Introduction

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Group Bible Study in American Evangelicalism

My alarm rings at 6:15 a.m. I am up, through the shower, dressed, and ready to go by 6:40. I kiss my girlfriend on the forehead, jealous she can sleep in at least until the sun rises. It is the first week of January, and, predictably for mid-Michigan, several inches of new snow has fallen overnight. The wintry air wakes me, along with an anxiety that the extra minutes of scraping windshields could make me late for the seven o’clock start. I begin the short drive east, cautious of my speed and traction. Luckily, there are few other cars on the road.

On my way to the restaurant I pass the “main drag” of downtown. To the left are coffee shops, bars, student bookstores, the newly built Barnes & Noble, the Gap, all manner of restaurants, more coffee shops, and more bars. To the right is the university campus, also still asleep. The quiet sidewalks are a sharp contrast to the typical, hectic feel of 40,000 students bustling and biking. It is just now seven, but I suspect the weather has slowed others’ trips as well.

The Coral Gables restaurant sits less than a mile from the edge of campus. It is locally owned and has an interesting history. In the 1950s and 60s it was the first spot across municipal lines to serve alcohol, giving it a lively reputation. When the dry laws ended, “the Gables” slowly morphed into its present status—a “family restaurant” serving mainly middle-aged, older adults, and retirees. My first step into the warm building on this morning held no surprises: the owner—a white-haired gentleman who has operated the Gables since 1968—greeted me and directed me to the back meeting room; several elderly couples had just sat down for breakfast; the smell of fresh-cooked bacon melded with the sterile air; and a quiet stillness dominated the main room. This was not the place my colleagues and I met for coffee, went for weekend cocktails, or (quite frankly) sought out for any reason whatsoever.
I was right; the weather had delayed some of the other men too. Apparently, it had even deterred some from coming, though there were still thirteen who braved the snow and ice. When I arrived, most were ready to begin. There was an elevated eagerness this morning because the group was discussing the first chapter from the latest book they were reading together. The round tables in the private room were covered with copies of the book, along with the usual fare of Bibles, ink pens, scattered notepads, and the occasional yellow highlighter. I was excited too; this was my first tape-recording of this group and only the sixth Bible study I had attended since the official start of my fieldwork. The group's discussion that morning mirrored the few I had observed previously and the forty-seven more I would attend throughout the coming year: a striking mix of humor, seriousness, curiosity, intimacy, intellectualism, consensus, and amiable contention.

In the early days of my fieldwork with Evangelical Bible study groups I remember the reaction of my colleagues—graduate student and faculty alike. A slight few were curious about what I would eventually discover, others were baffled at the decision to undertake such a project in the first place, and still others were politely dismissive. If anything, they would suggest an ethnography of North American Evangelicalism should investigate the relationship between religion and politics, namely the political maneuvering of conservative Christians resulting in the two-term presidency of George W. Bush. Or, why not study the faith-based social activism of Evangelicals and their increasing involvement in national and global inequities? But these were not my concerns. I had chosen to observe, listen, record, and analyze what happens while conservative Evangelicals are (to quote one of my more skeptical colleagues) “just sitting around talking.” I had chosen to attend to the conversations Evangelicals share among themselves, conversations that help orient their more visible forms of social mobilization.

In recent decades, scholars of American religion have had much to say about the Evangelical Christian movement. A great deal of attention has been paid to the varieties of Evangelical culture (Hunter 1983; Miller 1997; Muse 2005); the dynamics of congregational life (Warner 1988; Ammerman 1997; Becker 1999; Eiesland 2000; Watt 2002); paradenominational and educational institutions (Balmer 1989; Wagner 1990); rhetorical practices (Stromberg 1993; Bielo 2004, 2007b; Harding 2000); the embodiment of spiritual experience (Griffith 1997; Luhrmann 2004); social
activism and mobilization (Elisha 2004, 2008); economic logics (Bialecki 2008); and strategies of Bible use and interpretation (Ammerman 1987; Bartkowski 1996; Bielo 2007a, 2008; Crapanzano 2000; Malley 2004). This body of research has been extremely productive and one could easily argue that, along with the global spread of Pentecostalism (Robbins 2004), the scholarly understanding of American Evangelicalism is the most intricate for Christian cultures worldwide. Among these historians, sociologists, and anthropologists, there has been an enduring interest in where and how religiosity happens for these Christians. Where is it that we see Evangelical culture “in action”? Despite a rich ethnographic record, a significant and surprising lacuna persists—an in-depth, comparative analysis of that most pervasive of social institutions in Evangelical life: group Bible study.

Evangelicals throughout the United States emphasize the need for Bible study in their individual and collective lives. As I demonstrate throughout this book, Bible study contends strongly for being the most consequential form of religious practice to the ever-evolving contours of American Evangelicalism. From a sheer numerical perspective, it is the most prolific type of small group in American society, with more than 30 million Protestants gathering every week for this distinct purpose. As a matter of substance, it provides individuals a unique opportunity to engage in open, reflexive, and critical dialogue. If we are serious about developing the anthropology of Christianity in the United States, we must attend to sites of cultural production and reflection. A claim to which I return throughout these chapters is that in the midst of “just talking,” much happens—much that informs us about what it means to be an American Evangelical at the beginning of the 21st century. What are Evangelicals interested in? What are they concerned about? What are they conflicted about? And what are the narratives, vocabularies, and cultural models used to articulate them? In responding to these questions I am attempting to theorize a practice that is globally recognized as significant across Christian traditions. Yet, no one has thus far been able to provide a systematic account of what happens when Evangelicals gather to read, discuss, and debate.

Bible study groups form in numerous ways. Congregation-wide efforts are launched to bolster participation in short-term church programs, and individuals act on an impetus to explore their faith with fellow believers. Most groups meet once a week, though some prefer only two or three monthly gatherings. They meet in homes, churches,
coffee shops, restaurants, and other public and private venues. There are groups organized strictly for men, women, couples, couples with young children, college students, empty-nesters, retirees, business owners, dieters, church leaders, young professionals, and so on, almost indefinitely. The typical meeting begins with prayer, usually a brief request for God to “bless” the group members’ time together. The majority of the meeting alternates between reading and an interactive discussion about the text of study. As we will see time and again through the case studies presented, Bible study conversations are distinctive in Evangelical life for their blend of self-deprecating and insightful humor, curious inquiry, intense intellectual banter, and intimate exchanges of information. Groups move with ease among topics as diverse as theological doctrines, hermeneutics, moral questions, politics, social mores, history, current events, congregational concerns, and personal experiences. Biblical texts are often the basis of discussion but are certainly not the only type of text that is read. Members are voracious readers, systematically working through Biblical texts, Biblical commentaries, devotional materials, best-selling Christian books, and print and online articles from Christian periodicals. (A select few groups also interspersed video or audiotape study series or lengthier films into their group schedules.) Discussions are followed by a closing prayer, which can be brief or extensive, sometimes lasting upwards of thirty minutes. Bible studies rarely last for less than an hour and often exceed two hours. Before and after the typical Bible study meeting, participants socialize with one another: laughing, trading stories, exchanging books, and generally enjoying each other’s company. Within this generic structure a host of themes central to Evangelical culture are habitually performed and consciously reconsidered. These themes appear as textual practices, religious dispositions, and discursive formations.

In this book I present an ethnography of Evangelical Bible study life. In doing so I seek to address a series of questions: what are the defining characteristics of this practice? Why is Bible study so important in the lives of Evangelicals? What are the continuities and tensions among and between individual Bible study groups? Why is Bible study so crucial for understanding Evangelical culture? What are the broader discourses—Evangelical and American alike—that help shape Bible-study life? What role does Bible study play in making religiosity happen for Evangelicals? And how does the world of Bible study translate and become effectual for individuals as they go about the remainder of their religious and social
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lives? To get at these questions I rely on three frameworks for studying cultural life: (1) a focus on social institutions, emphasizing the role of face-to-face encounters; (2) a focus on the use of texts to mediate relationships, ideas, and motives for action, highlighting the role of collective reading; and (3) a focus on close analyses of spoken discourse as a means of studying institutions and the social life of texts. As I discuss these approaches, I point to their mutual compatibility and utility in an ethnography of Bible study life and, ultimately, for enhancing our understanding of American Evangelicalism.

Words Upon the Word is based on nineteen months of ethnographic fieldwork carried out between June 2004 and December 2005. I conducted this research in and around the Midwestern city of Lansing, Michigan. The project included six Protestant congregations: three United Methodist and one each from the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, Restoration Movement, and Vineyard Fellowship. In total, I observed 324 Bible study meetings with 19 groups, and audio-recorded 167 of these meetings. The chapters that follow provide an up-close portrait of five groups and include audio-recordings and observations from 89 meetings. These case study groups, as well as the wider project sample, encompass a variety of ethnicities, gender compositions, ages, social classes, educational backgrounds, income levels, and political postures. I do not advance any specific arguments about the racialized, gendered, or otherwise demographically rooted qualities of Bible study life. Rather, I rely on the diversity of the project sample to strengthen my overall claim: Evangelical Bible study is organized by a series of practices, logics, and tensions that are deeply embedded in the broader cultural scene of American Evangelicalism.

Toward an Ethnography of Bible Study

In presenting this research to friends, students, and colleagues I am predictably confronted with one question: “How did you ever get interested in doing that?” My path toward an ethnography of Bible study life is strikingly academic. I did not grow up attending small groups, always wondering if others found them as rewarding or questionable as I did. My parents were not preachers or missionaries. I did not attend a Christian college or begin my career as a seminarian (only to later convert to anthropology). I was not intent on unmasking the negative impact of Evangelicalism in American life, nor did I start out as an unapologetic
advocate for Evangelical Christianity. I was, in fact, in the office of my dissertation advisor. I was in my second year of a Ph.D. program in cultural anthropology (not yet overridden with cynicism but increasingly sleep deprived and over-caffeinated) working as a research assistant. I was helping to analyze a rather large corpus of data from a four-year ethnographic project that included eight mainline Protestant congregations and four Roman Catholic parishes (see Roberts 2005). During the fieldwork among mainline churches, the project researchers attended and took copious hand-written notes among several Bible study groups. Unsure of how to incorporate this particular data set into his other analyses, my advisor relied on the time-honored practice of turning to his graduate advisee. Having never attended a Bible study, I accepted the task with great curiosity. As I read through these notes, three thoughts slowly dawned on me. First, the content of these meetings was an amazing record of lay theology and spirituality “in action.” Second, surely scholars had already taken advantage of this opportunity. Last, verbatim transcripts of these discussions would be far more advantageous than handwritten notes.

I return to the first and third of these thoughts in the next section. As to the second—what scholars, namely sociologists and anthropologists, have already said about Bible study—I was shocked. At the time, and still today, there are only three substantial works that focus principally on group Bible study among American Christians. Robert Wuthnow’s companion volumes, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America’s New Quest for Community* (1994a) and “I Come Away Stronger”: *How Small Groups Are Shaping American Religion* (1994b), were the first to analyze this phenomenon at length. *Sharing the Journey* is a quantitative account of the diversity of small groups in American life. Wuthnow argues that, beginning in the 1960s, Americans have steadily rearranged their search for community belonging, seeking small group opportunities in place of larger, more formal institutional structures. Among these, small group Bible study is the most prolific in American life, with more than 30 million men and women participating in these groups at least once a week (68). This bears repeating: no other form of small group, religious or otherwise, is as widespread in American life as group Bible study. Despite recognizing the ubiquity of Bible study in American Christian life, Wuthnow fails to recognize what it accomplishes. Instead, in a surprising final analysis, he seems to de-emphasize its uniqueness:
What counts is less the studying of specific lessons . . . but activities that people enjoy, that allow them to interact informally with a few other people, and that, in many ways, are not decidedly different from the activities that other people who are not in such groups do in their leisure time. (148)

If nothing else, I hope this book convinces that Bible study is not best theorized as just another “leisure” activity and that it is a “decidedly different” practice.

“I Come Away Stronger” is a collection of twelve ethnographic essays depicting small groups in mainline and Evangelical Christian congregations, as well as Jewish synagogues and nonsectarian organizations. However, the essays are almost exclusively descriptive, identifying the varieties of composition, purpose, and “feel” one finds in the small group movement. These narrative portraits are certainly valuable, but it is left to the reader to decide what each group is telling us about Evangelical culture. The chapters by Bender (1994: 225–50) and Olson (1994: 125–47) stand out for attempting to move beyond documentation to create some sort of focused analytical argument. The collection as a whole, however, raises far more questions than it answers about how Bible studies work, how social discourses structure group interaction, what continuities and tensions define Bible study life, and generally why this cultural practice carries any social significance whatsoever. Finally, Women in the Presence: Constructing Community and Seeking Spirituality in Mainline Protestantism (1995) is an in-depth ethnography from the anthropologist, Jody Shapiro Davie. Focusing on one women’s Bible study in a New England Presbyterian congregation, Davie picks up where the Wuthnow collection falls short. Based on extended fieldwork with the group and one-on-one interviews with each member, Davie suggests that Bible study is a highly unique practice in American religious life. Consider the following statement from the opening pages of Davie’s book in comparison to Wuthnow’s conclusion:

Attendance at a Sunday church service permits worshippers to gather together for a common enactment of faith, but the service is a public performance: meaning-laden, surely, but fully corporate, consensual. It is not a time for dialogue, not a time for active personal negotiation of meaning except on the most inward level. . . . [It is in] small groups where persons who share a religion come together by choice in order to be actively
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engaged in the enhancement and enactment of their spiritual lives on various levels, the potential exists for not only the creative articulation of individual faith, but also for a joint, or collaborative, search for and discussion of meaning and experience, and the affirmation of the life of the spirit. (1–2)

Davie goes on to analyze the communicative boundaries and type of spirituality cultivated by this women’s group in their meetings. Despite an impressive analysis, we are left wondering about several crucial questions: how indicative are Davie’s observations outside of mainline Presbyterianism? How indicative are her arguments for Bible study groups that arrange their meetings differently and perform different types of religious reading? Thus, while Davie’s conclusion about the value of Bible study is far more accurate than Wuthnow’s, she is handicapped by a lack of comparative analysis.

By picking out these three works I am not suggesting that Bible study has been completely ignored by other sociologists and anthropologists of American religion. Brief depictions and references to the importance of group Bible study appear in numerous widely cited works (e.g., Titon 1988; Ammerman 1997; Griffith 1997; Miller 1997; Becker 1999; Crapanzano 2000; Eiesland 2000; Ault 2004; Malley 2004). The collective shortcoming of this work, along with the valuable contributions from Wuthnow and Davie, is twofold. First, the only semblance of an explanatory framework has been to understand Bible study in functionalist terms. Congregationally, Bible study has been explained as functioning to foster participation in the local church, increase bonds of fellowship, help make important policy and program decisions, and socialize new members into the local culture of the church (e.g., Eiesland 2000). In short, Bible study is viewed as satisfying distinct needs and purposes within the local church community. Individually, Bible study has been described as functioning to provide emotional support and accountability, generically reinforce beliefs and values, and serve as a source of spiritual growth for participants (e.g., Becker 1999). My objection to these analyses is not that they are inaccurate but that they are vastly incomplete. I argue for an analytical framework that extends well beyond local and individual functions. Second, what is lacking throughout the existing literature on Bible study is a sustained focus on this practice for itself: an in-depth, comparative account that situates Bible study within a defined framework to understand the cultural significance of this phenomenon. In other words, Bible study must not only be
regarded as a means toward other ends (e.g., as a barometer for church growth), but also as an event that accomplishes its own cultural work and is appreciated as such by its participants. To achieve this there must be an account of the themes that define Bible study life and how these connect to prevailing discourses and trends within the broader Evangelical movement.

The lack of systematic research on the practice of group Bible study is striking for a number of reasons, some of which I have already indicated. The sheer numerical presence, greater than 30 million people each week, provides ample reason to wonder why more attention has not been paid to Bible study. The importance of Bible study as a unique congregational and religious event, as described by Davie, is equally compelling. We should also question this scant attention on historical grounds. At its core, group Bible study is a practice that centers on the interaction between Christians and their sacred scriptures. Beginning at least with the 16th-century European Reformation, Protestants have been supremely concerned with their ability and duty to read and comprehend the Bible for themselves. Among others, Martin Luther, William Tyndale, and John Calvin all charged Christian believers to assume a personal responsibility in reading scripture and grasping theological truths (Frei 1974; Cummings 2002). In the context of the United States, this responsibility has been understood as best met through collective endeavors. The birth and rapid spread of the Sunday school movement in the 19th century testifies to the centrality of scriptural study and the voluntary, church-based, group focus of American Evangelicalism (Boylan 1988). Studying the Bible indexes a broader schema among Evangelical Protestants, a firm connection between literacy and spirituality. The authority invested in religious reading and a fundamental affinity for all manner of texts has been an organizing feature of conservative Christianity since the late 1800s (Brown 2004). Finally, the paucity of analytical, critical work on Bible study from scholars is astounding in light of the rather voluminous attention paid to it by pastors and church leaders. Widely popular church campaigns such as Rick Warren’s 40 Days of Purpose, Bill Hybels and Mark Mittelberg’s Becoming a Contagious Christian, and scores of others are centered on the formation of weekly small groups. Monthly congregational newsletters devote entire sections to the types of Bible study opportunities offered by the church. Christian bookstores have special sections devoted solely to Bible study materials. A (very unsystematic) search on Amazon.com for “small-group Bible study” returned a not-so-modest 1,766 results. (Compare this to the
same search for “Evangelical politics,” which produced only 208 results!) It seems as though everywhere in the worlds of church leadership, church growth, and spiritual development, Evangelicals are talking about group Bible study.

Thus, there is little reason to wonder if there is a need for more substantial research on this religious practice. The question remains, however, what is the best way to go about this research? I argue that group Bible study is most fruitfully understood as a vital social institution, rooted in the processes of collective reading and intersubjective dialogue. Through the weekly exchanges that occur between texts and readers and among those readers about those texts, we see the continuities and tensions of American Evangelicalism “in action.”

**Institution, Reading, and Discourse**

The arguments I raise in this book locate important lessons about the current shape of American Evangelical culture in the details of Bible study conversation. This approach rests on a series of assumptions about the nature of culture and what happens when a group of readers interact with a text together. As an anthropologist by training, part of my socialization into the discipline was first to embrace and then question “culture” as an organizing analytical concept. Indeed, more so than any other theoretical-methodological device, anthropologists have spilled their ink over the status of “culture” (e.g., Clifford and Marcus, eds. 1986; Marcus and Fischer 1986; Rosaldo 1989; Abu-Lughod 1991; Kuper 1999). My approach towards Evangelical “culture” emerges primarily from theories of social practice (e.g., Bourdieu 1977), which emphasize the integral and active role of social institutions.

**Institution**

Approaching “culture” as collections of overlapping, interrelent institutions is not simply a matter of identifying organizational structures. Rather, “institutions” in this sense refers to “any relatively durable set of social relations which endows individuals with power, status, and resources of various kinds” (Thompson 1991: 8). More explicitly, institutions are stable social forms—of all sizes and types—that contribute to the formation of dispositions: inclinations of action, thought, embodiment, interpretation, belief, interaction, and speech. Thus, when we speak of
“culture” we are in reality grasping for the social processes by which such
dispositions are formed, become habitualized, made attractive and worth
seeking, or defined as oppressive and worth rejecting. To borrow from
Brian Street, “culture is a verb,” a “signifying process” in the “construction
of meaning,” not a “fixed inheritance of shared meanings” (1993: 23).

A key element in this conceptualization of social institutions is their
capacity for production (see Berger and Luckmann 1966). Institutions are
not simply social arenas where individuals congregate to passively receive
and exchange information about their surrounding world. Rather, as sites
of knowledge production, institutions provide social locations where we
can actively engage the history of the ideas and epistemologies with which
we live. The cultural scene of American Evangelicalism, for example, en-
compases numerous bodies of knowledge, including theology, herme-
neutics, science, nationalism, legality, and everyday ethics, just to list a
few. An institutional approach to “culture” recognizes that much of indi-
viduals’ interactions with these systems of knowing occur through various
types of social settings and relations. And if we want to see how individu-
als and collectivities are experiencing forms of knowledge we must look
closely at the sites where this actually happens.

This framework for studying “culture,” however, is not strictly mental-
ist and ideological. It is ultimately concerned with how the life of an in-
stitution relates to the life of individual and collective action that ensues
from participation in that institution. Cultural life cannot solely be about
thought, belief, value, and the like, but must also attend to action, strategy,
change, coercion, and resistance. Thus, in the analysis of institutions we
find the breeding ground for intention, creativity, motivation, and ambi-
tion. And while the analyses I present in this book focus on the life of one
Evangelical institution, it is clear in each chapter that what happens in Bi-
ble study is destined not to stay in Bible study but most certainly informs
the logic and decision making of participants as they leave the group set-
ting to be mothers, fathers, spouses, bosses, workers, and citizens.

Of course, not every social institution in every cultural setting func-
tions equally as a site of knowledge production and disposition forma-
tion. Theories of practice have been most interested in observing those
scenes where the dynamic and conflicted nature of social life is made
apparent—either as public performance or backstage reflection. Among
American Evangelicals, group Bible study is just such an institution. This
returns me to Jody Davie’s key observation about the nature of group Bi-
ble study, namely, its uniqueness in the context of the American Christian
experience. It is a site where individuals are able to critically and reflexively articulate the categories of meaning and action that are central to their spiritual and social life. This happens primarily in and through the act of collective reading.

Reading

Group Bible study is an event defined by the interaction between a collection of readers and a text. While this does distinguish Evangelical Bible study, it is certainly not unique. Cross-culturally, numerous events have been observed that are built around this same phenomenon. Orthodox Jews gather to read and study the Talmud (Boyarin 1989); Muslims from varying regions find a host of performative and interpretive uses for the Quran (e.g., Baker 1993; Bowen 1993; Lambek 1990); literary clubs seem to form around most any available genre (Long 2003; Radway 1984; Reed 2004); and thousands of university students huddle around assigned texts every week in undergraduate and graduate seminars. Without question, texts are crucial to a variety of social institutions. In all of these, texts are not read only to be discarded. They are not forgotten. Sacred or academic, ancient or recently published, texts become embedded in the lives of readers and serve as guides to action. The use of texts is not static or stagnant, and the relationship between reader and text in the group context is never uniform. Indeed, collective reading is as likely to produce tension as it is continuity, depending on the text under study, the composition of readers, and their recognized purpose of being together. These dynamics require an understanding of the social qualities of textual consumption.

The empirical study of reading has been taken up most intentionally by those within “the ethnography of reading” (Boyarin, ed. 1993). This field of inquiry seeks to understand the cultural logics that organize reading—as a structured form of social action, an emergent performance event, and a defined category of practice. Ethnographers of reading have shown interest in all manners of literacy, from the most mundane reading events to those at the center of ritual and communal life. This body of research has posed a series of fundamental questions about the culturally constructed nature of reading: what constitutes an act of reading? Who reads alone and who reads together? What does reading accomplish? Who has the access and legitimacy to read? What is deemed worth reading? Who deems it so? Whose readings are authoritative? And what sociohistorical processes—local and global—structure acts of reading? The fundamental
strength of this scholarship is its recognition that the act of reading is about so much more than just consuming information. It is, in fact, a forum for (and form of) social interaction, moral discourse, and epistemological formation.

*Words Upon the Word*, alongside other works in the ethnography of reading, is a product of the “turn toward the reader” within literacy criticism and cultural hermeneutics in the 1970s. Reader-response theory, as it came to be known, objected to the assertion that texts contain finalized meanings via defined authorial intentions or specific properties of genre. For its proponents this model implied a rather passive reader whose job was simply to excavate the buried meaning from a text. Instead, reader-response theorists sought to demonstrate how meaning is invested in a text by its interlocutors, thereby restoring a more active role to the reader. In turn, the idea of an active reader is a social problem, not only because the baggage brought to the reading of texts is culturally derived, but also because the consumption of texts (even when performed alone) is always done within particular settings of society and history. Stanley Fish (1980) captures this in his model of the “interpretive community” whereby readers read the way they do because of their participation in defined communities of practice. Such communities operate on common procedures for engaging texts, sharing hermeneutic assumptions, interpretive strategies and performative styles. It is from this collective reading context that meaning ensues, not from the individual reader and not from the text itself. As a result, we see reading and interpretation as fundamentally cultural acts, and we open a space to view the multiplicity of social meanings that arise from the reader-text interaction.

Studies of “scripturalism” have continued in this tradition of thinking about readers, their texts, and the social contexts of reading (see Malley 2004 for a critical review of this field). Scholars of comparative religion, most famously Wilfred Cantwell Smith (1993), have called attention to the fact that “scriptures” rely on communities of practice to recognize them as such. For a text to be “sacred” or “scriptural” it must be endowed and continue to be endowed with the appropriate significance by a defined group of interlocutors (see Levering, ed. 1989). There are many questions to be asked about the “social life of scriptures” (Bowen 1992: 495; Bielo, ed. Forthcoming)—what communities of readers do with their sacred texts across settings and involving different social actors. As textual artifacts, scriptures can experience change due to their social circulation. In the case of American Evangelicals and the Bible, one need look no further
than paraphrases, children’s Bibles, Biblezines, and graphic novel Bibles to see evidence of this. Moreover, scriptures are implicated in all manner of normative rhetoric, quoted irrespective of occasion, and invested with divergent meanings for divergent reasons. In short, the social life of scriptures is a busy one, hectic even. The work I present here on group Bible study provides an up-close vision of where Evangelical readers take their scriptures (as well as texts that comment on scriptures) in their own anthropological imaginations.

A collective strength of the reader-response tradition is that it stresses the formative impact of texts on the lives of readers. The social life of scriptures includes the propositional beliefs they encourage, the emotions and motivations they cultivate, and the practices they shape. This relationship between text and world foregrounds the need to better understand what happens between readers and texts. After all, these processes and products are quite meaningful outside a closed circle of religionists huddled around their scripture because they eventually enter the surrounding social world through those religionists. In the chapters that follow I analyze various products of collective reading, such as Bible interpretation, spiritual intimacy, and personal witnessing. These scenes should therefore be understood as both a form of mutual knowledge production and potent incitements to action.

Discourse

A framework that emphasizes institutions and collective reading does well to identify where to begin observation and what to look for. It falls short, however, on the question of how to look. The methodological complement I employ is that of “discourse analysis.” Following the tradition of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934), I understand intersubjective institutions to be constituted by their semiotic, linguistic, and interactional features. The knowledge and orientations toward action that are produced within social institutions rely on processes of signification (e.g., the exchange of talk) and the rules and strategies that organize this behavior. Thus, to study an institution necessarily entails the study of its discourse.

By “discourse” I mean language-in-use, that dialogical stream of communicative activity that helps to define group identity and purpose. At least since the 1960s (Hymes 1964) anthropologists have studied speaking not simply as a vehicle through which culture gets transmitted. Rather, it is in the details of linguistic practice that the study of culture can take
place. Questions of meaning and social structure can be understood through the combined analysis of speech content, strategies of talk, discourse organization, and accompanying interactional features (Sherzer 1987). The discourse-culture link has been recognized as particularly salient within “religious language,” where ideas about the nature of language and the identities of speakers, patterns of linguistic form, and contexts of performance are all integral to religious formation (Keane 2004). In fact, the analytical connection between language and religion appears quite natural, given their shared interest in questions of meaning making, identity performance, and establishing common bonds of sociality.

The close coupling of religion and language has been highlighted in the study of American Evangelicalism. Two of the most widely cited works among anthropologists and sociologists, monographs by Susan Harding (2000) and Vincent Crapanzano (2000), are both linguistically oriented investigations. Harding, in particular, sees language as central to born-again Christianity. She argues that “speaking is believing,” suggesting that religious conversion is marked by adopting forms of discourse and, by extension, modes of thinking and being in the world (33–60). Harding’s now influential claim is evident also in the work of Peter Stromberg (1993), whose analysis of Evangelical conversion narratives emphasized that such performances are not simple retellings but effectual rituals where emotions and experiences are reframed in born-again terms. Perhaps the ultimate lesson of this research tradition is the inseparability of language and religion in Evangelical culture and that the former is among the most useful ways of understanding the latter (cf. Csordas 1997, Meigs 1995, Muse 2005, Shoaps 2002, Witten 1993).

Of course, American Evangelicals are not the only Christians to pay close attention to words, discursive forms, and attitudes toward language. Indeed, the history of Christianity could be sketched in linguistic terms. Augustine is widely recognized as setting the theoretical agenda for both signification and reading in the West (Ando 2001; Stock 1996). Aquinas was invested in both Aristotelian semiotics and the doctrine of analogy (Ayres 2006). Erasmus struggled to balance the limitations of language with his desire for vernacular translations (Boyle 1977). The European Reformation recast Protestant language ideologies. Namely, the spoken and written word were ascribed an unprecedented trust as a communicative vehicle for accurately conveying exterior realities and internal states (Cummings 2002; Keane 2007). The struggles—from the 17th century through the 21st—over Biblical literalism, systematic theology, common
sense philosophy, Enlightenment philosophy, German neo-orthodoxy, “fundamentalism,” “liberalism,” and “postmodernism” are all anchored in questions about what language can and cannot do (Macquarrie 1967; Ward 1995; Jeffrey 1996). We might go so far as to suggest that Christians are as much *homo linguisticus* as they are *homo religiosicus*. Alongside theologians, historians, and literary critics, anthropologists of Christianity have honed in on the historical, cross-cultural intersection of Christian culture, linguistic ideology, and discursive practice (e.g., Robbins 2001; Engelke 2007; Keane 2007). In many ways *Words Upon the Word* emerges from this tradition as I analyze how conservative Evangelicals, through their dialogue and collective reading, articulate their versions of Christian language, identity, and culture.

What I have presented above are the guiding analytical assumptions and principles for this study of American Evangelicalism. The framework I am advocating focuses on the life of social institutions, the practices of collective reading and interpretation, and the discourse that gives life to these processes. Ultimately, this book is about what happens when American Evangelicals gather to read and discuss various texts and the very real impact that this form of social action has on the remainder of their lives. I focus on group Bible study because of its dialogic, reflexive, and dynamic characteristics as an event where this type of action occurs.

*Plan of the Book*

In the chapters that follow I argue that there are definable themes in Bible study life. The five themes I address in this book are both the most prevalent and most significant for understanding group study. They are, however, not the only themes one might observe. For example, I do not directly address the role of local congregational life in shaping the content and organization of group study. By leaving certain themes out, I am, necessarily, drawing an inevitably partial portrait of Bible study. It is my hope that readers will sympathize with this dilemma as they are introduced to the themes on which I do focus. For each theme, I argue explicitly for its priority within group life, and its (often very serious) consequences for understanding the status of Evangelicalism.

In the course of highlighting these themes, I stay attentive to two crucial realities of Bible study life. First, group study is dialectically implicated in broader discourses of American Evangelicalism (e.g., prosperity
theology, gender ideologies) and American society (e.g., democratic ethos, religious pluralism). By dialectical I mean simply that these discourses help to structure processes of reading and dialogue, while also being placed under self-conscious scrutiny through group interaction.

Second, while my primary focus remains on the continuities among and between Bible study groups, I make clear in each chapter where tensions are likely to and do arise. Through their disagreements and contradictions (potential, seeming, and real), these groups come face-to-face with the heterogeneity that defines American Evangelicalism. And as a result, they reveal that their faith and their group life need not be threatened by these elements of diversity and conflict.

I begin in chapter 1 by addressing several questions of ethnographic reflexivity. I examine the methodological decisions made in designing and carrying out this research. In the latter half of the chapter I turn to the question of how I participated and related with the project groups, outlining the ways in which my presence undoubtedly impacted the ethnographic scene I was there to document. Ultimately, the goal of this chapter is to intentionally reflect on the myriad of decisions I needed to make throughout the project and how those decisions impacted the shape of the research.

In chapter 2 I examine the organizing theme of group life: Bible reading and interpretation. While reading directly from biblical texts is not always a part of group meetings, scripture remains at the center of why these groups meet and how their conversations are structured. My analysis focuses on a Lutheran men’s Bible study and their thirteen-week study of the Old Testament book of Proverbs. I argue that the practice of group Bible reading is best understood through an analytical scheme that pairs distinct ideologies articulated about the Bible as a text (“textual ideology”) and distinct hermeneutic activities that groups perform with Biblical texts (“textual practice”).

Chapter 3 takes up the question of how participants understand the event of Bible study and what they expect from this event. Employing the sociolinguistic concept of “interactive frames,” I argue that Evangelical Bible study is defined by the sustained attempt to cultivate increased intimacy among participants. I focus this analysis on fourteen meetings of a mixed-gender home group from a Restoration Movement congregation. I emphasize how this frame of intimacy helps organize group meeting structure, norms of interaction, and modes of Bible interpretation.
Chapter 4 analyzes the ways in which the personal interests of participants work to structure religious reading. Like other forms of collective belonging, Bible study groups often coalesce because they share certain interests and passions. In the case of Bible study, the shared interests of participants provide a “subtext” for reading (Long 1993: 194). The case study for this chapter is a mixed-gender home group from a United Methodist congregation. This analysis is based on the group’s sixteen-week study of the best-selling Evangelical text *The Jesus I Never Knew* by Philip Yancey (1995). I illustrate how this group’s shared interest in the general category of “history” constitutes their subtext for reading, organizing their discussion of the book itself, its biblical references, the moral-political issues it raises, and the group’s prevailing mode of hermeneutic activity.

Chapter 5 explores how Bible study participants use group meetings as an opportunity to practice “witnessing.” The sociological and anthropological research on American Evangelicals has identified “witnessing” as a distinct speech genre in which “believers” attempt to convert “nonbelievers” to Christianity. I argue that a prevailing theme in Bible study life is a form of performance rehearsal, wherein participants reenact past witnessing encounters and imagine potential opportunities. Ultimately, the aim is to define what constitutes effective and ineffective witnessing. My analysis is based on over thirty hours of discussion from a United Methodist men’s group and their reading of the New Testament book of Acts.

The final analytical chapter considers how religious identity is constructed and negotiated in group Bible study. The issues addressed in chapters 2 through 5 all speak to the tensions and emphases of Evangelical identity. In chapter 6 I focus my analysis on one Lutheran women’s Bible study group and their ongoing struggle to identify the nature of their religious identity. Based on observations and recordings from eighteen group meetings, I argue that this ongoing articulation of identity is grounded in conceptualizations of what distinguishes a defined Lutheran Self from a variety of “misguided” Christian others.

In the last chapter, I return to the necessity of developing an ethnography of Bible study life. In particular, I highlight the theoretical and methodological lessons available in this type of research. In the spirit of encouraging open-ended scholarship, I end by pointing to three areas of Bible study ethnography that deserve more attention and might provide a useful starting point for others. Throughout the course of this book, readers will encounter a variety of Bible study groups from different Protestant traditions that have cultivated different group dynamics. The arguments I
pursue are always presented in the context of verbatim group interactions. As I move between qualitative analysis and primary empirical data, I am confident that readers will be struck by the creativity and acumen of these groups and the individual participants. I have suggested in this introduction that a key aspect of social institutions is their ability to encourage reflexive dialogue and that Bible study stands out in this regard. I believe this assertion is borne out time and again in the chapters that follow as these individuals reveal themselves as critically engaged social actors. In short, I believe that the analyses in this book repeatedly demonstrate the importance of what happens when Evangelicals are “just sitting around talking.”