



# MEGA-CHURCH OR MEGA-SECT

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MEGA-CHURCH OR MEGA-SECT

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## Abstract

This paper examines the modern-era megachurch in the context of its analogies with the Reformation era Catholic Church. And demonstrates that there are similarities, and provides examples, including the ways in which the religious, political, social, and economic power of the megachurch is analogous to that of the Reformation era Catholic Church. It also identifies concerns raised by those similarities including the potential for continued megachurch growth in size and influence to reduce the number of touchpoints politicians must reach, as well as the diversity of concerns politicians must address, to obtain and maintain religious legitimacy.

This paper also examines the megachurch through the lens of the Troeltsch and Niebuhr church-sect typologies. And it shows how the megachurch demonstrates many of the behavioral characteristics of the church while also engaging in the tension inducing activities of the sect.

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## Chapter I.

### Introduction

The United States of America is a highly religious nation, and the megachurch is one of the most well-known and visible aspects of American religion. We will examine the megachurch through the sociological lens of the traditional Troeltsch and the Niebuhr sect typology. An effort to determine whether the megachurch is best defined as a sect, a church, a denomination, or otherwise.

Our analysis will also serve to examine the ongoing relevancy of this historical lens in providing a framework for parsing the behavior of religious actors, and in identifying relevant indicators as they relate to social power, manipulation of tension with the environment, and the relationship of the religious entity with the state.

We will also examine the megachurch in the context of its analogies with the Reformation era Catholic Church. In the Reformation era every aspect of life centered around the Catholic Church, and the state was the enforcer of last resort for Catholic Church orthodoxy. The impacts of the Catholic Church included the theological, social, as well as the political. We will examine the impact of the megachurch in the United States, including the extents of its theological, social, and political power. We will examine whether the power of the megachurch is analogous to, or whether its growing influence has the potential to be analogous to, that of the Reformation era Catholic

Church. If we find such analogies do exist, that will assist us in projecting potential consequences of continued megachurch growth in the United States.

I've found no scholarship examining the consequences of the rise of the megachurch in the context of its similarities with the Reformation era Catholic Church. Because similarities do exist, the more common studies of the megachurch might be overlooking certain reformations that mean important changes in U.S. Christian establishments and in the United States more broadly. Examining the megachurch through the lens of the Reformation will enable us to contextualize, without trivializing, the growth of this popular religious institution. This paper will fill what appears to be a gap in the pertinent literature.

My initial interest was to write on the prosperity gospel and whether it was preached with different points of emphasis based on the income level of the congregation. To provide sufficient contextual understanding required an understanding of the history of the prosperity gospel and the history of the church. As I worked through the numerous books and articles in the historical record, looking for insights and opportunities to engage them in conversation, and to put them in conversation with each other, it became clear that I would have to break the constituent parts of my research down much further than I originally thought necessary. Over time I found the constantly recurring theme in my research was the centrality of the Reformation, and that became the narrowed focus of my research.

Scholarship should not only look back to explain what was, and look out to explain what is, but it should also look ahead to help prepare society for what may come. In my effort to bring the lessons of the Reformation forward and show their relevancy to

the present, the analogies between the Reformation era Catholic Church and the modern-era megachurch provided an appropriate vehicle for doing so. The analogies between the Reformation era Catholic Church and the modern-era megachurch also provided an opportunity for me to look ahead and help prepare society for what may come. And that became the focus of this paper.

Although there is a substantial amount of scholarship on defining an entity as a sect, a church or as a denomination, there is less scholarship on why the classification matters. In situating this paper among the related research that precedes it, this paper takes the next step of helping to demonstrate why the answers proffered by that research matter and why the research itself remains relevant. The discussion of why the classification matters will necessarily reinvigorate, and either reinforce or improve the scholarship on how to best arrive at the proper classification.

My hope, as an initial matter, is that this paper will spark additional scholarship on the megachurch, and use of the classification of religious entities as a means for considering their impact on, and their relationship with, the broader society. This is important given the realized and potential influence and consequences linked to the varying roles that sects, churches, denominations, and megachurches perform in our society.



## Chapter II.

### Literature Review

The conceptual foundation of church-sect typology, including that of the subsequently proffered subtypes, is generally attributed to the collective work of Max Weber, Ernst Troeltsch, and Richard Niebuhr. Broadly speaking, the church-sect classifications have been based on a combination of organizational behavioral characteristics, relationships, social economic stratification, theology, and the subjectively determined compliance with the biblical moral ideal and or uprightness of the organization. These elements lie along a continuum, about which there is no general agreement, of markers used as determinants of the label or classification ultimately ascribed to the organization.

The principal purpose of this review is not to trace the entire scholarship of church-sect typology. Instead, it is limited to the key foundational aspects of the church-sect typology that arise in our discussion of the Protestant megachurch in the United States.

#### The Classical Church Sect Divide

According to Niebuhr, author of *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*, churches are social groups into which people are accepted, much like the way a person is accepted into the family into which they are born. Whereas sects are voluntary associations into which one must be accepted, most likely after demonstrating a prerequisite of having undergone a particular religious experience (17-18). Niebuhr's

church-sect dichotomy is stark. Churches are inclusive, sects are exclusive, and churches emphasize the universality of the gospel, whereas sects emphasize the ethical responsibility of the individual.

Niebuhr, also found that the church is closely aligned with the society in which it exists, and that it is committed to accommodating the ethics of its socio-political environment. Whereas the sect, in contrast to the church, is always a minority group, separated from the world, and abhors compromise of its ethics (18-19).

Yet, Niebuhr posits that over time, generally within one generation, sects become churches. And that they undergo this metamorphosis because as children are born into the sect, it must then bear responsibility for training the new generation, and necessarily adopts the characteristics of the church. Additionally, with each successive generation maintaining isolation from the world becomes increasingly more difficult and compromise becomes more likely. This strain to maintain its physical, ethical, and or theological isolation and purity is further exacerbated by the arrival of theologically educated clergy in place of the original enthusiastic pioneering lay leaders (17-21).

In “Church and Sect Revisited” Benton Johnson challenges Niebuhr’s theory on the inevitability of the evolution of sects, first by turning to the work of Bryan Wilson (128-29). In contrast to Niebuhr, Wilson’s work posits that some sects do retain their distinctiveness while others assimilate to the culture of their environment. According to Wilson, author of “An Analysis of Sect Development” the determining factors are the level of screening of prospective members, the degree of insulation and isolation of sect members from the world, and the absence or presence of trained ministry. And as it pertains to the environment, sects in repressive environments are less likely to evolve into

denominations. According to Johnson, Niebuhr's theory is wrong, and Wilson's theory is better (129).

Johnson further challenges Niebuhr's theory on the inevitability of the evolution of sects into denominations by noting that the impact of the interaction between the sect and the society is a two-way process. And that the sect may be able to impose its will on society (129). Johnson caveats his observation, by noting the unlikelihood of a sect being able to force such a level of change on its environment that the culture of the sect becomes the dominant culture of its environment (130). But the idea of reciprocal influence between the sect and the society is consistent with the observation by Troeltsch, that during the mediaeval period the State united its organization with the Church and combined the spiritual aims and standards of the Church with that of the State. As a result, the influence of the church was reflected in the general social life of society which was governed by the standards of the Church (212).

The influence of the sect on society, as reflected in the various impacts of the megachurch on American laws, Presidential election primaries, and politics, may be representative of the societal change that Johnson deemed unlikely to come to pass. This will be a critical component of our discussion of the megachurch. As will the demonstrated ability of the megachurch to retain sect like behaviors, notwithstanding its size, and its entwinement in American life, which would seem to make it a church. We will address the issue of whether the megachurch is a sect that is changing its environment as opposed to the traditional sect striving to resist being changed by its environment. All of which begs the question of whether the megachurch was a sect that

has become a church not by adapting to the U.S. environment, but by forcing the U.S. environment to adapt to the megachurch.

Authors Rodney Stark, Professor of Sociology, University of Washington, and William Bainbridge, Assistant Professor Dept. of Sociology, University of Washington, in their article “Of Churches, Sects, and Cults: Preliminary Concepts for a Theory of Religious Movements,” also addressed Niebuhr’s argument regarding the sect’s inevitable transformation into a church (123). Stark and Bainbridge posit that absent a method of measurement it is impossible to measure the existence of a transforming movement (122). To address this problem, Stark and Bainbridge turn to the work of Johnson in “On Church and Sect” in which he utilizes a single attribute, along a continuum, ranging from rejection to acceptance of the social environment. Stark identifies tension with the environment as social deviance and sets forth a potential measure of the level of social deviance along a marked scale of difference, antagonism, and separation. Thereby allowing for measurement of religious movement and for classification of religious institutions (124).

Niebuhr describes sects as outcast minorities, schismatic consequences of poor church members that have formed their own religious entity in rebellion against ineffective representation in the church (19). This religion of the disinherited, as Niebuhr describes it (32), in part demonstrates the more radical nature of sects in comparison to churches, and to a lesser degree the conservative nature of the church that is aligned with the broader social, economic, and political environment.

Stark and Bainbridge acknowledge that some new religious bodies are created by schisms, but also note that there are non-schismatic sects such as those that are the result of religious innovation and those imported from other societies (117).

According to Troeltsch the church is conservative, accepting of the secular order, aims for universal acceptance, and is comparatively less selective of its membership. To this end, the church utilizes the state and becomes an integral part of the social order (331-43). This aligns with the perspective of Niebuhr. Troeltsch also says that the church sees itself as the mediator between man and the supernatural, imparts grace through the sacraments, and views the secular order as preparation for the supernatural life. The church stands in contrast to the sects which are comparatively small and more selective in its membership, requires a high level of intraorganizational unity, aims for internal spiritual perfection in its members, and is generally associated with the lower class. Whereas the essence of the church is the institution. The essence of the sect is the individual. The sect does not serve as a mediator but instead directs its members directly to the supernatural, and it rejects or at least stands apart from the world which it views as a corrupting influence (331-43). According to Troeltsch, the word “sect” represents an “independent sociological type of Christian thought” (338), and sects have no desire to be popular churches (998).

Many of the characteristics attributed to the sect are also characteristics of the megachurch, although contrary to the behavior of sects, megachurches strive for both growth and popularity. We will necessarily parse Troeltsch’s definition of the sect in detail during our discussion of the megachurch. But of note is the alignment between the idea of an “independent type of Christian thought” and tension with the environment.

Which in turn raises the issue of whether, irrespective of organization size, tension with the environment equates to sectarian status. Or is the megachurch, given its size, on its face too large to be a sect? Also, if, as Troeltsch posits, the word “sect” stands for an independent sociological type of Christian thought, and if that independent thought is now the dominant thought as reflected in the dominance and impact of the megachurch, does that mean that the church and the sect have switched societal roles? Troeltsch also stated that the Church utilizes the State and the ruling classes and becomes an integral part of the existing social order (331-43). Does the similar behavior and standing of the megachurch indicate that the megachurch is indeed a church?

According to Benton Johnson, a majority of the prosperous and popular religious organizations in the United States could not be validly classified as either a sect or a church in accord with Troeltsch’s typology (“On Church and Sect” 541). Johnson identifies two primary problems with the church-sect dichotomy articulated by Troeltsch. The first is that the definitions are based on the history of Christian Europe prior to about 1800, which would be inapplicable today. Johnson and Niebuhr agree that the churches in the U.S. are significantly different from the Troeltsch church (“Church and Sect Revisited” 125). Johnson’s second primary problem with Troeltsch’s typology is that the definitions contain numerous elements, and those elements vary independently of each other. Which, in turn, makes the classification of mixed types difficult at best (“On Church and Sect” 541).

Given the numerous independent variables in Troeltsch’s definitions, and the resulting difficulty in classifying mixed cases, Johnson proposed a single variable along a continuum of acceptance or rejection of the social environment. Along this continuum,

the sect rejects the social environment, and the church accepts the social environment (543). Although the single variable was in a sense revolutionary, it still aligned with the general placement of the sect and the church in Troeltsch's typology. This does not, however, remove the subjectivity of the distinction. Even Johnson acknowledges that the line of demarcation between sect and church remains arbitrary (543). He also subsequently acknowledged that religious organizations for internal and or external reasons can, and do, intentionally move along the church-sect continuum ("Church and Sect Revisited" 131).

The issue of tension with the environment, and the ability and willingness to manipulate the level of tension, is one of several areas that we will examine in our discussion of the megachurch. For example, if the degree of tension is the determining factor, does the continued growth of the megachurch, the adoption of some portion of megachurch theology as general societal rules, and the pandering of the political elite to the megachurch, if only because of its size, reduce the tension and thereby make the megachurch less a sect and more a church? And, whereas the discussion of tension generally refers to becoming more conservative, it may be more accurate to say that tension seeking can be more or less liberal, or more of less conservative, as megachurches move back and forth on the continuum to purposefully maintain the desired tension. We will also look at the issue of having imposed its theological beliefs as part of the civil law (e.g., abortion), whether the megachurch has now co-opted the State into enforcing the megachurch theology as the State once did for the Catholic Church. Is one of the consequences of the State adopting megachurch theology as law, the inability for the megachurch to be seen as a sect? And does it make it objectively necessary to see

the megachurch as a church? What is the impact of the megachurch having taken on the outward accoutrements of a church, especially given its size, while continuing the tension inducing characteristics of a sect? Also, given the theological and political conservative view of the megachurch, could it be that the mainline churches, especially given their size relative to the megachurch, are becoming the sects, and the megachurch is becoming the church in the traditional Troeltsch typology?

According to Laurence R. Iannaccone, Professor of Economics and Director, Institute for the Study of Religion, Economics and Society, Chapman University, Troeltsch's observations were deficient as a "basis for behavioral theory" given the existence of mixed types containing elements/characteristics associated with both church and the sect ("A Formal Model" S242). This observation, by Iannaccone and numerous others, led to the development and introduction of subtypes as means for further clarification. But the subtypes have generally served to decrease in value as they have increased in number (S242). And even among the subtypes ostensibly developed to elucidate our understanding, there is little agreement among scholars as to their proper usage.

Iannaccone put forth a distinction from Troeltsch, which he identified as being much in alignment with that proffered by Johnson in "On Church and Sect." According to Iannaccone, the behavioral standards that Troeltsch identified as causes of sectarian and/or church orientation, are actually consequences driven by economic considerations of scarcity, production, and rational choice (S244). And in contrast to Niebuhr's thesis that the natural evolution of sects is to become mainstream churches or denominations, Iannaccone posits that whereas sect members may convert, defect, or evolve, the sect



itself will maintain its sect like characteristics throughout its existence. This is consistent with the finding by Stark and Bainbridge that sects maintain their tension with the environment throughout their existence (S257-58).

Iannaccone further posits that sect members, in addition to having more extreme beliefs, also have more intense religious experiences, and are more homogeneous than their church counterparts (S258). This would seem consistent with the exclusivity and the religious experience prerequisites identified by Niebuhr (18). Iannaccone also states that although sects maintain high levels of tension with the society in which they exist, to compensate for what members are giving up by rejecting society, sects, in contrast to churches, must provide its members, with high levels of rewards, including their closest friendships (“A Formal Model” S259-260). This is consistent with Troeltsch’s observation regarding the intraorganizational unity among sect members. And it is also analogous to Stark and Bainbridge finding that sect and cult members receive direct rewards with their membership (S260). Because direct rewards necessitate high levels of commitment from sect members, Iannaccone posits that high level of participation among sect members is a derived characteristic not a causal prerequisite of sect membership (S260). Lastly, Iannaccone also states that sect members are likely to have lower socio-economic status, lower levels of education (S262), and less to lose by nonconformity than church members (S260). This is consistent with the observations of Niebuhr and Troeltsch. According to Iannaccone, his model is “a foundation for church-sect theory as opposed to church-sect classification (S263).

#### The Classical Denomination

According to Niebuhr, denominationalism in the United States stands, or is divided, primarily on the four-legged stool of nationalism, race, class, and sectionalism (6). The reason for denominationalism is usually attributed to the creeds of the individual churches within each of the denominations (12). But even if this is true, we come full circle because theology is influenced by its social environment (16), which brings us back to nationalism, race, class, and sectionalism. Consequently, Niebuhr generally views denominationalism as a failure of Christianity to transcend earthly distinctions as it was intended to do. And instead, as represented by denominations, Christianity has been reduced to an ever-hardening caste systems of nation, race, class, and sectionalism motivated primarily by a desire for organizational self-survival (21). Niebuhr views denominations as the accommodation of religion to social caste, representative of the secularization of Christianity, and more akin to political and class entities than churches (24-25). Niebuhr acknowledged that a transition to cultural homogeneity could portend potential future unity among American churches. But he balanced this glimmer of optimism with noting the potential for religious forums to serve as a future place of conflict (270-72).

According to Johnson, the large American Protestant denominations are structurally sectarian. And denominations have relinquished traditional Christian claims to supremacy, have low admission standards, and virtually nonexistent discipline. Additionally, similar to the view expressed by Niebuhr, Johnson also states that membership in the American Protestant denominations is generally “limited to particular classes, races, and regions to whose narrow prejudices and interests they are obliged to cater in order to survive” (“Church and Sect Revisited” 132). But Johnson also identifies

what he refers to as aggressive denominations, that seek to extend influence, including some with ambitions of dominating national life (135). Johnson's aggressive denomination sounds much like the megachurch.

More often than not, the megachurch has become operationally (or at least outwardly) non-denominational, as it generally accepts as a truism that denominations can serve as a bar to entry for some prospective members. But at the same time, the megachurch has taken on many of the roles of denominations and may actually be reshaping American religion by reshaping the denominational system. Could it be that Niebuhr was right in identifying the denomination as a failure? In which case it may be that the megachurch, despite its individuality, and its creed of non-denominationalism, ostensibly in the name of one God, is progress.

### Chapter III.

#### The Megachurch Reformation of U.S. Christianity

In 1957 only 3% of Americans identified themselves as being unaffiliated with any religion (Wellman, *High on God* 60). By 2021, according to the Pew Research Center, 29% of Americans identified themselves as being unaffiliated with any religion (Smith). Concomitant with the growing reduction in religiosity is the growing concentration of American church goers in megachurches. As of 2020 “10% of churches account{ed} for 50% of all American church goers” (Wellman, *High on God* 5). And the cause of this concentration likely extends beyond the numerical or theological. For example, in their responses to a 2020 survey, 93% of all megachurches identified themselves with labels associated with political conservatism (Bird and Thumma 10).

The continuous growth of megachurches and the increasing concentration of American churchgoers in megachurches, may signify an ongoing economic, social, political, and cultural shift. There likely exists stark and nuanced sociological and theological differences between megachurches. But the twin trends of megachurch growth, and the concentration of American church goers in megachurches, may portend a reformation in the standing, makeup, perspective, and influence of the Christian church, to a degree not experienced since the historical Reformation. The Reformation provides an apt prism for contextualizing the societal impacts of megachurches because, as one researcher described it, “the Reformation was one of history’s great episodes of religiously inspired social change” (Pfaff 189).

There are similarities between the Reformation era Catholic Church and the modern-day megachurch in the United States. Examples of the similarities include the ways in which the religious, political, social, and economic power of the megachurch is analogous to that of the Reformation era Catholic Church. One indicium of this is the continuing concentration of modern megachurch era churchgoers in an increasing smaller number of churches with believers of similar theological and political beliefs. The resulting entwinement of theological and political power inuring to the benefit of megachurch leaders, and the responses of political leaders to that power, is reminiscent of the power of Catholic Church leaders during the Reformation era. Another similarity is the way in which theological advocates, such as the Religious Right, and the supporters of the Protestantism, have been able to drive the social discourse, as well as the political agenda, through the effective use of communication technology. And as evidenced by the tenor of the public discourse, an additional similarity is the hardening line of intra-faith political separation.

### Background

The traditionally told story of the Reformation is that it began on October 31, 1517, when Martin Luther nailed his Ninety-five Theses to the doors of Castle Church on the day of its consecration and ended either with the Peace of Augsburg in 1555, or the Peace of Westphalia in 1648. The convenience of this version of the story is that it has a definite beginning, a generally accepted as morally reasonable rationale in the middle, and a murkier but still somewhat definite end.

## Inter and Intra Religion Conflict

Mario Ferrero, Department of Humanities, University of Eastern Piedmont, Italy, notes that the 1555 the Peace of Augsburg, temporarily ended the Protestant Catholic war in Germany and left the decision of whether lands would be Catholic or Lutheran up to the princes of the lands (282). But, as Winter-Jensen, Emeritus Professor of Comparative Education at the Danish University of Education, Copenhagen, explains in more detail, the agreement did not include all reformed versions of Christianity, such as Calvinism (113). And it wasn't until almost 100 years later, in 1648, that the Peace of Westphalia broadened the principle of "cuius regio eius religio (one's religion is to be that of the sovereign ruling the territory of one's abode)" to include all of Europe, Calvinism, and other versions of Protestantism (Ferrero 282). The conflicts necessitating these peace agreements were outgrowths of the daily inter, and intra, Catholic, and Protestant conflicts. These conflicts showed up in various guises such as anti-Lutheran policies resulting in the execution of Protestants as heretics (Winther-Jensen 115), and Dominican friars participating in the Inquisition and engaging in armed conflicts against Protestants (Becker 7).

Sascha Becker, Department of Economics, University of Warwick, Coventry, United Kingdom, provides an in-depth summary of the various arguments in the debate over purported outcomes from what some referred to as the dark side of the Reformation (20-21). And some of these alleged outcomes of the dark side of the Reformation continue to show up in various guises, and in some cases thrive, in its wake. These include, but are not limited to persecutions, witch trials, the rise of nationalism, heightened Nazi vote share, and eliminationist antisemitism. While Becker et al. noted

that the sweeping nature of these claims were overbroad, they also found that correlations do exist (20-22).

One example that seems to align with this dark side narrative is the Vatican's creation of the Holy Office. According to Robert B. Ekelund, Lowder Eminent Scholar Emeritus, Auburn University, the Holy Office was created to institute repression, censorship, and to oversee the Inquisition (697-98). The Vatican opened the Holy Office in 1559 (697) and it remained open until 1965 (698n17). Furthermore, as Udi Greenberg, Associate Professor of history at Dartmouth College, explained in detail, it also wasn't until 1965 that the Catholic Church renounced the duty of Catholic led states to impose the teachings of the church, to serve as God's secular arm, and to repress other religions (461). But the dark side was not limited to one side of the Protestant Catholic divide or the other. Becker noted the long-standing debate over whether Luther's nationalism, ethics, and anti-Semitism, predisposed Germany towards intolerance (20-21). And Alec Ryrie, Professor of the history of Christianity at Durham University, England, identified dark behavior on the Protestant side, by tracing its history of murder and moral authoritarianism from Calvin through to the puritans, and unto support for slavery and apartheid (7-8). And as the Church was not simply divided but fragmented in the post-Reformation period, intolerance and fragmentation may have been mutually reinforcing. For example, as Julius Gathogo, Kenyatta University and Visiting Distinguished Professor of Missiology & Historiography, ANCCI University, explained, some groups, such as the Anabaptists, were persecuted by Protestants, and Catholics, and by the State (353-54) In short, as Gathogo further stated, and traced the evidence of in detail,

intolerance manifested in extremism and/or fundamentalism has been a critical religious dysfunction (339-40).

### The Megachurch

Although there is no official number, the term “megachurch” generally refers to large protestant churches with weekly service attendance of at least 1,500 to 2,000 people. Included within this discussion of the megachurch, is the “gigachurch,” which according to Barney Warf, Professor, University of Kansas, and Morton Winsberg, Professor, Florida State University, refers to churches with weekly service attendance of more than 10,000 people (34). And some gigachurches, according to Charity Carney, faculty member at Stephen F. Austin State University, have weekly service attendance of 50,000 people (61). It helps to contextualize these attendance numbers by contrasting them with the median size of the American congregation, which according to James K. Wellman, Associate Professor and Chair of the Comparative Religion at the Jackson School of International Studies, University of Washington, is 75 people (650).

Speaking solely in terms of the number of attendees, there is a long history of large churches in America. But, as David E. Eagle, Assistant Research Professor, Duke University, explains, the current incarnation of large churches referred to as megachurches has only been recognized as a distinct form of religious organization since the 1980s (591). And although some researchers, like Stephen Ellingson, Associate Professor of Sociology Hamilton College, date the birth of megachurches to the mid-1970s and early 1980s (18), other researchers disagree. Eagle argues that megachurches have long existed in everything but name (591). And Mark Chaves, Professor of



Sociology, University of Arizona, notes some megachurch characteristics (gifted leaders, focus on spiritual and physical needs, multi-purpose buildings, musical excellence, non-religious activities, small group activities, and seating for thousands) as having been found in churches as early as the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries (Carney 61-70; Chaves 339-340; Ellingson 16-21). But Ellingson does recognize a distinction between the megachurch and its predecessor, and credits the megachurch with having greater size, growth rate, range of programs, and marketing skills (18). And researchers generally do agree that there has been a sustained rapid growth of megachurches that began in the 1970s (Chaves 335; Ellingson 17), which, according to the authors of the Hartford Institute report on megachurches, has continued to the present (Bird and Thumma 6-7). The numbers bear this out. There were approximately 50 megachurches in 1970 (Ellingson 591); 150 in 1980 (Warf and Winsberg 35); 350 in 1990, 600 in 2000 (Wellman, "God Is Like a Drug" 650); 1,310 in 2005 (Warf and Winsberg 35); 1,600 in 2011 (Wellman, "God Is Like a Drug" 650); and 1,750 in 2020 (Bird and Thumma 2).

The development and proliferation of megachurches has impacted American Christianity (Ellingson 17), mainline churches (Ellingson 26-28), politics, and culture (Wellman "God Is Like a Drug" 651). Whether due to their success or fear that they will siphon attendance and/or membership, the presence of megachurches forces other churches, irrespective of denomination, to respond, if only in anticipation of the potential impact of the megachurch (Ellingson 18). The impact of the megachurch is amplified by the fact that 70% of megachurches have multiple locations (Bird and Thumma 3), including locations in states other than that of their main location (Warf and Winsberg 38). And 32 megachurches have 10 or more locations (Bird and Thumma 6).

According to Warf and Winsberg megachurches are at the intersection of religion and conservative politics in the United States, and megachurches reflect the visibility and power of conservative religious forces (38). Similarly, Robert Putnam, author of *American Grace: How Religion Divides and Unites Us*, alleges that conservative politics have been the most visible aspects of religion in America since the 1980s (81). Interestingly, the time frame of his observation aligns with the explosive growth of the megachurch. Yet, it may be, as Eagle posits, that megachurches espouse conservative theology, because the dominant form of Christianity is evangelical (591). It should also be noted that although most megachurches are evangelical, as Putnam observes, all evangelicals are neither deeply conservative nor members of the Religious Right (81). And according to megachurch leaders, most megachurches avoid political action (Bird and Thumma 12). But be that as it may, as Wellman has noted, some megachurch leaders have been asked to endorse political campaigns and causes (“God is like a Drug” 651). And, in any event, megachurch activities are not without a realized and potentially broader effect. Ellingson posits that megachurches may be reshaping American religion through the continued growth of evangelicalism and may be reshaping religious culture by their influence (26). An influence that Jason Wollschleger, Associate Professor of Sociology, Whitworth University, and J.R. Porter, Graduate Center, City University of New York, NY, describes as political, social, religious, and economic (280).

According to Wellman, “the largest 10% of churches account for more than 50% of all American churchgoers” (“God Is Like a Drug” 651). This aligns with the observation by Chavez, that church goers are becoming more concentrated in large churches, irrespective of denomination (337). And even though church attendance is

falling, and denominational affiliation is falling, as Marc von der Ruhr, Professor of Economics, St. Norbert College, and J. P. Daniels, Professor of Economics and International Business, Marquette University, have noted, megachurches are growing and attendance at megachurches is growing (478). Additionally, whether consciously or subconsciously congregations sort themselves into like-minded political groups, and the sorting becomes self-reinforcing, thereby determining who stays and who goes (Putnam 442). The idea of congregational self-sorting and reinforcing appears consistent with the responses to the megachurch survey in which 93% of all megachurches identify themselves with labels associated with political conservatism (Bird and Thumma 8). But there are potential issues and that may arise from the increasing concentration. Chavez notes that the concentration may be changing the social and political significance of religion in America. More specifically, he posits that the concentration increases the potential social and political influence of religion, that it may change the access and political influence of megachurch leaders, and that it may also change the behavior and responses of political leaders to the megachurch and its leaders. Additionally, the concentration may also change the development and diffusion of worship practices, as well as the dynamics of intradenominational politics (337).

#### Megachurch and Reformation Era Parallels

Intentional inter-denominational violence, intra-denominational violence (e.g., The Battle of Kappel, the Thirty Years War, etc.), discrimination, and ostracization based on religious beliefs were hallmarks of the Reformation era. While religion based physical and non-physical violence does exist in the United States, it has not risen to the level that existed in the Reformation era. Yet, some of the similarities that drove the Reformation

era violence are prevalent in the megachurch community, and in those communities whose beliefs align with what they believe to be the political beliefs of the megachurch.

Clinical psychoanalyst Randall Sorenson utilizes the concepts of strictness and relativism in addressing the reason why mainline Protestant churches are, in his words, dying. According to Sorenson, these terms were first introduced as part of a hypothesis by D. M. Kelley in the book *Why Conservative Churches are Growing*. And that according to Kelley's hypothesis, religiously strong groups are guided by strictness and religiously weak groups are guided by relativism. Strictness is defined by behaviors and individual catalysts, like those that motivated Reformation era actors, such as "absolutism (a belief that 'we have the truth, and all others are in error'), conformity (an intolerance of diversity or dissent)" and "fanaticism (a missionary zeal to spread the message of the group to outsiders)" (853). Relativism is defined by behaviors and individual catalysts such as the belief that no one has a monopoly on the truth, an appreciation for diversity and individual differences, an interest in exchange via dialogue and a reluctance to impose their beliefs on others (853). Sorenson encapsulates the impact of these two disparate belief and behavior systems in stating that "strong religious groups instill and sustain hearty constructions of socially sanctioned meanings. Weak groups fail to impose a socially shared sense of what passes for 'reality'" (855). Kelley's hypothesis, according to Sorenson, has in large part been empirically proven by numerous researchers (853).

If seen without having been provided any context, Kelley's hypothesis, beginning with its definitions of strictness and relativism, can appear to reflect political beliefs and behaviors more than theological beliefs and behaviors. Admittedly, as Putnam has observed, America is a highly religious nation, so the intertwining of religion and

politics is unsurprising (376). Yet, the question that naturally arises, is how entwined are these bedfellows, and whether religion is leading the politics, or are the politics leading the religion? This is especially pertinent as it relates to what takes place inside of the U.S. megachurch. The Reformation era Catholic Church was state supported, and the state was the enforcer of last resort for Catholic church theology. But the same level of state and church entwinement, whereby the state becomes the tool of the church, would be problematic in the United States. Or even if a significant section of the U.S. populace believed that the state or its political leaders, unofficially supported Christianity above other religions, it would be problematic. Freedom of religion and separation of church and state is a significant part of the values, or myth, upon which America is built. And an environment in which the megachurch grows to such size and influence that its competitors are removed or effectively marginalized, and in which the leading political lights appear beholden to the megachurch, or feel compelled to do its bidding, would threaten the ideal of separation between church and state. And it would threaten the entire freedom of religion edifice.

#### Communication Technology and the Transmission of Ideas

In the Reformation era, the effective use of communication technology meant the effective use of the printing press. In the modern megachurch era, Fox News, Sinclair Broadcasting Group, conservative talk radio, Christian radio, satellite television networks, and social media have replaced the printing press as communication differentiators. But, in both eras the rapid transmission of ideas, and what some may call alternative facts, were what Jared Rubin, Professor of Economics, Chapman University, described as “designed to catch the attention of readers” (274). In the Reformation era it

was allegations such as being called a heretic or the antichrist. Megachurch era themes may be the birther movement, and “PizzaGate.” In both eras these types of issues have simultaneously served as catalysts, reactants, and outcomes in addition to driving the discourse. The tone of the discourse is also similar. The description of Martin Luther by Patrick Wyman, author of *The Verge: Reformation, Renaissance, and Forty Years That Shook the World*, as combative (259). And the description of Martin Luther by Jurgen Moltmann, Professor Emeritus of Theology at the Eberhard-Karls-Universitat, Tubingen, Germany, and Steffen Losel, Associate Professor, Emory University Candler School of Theology, as having “cultivated an uncultured culture of dispute” in which he “derided and mocked his opponents” (12), is reminiscent of some modern-day megachurch supported political leaders. And in both eras the communication technology of the day was the media through which issues were framed and reframed to provide different or desired perspectives.

In discussing the impact of communications technology during the Reformation era, Karen F. Scialabba, Professor, Marist College, explained that the media shaped how people experienced, articulated, and reacted to their reality (72). And that the effective use of the communication technology of the day also served to determine which issues “directly or indirectly” were important (79). The same explanation holds true during the modern megachurch era.

Although scholars such as Ekelund and colleagues have found multi-correlation between printing and Protestantism (697), there does not appear to be universal agreement on the importance of printing technology in the “success” of the Reformation. Rubin provides a detailed discussion on the role of the printing press and identifies some

researchers that have argued that the printing press changed little, others that have argued that it changed everything, and some that have argued that the degree of attribution to the role of the printing press was overblown (270-71). Andrew Pettegree, Professor of Modern History at the University of St. Andrews, in discussing the role of print and the Reformation stated that the affinity between the two was “more often assumed than demonstrated” (980). Then took the noncontroversial position that print played a vital role (997). But notwithstanding the differences among scholars about the impact of the print media, the comments and behaviors of the Protestant and Catholic antagonists give a good indication that they believed that the print media was valuable. Luther’s valuation of the printing press is ostensibly reflected in his contemporaneous comments, captured by Mark Greengrass in his book *Christendom Destroyed: Europe 1517-1648*, in which Luther described printing as God’s highest act of grace (246). And the behavior of the Catholic Church during and after the Reformation era, such as maintaining the Index of Forbidden Books, seems to indicate their belief that print played and continued to play a critical role. But, as Rubin has pointed out, there is no counterfactual history to determine whether the Reformation would have been a success in the absence of the press (282). So, the question of whether the printing industry drove the Reformation, or the Reformation drove the printing industry, or neither, remains outstanding.

Notwithstanding this uncertainty, efforts to censor communications existed during the Reformation era, and they continue to exist during the megachurch era. The printing press was available to the Catholic Church just as it was available to Luther and the Protestants. But the Catholic Church printed most of its works in Latin (Becker 7), which limited its audience. And through its Index of Forbidden Books, and the Inquisition, the

Catholic Church expended significant resources censoring the writings of Protestant authors and even Catholic authors such as Luther, that didn't meet their approval. The efforts and the success of theological advocates to promote or censor communications, and to drive social discourse, as well as the political agenda, through the effective use of communication technology is another similarity between the Reformation era and the modern megachurch era.

During the Reformation era the printing press was in its infancy, and broadcasting as we know it did not exist. As the nascent communication industry evolved through the development of the printing press, communications originated by the Catholic and Protestant churches were its lifeline (Pettegree 981-82). Today's communication entities and mediums are much more diversified. But this should not be taken for granted, as accompanying the growth of the modern megachurch, has been a well-documented consolidation of major media outlets, and a less well-documented consolidation of Christian radio.

According to a February 2, 2023, report by Inside Radio, religion (teaching, variety) is the third most popular radio format in the United States (Inside Radio). And Anne Nelson, in her book *Shadow Network: Media, Money, and the Secret Hub of the Radical Right*, states that at least three of the top five owners of Christian radio stations, Salem Media Group, American Family Association, and Bott Radio Network, are known members of the Council for National Policy ("CNP") (55). The Washington Post describes the CNP, a registered non-profit organization, as "a social, planning and communications hub for conservative activists" (O'Harrow). The Council for National Policy describes itself as "leading the conservative movement." And former Vice



President Pence, as posted on the CNP website, describes it is one of the “oldest and most effective organizations in the history of the conservative movement (CNP – Council for National Policy).

The combined footprint of Salem Media Group, American Family Association, and Bott Radio Network is substantial. Bott Radio Network, a registered non-profit, operates 120 radio stations broadcasting in 16 states (Bott Radio Network). American Family Radio, a registered non-profit, operates 180 radio stations broadcasting in 30 states. It describes itself as representing and standing for traditional family values (American Family Radio). And Salem Media Group, according to a 3/23/23 Radio World article, delivers syndicated news, Christian and conservative talk programming to approximately 3,100 affiliated radio stations (Stine). As of June 2023, it was the twelfth largest radio company in the United States (Saleem). And according to Christianity Today, it reaches an estimated 298 million listeners each week (Silliman, “Largest”).

This entwinement, and arguably alignment, of the sacred and the secular is not as incongruous as some may perceive it to be. It is consistent with the environment in which 93% of megachurches self-identify as politically conservative. It is consistent with Niebuhr’s description of Christianity, which would include its communication apparatus, as having devolved from transcending it environs to being guided by “economic and political forces” (265). It is consistent with the idea of the church, in contrast to the sect, being at home with, and being an integral part of, the social and political leadership of its environs. It is consistent with the entwinement of the Reformation era Catholic Church with the secular powers of the day. And it is also consistent with how the Protestant

Church as it grew, sought, and obtained support from the secular powers in enforcing the then new Protestant orthodoxy.

The modern-day communication entwinement and/or alignment of the sacred with the secular, whether it is real or only appears so, is not limited to the Protestants. It also appears to be taking place among the Catholics. For example, Eternal Word Television Network (“EWTN”) is the largest Catholic media network. And according to Mary Jo McConahay, author of *Playing God: American Catholic bishops and the far right*, the host of EWTN’s flagship show, *The World Over* with Raymond Arroyo, also serves as a guest host on Fox News (134). And according to the Fox News web site, Arroyo also serves as a co-host on the Fox News Channel subscription-based streaming service (Fox News).

Communication channels have grown exponentially since the Reformation era and their growth continues apace today. Yet even then, as now, there was a push to censor or restrict access to information and the communication of ideas. The most extreme of these efforts, although not often referred to as an effort to limit the communication of ideas, may have been the killing, by burning or otherwise, of so-called heretics by both Catholic and Protestant entities. And although both Catholics and Protestants burned books, the most infamous effort to restrict communications and the access to ideas through written media, may have been the Catholic Church’s Index of Forbidden Books. Although Pope Gelasius I may have issued the first index as early as 496 (Mchangama, *Free Speech: A History from Socrates to Social Media* 31), the Index of Forbidden Books was the responsibility of the Holy Office, which was created by the

Vatican to institute repression, censorship, and oversee the Inquisition (Ekelund 697-98). The Holy Office opened in 1559 (697) and it remained open until 1965 (698n17).

Robin Vose, Professor of History at St. Thomas University in Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada, and author of *The Index of Prohibited Books: Four Centuries of Struggle over Word and Image for the Greater Glory of God*, described the Index of Forbidden Books as an outgrowth of the Inquisition's mechanisms of intolerance (227-28). In a sense, given that description, the Index of Forbidden Books if not being reconstituted it is at least reflected, in the megachurch era effort of some Protestant churches and their proxies to ban books in schools and libraries. According to the American Library Association in 2022 there were more efforts/challenges to books than in the previous 21 years. Most of the challenged books were written by or about people of color or members of the LGBTQIA+ community (American Library Association "Record Book Bans in 2022"). And by the end of the third quarter of 2023, the number of challenged titles was more than 20% higher than the number challenged in the same reporting period in 2022 (American Library Association, "Releases Preliminary Data on 2023 Book Challenges").

The current effort to censor books may also be additional evidence of the switching of roles, or at least the behaviors, of the Catholic and the Protestant entities from the Reformation era through to the megachurch era. And the switch may reflect what may be the greater principal surrounding Niebuhr's idea that sects, over time, automatically become churches, which is that even in religion, as market dominance of a given actor evolves, the behavior of that actor in the market necessarily evolves based on their position in the market.

Which in turn raises the possibility, noted by Russell Moore, editor in chief of *Christianity Today*, and author of *Losing Our Religion*, that a market driven approach to religion leads to a market driven approach to truth. And that this approach has “left conservative Christianity in the hands of hypocrites and hucksters” (12). But things are not necessarily so dark. The other side of that possibility coin is that the megachurches and other entities are simply using secular channels to communicate their Christian worldview in the language and media of popular culture (Ellingson 27). Which would make sense given the oft stated goal of the megachurch is to reach the unchurched. It would then also follow that megachurches would strive to reach the unchurched, at least in part, through secular not sacred sources. Which would have the added advantage of increasingly the likelihood that the targeted audience would see themselves in the message, by their identification with the media through which the message is delivered. Nor are the possibilities necessarily so stark that they mandate one or the other. Both sides of the possibility coin may contain elements of truth, and with each megachurch or other religious entity it may be a matter of degree.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the megachurch and the Reformation era Catholic Church, in many ways the megachurch, has bent many of the traditional expectations. And as David Fowler, Chair, Department of Business Administration, Newberry College, has observed, the megachurch has also bent many of the rules of church behavior. For instance, beyond the messages that they send simply by the channels they choose to use, megachurches also communicate by what they intentionally do and don't do, by the symbols they use and don't use, by the historically sacred cultural norms they remove and by each culturally secular normative that they employ. This

begins in large part with a decision, whether *de facto* or *de jure*, to be or act as a non-denominational entity. Non-denominationalism reduces cultural expectations. Reduced cultural expectations reduces the performative anxieties that come with real or perceived behavioral standards. And the absence of real or perceived behavioral standards makes the non-denominational church feel less frightening and more welcoming. This, in contrast to the traditional church, is one example of how the megachurch prioritizes the needs of its members and potential members. This type of prioritization permeates the operational practices of the megachurch.

Megachurch services are generally high energy affairs more reminiscent of the classic revivals than of a traditional church service (Putnam 164). They are uplifting (Warf and Winsberg 36) technologically driven (Ellingson 21), including in the use of lights, music, and in-service messaging, and they are non-threatening, events (Warf and Winsberg 36). Combined with casual dress, the scarcity of traditional religious symbols, such as crosses, and their intentional appeal to youths (Fowler 219), the services can seem to be as “much a social event a spiritual one” (Warf and Winsberg 36). This is reinforced through small group memberships, food courts, shopping malls, swimming pools, and traditionally secular activities and clubs. In combination with a campus likely to look like a junior college, a shopping mall, or an office park, these attributes all serve to reinforce the message of the megachurch as a reassuring social space as much as, if not more than, a sacred space.

The prioritization of the social over the theological in recruitment, retention, and its public facing services, in addition to what Warf and Winsberg describe as a multi-denominational approach over theological purity (Warf and Winsberg 34-36),

distinguishes the megachurch from mainline churches. But it would be a step too far, given their evangelical foundation, commitment to biblical inerrancy, and their fervor, to say that as a general matter the social outweighs the sacred in the megachurch.

Although in many ways megachurches bend the traditional rules (Fowler 219), and their sustained growth trend since the 1970s is unprecedented, contextually, it is important to understand that organizationally megachurches and most of their defining attributes are not new. As Chaves notes, and as Katie Corcoran, Associate Professor - Sociology, West Virginia University, and author of *Megachurch: An American Original (Almost)*, notes, megachurches date as far back as the 19<sup>th</sup> and possibly the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Chaves 339- 340; Corcoran, 41-55; Eagle 601). And their predecessors exhibited many of the behavioral and structural characteristics, such as youth focus, cutting edge technology, professional and modern music, charismatic leadership, and non-sacred activities and facilities such as bowling alleys and swimming pools, associated with the modern-day megachurch (Carney 68-69; Eagle 590-601). Their predecessors also faced the same questions regarding the point at which modernity and appeals to the masses became theological heresy if not apostasy.

Yet, many churches have and are continuing to adopt the practices of the megachurches. But even if every old-line church adopted megachurch practices, every church could not turn into a megachurch, if only because the number of church-attending Christians do not exist to support such an outcome. Beyond that, research has shown that regardless of denomination affiliation, the dwindling number of churchgoers are “increasingly concentrated” in the largest churches of their denomination, which includes non-megachurches (Chaves 336). So, answering the oft asked question regarding what

the megachurches are doing differently would not tell us why churchgoers are increasingly concentrated in the largest churches of all sizes and denominations. This is not to say that observing megachurches would be of no benefit for churches looking to increase attendance, especially since, as we've noted, churches are chosen primarily by form and function. And some churches have adopted many of the megachurch practices, which serve to increase and further demonstrate the megachurch's continually growing influence.

Although our focus is on the megachurch through the prism of the Reformation era Catholic Church, there are operational and theological distinctions between the entities that are pertinent to this discussion. The overarching distinction being that operationally and theologically the Reformation era Catholic Church operated under the aegis of the state mandated orthodoxy. The megachurch lacks this authority, which is one reason why it undertakes culturally popular mass appeal efforts. But the continually increasing megachurch influence in combination with the potential use of state authority is the concern raised by this paper. At some point the level of megachurch influence could lead to megachurch hegemony which increases the possibility of mandated orthodoxy. Such mandated orthodoxy existed for the Catholic Church in the Reformation era, and it existed, arguably at a lower level, for the Protestant Churches under the mandate of "cuius regio eius religio," and it existed to some degree for the State supported churches in the infancy of the United States.

## Additional Concerns Raised by Megachurch Growth in the U.S.

Prior to the Reformation, the Catholic Church was the state supported monopolistic provider of religion. The Reformation fragmented the Catholic Church. And the power that once resided solely in the Catholic Church was decentralized and unequally spread among the many subsequently developed Protestant and non-protestant churches and communities. The continued growth of the megachurch is in many ways a reconcentration of the power that was redistributed, but not dissipated, upon the fragmentation of the Reformation era Catholic Church. Although the churches in the United States are generally not state supported, according to Warf and Winsberg, for most people the church is still the link in their social and political networks, and their most important civic organization (36). In addition to the fact that 93% of all megachurches identify themselves with labels associated with political conservatism (Bird and Thumma 10), it is of note that most megachurches are evangelical (Putnam 14). Most evangelicals worship in racially homogenous congregations (315). And racism is most pronounced among white evangelicals concentrated in the South (315), where 49% of all megachurches are located. Which stands in stark contrast to the Northeast where only 3% of megachurches are located (Bird and Thumma 27). These facts would seem to indicate that megachurch growth is not just a concentration of numbers, but a concentration of social, political, theological, and likely of a particular racial viewpoint. All of which, in toto, appears to support Putnam's point that the political and religious have become mutually reinforcing and now serve to exacerbate rather than attenuate divisions (82). These divisions are exacerbated by the hyper-divisive American political climate in which the megachurches now find themselves. But megachurches also



contribute to establishing the hyper-divisive American political climate by purposefully and publicly increasing the level of tension with their social and political environment.

Many megachurch leaders have become famous national and international media personalities, if not equivalent to the Vicar of Christ in Rome at least equivalent to that of a prince of the realm. And many megachurch leaders have the trappings of success, including bodyguards, chauffeured cars, and private jets. Most importantly, they have the highest levels of political access and influence. National and local political figures vie for the attention if not the endorsements of these megachurch leaders, which may in many ways be a zero-sum affair. Because as megachurch leaders gain access and influence, non-religious leaders, or even leaders of smaller churches, denominations, or those that may have different perspectives or beliefs, lose access and influence. This loss of access may be heightened in the current environment where 29% of Americans identify themselves as having no religious affiliation but according to the Pew Research Center, 88% of the 118<sup>th</sup> Congress self-identifies as Christian (Diamant).

In addition to their external influence, as the social, political, and theological becomes more entwined, the influence of the megachurch leader grows on the laity inside of the church. And it grows on those outside of the megachurch that agree with the political and social positions espoused by the megachurch leader. In part the growing influence of the megachurch leaders results from the issues at play not being purely or solely theological. If the issues were purely theological, most church members in the United States would be better positioned to read their Bibles and make their own decisions regarding the accuracy and consistency of the megachurch leader's expressions and positions with the biblical text. But because the issues are multifaceted, or are often

made to seem multifaceted, and deeply entwined with issues not written in the biblical text, the megachurch leader has more room to espouse extratextual meanings and to sanction or proscribe related behaviors and beliefs. So, essentially, meanings and behaviors are imposed from without by the megachurch leader, not internally derived from individual interpretation of a common biblical text. This too is reminiscent of the power of the Reformation era Catholic Church leaders. At that time most of the laity could not read Latin, which was the language of the Catholic Church (Ferrero 290). And most Catholic Church services were conducted in Latin (Cantoni 2049). So, the state supported Catholic Church, was the mediator between God and man, and was also the entity that set political, social, cultural, and theological norms for the church members and society. Yet, the megachurch has the potential for even more power than the Catholic Church of the reformation era because the Catholic Church was in many ways maintaining orthodoxy. Whereas the megachurch is creating its own brand of orthodoxy, changing norms, and successfully using its political influence to implement its orthodoxy into the political and social system through its proxies. Additionally, the beliefs, behaviors, educational tools, and systems, as well as the worship practices of the megachurch, are being adopted by churches seeking to compete with the megachurch (Ellingson 26). And other would-be competitors are closing their doors or are merging with a megachurch (Bird and Thumma 7), all of which serves to increase the influence, presence, and power of the megachurch.

As megachurches continue to grow, in size and influence, one potential consequence is that megachurch growth will reduce the number of touchpoints politicians must reach, as well as the diversity of concerns politicians must address, to obtain and

maintain religious legitimacy. A derivative concern is that as the importance of the megachurch as the source of legitimacy grows, other entities will matter less as a source of legitimacy. This is also analogous to the Reformation era. And assuming continued megachurch growth, this would be equal to the Reformation era, during which the Catholic Church was the sole religious provider of political legitimacy. Generally, political endorsements are accompanied by an expressed or implied *quid pro quo* in which the candidate agrees to support the interests of the endorser, or the endorser believes the candidate will behave in some identified manner. According to Davide Cantoni, Professor of Economics, University of Munich, during the pre-Reformation era the Catholic Church was able to obtain tax exemptions, resource controls and political power in exchange for providing legitimacy (Cantoni 2039). Given the range of legal and political benefits afforded churches and other nonprofit entities covered under Section 501c3 of the U.S. tax code, modern day exchange costs are likely to be more specific to the particular megachurch, and or support of its desired legislation. Which means that the megachurch theological/political agenda could continue to grow in influence. Such continued growth has the potential to gain a similar level of influence and embeddedness into the societal norms as the Reformation era Catholic Church theology was embedded into the societal norms of the Reformation era. There is also the risk that the theologically driven social norms will become the dominant societal norms that politicians strive to implement and protect, and that the megachurch and its leaders, receive heightened and/or unequal levels of political access and power.

Given the overwhelming self-identification of the megachurch with the U.S. political right, should the megachurch be in the position to coerce, or impose, adherence

to its beliefs, the risk for those of different theological and political beliefs, is that freedom of religion, and the separation of church and state may exist *de jure* but not *de facto*. The danger, should this become a reality, is not simply to the Christian church, but to the larger U.S. body politic as local and national political leaders become surrogates for the megachurch's political cause. This may also have an international impact due to the types of administrations voted into office, the policies those administrations may seek to promulgate, as well as the tone and tenor of the relationships between the U.S. and other countries.

Although the Reformation era Catholic Church is the prism we are using, history has shown that the problem is not the religious belief, but intolerance supported by the misuse of hegemonic power under the aegis of the state. For example, the Declaration of Religious Freedom, approved by the Second Vatican Council, renounced the duty of Catholic-led states to serve as the secular arm of God, to impose Catholic beliefs, and to repress other religious groups seeking to disseminate their own beliefs (Greenberg 461). These are examples of the types of behaviors that raise concerns, that have occurred, could occur again, and identify potential consequences should the megachurch accede to similar positions of power.

## Chapter IV.

### The Megachurch and the Denominations

Religion, according to *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics*, “is expressed through affiliation with a local church, a specific denomination, or a religious tradition” (Smidt 10). And the denomination, an overarching theological and operational entity for affiliated congregations, has historically been the most socially dominant form of religious expression in the United States. According to Russell E. Richey, Dean Emeritus, William R. Cannon Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Church History, Candler School of Theology, Emory University, the denomination likely “draws more heavily on culture and society” than other religious entities (202). Richey describes the denomination as a social form, much like a political party, that traditionally exists in an environment of religious and denominational pluralism (200). Yet, as some scholars, such as Mark Sedgwick, Professor of Arab and Islamic Studies, Aarhus University, Denmark, have noted, while a denomination could indeed be one among many, such as the modern-day Catholic Church in the United States, it could also constitute the whole, such as the Catholic Church in 17<sup>th</sup> century Spain (166).

A brief history of denominations in the United States will help us contextualize and potentially identify patterns helpful to understanding their role, and that of the megachurch, in the United States today. Mark Ward, Sr., Professor of Communication, University of Houston-Victoria, Victoria, Texas, has observed that in the days of the English colonies, religion followed the form of the disparate mother countries. But even

this “unity” was further fragmented in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century by the revivals of the First Great Awakening. As the revival meetings of the time were often conducted by itinerant preachers outside of establishment channels, the revivals created alternative religious settings, structures, and a type of evangelicalism that emphasized “personal religious experience and piety” (119). The emphasis on personal religious experience, and the shifting of power between the pew and the pulpit, that Ward cites as the democratization of American Christianity (119), was an unprecedented transfiguration that reshaped and continues to impact organized religion. And as conflict is the handmaiden of democracy, routinized conflict may have become the unintended consequence, the fault line, and ultimately the most public and political face of Protestant religion in the United States.

Ward notes that the subsequent ratification of the Constitution was accompanied by disestablishment of the state churches (although this was not immediate in all states). And this was followed by the explosive growth of what were the Baptists and Methodists sects, with their promotion of the use of lay clergy and a call for active faith on the part of believers. One way such active faith manifested itself was in the form of voluntary societies, created, operated, and supported outside the aegis of established church channels. Many of the activities that denominations subsequently became known for, including foreign and home missions, development and distribution of religious education materials, Bible printing and distribution, Sunday schools, and social activism, were originally performed by the voluntary societies. But during the economic depression of the 1830s these roles began shifting from being supported by individuals and operated by voluntary societies, to being supported and operated by the Protestant denominations. And of these bodies, those that subsequently became known as mainstream Protestant

denominations prospered well into the 1950s. But as Americans became more physically, organizationally, and denominationally mobile, denominations began to lose their preeminence (120-21).

Richey, addressing the loss of Protestant denomination preeminence, notes that the term “disestablishment,” used to describe the change in church-state relations during the Revolutionary era, is the same term used to describe the change in status of the mainstream denominations (200). But he questioned the equivalency of the events. As whereas the disestablished state supported church did cease to exist, the death of the denomination is less certain. Richey suggests consideration of whether the “slippage” of denominations is less an existential crisis and more of a process. Essentially, a reconfiguration, of the kind that the denomination has undergone in taking on different forms throughout its existence (201). A consideration that is germane to our understanding of the current and future role of the megachurch.

In discussing the causes for “slippage” of the mainline denominations, Richey attributes it to internal and contextual factors (200). Richey does not define what he means by contextual factors. But Iannaccone defines contextual factors as “the demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the communities surrounding a church” (Iannaccone, “Reassessing Church Growth” 198). A significant part of the internal factors that Richey identifies can be summarized as transcendent struggles between liberal and conservative coalitions. In transcending denominational and religious boundaries, according to Richey, these struggles appear to be a part of the larger societal cultural conflicts (199-200).

The liberal conservative divide, and the transcendent struggles Richey identifies as evident in the disestablishment of mainline denominations, are neither unusual nor endemic to the specific events. An objective observer can choose to trace the liberal conservative divide to several distinct periods or events in the history of the United States. Robert Wuthnow, Professor of Sociology Emeritus, Princeton University former chair of the Department of Sociology and Director of the Princeton University Center for the Study of Religion, identifies the activism and protests of the 1960s and early 1970s as one distinctive point of division, and the evangelical movement that began in the 1940s as another (227). For our purposes, because of the present-day impact of its aftermath, the 1925 Scopes “Monkey” trial is an apt, liberal conservative point of division.

By way of context, as K. L. Marshall, New College, University of Edinburgh, explained, evangelicalism dates to the Great Awakening (133). And though distinct, fundamentalism is a subset of evangelicalism. The term “fundamentalist” was derived from *The Fundamentals*, a series of early 20<sup>th</sup> century essays supporting the reputed fundamentals of the Christian faith. And by the time of the Scopes trial, fundamentalists were known for their militancy, and willingness to fight, on behalf of their beliefs. Analogous to how modern-day fundamentalists groups are known for militancy on behalf of their beliefs. Belief in the fundamentals crosses denominational boundaries. And although the fundamentalists won the Scopes trial, in support of the law prohibiting the teaching of evolution, the general standing of fundamentalists in public opinion at that time suffered a setback as a result. And in the aftermath of the trial, the fundamentalists turned further inward, and focused on furthering the development of their own networks of churches and Bible institutes (133). According to James W. Fraser, Professor of



history and education and the chair of the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences in the Professions at New York University's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development, in response to this setback, fundamentalists retreated from the national stage, and avoided the national spotlight, but grew in local churches and through evangelists (125). They also built and established their own networks, Bible institutes, conferences, mission societies and publishing houses. And through that process, as Ward explains it, evangelicals rejected the denominations and reverted to the voluntary societies (121).

This reversion to the voluntary society model was an important change with long-lasting consequences. As we have discussed, prior to the Scopes trial there had been numerous shifts of power between the pews and the pulpits throughout the history of the denomination. But the post-Scopes shift was unique in that the other shifts were internal, and the power was retained within the denomination by either the pew or the pulpit. Whereas post-Scopes, an entire cohort of believers, willing to fight for their beliefs, left the denomination and set up competing institutions. So, instead of shifting power within the denomination, the post-Scopes shift removed power from the denominational pew, and from the denominational pulpit. Although the shift was unique, it was analogous to the shifting of power from the voluntary societies to the denominations in the 1830s, after which the denominations thrived for over 100 years. Whether the shift of power from the mainstream denominations to the fundamentalists, which for inclusivity's sake we will refer to as the conservative evangelicals, will thrive for over 100 years, as the denominations did, remains to be seen.

## Chapter V.

### Megachurch Behaviors and Distinctions

According to Ward, denominations reached their peak in the 1950s (120). At the end of the 1950s, as noted by authors Roger Finke, Professor of Sociology and Religious studies at the Pennsylvania State University, and Rodney Stark, University Professor of the Social Sciences at Baylor University, in *The Churching of America 1776-2005*, according to the outgoing president of the National Council of Churches, there were 258 denominations. And 80% of the members belonged to the largest twenty-four denominations (197). The 1960s is often identified as the beginning of the decline of denominations. But, according to Finke and Stark, it would be more accurate to say that the decline of denominations became more noticeable in the 1960s (245-47). Nonetheless, what did happen in the 1960s, was that the group that Finke and Stark refer to as the evangelical group, experienced explosive growth (247). This aligns well with what we've discussed regarding the growth of the megachurch. There were approximately 50 megachurches in 1970 (Ellingson 591), and approximately 1,750 in 2020 (Bird and Thumma 2). It can be difficult to extrapolate comparative meaning from the denomination and megachurch numbers. But it helps to understand that most megachurches operate as nondenominational entities (Ellingson 18). And according to the 2020 U.S. Religion Census, if nondenominational were a denomination it would be the largest protestant denomination (Silliman, "Nondenominational"). Additionally, as Putnam has pointed out, the "typical megachurch is both evangelical and nondenominational" (14). In short, the megachurch is now the biggest and fastest growing kid, on the denomination block.

Because most megachurches operate as nondenominational entities, as Ruhr and Daniels explain, even those that belong to a denomination do not emphasize the denominational relationship (473), because denominations can serve as, or at least feel like, a bar to entry for outsiders (477). Yet, Ellingson posits that megachurches may be reshaping the denominational system by creating quasi-denominations (26-27). And, as a practical matter, megachurches have taken on many of the roles traditionally served by denominations. Roles such as serving as resource hubs for ministers, ministry models, worship models, worship music, evangelism conferences, study guides, leadership training and leadership development (18-27).

The denomination is an overarching collective entity. And the megachurch, notwithstanding its size, is an individual congregation. Although this too is evolving as more megachurches continue to open additional campuses. Still, it is helpful to examine the megachurch in the context of a traditional denominational congregation. Megachurches often appear different in form, and function differently, than mainline churches. This matters because, to start, doctrine is, or at least was, presumably the “*raison d’etre*” undergirding denominational separation and distinction. But according to Ruhr and Daniels, churches are now chosen primarily by form and function instead of doctrine (475). So not only are denominational identities no longer important to most Protestants, but even denomination members do not see a significant theological difference between the denominations (Wuthnow 226). All of which has served to essentially nullify what may have traditionally been a denominational strength. And leaves form and function with an even more heightened level of importance.

Unlike traditional churches, most megachurch facilities often include multipurpose buildings, shopping areas, coffee shops, bookstores, advanced audio-visual capabilities, and television centers, as well as conference centers (Eagle 590-601; Ellingson 18-20; Ruhr and Daniels 473). Megachurches often look more like a college campus, an office park, or a mall, than a traditional church. Inside the worship areas, few of the traditional accoutrements or symbols of Christianity are immediately evident. The music is more likely to be from a band than an organ. The words to the songs are found scrolling across the screens around the stage rather than in a hymnal. And the dress is casual. Each of these characteristics is intentional, and each is designed to make the religious experience take place in a comfortable and familiar setting (Ellingson 16-21). One purpose for ensuring the sense of comfort and familiarity is to attract the unchurched, which are people who were not previous attenders of churches (20). Churches that focus on the unchurched are often referred to as “seeker” (17-20) or “seeker-sensitive” (Putnam 55) churches. They prioritize evangelism, and experiment with worship styles, religious ideas, and even the architectural environment, to attract the unchurched. Some megachurches even hold separate “seeker” and “believer” services (Ruhr and Daniels 478). They also craft their messages to meet the needs of their audience, or as Warf and Winsberg explain it, they are more oriented to member’s needs than strict theological messaging (34). Their messages are designed to uplift listeners and to address their immediate life issues (36). Notwithstanding their focus on attracting the unchurched, megachurches do so while maintaining the tension between insiders and outsiders that makes belonging feel special (Ellingson 24). This sense of difference among megachurch members, and separation from those outside of the church, is

important as it heightens the sense of belonging and makes the church what Warf and Winsberg refer to as moral community in a secular society (37).

Even megachurches that are not seeker or seeker-sensitive make use of well-staged lighting, camera angles, sight lines, electronic and rock music, as well as casual dress, which makes attendance more a welcoming social event than a trip to church (Warf and Winsberg 47-48). Megachurches engage in high levels of recruitment and evangelizing (Ruhr and Daniels 473; Warf and Winsberg 37). And they maximize the use of small groups within the larger church body, to foster fellowship, to nurture, to develop secular and religious programs that more deeply incorporate participants into the church, and to thicken social networks (Ellingson 19; Putnam 164; Ruhr 481). This essentially bundles the secular activities within the church group activities. Which, according to Ruhr and Daniels, creates a complementary relationship instead of a competitive relationship between the secular and the religious (481). And it empowers attendees to choose from a wider range of activities through which they engage with the church, and the act of choosing drives commitment to the church, which in turn facilitates church growth (Ruhr and Daniels 482).

Warf and Winsberg posit that the continued growth of megachurches leans toward the potential oligopolization of religious services, which will have social and economic consequences (48). This potential for these social and economic consequences to manifest is heightened as traditional denominations or individual congregations attempt to retain or capture shares of the religious marketplace, by knowingly or unwittingly adopting the methodologies of the megachurch. And even if through this process, the traditional denomination or individual congregation is successful in their effort to retain

or capture shares of the religious marketplace, they will have effectively furthered the megachurch's brand of orthodoxy. For example, according to the authors of "Bigger, Better, Louder," Kate Bowler, Associate Professor of American Religious History, Duke University, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and Wen Reagan Director of Music and Worship at Blacknall Presbyterian Church, Durham, North Carolina, megachurches have generally set a higher standard for musical entertainment. This has included professionalizing all aspects of musical production (197). And through the 1980s and the 1990s, megachurch pastors began partnering with musical collaborators to craft services that "would attract and hold members" (193). The resulting rock concert effect, of large audiences, huge repetitive television exposure, and a ready market of consumers, has led to a series of hit recordings. The Christian Copyright Licensing International, created in 1988, provides copyright licenses that allows churches to perform these hit recordings which are well known to the Christians audience, and to show the words on the screen during services. In purchasing these rights, the denomination or individual congregation is feeding the revenue stream, through the licensing agency, to the artist. And in those instances where the artist is an employee of the megachurch, the megachurch also gets a part of the revenue stream (197-202). So, the denomination or individual congregation trying to attract and retain members through playing popular Christian songs, in a manner that their members regularly see on television, may be unwittingly bringing the megachurch norms into their church, and providing additional streams of income to the megachurch.

## Chapter VI.

### The Megachurch through the Lens of the Traditional Typology Sect

Through the lens of traditional church-sect typology, sects are voluntary associations into which a person must be accepted, most likely after demonstrating a prerequisite of having undergone a particular religious experience (Niebuhr 17-18). Joining a megachurch, generally requires a person to confess that they have, in accordance with the biblical Book of Romans, Chapter 10 verse 9, confessed Jesus as Lord and believe that God has raised him from the dead. But there is no other “demonstration” or proof required. Usually, a person who did not profess to confessing Jesus as Lord prior to the invitation to join the Church, will be asked to echo the words of whoever is giving the invitation, thereby becomes “saved” and then joins the Church immediately afterwards. Those who are already saved, or claim to be so, can often join the Church at the end of the service, along with those who have just been saved. And generally, there are no additional requirements regarding maintaining the membership.

So, it appears reasonable to say that the megachurch generally “employs purely formalized procedures of admission; breadth and tolerance are emphasized; since membership is laxly enrolled, [and that] expulsion is not a common device for dealing with the apathetic and the wayward” (Wilson 4). But as apt as this description appears in describing the megachurch, Wilson did not make this statement in describing the megachurch. He made the statement in describing the denomination. But its applicability to both the denomination and the megachurch reinforces the point that the megachurch is not exclusive as is the traditional sect. In fact, the megachurch is intentional in striving to

be numerically inclusive. This is demonstrated in the effort of the megachurch to seek, attract, and retain the unchurched (Ellingson 20; Ruhr and Daniels 478), a demographic that is unlikely to have previously had a particular religious experience.

On the surface, the behavior of the megachurch, assuming that it was once a sect, would seem to support Niebuhr's theory that sects inevitably evolve into churches. The intentional inclusivity of the megachurch is inconsistent with the Troeltsch typology sect. The level of screening for megachurch membership is low, as is its evaluation of the behavior of its members for retention or expulsion, both of which are inconsistent with the traditional sect. Nor does the megachurch strive for isolation, which is also inconsistent with the traditional sect. In fact, the growth of the megachurch has been continuous and numerically significant (Finke and Stark 247; Warf and Winsberg 48). And the megachurch has been successful in having its theological beliefs adopted as social and political environmental norms. Along with the continued growth of its political influence, the behavioral characteristics of the megachurch appear to be more indicative of an entity striving for societal domination than an entity striving for societal isolation.

The domination-seeking behavioral tendencies of the megachurch are inconsistent with the isolationist tendencies ascribed to the sect by Troeltsch. But they are not inconsistent with the observation by Johnson, that the social ethic of the sect may be to "radically to reform the existing social order" (Johnson, "Critical" 88). And because of the political power that the megachurch has amassed, its political conservatism, and its consistent support for one political party over the other, the megachurch may be a beacon for certain population groups that feel dispossessed of social or political power and would like to reform the social order as they see it.



As early as 1910, John Gillin, 16<sup>th</sup> President of the American Sociological Association, spoke of the impact of great societal change on the facilitation of sect development (238). Wilson spoke in a similar vein. As he explains it, social change, dislocation, and insecurity are stimuli for the emergence of sects (8). And the timing of the increased pace of social change in the United States, aligns with the growth of the megachurch in the United States.

Change is a constant in the modern world, especially as the rate of technological change increases exponentially. But the United States is undergoing a period of rapid social change and shifts maybe not seen since the post-civil war reconstruction era. According to a University of Pennsylvania study, there is an ongoing shift in which the historically socially dominant, and numerically majority, group in the United States is becoming a numerically minority group. This outcome, in addition to shifting societal norms, can be perceived as a group threat. But this group may be finding common cause with another demographic in the megachurch that is feeling dispossessed. According to Rosemary L. Al-Kire, postdoctoral researcher in Social Perceptions and Intergroup Attitudes Lab, Washington University, Christianity will likely be a minority religion in the United States by mid-century (1). That knowledge of this shift in status leads to perceptions of threat among American Christians. And that the perceived threat is associated with increased political conservatism (1).

As it pertains to the megachurch, the larger cohort of its members may feel threatened by the pending shift to becoming a minority religion. And members of the historically dominant religion, who are also members of the historically socially dominant and numerically majority group, can feel individually and collectively that they

are victims, unfairly being disposed of power. Which, among other things, increases conservatism, increases group identity, and increases negativity toward outgroups. The negativity towards outgroups is a challenge to the professed, or maybe even idealized, inclusivity of the megachurch. Be that as it may, 93% of the megachurches in the United States describe themselves in terms that align with political conservatism. And political conservatism in the United States, especially as it relates to negativity toward outgroups, has historically had a strong racial component. And as a practical matter, this racial animus would exist in addition to the racial divide that already exists among churches in the United States. Nonetheless, negativity towards outgroups is consistent with the sect typology.

In fact, the megachurch demonstrates this and other behaviors that are consistent with the traditional Troeltsch and the Niebuhr sect typology. And these consistencies would seem to support Wilson's argument that some sects do retain their sect-like distinctiveness. Recall that according to Niebuhr, churches emphasize the universality of the gospel, whereas sects emphasize ethical responsibility of the individual (17-18). The megachurch also emphasizes personal ethical responsibility. And as does the sect, the megachurch defines itself theologically. But unlike the sect that isolates itself from the larger environment, the megachurch often also defines personal ethics politically, because, according to Ward, American Evangelicals see political activity as religious activity (123).

Although the theological essence of the megachurch is the individual relationship with Christ, there are consequences of seeing political activity as religious activity. Before political activity and religious activity were conflated, the theological could serve

as a boundary for the extremes of the political. Once the two are conflated, the theological no longer serves as a boundary but as a justification for the extremes of political activity. In short, the boundary power of theology is reduced if not lost, and potentially serves as an accelerant where it once served as a deterrent. Another consequence of seeing political activity as religious activity is that the megachurch itself and membership within the collective takes on heightened importance. This goes beyond the theological and unto the social meanings and the real or perceived social value that inure to insiders. It also includes the sense of theologically justified denigration of outsiders, and the support for all political activity under the banner of theological beliefs or even perceived truths. Which in combination, leaves little room for independent analysis. Leaving political disagreement prey for being perceived or described as theological heresy. This conflation of the theological and the political, as well as the consequences of the conflation, is analogous to the beliefs and behaviors of the Reformation era Catholic Church.

Also consistent with the traditional sect typology is the idea of the megachurch being the church of the dispossessed. This is undergirded by the megachurch claim that the larger social environment in the United States is hostile or repressive. And to the extent megachurch members and potential members believe this claim, it serves its purpose. Whether or not the claim is true is irrelevant to whether the group feels dispossessed. The claim exacerbates, and to some it justifies, the sense of victimhood among members and potential members. It gives credence to the idea of the megachurch being the church of the dispossessed. And it enables the megachurch, and the traditional sect sized entities that want to become megachurches, to use the external environment as

a foil to establish or emphasize difference, and to maintain or heighten tension.

Difference and victimhood are used as rallying cries and as recruitment tools.

One example of this is FloodGate Church in Brighton, Michigan. Approximately a week prior to Easter 2020, Bill Bolin, the pastor of FloodGate Church, announced that he would continue to hold services in contravention of Michigan's COVID-19 shutdown orders. According to Tim Alberta, a reporter for *The Atlantic*, for the 10 years preceding this announcement FloodGate Church had an average Sunday morning attendance of about 100 people. But this announcement drew politicians and activists to the FloodGate pulpit. And by Easter 2021, FloodGate had 1,500 people in attendance each weekend. As Bolin expressed in an interview with Alberta "If you're not taking a side, you're on the wrong side" (Alberta).

Whether by presenting itself as being under attack by political forces, claiming that the larger social environment in the United States is repressive, or otherwise, the megachurch is intentional in maintaining tension with the environment. Recall that Johnson proposed using tension with the environment as the single variable of measurement, in which the sect rejects the social environment, and the church accepts the social environment (Johnson, "Church and Sect" 543). Although this approach may support a given answer, it doesn't resolve the issue of whether irrespective of organization size, tension with the environment equates to sectarian status. Because at times even some denominations seek to increase tension with the environment. For example, in 2023 the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Protestant denomination in the United States, expelled at least five churches, including the renowned Saddleback Church, Lake Forest, CA, because they had female pastors. And as reported by Elizabeth

Dias and Ruth Graham of the New York Times, the Southern Baptist Convention also passed an amendment to its constitution restricting the position of pastors to men (Dias and Graham). As to whether this was done with an eye toward the external environment, Pastor Mike Law, author of the proposed amendment, said that having women pastors would lead to “acceptance of gay, lesbian and transgender pastors”, and result in the Southern Baptist Convention becoming like other declining mainline denominations (Wingfield).

In any event, if the degree of tension is the determining factor, then given the size and influence of the megachurch, the adoption of some portion of megachurch theology as general societal rules, and the pandering of the political elite to the megachurch, it seems reasonable to view the megachurch less as a sect and more as a church.

It seems unlikely that sects in repressive environments would experience the sustained and public growth that the megachurch has undergone. But if the environment in the United States is repressive, it has not stopped the evolution of the megachurch, notwithstanding its sect like origins, from developing church like characteristics. These characteristics which include its level of political influence, the depth and breadth of its societal relationships, and its influence on the social political environment in which it operates, even if only because of its size, all of which are inconsistent with the Troeltsch typology sect. And these characteristics, in conjunction with the successful and ongoing efforts of the megachurch, and its political allies, to impose its professed theological doctrines, are analogous to the social and political power of the Reformation era Catholic Church.

The megachurch is also incompatible with Niebuhr's description of the sect as a minority group separated from the world. The influence of the megachurch in U.S. presidential primaries, and its influence in the passage of laws, and having its views serving as benchmark in hearings evaluating candidates for the U.S. Supreme Court, are indicia of its entwinement with, and its influence on, the world. In fact, the megachurch may be the manifestation of the result that follows the level of influence by a sect on its environment that Johnson doubted would ever happen. Johnson argued that the influence of the sect and the environment was reciprocal, noting that sects "may compromise the world by making an impact on it" ("Church and Sect Revisited" 129). And he further argued that if a sect could remold its environment according to its own blueprint, then it would no longer be a sect but at least a "prominent aspect" of the dominant culture. Although Johnson found this outcome unlikely (Johnson, "Church and Sect Revisited" 130). Yet, it seems reasonable to say that the megachurch is at least a prominent aspect of the social political environment in the United States. The megachurch has in large part shaped the social political discussion, and arguably has in significant part helped to define the social political environment, as did the Reformation era Catholic Church. Consequently, the megachurch is arguably no longer a minority group in terms of influence, even if they may be a minority group numerically.

Reasonable minds may differ on the extent to which the influence of the megachurch on American laws, and presidential election primaries, could also be attributed, in some part, to other groups or factors. But few, at this stage, should doubt that Christianity and the environment have reciprocally influenced each other. For example, Christianity started as a sect, and by the Reformation era, Christianity in the

form of the Catholic Church was the dominant social political force throughout Western civilization. So, the idea of a sect influencing a society to the point of dominance may be rare, but not unprecedented. Similarly, the influence of the megachurch is reflected in the form of the conservative political and theological beliefs that have become a part of the larger societal norms, as is represented by and through the megachurch and its supporters.

The growth and the impact of the influence of the megachurch does not negate the fact that the influences between the megachurch and society have been, and continue to be, reciprocal. Although the megachurch is no longer a sect striving for survival. The megachurch has, using its evangelical origins as a baseline, changed in a manner that has loosened its original tension with its larger social environs. From the 1920s through the 1960s evangelical congregations and denominations were known for their strict, separatist lifestyles. But by the 1980s most of the strict, separatist behaviors identified with fundamentalist evangelical Christians were ignored, diminished, or abolished (Iannaccone, "Faith" 1027). Those changes placed the behaviors of evangelical Christians more in alignment with the general beliefs and mores of the larger society. And thereby loosened the tensions between evangelicals and the larger society. Those shifts to more mainstream norms reflected the influence of the larger society on the evangelicals, and on what is now the megachurch. Additionally, the loosening of tensions also enabled the megachurch to gain a broader range of influence on the larger society. The changes allowed the megachurch to fit into the broader community more easily, which facilitated its ability to hold the position of power and influence that it currently holds in the United States.

There are additional characteristics of the megachurch that seem incompatible with being a sect. For instance, the ability of the megachurch to bestow national political legitimacy is beyond the scope of a Troeltsch or Niebuhr type sect. And the idea of the political elite protecting and promoting the theology of a sect, as it does the megachurch, is inconsistent with the sect being a minority group, separated from the majority physically and theologically. Although the quid pro quo exchange of legitimacy bestowed and protection et al provided is a long-standing norm.

Davide Cantoni, in a study of the economic effects of religious competition, discussed the millennia long history of exchange between secular and religious entities for political legitimacy. The traditional quid pro quo for the religious entity's endorsement is the secular entity's endorsement and protection of the religious entity's theology. But, not incidentally, even in Cantoni's study, the religious entity is referred to as a church, not as a sect. And that is consistent with the idea that this type of exchange is beyond that of a traditional sect. Yet, notwithstanding the disjunctive appearance of the pairing, there are sects outside of United States with high levels of political power but are still denominated as sects. One example, is the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox Jewish community.

According to Eli Berman, Professor of Economics, UCSD; Research Director, UC Inst. on Global Conflict & Cooperation, Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Jews has essentially had "veto power over public policy for more than two decades" (907). But they also retain many of the characteristics of the traditional Troeltsch Weberian sect. The practices of Israel's Ultra-Orthodox Jews are more stringent and time intensive than the practices of traditional Judaism. But counter to Niebuhr's theory on the inevitability of the sect's evolution into a denomination, the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox community's religious practice



increasingly becomes more stringent with each generation (907). Their distinct physical appearance and their dress identifies them as members of the Ultra-Orthodox community. Deviations from the community's norms are little tolerated and can result in ostracism (910). Social isolation is a norm. Not just from the general population, but also from other generally expected norms such as television, modern literature, and sports. It also extends to isolation, or at least reduction to the extent possible, from the larger Jewish community (911). The average male remains in the Ultra-Orthodox community yeshivas until the age of 40 (908). And most of the families with fathers in the Ultra-Orthodox community yeshivas live in poverty (943).

Yet, this community with most of the accoutrements of a sect, from behaviors to relative poverty levels, has held “disproportionate” political influence in Israel since the late 1970s. They are the swing voting block on the right and on the left. And their political influence has led to government policies and financial assistance for their Ultra-Orthodox schools, and reduced tax burdens and health costs specifically for their community. Their influence has also resulted in increased government funding for programs in which they disproportionately benefit (912). And their political agenda includes having their Ultra-Orthodox beliefs incorporated into Israeli law (913). For example, according to an article in the New York Times, as part of the agreement forming a coalition government with the Ultra-Orthodox parties, the Israeli Prime Minister agreed to a proposal that, among other things, would segregate seating by sex at publicly funded shows and concerts. Another pending proposal from the coalition government is to increase the power of the Orthodox rabbinical court. The court, which

has only male judges, has jurisdiction over the divorce of Jews in Israel, and gives only men the power to formally dissolve a marriage (Rabin).

In juxtaposition, it appears that the sect like characteristics of the megachurch are less pronounced than those of the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox community. The direct benefits emanating to the megachurch from their political influence, appears to be less pronounced than those that emanate to the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox community. And compared to the Ultra-Orthodox community, the political influence of the megachurch appears to be less broadly based, as the benefit of their influence appears to be drawn primarily from one side of the U.S. political aisle. But the Ultra-Orthodox community does demonstrate that it is possible to be a sect and have the level of political influence that the megachurch currently has. But it remains to be seen whether the megachurch can achieve the level of influence that the Israeli Ultra-Orthodox community has achieved and retained for more than two decades. Nonetheless, however the megachurch is defined, whether as a sect, a church, a denomination, or otherwise, the potential social political power of the megachurch is significant. As was the actual social political power of the Reformation era Catholic Church.

The megachurch retains many attributes of the Troeltsch Niebuhr typology sect. But the widespread influence of the megachurch pushes against Troeltsch's delineation of the sect as an independent sociological type of Christian thought. There is alignment between the idea of an "independent type of Christian thought" and tension with the environment. But as the megachurch becomes more of a thought leader and trendsetter, the less its thoughts and behaviors remain an "independent sociological type of Christian thought" and the less tension there is with the environment. It may be that what was once

the independent sociological type of Christian thought of the megachurch, is now the dominant thought as reflected in the breadth of the impact of the megachurch. This begs the question, which is beyond the scope of this paper but worthy of further research, of whether the megachurch and the mainline denominations have switched roles, making the mainline denominations the new sects.

## Chapter VII.

### The Megachurch through the Lens of the Traditional Typology Church

Many of the church-like characteristics of the megachurch were addressed in the examination of the megachurch as a sect. But there remain other church-like characteristics of the megachurch to be examined. And those characteristics may help us to understand not just the “what” of the megachurch, but to some degree ultimately why they matter.

We’ve already recognized that the megachurch is less restrictive in its admission and retention standards and processes than the traditional typology sect. But even beyond that, the formulaic, routinized, and intentionally inclusive admission policies and procedures of the megachurch fit within Niebuhr’s description of churches as social groups into which people are accepted, much like the way they are accepted into the family into which they are born (Niebuhr 17-18). Whereas sects require some religious or cultural experience, the megachurch does all that it can to ensure that as little theological or cultural capital as possible is required. And strives to eliminate as many real or perceived barriers to entry as possible (Wellman, “God is Like a Drug” 654-59). Furthermore, as Ruhr and Daniels explain in their paper examining megachurch growth, some megachurches not only require little, but go so far as to subsidize attendance and participation in various secular group activities to increase the likelihood of increased commitment (481-89).

Niebuhr also describes the church as being closely aligned with the society in which it exists and with its ethos (18-19). The megachurch is dual natured in this regard.

It aligns with society, and it rejects society, as necessary and to the degree necessary, to obtain its goals. The acceptance and rejection of society is often referred to in terms of tension with the environment. The megachurch uses the heightening and lowering of tension with the environment as a strategic tool. Tension may be reduced in one area even as tension is increased in another area.

The megachurch rejects society as a foundational part of its brand (“in the world but not of the world”). It rejects society to the extent that the societal norms and the expressed norms of the megachurch are not naturally aligned. And it rejects society in the form of intentionally induced tension to achieve its goals. The megachurch accepts or aligns with the larger society by using familiar musical styles, comfortably familiar non-church like physical surroundings, and everyday comfortable dress. It does this not only to align with society, but also to reduce tension to the greatest extent possible, in support of its effort to attract and retain members. The megachurch also not only aligns with society, as necessary, but intentionally influences its larger social environment through its support of state and national political outcomes, political parties, and particular political candidates. In fact, as we’ve discussed, the megachurch views political activity as theological activity. Warf and Winsberg argue that megachurches are not only one of the most important components of U.S. politics, but also that the very governance of the megachurch aligns with conservative social and political ethos (38). This all fits well within Niebuhr’s description of the church.

On its face, the depth of the megachurch’s entwinement with the larger society, and its conflation of the theological and the political can appear inconsistent with its professed posture of being separate from the world. But this behavior is consistent with

and reflects the megachurch's strategic approach to rejecting or accepting the social environment as best suits its purposes. Which would seem to make the megachurch at least as much a political entity as a theological entity. And this is the intellectual and theological gulf that the megachurch attempts to straddle. It is the gulf between the sectarian ideal of separation from the environment that it professes, and the secular conflation of the political and the theological that it demonstrates. It may be, as Alberta expressed, that evangelicalism itself, has "morph{ed} from a spiritual disposition into a political identity" (Alberta). In which case the behaviors of the megachurch may merely be reflective of that change.

In an apt description of the megachurch, made long before the development of the modern megachurch, Troeltsch posited that the Church utilizes the state, as well as the ruling classes, to become an integral part of the existing social order (331-343). Similarly, the megachurch, through its political influence, uses the political elite and the state to introduce legislation and to pass laws consistent with the professed views of the megachurch. And as a vied for source of political legitimacy, the very presence of the megachurch can force politicians, even those not ostensibly subject to the direct pressure or influence of the megachurch, to take positions consistent with the megachurch's professed standards and desired outcomes. The megachurch also has an outsized role, given its numbers in the overarching society, in state and national politics, in national political primaries, in the selection of Supreme Court justices, and in the U.S. Presidential elections. This may or may not be sufficient to make the megachurch a church in accord the Troeltsch Niebuhr typology. But it is beyond the traditional scope of a sect, and it does lessen the tension with some aspects of society, which moves the megachurch

toward the lesser tension church-like end of the continuum. And to the extent that a megachurch initiated or supported law that aligns with the theological position of the megachurch is passed, the state becomes the tool by which the megachurch theology is enforced. This is less direct but still analogous to how the theology of the Reformation era Catholic Church was enforced. And thereby places the megachurch in a position analogous to that of the Reformation era Catholic Church. It also further demonstrates the depth of the entwinement of the megachurch with the social order.

The megachurch demonstrates many of the behavioral characteristics of the church. But it also continues to engage in the tension inducing activities of the sect. This would seem to be another crack in the value of the traditional typology in determining classification. But the Troeltsch typology still provides a well-known starting point from which to conduct an analysis of the relevant behaviors. And in this case, it has allowed us to see that the megachurch intentionally straddles the sect to church lines for purposes such as political influence, organizational growth, and survival. The very purposes that Niebuhr and others have ascribed to the church. This demonstrates the ongoing relevancy of the historical lens as it provided us a framework for examining the behavior of religious actors, identifying relevant indicators as they relate to social power, manipulation of tension with the environment, and the relationship of the religious entity with the state.

## Chapter VIII.

### Findings and Future Research Considerations

The implications of megachurch growth as uncovered in this paper raise potential concerns and suggest several areas of further study. Among them, especially in a U.S. where religion is rapidly dropping adherents, is the near-term broader social implications of continued megachurch growth.

For example, U.S. Presidents and political leaders have historically used civil religion as a failsafe while invoking a generic God of no specific religious creed to sacralize the American story, values, and promise, and as a point of unity for the American people. But continued growth of the megachurch in its current form may serve as a point of division. It may also increase the potential growth of Christian nationalism and of Christianity in the guise of civil religion. The growth of either further positions Christianity and the church as divisive if not oppressive and destructive entities for the many that Christian nationalism, and Christianity in the guise of civil religion, ostracizes. And given the demonstrated alignment between, and the entwinement of, leading state actors and the megachurch, this could ossify, and for some adherents legitimize, destructive constructed social and symbolic boundaries. Such an outcome would further tear the fabric of the American story and reduce it from we the people to we the few people of specific demographics and belief systems.

This paper has shown that in the conflation of political activity with theology, the megachurch, instead of serving as a moral boundary and a deterrent restraining the worst of political activity, may be serving as an accelerant justifying the extremes. Similarly,



the extremes of exclusion and otherness that accompany Christian nationalism and Christianity in the guise of civil religion, could result in the church being seen and or used as religious justification for the injustice, violence, and other means taken to reinforce constructed social and symbolic boundaries. This is not a plea to thwart the development of the megachurch. But, regarding the entwinement of religion and politics, notwithstanding any short-term benefits, it may be a proof point in support of De Tocqueville's observation that any such alliance, is "bound to be burdensome for religion" (Finke and Stark 5).

Yet, as it relates to the megachurch, the burden for religion may be a boon for scholars in the multi-disciplinary opportunities that it presents for conducting research and providing practical answers to current problems and potential concerns. One example may be an examination of the establishment clause implications raised by the entwinements discussed in this paper. Another may be an analysis of whether religious entities should be treated differently based on the role of the entity in society or the benefits granted the entity by society. In this vein would be an examination of the organizational relationships of entities covered by the Johnson Amendment to the tax code prohibiting 501 (c)(3) entities from endorsing or opposing political candidates. And consideration of the benefits and challenges of expanding this prohibition to cover entities related to the religious entities benefiting from the tax exemption. Such an extension would be analogous to the ethical rules prohibiting federal employees and their family members from engaging in certain business efforts and relationships, or holding certain stocks, related to the federal employee's work or the work of their federal agency.

For scholars looking to build on the classical works of Troeltsch and Niebuhr, this paper has shown that the megachurch is now a thought leader and trendsetter, and it's once sect like thoughts and behaviors, including its "independent sociological type of Christian thought" has become the dominant thought. This begs the question, and provides an opportunity for further research, on whether the megachurch and the mainline denominations have switched roles, making the mainline denominations the new sects. And some researchers may choose to examine the potential threat to the freedom of religion edifice, assuming a megachurch of such size and influence that its competition is *de minimis*, and the leading political lights appear beholden to it.

And lastly, even beyond the discrete questions and opportunities raised by this paper there is another analogy between the Reformation era and the modern-megachurch era that researchers may want to consider further. Among the many outcomes from the Reformation era for the Catholic Church was that it incurred losses on several fronts. Accompanying the loss of theological dominance was also a financial loss and a political loss. The loss was not a one-time loss solely to the Catholic Church. Every subsequent church split, every state church developed, every subsequent reformation in other countries, further dissipated influence, and power. The modern-day megachurch arguably has begun to reharness, or at least has the potential to reharness, parts of this influence and power, at least theologically and politically. And the national level consequences of the growth of the megachurch are trickling down from national to state and local levels of government.

It may or may not be that the megachurch era, to paraphrase Pfaff's description of the Reformation, is a great episode of religiously inspired social change (Pfaff 189). But,

using fundamentalism as a proxy, if the changes that are being manifested, including the Supreme Court decisions being issued, and the Congressional legislation being enacted, on the national levels and ultimately reflected on the local level, are religiously inspired, that raises another issue that dates back to the Reformation era. Theologically driven norms in an era in which 29% of Americans identify themselves as having no religious affiliation, and 88% of the current Congress self-identifies as Christian (Diamant), is reminiscent of Reformation era concept of *cuius regio eius religio* (one's religion is to be that of the sovereign ruling the territory of one's abode). Scholars may want to examine whether this is an indication that the idea undergirding *cuius regio eius religio* may be more than a historical footnote.

Whatever the outcome of future lines of inquiry, this paper has shown that there are similarities between the Reformation era Catholic Church and the modern-day megachurch in the United States. Examples of the similarities include the ways in which the religious, political, social, and economic power of the megachurch is analogous to that of the Reformation era Catholic Church. One indicium of this is the continuing concentration of megachurch era churchgoers in an increasing smaller number of churches with believers of similar theological and political beliefs. The resulting entwinement of theological and political power inuring to the benefit of megachurch leaders, and the responses of political leaders to that power, is reminiscent of the power of Catholic Church leaders during the Reformation era. Another similarity is the way in which theological advocates, such as the Religious Right, and the supporters of the Protestantism, have been able to drive the social discourse, as well as the political agenda, through the effective use of communication technology. And as evidenced by the

tenor of the public discourse, an additional similarity is the hardening line of intra-faith political separation.

Notwithstanding the similarities between the megachurch and the Reformation era Catholic Church, in many ways the megachurch, has bent many of the traditional expectations. Among these is the manner in which the megachurch has prioritized the needs of its members and potential members, and the manner in which this prioritization permeates its operational practices of the megachurch. And in many ways the megachurch is creating its own brand of orthodoxy, as many of its beliefs, behaviors, educational tools, systems, are being adopted by other churches which serves to increase the influence, presence, and power of the megachurch.

As megachurches continue to grow, in size and influence, one potential consequence is that megachurch growth will reduce the number of touchpoints politicians must reach, as well as the diversity of concerns politicians must address, to obtain and maintain religious legitimacy. A derivative concern is that as the importance of the megachurch as the source of legitimacy grows other entities will matter less as a source of legitimacy which will have consequences pertaining to access and representation. On its face, the depth of the megachurch's entwinement with the larger society, and its conflation of the theological and the political can appear inconsistent with its professed posture of being separate from the world. But this behavior is consistent with and reflects the megachurch's strategic approach to rejecting or accepting the social environment as best suits its purposes. Which would seem to make the megachurch at least as much a political entity as a theological entity. Although, the megachurch demonstrates many of the behavioral characteristics of the church. It also continues to engage in the tension

inducing activities of the sect. In this and other behaviors the megachurch straddles the intellectual and theological gulf between the sectarian ideal of separation from the environment that it professes, and the secular conflation of the political and the theological that it practices.

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