“What exactly is e-VAN-ge-LIST-ical-ism?” asked a sociologist at a recent colloquium about American religion and politics. The religious literacy of mainstream academics is appalling. They struggle with basic terminology (“you know, Father, Son, and whoever the other guy was”) and hardly any are involved in religious congregations themselves. According to a recent study of social science faculty at major research universities, 77 percent had attended religious services fewer than 5 times in the past year and only 8 percent attended services regularly. In the same study, only a quarter said they believed in God. A mere 1 percent identified themselves as evangelical Protestants (Ecklund and Scheitle 2005). Thus, when social scientists emerge quadrennially to interpret the role of religion in national politics, it is not surprising that their arguments ring false. They imagine that conservative Protestantism can be understood as a mask for class interests, a mode of organization, or a tool of political operatives. They ignore the fact that conservative Protestantism is religion.

The problem is especially acute in sociology. Among the more than 400 faculty employed at the 15 top-ranked sociology departments, fewer than a handful specialize in sociology of religion. Most of these departments offer no graduate-level training in religion at all. Of 468 articles published in the past 6 years in the American Journal of Sociology and American Sociological Review, only 10 have dealt primarily with religion.
Only one was centrally concerned with conservative Protestantism (Hout, Greeley, and Wilde 2001). None included qualitative information about conservative Protestants. Yet, in the general public, a quarter of Americans are affiliated with conservative Protestant churches and in some polls as many as four in ten identify themselves as evangelicals. A discipline that purports to be knowledgeable about society has clearly dropped the ball. This is the same discipline that claims as its founders such significant contributors to the study of religion as Max Weber and Emile Durkheim.

Fortunately, scholars in other disciplines and marginalized scholars in the social sciences have devoted a great deal of attention to conservative Protestantism. From historians, scholars in religious studies, ethnographers, and the occasional political scientist, anthropologist, and sociologist we are able to piece together information about the language evangelicals use, how they worship, what they think about themselves and their place in society, and where their faith influences or does not influence their lives. Sociologists who excuse themselves in the name of science from ever having to do more than include religion as a variable in surveys could gain much by broadening their horizons.

The focus of this chapter is conservative Protestantism as religion. In hopes of connecting with a few of those in my discipline who care nothing about religion, I consider conservative Protestant religion through the lens of cultural capital. This is not the language that conservative Protestants themselves would use. Nor is it a concept that lends itself readily to the study of conservative Protestantism. Among sociologists of culture, whose view of culture has necessarily been broadened sufficiently to include all kinds of beliefs and values, the concept of cultural capital has been a convenient way of
focusing on the high-status culture that still matters most to academics. In operational terms, cultural capital consists of having graduated from college, gaining an advanced degree, reading books, going to art galleries and the opera, and having fine taste in one’s consumption of art and music. Cultural capital is simply *haute couture*. It consists of skills, talents, and experiences that get people into the higher echelons of society – into the right universities, professions, and clubs. There is little room for ordinary people in the study of cultural capital except insofar as they mimic elite culture in such small ways as purchasing books for their children or enrolling them in ballet classes. In this view of cultural capital, conservative Protestants would be the last ones that scholars would anticipate having any. After all, conservative Protestants are surely the benighted heirs of snake handlers and faith healers. They lost their cultural capital eight decades ago in Dayton, Tennessee.

The reason for focusing here on cultural capital is precisely that it is odd for academics to think that conservative Protestants have any. To move in the direction of making this a credible argument we need to remember two important qualifications that have been made to the concept of cultural capital in recent years. The first is that Bourdieu’s (1984) rarified emphasis on aesthetic taste has had to be broadened even in studying elites. As Lamont’s (1992) work has shown, money and especially morality are important markers of status as well as taste. The other is that cultural capital is context specific. Especially in pluralistic societies like the United States, people living in different racial, ethnic, and regional subcultures have their own forms of cultural capital and their own standards of performance in relation to these status rankings. Black workers who pride themselves on being more honest than their white counterparts
(Lamont 2000), and Latino immigrants with loyalties to la raza, are examples.

Conservative Protestants have cultural capital as well that serve as symbols of status within their own subculture. In addition, and an important part of my argument, conservative Protestants’ cultural capital includes characteristics that help them pursue their aims in the wider society. In this respect, cultural capital is less about status and more about identity. Evangelical culture currently gives evangelicals a unifying identity, engages them in common practices, and mobilizes them to be involved in the wider society. We must begin, though, by briefly situating conservative Protestantism in its historical context.

**Conservative Protestantism in Historical Context**

The most extensive and authoritative account of evangelicalism in antebellum America estimates that evangelical Protestants accounted for 85 percent of all U.S. churches in 1860 (Noll 2002:170). It is helpful to keep this figure in mind when considering conservative Christianity in the early years of the twenty-first century. Evangelicalism may have grown in recent years, but it is a far cry from the dominant influence it once had in American culture. In 1860, the theological meaning of evangelicalism was nevertheless much the same as it is today. “Evangelicals called people to acknowledge their sin before God, to look upon Jesus Christ (crucified—dead—resurrected) as God’s means of redemption, and to exercise faith in this Redeemer as the way of reconciliation with God and orientation for life in the world” (Noll 2002:171). Evangelicals emphasized personal experiences of God’s grace and held the Bible to be the unique
revelation of God’s truth. All the major theologians associated with evangelical
denominations—Francis Asbury, Nathaniel W. Taylor, Charles Hodge, and Phoebe
Palmer, among others—agreed on these essential points. Evangelicals were also
instrumental in combining personal moral conviction with social action through such
efforts as the temperance and anti-slavery movements (Young 2006).

Yet there was no sense in which evangelical Christianity constituted a single or
unified religious monolith. It was divided among Methodists, Baptists, Presbyterians,
and Congregationalists, all of whom took their distinctive denominational traditions and
practices quite seriously. Styles of worship and modes of church governance varied
considerably from one denomination to another. By the eve of the Civil War, evangelical
Christianity was further divided along racial and regional lines. Even within
denominations and regions, respect for congregational autonomy, geographic distances,
slow travel, and inadequate communication inhibited the emergence of a single
evangelical identity. In the absence of any other sizable group of Protestants or of a
substantial Catholic population, the various evangelical denominations could also forego
seeking unity among themselves as a defensive strategy against others.

At the end of the nineteenth century, evangelical Protestant denominations still
constituted the lion’s share of American religion. The Southern Baptist Convention, with
only 500,000 members in 1860 grew to 2 million by 1900. Nearly every county in North
and South Carolina, Tennessee, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Louisiana, and
east Texas had at least 20 Baptist congregations. Methodists increased from 2 million to
6 million in the same period, becoming the most populous denomination in nearly every
state (Gaustad and Barlow 2000). Both denominations were known for biblical
preaching, an emphasis on personal salvation, periodic revivals, and regular prayer meetings. Presbyterian churches had grown less rapidly, but were also well-represented in nearly every state. The strength of evangelicalism, like that of the nation, was in farming communities and small towns, where churches and fraternal orders, along with an occasional lyceum or opera house, were typically the centers of local culture. Evangelicalism was also increasingly represented in the cities. Dwight L. Moody held urban revival meetings with backing from J. Pierpont Morgan and Cornelius Vanderbilt in New York and from John Wanamaker and Anthony Drexel in Philadelphia. At the Chicago World’s Exhibition in 1893, more than 130,000 people heard Moody speak in a single day. Bible institutes, of which Moody’s in Chicago was one of the first, became popular low-cost options for training clergy and missionaries. At the nation’s elite colleges, the Student Volunteer Movement organized campus chapters, hosted summer conferences, and by 1911 sent out 5,000 volunteers as foreign missionaries to “evangelize the world in this generation.”

The next half century, though, was marked more by retreat among evangelicals than by advance. When H. Richard Niebuhr (1929) wrote his famous treatise on denominationalism, he observed that race, class, and region were still as divisive as they had been in 1860. The Catholic population had swelled from 3.5 million in 1870 to 15 million in 1910. Jews increased from less than 1 million in 1906 to 4 million in 1926. Protestantism itself was increasingly divided. Ethnicity and national origin added diversity in regions settled by immigrants from Scandinavia, Germany, and Eastern Europe. The rise of Pentecostalism, numerous small denominations, and the fundamentalist movement contributed further diversity. Evangelicalism remained
disproportionally centered in rural areas, whereas the population was increasingly urban. Theologically, the churches were divided about how much or little of Darwinism, progressivism, internationalism, and biblical higher criticism to accept. Culturally, what has recently been termed the “secular revolution” dramatically reduced the influence of evangelical Protestantism in higher education, science, medicine, publishing, and the arts (Smith 2002).

Why evangelicalism emerged strong and in cultural tension with religious liberals after World War II is a development I have discussed elsewhere at considerable length. In The Restructuring of American Religion (1988), based on national surveys, historical evidence, and numerous materials from religious leaders, I provided a multi-level interpretation of the emerging influence of American evangelicalism. My interpretation was heavily cultural, but also emphasized the changing economic and institutional landscape of American religion. I argued that American Christianity has been particularly susceptible to changes in the social environment because of its this-worldliness and the manner in which it constructs its institutional memory. Those predisposing factors, as well as religion’s overall historic prominence in the United States, meant that it would be shaped by political, economic, and cultural events, just as it had been in the past. The rapid growth of higher education during the 1960s produced an education gap between more active orthodox believers and less active or less evangelical young people that had not been observed in research conducted in the 1950s. Further divisions grew out of the civil rights movement and protests against the Vietnam war. By the late 1970s, the Republican party’s Southern strategy, which resulted in Ronald Reagan’s victory in 1980, was separating evangelical Democrats in the south from
Catholic Democrats in the North and uniting them with evangelical Republicans in the Midwest and West. *Roe v. Wade* and questions about school prayer, feminism, and gay rights were also dividing public opinion along religious lines.

Evangelicalism was by no means passive in responding to these changes. The National Association of Evangelicals, founded in 1940, had made significant strides in repudiating fundamentalism’s separatist attitude toward worldly engagement and in promoting at least symbolic cooperation among the various conservative denominations, despite continuing differences on such questions as speaking in tongues, dispensationalism, and eschatology. Leadership networks spanning denominations and regions were being forged among such institutions as Park Street Church in Boston, Tenth Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia, Gordon-Conwell Seminary in Massachusetts, Moody Bible Institute and Wheaton College in Illinois, large Baptist churches and seminaries in Texas, and Fuller Seminary in Los Angeles. Billy Graham made effective use of television in preaching about personal salvation. Young Life was organizing hundreds of chapters in high schools and Campus Crusade for Christ was doing the same on college campuses, strategically targeting key students in fraternities and sororities and linking them with prominent clergy and business leaders. These and other special purpose organizations, which evangelicals called parachurch ministries, grew dramatically during the 1960s in response to concerns that religious activities should be as professionally organized, entrepreneurial, and mission-oriented as other nonprofits and secular social movements. They transcended denominational differences, mobilized volunteers, and made use of the institutional resources already present in churches and on college and seminary campuses.
In the early 1970s, it appeared that what Richard Quebedeaux (1974) described as a new wave of “young evangelicals” – well educated, politicized by the Vietnam war, and disaffected by Watergate and by older evangelical leaders’ support of the war and Nixon – had amassed sufficient cultural capital to spearhead a politically and socially progressive movement within evangelical Protestantism. What they lacked were grassroots supporters in evangelical congregations, where sentiments about war, civil rights, and Nixon remained far more conservative. Even in mainline Protestant denominations, where national leaders had taken the progressive side on social issues, rank-and-file members often disagreed.

These incipient divisions were largely missed or misinterpreted in scholarship of the day. Herberg (1955) had cast Protestantism in monolithic terms over and against Catholics and Jews and Lenski’s (1961) study of religion in Detroit did nothing to identify diverging strands among Protestants. Hadden (1969) and Quinley (1974) diagnosed the problem simply as one of clergy being out of step with parishioners and Greeley (1972) emphasized the continuing significance of denominationalism. In retrospect, the most important evidence came from a study of church members in northern California – by no means the Bible belt – that showed how pervasive evangelical beliefs continued to be. Fifty-seven percent of the Protestants studied agreed that Jesus was born of a virgin, 50 percent said it was completely true that Jesus had walked on water, 57 percent said miracles in the Bible actually happened, and 65 percent said believing in Jesus as savior was absolutely necessary for salvation (Glock and Stark 1965). Although the percentages varied, a substantial minority or majority of members in all denominations held these views.
Whereas the younger socially progressive evangelical leaders failed to connect with grassroots members, the televangelists succeeded (Hadden and Shupe 1988). By the late 1970s, Jerry Falwell, Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts, Jimmy Swaggart, and Jim and Tammy Faye Baker were all reaching large audiences. Their programming spanned denominations, did not deter viewers from being actively involved in local congregations, and provided a means of developing lists for direct-mail solicitations. In this respect, television itself became a significant form of cultural capital. However, at least four other factors were important in molding evangelicalism into a national identity. One was the presidential candidacy of Jimmy Carter, a born-again Southern Baptist who stirred media interest in what it meant to be an evangelical. A second was polling, especially Gallup polls that began asking the public if they were evangelicals and held various beliefs associated with evangelicalism. Before, estimates included only members of denominations affiliated with the National Association of Evangelicals; with polls, evangelicalism became much larger and cut across denominations. Third, denominational identities were themselves weakening as a result of ecumenical cooperation, intermarriage, and geographic mobility. And fourth, members who were dissatisfied with their denominations’ ecumenical programs, mergers, or policies on social issues could find kindred spirits through television ministries, special purpose ministries, and advocacy organizations.

A Gallup survey in 1984 showed that the American public was almost evenly divided in its “religious views” between self-identified religious conservatives (41 percent) and religious liberals (43 percent) and that the proportions who said they were very conservative (18 percent) or very liberal (19 percent) were also about even. Sixty-
eight percent of conservatives felt there was a great deal or fair amount of tension between religious conservatives and religious liberals; 64 percent of religious liberals agreed. Conservatives said liberals were morally loose, did not know Christ, and did not believe in the Bible; liberals described conservatives as overly strict, intolerant, fanatical, simplistic, and too concerned about their own salvation. Greater contact with the other side was associated with feeling less favorable toward it. The study also showed that religious conservatives and liberals were deeply divided from each other in their views about abortion, school prayer, and even spending on social welfare programs (Wuthnow 1988). A follow-up study in 1999 showed that the public was still divided: 44 percent identified themselves as religious conservatives (26 percent as very conservative) and 50 percent said they were religious liberals (28 percent, very liberal). Among evangelical Protestants, 60 percent said they were very conservative, while only 7 percent said they were very liberal (Wuthnow 1999).

Were numbers all that mattered, religious liberals should have had as much influence in national affairs as religious conservatives – or more, given some of the differences between the two. In both studies, religious liberals were more highly educated than religious conservatives. Other research, using a different way of identifying evangelicals, has shown that members of evangelical denominations are less likely than members of liberal mainline denominations to have personal contacts with influential people, such as scientists, corporate executives, and government officials (Wuthnow and Evans 2002). Of particular significance to any consideration of cultural capital, adults who were raised in conservative Protestant denominations are a third less
likely than those raised in mainline denominations to have graduated from high school
and only half as likely to have graduated from college (Massengill 2005).

The cultural prominence of evangelicals, though, depends on other factors besides
the educational attainment of rank-and-file members. Special purpose groups were a
vehicle not only for saving souls but also for mobilizing people, money, and ideas. In
2004, Campus Crusade for Christ’s revenue had reached $420 million. One of its
activities was the Jesus Project, a film about the life of Jesus. From the project’s
inception in 1979 through 2005, an estimated 42 million videocassettes and 13 million
audiocassettes were distributed, which reached an estimated 6 billion people in 105
countries and were believed by the organization to have resulted in approximately 200
million “decisions for Christ.” Although support for evangelical programs like this
comes from local congregations and individual donors, it also comes from wealthy
benefactors and foundations. Between 1999 and 2003, Campus Crusade received $54
million in foundation grants. Several of the nation’s largest foundations give only to
evangelical organizations. These include the Arthur S. DeMoss Foundation, which gave
349 grants totaling nearly $95 million between 1999 and 2003; the DeVos Foundation,
which gave 150 grants totaling $45 million; and the Maclellan Foundation, which gave
96 grants totaling $38 million (Wuthnow and Lindsay 2006). The role of wealthy donors
has been considerable in supporting the National Prayer Breakfast, which brings top
government and religious leaders together each year in the nation’s capital, and such
projects as Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ*, as well as colleges, seminaries, and local
churches (Lindsay 2006). Government is another source of funding for evangelical
organizations. In 1981, the evangelical humanitarian relief and development
organization, World Vision, spent $60 million on overseas aid, of which 6 percent came from U.S. government sources. By 2003, World Vision’s overseas expenditures had risen to $513 million, 37 percent of which was from government. Religious television has generated its own revenue. In 1997, Pat Robertson sold International Family Entertainment, the parent company of the Family Channel, to media mogul Rupert Murdoch for $1.9 billion. In 2005, Robertson’s Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) reported total assets of $252 million, contributions of $457 million, and expenses of $424 million. CBN’s rival, the Trinity Broadcasting Network (TBN), reported assets of $669 million, revenue of $184 million, and expenses of $113 million.

In these ways, evangelical Protestantism fits conveniently with arguments about culture being produced and thus a function of clever management and organizational skills. However, evangelical Protestantism cannot be understood by looking only at organizations and money. Its cultural capital lies in its teachings and practices, its worship, and its spiritual experiences – in short, in religion. Each aspect of evangelical Protestantism has adapted to American culture in ways that retain evangelicalism’s distinct identity and yet permit its adherents to engage actively in nearly all realms of cultural life.

*Jesus in American Evangelicalism*

If evangelicals were asked what lies at the heart of their faith, the majority would probably say Jesus. In a national survey conducted in 2003 (Wuthnow 2005), 66 percent of adults in the United States said they believed that “Jesus was the only divine son of
God who died and rose again to save us from our sins.” Among members of conservative Protestant denominations, 85 percent selected this view and and an additional 9 percent said “Jesus embodied the essence of divine love and showed us how to attain spiritual union with God.” In another national survey (Wuthnow 1999), 94 percent of respondents affiliated with evangelical denominations agreed that “God has been fully revealed to humans in Jesus Christ.” Believing in the divinity of Jesus is hardly unique to evangelicals, but it does provide evangelical culture with a unifying core. The cultural capital of collectivities involves being able to agree about something and having a symbol to represent that agreement. If infant baptism, eschatology, or speaking in tongues were central, there would be far less agreement among evangelicals. One of the feats accomplished by Billy Graham and Campus Crusade for Christ was to refocus the evangelical movement around the figure of Jesus in a way that cut across denominational lines. In both, the essential feature of the Christian gospel was inviting Jesus into one’s life. “Jesus is Lord,” explained a member I interviewed at an evangelical church that has been growing since it decided to focus less on its distinctive denominational heritage. “That’s the primary statement of faith. How you understand that should not be a hindrance to being in community together.” Evangelicals can agree that people around the world should see the Jesus film. They can embrace the *Passion of the Christ* as a special witness to their beliefs, even though the movie’s imagery is more traditionally Catholic. Moreover, Jesus is less about belief, creed, or doctrine in contemporary evangelicalism (even though those remain important) and more about narratives and symbols. The Jesus film is not about the teachings of Jesus, but the life story of Jesus.
Warner Salman’s many paintings of what he imagined Jesus to be like were some of the twentieth century’s most widely circulated popular art (Morgan and Promey 2001).

“Jesus is a friend, is a friend next to you,” sang the children during a summer program at an evangelical church. “We look to him,” says a member of a Christian and Missionary Alliance church. “No matter what your problems are, whether it be with children, or your marriage, or your neighbor, whatever it is. He will show you the way. He’ll give you the answers.” Qualitative research shows that evangelicals frequently speak about Jesus in intimate terms like these. Although God may also be personal, God is more likely to be viewed as wholly other, pure, conceptually separate from humans, and indeed spiritually separated from humans who are sinful or at least unrepentant. Indeed, the distance between God and humans is one of the distinguishing features of evangelicals’ grassroots theology, setting them apart from theologically liberal Protestants and Catholics who view God as more of an essence of life or as a mystery. The figure of God is also less distinctly associated with evangelicals, because Catholics, Jews, and Muslims worship God. In contrast, Jesus is both God and human and thus identifies with human pain and provides comfort. “I believe Jesus walked and lived on this earth,” says a member of a charismatic church. “He lived here, he lived among people, he loved people.” For evangelicals, the special status of Jesus is confirmed in the idea that only Jesus can bridge the considerable gap that exists between sinful people and a perfect God. An evangelical Presbyterian says, “The Lord tried to reach down and touch us and talk to us and help us and guide us. Christ was the ultimate effort.” “He lived and he died that we could be reconciled back to God,” echoed a Church of Christ member.
The extent to which Jesus has become “our buddy,” as one evangelical put it, has been criticized as an accommodation to the therapeutic emphasis in contemporary culture (Hunter 1983). There is probably some warrant for this criticism. The rhetoric of separation from God is sometimes framed in language about alienation, estrangement, and even loneliness. Jesus solves that problem by lending a comforting ear, just as a therapist might. However, viewed as cultural capital, evangelicals’ emphasis on Jesus is a considerable asset. Jesus not only offers eternal salvation, but also provides a companion who gives people strength to believe they can overcome their problems. The highly personalized relationship with Jesus, moreover, gives flexibility in how one chooses to follow Jesus. The popular question, “What would Jesus do?” can be answered in many ways, depending on one’s circumstances.

Evangelicals’ belief in Jesus lends itself to mobilization as well. In her research among Pentecostal women, Griffith (1997:137) observed that a woman who experiences “boundless and unconditional love from her ‘daddy’ [God] makes her feel she can never be lonely again” and, in return, feels “constant praise and gratitude for such generosity, and the perpetual desire to obey God’s will in all circumstances.” In my research among recipients of care giving from churches and faith-based organizations (Wuthnow 2004) I observed that many regarded it as their right to receive assistance, and caregivers agreed that having one’s needs met was a basic human right. However, among evangelicals it was more common to draw parallels between the assistance given and the love God showed the world in sending Jesus. As one pastor explained, “It’s the love that we read about in the New Testament that God has toward all mankind. And when Jesus dies on the cross he dies for the sins of all mankind from the whitest lie to the darkest, horrific
action anyone has taken. Without conditions. We aspire to mirror that as best we can.”

One might assume that if a gift is given unconditionally, there is no reason to pay it back. Yet, the response from recipients was actually quite different. If the assistance received was an instance of unconditional love, then overwhelming gratitude was the appropriate response. “The more I’m helped, the more I want to help others,” said one recipient. And one of the most obvious ways of helping was to do volunteer service work. Those who received assistance from congregations were especially likely to say they had done service work in response.

*The Meaning of Biblical Literalism*

According to the General Social Survey, 24 percent of Americans believe in a literal interpretation of the Bible. Among members of evangelical Protestant denominations, this figure is 57 percent. Over the past 20 years, biblical literalism has dropped by 14 percent in the population at large, but has held almost constant among evangelicals. Does this mean that evangelicals are increasingly out of step with the culture? With better survey data and qualitative interviews, we can say what all this means and see more clearly how the Bible serves as cultural capital for evangelicals. One possible interpretation is that biblical literalists are believers in what fundamentalist theologians term “inerrancy.” Inerrantists believe that the Bible is perfect, just as God is, and thus is free of mistakes, including assertions that might be false historically or scientifically. Belief in inerrancy does go with biblical literalism, but the relationship is by no means perfect. In one national survey (Wuthnow 1999), 30 percent of biblical literalists agreed
that “the Bible may contain historical or scientific errors” and another 12 percent were unsure. Nor does biblical literalism mean that evangelicals regard the Bible simply as a book of factual truths. Eighty-four percent of evangelicals agree that there is “a lot of music and poetry in the Bible”; 71 percent of biblical literalists agree. Another view of biblical literalism is that it means looking only to the Bible for divine truth, and thus, in the view of critics, being insufferably narrow and dogmatic. However, this interpretation describes only a minority of biblical literalists: 37 percent think “God’s truth is fully revealed only in the Bible,” while 60 percent say “The Bible is one of many ways in which God’s truth is revealed.” Where there is more consensus among biblical literalists is that “the Bible is a detailed book of rules that Christians should try to follow.” Ninety percent agree. Like stories and artistic depictions of Jesus, the Bible is also a tangible symbol for many evangelicals. It is a book, a sacred object that reminds them of their families and their congregations. Seventy-one percent of evangelicals say they had a special Bible that belonged to them or their family while they were growing up.

From qualitative information, it appears that biblical literalism indeed means that a person takes the Bible seriously and regards it as an important practical guide, not as a text that one examines systematically for consistency or scientific facts. A revealing episode occurred while I was monitoring interviews being conducted for a recent survey of mine. As the interviewer began reading the standard question about the Bible, the respondent stopped her in the middle of the literalism option and said, “That’s me. That’s what I believe.” The interviewer politely insisted that she needed to read all three options. The respondent cut her off again: “That’s what I believe. I just believe in the Bible.” In in-depth interviews, evangelicals are often unsure what it means to say that the
Bible is free of errors, but they regard it as God’s unique revelation to humankind. It is unique because it tells the story of Jesus. “It’s the story of how [God] revealed himself to people over time,” a Southern Baptist said. In telling about Jesus and other biblical characters, the Bible thus provides practical guidance. “It’s a guide book for how to live,” an evangelical Reformed member said. “It’s not the same as any other book.” A Missouri-Synod Lutheran expressed a similar view: “The Bible to me is a constant reminder of how we should live our lives. It’s definitely a fact.”

If the Bible is an instruction book for life, taking it seriously is an important cultural asset. In an era of uncertainty and ambiguity, having one source of practical wisdom is highly reassuring. That there is a demand for such guidance is evident in the fact that megachurch pastor Rick Warren’s *Purpose-Driven Life*, which distills biblical wisdom into succinct easy-to-digest lessons, has sold 20 million copies. At the same time, when biblical literalism means taking the Bible seriously, rather than regarding it as a radical departure from commonsense, evangelicals can adapt more easily to contemporary culture. For instance, in the General Social Survey, biblical literalism, though negatively associated with higher levels of education, is more weakly associated now that it was 20 years ago (Wuthnow 2007).

The mobilizing potential of biblical literalism is evident in the fact that evangelicals not only believe things about the Bible, but also organize individual and group activities around it. Three-quarters of evangelical Protestants say they read the Bible in their daily life at home at least once a week. Sixty-two percent say that participating in small Bible study or prayer groups has been very important to their spiritual growth and an additional 22 percent say this has been fairly important. Bible
study groups were one of the keys to Baptist and Methodist growth in the nineteenth century and they are currently one of the most common small group activities in the United States. Research shows that between 35 and 40 percent of U.S. adults are involved in a small group that meets regularly and provides caring and support for its members (Wuthnow 1994). Fifty-six percent of the members of any kind of small group say their group activities include study or discussion of the Bible. Forty-four percent describe their group as a “Bible study.” For evangelicals, and indeed for many non-evangelicals, Bible study groups are an important source of social capital. People make friends, support one another within the group, but also become more involved in their congregations, and do volunteer work in their communities. For some members of Bible study groups, participation also exposes them to wider issues: 70 percent say their group discusses social issues or politics; 33 percent say their group has caused them to be more interested in peace or social justice (Wuthnow 2000).

The Born-Again Experience

In recent national polls, between 40 and 45 percent of Americans claim to have had a born-again experience. Among members of conservative Protestant denominations, this figure is 83 percent (Wuthnow 1999) and among self-identified evangelicals who are actively involved in Protestant congregations, it rises to 89 percent. Historically, the born-again experience was interpreted differently in traditions that did or did not teach that God’s elect were already chosen from the beginning of time. For those who did, being born again was a sign or moment of affirmation of one’s foreordained election. For
those who did not, the born-again experience acquired greater urgency as the time when a person decided to become a believer in Jesus and thus gain entry into the kingdom of heaven. The latter understanding gained popularity during the nineteenth century and was thus the one that helped define the evangelical movement of the twentieth century. Baptist worship services notably included an “altar call” during which a person who wished to be born again could walk to the front of the church and publicly “receive Christ.” The Billy Graham crusades that began in the 1950s exposed viewers to thousands of examples of people “going forward” to be born again.

The idea that a born-again experience is required to secure a place in heaven for one’s soul after death remains strong, but has been modified by other understandings that emphasize the feelings associated with the moment of conversion and especially the sense of being strengthened, uplifted, or set on a new path. The following account, told by a former Episcopalian who now attends a nondenominational evangelical congregation, is typical. “I was married but not very happy, struggling with two little children, and [Jesus] came and met me at the point of my need. I was sitting in church on an Easter morning and He just said, ‘Do you want your will for your life or my will for your life?’ I sat there thinking that my will has not been doing a very good job, so I said, ‘I’ll take your will.’” She says that she was “converted” in that instant and now had a “personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ.”

Viewed sociologically, the born-again experience is a significant aspect of the cultural capital of American evangelicals. It defines symbolic boundaries separating insiders from outsiders and elevates a person’s status within the evangelical community. It also punctuates ordinary time with a special moment that is charged with emotion,
associated with collective rituals, and filled with power (Collins 2004). The same woman continues, “This shower of joy just fell all over me. I’m sitting in there with this huge grin on my face, with God’s presence just coming all over me.” Durkheim (1973:172) would have viewed this as an experience of empowerment: “The man who has obeyed his god and who, for this reason, believes the god is with him, approaches the world with confidence and with the feeling of an increased energy.”

Recent work in cognitive psychology also helps interpret the significance of the born-again experience. Schemas that emphasize emotion and the self produce memories that are among the most long-lasting of all experiences (DiMaggio 1997). A person remembers a born-again experience because it was a kind of peak experience, involving a flood of joy or feelings of release, and because it marked a transition in one’s personal identity. A born-again experience thus becomes a pivotal point in a personal narrative. As believers reconstruct their life stories, a typical pattern is to emphasize problems prior to the born-again experience, such as depression, loneliness, a lack of focus, or substance abuse, and then to describe their post-conversion life as one of greater peace, emotional strength, and moral stability (Stromberg 1993). Having had such an experience becomes cultural capital, then, in two respects: it provides a story of one’s self that both incorporates faith and makes sense of one’s life in a compact memorable format, and it is the kind of scripted narrative that can be shared as a marker of being a member of the evangelical community.

The born-again experience must also be understood, not as a one-time event, but as an experience that either recurs or symbolizes additional possibilities for personal transformation. The word that best captures this aspect of the born-again experience is
hope. A person who feels pulled down by an addiction or a failed marriage is inspired to believe that he or she can move on, start over, embark on a new life – in short, be born again. Griffith’s (1997) study of Pentecostal women’s prayer groups shows that stories about one’s past and present life are common. In telling their stories, members create frameworks that conceptualize complex events in familiar ways and that often follow examples of characters in the Bible. The stories include expressions of hope that the past can be set aside and a new life begun. Prayer, Griffith argues, is not simply uttering petitions to God, but “operates as a climactic moment in an endlessly repeatable pattern of spiraling downward and ascending to victory yet again. [It] provides a woman with the courage to look within herself and request a change, whether a return to the purer selfhood of a younger age or the abolition of all former pretenses in favor of a new authenticity” (78).

Patterns of Worship

Worship services in conservative Protestant churches vary widely in style and content. In the National Congregations Study (Chaves 2004), variation among congregations classified as “white conservative, evangelical, or fundamental” was evident especially in styles of music. Although nearly all (98 percent) included congregational singing, about half did and half did not feature singing by a soloist, about a quarter used drums and electric guitars, three quarters used a piano, and half used an organ. Relatively few (18 percent) had celebrated communion at their most recent service. And less than half (44 percent) included a time during the service especially for children.
These variations notwithstanding, one of the distinguishing features of conservative Protestant worship is its emphasis on congregational participation, often through structured informality and sometimes with a relatively high level of emotion. In addition to congregational singing, services usually include a time when people greet each other by shaking hands (84 percent) and many churches (65 percent) include a time for silent prayer or meditation, consider it acceptable for people to call out “amen” or other expressions of approval (81 percent), and encourage laughter (72 percent) or applause (62 percent). These figures are significantly higher for conservative Protestant churches than in mainline Protestant and Catholic churches; they resemble, but are lower than, figures for African American churches.

Worship is thus similar in some respects to the born-again experience in that both are sacred times set apart from everyday life by an emotionally memorable encounter with God. Although biblical preaching is important, the ambience of the service is equally significant. Evangelical praise music is notably meditative, setting the mood for worshippers to listen attentively and submissively to the sermon, and reinforcing the sense of intimacy with Jesus (Wuthnow 2003b). Analysis of evangelical sermons (Witten 1993) shows that they frequently begin by emphasizing the chaotic complexity of contemporary society and then move toward solutions that can be framed in simple language (“God loves you,” “Jesus is the answer”). The sermons’ narrative structure includes anecdotes that establish the pastor’s authority by showing the pastor answering questions presented by interlocutors and that draw sharp distinctions between the gathered faith community and the secular world.
The other notable feature of conservative Protestant worship is its repetitiveness. This aspect is often overlooked by observers who associate repetitiveness with more highly ritualized liturgical traditions. However, repetition is also an important feature of evangelical worship. Services typically occur at the same time of day on the same day each week. They occur in the same space with many of the same people present and the same person or persons officiating. Although the hymns are likely to vary from week to week, they usually happen at the same time during the service and take up the same amount of time. Familiar hymns are sung again and again. Scripture readings and the sermon always focus on the same book, which is revered as having canonical significance. All of this structures expectations, provides an experience of stability or continuity in a world where many other things appear to be changing, and gives people a common identity as fellow Christians.

As cultural capital, it is difficult to overestimate the significance of evangelical worship services. Churches in general are one of the few places where Americans engage in choral singing (Chaves 2004). As many adults say they sang in a church choir while they were growing up as sang in a choir at school (Wuthnow 2003b). There are 20 times more congregations in the United States than performing arts organizations. In total, Americans make about 3 billion visits to their places of worship each year – at least three times the number of visits to art museums, plays, musical performances, historical sites, and arts and craft fairs combined. Evangelicals typically attend religious services more often than members of other denominations. Half of evangelicals say their congregation has sponsored a music performance other than during worship and half say
this about sponsoring a drama or skit. One member in four reports that his or her congregation holds an annual art festival or craft fair.

It would be inaccurate, though, to suggest that evangelical cultural capital consists mainly of providing alternative venues for the arts. The central feature of evangelical worship is worship. Evangelical churches are by no means the only places in which worship happens, but they are among the nation’s most numerous and most frequented. Evangelicals believe they are preaching the authentic Bible and adapting worship to contemporary culture as effectively as Saint Gregory did in his day or Martin Luther did in his. They also believe that there is “power in the Word.” They would not say “magical,” but they do argue that God’s spirit enters into the biblical and spoken word and works mysteriously in “hearts” to “convict” people. Harding’s (2000) account of how dramatically she, as a secular anthropologist, was influenced by the words of an evangelical preacher during a lengthy interview is gripping evidence of what evangelicals regard as spiritual power.

Integration of Faith and Life

In cultural sociology, it has long been recognized that people divide their lives into separate domains. Berger and Luckmann (1966), following Schutz, termed these spheres of relevance. In more recent parlance, these spheres are sometimes called schemata (DiMaggio 1997). They organize enough of one’s experience to accomplish certain tasks, such as going to the grocery store or playing tennis, but they also bracket extraneous considerations that would complicate focusing on the task at hand (a reason
why talking on cell phones while driving is prohibited in some states). It is this need for compartmentalization that has led recent sociologists of culture to argue that culture is fragmented. However, there also appears to be a countervailing desire for coherence. A person somehow has to decide whether to spend a morning shopping for groceries or playing tennis. And that person, as person, is likely to understand that he or she is both a grocery shopper and a tennis player and that these are constitutive but not exhaustive of his or her self identity. This desire for coherence can be fulfilled in various ways. At one extreme, coherence may be found through such scripts as “I go with the flow,” “I am just a bundle of roles,” “I don’t think much about the big questions in life,” or “I like diversity and am good at multi-tasking.” At the opposite extreme are people who believe that one dominant characteristic or interest infuses their entire life. For instance, my neighbor, a physicist, tells me that she is “a scientist, and being a scientist I take a scientific approach to everything I do, whether it’s working in my lab, doing my taxes, buying groceries, or cleaning house.”

Evangelicals are like my neighbor, only they emphasize that their faith should be the integrating feature of their life. In a 2005 survey of church members, 94 percent of evangelical Protestants said it was “extremely” or “very” important to them as an adult to grow in their spiritual life (Wuthnow 2005b). Four in ten said they had devoted a great deal of effort in the past year to their spiritual life (compared with only a quarter of mainline Protestants and Catholics). Working on their spiritual life involves attending worship services, participating in small groups, reading the Bible, and praying. All of these activities help evangelicals to define themselves in relation to their faith. They also believe in spreading their faith, meaning that they expend energy that helps their
congregations grow. In the same survey, 85 percent said it is very important for Christians to share their faith with people who are not Christians and 95 percent agreed that “Christians in the U.S. should work harder to spread their faith throughout the world.” Although evangelicals seldom engage in conversations with Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, or Jews with the aim of converting them, two-thirds say that they have talked with someone – usually a person who does not attend church – to encourage them to become a Christian (Wuthnow 2005a:200).

Integration of faith and life manifests itself in all sorts of organized evangelical endeavors. One of the most notable in recent years is the Christian dieting movement, which applies the same born-again logic to bodies as evangelicals do to the soul. The Christian dieting phenomenon, which is largely directed toward evangelical women, includes self-help groups, diet books, and exercise regimens. It is the evangelical counterpart to the wider interest in health foods, weight loss, and fitness (Griffith 2004). Other examples of efforts to bring evangelical spirituality into various realms of life include “integration of faith and learning” statements at church-related colleges, where enrollments have been rising in recent years; evangelical feminist groups; and Christian cross-over music, such as holy hip hop.

The point is not that evangelicals consistently behave in ways that correspond with their convictions or that differ from the lives of other Americans. It is rather that evangelicals like to believe that there are connections between their faith and their lives and thus engage in social activities that reinforce this belief. Although they are no more likely to do volunteer work in their communities than mainline Protestants and Catholics, they do more volunteer work at their churches and argue that service is best provided
under religious auspices (Wuthnow 2004). They also want churches and church leaders to be involved in politics and in other ways to speak out on social issues. In a 2004 survey conducted nationally, only 24 percent of evangelical Protestants said it made them uncomfortable when political candidates discuss faith; 87 percent said it is important that a president have strong religious beliefs (Green 2004). The survey also showed that 84 percent of evangelical Protestants thought organized religious groups should stand up for their beliefs; only 35 percent thought organized religious groups should stay out of politics.

Putting Faith into Practice

Evangelicals are thus predisposed to think that their faith should matter in any and all spheres of life. They are not content to say that some realms simply should not be influenced by faith. For our considerations about cultural capital, this poses two problems. One is that evangelicals have to live in the same world as non-evangelicals and yet feel that their faith is not irrelevant. A focus on emotions is the way they do this. Faith governs how they feel about their world, they say, even if it does not have distinctive consequences (Wuthnow 1998). The other is how to determine what the hot button issues are that are worth becoming especially involved in. On many issues, evangelicals are divided or do not differ much from non-evangelicals. But they have gravitated toward a few. These are largely ones where there is a predisposition toward involvement, but where networks and leadership provide the best explanation. Munson (2002) has shown that people become involved in pro-life advocacy, less because of
strong prior convictions and more through being in harm’s way where someone invites them to a meeting or rally which then energizes them into further involvement. This is where organized leadership becomes important. Pat Robertson’s enormous wealth, Jerry Falwell’s television audience, and James Dobson’s Focus on the Family reach large numbers of people in these ways.

It is important, though, to understand that the relationship between evangelicals and public issues is constructed and is a way in which evangelical identity is reaffirmed. Examples include journalists writing about evangelical influence in politics, even when it is difficult to determine where the influence lies. A *Boston Globe* writer, for instance, observed that George W. Bush had “happily ceded huge swaths of his domestic and international policy” to Christian fundamentalists, even using “his global AIDS initiative, his foreign aid policy, and his war on terror to please religious radicals” (Kaplan 2005). In a more sympathetic view, a *Wall Street Journal* article suggested that “interest in global issues” had “galvanized” among evangelical Christians and led to greater involvement in efforts to curb international sex trafficking and promote peace in southern Sudan (Waldman 2004). Evangelical leaders themselves have embraced these statements about their influence. Richard Cizik, vice president of government affairs for the National Association of Evangelicals, for instance, has stated, “We represent conservative evangelicals who are the mainstay of the GOP coalition that’s running both ends of Pennsylvania Avenue” (Page 2005). The reality is more complex. Hertzke (2005) shows that evangelicals played a role in international religious freedom and sex trafficking legislation, but Jews also did, and so did high ranking public officials. Similar arguments have been made about evangelicals’ influence in the 2000 and 2004
presidential elections and in the Bush administration’s decision to invade Iraq. Yet it is
difficult to establish that evangelicals played the decisive role in any of these events. A
better interpretation is that publicity about evangelicals’ political role is itself a form of
cultural capital. Stories about evangelicals reinforce the impression that there is such a
thing as evangelicalism and conveys the idea that this is a segment of U.S. religion with
particular clout.

Conclusion

Evangelical Protestants have cultural capital that maintains their distinctive identity and
yet makes it possible for them to adapt to the wider society. Part of the story is the
symbolic distance from “the world” that comes from imagining themselves as being
embattled (Smith 1993). But this is more than simply a gesture without substance. It
depends on the cultural practices that maintain evangelical identity. And part of the story
is accommodating to the culture (Hunter 1983; Wolfe 2003). But it is not enough simply
to declare culture the winner and evangelicals neutered. In emphasizing cultural capital, I
have argued that evangelicals have beliefs about Jesus and the Bible, experiences of
personal transformation and worship, and understandings about their faith’s relevance to
individual life and the world – all of which make their religious commitment attractive to
them and capable of mobilizing them to join groups, seek converts, and engage in
political action.

It is worth emphasizing that many of the characteristics of conservative
Protestants are not unique to conservative Protestants. Many mainline Protestants and
Catholics share the same Christian beliefs and practices. These other religious traditions also have repetitive rituals and emotionally charged experiences, and their adherents do volunteer work and sometimes participate in social advocacy. In examining the cultural capital of evangelicals, one need not argue that their beliefs and practices are so attractive or powerful as to render it implausible that other groups should pursue their own faith (or no faith). The point is rather that evangelicals are one of the viable ways in which people in an otherwise secular world continue to find faith commitments meaningful. Given their prominence in American history, it should not be surprising that evangelicals are still an important form of religious expression.

Conservative Protestants’ continuing place in the American culturescape, I have suggested, lies in more than numbers and can hardly be understood by characterizing them as backwoods folks who are naively misinterpreting their class interests or being duped by political leaders. Like many other groups, evangelicals sometimes feel that their position in society is not what it once was or should be. Many evangelicals do believe that they have found the answer to a happy life and wish to share that answer with others. They have a stake in believing that they do – or should – have cultural and political influence. One of the reasons they are as influential as they are is that they have a rich tradition that is distinctive enough to help maintain their identity, and yet not so distinct that they are incapable of participating in the wider society.
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