

What's Hotter: Hell House or Global Warming? The Shifting Rhetoric of the Evangelical Right

Colin Snowsell
Graham Center, College of Engineering
University of Saskatchewan

If it's not love, then it's the bomb that will bring us together.—The Smiths¹

Introduction

In 2002, the year I attended a showing of *Hell House* (George Ratliff, 2001), it was still common within the academy to refer to North American evangelical organizations as counterpublics.² *Hell House*, a documentary film about an outreach program of Trinity Church, an Assemblies of God church in Cedar Hill, a suburb of Dallas, Texas, does nothing to stake a claim to the dignity of a more centralized position within the public sphere.³ Hell House ministries are not limited to either the Assemblies of God church or to the state of Texas or even to 2001. These were merely the conditions for the Hell House perfect storm: one of the largest evangelical denominations in a morally conservative state, a year after the election of George W. Bush, a self-professed evangelical Christian as the President of the United States.

Despite Ratliff's evenhandedness, *Hell House* (the mission not the movie) came off looking comic and cruel at the same time. There remains a great deal of truth in the old axiom, one that points to an imagined event only slightly less gruesome than the ones depicted by Hell

¹ Morrissey & Johnny Marr 1987.

² See, for instance, the respective discussions in Fraser, Hansen, and Warner. It should be pointed out that the terms "counterpublics" and "partial publics" refer to the influential public sphere work of Jurgen Habermas. For refinements and critiques of the theory see also the collections of Robbins and Hall and Montag.

³ Founded in 1911 in Arkansas, during a continent-wide revivalist movement, the Assemblies of God is the largest of the denominations to claim to be Pentecostal. As depicted in *Hell House*, Assemblies of God members claim to "speak in tongues," and the denomination includes public glossolalia in its liturgy. Worldwide, the denomination claims 30 million members in 11,000 churches in approximately 120 countries. See Little 1997. Prior to *Hell House*, the Assemblies of God was best known to the mainstream media and public as the church of Jimmy Swaggart, a televangelist who in 1988 was exposed and subsequently defrocked for the hiring of prostitutes for pornographic purposes.

House: give ‘em enough rope. Ratliff was not biased; all he did was power on his camera and point. There is only so much sympathy a casual observer can muster for the spectacle of grown men devising ways to terrify teenagers into converting to Christianity—not in response to a nuanced depiction of God’s merciful love, but because of the blood-spattered, gore-filled consequences of failing a vengeful celestial beast who spares no devisable horror imaginable to those who give him the old snubaroo.

At the 12th annual edition of the Willow Creek Organization’s Leadership Summit, a hybrid Live8/ motivational guru business seminar hosted August 9 to 11, 2007 from the Willow Creek Church in South Barrington, Illinois and broadcast live to over 100 regional sites, there were no scare tactics. Nor were any advocated as effective tools of outreach and evangelization. The message told to the 7,000 present in Illinois and the 93,000 others of us present through live video-feed, was two-fold: feel shame for the church’s past mistakes, learn to love a world in need. In this paper I wish to argue that these two signpost events—the 2001 documentary *Hell House* and the 2007 Leadership Summit—point to a significant change in rhetorical strategy that nonetheless preserves a coherent ideological goal.⁴

I want to anticipate and address pre-emptively two intertwined critiques of these texts:

1) What is the relationship between a film from 2002 and a conference from 2007? Primarily, what links them is me, my response to them as an active participant of two distinct but actively engaged audiences, and my sense from one to the other that a significant shift had taken place, and that the best way to analyze the broader culturo-theological change was to interrogate each text, but to do so in the context of the time and space of my consumption of each. The

⁴ After this document was written and submitted for publication, there was published in May of 2008 “An Evangelical Manifesto” which signaled publicly a shift towards Christian humanitarianism and a repudiation of “cultural wars” on the grounds that the divisiveness of these so-called wars had proven counter-productive. Although none of the protagonists of my essay were on the committee’s steering committee, the manifesto’s appeal for a new public approach is the same call that I describe. (See *An Evangelical Manifesto* 2008).

comparison is not exclusively auto-ethnographical, but my experience of the texts as an audience member, and my experience of the audience's response to the texts, provides insights which are not easily nor productively detachable from the texts themselves.⁵

2) Having granted that a secondary comparison concerns my observations of the audiences: their constitution, their varied consumption of each respective text, and my subjective response as member of each respective public, my primary comparison is of the events as texts themselves. I acknowledge that the selection of these texts/events may seem arbitrary, that the sample may seem small and that, in any case, comparing a film intended for art house cineaste consumption with a conference intended for leaders of the already-converted may seem ill-suited to the type of comparative contextual analysis to which I wish to submit them.

I intend each of these texts to act as bookmarks of an unprecedented era of American Conservative Christian Evangelical political and cultural hegemony. The groundwork for this era began two decades earlier, cohering around the Presidency of Ronald Regan from 1981 to 1989. However, the tentative political machinations of this earlier incarnation seemed benign, no matter that we recognize them now as but the earlier stages of a consumptive cultural disease whose greatest ravages appear to have been halted with the election of Barack Obama to the American Presidency in 2008.

This paper then is an attempt to analyze the shift in rhetoric that marked the promotion of a supporting actor to lead. Analyzing the conference as a rhetorical response to its predecessor

⁵ It might be suggested that an equally useful study would compare, for instance, the transcripts of the 2001 and 2007 versions of The Leadership Summit; I welcome such a study. However, my analysis is not of the text itself, but of having been a participant at the summit itself, and my experience as such; short of a time machine (which, were I to possess one I would be disinclined to waste on 2001, the year before the start of Iraq war, and which I am happy to relinquish to history's claims) I do not have the means of subjectively experiencing and closely reporting on a different evangelical text from 2001. In any case, my interest in this topic stems entirely from the situation in which I encountered *Hell House*, and I find it productive to mark the theoretical and rhetorical beginning accurately and accordingly.

may seem to imply that the one has replaced the other. This is not the case. Hell House ministries continue. They have not been fully replaced by what I will argue the conference represents: a new narrative of love (Luo and Goldstein). Whether you view these rhetorical changes as positive or cynical will depend a great deal on your tolerance for the political maneuvering of culture-theological conservatism.

The evangelical church as socially conscious movement did not begin with the unpopularity of the Bush administration. Left-leaning evangelical organizations, such as Jim Wallis's Sojourners and Ronald J. Sider's Evangelicals for Social Action, have long been involved in social justice. In Canada, as is well known, the evangelical church gave birth to a popular protest movement that evolved into the country's enduring socialist party. What became the New Democratic Party was formed by Tommy Douglas, an evangelical pastor whose legacy is a national healthcare program.

The persistence of scare tactics and the longevity of socially conscious evangelism are not, however, representative of broader trends within the public sphere. In both cases, they exist as vestigial manifestations of once dominant cultural and religious trends, tending to survive with greater prevalence in regional spheres resistant to broader cultural change. Tangentially, it may be interesting to observe that, in the history of 20th century North American evangelism, the fire and brimstone preacher versus the anti-capitalist reformist preacher existed as street corner rivals, if not different sides of the same reverend. The new rhetoric of the Christian right, I will attempt to show through these two texts, has not replaced one with the other, but has combined them anew and repacked them to a secular public grown increasingly resistant to the former.

As Hart (25-26) notes, the rhetorical critic is a sampler. Although the selection of these two cultural texts is an expediency born of subjective circumstance, I intend to show that placed

together they form a sequential and coherent narrative that is reflective of a larger story; other topically analogous texts selected from, roughly, the same cultural and temporal periods, will identify the same trends. “The good critic,” Hart goes on to say, “never studies a particular text simply because it exists but because it promises to tell a story larger than itself” (25).

The larger story here is how a former counterpublic grew to become the political mainstream; how it squandered the political capital it accrued along the way by over-reliance on a negative evangelism; and how it has shifted and softened its rhetoric to engineer a strategic retreat designed to appease and reduce the surplus of ideological foes its negative rhetoric had accumulated. A number of questions follow from this. Does the shift in rhetoric signal a core change in how evangelical North Americans propose to interact with those who do not share their belief system? If evangelicals continue to prioritize and produce the organized, concerted wide-scale and effective physical relief—in the specific manifestations of global AIDS and hunger relief—of persons without access to meaningful political action of their own, does it matter that they remain susceptible to quirks such as Hell House?

Finally, and, I believe, most importantly, what does it mean when the greatest ameliorator of the ills of global capitalism remains, as does the Christian right, the single greatest political collective behind the most virulently capitalist entity late industrialism has ever produced?⁶ The

⁶ The critique of global capitalism which forms the world view from which this paper operates, but does not have nearly the scope to consider, is based in the work of, for instance, Hardt and Negri, Deleuze and Guattari, Passavant and, of course, Marx. A coarse and brief summation would hold that through its own logic, capitalism divides the world into owners and workers; workers sell their labour cheaply so that owners may profit from it by selling the fruits of such labour for more than what was paid for the labour itself. The maintenance of economic inequalities is, therefore, the basis of the system.

Despite occasional concessions to appease discontented groups of workers, the logic of the system rests on inequality which tends to expand into systematic injustice. At all times, some global group or natural resource must be exploited so that those with capital may acquire for the lowest possible price what may be sold for the highest possible profit. The pursuit of profit as the primary motivator of humankind must inevitably create misery, for it must ultimately evaluate all other concerns – humanitarian, ecological – as secondary to its primary motive whenever such values come into conflict. Such conflicts would arise when, for instance: the paying of decent living wages to factory workers in third world countries would reduce profit margins beneath levels acceptable to various

epigraph which begins this paper offers, I believe, a false dichotomy. Not love or the bomb, but love *after* the bomb, if we acknowledge that the bomb need not refer to nuclear holocaust but rather a world ravaged by an economic system that has expanded the gulf between those in the affluent West and those without into a crisis that few of any background, expertise or discipline pretend to know how to solve. Into the crisis caused by the same political climate that brought them into the political mainstream now steps a church ready to offer love. Not, therefore, *if* not love *then* the bomb. Rather, “why not love, after the bomb?”

Boards of Directors; or when the proffering of effective AIDS medication at prices people of chronic poverty could afford would erode what capitalists might consider an acceptable return on investment.

Hell House

For more than a century, putting the fear of an eternity consumed in flames has been the stock in trade of a movement that tends to regard the more moderate theology of mainstream Protestantism, never mind Catholicism, as little more than the devil in disguise. The Hell House ministry is an astutely updated and masterfully re-packaged version of good old-fashioned fire and brimstone revivalist preaching. It professes the love of an almighty God, even as it seems to delight in his inflexibility, mercilessness, and free-wheeling vengeance. Using the format of a haunted house, the Hell House ministry herds small groups of attendees at a time through several hellish scenes. Among the scenes depicted in the film are doing drugs at a rave, suicide, drunk driving, premarital sex, death from AIDS, and abortion. To underscore the theology of eternal damnation without repentance, “unsaved” fatalities are dragged away to hell by actors dressed in demon costume. Fortunately, church members turned salvation counselors await at the exit of Hell House, ready to show erstwhile Halloween revelers, now turned terrified kids, how to save the immortal soul many had not even realized they possessed, yet alone realized was a car crash away from eternal flames.

The rhetoric is effective, for it understands it has two audiences: a primary audience of potential attendees, the local unconverted; and a secondary audience of cynics, an audience greatly magnified by the exhibition of the documentary. To the first audience, to those who do not reject the concepts of heaven and hell, and who have participated in any of the activities designated by Trinity as sinful, fear is an excellent persuader, as the film documents. If the purpose of the church is to expand its local membership while creating new Christians, the Hell House ministry seems effective. Within the evangelical community, this perception seems to be

shared, for Hell Houses were staged by local churches – and even some traveling Hell House troupes – across North America.

However, the piece is even more effective in communicating to its secondary audience, even if this purpose is not fully conscious or intended. Hell House ministries, to any observer not immediately implicated in a public of evangelicals or a world view of good versus evil, heaven versus hell are fully ridiculous spectacles. For instance, I saw *Hell House* at Cinema du Parc, a repertory three-screen Anglo bastion in the student ghetto adjacent Montreal's McGill University, on a night when the theatre was nearly full. Although the documentary has been lauded by mainstream film critics for its sympathetic, non-judgmental portrayal of Trinity Church's congregation members, many of the situations played amongst the cultural elite at du Parc with the hilarity of a mockumentary.

When trying to explain why the current year's version (the Hell House ministry originated at Trinity in 1990) includes a date rape/rave scene, the scene's originator, a young male church member, talks about his pre-salvation experience at raves. Asked to name the drug that he claims to have seen firsthand being dispensed and consumed, he fumbles awkwardly before announcing, "I'm pretty sure its official name is the date rape drug." Seldom have I heard a film audience laugh so uproariously. The audience continued to laugh; it was laughter not resulting from the skill of the director, but at the spectacle of bumpkin born-again's spooking each other in the dark. Who on earth could take such people seriously?

There are several problems with the left's dismissal of evangelicals. Julia Lesage writes in an excellent cultural studies' analysis of the American Christian right:

In the university where I teach, my peers...cling to a now self-destructive ignorance about the Christian right, ignoring the way it strategically defunds their workplace, that is, public education, and having little understanding of the conservative right's cultural agenda or its social base. For

me, looking at the Christian right is often like looking in a mirror because its participants choose to live within a politically resistant counterculture (295-6).

Films like *Hell House* seem to allow leftist cultural scholars and practitioners, such as the du Parc intelligentsia, to rest easy in their assumption that smart and good people do not have anything to do with the right, much less the evangelical Christian right. This, then, is the great triumph of Hell House type rhetoric: it works as a kind of front. By engaging in rhetoric that appears to the intellectual and cultural mainstream as repulsive and bizarre, the evangelical church becomes easily dismissible.

As Lesage predicted it would be, and as most observers of the vagaries of North American politics now understand, ignoring this church was a mistake. Lesage quotes fundamentalist organizer Ralph Reed crowing about the unanalyzed ease with which the Christian right has achieved its dominance:

Few in Washington understand...“the parallel universe” in which religious conservatives live, where the radio and television programs reach more people every day than network newscasts and where pro-family organizations can mobilize the grassroots as effectively as the labor unions and civil rights movement did at their peak (298).

The Bush administration, twice elected by a polarizing rhetoric that pitted the evangelical Christian against the liberal, has wrought more negative change in the world than, arguably, any other American government has. From foreign wars to the near elimination of health care, public education and public assistance, this self-professed Christian government has brought considerable misery to the masses – both within and outside its borders. What has materialized as global revulsion against the world created by the Bush administration has drastically shifted the audience to whom the evangelical church must compete for members. Hell House scare tactics

seem both cynical and simplistic. For many families, the hell in which they live, as a result of Bush administration's policies, is much greater than stage make-up and crepe paper flames could ever hope to portray. After Iraq, after AIG, it's not the AFTERlife that scares people.

However, there is no indication that the evangelical right wishes in any way to relinquish the political capital it has taken three decades to accumulate. There are few historic examples of groups with power voluntarily forfeiting it out of some sense of collective guilt. The task then for the church is to devise a new message. As signaled by the Summit, the church's purpose seems to be to protect its power base while devising an appeal to those outside its sphere of influence that assuages concern that it intends to continue wielding their considerable lobbyist acumen to further goals not always and not necessarily shared by the broader political sphere.

What I intended to show with the 2007 Leadership Summit is that the new rhetorical message is one of love: love for the poor, love for the hungry, love for the sick and diseased, love for the planet. The evangelical Christian right has, again in this regard, begun to practice what both it, and the left, preached: love—love based on a Bitzerian exigence (Bitzer 1-4). It is love that is willing to restructure itself according to the constraints of a specific situation, so that it is better able to fashion a message that speaks to a specific audience. This message of love is precisely the sort of message many have demanded – even begged – the cultural left to inhabit before anyone else got there first. Apostolidis, for instance, writes: “Activists need to take stock of the desiccated condition of liberal-left popular culture and respond to Christian right pop culture by creative new narratives of social transformation” (20). Michael Warner suggests that “language that takes us outside the usual frame of reference, teaching us to see or think in new ways, can be a necessary means to a more just world” (135). Perhaps predictably, it's not activists or the cultural elite who have listened.

Six years after I saw *Hell House*, it was the conservative evangelical church which had taken Warner's advice. It was at the 2007 Leadership Summit that I heard the use of language far outside its usual frame of reference, (which, as its context in Warner indicates, is in the realm of the academic: theorists of counterpublics, readers of Deleuze & Guattari, activists and anarchists) in order to achieve goals of social justice. The evangelical church, not the left, had taken stock of the desiccated left like Apostolidis suggested—to claim the DIY core that was once the property of the left in order to rehydrate it with a different message. I would posit that of any counterpublic you could name, none has been as responsible for shifting its rhetorical approach in the manner theorized by cultural studies' academics as evangelical Christians. I would posit also, that of any counterpublic you could name, none has less familiarity with this theory than evangelical Christians.

The evangelical Christian right, on the evidence of the Summit, sensing an urgent need, has listened to critiques of it, has listened to anything and has returned with an emotional message—self-shame, global love—that engages its critics while also giving it a purpose tailored for a specific exigence. Consider the rhetoric of the 12th Annual Leadership Summit. The theme, as I discuss below, throughout the summit is this: we were wrong; we acknowledge we were wrong; we want to change. A desire to apologize, or to seek forgiveness, is not, and should not be, interpreted as uniquely or primarily a cynical tactic of self-preservation. But a public call for forgiveness that foregrounds a leadership retreat that acts as a collective regrouping is a public and intentional shift in strategy and should be interpreted as such. Backdrop to a segment featuring an interview with Richard Curtis, the founder of Comic Relief and director of HBO's

The Girl in the Café, played The Beatles “Love is All You Need.”⁷ Six years ago, this stuff happened only in Jimmy Carter’s imagination. Speaking of President Carter, he spoke also—the invited guest of the heirs of the same conservative right that voted him out of office in 1980.

Onward Christian Generals

The conservative right gained power in the United States through the fusion of big business and moral conservatism. The dismantling of the American welfare state, the dominance of corporate interests, has been made possible through the rhetoric of family values, and by blaming the ills of the world on sin. Things look grim because of sin. What does sin look like? *Hell House* shows us. Things would improve if non-Christians would just stop sinning so much. That it is paradoxical that this rhetoric facilitates an aggressively conservative political agenda that vastly reduces the quality of life of many of the evangelicals from whom it draws support, does not concern its leaders. Any party that works for it on its two key moral issues: illegalizing abortion and keeping homosexuality out of the political and cultural mainstream, has almost carte blanche to fill the rest of its platform with whatever sort of policies it pleases. Whatever ills unfold, the right has remained ready to place the blame for any economic decline on the left’s identity politics. As Anna Williams (1998) writes:

Taking benign capitalism as one of its basic assumptions, this ideology must deny the harsh realities of the global marketplace and posit false causes for its many shortcomings (for example, unemployment among the white lower middle class is “caused” by affirmative action and not by the relocation of manufacturing to cheaper overseas labor markets) (281).

⁷ *The Willow Creek Leadership 2007 Online Experience*, the web site documenting the event, contains archived video and audio footage of many of the event’s featured speakers and entertainers, as well as comprehensive discussions about various topics, and supporting biblical references.

To evangelicals the “false cause” discussed by Williams is a big tent called “sin.” Finance’s troubles, as 2009 and the global economic collapse have made clear, have causes in policy deregulation caused by a takeover of government by Wall Street (Taibbi). However, until the collapse, it was common to blame non-Christian discourses for disasters, both economic and natural. Capitalism was not to blame; capitalism practiced by Christians would produce measurably better results than capitalism practiced by secularists and humanists. That voice, the voice of James Dobson, remains powerful.⁸ Yet it is no longer dominant.⁹

Those two concerns remain paramount. But they are no longer the only two issues. Presently, they are not even the priority issues. The crash of the economy, the dimensions of global hunger, the speed with which AIDS and other diseases spread, frustration over the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have, for the present, eclipsed the customary social conservative agenda. In this current environment, furthering the vilification of pro-choice and pro gay-rights factions has not nearly the receptive audience, outside the church’s core base, it might otherwise have. The 2007 Summit was conducted against a backdrop of inevitability: no one seemed to think seriously that the Republicans had a chance in 2008. The shift in rhetoric showed impeccable timing and political savvy.

Even if we momentarily suspend consideration of the global cost of the Bush administration’s policies, the domestic economic consequences of getting their morality publicly naturalized and universalized are so steep that, increasingly, even the majority of their members—the North American middle classes—are made to feel the sting of a global capitalism whose expansion they once believed would save them. In such an environment, the church has a

⁸ See, for instance, Apostolidis for what remains the best discussion of Dobson’s successful vilification of non-family values discourses.

⁹ As the *New York Times* notes, the National Association of Evangelicals chastised Dobson and other leaders of the Christian right for opposing the group’s involvement in anti-global warming initiatives (Goodstein).

new rhetorical purpose. Sensing that it was about to embark into a political wilderness where the halls of power were no longer occupied by a majority sympathetic to its conservative moral agenda, the church devised a new appeal. It portrayed itself now as a unifying force for love, a big tent where the voice of anyone is welcome.

Bill Hybels, the pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, is a leading practitioner of this rhetoric shift.¹⁰ While Bill Hybels may not have quite the public profile of Rick Warren, Bono takes Hybels' calls.¹¹ Prior to the likes of Warren and Hybels, few were the number of conservative evangelical leaders willing to consider the voice of anyone not aligned precisely with them on their two key issues: opposition to gay marriage and opposition to legalized abortion. The approach has reversed itself: now the moderate evangelical leader works simultaneously to appease the conservative base and unsettle it. Consider, for instance, the speaker list for the Leadership Summit. It read like an Agatha Christie murder mystery dinner party: the Harvard dean, the Cambridge-educated motivational guru, the General, the C.E.O., the parson and the congressman.

If *Hell House* showed Christians as feeble rubes, the Leadership Summit shows a much different depiction that confirms their place directly in the centre of the public sphere. These are sophisticated and urbane professionals. One of 19 Canadian sites to host the Summit, Saskatoon's Lakeview Free Methodist Church, seats 700 in a sanctuary as modern as any cinema. The acoustics and lighting are peerless. Rising rows of individual seats are padded, comfortable and, in the more sharply staggered seats behind the main entrance, each is equipped

¹⁰ This does not mean to imply, that without him, no shift would have taken place. Such broad rhetorical shifts seldom have a temporal, spatial or individual point of origin.

¹¹ One might just as readily point to Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Church in Lake Forest, California. Like Hybels in Illinois, Warren is at the forefront of an interdenominational movement that champions AIDS elimination, global poverty, and ecological preservation. His book, *The Purpose-Driven Church*, has been on the *New York Times* bestseller list for some 174 weeks, give or take, and has been translated into 56 languages (On the phenomenon of Christian books topping the *New York Times*' best seller list see Donadio's 2004 essay).

with a cup holder. Elsewhere in the city, perhaps only the new multiplex downtown has amenities which could compete with the comfort and design of Lakeview, which opened in February of 2007. Once seated, the modern amenities of Lakeview recede.

Indeed, once seated you see on the projection screen on stage that Lakeview is but a smaller scale model of Hybels' Willow Creek Church. You see this in shots transmitted live by a production team so professional you get the sense that if they were asked to fill in for the Super Bowl halftime show all they would need would be a couple hours of prayer. Having seemed to identify as problematic to their future growth and present survival a stale liturgy, and their perception as fanatics or fusspots obsessed with hymnals and ritual, North American evangelicals modified their rhetoric. The change was swift, dramatic and effective. Evangelical churches embraced the instruments of contemporary popular music, the technology of the mass media and the casualness of the suburban mall. Entering an evangelical church no longer felt like entering foreign space; it, and everyone in it, felt entirely familiar.

With the Democratic Party ascendant and the global mood for another internecine American feud over abortion and gay rights low, the American Christian right has wisely decided to engage in high profile, non-controversial action in collaboration with whoever wants to lend expertise or money or manpower. The church has too much invested in its successful presentation of itself as normal to jeopardize its gains by insisting on the maintenance of appeals such as Hell House. The rhetorical shift aspires to convince the audience of core change, even though it is merely cosmetic and calculated. A group whose theology holds as central the inerrancy of scripture and its permanence over time can, ultimately, engage only in changes of this variety. To change anything significant would be to change its central defining characteristic. Seen in this light, there is nothing inconsistent with the invited speakers.

The church mollifies would-be opponents with well-publicized collective engagement in enterprises so charitable and worthy that it is difficult to find traction on which to oppose them; in so doing, the church protects its power base by removing itself from public debate of contested topics. There is nothing insincere in this. It is an effective strategy for a group that claims nowhere to have relinquished its goal of the constitution of a theocracy in which outlawing abortion and gay rights would be merely the jewels of a crown that many, who currently join it as allies of convenience, would ultimately find quite thorny to wear.¹² That, however, is not the principal objection to the core goals that the rhetoric shift masks successfully.

Presently, there is no American political party that would uncouple moral conservatism from big business operating globally. As we have seen, the necessary consequence of pursuing moral conservatism by supporting the politics of global capitalism is the creation of misery through the logic of capitalism. The conditions it currently wishes to be seen fixing are the same conditions it wishes in the future to continue creating. Logically, a church that opposes the creation of the condition that its new rhetorical approach addresses, would oppose the root cause of these conditions: voracious global capitalism.

The immediate goal of the new rhetoric is to offer a truce to prevent further erosion of political capital; its ultimate goal is therefore to transition through an era of reduced power by offering to its former and future political opponents an image of itself as collaborative and charitable until such a time as it may wield its power to return to political power those interests who will facilitate its actual goal: imposed morality through de facto theocracy. At such a time,

¹² “An Evangelical Manifesto” makes no claim to speak for any organized body of evangelicals; however the authors of this manifesto, which was released in 2008, recommend a rhetorical shift very similar to the one described in this paper. This does not mean that all evangelicals advocate a less confrontational approach: particularly following the February 2009 resignation, there exists a perceived power vacuum on the right. None of the leaders or groups touted as potential Dobson replacements offers any significantly different cultural policy. The differences are entirely in rhetorical approach (see, for instance, Gilgoff).

there is no reason why it would not return to a rhetoric of fear and shame to convert those whose codes of personal morality conflict with their own. This is why the group is known as evangelical: it *evangelizes*. By definition, it cannot be true to its purpose by leaving well enough alone. Listening to the speakers there was no sense that once shame and love had exhausted themselves as effective emotional appeals, the church wouldn't revert back to fear and guilt once a new social and political climate suggested such a rhetorical strategy effective once again.

The leaders they invite do not challenge these core beliefs at all. On the contrary, they seem carefully selected to reinforce them. Does the evangelical Christian right continue to blame much of the world's ills on identity politics and liberalism? Does it continue to equate social redistribution—even when it comes from other Christians (on the left)—with evil? A technologically sophisticated public with the cultural clout to get Bono and Jimmy Carter isn't going to crack like a scared witness in the final five minutes of a *Law and Order* episode and give the whole thing away. But the answers to anyone listening are, respectively: an emphatic yes and a equivocating yes.

Floyd H. Flake, U.S. congressman from New York from 1986 to 1997, cautions that government is not the answer. Marcus Buckingham, the Cambridge-educated motivational guru, instructs us to focus on our strengths, not our weaknesses. So does Michael Porter, professor at Harvard Business School.

The general, Colin Powell, present through a pre-taped interview with Hybels, tells us a good boss keeps an open door policy, listens to subordinates, doesn't hire 'yes' men, creates conditions of trust and leads ethically and honestly. You keep expecting him to turn to the camera any moment and say, "I hope you're listening *George*."

Jimmy Carter's canned interview on Day Three goes down the least well of all. Hybels introduces the segment by explaining that he received many calls and e-mails from pastors threatening to boycott if Carter was included. This is the strange evangelical mindset revealed: The meek may inherit the earth, but until then, more warriors and tycoons please. Carter is affable and humble and wants to talk about peace. The followers of The Prince of Peace don't seem interested. Do not return evil with evil. Blessed are the peacemakers. These are biblical messages that the pastors do not seem to want to hear. If AIDS and Africa are now acceptable evangelical causes, Christians united in their opposition to war, seems much too big a step.

Both the opening and closing addresses are delivered by Hybels. Hybels is a handsome, earnest and likeable man. Tanned, in good slacks and good shirts, he looks like what he is: a powerful C.E.O. at a leadership retreat. It is not possible to doubt Hybels' sincerity. This is a man who believes that he has a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and believes that the local church, working separately and in isolation, is the great source of hope for the world. He is aware of the church's historic failings. *He* believes in peace. He believes in prayer. He believes we currently have the resources to meet the battle of AIDS and hunger square on and to not do so is sin. Hybels also believes in capitalism.

Money and commerce and sales pitches are everywhere throughout The Leadership Summit. Everything is for sale here: CDs, children's books, DVD curriculum, pay packages on "spiritual gift analysis" for download. Perhaps it is naive to criticize Willow Creek for its commercialism. We live in a world of commerce and churches throughout the world collect money from their members and adherents in the form of tithes and offerings. Willow Creek and Saskatoon's Lakeview church use the money they acquire to build excellent facilities which

benefit their respective congregation and community. They also use the money they collect to fund programs that feed the hungry and house those without shelter.

The affinity between capitalists and evangelists is, in some measure, logical. If capitalism is founded in the need for perpetual growth, so is evangelism. Until the second coming of Christ, evangelicals believe they are tasked with growing the church into all corners of the globe. Captains of industry possess skill sets that translate fluidly to such a project. This is the source of the Willow Creek Organization's schizophrenia: as the economic crash has made abundantly clear to observers across the political spectrum, all that North American evangelicals aim to fix, the ideology of the political party that sheltered them has first caused.¹³

This, then, is the frustration one feels with the evangelical church's new rhetoric. It is designed effectively to reflect merited critique. The governments they elect enable the humanitarian crises they seek to repair by allowing the corporations they serve to neglect their humanitarian responsibility in pursuit of profit. A well-known example that the church itself does not contest: the AIDS crisis became a pandemic during the two decades North American evangelicals fought vociferously against increased AIDS funding on the grounds that it was a gay disease. As Stolberg notes, Bush's 2003 announcement to increase AIDS funding to Africa to \$15 billion over 5 years, struck many observers as a return to the concerns of Jimmy Carter, more than a continuance of pragmatic Reaganism. This is only partially so. Bush was able to get funding approved by giving the spending of much of it to evangelical groups who would counter the disease as part of their spiritual ministries. Stolberg writes: "But for a conservative Republican administration, any initiative involving AIDS is tricky business. A moral battle, by definition, involves notions of right and wrong. And the same 'church folk' who applaud Mr.

¹³ This seemed like a controversial claim when it was first written. The recent global economic downturn, subject of countless editorials and news articles, has confirmed without any reasonable equivocation, the veracity of these claims. The clearest (and most damning) analysis I've seen comes from Taibbi.

Bush's compassion may also find themselves uneasy when confronted with its details.” Attaching the money to Christians gets around this unease. Clinton was only able to raise global AIDS funding to \$225 million. While funding was stalled by successive congresses unwilling to anger their conservative base, the profits of pharmaceutical companies soared from the exclusivity of their AIDS medicine patents. Now that AIDS has become a pandemic and the companies have made their money, evangelicals have helped to create the finest hour in which they now, by any standard, shine.

It’s simple to respond to criticisms such as the ones offered above: better late than never; better something than nothing. Forgive us, Hybels says. We were wrong. How do you argue with that?

Conclusion

The North American evangelical church cannot be, nor should it be, expected to stop trying to grow. The propagation of a specific theology, and the moral code attendant to that theology, is its ethos and its purpose. The evangelical church will, likely, always want to inhabit the public sphere to oppose abortion and gay rights. In order to do so, there is no reason why it would not – and every reason why it would – revert back to the rhetoric of fear, should it assess the audience as susceptible to such an approach.

There is little one can do against the rhetoric of future Hell Houses. Perhaps all you can do is to turn away—provided that turning away does not involve ignoring the political maneuverings in which the evangelical church has traditionally engaged. A rhetorician can only observe that a more effective and more permanent rhetorical strategy might be one that doesn’t work to conceal the evangelical church’s fulfillment of its core goals through parties whose

ideologies necessitate the enactment of economic policies that do so many things that the New Testament finds abhorrent.

“I’m *done* just adding more stuff to my overstuffed life,” Hybels remarked after the Carter session. He talked about the need for resource redistribution. In Saskatchewan and in Illinois, the audience murmured and applauded. Are North American evangelical leaders waiting for the great leap forward? A public sophisticated enough to produce events like the 12th Annual Leadership Summit can ignore the conclusion to that question for only so long without re-injuring the ethos the rhetorical shift this paper has discussed has done so much to rehabilitate.

Coupling moral conservatism to big business is flawed logic for a group concerned also with sustaining the compassionate global relief in which it now engages. As long as the church supports the ideology of political parties who enforce economic systems that enrich the few and impoverish the many, that, in other words, continually create the conditions the evangelical church aims to improve, evangelicals will continue to operate from an ethos that anyone concerned with meaningful and sustained change must necessarily find suspect.

The evangelical church has every right to operate in the public sphere in pursuit of morality consistent with its theology. Should it wish to devise a rhetorical strategy tailored for the evangelization of a much broader audience, working to permanently improve the lot of humankind and its environs, seems like a logical appeal which its current rhetoric of love would make very persuasive. Such a strategy would, however, require the rescinding of the political *carte blanche* currently offered to those parties which promise to support its goals of moral conservatism. Until that happens, the evangelical Christian’s right rhetorical strategy is, though very persuasive, literally, mere rhetoric. It’s a rhetorical strategy that requires ignorance of the first act. Who would laud anyone for helping up the man he had just knocked to the ground?

Works Cited

- An Evangelical Manifesto. "An Evangelical Manifesto", May, 2008.
<<http://www.anevangelicalmanifesto.com/index.php>>
- Apostolidis, Paul. *Stations of the Cross: Adorno and Christian Right Radio*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2000.
- Bitzer, Lloyd F. "The Rhetorical Situation." *Philosophy and Rhetoric 1* (Winter 1968). 1-14.
- Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Donadio, Rachel. "Faith-Based Publishing." *New York Times*, November 28, 2004. October 19, 2007. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9502E4DC103FF93BA15752C1A9629C8B63&fta=y>>
- Fraser, Nancy. "Rethinking the public sphere: a contribution to the critique of actually existing democracy." In Bruce Robbins, ed. *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. 1-32.
- Gilgoff, Dan. "What James Dobson's Resignation Means for Focus on the Family's Future". *U.S. News & World Report*. February 27, 2009.
<<http://www.usnews.com/blogs/god-and-country/2009/02/27/what-james-dobsons-resignation-means-for-focus-on-the-familys-future.html>>
- Goodstein, Laurie. "Evangelical Group Rebuffs Critics on Right." *New York Times*, March 14, 2007. October 25. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/14/us/14evangelical.html>>
- Habermas, Jurgen. *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1989.

- Hansen, Miriam. "Foreword" to Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge. *Public Sphere and Experience: Toward an Analysis of the Bourgeois and Proletarian Public Sphere*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993. ix-xli.
- Hardt, Michael and Antonio Negri. *Empire*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2000.
- Hart, Roderick P. *Modern Rhetorical Criticism*. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 1997.
- Hill, Mike and Warren Montag. "Introduction: What Was, What Is the Public Sphere? Post-Cold War reflections." *Masses, classes and the public sphere*. Mike Hill and Warren Montag, eds. London and New York: Verso, 2000. 1-12.
- Hill, Mike and Warren Montag, eds.. *Masses, Classes and the Public Sphere*. London and New York: Verso, 2000.
- Lesage, Julia. "Christian Coalition Leadership Training." In. Linda Kintz and Julia Lesage, eds. *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 295-325.
- Little, Tiffany A. "Assemblies of God." *The Religious Movements Homepage at the University of Virginia*, 1997. October 25, 2007.
<<http://religiousmovements.lib.virginia.edu/nrms/AofGod.html>>
- Luo, Michael and Laurie Goodstein. "Emphasis Shifts for New Breed of Evangelicals." *New York Times*, May 21, 2007. July 18, 2007. < <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/21/us/21evangelical.html?hp>>
- Marx, Karl. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. Malden, Mass: Blackwell, 2002.
- Morrissey and Johnny Marr. "Ask." From *Louder than Bombs* by The Smiths [Audio recording]. Rough Trade/Sire, 1987.

- Passavant, Paul and Jodi Dean. *Empire's New Clothes: Reading Hardt and Negri*. New York: Routledge, 2004.
- Robbins, Bruce, ed. *The Phantom Public Sphere*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- Sharlet, Jeffrey. "Jesus plus Nothing: Undercover Among America's Secret Theocrats." *Harper's*, March, 2004, 1-11. April 24, 2006.
<<http://www.harpers.org/archive/2003/03/0079525>>
- Stolberg, Sheryl Gay. "The World: A Calling to Heal, Getting Religion on AIDS." *The New York Times*, February 2, 2003. October 25, 2007. <<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9E01E4DE1538F931A35751C0A9659C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=all>>.
- Taibbi, Matt. "The Big Takeover." *Rolling Stone*, Issue 1075, April 2, 2009.
http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/story/26793903/the_big_takeover>.
- Warner, Michael. *Publics and Counterpublics*. New York: Zone Books, 2003.
- Warren, Rick. *The Purpose Driven Church: Growth without Compromising Your Message and Mission*. Toronto: Harper Collins, 1995.
- Williams, Anna. "Conservative Media Activism: The Free Congress Foundation and National Empowerment Television." *Media, Culture, and the Religious Right*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998. 275-294.
- Willow Creek Association. *Willow Creek Leadership Summit 2007 Online Experience*, 2007. October 25, 2007. <<http://wall.willowcreek.com/leaders/index.asp>>.