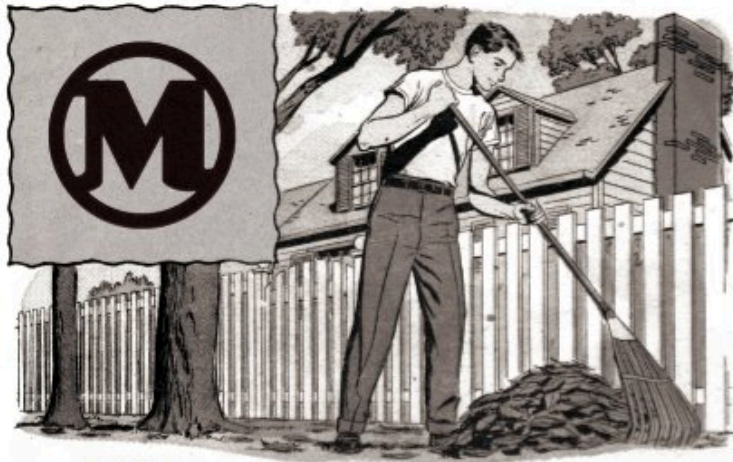
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Appendix A: Characteristics Attributed to Sects, 1910-1978^a

Aloof or antagonist toward prevailing society	Strict membership standards
Lower class participants	Participation in service
Exclusive standards of membership	Spontaneity
Doctrinal purity	Folk hymns
Spontaneous worship with group participation	Leaders have unique view of legitimacy
Lay ministry without professional pedigree	Membership is exclusive
Explicit non-bureaucratic organization	Culture contrary to that of dominant institutions
Total ideology of life and ethics	Association rather than community
Subjective grace by direct relationship	Near communal/friendship league
Individual salvation from sin	Rejection of dominant order
Exclusive association of committed	Orientation of monopolism by organization toward social values
Critical/antithetical to social institutions	Small
Rejection of social environment	Personal, inward perfection
Fellowship of the elect	Direct personal fellowship
Spontaneity of expression	Avoidance of society
De-emphasis of organization	Religious asceticism
Maximum democratic participation	Members join of own free will
Small in size	Lower classes
Laymen as leaders	Selective membership
Purity of doctrine and demands	Intensity of experience over universality
Traditional ethical principles	Uncompromising radical attitudes
Concentration on otherworldly issues	Very high, austere standards of morality
New member's through conversion	Religious sincerity
Disproportionately lower class	Charismatic authority
Protest against established religion	Voluntary association
Protest against society	Membership by proof of merit
Separation from general society	Exclusiveness and expulsion practiced to maintain purity
Exclusiveness in attitude	Concept of an elite; a remnant
Emphasis on conversion	Standard of personal perfection
Voluntary joining	Priesthood of all believers
Spirit of regeneration	High level of lay participation
Ethical austerity	Opportunity for spontaneity
Cultural and economic poverty	Hostile or indifferent to secular society
Self-centered religion	Total commitment to group
Non-cooperative with churches	Exclusive type of membership
Suspicion of rival sects	Rejection of secular order
Non-professional ministry	Lack of organizational structure
Confessional membership	
Emphasis on conversion	

^a Adapted from Knudsen, Earle, and Shriver 1978.

Appendix B: Mars Hill Church Security Flyer



MARS HILL SECURITY MAY LOOK HARMLESS



HOWEVER WE'RE READY TO JUMP INTO ACTION AT A MOMENT'S NOTICE



TO PROTECT THE CHURCH BODY FROM ALL THREATS



INCLUDING WOLVES



JOIN US AND SERVE WITH YOUR BROTHERS



TO FIND OUT MORE EMAIL: BALLARDSECURITY@MARSHILLCHURCH.ORG



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