

CLASH OF CONVICTIONS: EXAMINING DIVERGENCES AMONG TRADITIONAL AND  
PROGRESSIVE CHRISTIANS IN CONTEMPORARY AMERICA

by

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## ABSTRACT

Contemporary American Christianity is experiencing a growing divide between traditional and progressive biblical interpretations. This study explored the interplay of personality traits, religiosity, and cognitive dissonance on biblical interpretation, cultural integration, and faith practices among Florida Christians. The purpose of this explanatory sequential mixed-methods study was to explore how personality traits, religiosity, and cognitive dissonance influence biblical interpretation, cultural integration, and faith practices among Christians in Florida, in the context of a growing divide between traditional and progressive biblical worldviews. Cognitive Dissonance and Social Identity theories provided psychological frameworks for understanding individual and group religious behaviors. Data collection involved a survey of 118 self-identified Christians, followed by semi-structured interviews with 16 participants. Quantitative data underwent regression analysis, revealing significant associations between personality traits, Christian orthodoxy, and religiosity centrality. Qualitative data were analyzed thematically using grounded theory, identifying five key themes: orthodoxy interpretation spectrum, faith centrality in identity, cultural integration approaches, personality factors in doctrinal adherence, and cognitive dissonance experiences. By integrating psychological and theological perspectives, this study offers a nuanced understanding of intra-Christian divisions. Findings have implications for religious leaders, counselors, and policymakers seeking to foster unity within diverse Christian communities.

*Keywords:* American Christianity, personality traits, cognitive dissonance, religious identity, biblical interpretation

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Christianity has profoundly impacted America's foundation since its beginning and continues to serve as a research topic and academic interest (Barna Group, 2020). Contemporary society is presented with distinctive complexities among Christian interpretations and adherences. These variances are characterized by theologically multifaceted perspectives and passionate debates over biblical application and adherence, which have significant repercussions that resonate deeply within America's social and cultural fabric (Pew Research Center, 2020).

Modern shifts in Christian beliefs guide opinions and perspectives that often conflict, specifically on current social and cultural issues (Thouki, 2019). These current societal changes lead to passionate conversations that are prominent in the developing attitudes across progressive and traditional Christians (Rouse, 2019). The acceptance and assimilation of cultural norms and movements, such as gender and sexuality, lead to divergences with traditional Christians, promoting upholding foundational doctrine (Earl, 2021). At the same time, progressive Christians support inclusivity and understanding using a contemporary interpretation of Christian principles (Stephen, 2020).

Popular culture also creates controversies, as disputes surface as traditionalists favor protecting from sensed evil in provocative media, and progressive Christians increasingly encourage thoughtful dealings with secular content to sustain cultural resonance with faith (Barna Group, 2021). High-profile controversies surrounding church



practices, secular influences, and celebrity pastors demonstrate further tensions over biblical applications and standards to leadership (Gibson, 2022).

This section will delve thoroughly into the historical evolution of Christianity's role in molding American values and provide a comprehensive review of existing literature on traditional doctrines, contemporary interpretations, and resulting societal challenges. A thorough examination of the complicated intersection between timeless Christian principles, emergent perspectives, and increasingly fragmented application is essential for scholars, Christian leaders, and policymakers striving to de-escalate tensions and promote unity among believers. By investigating the theological changes concerning why progressive views on biblical principles cause heightening divergence, this study seeks to describe a split society that contrasts biblical applications to pressing social concerns (Barna Group, 2021).

### **Background**

Contemporary Christianity in America exhibits immense diversity in theological beliefs, cultural practices, and ethical stances despite a shared scriptural foundation in Jesus Christ and the Bible (Pew Research Center, 2020). Scholars have traced this multifaceted nature to several critical factors, including impactful historical developments, the growth of distinct denominational traditions, the influence of sociocultural forces, diverging approaches to biblical interpretation, and the rising impact of progressive Christian thought (McLaren, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2021).

Significant historical events have profoundly influenced the fragmented nature of modern American Christianity, particularly exemplified by the 18th-century Great Awakening, which led to the proliferation of Christian factions and religious denominations as devotees sought personal relationships with spirituality and embraced vibrant worshiping routines (Moore, 2021). The late

19th century saw the rise of the Social Gospel movement of the late 19th century led to the Protestant reform measures spearheaded by thinkers like Walter Rauschenbusch (Moore, 2021). This movement asserted that Christianity must intentionally engage with societal concerns, such as poverty and discrimination, rather than concentrating solely on personal salvation (Moore, 2021).

### **Postmodern and humanistic influences**

In the 1960s, postmodernist and humanistic philosophies, such as those acknowledged by Stackhouse (2022), became more prominent in American culture and began to influence some strands of evangelical Christianity. Postmodernism emphasizes relativism, subjectivity, and the cultural construction of truth claims, leading some Christians to be more skeptical of biblical authority and focus more on subjective spiritual experiences (Thouki, 2019). Humanism elevated human reason, emotions, and experiences over divine revelation. This anthropocentric focus aligned with an increasing emphasis on felt needs and personal fulfillment in American Christianity.

### **Emphasis on subjective experience over biblical authority**

As postmodern and humanistic attitudes took hold in some evangelical circles, there was a shift from the primacy of biblical authority toward a greater reliance on personal spiritual experiences and feelings as a source of truth (Johnson, 2017). Some Christians began to view the Bible as a subjective source of personal meaning rather than an objective divine revelation (Johnson, 2017). Doctrinal preaching was deemphasized in favor of more experiential worship services designed to produce emotional and spiritual highs (Johnson, 2017). For some evangelicals, their own spiritual impressions, emotions, and mystical experiences took precedence over the plain meaning of scripture,

contributing to weaker doctrinal boundaries among some evangelicals' truth (Johnson, 2017).

In the post-World War II period, neo-orthodox theologians like Paul Tillich sought to recover traditional doctrines while acknowledging modern critiques (Thouki, 2019). Tillich's reinterpretation of God as the "ground of all being," moving away from biblical literalism, profoundly impacted the rise of progressive Christianity in modern America (Thouki, 2019). Additionally, the societal transformations of the 1960s-70s, including racial, cultural, and sexual revolutions, prompted a critical reexamination of long-held traditional Christian views on race, gender, and sexuality, further contributing to the emergence of progressive theological philosophies (Thouki, 2019).

In the 1970s, feminist views increasingly captured attention as scholars such as Rosemary Radford Ruether challenged patriarchal understandings of Scripture and the emphasis on men as pastors and within church leadership (Thouki, 2019). The emergence of feminist theology, advocating for the inclusion and equal treatment of women, not only underscores Christianity's historical role in marginalizing women but also supports the overarching goals of the progressive reform movement (Thouki, 2019). These questions were prompted by the civil rights and feminist movements and resonated with many Christian thinkers (Thouki, 2019).

Moslener (2019) states that the evolution of progressive Christianity is significantly affected by the late 20th-century Evangelical movement, driven by a response to the widespread oppression and suffering of marginalized groups. This related Liberation theology stresses that Christians are responsible for speaking up, acting against injustice, and facilitating systemic change. The Evangelical Left movement diverges from orthodox evangelicalism, which traditionally emphasizes personal faith and biblical authority. Instead, it contends that the Bible calls Christians to integrate their faith with broader societal concerns. By advocating social

justice, environmental responsibility, inclusivity regarding gender and sexuality, and the pursuit of equality while critically examining U.S. military and foreign policy aspects, the Evangelical Left has significantly increased the visibility and influence of progressive Christianity in America.

Similarly, the postmodern Emerging Church movement during the 1990s contributed to the growing attraction of progressive philosophies. This movement responded to their belief of orthodox tenet shortcomings, including the disconnect from modern culture and societal matters motivated by modern scholars, liberation theology, and postmodern philosophical and theological subjects. The evolution of the Emerging Church in the faith diverges from conservative beliefs, aiming to furnish a space striving to provide modern methods for finding meaning and purpose as Christians while developing contemporary, inclusive, and acclimating sociocultural facets in the church and worship. Its decentralized design and principles of social justice, merging faith with culture, and facilitating equality and acceptance have gained traction, particularly among younger generations and those Christians adopting liberal perspectives.

Despite objections from fellow Christians for departing from Biblical inerrancy and salvation in Christ alone, the movement has obtained recognition for its modern process of contemporizing the faith to acclimate better American societal values. By improving the reach of progressive Christianity to Christians once skeptical and hesitant of rigid doctrine, the Emerging Church continues to influence American culture and its role in growing progressive Christian worldviews.

### **Problem Statement**

A fundamental challenge confronting scholars in the psychology of religion stems from the Christian identity's highly diverse and continuously evolving nature (Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2003). While the broad term "Christian" connotes a shared connection to the Christian religious tradition, it encompasses an extensive range of beliefs, practices, and biblical interpretations (Jones, 2021). The variance in doctrinal interpretation extends far beyond the standard individual perspectives. Contemporary sociocultural changes have further amplified this heterogeneity by intensifying theological fragmentation and impeding the formation of a unified collective identity centered on common scriptural tenets (Dulin, 2021).

Ambiguity persists regarding whether "Christian" constitutes a coherent category with broadly shared convictions and values, posing a critical obstacle for research examining relationships between faith and mental health (Tanner, 2022), as findings linking religious beliefs to attitudes and behaviors may be confounded by the considerable variability in beliefs across individuals identifying as Christian (Village & Francis, 2021). Likewise, investigations into connections between religious involvement and wellbeing face similar challenges, as diverse expressions of religious engagement may exert differential effects on mental health outcomes (Mohler, 2019).

Therefore, addressing these issues necessitates developing a more nuanced comprehension of the factors engendering divergent biblical interpretations and applications among Christians. Elucidating the psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics underlying exegetical fragmentation represents an essential priority. Accordingly, this study investigates how specific spiritual disciplines, internalized commitment levels, and forms of cultural engagement influence Christians' hermeneutical orientations and biblical readings. Explicating

these complex interrelationships will provide researchers with greater clarity on the possibilities for examining Christians as a meaningful collective category.

### **Purpose of the Study**

This mixed methods study explores the relationship between the beliefs and practices of Christians in Florida who self-identify as having progressive versus traditional biblical worldviews and their perspectives on popular culture and church practices in modern America. It examines how personality dimensions, religiosity, and psychological factors influence these relationships. Specifically, it investigates how openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism relate to the beliefs and practices of progressive and traditional Protestants regarding popular culture and church practices, as well as how cognitive dissonance moderates these relationships.

The study explores psychological factors leading traditional and progressive denominations towards divergent approaches in incorporating popular culture into church services and aligning doctrinal beliefs with practices. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data is expected to provide an enhanced explanatory framework for understanding the psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics contributing to divisions between traditionalist and progressive Christians on biblical interpretation and adherence despite common foundations.

### **Research Questions**

#### Research Questions

**RQ1:** What personality and identity constructs contribute to the misalignment between an individual's professed Christian doctrinal beliefs and their actual behaviors and adherence in daily life?

**RQ2:** How do cognitive and behavioral factors shape the formation and expression of distinct Christian identities in contemporary American society?

**RQ3:** What psychological factors contribute to Christians' divergent approaches to integrating culture into their faith practices, resulting in varying perceptions of cultural engagement and assimilation?

### **Assumptions and Limitations of the Study**

This study is based on several interconnected assumptions that shape its design and methodology. Participants are assumed to answer survey and interview questions truthfully and precisely, reflecting their nuanced perspectives on religiosity, biblical interpretations, and stances on sociocultural issues. Additionally, there is an expectation that the selected Christian participants, representing diverse denominations and demographics, mirror the broader society and emerging trends within America. The study also assumes that participants understand scripture and core biblical principles, empowering them to offer insightful commentary. Christian practices, sociocultural themes, and biblical interpretations are assumed to furnish a worldview through which variables of interest are interpreted.

The study acknowledges several inherent limitations that fall into crucial areas. Self-reporting and sampling issues include potential biases like selective memory or social desirability, and convenience sampling with limited statistical power may restrict the generalizability of findings. The scope and contextual complexities of the study provide only a limited view of overall dynamics, missing factors related to denominational, regional, ethnic, and political identities. Researcher bias and methodological challenges, such as my identity as a devout American Christian, introducing unintentional bias, inconsistencies in integrating data types, and limitations in understanding, could further complicate the analysis. Triangulation

methods may mitigate some biases, but researcher perspectives might still influence the results.

Additionally, sensitivities to temporal and cultural contexts, ethical constraints, and uncontrolled influences like the media and political climate may affect the internal validity and generalizability of the findings. These limitations necessitate a nuanced interpretation of the results and point to areas for careful reflection and future exploration within American Christianity. Acknowledging these constraints underscores the importance of context and complexity in evaluating the findings.

### **Theoretical Foundations of the Study**

The theoretical foundation of this research study is constructed upon cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), providing a comprehensive framework for examining the emergence of progressive Christianity and the transformation of religious beliefs. Integrating these two theories facilitates an in-depth understanding of the cognitive, social, and motivational factors that shape individuals' belief systems within the context of progressive Christianity.

Cognitive dissonance theory is a valuable framework for understanding how individuals navigate conflicts between their established religious convictions and evolving societal norms (Festinger, 1957). Within this theoretical perspective, the incongruity between an individual's beliefs, attitudes, and actions results in psychological discomfort or dissonance. Individuals are motivated to modify their beliefs or behaviors to alleviate this discomfort.

Within progressive Christianity, Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory elucidates how individuals grapple with the disparities between their deeply ingrained



religious beliefs and their desire for social acceptance and alignment within a changing societal landscape. As contemporary American culture transforms values, ethics, and social justice concerns, many Christians find themselves in situations where their long-held beliefs no longer align with prevailing societal views. This cognitive dissonance becomes particularly salient when individuals seek acceptance within their faith communities and society. To resolve this dissonance, individuals may engage in belief adaptation, modifying their religious views to align with what they perceive as socially acceptable (Festinger, 1957).

Complementing the insights provided by cognitive dissonance theory, Tajfel and Turner's (1979) social identity theory emphasizes the central role of group identity in shaping individual beliefs and behaviors. This theory posits that individuals categorize themselves and others into distinct social groups, and their self-esteem is intricately tied to their group identity. As individuals affiliate themselves with the values and norms espoused by progressive Christianity, their self-esteem becomes closely linked to this newly embraced social identity. The intense desire for social belonging within the progressive Christian community motivates individuals to adopt beliefs and behaviors aligned with the group's ethos and prevailing societal norms.

Individuals are incentivized to maintain a positive social identity, which drives them to embrace the beliefs and behaviors associated with their chosen group (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Social identity theory offers valuable insights into how individuals' alignment with the progressive Christian community shapes their belief transformation. Recognizing the presence of Bible elements that resonate with cognitive dissonance theory and social identity theory is crucial as the foundational basis for this research.

Biblical narratives portray individuals wrestling with cognitive dissonance as they face conflicting beliefs and societal pressures. The tension between maintaining conventional

religious tenets and adopting more comprehensive ethical imperatives is prominent in these portrayals. The Bible emphasizes community and shared identity within the early Christian church, aligning closely with the principles expounded by social identity theory. The biblical accounts of believers coming together, sharing their faith, and collectively adopting new norms vividly exemplify the role of group identity in shaping individual behavior.

By integrating Cognitive dissonance theory and social identity theory, this research study establishes a robust theoretical foundation for investigating the emergence of progressive Christianity and the transformation of religious beliefs. These theories provide valuable insights into the intricate cognitive processes, dynamic social interactions, and underlying motivations that drive belief adaptation. This interdisciplinary approach, grounded in psychological theories and biblical narratives, facilitates a comprehensive understanding of the interplay between individual cognition, group identity dynamics, and the process of religious transformation (Festinger, 1957; Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

### **Definition of Terms**

**Term One** – Biblical Adherence: The practice of following and living according to the teachings and instructions of the Bible.

**Term Two** – Biblical Authority: The conviction that the Bible, as the word of God, is reliable and authoritative for faith and practice.

**Term Three** – Biblical Inerrancy: The dogma that the Bible is without error and fault.

**Term Four** – Biblical Interpretation: The process of understanding and discerning the meaning of the Bible.

**Term Five** – Biblical Obedience: The act of following the instructions and commands given in the Bible out of respect for its divine authority.

**Term Six** – Biblical Tenets: The fundamental principles or beliefs accepted as true and held as the basis for Christian behavior, measures of obedience, and decision-making, as found in the Bible.

**Term Seven** - Bible: The Christian scriptures consist of the Old and New Testaments.

**Term Eight** - Christianity: The monotheistic religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ, as depicted in the New Testament of the Bible.

**Term Nine** - Christians: Followers of Christianity who believe in and follow the teachings of Jesus Christ.

**Term Ten** - Church: The collective body of individuals who profess belief in Jesus Christ and follow the religious practices of Christianity.

**Term Eleven** - Church Leadership: The individuals or groups overseeing and guiding a Christian church's religious practices, services, and activities.

**Term Twelve** - Cultural Christian: Individuals who identify with Christian culture or values but may not hold Christian beliefs or actively participate in religious rituals and practices.

**Term Thirteen** - Discernment: In a religious context, this is the ability to judge or perceive the divine truth.

**Term Fourteen** - Doctrine: A belief or set of beliefs held and taught by a church, political party, or other group.

**Term Fifteen** - Emergent Christian: A 21st-century movement within Protestant Christianity that emphasizes the lived experience, social justice, and cultural relevance of Christianity. It

typically eschews dogmatism and embraces postmodern, deconstructive interpretations of scripture.

**Term Sixteen** - End Times: The period prophesied in the Bible during which certain marked events will lead to the second coming of Jesus Christ, also known as eschatology.

**Term Seventeen** - Eschatology: The part of theology concentrated on humans' death, judgment, and the eternity of one's soul, often related to the end times.

**Term Eighteen** - Evangelical: A branch of Protestant Christianity characterized by belief in the necessity of being "born again," belief in inerrancy and biblical authority, and a weight on teachings declaring the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ for salvation.

**Term Nineteen** - Evangelicalism: A worldwide movement within Protestant Christianity that upholds the belief that the doctrine of the Gospel consists of salvation through grace in Jesus Christ's atonement.

**Term Twenty** - Fundamental Christian: A Christian who believes in a literal interpretation of the Bible, often characterized by a robust commitment to evangelism.

**Term Twenty-One** - Glorify: In a religious context, to praise, worship, or honor God. It also refers to the Christian belief that God makes believers spiritually perfect or "glorious."

**Term Twenty-Two** - God: The supreme being in Christianity, understood as the eternal, omnipotent, omniscient, and benevolent creator of the universe.

**Term Twenty-Three** - The Gospel: The teachings of Jesus Christ as recorded in the New Testament, particularly the good news of salvation.

**Term Twenty-Four** - Hermeneutics: The field of study concerned with the theory and practice of interpretation, especially of scriptural text.

**Term Twenty-Five** - Intra-Christian Relations: Interactions and relationships within the Christian community, often involving different denominations or groups.

**Term Twenty-Six** - Jesus: The central figure of Christianity, believed by Christians to be the Son of God and the Messiah prophesied in the Old Testament.

**Term Twenty-Seven** - Jesus Christ: The central figure of Christianity, believed by Christians to be the Son of God and the savior of humanity as described in the New Testament.

**Term Twenty-Eight** - Liberal Christian: A Christian who interprets the teachings of the Bible in the light of modern knowledge, science, and human rights concerns.

**Term Twenty-Nine** - Moderate Christian: A Christian who holds religious beliefs that fall in the middle of the spectrum between liberal and conservative.

**Term Thirty** - New Testament: Following the Old Testament in the Bible, these books describe the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and the foundation of the Church.

**Term Thirty-One** - Nominal Christian: An individual who identifies as a Christian but does not actively engage in the practices and beliefs typically associated with Christianity.

**Term Thirty-Two** - Old Testament: The first part of the Christian Bible, corresponding to the Hebrew Bible, containing the law, history, prophecy, and poetry of the Hebrew people before the birth of Jesus.

**Term Thirty-Three** - Persecution: The act of subjecting someone to hostility and ill-treatment, mainly because of their religious beliefs or faith.

**Term Thirty-Four** - Popular Culture: The beliefs, practices, and objects embodying a social system's most broadly shared meanings. It includes media, entertainment, lifestyle, and leisure activities.

**Term Thirty-Five** - Prayer: A solemn request or thanksgiving to God in Christianity.

**Term Thirty-Six** - Prophecy: To declare or predict something by divine inspiration, or in a biblical context, to speak the word of God.

**Term Thirty-Seven** - Progressive Christian: A believer who prioritizes the social gospel and focuses on issues such as poverty, social justice, and human rights, often promoting more liberal interpretations of the Bible and doctrine.

**Term Thirty-Eight** - Protestant: A follower of any Western Christian church that separates from the Roman Catholic Church and adheres to the principles of the Reformation.

**Term Thirty-Nine** - Revival: A period of renewed religious interest, often characterized by mass conversions and increased evangelism.

**Term Forty** - Secularization: The process by which religion loses social and cultural significance.

**Term Forty-One** - Sin: A transgression of divine law, often understood as an act against the will of God.

**Term Forty-Two** - Salvation: The forgiveness of sin through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ that restores humankind's relationship with God.

**Term Forty-Three** - Scripture: The sacred writings of Christianity in the Bible.

**Term Forty-Four** - Sociocultural: Pertaining to the combination or interaction of social and cultural factors.

**Term Forty-Five** - Theology: The study of the nature of God and religious belief.

**Term Forty-Six** - Traditional Christian: A Christian who maintains the doctrines or practices of the Christian faith that have been held from antiquity or from the time of the first ecumenical councils.

**Term Forty-Seven** - Worldview: A particular philosophy of life or conception of the world that an individual or group holds.

**Term Forty-Eight** - Worldly: Relating to or devoted to the temporal world instead of the spiritual one. Christians often use this term to describe actions, attitudes, or things focused on worldly pleasures or material things rather than spiritual values.

### **Significance of the Study**

Despite shared theological doctrines, insights into the growing fragmentation within contemporary American Christianity mark a crucial advancement in understanding this timely phenomenon. By examining how diversifying individualistic expressions, biblical interpretations, spiritual identity, and sociocultural attitudes via this mixed methods study introduces novel empirical evidence on correlations and predictive relationships that will inform hypotheses testing in future investigations into the complex interplay influencing modern religious identities. These findings help bridge a gap in existing theoretical models that lack integrative lenses encompassing multidimensional drivers.

The tailored initiatives grounded in empirical insights about cultural, developmental, and psychosocial fragmentation drivers will equip church leaders with practical tools to promote intergenerational dialogues addressing escalating divides over gender roles, economics, and sensitive social issues. The research guides congregations to contextualize scriptural teachings on abortion and sexuality to foster coherence amid rapid societal shifts.

Regarding family dynamics, the study offers dialogue navigation strategies to build understanding between youth adopting more progressive ideologies than previous generations. For communities, findings can aid reconciliation efforts addressing polarization along political lines. This urgent mixed methods study promises to benefit scholarship, the church, families, and

society as contemporary American Christianity experiences growing divides by illuminating practical pathways to mitigate rising fragmentation and polarization while elucidating complex theoretical factors.

### **Summary**

This foundational chapter lays the necessary groundwork for investigating the fragmented state of Christianity within contemporary America. The background research explores the historical, denominational, cultural, interpretive, and theological factors affecting the religious divisions, starting with an introduction overviewing the diverging viewpoints among traditional and progressive Christians (Alu, 2020; Barna Group, 2018; *Pew Research Center*, 2020). These dynamics culminate in the problem statement, highlighting modern societal tensions and conflicts that warrant deeper investigation (Brown, 2019). The purpose and research questions further hone the intent to comprehensively explore the drivers of divisions and offer actionable insights to restore unity. This section also outlines critical assumptions, limitations, and theoretical foundations shaping the investigation, while accentuating the significance of developing practical understandings to inform practical initiatives to equip church leaders and families to navigate rising sociocultural polarization.

With this robust foundation established, the subsequent section will delve more in-depth into scholarly discourse and debates illuminating the intricacies of contemporary Christian disharmony. The next chapter facilitates a more penetrating examination of the multifaceted beliefs, practices, and perspectives differentiating modern American Christians across denominations, demographics, and Christian biblical worldviews, aiming to enrich conceptual comprehensions of this complicated phenomenon and steer the focus on ways toward harmony



amidst diversity. Overall, this opening section provides the necessary context and direction for the research investigation.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Overview

This literature review delves into the multifaceted nature of self-identifying Christians in contemporary America, examining their conflicting views and practices while considering influences from American sociocultural factors (Rouse et al., 2019). Traditional Christianity's foundational core doctrines, centered around the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus as depicted in the Bible, constitute a critical foundation for scholars seeking to comprehend the essence of the faith (Garcia, 2020; O'Callaghan, 2019; Stephens, 2020). In the context of the influence of cultural dynamics within contemporary America, an investigation is examined into the differences between believers' professed faith and authentic religious practices, alongside the impact of individualism and self-promotion conflicting with Christian identity (Brown, 2018).

One key area of focus is the practice gap between traditional Christians and progressive Christians, encompassing differences in beliefs, practices, and biblical interpretation (Bell, 2020; Offutt, 2022). This examination provides insights into the current diversification within American Christianity. Additionally, challenges churches and leaders face amidst theological clashes, changing cultural norms, and divergence in biblical interpretation and adherence are discussed (Wright & Arterbury, 2022). The complexities of maintaining unity, providing effective ministry, and adapting to shifting demographics while upholding scriptural authority present complex challenges for clergy and churches (Beer, 2020).

The review also critically analyzes the impact of secularism, media, popular culture, and societal trends on Christian beliefs and practices within the American context (American Worldview Inventory, 2020). Cultural currents such as individualism, consumerism, subjectivism, and relativism often conflict with traditional Christian ethics and community

(Wyman Jr., 2020). Moreover, implications and challenges for Christian unity and identity are investigated, given the increasing tensions between traditional and progressive Christian communities (Kim et al., 2020). Bridging differences in theology, social views, and religious practices poses difficulties but provides opportunities for mutual understanding (Burge & Djupe, 2022). Examining these complex and interrelated factors provides a critical context for understanding current divisions within American Christianity regarding issues like gender roles, sexuality, and secular influences (Nyland, 2023).

This analysis aims to foster constructive dialogue and unity between these groups by thoroughly examining factors influencing diversification and conflicts. It explores foundational beliefs of traditional Christianity, discrepancies between professed faith and actual practices, cultural influences that challenge biblical fidelity, broadening intra-Christian obstacles, difficulties church leaders face amidst these dynamics, implications for Christian identity, and suggestions for future research to strengthen Christianity amidst American sociocultural change (Ladouceur, 2020).

This literature review endeavors to deepen comprehension, address frictions, and provide guidance for promoting unity while upholding theological integrity. A nuanced familiarity with these factors provides a crucial background for analyzing current divisions over gender, sexuality, race, social justice, and other modern societal issues. Through intentional reflection and analysis, this review aims to shed light on the difficulties Christianity faces within the contemporary American cultural climate and the factors influencing divergence, offering insights to foster harmony while preserving fidelity to biblical teachings.

### **Description of Research Strategy**

This literature review search strategy synthesizes key research on the contemporary

conflict between progressive and traditional worldviews among Christians in America. A systematic search strategy was utilized to retrieve the most relevant sources. The researcher initiated the process by emphasizing the Jerry Falwell Library database given its extensive collection of biblical research sources. However, additional databases like JSTOR, PubMed, and Google Scholar were also thoroughly searched to provide comprehensive coverage of the literature.

To conduct the searches, targeted keywords and relevant terms such as “progressive Christianity,” “sociocultural influences,” and “contemporary American Christianity” were utilized, along with Boolean operators (AND, OR, NOT) to refine and narrow the results. The search specifically focused on retrieving recent publications within the past five years to ensure currency and relevance. Additionally, specific techniques were assumed to thoroughly examine biblical tenets to support the review. These included vital techniques such as word studies, language analysis, examination of historical and cultural contexts, and consulting commentaries and scholarly works to gain insight into interpretation.

This search method accessed the Jerry Falwell Library database for peer-reviewed journal articles, while also drawing from other academic databases. Combining keyword strategies and Boolean operators with a focus on current materials enabled the retrieval of relevant literature. Biblical text analysis techniques provided the necessary background understanding. Through these systematic methods, the review obtained a robust collection of timely literature to synthesize key research in line with the study's purpose.

### **Review of Literature**

Sociocultural influences and evolving views in contemporary America increasingly shape divergent identities within Christianity, impacting biblical interpretation and adherence

(*American Worldview Inventory*, 2020). These varied versions of Christian identification cause fragmentation within the faith, leading to divisions and conflicts among self-identifying Christians, prompting a need to address the problematic climate among American believers (Willey, 2019). Christians' use of contemporary hermeneutics often distorts biblical significance due to subjective reader views, highlighting the perceived flexibility of interpretations (Alu, 2020).

Traditionalists stress biblical literalism, historical tenets, and beliefs, leading to skeptical or rejectionist standpoints on assimilation and modernizing religious principles (Preda, 2019). Examining the factors contributing to this fragmentation is necessary to gain a nuanced understanding of the evolving nature of contemporary Christian identity, which has traditionally been set upon orthodox tenets. Traditional Christian tenets have long served as the foundational pillars upon which the faith and identity of believers have rested. These orthodox principles encompass core doctrines such as the belief in the Holy Trinity, the divinity of Jesus Christ, the authority of the Bible, and the significance of salvation through faith in Christ. Contradictory to traditional views, progressive Christians champion contextual interpretations of scripture, privileging principles like social justice over legalism, accepting modern praise and worship, and supporting the liberal advancement of outstanding traditions.

This literature review explores how progressive and traditional Christians diverge in their biblical hermeneutics and doctrinal adherence when addressing contemporary issues in America. Significant variations emerge in their perspectives toward integrating faith with popular culture in church worship practices and leadership approaches. These tensions have led to divisions within the Christian community, presenting considerable challenges for churches and leaders navigating complex theological disputes and criticisms (Preda, 2019). Disparate interpretive

frameworks clash on issues ranging from music genres and service styles to gender roles and sexuality. Investigating these polarized biblical worldviews illuminates the divergent foundations underlying tensions between traditional and progressive Christians when applying orthodoxy and orthopraxy to contemporary topics.

A thorough examination of contributing factors within the current sociocultural context is vital for grasping these complexities and promoting potential avenues for greater harmony amidst the fragmented landscape of contemporary American Christianity. This review begins by outlining areas of orthodoxy, acknowledging the shared significance of Scripture across differing Christian perspectives, and noting emerging divisions stemming from contrasting interpretations. It then introduces central themes related to orthopraxy, including biblical interpretation, authority, and implications for navigating complex issues facing Christianity in America today.

### **Psychological Undercurrents of Contemporary Christian Conflict**

Contentions among contemporary American Christians stem from intricate psychological and theological factors that divide traditional and progressive viewpoints (Parks, 2017). Existing literature seeks to thoroughly explain these dynamics, emphasizing that while Christians share foundational beliefs, they demonstrate contrasting interpretations and adherence, diverging in biblical hermeneutics, orthodoxy, orthopraxy, and Christian identity (McClintock, 2020; Stephens, 2020). These deviations are critical for comprehending existing strains among Christians.

Traditional and progressive Christians present substantial contrasts in interpreting and applying core principles, encompassing biblical hermeneutics, theological adherence, practical application, and forming distinct Christian identities (Stephens, 2020). Beneath these differences lie contrasting psychological and theological frameworks significantly affecting core doctrine

interpretation (McClintock, 2020). Traditional Christians often view these doctrines through an identity preservation lens, aligning interpretations with established beliefs to maintain their religious community identity, while progressive Christians interpret these doctrines through evolving social identities, adapting them to their changing worldview (Parks, 2017; Smith, 2016). Recognizing psychology's pivotal role in shaping these conflicts is essential for a comprehensive analysis.

Exploring the interconnections among faith, theology, and psychology is a precursor to a more profound analysis of the convergence and deviation among traditional and progressive Christians involving orthodoxy and orthopraxy (Jenkin, 2021). Despite their shared foundational beliefs, their interpretations and applications differ significantly, shaped by contrasting psychological and theological influences (Yende, 2022).

### **Orthodoxy and Orthopraxy Divergences**

A significant question arises amid current cultural shifts showing shifting balances between orthodoxy and orthopraxy, affecting the psychology underpinning traditional versus progressive Christian worldviews (Leeman & Naselli, 2020). As culture changes, many question or adapt traditional doctrines (Ammerman, 2014). Inconsistent interpretations of orthodoxy impact social formation, contributing to widening divisions among Christians due to the lack of consensus in their faith identity (Jones, 2016). Traditionalists adhere strongly to literal biblical interpretation, while progressives support metaphorical interpretation and theological adaptation to culture (Jones, 2016). These differing orthodoxies align with contrasting orthopraxis; traditionalists favor scripture reading and conservative values, while progressives champion inclusive worship, social justice advocacy, and liberal ethics (Bean, 2014; Drescher, 2016).

As cultural shifts challenge biblical interpretations, the interplay between orthodoxy and

orthopraxy reciprocally reinforces divergence across theological, moral, and social domains. Moreover, the focus on appealing worship practices may overlook theological rigor. Maintaining spiritual vitality while remaining grounded in core beliefs and consistent practices continues to pose challenges. However, creative engagement with culture may also reinvigorate faith in new ways. The path ahead likely involves discerning which doctrines and practices are essential versus open to flexibility. Examining this interplay provides vital insight into the psychological factors dividing traditionalist and progressive Christians.

### ***Self-Identification of Christians in Modern America***

The question of what constitutes Christian identity in modern America represents an ongoing debate, with traditional and progressive Christian communities espousing distinct perspectives. This discourse examines how individuals across the Christian spectrum perceive themselves as Christians, and how these self-conceptions diverge between traditional and progressive factions. Christian self-identification in contemporary America involves a multifaceted interplay of beliefs, practices, cultural contexts, and theological interpretations (Smith, 2016). Traditional Christians, particularly evangelicals and fundamentalists, frequently endorse more conservative definitions of Christian identity (Mohler, 2011). They emphasize adherence to specific doctrinal tenets, including biblical inerrancy, the virgin birth and resurrection of Christ, and the second coming of Christ (Fitzgerald, 2017).

Affirming these beliefs is vital for their self-identification as Christians, with acceptance of core doctrines often seen as the baseline requirement for being a Christian (Mohler, 2003). In contrast, progressive Christians adopt a more adaptive, inclusive framework for conceptualizing Christian identity (Bass, 2006). They prioritize Christ's ethical teachings and model of love, tolerance, mercy, and social justice (Jones, 2021). For progressives, identity stems less from



doctrinal conformity and more from embodying Jesus's values in one's life. As such, they contend that practicing Christ's ethic of love and justice is more central to identity than strict doctrinal orthodoxy alone (Fuist, 2016). The divergences between traditional and progressive Christians over identity originate from their contrasting definitions and priorities (Siker, 1994). Traditionalists consider specific doctrinal beliefs as the crux of Christian identity. They posit that affirming Christ's divinity and resurrection, plus biblical inerrancy, constitute the bare minimum requirements for being Christian (Mohler, 2003).

Accepting these tenets and proclaiming faith in Christ are paramount. Progressives, alternatively, propose that enacting Christ's teachings on love, compassion and social justice bears more importance in defining Christian identity than rigid doctrinal alignment (Fuist, 2016). For them, identity manifests through embodying these values in one's conduct and engagement with societal concerns (Bass, 2006). Doctrine holds secondary status compared to practicing Christ's values. Additionally, these divergent perspectives shape how traditional and progressive Christians regard each other. Traditionalists may dispute whether progressives who do not stringently affirm orthodoxy qualify as genuinely Christian. They tend to see doctrinal conformity as the quintessential marker of Christian identity (Mohler, 2003). Progressives conversely may perceive traditionalists as excessively focused on doctrinal purity over social justice and compassion (Siker, 1994).

These conflicting definitions of Christian identity thus foster tensions between the two groups. In summary, within contemporary America, self-identifying as Christian represents a multifaceted, contentious concept, especially across traditionalist and progressive Christian circles. While areas of common ground exist, traditionalists accentuate adherence to specific doctrines as integral to Christian identity, whereas progressives underscore enacting Christ's

values of love, mercy, and justice. These complex, differing frameworks of identity underpin ongoing debates within American Christianity. Reconciling these divisions may necessitate openness to pluralism in biblical interpretation and Christian custom, paired with mutual respect for shared values beneath contrasting beliefs and practices.

### ***Faith and Psychology: Core Doctrines***

Core Christian doctrines, including the divinity of Christ, the bodily resurrection of Jesus, the Trinity, salvation by grace, and the authority of the Bible, form the unifying cornerstone of Christian belief, transcending denominational and traditional boundaries (Johnson, 2019; Smith, 2016). These doctrines define Christian identity and serve as a lens through which individuals interpret sacred scripture (Parks, 2017). However, within the unifying framework of orthodoxy, a diverse spectrum of interpretations and applications of core doctrines emerges, closely tied to the contrasting perspectives held by traditional and progressive Christians (McClintock, 2020).

Theological frameworks underpinning these interpretations can vary significantly, impacting Christian understandings of foundational beliefs. Additionally, doctrinal development's historical and theological context plays a crucial role in shaping how doctrines are perceived today. Moreover, psychological factors, such as cognitive biases, social identity theory, and moral frameworks, influence how individuals engage with and interpret core doctrines (Parks, 2017). Traditional Christians may align interpretations with existing beliefs to maintain a sense of identity within their religious community, while progressive Christians may interpret doctrines to reflect their evolving social identities (Smith, 2016).

These differing interpretations of core doctrines also have practical implications for various aspects of Christian life, from worship practices to ethical decision-making (Smith, 2016). Furthermore, they foster unity or division within the Christian community, occasionally

leading to schisms within denominations or congregations. In the modern context, core doctrines face the challenge of adapting to changing societal norms and values, which can influence how they are understood and applied.

Consequently, the relevance of these doctrines in addressing contemporary issues within the Church is an important consideration. Additionally, core doctrines have implications for interfaith dialogue, shaping how Christians engage with individuals from different religious traditions while upholding their core beliefs (Parks, 2017). Exploring these multifaceted aspects provides a holistic understanding of how core doctrines function within orthodoxy in contemporary American Christianity, shedding light on the dynamic interplay between faith, theology, and psychology within this faith tradition.

### ***Dissonance in Biblical Hermeneutics***

Biblical inerrancy declares that the Bible is the inspired Word of God and authority for Christians (DeWaay, 2010). While there is widespread agreement among differing Christian perspectives regarding the significance of Scripture, traditional and progressive Christians are generally united on core doctrines, and differences in interpretation emerge, contributing to polarization among American Christians (Barnes, 2019; Smith, 2020). In contrast, progressives embrace a critical realist approach, contextualizing Scripture and focusing on conceptual themes that allow reinterpretation based on contemporary realities (Smith, 2020). However, both perspectives have their limitations; traditionalists may sometimes overlook the human dimension in Scripture, while progressives may potentially disregard transcendent divine truth (Sire, 2020).

Progressive stances allow for the modern contextualization of doctrine, while traditional views maintain the unchanging relevance and authority of the Bible across time and cultural contexts (Preda, 2019). Empirical studies reveal these dichotomies statistically, with

conservatives prioritizing biblical literalism and traditional morality while liberals favor contextualization and social progressivism (Barnes, 2019; Burge & Djupe; Krull, 2020).

In their comprehensive study of hermeneutics, Alu (2020) argues that traditional Christians often adopt a literalist interpretation of the Bible. This approach leads them to view the doctrines as genuine accounts that serve as the inspired Word of God, significantly influencing their convictions and moral reasoning. Conversely, Alu (2020) asserts that progressive Christians see Scripture as symbolic, prioritizing conceptual themes rather than rigid objective exactness and reading the Bible metaphorically and contextually. Regardless, merely classifying literalist and symbolic stances risks oversimplifying the current standpoints. While providing an important conceptual distinction, Alu's (2020) traditionalist-progressive dichotomy overlooks the complexity and diversity in contemporary biblical hermeneutics.

The *American Worldview Inventory* (AWVI, 2020), a landmark study on spiritual perspectives by the Cultural Research Center, was based on a survey of over 5,000 Americans measuring beliefs and application of biblical doctrine. The AWVI (2020) defines the biblical worldview as the perspective through which Christ followers experience, comprehend, and react to reality, rooted in biblical tenets. The study revealed that the number of American self-identifying Christians embracing a biblical worldview has declined more than 50% since the early 2000s with only 38% of Americans affirm biblical literalism, while 54% hold an intermediate view that regards the Bible as inspired but not inerrant. This finding offers greater nuance than Alu's (2020) framework.

While Alu (2020) outlines theological unlikeness, claiming that the dichotomous representation does not adequately grasp the multidimensional complexness of modern biblical hermeneutics. Comprehensive study demands considering sociocultural and institutional

influences on biblical interpretation. Wuloff (2019) explains how conservative evangelicals strictly adhere to biblical literalism, believing Scripture represents absolute divine truths that transcend culture. They emphasize being "born again" and nurturing deep personal spirituality and connection with Jesus (Bielo, 2019). However, DeWaay (2010) argues that traditionalists' assimilation with broader cultural norms has increasingly fostered divisions from progressive strands.

In contrast, O'Donovan (2019) highlights how modern societal influences like individualism and secularism have impacted progressive Christian ethical perspectives. Gender-inclusive terminology changes to de-emphasize patriarchal messaging have caused concerns about distorting scriptural accuracy (Perry & McElroy, 2020). Furthermore, the *Pew Research Center's* (2019) findings indicate hermeneutical distinctions between religious groups, with 82% of white evangelicals adopting biblical literalism compared to 19% of religiously unaffiliated Americans, which suggests that sociocultural factors outside personal assumptions impact biblical perspectives.

Upenieks (2021) comments that consistent biblical reading promotes challenging assumptions that literalism correlates with biblical adherence. Additional factors, such as denominations, translations, and religious background, form comprehension of biblical passages and their interpretation. As traditional and progressive Christians diverge on ethical issues due to different assumptions of biblical authority and engagement with culture, conflicting biblical interpretations reinforce and exacerbate these tensions.

### ***Interpretations of Jesus' Divinity and the Doctrine of Salvation***

Modernizing sentiments on Jesus' deity and the doctrine of salvation among contemporary American Christians have encouraged examination, recognizing the continuous

change within the biblical perspectives (Stephens, 2020). Ladouceur (2020) examines the impact of evolving perceptions of Jesus as the foremost figure of their faith, noting increasing ambiguity and variances with progressive views on biblical inerrancy and authority. Bird (2022) further considers how progressive tendencies of creating vagueness of foundational doctrine contribute to tensions with traditional Christians, as both groups display varying beliefs in the significance of salvation through Jesus.

Henson (2019) shows an example of Progressive Christians in contemporary America embracing fluid sentiments regarding Jesus as God incarnate. The author demonstrates how progressive Christians encourage a willingness to embrace uncertainty and continually pursue truth while being less rigid and conservative. This mindset involves actively questioning traditional assumptions and fostering an environment that promotes open dialogue and exploration (Tanner, 2022). These progressive Christians are committed to redefining the concept of salvation beyond the confines of rigid theological doctrines, seeking to incorporate diverse perspectives related to Jesus' identity and the meaning of salvation in the contemporary world (Jones, 2022).

Mohler (2021) notes that Traditional Christians are firmly embedded in the authority of the Bible, regarding Jesus' death and resurrection as foundational for identification as a Christian, believing that salvation is granted by God's grace through trust in Jesus' redemption for humanity (Ephesians 2:8-9; Acts 2:38; *New Living Testament*). Barna's (2020) investigation reveals a significant departure from traditional doctrine among many American Christians, as indicated by an increasing diversity of beliefs. The study shows that only 33% of respondents affirmed grace-centered salvation, while 48% supported works-based righteousness. This shift in belief reflects a concerning trend of declining biblical literalism.

Similarly, Smith (2020) found that over 50% of Christians from various denominations adhere to "works-righteousness," including 41% of evangelicals who officially advocate salvation through faith alone. The research highlights a significant divergence between official teachings and the beliefs of a substantial portion of evangelicals. Further supporting the notion, Mohler (2021) argues that a born-again Christian identity unwaveringly upholds the authority of the Bible and atonement. Literature reflects the literature, indicating that born-again Christians are a prominent faction upholding this theological stance.

In contrast, Jones (2022) argues that progressive Christians, specifically evangelical young adults, often deny Jesus as God incarnate that offers the sole path to salvation and instead focus on Jesus as a motivational and ethical teacher. Tran's (2022) observation in their research asserts that traditional Christians concentrate on their salvation while progressives prioritize individualism and worldly sociocultural precedence.

Tanner (2022) states that postmodern influences are significantly responsible for the divergences among Christians regarding Jesus' deity and salvation. However, Perman (2021) argues that fundamental salvation theologies stay widely professed, citing AWVI (2020) data showing that 79% consider the subject of the Gospels on Christ's life, death, and resurrection as the cornerstone of Christianity. Peach et al. (2022) warns that accommodating pluralism within Christianity cannot compromise foundational doctrines.

The differing perspectives among progressive and traditional Christians and divergent opinions on biblical interpretations have substantial implications for how salvation is viewed compared to prioritizing the individual's interpretations of righteousness as truth (DeWaay, 2017). Progressive biblical worldviews often prioritize flexibility and are open to considering sociocultural factors, leading to diverse views on salvation and Jesus as Lord (Pew Research

Center, 2020). Meanwhile, traditional biblical worldviews adhere to established theological principles, with Jesus holding a central and paramount position in the faith (Alu, 2021).

### **Self-Love, Individual Autonomy, and the Evolution of Christian Identity**

A central factor of the paradigm shift in modern American Christianity is prioritizing personal satisfaction, self-expression, and happiness, often taking precedence over strict adherence to biblical doctrine (DeWaay, 2010). Qualitative researchers have documented this pattern across evangelical Christian communities, with in-depth interviews revealing that many believers readily contradict or ignore traditional scriptural teachings to justify pursuing individual fulfillment, self-love, and acceptance within broader society (Jenkin, 2021; Tanner, 2022). Willey (2019) regards the evolution of progressive Christians toward individualism as ironic. The author demonstrates their view by providing an example of the cowboy, revered for autonomy and detachment from society. Nevertheless, paradoxically, they remain deeply committed to protecting the society in which they are estranged.

Similar dichotomies within progressive Christianity include prioritizing personal truth about earning their salvation and sin through good works yet leaning on interdependent community relations to determine these premises (Willey, 2019). Arterbury (2022) holds a similar stance, arguing that the origin of strains between contemporary Christians is the emergence of progressive biblical worldviews and the prevalent sociocultural movements toward personal moralism, self-love, individual autonomy, and reliance on oneself for fulfillment. The author regards desires for authenticity, self-expression, personal truth, and happiness in opposition to traditional doctrine, especially concerning understanding one's calling.

Many progressive Christians in modern society prioritize individual recognition over communal efforts and seek to assimilate sociocultural factors, such as race, gender, sexuality,



and popular culture, within their spiritual identity (Willey, 2019). They desire to fuse their lived experiences and faith; however, Arterbury (2022) also acknowledges challenges as progressive Christians may lack the critical facets of understanding doctrine to analyze cultural influences considering biblical assertions adequately. The author explores whether considering their bodily situations moves them closer to or away from scripture and indicates that progressive cultural views have co-opted the language of doctrines, confusing the understanding of God's call.

Due to limited exposure to traditional Christian practices and resistance to foundational biblical interpretations, Alu (2020) acknowledges the risk that individuals may become susceptible to ideas contradicting Christian scripture and time-honored church traditions. While some scholars champion biblical inerrancy and a Christ-centered approach, others suggest that this viewpoint should also consider the complexities of current American society and the significance of assimilated self-identity with current sociocultural events (Arterbury, 2022; Willey, 2019). Scholars advocating for a return to traditional religious practices acknowledge that factors such as emotional insecurities, cultural trends, and a fixation on personal achievements significantly influence perspectives and warrant examination to comprehend divergent Christian beliefs (DeWaay, 2010; Jenkin, 2021).

Surveys support that personal choices often precede strict biblical authority, as evidenced by 61% of American Christians who believe that biblical teachings can adapt to individual circumstances (Pew Research Center, 2022). The analysis shows that progressive Christian identity is characterized by a willingness to compromise or even abandon fundamental biblical tenets to validate individual choices and lifestyles (Burge & Djupe, 2018). The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS), Intrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (IRO), and Extrinsic Religious Orientation Scale (ERO) collectively provide a solid foundation for investigating religiosity

within contemporary American Christianity (Allport & Ross, 1967; Huber & Huber, 2012). Notably, Pomerantz and Brown's (2020) research, employing the IRO and ERO, reveals that intrinsic orientations lead individuals to challenge established norms, while extrinsic orientations are associated with conformity, suggesting that America's polarized religious landscape may, in part, be attributed to motivations linked to progressive as opposed to traditional values. However, Forsyth's (2019) multidimensional model cautions against oversimplifying orientations, highlighting the need for further research.

Furthermore, Gonçalves et al.'s (2023) study validates their Intrinsic Religious Motivation Scale (IRMS) and the CRS among Portuguese Christians, emphasizing the significance of intrinsic motivations and religious centrality for Christians worldwide. Pomerantz and Brown's (2020) study underscores the substantial role of religious orientations in shaping perspectives, laying an empirical basis. Integrating their approach with Saroglou et al.'s (2020) framework progresses knowledge of how religiosity contributes to the identity of modern American Christians among divergent perspectives of traditional and progressive worldviews.

Theologians link this evolution to the postmodern renunciation of fundamental biblical truth, instead adopting moral relativism, which has diminished the views of biblical authority (Dulin, 2021). Additionally, positive self-help and personal development themes in contemporary American society that promote self-esteem, self-love, and acceptance interfere with Christian traditional perspectives. Wells (2020) contends that this conflict in self-identifying as a Christian occurs with progressive viewpoints that further promote self-reliant individuality rather than relying on God and identity in Jesus Christ.

A survey by Pew Research Center (2022) found that 30% of American Christians perceive the Bible as the literal word of God, whereas 68% view it as a text authored by men

with spiritual truths open to interpretation. Similarly, ethnographers Kucinkas and Stewart (2022) state that many Christians prioritize their personal experiences, feelings, intuitions, and spiritual senses as authentic bases for God's direction, better suited for them than interpreting and adopting biblical passages.

Furthermore, Clifford (2021) states that modernity catalyzed transformations in biblical hermeneutics, contributing to varying worldviews among Christians. Influenced by postmodern skepticism, modern Christians began interpreting the Bible within their individual, diverse frameworks, viewing everyday experiences and cultural trends necessary to define their reality and truth as believers. Consequently, numerous Christians began viewing biblical narratives in ways that separated from the traditional literal method. They no longer found their cultural narratives relevant within scripture, creating dissonance among traditional and progressive biblical worldviews (Arterbury, 2022). The once-standard literal interpretations disbanded as Progressive Christians wrestled with contrasting biblical stories, their lived realities, and accepted truths (DeWaay, 2010).

The intersection of survey data and in-depth qualitative analysis corroborates this transition from biblical authority to divine revelation and moral direction (Clifford, 2021; Kucinkas & Stewart, 2022; *Pew Research Center*, 2022). As Progressive Christians continue to rely on their own accord for joy, contentment, and acceptance, the focus for sentiments to distinguish spiritual truth and righteousness frees dependence on God and biblical authority (Dulin, 2021). Mohler (2019) concurs, expressing progressive Christians' focus on personal conscience as preceding guidance from the Holy Spirit, interpreting doctrine through the lens of subjective moral impulses and modern culture.

There is extensive literature citing theologians and scholars' connection of the

postmodernist ideological framework with this transition for rejecting external absolute truths to construct a reality of being a Christian founded in the psychological self (Clifford, 2021; Dulin, 2021; Kucinkas & Stewart, 2022; Mohler, 2019; *Pew Research Center*, 2022). These findings acknowledge that the shifts in biblical interpretation exacerbated Christian disagreement about biblical authority, meaning, and applicability. Traditionalists retained historical-grammatical exegesis, while progressives adopted reader-response criticism and other postmodern approaches to find existential meaning in scripture. This hermeneutical rupture catalyzed friction within faith communities, reflecting the clash between traditional and progressive worldviews centered around biblical interpretation (Alu, 2020).

### ***Conforming Over Christian Distinctiveness***

Modern American sociocultural subjects have a role in the tendency for Christians to blend their identity with elements from secular society rather than emphasizing bringing glory to God grounded in biblical adherence and practice (Clem, 2023). Further, as secularism continues to expand and infiltrate Christianity through influences of social media, music, celebrities, popular culture, and progressive ideologies within the church, resulting in numerous Christians adjusting their opinions and principles to align with dominant societal values to sustain relevancy and approval (Pally, 2021).

Clem's (2023) analysis of the complex relationship between secular and religious ethics echoes contemporary progressive perspectives of the faith, noting the divergence from traditional viewpoints on merging worldly and religious disciplines. Progressive Christian beliefs stress inclusivity, welcoming sociocultural topics within religious interpretation, and modernizing biblical worldviews. The author challenges traditional, strict categorizations between contemporary societal factors and the holy and offers a variation for believers desiring common

ground between religious traditions and individualistic moral frameworks. This inclusive outlook warrants the capability of gaining understanding and moral insight across denominations, reflecting openness to multiple sources of truth in modern America. The author challenges traditional, strict categorizations between contemporary societal factors and the holy, offering a variation for believers desiring common ground between religious traditions and individualistic moral frameworks (Clem, 2023).

The rise of individualism is evident in religious autonomy, where Christians interpret faith independently based on personal values rather than communal tradition (Dulin, 2021; Uecker & Froese, 2019). Barna (2021) conducted a survey and discovered that 61% lean mainly on their own intuitions, while merely 38% seek understanding through church and pastors. Qualitative studies likewise show that numerous Christians deny dogmas restricting individual autonomy, such as conventional sexual morals or gender norms (Jenkin, 2021). Progressive Christian ideologies additionally intensify originality by encouraging moral relativism and postmodernist views. As fundamental biblical assertions are dismissed, scripture experiences are based on subjective contemporary significances, such as feminism, queer theory, and critical race theory (Dulin, 2021).

Theological scholars argue that the boundaries of Christian identity risk dissolving into relativistic universalism as core doctrines become open to subjective negotiation (Wellum, 2020). A key theme emerging from qualitative research is the prevalent prioritization of personal satisfaction, happiness, and self-expression over adherence to biblical doctrine (DeWaay, 2010; Jenkin, 2021). Surveys reveal that most American Christians will ignore or reinterpret traditional scriptural teachings to accommodate modern lifestyles and identities (*Pew Research Center*, 2022). Scholars link this to postmodern relativism and the self-esteem movement, which

have elevated subjective experiences and self-love notions over submission to divine revelation (Dulin, 2021; Wells, 2020).

Similarly, analyses indicate a growing preference toward unique religious understandings being valued with biblical authority (Kucinkas & Stewart, 2022). Notably, the *Pew Research Center's* survey (2022) reveals that only 30% of Christians consider the Bible as God's direct word. Examining these changes reveals challenges to the traditionally dominant Christian tenets, which have maintained scripture as the direct authority of spiritual revelation (Hansen, 2019). Scholars note potential concerns in this respect, with some indicating that Progressive Christians may unintentionally drift away from foundational biblical belief as they align with ideologies that echo current sociocultural norms (Clem, 2023; Dulin, 2021).

### ***Faith, Technology, and Social Media***

Recent scholarship examines the complex interrelationship between social media, Christian identity, and distinctiveness. While findings suggest favorable and unfavorable influences on Christian commitment, some researchers express concerns about social media's potential long-term effects on diluting core doctrines and blurring lines between biblical truths and cultural relativism (Dulin, 2021; Ladouceur, 2020; Mohler, 2019).

Several studies indicate social media's capacity to facilitate community, spur spiritual growth, and reinforce religious identity, especially for isolated Christian subgroups (Baylor Religion Survey, 2022; Kucinkas, 2022; Wright & Arterbury, 2022). However, critics argue that these benefits may be superficial or temporary, failing to nurture substantive scriptural understanding (Dulin, 2021). Some posit that pursuing personalized spiritual experiences through social media reflects a postmodern rejection of divine revelation in favor of individually constructed meaning (Smalbrugge, 2019).

Additionally, increased exposure to contradictory worldviews is a concerning risk of social media engagement (Wright & Arterbury, 2022). Critics emphasize algorithm-driven echo chambers that shelter users from engaging with theological diversity (Kucinkas, 2022). Prolonged immersion in homogenized online environments may gradually erode the uniqueness of Christian beliefs over time. Rapid dissemination of misinformation can also distort doctrine if not verified against scriptural authority (Baylor Religion Survey, 2022).

While connections with fellow Christians and faith-driven motivations for social media use are associated with favorable outcomes, caution is urged regarding the long-term threat of assimilating Christian distinctiveness into watered-down cultural portrayals (Ladouceur, 2020). Some contend that contemporary Christians tend to conform to secular society enabled by social technology, demanding vigilance (Dulin, 2021). While findings are mixed, critical analysis reveals legitimate concerns about social media reshaping Christian identity through increased exposure to opposing worldviews, misinformation, and algorithmic filters that may manipulate perspectives over time. Further research should weigh short-term connectivity benefits against risks of gradual doctrinal dilution and declining adherence to biblically grounded beliefs and practices.

### **Gender, Sexuality, and Focus on Inclusivity**

Substantial studies are emerging that analyze the interchange between evolving sociocultural norms and conventional biblical worldviews on gender roles, same-sex marriage, and LGBTQ+ inclusion within modern Christianity (Bádue & Jay, 2023; Baker et al., 2019; Coburn & McGeorge, 2019). A Pew Research study found that 66% of traditional Christians believe the church should disclaim cultural movements like gay marriage, while 78% of progressives support biblical modifications on topics like homosexuality (*Pew Research*

*Center*, 2022). Traditionalists assert that the Bible prohibits homosexual practices, while progressives interpret such verses in a cultural context (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Leviticus 18:22, Romans 1:26-27, Goss, 2022). Pally (2021) and Clem (2023) agree that this conformity arises partly from American pressure to accept progressive viewpoints on sociocultural points of contention, with the threat of controversy and backlash for voicing opposing beliefs, even when supported by scripture.

Smith (2022) criticizes Traditional Christians' exchanges with LGBTQ+ topics as "destructive intolerance" in the continuing discord. This viewpoint can claim to be supported by verses such as Galatians 3:28, where "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*English Standard Version*, 2010). This verse may emphasize unity and equality among believers, advocating for a more inclusive and compassionate approach toward the LGBTQ+ community within Christianity. The author highlights the lack of rationale and evidence regarding traditionally conservative Christians' opposing attitudes, thereby contesting the reality and righteousness of their perspective against LGBTQ+ rights (Smith, 2022).

The direct focus of the objection lies in the conflict between the progressive values supporting LGBTQ+ rights and the orthodox beliefs of Traditional Christians, with Smith (2022) assuming a pro-LGBTQ+ rights standpoint. In contrast, Spiegel (2020) stresses the value of developing self-control among contemporary Christians in America, especially concerning gender, sexuality, and inclusivity. The author examines how divergent interpretations of self-control contribute to divisions within Christianity and moral disparities among Christian communities. Spiegel (2020) delves into the internal struggles within Christianity related to sexual self-control, emphasizing the importance of scripture, such as in 1 Thessalonians 4:3-5



(*English Standard Version*, 2010). This verse underlines God's intention for believers to abstain from sexual immorality. It relates to the author's assertion that Christians exert self-control over their bodies, avoiding lustful desires that can lead to moral tensions over situations.

By learning and adhering to this biblical authority, Traditional Christians aim to manage the complexity enveloping gender, sexuality, and inclusivity within contemporary Christianity (DeWaay, 2010). While Smith (2022) emphasizes LGBTQ+ rights and confronts intolerance, Spiegel (2020) delves into the internal struggles within Christianity related to sexual self-control. Migliorini's (2019) analysis offers perspective into the experiences of LGBTQ+ individuals within Catholicism, addressing the challenges of religious pluralism. It offers a standard of reasoning grounded in humility and critical reflection, explicitly focusing on the tension between personal identity, gender, sexuality, and Christian doctrine. The scholar's examination of the conflicts and tensions surrounding gender, sexuality, and inclusivity within modern American Christianity uncovers the intricate interplay between evolving societal norms, traditional biblical teachings, and personal convictions.

Neumann (2022) presents an analysis of an article titled "'Help, I'm Gay,'" which was published in *Christianity Today* in 2013 and portrayed a fictional dialogue between Stanton L. Jones and a character named "Todd." This conversation symbolizes the opposing perspectives within evangelical Christianity concerning sexuality. The article examines the challenges faced by Traditional Christianity in providing acceptable reasons for their resistance to homosexuality.

Despite aiming to present a moderate evangelical perspective that combines biblical inerrancy with inclusivity, Neumann's (2022) writing depicts a relatively vague standing on the controversial topic, emphasizing God's judgment on sin while citing existing literature supporting the Bible's condemnation of suggestive homosexuality. Regarding LGBTQ+

inclusion, several progressive congregations have adopted the view by designating gay pastors and candidly challenging traditional scriptural interpretations to accommodate modern culture (Moore, 2021). These churches view the Bible as a historical manuscript, recognizing its roots in a distant cultural context and the reason that it may not sufficiently address modern social subjects (Weaver, 2020).

Coburn and McGeorge (2019) identify that some progressive denominations, like the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church, have openly gay and lesbian pastors leading congregations. These churches take a pro-LGBTQ+ stance, arguing that biblical condemnations of same-sex relationships are products of their historical context and do not apply to current interpretations of sexuality and love. Progressive churches often emphasize the core teachings of love, acceptance, and inclusivity as central tenets of Christianity (Nyland, 2023). Many prioritize Jesus' message of compassion and radical inclusiveness, interpreting it as a call to affirm and embrace LGBTQ+ individuals as equal faith community members (Kucinkas, 2022). Progressive perspectives on queer acceptance often draw support from verses like Galatians 3:28, which proclaims, "Neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (*English Standard Version*, 2001).

On the other hand, Traditional Christians point to verses condemning homosexuality, restricting women's roles, and upholding church authority, supported by scripture within the Book of Leviticus stating, "If a man lies with a male as with a woman, both of them have committed an abomination" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Leviticus 20:13). Regarding church decisions, the United Methodist Church (UMC) faces significant controversy over the issue of homosexuality, resulting in a 2019 vote that led traditionalists to leave the congregation (Peterson et al., 2022).

In contrast, the Episcopal Church's embrace of same-sex marriage in 2021 gained widespread progressive approval (Widger, 2023). Research suggests that younger Christians increasingly focus on gender and sexuality topics, indicating coming devotional changes toward affirming denominations (Jelen, 2018; Neumann, 2022). While divergences continue, analyzing biblical principles on inclusion and transparency may promote accord between Christians (DeWaay, 2010).

### **Influence of Popular Culture, Music, and Media**

A central debate exists between traditional and progressive Christian perspectives on the influence of contemporary celebrity, media, and popular music culture in America, highlighted by scholars such as Rocha (2021), citing that this intersection of modern popular culture with religious principles carries unique complexities and schisms that problematize harmony among believers. The result manifests in a paradox between followers who exert discretion when engaging with secular societal trends and those who embrace a progressive perspective, championing an inclusive and unrestricted approach (Stephens, 2020; Uecker & Froese, 2019).

The Bible portrays Lucifer as one of the highest-ranking angels in heaven, entrusted by God as chief musician leading choirs in divine praise and worship (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:12-19). However, Lucifer's pride led him to rebel against God, craving personal glory rather than honoring the Creator. Consequently, Lucifer was cast out of heaven, redirecting his once-holy musical talents toward self-exaltation (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Isaiah 14:12-15, Ezekiel 28:12-19). This biblical story has been analyzed through numerous historical lenses but has gained particular significance regarding contemporary American popular culture. Some draw a parallel between Lucifer's moral corruption and modern celebrity musicians who seem to utilize their talents for ungodly aims or promotion. They warn

against the spiritual dangers of excessive fandom and admiration of such figures.

Many traditional Christians correlate modern American popular culture and entertainment with sin and immorality, seeking to restrict the susceptibility of media influence to uphold Christian values against what they see as dangerous progressive assimilations (Rocha, 2021). The perspective of traditional Christians often perceives contemporary media and entertainment as glorifying sin, undermining biblical doctrines, and misguiding Christ-followers (*English Standard Version*, 2001; 1 John 2:15-17; Johnson, 2017; Rocha, 2021; Romans 12:2). In contrast, progressive Christians support a more nuanced engagement with cultural and media avenues, interpreting scriptures to discover vibrant lessons between biblical tenets and current American climates instead of disregarding or evading modernization entirely (Brown, 2019). This progressive perspective allows for evolving cultural trends and aims to balance religion with an inclusive and understanding worldview (Brown, 2019).

### **Tensions, Trials, and Transformations in the Church and Leadership**

The rise of progressive Christianity has posed significant challenges to traditional church doctrine and practices. Progressive biblical scholarship aimed at dismantling mythological aspects of Christianity threatens traditional beliefs (King, 2012). The American Church encompasses a vibrant, yet divided landscape characterized by competing visions between traditionalist and progressive factions (Perry et al., 2020; Dempsey, 2019). Traditional Christians staunchly defend historical Christian doctrine, tradition, and biblical authority against perceived erosion by shifting cultural trends. Progressives argue for adapting Christianity to align with contemporary social justice causes, diversity, and individual self-expression (Green, 2018; McMahon, 2017).

Reinterpreting concepts like holiness and sin has also catalyzed debates. Stay et al.

(2019) advocate broadening holiness beyond exclusivity, clashing with traditional purity norms. Likewise, progressive rejections of original sin (Delio, 2020) counter traditional hamartiology anchored in Genesis 3 and Romans 5:12-19 ((*English Standard Version*, 2001, Murphy, 2022)). Such doctrinal reassessments illuminate growing divides over biblical authority and adaptability. A content analysis in the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* showed significant inter-denominational debates regarding adaptation or rejection of original sin theology, with 78% of conservative pastors opposing rejection of original sin compared to 51% of progressive pastors (Francis, 2021).

Atonement theology represents another contentious issue. Progressive perspectives like moral influence theory conflict with substitutionary atonement, traditionally rooted in passages like Isaiah 53:5 (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Johnson et al., 2022). These disputes highlight deeper rifts over Christology and the authority accorded to specific scriptural interpretations. A 2022 survey of Protestant pastors in *Sociology of Religion* found up to 45% disagreement on whether certain atonement theories align with biblical truth, indicating lack of theological consensus (Smith, 2022).

While traditionalists advocate preserving traditional practices and biblical literalism (Perry et al., 2020), progressives promote inclusive reform and modernizing interpretive lenses, emphasizing verses about acceptance like Mark 2:17. As progressive voices grow louder, tensions rise over Christianity's future trajectory (*English Standard Version*, 2001). A key area of contention involves high-profile cases of personal moral failings among prominent leaders (Green, 2018; McMahon, 2017), sparking debates over condemnation versus grace and restoration. Misconduct allegations and lack of accountability in megachurches raise pressing concerns about ethical practices, though some defend cultural engagement strategies for growth.

For example, in 2022, it was revealed that Bill Hybels, the former pastor of Willow Creek Community Church, had engaged in inappropriate behavior with women (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 Timothy 3:1-7).

The 2020 firing of Carl Lentz, the former lead pastor of Hillsong East Coast megachurch, marked a significant turning point in ongoing debates surrounding personal misconduct and leadership integrity within the contemporary American Church (Easter, 2020). Lentz was terminated from his position after revelations emerged in *The New York Post* on November 4, 2020, regarding his involvement in an extramarital affair, rapidly gaining widespread attention. Advocates of stringent accountability argued that Lentz's prestigious role as lead pastor obligated adherence to higher moral standards; his actions had grievously damaged the Church's reputation in the public eye, disqualifying him from continued leadership per biblical qualifications requiring blameless conduct from elders (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 Tim 3:1-7, 2010; Dempsey, 2019).

In stark contrast, Progressive Christians are advocates of forgiveness, contending that all people remain inherently fallible. The repentance and remorse displayed by Lentz were deemed warranted for granting an opportunity for redemption, given Christianity's biblical mandate for believers to practice unlimited forgiveness when a brother or sister strays morally (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Luke 17:3-4, 2010; Johnson, 2021). This event raised concerns about the ethical practices of megachurches and the lack of accountability for their leaders. These and other cases have sparked an ongoing debate between traditionalists and progressives in the Church about how to respond. Traditionalists call for strong condemnation and removal from leadership, while progressives advocate for more grace and potential restoration to leadership if the person repents (Crome, 2019).

The rise of the celebrity pastor has exacerbated debates surrounding personal misconduct and leadership integrity within the contemporary American Church (Easter, 2020; Riggs, 2021). Celebrity pastors are often perceived as larger-than-life figures seemingly immune to ordinary moral standards, making accountability difficult even amidst serious misconduct allegations (Dempsey, 2019). For instance, a study by Easter (2020) in the *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture* found that 72% of respondents viewed celebrity pastors as "transformational leaders" who help followers achieve personal and spiritual goals through their charismatic presence and savvy use of social media. This charismatic leadership style can foster an unhealthy power dynamic where followers become unwilling to question or critique the pastor's actions (Easter, 2020).

Additionally, the celebrity pastor model reinforces traditional gender roles and sexual norms, conflicting with progressive Christians preferring inclusive leadership (Johnson, 2021). A *Pew Research study* found that 89% of progressive Christians view celebrity pastors as perpetuating the marginalization of minority groups, including LGBTQ individuals, whom progressives believe should be fully welcomed in the Church (*Pew Research Center*, 2022). For example, celebrity pastors like John Piper and Mark Driscoll have preached complementarian views of gender roles, arguing that women should submit to male leadership at Church and at home (Greear, 2018). This clashes with progressive Christian advocates calling for full gender equality in church leadership and ordination (Jones, 2022).

Furthermore, the rise of celebrity pastors has increased polarization between Christians according to Riggs (2021) in *Theology Today*. The study found that traditional and progressive Christians now diverge sharply on social issues like LGBTQ rights and racial justice due to the influence of contrasting celebrity pastors on their respective camps. For instance, traditionalist

celebrity pastors like John MacArthur preach against LGBTQ inclusion, while progressive ones like Eugene Cho endorse racial justice efforts like Black Lives Matter (Smith, 2020). This polarization risks further fracturing the church unity (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Ephesians 4:3, 2010).

Overall, the rise of celebrity pastors has presented complex challenges for the American Church. As these prominent figures amass devoted followers, questions persist around pastoral misconduct accountability, leadership qualifications, and bridging social divides. Some Christians argued that Lentz should be condemned and removed from ministry, while others argued that he should be given grace and allowed to continue in ministry after repenting (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 John 4:19, 2010). The Church must continue engaging with these issues through prayer, wise counsel, and discerning spiritual leadership to move toward unity and integrity amidst changing cultural landscapes (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 Corinthians 14:33; Proverbs 15:22, 2010).

Cultural and stylistic adaptations also diverge between traditional and progressive churches. A study in the *Review of Religious Research* found that traditional church services emphasize theological teaching, while progressive services focus on relational connection, sparking debate about proper worship (Francis, 2021). Progressives defend cultural adaptations like modern music as contextualization, while traditionalists argue it distracts from reverent, scriptural worship (Carson, 2023).

Overall, controversies surrounding pastoral misconduct, doctrinal disputes, and cultural adaptation reveal complex tensions between progressive and traditional Christians on applying biblical principles within a changing culture. Thoughtful analysis of Scriptural integrity, grace, contextualization, and theological foundations is needed amidst these debates.



### *Secular Cultural Influences in Worship*

Secular pop culture's growing influence in megachurch worship has sparked heated debate. Recent controversial events include megachurches inviting mainstream artists like Justin Bieber to give concerts during Sunday services (Barna, 2022). While some praise attracts new youthful audiences, critics argue it turns worship into secular entertainment lacking spiritual substance (Whitehead, 2021). Mike Todd's Transformation Church also drew outrage in 2022 for an Easter Sunday production featuring elaborate devil costumes and pyrotechnics. Detractors condemned it as biblically inappropriate and spiritually dangerous, while defenders emphasized creative resonance (Roys, 2022).

Broader worship styles change, like dancing, casual dress, and secular music genres continue dividing traditional and progressive Christians. Advocates argue that thoughtfully integrating culturally relevant elements helps connect with modern populations (Park et al., 2022). However, critics contend that uncritical adaptation risks compromising theological depth and reverence (Bowler, 2022). The "Beyoncé Mass" at Grace Cathedral in 2018 highlighted tensions around secular cultural influences in worship. Integrating Beyoncé's music and black feminist theology into the liturgy sparked polarized reactions (Barna, 2021). Some praised its modern cultural resonance, connecting with young African Americans through the familiar lyrics of songs like "Freedom." However, critics argued that it eroded traditional reverence and inappropriately elevated entertainment over Scripture (Barna, 2019).

Quantitative surveys reveal significant age and race divides regarding cultural worship influences. For instance, Smith (2020) found African American Christians more welcoming of hip-hop music in services than older white congregations. Surveys revealed sharp generational divides. While most Christians over 65 vehemently rejected cultural appropriateness, Christians

under 30 were much more receptive (Park et al., 2022). This reflects broader divergences between upholding historical worship practices honored in tradition (Psalms 33:3) and adapting liturgy to enhance cultural relevance for youth (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Colossians 3:16).

Core concerns arise regarding perceived connections between media, sexual immorality, false idolatry, and satanic influences. Biblical passages on resisting worldly temptations and false idols underpin traditional wariness about provocative media (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 John 2:15-17; James 4:4, 2010). For instance, Lady Gaga's occult symbolism overtly contradicts biblical morality among conservative Christians (Uecker & Froese, 2019). Overall, these traditional believers advocate restricting exposure and inoculating believers against shifting cultural values.

Miley Cyrus' transformation from a wholesome, openly Christian child star to a controversial pop figure alarms traditional Christians concerned about her influence on youth and promotion of values contrary to their faith (Williams, 2019). In contrast, some progressive Christians emphasize understanding evolving beliefs and defending creative freedom, advocating open dialogue (Smith, 2019). Similarly, Lil Nas X's recent comments that the Christian Church contributed to his teenage self-hatred for being gay, and his satanic-themed music video have ignited significant controversy (Lasciy, 2022). Some Progressive Christians assert Lil Nas X's statements were framed in the context of his artistic expression and sexual identity, despite satanic imagery. Lil Nas X expressed the church condemned his sexuality, causing teenage self-loathing. Some media portrayed this as defiantly celebrating himself against shame attempts.

Broader tensions arise between cautious traditional and progressive Christians regarding modern media's impact on morality perspectives (Rogers, 2020). While provocative content

troubles traditional believers (Adams, 2021), progressives highlight God's grace, exhibiting openness to exploring moral questions through culture (Wilson, 2020). These divergent responses reflect differing views on adapting faith to cultural change (Thompson, 2019).

### **Conclusion**

The divergence of Christian beliefs among individuals in modern America can be attributed to a range of sociocultural influences and factors. These influences encompass elements such as popular culture, influential figures, media, and the emergence of modern megachurches (Barna Group, 2021; Pew Research Center, 2020). These sociocultural dynamics contribute significantly to the disagreements observed among traditional and progressive Christians concerning biblical interpretation and adherence (Alu, 2020; Tanner, 2022).

Conflicting viewpoints are recognized within the academic community, underscoring the necessity for further exploration into this topic (Burge & Djupe, 2022; Smalbrugge, 2019). A deeper understanding of the specific sociocultural influences that shape Christian beliefs and practices is paramount to comprehending the intricate dynamics of contemporary American Christianity (Uecker & Froese, 2019). The maintenance of Christian perspectives within friendships among individuals who share the same faith assumes a critical role in upholding individual convictions and principles. Furthermore, it cultivates an environment characterized by reverence, receptiveness, and understanding (Barna Group, 2020). By adopting a humble attitude and demonstrating a sincere desire for knowledge, individuals actively contribute to the ongoing narrative of the Kingdom of God, thereby facilitating personal and societal transformation (Yende, 2022).

The imperative for a genuine and transformative Christian lifestyle that reflects a profound commitment to God's teachings is emphasized (DeWaay, 2017; Mohler, 2021). This

call challenges Christians to align their beliefs with their actions and to live in accordance with biblical principles (*English Standard Bible*, 2001, James 1:22-25). By closing the gap between professed beliefs and actual lifestyle, Christians can endeavor to bridge the divergence in their beliefs (Pew Research Center, 2019). The divergence of Christian beliefs in modern America finds its roots in a multitude of sociocultural influences (Offutt, 2022; Rouse et al., 2019). A comprehensive exploration of these influences and an understanding of their impact serve to illuminate the dynamics of contemporary American Christianity. By upholding Christian perspectives, fostering a humble attitude, and embodying biblical principles, Christians can actively work towards narrowing the gap between their beliefs and their actions (Ladouceur, 2020; Leeman & Naselli, 2020).

### **Implications and Future Directions**

American Christianity stands at a pivotal juncture, marked by its rich diversity and complex history, yet also by increasing divisions along theological and cultural lines. This dissonance presents profound challenges for the future of American Christianity. However, within these challenges lie opportunities for growth and renewal. Promoting inclusivity emerges as a foundational step in addressing the dissonance within American Christianity. This entails actively engaging theologians and scholars from diverse backgrounds as collaborative contributors (Dulin, 2021; Smalbrugge, 2019). Such engagement widens the interpretive lens, confronts biases, and nurtures mutual understanding among Christians holding traditionalist and progressive views.

Creating safe spaces for dialogue is an equally essential endeavor, establishing open and respectful forums that encourage cross-perspective discussions and enable shared learning is crucial (Jones, 2021). Additionally, providing resources and educational access to marginalized

groups promotes equitable opportunities for all individuals to partake in theological interpretation. Engaging diverse voices acknowledges the undeniable reality of cultural diversity within American Christianity, combating biases, and fostering unity amid differences (Dulin, 2021). By incorporating varied perspectives, Christians can bridge divides and attain a more comprehensive understanding of Scripture and traditions. Overcoming biases necessitates cultivating humility and self-reflection. Christians are called to examine how their cultural or theological preconceptions shape their biblical hermeneutics, often leading to disagreements about the meaning and application of Scripture (Smalbrugge, 2019). This approach encourages an open-minded mindset, motivating Christians to seek alternative viewpoints and engage in constructive cross-perspective dialogue.

Considering diverse voices empowers Christians to gain insights from different cultural frameworks, critically evaluate biases, and broaden their understanding of Scripture (Tanner, 2022). Recognizing how contrasting theological traditions lead to divergent biblical interpretations and disagreements is vital (Dulin, 2021; Smalbrugge, 2019). Actively consulting diverse theological resources challenges assumptions and enriches comprehension of scriptural meanings and themes. Fostering an atmosphere of grace and mutual learning is imperative for addressing doctrinal tensions between traditionalist and progressive strands of American Christianity (Mohler, 2019). Despite genuine differences, an open and inclusive dialogue centered on Christ provides viable pathways forward in the faith's diversity (Jones, 2021).

These multifaceted steps provide a comprehensive framework for navigating the complex implications and future directions for American Christian orthodoxy. Embracing these strategies empowers Christians to move forward in a manner that remains faithful to their tradition while respecting those with different perspectives, ultimately fostering unity amidst the diversity

within American Christianity. Although uncertain, the future of American Christianity brims with potential. Proactively championing inclusivity, creating spaces for dialogue, engaging diverse voices, overcoming biases, and nurturing an atmosphere of grace and mutual learning enables Christians to build a more cohesive and vibrant faith community.

### **Biblical Foundations of the Study**

The Bible is the pillar of Christianity, serving as the authority, showing God's directives for the faith's beliefs and practices. As the foundation of Christianity, the Bible provides the lens through which this investigation of diverse theologies and traditions extends (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 2 Timothy 3:16-17). A call for unity and love amongst Christians is mentioned and highlighted throughout Scripture, demonstrated by Jesus' directives for the disciples to love one another as He has loved them (*English Standard Version*, 2001, John 13:34-35). However, modern America is increasingly divisive within Christianity despite the clear commands within the Bible, especially regarding emergent and progressive categories that consider how contemporary should impact views of biblical authority. These individuals consider how social norms, and secular issues should be considered within Christianity.

This transition from traditional practices and beliefs contradicts 2 Peter 1:20-21, which argues the timelessness of Scripture, transcending current societal factors (*English Standard Version*, 2001). The Bible's inerrancy and truth seen in 2 Timothy 4:3-4 warns that over time believers may interpret God's word to fit their narratives, picking and choosing parts to follow that can be twisted to excuse or condone otherwise contradictory behaviors (*English Standard Version*, 2001). Those identifying as Christians in America are finding themselves at odds more often, with differing interpretations and adherence to Scripture.

The Bible teaches how believers should engage with people, directing them to disjoin

from the temptation of sin by striving to be like Jesus in action and thought. While Christians are instructed to be the light of the world, the Bible forewarns against conforming to ways of the world and instead renew their minds (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Matthew 5:13-14, Romans 12:2). These commands guide believers on navigating between sociocultural trends, influences by secularization, and adopting biblical interpretations that condone sin or attempt to redefine Scripture.

The adoption of progressive and modernized views of the Bible, which questions its inerrancy due to justifications of elements not applying to modern society, poses significant threats to the unity of believers. Matthew 24:12 demonstrates this as Jesus warns of spiritual perils in a largely lukewarm Christian culture, delivering a crucial message on the dangers of individualizing or modernizing biblical truths (*English Standard Version*, 2001). The emergent nature of modern Christian obedience to biblical doctrines is reinforced in John 15:18 as Jesus expresses, "If the world hates you, remember it hated me first," which underlines potential tensions between Christian fidelity to biblical teachings and secular culture (*English Standard Version*, 2001). Ephesians 4:11-13 describes expectations for church leaders' conduct when guiding believers and encouraging faithfulness to biblical authority, which is becoming varied across denominations across America as contentions arise (*English Standard Version*, 2001).

The issues due to the departure from traditional adherence and interpretation of the Bible in modern America is seen in James 1:22-25, "Don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves," setting a foundation for discussing the practice gap and disputes among Christians (*English Standard Version*, 2001). These doctrines from the Bible serve as the cornerstone for Christianity; however, as the religion evolves in contemporary America, the opinions of its inerrancy continue to cause division among believers.

Concluding, the tensions ingrained within the Christian faith in America range according to individual and group interpretations of Scripture, creating an evident divide despite their common foundation. Examining how prospective views are shaped by secularization and contemporary issues is critical to unifying denominations of Christians, allowing for an understanding regardless of changing times.

### **Summary**

In summary, the growing divisions within contemporary American Christianity are fueled by sociocultural matters and the emergence of progressive biblical interpretations (Alu, 2020). These factors conflict with traditional Christian principles and prompt academic researchers to explore these complexities more deeply. The Bible carefully instructs navigating modern societal tensions, warning Christians to resist conforming to the world and instead be renewed in Christ (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Romans 12:2). These complicated sociocultural and theological dynamics call for analyzing how these components shape biblical understandings to facilitate common ground amidst diversifications. Christians must form their self-identity in foundational religious doctrines despite contradicting viewpoints. Scripture delivers guidance for conveying faith in modern America while offering the Church ways to pursue harmony, diversity, and upholding truth.

The next chapter conveys the research methods for this study, including details on the procedures, instruments, participants, data collection, and analysis plans to empirically study the facets affecting Christians with divergent viewpoints in contemporary America. Quantitative and qualitative approaches to understanding complex and often problematic topics with statistical and narrative measures offer social science research with biblical doctrines to encourage productive dialogues within modern Christianity. The research methodology seeks to illuminate



information and data regarding sociocultural influences, biblical interpretations, divergent worldviews, and reconciliation methods.

## CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHOD

### Overview

The Research Method section explains the processes used in this study on socioeconomic influences in modern American Christianity. The intention is to demonstrate a rigorous methodology aligned with the study's objectives and questions. This section first describes the explanatory sequential mixed methods design, explaining the sequential implementation of quantitative and qualitative phases to yield complementary insights on this complex issue. The Participants portion details the intended participants - adult Christians from diverse backgrounds. It discusses inclusion criteria, purposeful sampling techniques, recruitment strategies, sample sizes and associated permissions, ethics, and confidentiality safeguards.

The Study Procedures section chronologically describes recruitment, obtaining informed consent, participant interactions, conducting surveys and interviews, timeframe, setting, and data collection and storage protocols. Relevant materials like consent forms are appended. Key instruments like the online questionnaire and semi-structured interview guidelines are detailed, including their purposes, structure, variables, and evidence supporting their validity and reliability. The Operationalization of Variables section defines and explains the measurement of key concepts and variables. Analysis methods for quantitative and qualitative data are outlined thoroughly, including specific statistical techniques and thematic analysis strategies to address the research questions and hypotheses. Corresponding results, such as statistical tables, appear in the results chapter.

The study will also address vital ethical and methodological issues. The Delimitations and Limitations sections will acknowledge the deliberate scope and potential limitations, while accepted foundational principles will be noted in Assumptions. Together, these factors

demonstrate the study's meticulousness. The Research Method section summarizes these critical aspects and enables scholars to assess the methodological rigor and potential for replication. The goal is to demonstrate a methodical, ethical, and stringent approach to exploring the research question.

### **Research Design**

This study utilized a mixed-methods, grounded theory design to explore disagreements between traditional and progressive Christians regarding Christian identity. This approach integrated quantitative surveys with qualitative interviews and developed an inductive theoretical model grounded in the data (Creswell, 2018).

### **Participants**

Participants included self-identifying Christian adults ages 25 and older who live in Southwest or Southeastern Florida. It draws participants from various Christian backgrounds, including Traditional/Conservative Christian denominations such as the Southern Baptist Convention and Progressive/Liberal denominations like the United Church of Christ, the Episcopal Church, and, notably, the United Methodist Church (UMC) in Florida. Additionally, individuals attending non-denominational churches were also considered.

### **Study Procedures**

The inclusion criteria mandated that participants must be 25 years or older, self-identify as Christians, and possess English proficiency in reading and writing. Exclusion criteria encompassed individuals who do not identify as Christians and those who are under 25. Purposive sampling methods were utilized to recruit participants who could provide relevant perspectives on the research questions regarding disagreements between traditional and progressive Christians. The inclusion criteria required that participants self-identify as either

traditionally conservative or progressively liberal Christians and be 25 years or older. The purposive sampling approach facilitated recruiting traditional and progressive Christians meeting the criteria from various backgrounds, denominations, age ranges, and geographic regions. Data from this purposefully selected sample was intended to elicit subjective viewpoints, meanings, and lived experiences that could provide nuanced insights into debates over Christian identity and orthodoxy.

Recruitment involved posts, announcements, and flyers distributed through platforms and networks frequented by the target populations. These included Christian denomination Facebook and Instagram pages, physical church bulletins, Christian college campus flyers, and Reddit forums focused on Christianity. Snowball sampling allowed participants to share study information within their social and organizational networks.

A target sample of 115 participants, with equal numbers of self-identified traditional and progressive Christians, was recruited for the online survey. This satisfied the recommended guidelines for sufficient power in survey research (Bartlett et al., 2001). The sample included adults ages 25 and older who self-identify as Christian and have proficiency in English. Recruitment utilized purposeful sampling to encompass diversity in denomination, age, ethnicity, and geographic region within each subgroup.

For semi-structured interviews, theoretical sampling methods were used to purposively recruit 20-25 participants representing a range of perspectives until saturation occurs. Saturation is defined as the point when additional interviews yield no substantial new information. This ensured comprehensive data on the factors influencing biblical interpretation and adherence. Data collection involved an online survey and semi-structured video interviews. The survey gathered quantitative data on demographics, religious affiliation, practices, and attitudes toward

social issues, while the interviews elicited qualitative data regarding perspectives on biblical interpretation and application.

### **Recruitment Protocol**

Recruitment materials, carefully designed to be visually appealing and informative, explained the purpose of the study, who can participate, and how long the study takes. These materials included various media, such as social media posts, flyers, bulletin announcements, and a dedicated research website section. They also provided contact information for the researcher.

#### ***Recruitment materials***

Recruitment materials were distributed through various channels to reach as many potential participants as possible. These means included:

- Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Reddit, and LinkedIn were popular social media platforms with the target demographic.
- Physical locations, such as churches, academic institutions, community centers, and cafes, in Southwest and Southeastern Florida.
- Church bulletins in traditional, progressive, and non-denominational churches in Southwest and Southeastern Florida.

This dissemination strategy ensured the study was highly visible and accessible to potential participants. The researcher responded to all initial inquiries from prospective participants within 24 hours. The response included a brief study overview, including its purpose, procedures, risks and benefits, and eligibility criteria. Any questions prospective participants were answered.

### **Screening and Consent**

### ***Eligibility Criteria***

The researcher screened all prospective participants to make sure that they met the following eligibility criteria:

- Be at least 25 years old
- Self-identify as a Christian
- Be proficient in reading and writing English

A brief online survey assessed participants' eligibility. Participants who did not meet the criteria were informed they were not eligible for the study.

### ***Informed Consent:***

Eligible participants were given a comprehensive consent form that explained the study's objectives, procedures, risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and participant rights. The consent form is issued at the start of the quantitative survey. Participants had the opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification before participation. Upon consent, the form was submitted via Qualtrics and electronically signed. This process ensured that participants provided informed, uncoerced, and voluntary consent.

### ***Formal Enrollment:***

Once participants signed the consent form, they were formally enrolled in the study.

### **Survey Distribution and Completion**

Enrolled participants received an email with their unique identification code and an anonymous link to the Qualtrics survey. This design ensured that participants remained confidential and that their survey data could be combined with their subsequent interview data for comprehensive analysis. Participants were asked to complete the Qualtrics survey within one week. To encourage participation, reminder emails were sent to participants who had not

completed the survey. The 30-minute survey included a well-crafted questionnaire with 50 items. These items covered diverse topics, including participant demographics, religious background, behaviors, attitudes, psychological factors, and an open-ended section that gathered participants' perspectives, all relevant to the study's research questions.

### **Interview Scheduling and Completion**

The researcher scheduled 60—to 90-minute video interviews with enrolled participants. An online calendaring platform facilitated scheduling, allowing participants to select a date and time that worked best for them.

The interviews adhered to a semi-structured format, guided by an interview protocol that included ten fundamental inquiries and planned prompts designed to elicit profound discussions about biblical interpretation, Christian identity, doctrinal orthodoxy, and the factors influencing doctrinal adherence. The semi-structured format also allowed for ad hoc follow-up questions and clarifications.

To enhance the credibility and integrity of the data, annotated transcripts of the interviews were sent for participant review and corresponding feedback. Participants had one week to provide clarifications or supplementary insights if needed.

### **Instrumentation and Measurement**

This research study used a mixed-methods approach, with quantitative surveys and qualitative semi-structured interviews based on grounded theory techniques.

#### **Quantitative Measures**

The quantitative phase of the study included a comprehensive assessment using multiple validated instruments to measure various psychological, identity, and religious constructs. These measures helped contribute to the groundwork for analyzing the relationships between

personality traits, identity aspects, and levels of religious orthodoxy and centrality among the participants. Each measure was designed to capture distinct yet interconnected aspects of the participants' beliefs, practices, and psychological profiles. This contributed to a holistic understanding of the factors influencing Christian identity and practice.

### ***Demographics***

This section gathered basic background information about participants, such as age, gender, ethnicity, religious affiliation, and education level.

### ***Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ; Cheek & Cheek, 2018)***

This questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not important, 5 = extremely important) to evaluate the importance of personal, relational, social, and collective identity aspects. Higher scores indicate greater importance of that identity aspect.

### ***Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 2008)***

The BFI measures the Big Five personality dimensions (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism) using a 5-point Likert scale. Higher scores reflect higher levels of each trait.

### ***The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber & Huber, 2012)***

This scale uses a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree) to assess the centrality and importance of religious beliefs across five dimensions in a person's life. Higher scores indicate greater religious centrality.

### ***The Christian Orthodoxy Scale (CO; Fullerton & Hunsberger, 1982)***

This scale uses a 6-point Likert scale (-3 = strongly disagree, +3 = strongly agree) to assess agreement with traditional Christian tenets. Higher scores indicate greater orthodoxy.

## **Quantitative Survey**



The 30-minute online Qualtrics survey had 40 questions that assessed:

- **Demographics:** (10 questions) This section gathered basic information about participants
- **Big Five Personality Questionnaire (BFI;** John et al., 2008) (14 questions) measured five personality dimensions (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, neuroticism) with good reliability ( $\alpha = .70$ )
- **Christian Orthodoxy Scale (CO;** Hunsberger, 1989) (6 questions) measures adherence to core Christian doctrines. It assessed beliefs about God's existence, the Trinity, Jesus' divinity, salvation, and the Bible. A higher score indicates greater orthodoxy. The scale has a strong reliability ( $\alpha = 0.97$ )
- **The Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS;** Huber & Huber, 2012) (5 questions) assessed the importance of religious beliefs and practices in participants' lives with strong reliability ( $\alpha = 0.96$ )
- **Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ;** Cheek & Cheek, 2018) (5 questions) evaluated the importance of personal, relational, social, and collective identity aspects. The AIQ has acceptable validity, internal consistency, and retest reliability.

### **Qualitative Measures**

The qualitative phase of this mixed-methods study involved in-depth, semi-structured video interviews conducted over Zoom. These interviews explored participants' beliefs, practices, and perspectives in greater detail, providing a rich contextual understanding that complements the quantitative data. Participants were categorized based on their CO and CRS scores, identifying them as either "traditional" or "progressive" Christians.

### ***Open-Ended Responses***

Participants were prompted to provide in-depth, text-based responses to open-ended

questions about their views on biblical interpretation, Christian identity, doctrinal orthodoxy, and the factors influencing their adherence to religious doctrine.

### ***Semi-Structured Interview Questions***

Participants partook in semi-structured video interviews, during which they are asked questions about their views on biblical interpretation, Christian identity, doctrinal orthodoxy, and the factors influencing their adherence to religious doctrine.

### **Qualitative Interviews**

Semi-structured video interviews were conducted via Zoom, lasting between 60 to 90 minutes. The interview protocol consisted of 10 core questions, with follow-up probes to elicit depth and detail. The questions explored biblical interpretation, Christian identity, denominational differences, doctrinal orthodoxy, and influences on aligning beliefs and behaviors. Several strategies were implemented to strengthen qualitative reliability and validity. Member-checking of transcripts was conducted, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their statements. Detailed protocol descriptions were provided to ensure consistency and transparency in the interview process. Rich, descriptive responses were sought to capture the complexity of participants' experiences. Researcher bracketing was employed to acknowledge and mitigate potential biases.

### **Operationalization of Variables**

#### **Independent Variable (IV):**

- Christian Doctrinal Beliefs: Participants' adherence to orthodox Christian beliefs, as measured by the Christian Orthodoxy Scale (CO; Hunsberger, 1989). Higher scores indicate stronger adherence to traditional Christian doctrines.

#### **Dependent Variables (DVs):**

- **Religious Adherence:** The degree to which religious beliefs and practices are central to participants' lives, assessed using the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber & Huber, 2012). Higher scores indicate a greater centrality of religion in daily life.
- **Belief-Behavior Alignment:** The consistency between participants' reported beliefs and their religious behaviors, measured through a composite score derived from the Christian Orthodoxy Scale (CO; Hunsberger, 1989) and the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber & Huber, 2012). Higher scores indicate greater alignment between beliefs and behaviors.
- **Integration of Secular Practices:** The extent to which participants incorporate non-religious elements into their Christian lives, assessed through relevant items from the Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ; Cheek & Cheek, 2018) and the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS; Huber & Huber, 2012). Higher scores suggest greater integration of secular practices.

**Mediating/Moderating Variables:**

- **Psychological Factors:** A composite variable that included both personality traits and identity aspects, comprising the following:
- **Personality Traits:** Participants' scores on the five dimensions of personality as measured by the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 2008): openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism.
- **Identity Aspects:** Participants' scores on different dimensions of identity (personal, relational, social, collective) were assessed using the Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ; Cheek & Cheek, 2018).

These operationally defined variables provided a clear framework for examining the

relationships between Christian doctrinal beliefs, religious adherence, belief-behavior alignment, and integration of secular practices. They also considered the mediating or moderating effects of personality traits and identity aspects.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Quantitative Data Analysis**

This section delineated the quantitative data analysis procedures employed in this study, designed to comprehensively explore the relationships between doctrinal beliefs, Christian practices, and the integration of secular practices within Christian life. All analyses were conducted using JASP statistical software.

#### *Descriptive Statistics*

Descriptive statistics, including means (M), standard deviations (SD), and standard errors (SE), were calculated for all key variables: the Christian Orthodoxy Scale (CO), the Centrality of Religiosity Scale (CRS), the Big Five Inventory (BFI) personality traits (openness, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism), and the Aspects of Identity Questionnaire (AIQ). These statistics provide an overview of the data distribution and central tendencies.

Frequency tables were generated for demographic variables, including geographic location, gender, ethnicity, education level, marital status, religious background, length of time as a practicing Christian, denominational identification, and church attendance. This analysis offered contextual information about the sample composition and facilitated the identification of patterns within the data.

#### *Inferential Statistics*

Statistical inferences were employed to draw conclusions and extrapolate findings from

the collected sample data to the broader population. The following inferential statistics were used:

**Correlation analysis:** Correlation analysis examined the magnitude and direction of the relationships between participants' doctrinal beliefs (IV) and their Christian practices (DV-1) and the integration of secular practices (IV) with Christian life (DV-2). Pearson's correlation coefficients were calculated to determine whether there is a statistically significant correlation between these variables.

**Regression analysis:** Regression analysis explored more complex relationships and predictive factors. Multiple regression analysis evaluated the influence of various independent variables (IVs) on the dependent variables (DVs) of interest. This analysis helped determine which specific doctrinal beliefs (IV) are significant predictors of participants' alignment between doctrinal beliefs and Christian practices (DV-1) or the integration of secular practices with Christian life (DV-2).

**Comparative analysis:** Comparative analysis was used to identify potential differences or variations in the research outcomes based on specific characteristics or groups of participants. Given the diverse nature of the sample, this study involved comparing participants' responses from different Christian denominations and backgrounds.

**T-tests or ANOVA tests:** To assess variance, (ANOVA) tests were conducted. These tests assessed potential differences and examined whether there are statistically significant variations in the alignment between doctrinal beliefs and practices (DV-1) and the integration of secular practices (DV-2) based on participants' characteristics, such as their Christian denomination, age, ethnicity, or geographic region.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The qualitative phase of this study involved semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, who were categorized evenly into "traditional" and "progressive" groups based on survey responses. Following a grounded theory approach, data analysis proceeded through several methodological steps to ensure rigor and depth in understanding participants' perspectives.

### *Analytical Process*

**Open Coding:** Initial transcripts were subjected to line-by-line open coding to identify discrete concepts and ideas within the data.

**Axial Coding:** Codes from open coding were grouped into broader categories, allowing for exploring relationships between these categories.

**Selective Coding:** Core themes were identified through selective coding, focusing on those that directly address the research questions.

**Constant Comparative Method:** Throughout coding, a constant comparative method was applied to continuously compare data within and across interviews, refining categories and ensuring consistency.

**Memoing:** Analytical memos were written during coding to document emergent insights and reflections, contributing to the interpretive process.

Member checking enhanced credibility and confirmability, allowing participants to review and validate their interviews' interpretations. Additionally, an external auditor reviewed coding decisions and themes to ensure methodological rigor and minimize bias.

### *Relevant Codes:*

- Biblical Interpretation Approach
- Biblical Hermeneutics

- Cultural Adaptation Strategies
- Worship Preferences
- Faith Identity Formation
- Negotiating Orthodoxy in Modern Context
- Centrality of Faith
- Integration of Secular and Sacred Practices
- Psychological Factors in Faith Expression
- Cognitive Dissonance in Faith
- Theological Flexibility

### **Delimitations, Assumptions, and Limitations**

This study was geographically limited to Southwest and Southeastern Florida, focusing on Christian adults aged 25 and older. This regional focus, while practical, limits the generalizability of findings to other areas with different sociocultural contexts. The study examined various Christian perspectives, including traditional/conservative, progressive/liberal, and non-denominational churches. However, the diversity within these categories may not be fully captured, potentially limiting the applicability of findings to unrepresented denominations.

The study assumes that participants provide truthful and accurate responses to the quantitative survey and possess sufficient self-awareness to offer meaningful insights into their beliefs, practices, and psychological factors. However, responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias, particularly on religious orthodoxy and adherence measures. The validity and reliability of the study rely on established scales; however, the accuracy of these measures depends on participants' self-reports and the scales' relevance to the study's specific context of examining the relationship between orthodoxy, adherence, and psychological factors.

Participants were assumed to have sufficient English proficiency to engage with the survey materials. This may have introduced a language bias, potentially excluding individuals with limited English skills from the study. Conducting the survey online may have introduced access and digital literacy issues, potentially excluding individuals uncomfortable with or lacking access to online platforms. The study strived to minimize these barriers but acknowledged the potential for bias in the sample due to the online format.

Despite using purposive sampling, selection bias may have occurred. Volunteers for the study may have differed systematically from non-participants, potentially affecting the sample's representativeness. The researcher acknowledges these potential biases and implements strategies to mitigate their impact.

The cross-sectional design of this study provided an idea of the relationships between Christian doctrinal beliefs, religious adherence, belief-behavior alignment, and integration of secular practices at a single point in time. While this approach is suitable for examining correlations, it cannot establish causal relationships between variables.

These delimitations, assumptions, and limitations provide context for interpreting the study's findings on the relationships between Christian doctrinal beliefs, religious adherence, belief-behavior alignment, integration of secular practices, and psychological factors in Southwest and Southeastern Florida. They underscored the need for cautious application of results and highlighted areas for future research in different contexts or with alternative methodologies.

### **Summary**

This chapter offered a comprehensive overview of the mixed-methods research methodology employed in this study. The study utilized quantitative surveys and qualitative



interviews within the grounded theory framework to explore the factors influencing biblical interpretation and adherence among Contemporary American Christians in Southwest and Southeastern Florida.

The quantitative surveys to collect demographic data and assess participants' doctrinal beliefs, Christian practices, and integration of secular practices into their Christian life, along with the qualitative interviews, provided in-depth insights into participants' experiences and perspectives on these topics. Grounded theory analysis is utilized to examine qualitative data. This approach allowed for new theories and insights from the data rather than imposing preconceived notions. The study's deliberate delimitations, assumptions, and limitations were carefully considered to ensure the rigor and ethical integrity of the research. These delimitations are necessary to ensure feasibility and to obtain a diverse sample of participants.

## CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

### Overview

This mixed methods study explored the relationship between the beliefs and practices of Christians in Florida who self-identify as having progressive versus traditional biblical worldviews and their perspectives on popular culture and church practices in modern America. It examined how personality dimensions, religiosity, and psychological factors influence these relationships. Specifically, it investigated how openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism relate to the beliefs and practices of progressive and traditional Protestants regarding popular culture and church practices, as well as how cognitive dissonance moderates these relationships.

The study explored psychological factors leading traditional and progressive denominations towards divergent approaches in incorporating popular culture into church services and aligning doctrinal beliefs with practices. Integrating quantitative and qualitative data is expected to provide an enhanced explanatory framework for understanding the psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics contributing to divisions between traditionalist and progressive Christians on biblical interpretation and adherence despite common foundations.

The quantitative portion of the study utilized Qualtrics for data collection. Demographic figures and other survey data were compiled within Qualtrics. The data was then exported from Qualtrics and organized into a discernible spreadsheet using Excel. Subsequently, the organized data was uploaded into JASP for analysis. JASP was selected for its user-friendliness and cost-efficiency. The qualitative portion of the study employed Zoom to conduct online interviews. Each transcript was uploaded into NVivo for analysis. NVivo facilitated open coding and the development of descriptive codes and themes. The joint display converged data table was with

Microsoft Word.

## **Research Questions**

### **Research Questions**

RQ1: What personality and identity constructs contribute to the misalignment between an individual's professed Christian doctrinal beliefs and their actual behaviors and adherence in daily life?

RQ2: How do cognitive and behavioral factors shape the formation and expression of distinct Christian identities in contemporary American society?

RQ3: What psychological factors contribute to Christians' divergent approaches to integrating culture into their faith practices, resulting in varying perceptions of cultural engagement and assimilation?

## **Descriptive Results**

### **Participants and Demographics**

The data collection process occurred from February to March 2024, following approval from Liberty University for access to the Qualtrics platform. Initially, 124 individuals accessed the online survey, with six declining participation. A final sample of 118 participants completed the quantitative survey portion. The sample was equally distributed between Southwest Florida (50.0%) and Southeast Florida (50.0%). Female participants constituted the majority (69.5%), males comprised 28.8% of the sample, and 1.7% chose the response "Prefer not to say."

The age distribution of participants was as follows: 25-34 years (42.4%), 35-44 years (26.3%), 45-54 years (16.1%), and 55 years and above (15.3%). This distribution indicates a predominantly younger sample, with 68.7% of participants under 45 years old. Ethnicity data,

available for 87 participants, revealed Caucasian/White as the largest group (60.9%), followed by Hispanic/Latino (25.3%), African American/Black (9.2%), and Other (4.6%).

Educational attainment data provided by 87 respondents demonstrated a high level of education. The majority held a bachelor's degree (49.4%), followed by some college/associate's degree (26.4%), master's degree (11.5%), doctoral degree (6.9%), high school diploma or equivalent (4.6%), and other (1.1%). Among the 83 participants who reported their marital status, the majority were single (53%), with married (38.6%), divorced (4.8%), and other (3.6%).

### ***Religious Background and Practices***

Regarding religious background, 61% of participants reported being raised in a Christian family or community, while 19.5% converted to Christianity later in life. A small percentage (1.7%) reverted to Christianity after a period of non-religiosity, and 17.8% selected "Other" for their religious background. The duration of Christian practice varied considerably among participants. The majority (57.6%) reported more than 20 years of practice, with the remaining participants distributed across less than 1 year (8.5%), 1-5 years (12.7%), 6-10 years (11.9%), and 11-20 years (9.3%).

Denominational affiliation analysis revealed a strong preference for non-denominational Christianity (59.3%). Other denominations represented included Baptist (4.2%), Lutheran (3.4%), Methodist (4.2%), Presbyterian (5.1%), and Pentecostal (1.7%). Church attendance patterns indicated frequent participation, with 59.3% of participants attending weekly. The remaining participants reported attending occasionally (17.8%), rarely (11%), monthly (5.9%), or never (5.9%). Table 1 displays the demographic characteristics of participants.

**Table 1***Demographic Characteristics of the Sample*

	<i>n</i>	<i>%</i>
Age		
18-24	0	0%
25-34	50	42%
35-44	31	26%
45-54	19	16%
55 and above	18	15%
Geographic Location		
Southwest Florida	59	50%
Southeast Florida	59	50%
Other	0	0%
Gender		
Male	34	29%
Female	82	69%
Other	2	2%
Marital Status		
Single	32	39%
Married	44	53%
Divorced	4	5%
Other	3	4%
Education Level		
High School Diploma	4	5%
Some college	23	26%
Bachelor's degree	43	49%
Master's degree	10	11%
Doctoral degree	6	7%
Other	1	1%

*Note.* N = 118.

These descriptive statistics comprehensively overview the sample's demographic characteristics and religious practices. Findings reveal diversity among participants regarding age, ethnicity, and educational background, with a strong representation of young adults,

females, and non-denominational Christians. The high frequency of church attendance and long-term practice of Christianity among many participants suggest a sample of committed believers.

### *Participant Descriptives for Qualitative Interviews*

Following the quantitative phase, an in-depth, semi-structured interview was conducted to further explore participants' beliefs, practices, and perspectives. Participants were categorized as "traditional" or "progressive" based on their CO and CRS scores. These scales assessed doctrinal adherence and religious centrality using Likert-type items ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Participants scoring 4 or 5 on specific survey questions were classified as "traditional," indicating strong agreement with orthodox Christian beliefs and high religious centrality. Those typically scoring 1 or 2 were categorized as "progressive," suggesting less orthodox views and lower religious centrality.

A selection of 10 participants from each category for the qualitative phase was chosen using purposive sampling. However, of the 20 invited participants, only 16 completed the interviews. Among the four who did not participate, two cited scheduling conflicts, one experienced a family emergency, and one did not respond to follow-up communications. Table 2 presents the demographic characteristics of these interview participants.

The final sample (N = 16) represented diverse demographics: the age range was from 25 to 55+ years, with 50% under 45 years old. The sample included six males (29%) and 10 females (69%). Geographic distribution showed 43.75% from Southwest Florida and 56.25% from Southeast Florida. Regarding marital status, 62.50% were single, 31.25% married, and 6.25% divorced. The length of time as a practicing Christian varied widely, with 56.25% having more than 20 years of practice, 18.75% with 1-5 years, and 25% with less than 1 year. Religious backgrounds were diverse: 50% were raised in Christian families or communities, 12.50%

converted later in life, and 37.50% reverted to Christianity after a period away. Denominational affiliations included non-denominational (62.50%), Baptist (12.50%), Lutheran (6.25%), Methodist (12.50%), and Pentecostal (6.25%). Church attendance patterns showed 50% attending weekly, 25% monthly, 18.75% occasionally, and 6.25% rarely. This diverse sample aimed to capture a comprehensive range of experiences and viewpoints within contemporary American Christianity, showing the balance of traditional and progressive perspectives (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Qualitative Participant Demographics*

	<i>n</i>	%
<b>Age</b>		
25-34	4	25%
35-44	4	25%
45-54	3	18.75%
55 and above	5	31.25%
<b>Geographic Location</b>		
Male	7	43.75%
Female	9	56.25%
<b>Marital Status</b>		
Single	10	62.50%
Married	5	31.25%
Divorced	1	6.25%
<b>Length of time as a practicing Christian</b>		
Less than 1 year	4	25%
1-5 years	3	18.75%
More than 20 years	9	56.25%
<b>Religious Background</b>		
Raised in a Christian family or community	8	50%
Converted to Christianity later in life	2	12.50%
Reverted to Christianity after a period	6	37.50%
<b>Denominational Affiliation</b>		
Non-denominational	10	62.50%
Baptist	2	12.50%
Lutheran	1	6.25%
Methodist	2	12.50%
Pentecostal	1	6.25%
<b>Church Attendance</b>		
Weekly	8	50%
Monthly	4	25%
Occasionally	3	18.75%
Rarely	1	6.25%

*Note.* N=16.



**Table 3***Detailed Demographic Characteristics of Individual Interview Participants*

Participant ID	Age Range	Geographic Location (FL)	Length of Time as a Practicing Christian	Group Designation
P1	25-34	Southwest	More than 20 years	Traditional
P2	35-44	Southeast	1-5 years	Progressive
P3	55 and older	Southeast	More than 20 years	Traditional
P4	45-54	Southeast	Less than 1 year	Progressive
P5	25-34	Southwest	1-5 years	Traditional
P6	35-44	Southeast	More than 20 years	Progressive
P7	45-54	Southwest	More than 20 years	Traditional
P8	55 and older	Southeast	Less than 1 year	Progressive
P9	25-34	Southwest	1-5 years	Traditional
P10	35-44	Southwest	More than 20 years	Progressive
P11	45-54	Southwest	Less than 1 year	Traditional
P12	55 and older	Southeast	1-5 years	Progressive
P13	25-34	Southwest	More than 20 years	Traditional
P14	35-44	Southeast	Less than 1 year	Progressive
P15	55 and older	Southeast	More than 20 years	Traditional
P16	55 and older	Southeast	More than 20 years	Progressive

*Note.* This table summarizes the demographic characteristics of participants in the qualitative interviews. Group designations were based on Christian Orthodoxy and Centrality of Religiosity Scale scores, categorizing participants as "Traditional" or "Progressive."

Following open coding, axial coding was used to explore relationships between the initial codes and group them into broader categories and subcategories. This process involved identifying connections between concepts and organizing them into a more structured framework. A focus was on how these categories related to one another, such as the potential influence of biblical interpretation approaches on cultural adaptation.

Selective coding involved identifying a core category that captured the study's central phenomenon and integrating all major themes around this central concept. In this study, the core category emerged as negotiating Christian identity in secular American culture, reflecting the overarching process participants engaged in as they navigated their faith within society. All other categories, such as biblical hermeneutics, cultural adaptation, and spiritual identity formation, were then related to this core theme to develop a coherent theoretical framework.

Throughout the coding process, constant comparison was constantly employed, continuously comparing new data to existing codes and categories to refine and develop the emerging theory. Additionally, analytical memos were used to document thoughts, emerging patterns, and potential theoretical insights, which guided the analysis and theory development process. This approach to qualitative data analysis allowed for the systematic examination of how Christians in contemporary America negotiate their faith identities and practices with modern cultural contexts.

### **Study Findings**

This section presents the study's findings. The analysis combines quantitative data from surveys and qualitative data from semi-structured interviews to comprehensively understand the relationships between Christian doctrinal beliefs, religious adherence, and psychological factors. A series of regression analyses assessed the relationships of CO, the BFI, AIQ, and CRS. The

following sections detail the findings from these analyses, focusing on predicting orthodoxy and centrality of faith.

***Quantitative Findings:***

A regression analysis was conducted to predict CO based on the BFI. This model accounted for 31.8% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.318$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.287$ ) and was statistically significant  $F(5, 112) = 10.440$ ,  $p < .001$ . In this model, agreeableness ( $B = 0.431$ ,  $t = 3.351$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and neuroticism ( $B = -0.283$ ,  $t = -3.951$ ,  $p < .001$ ) were significant predictors of Christian orthodoxy (see Tables 1, 2, and 3).

The regression model, which includes questions from the AIQ, CO, and the BFI, accounts for 47.6% of the variance in the centrality of the Christian faith in a person's life ( $R^2 = 0.476$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.421$ ). The model is statistically significant  $F(11, 106) = 8.744$ ,  $p < .001$ . Table 6 shows that of the variables included, only two were significant predictors (see Table 4). CO was the strongest predictor ( $t = 6.443$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\beta = 0.581$ ), producing the following prediction equation:  $y = 0.946 + (0.575 \times \text{CO})$  – where  $y$  is CRS (see Table 5). Item 3 of the AIQ ("*My personal self-evaluation, the private opinion I have of myself*") was also a significant predictor ( $t = 2.267$ ,  $p = .025$ ,  $\beta = 0.182$ ), producing the following prediction equation:  $y = 0.946 + (0.195 \times \text{AIQ} - \text{Item 3 score})$  – where  $y$  is CRS. No other included predictor, including the BFI, was statistically significant in the full model (see Table 6).

When examining the predictors individually, CO accounted for 41.3% of the variance individual for predicting CRS ( $R^2 = 0.413$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.408$ ). This model was statistically significant  $F(1, 116) = 81.712$ ,  $p < .001$ , producing the following equation:  $y = 1.093 + (0.636 \times \text{CO})$  – where  $y$  is CRS (see Tables 7, 8, and 9). Item 3 of the AIQ was also statistically significant as a predictor  $F(1, 116) = 9.136$ ,  $p = .003$ , accounting for 7.3% of the variance ( $R^2 =$

0.073, Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.065$ ). The analysis produced the equation  $y = 2.542 + (0.289 \times \text{AIQ Item 3})$ —where  $y$  is CRS (see Tables 10, 11, and 12).

A final regression analysis examined the relationship between the CRS, BFI, and AIQ, excluding CO. This model accounted for 20% of the variance in centrality ( $R^2 = 0.20$ , Adjusted  $R^2 = 0.16$ ) and was statistically significant  $F(6, 111) = 4.64, p < .001$ . Two predictors emerged as significant: neuroticism ( $B = -0.24, \beta = -0.29, t = -3.07, p = .003$ ) and AIQ ( $B = 0.29, \beta = 0.18, t = 2.05, p = .04$ ). The other BFI personality traits (openness, agreeableness, extraversion, and conscientiousness) did not significantly predict centrality (all  $p > .05$ ).

**Table 4***Model Summary - Christian Orthodoxy and Big Five Personality Traits*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE
H <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.958
H <sub>1</sub>	0.564	0.318	0.287	0.809

**Table 5***ANOVA*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
H <sub>1</sub>	Regression	34.170	5	6.834	10.440	< .001
	Residual	73.317	112	0.655		
	Total	107.487	117			

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown

**Table 6***Coefficients*

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standardized	t	p
H <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	4.094	0.088		46.403	< .001
H <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	3.185	0.855		3.726	< .001
	Openness	-0.015	0.148	-0.009	-0.103	0.918
	Agreeableness	0.431	0.129	0.310	3.351	0.001
	Extroversion	-0.148	0.082	-0.161	-1.799	0.075
	Conscientiousness	0.200	0.130	0.141	1.536	0.127
	Neuroticism	-0.283	0.072	-0.345	-3.951	< .001

**Linear Regression – Centrality****Table 7***Model Summary – Centrality of Religiosity, Big Five Personality Traits, Christian Orthodoxy, and Aspects of Identity*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	df1	df2	p
H <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.949	0.000		0	117	
H <sub>1</sub>	0.690	0.476	0.421	0.722	0.476	8.744	11	106	< .001

**Table 8***ANOVA*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	p
H <sub>1</sub>	Regression	34.170	5	6.834	10.440	< .001
	Residual	73.317	112	0.655		
	Total	107.487	117			

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

**Table 9***Coefficients*

Model		Unstandardized	Standard Error	Standard Error	t	p
H <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	3.698	0.087		42.339	< .001
H <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	0.946	0.871		1.087	0.280
	Openness	-0.154	0.137	-0.088	-1.122	0.264
	Agreeableness	-0.092	0.123	-0.066	-0.746	0.457
	Extroversion	-0.003	0.075	-0.004	-0.044	0.965
	Conscientiousness	0.096	0.118	0.068	0.811	0.419
	Neuroticism	-0.066	0.070	-0.081	-0.933	0.353
	Christian Orthodoxy Scale	0.575	0.089	0.581	6.443	< .001
	My reputation, what others think of me	-0.059	0.067	-0.072	-0.892	0.375
	My social behavior, such as the way I act when meeting people	0.061	0.094	0.055	0.646	0.519
	My personal self-evaluation, the private opinion I have of myself	0.195	0.086	0.182	2.267	0.025
	My feeling of being a unique person, being distinct from others	0.049	0.068	0.056	0.733	0.465
	Knowing that I continue to be essentially the same inside even though life involves many changes	0.056	0.066	0.065	0.855	0.394



## Linear Regression – Christian Orthodoxy

**Table 10**

*Model Summary – Christian Orthodoxy*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	df1	df2	p
H <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.949	0.000	81.71	0	117	
H <sub>1</sub>	0.643	0.413	0.408	0.730	0.413	2	1	116	< .001

**Table 11**

*ANOVA*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	p
H <sub>0</sub>	Regression	43.536	1	0.949	0.000	81.71
	Residual	61.804	116	0.730	0.413	2
	Total	105.340	117			

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

**Table 12***Coefficients*

Model		Unstandardized	Std Error	Standardized	t	p
H <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	3.698	0.087	0.087	42.339	0.087
H <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	1.093	0.296	0.296	3.691	0.296
	Christian Orthodoxy Scale	0.636	0.070	0.070	9.039	0.070

**Table 13***Model Summary – Centrality*

Model	R	R <sup>2</sup>	Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	RMSE	R <sup>2</sup> Change	F Change	df1	df2	p
H <sub>0</sub>	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.949	0.000		0	117	
H <sub>1</sub>	0.270	0.073	0.065	0.917	0.073	9.136	1	116	0.003

**Table 14***ANOVA*

Model		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Squares	F	p
H <sub>1</sub>	Regression	7.691	1	7.691	9.136	0.003
	Residual	97.649	116	0.842		
	Total	105.340	117			

*Note.* The intercept model is omitted, as no meaningful information can be shown.

**Table 15**

Model		Unstandardized	Std Error	Standardized	t	p
H <sub>0</sub>	(Intercept)	3.698	0.087		42.339	< .001
H <sub>1</sub>	(Intercept)	2.542	0.392		6.487	< .001
	My personal self-evaluation, the private opinion I have of myself	0.289	0.096	0.270	3.023	0.003

### *Qualitative Findings:*

This section presents the findings from the qualitative analysis of semi-structured interviews with 16 participants, evenly divided into "traditional" and "progressive" groups based on their CO and CRS scores. NVivo software analyzed and facilitated the coding process and theme development.

**Data Integration.** The qualitative analysis was conducted in parallel with the quantitative analysis, allowing for ongoing integration of insights from both data sources. Findings from the quantitative analysis, particularly regarding the relationships between personality factors, religious orthodoxy, and centrality of faith, informed the development of interview questions and guided the exploration of themes in the qualitative data. Conversely, emerging themes from the qualitative analysis provided context and depth to the quantitative results, offering explanations for observed statistical relationships.

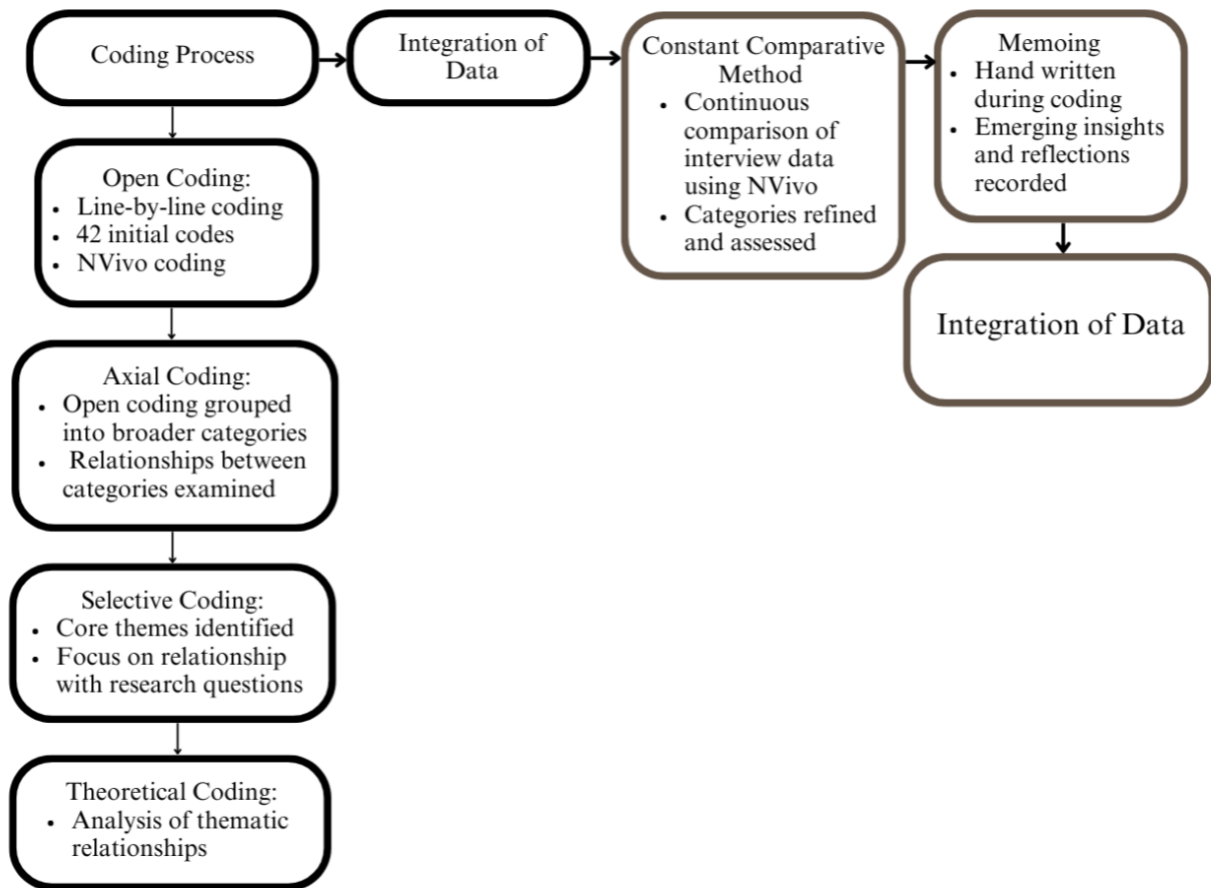
Quantitative findings from the CO, CRS, and BFI results informed the qualitative analysis and participant selection. Participants scoring high on the CO ( $M = 4.094$ ,  $SD = 0.958$ ) and CRS ( $M = 3.698$ ,  $SD = 0.949$ ) were categorized as "traditional," while those with lower scores were classified as "progressive." The BFI results showed significant correlations between agreeableness and CO scores ( $r = .431$ ,  $p = .001$ ) and between neuroticism and CO scores ( $r = -.283$ ,  $p < .001$ ), which guided our exploration of personality factors in faith expression. Higher scores on the BFI indicate more potent expressions of the respective personality traits.

Purposeful sampling based on these quantitative results ensured a diverse representation of perspectives. Triangulation was employed to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings by cross-verifying data from multiple sources.

**Coding Process.** The coding process for this study involved multiple stages to analyze and interpret the qualitative data systematically. The process began with open coding to identify discrete concepts and initial codes, followed by axial coding to explore relationships between these codes and group them into broader categories. Selective coding then identified core themes that integrated all major categories. Throughout these stages, thematic coding, constant comparison, and memoing were employed to refine the emerging theory and ensure consistency and depth in the analysis (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Qualitative Data Analysis Process*



**Open Coding.** The open coding process involved a meticulous line-by-line examination of interview transcripts using NVivo software to identify initial concepts and themes. It displayed several distinct codes reflecting participants' experiences and perspectives on their Christian faith in contemporary America.

**Biblical Interpretation Approach.** This code directly addresses the study's research question about factors contributing to differences in biblical interpretation. Participants expressed varying approaches to interpreting the Bible. A traditional participant with high CO scores (4.8) and high conscientiousness (4.2) stated, *"Every word in Scripture is divinely inspired and must be taken literally"* (P3, traditional). Conversely, a progressive participant with lower CO scores (3.2) and high openness (4.5) noted, *"The Bible has to be seen as relevant for its time in history and not necessarily up to date with current culture"* (P8, progressive). Another traditional participant said, *"Literal interpretation is crucial for maintaining the purity of our faith"* (P5, traditional). A progressive participant argued, *"Historical context helps us apply biblical principles in today's world"* (P12, progressive).

**Cultural Engagement.** This code relates to the research question about integrating Christian beliefs with secular practices. A traditional participant with low openness (2.8) asserted, *"Christians should be in the world but not of it"* (P1, traditional). A progressive participant with high openness (4.4) countered, *"We need to engage with culture to make our faith relevant and impactful"* (P6, progressive). Another traditional participant noted, *"Cultural influences can dilute our faith if we're not careful"* (P7, traditional). Conversely, a progressive participant remarked, *"Cultural engagement is essential for our church's growth and relevance"* (P4, progressive).

**Faith Identity Formation.** This code addresses the research question about the connection between doctrinal beliefs and personal identity. Participants described different processes of faith identity formation. A traditional participant with a high CRS score (4.5) expressed, *"My Christian identity is based on upholding biblical truths and traditional values"* (P9, traditional). A progressive participant with moderate CRS scores (3.6) shared, *"My faith identity is constantly evolving as I gain new experiences and understandings"* (P8, progressive). Another traditional participant noted, *"Faith is the cornerstone of my identity, shaping every decision I make"* (P9, traditional). A progressive participant stated, *"As society changes, my faith has to evolve with the culture so I can grow over time"* (P12, progressive).

**Axial Coding.** Axial coding explored relationships between initial codes, grouping them into broader categories and subcategories. This process involved identifying connections between concepts and organizing them into a more structured framework. Key categories that emerged during this phase included biblical hermeneutics, cultural adaptation strategies, and faith-identity negotiation processes. The analysis focused on how these categories related, such as the potential influence of biblical interpretation approaches on cultural adaptation.

**Biblical Hermeneutics.** This category encompassed various approaches to biblical interpretation, reflecting the influence of personality traits on doctrinal understanding. A traditional participant with high conscientiousness (4.3) stated, *"We must interpret Scripture literally to preserve its divine truth"* (P2, traditional). A progressive participant with high openness (4.6) countered, *"Understanding the Bible requires considering its historical context and applying it to our modern world"* (P2, progressive).

**Cultural Adaptation Strategies.** This category addressed how participants navigate the integration of faith and secular culture. A traditional participant with high agreeableness (4.2)

noted, *"We can engage culture thoughtfully while firmly maintaining our biblical principles"* (P13, traditional). A progressive participant shared, *"Adapting our practices to contemporary culture helps us reach more people with the Gospel"* (P7, progressive). Another traditional participant remarked, *"Cultural adaptation must not compromise our core beliefs"* (P4, traditional). A progressive participant with high openness (4.5) shared, *"Cultural relevance is key to spreading our faith"* (P16, progressive).

**Selective Coding.** Selective coding identified a core category that captured the study's central phenomenon and integrated all major themes. The central phenomenon emerged as "Negotiating Christian identity in secular American culture," reflecting the overarching process participants engaged in as they navigated their faith within society. All other categories, such as biblical hermeneutics, cultural adaptation, and spiritual identity formation, were then related to this core theme to develop a coherent theoretical framework.

**Negotiating Orthodoxy in Modern Context.** This theme explored how participants maintain their beliefs in contemporary society, reflecting the interplay between personality traits and doctrinal adherence. A traditional participant with high CO scores (4.7) and high conscientiousness (4.4) stated, *"It's challenging to uphold orthodox beliefs in a rapidly changing world, but it's essential for our faith"* (P3, traditional). Conversely, A progressive participant with lower CO scores (3.1) and high openness (4.6) noted, *"We need to reinterpret traditional doctrines to make them relevant and meaningful today"* (P10, progressive). Another participant noted the challenge of this negotiation: *"We need to find ways to apply timeless truths to modern situations without compromising our core beliefs"* (P7, traditional).

**Centrality of Faith in Personal Identity.** This theme examined how central faith is to one's identity, directly addressing connections between Christian doctrinal beliefs and



personality traits. A progressive participant with moderate CRS scores (3.4) and high openness (4.6) noted, *"My faith is important to me, but it's one part of my identity alongside my professional life, personal interests, and relationships"* (P12, progressive). Another participant reflected on the evolving nature of faith identity: *"As I've grown older, I've realized that my faith isn't static. It grows and changes with me, shaping and being shaped by my life experiences"* (P4, progressive).

**Integration of Secular and Sacred Practices.** This theme explored how participants navigate the intersection of faith and secular culture, addressing the integration or adaption of Christian beliefs with secular practices. A traditional participant with high CO scores (4.6) and low openness (2.8) cautioned, *"We should be very careful about adopting worldly practices in our faith. There's a risk of diluting our beliefs"* (P1, traditional). A progressive participant with lower CO scores (2.9) and high openness (4.4) suggested, *"Incorporating cultural elements can enhance our worship and outreach. It helps make our faith relevant to people's lives today"* (P6, progressive).

**Psychological Factors in Faith Expression.** This theme addressed psychological factors contributing to different approaches incorporating contemporary culture into faith practices. A participant with high neuroticism scores (4.1) and high CRS scores (4.5) shared, *"I often worry about whether I'm living up to God's expectations. My faith gives me comfort, but it's also a source of anxiety sometimes"* (P9, traditional). Another participant with high Extraversion (4.3) and moderate CRS scores (3.8) noted, *"I love expressing my faith through community outreach and social events. It's energizing to share my beliefs with others"* (P14, progressive).

**Cognitive Dissonance in Faith Journey.** This theme explored how participants manage conflicts between faith and other aspects of life, addressing the psychological concept of

cognitive dissonance concerning faith. A participant with high CO scores (4.5) and high conscientiousness (4.4) shared, *"Sometimes I struggle to reconcile certain biblical teachings with my personal experiences or scientific knowledge. It's a constant process of seeking understanding"* (P11, traditional). A progressive participant with lower CO scores (3.1) and high openness (4.7) noted, *"I've had to work through conflicts between my faith and my understanding of social issues. It's led me to a more nuanced view of scripture and doctrine"* (P4, progressive).

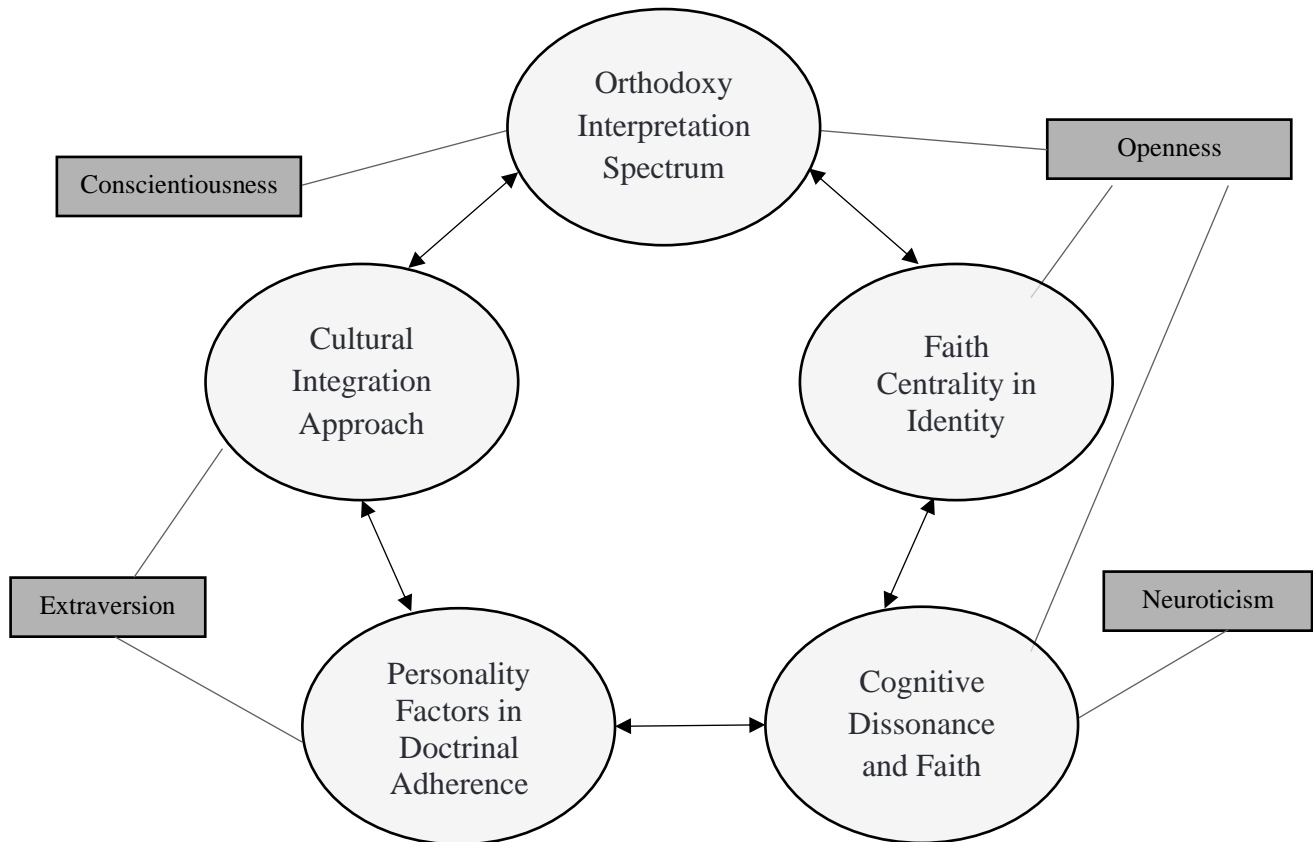
**Constant Comparison.** Constant comparison was employed throughout the coding process, systematically comparing new data with existing codes and categories. This iterative approach facilitated the refinement of emerging themes and the identification of patterns across participant experiences. To provide a structured overview of this process, Table 4 outlines the qualitative coding process and thematic analysis, detailing the progression from open coding to axial coding, selective coding, and thematic coding.

**Table 16***Qualitative Coding Process and Thematic Analysis*

Coding Stage	Theme	Subtheme
Open Coding	Biblical Interpretation Approach	Literal interpretation, Contextual interpretation, Historical-cultural context consideration
Axial Coding	Biblical Hermeneutics	Literal vs. contextual interpretation, Historical context consideration, Application to the modern world
Selective Coding	Negotiating Orthodoxy in Modern Context	Upholding traditional beliefs, Reinterpreting doctrines for relevance, Balancing timeless truths with modern application

**Memoing.** Analytical memos were used to document thoughts, emerging patterns, and potential theoretical insights throughout the analysis. These memos served as a reflective tool, capturing the researcher's evolving understanding of the data and helping to guide the theory development process. Memos ranged from brief observations about specific codes to more elaborate explorations of potential theoretical connections.

**Theoretical Model.** This theoretical model represents a synthesis of quantitative and qualitative findings, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding the interplay between Christian beliefs, cultural engagement, and psychological factors. Analysis of relationships between themes led to a theoretical model comprised of five key components that developed during the coding process (see Table 5).

**Figure 2***Theoretical Model Diagram*

*Note.* The model shows the relationships between orthodoxy interpretation, cultural integration, faith centrality, personality factors, and cognitive dissonance, highlighting the influence of personality traits.

**Table 17***Qualitative Themes and Subthemes with Supporting Quotes*

Theme	Subtheme	Participant Quote
Orthodoxy Interpretation Spectrum	Tension between traditional beliefs and contemporary norms	"It's challenging to hold onto biblical truths in a world that's constantly changing" (P3)
	Reinterpreting scripture	"I believe we need to reinterpret scripture in light of our current understanding and experiences" (P8)
Faith Centrality in Identity	Faith as a core aspect of identity	"My faith is the core of who I am; it guides every decision I make" (P5)
	Faith as a part of a larger identity	"My faith is central, but it's more about living out Christ's love than adhering to specific doctrines" (P12).
Cultural Integration Approach	Caution in integrating secular practices	"We need to be in the world but not of it" (P1).
	Openness to integrating secular practices	"I see God's work in many aspects of culture, not just in explicitly Christian contexts" (P10).
Personality Factors in Doctrinal Adherence	Community and harmony in faith expression	My personality influences how I express and practice my faith (P9).
	Internal struggles with faith and doctrine	"I've noticed my approach to faith has evolved as I've grown and changed as a person" (P14).
Cognitive Dissonance and Faith	Managing conflicts between beliefs and actions	"Sometimes I find myself acting in ways that don't align with my beliefs, and it creates this internal tension I have to work through" (P11).
	Coping with cognitive dissonance	"I've had to work through conflicts between my faith and my understanding of science" (P4).

*Note.* This table provides an overview of the major themes and subthemes identified during the qualitative analysis, supported by quotes from participants.

**Orthodoxy Interpretation Spectrum.** The orthodoxy interpretation spectrum component, ranging from literal to contextual interpretation, is informed by quantitative findings on the relationship between openness, conscientiousness, and CO scores. The qualitative data enriches this component by providing concrete examples of how individuals across this spectrum approach biblical interpretation. Conversely, a progressive participant noted, *"I believe we need to reinterpret scripture in light of our current understanding and experiences"* (P4, progressive). Another traditional participant remarked, *"The Bible's teachings are timeless and should not be compromised"* (P5, traditional). Another participant added, *"Our understanding of the Bible should evolve with our growing knowledge and societal changes"* (P12, progressive).

**Faith Centrality in Identity.** The faith centrality in identity component integrates quantitative findings on the CRS with qualitative themes related to identity formation. Quantitative data from the BFI, particularly agreeableness scores, informs the Personality Factors in the Doctrinal Adherence component. In contrast, qualitative data provides nuanced insights into how these traits manifest in religious practice. A traditional participant explained, *"My faith is the core of who I am; it guides every decision I make"* (P3, traditional). A progressive participant shared, *"My faith is central, but it's more about living out Christ's love than adhering to specific doctrines"* (P10, progressive). A progressive participant noted, *"My faith is intertwined with my identity, but it's also shaped by my experiences and growth"* (P14, progressive).

**Cultural Integration Approach.** This component examines how Christians navigate the incorporation of secular cultural elements into their faith practices. Findings reveal a spectrum of integration strategies influenced by individual factors and denominational orientations. Participants with higher openness scores on the BFI and lower CRS scores tended to favor more

adaptive integration. One participant with high openness (4.6) and moderate CRS (3.4) stated, *"Everyone is supposed to be loved and accepted. We are not supposed to judge"* (P6, progressive). Alternately, those with lower openness and higher CRS scores often advocated for more selective engagement. A participant with low openness (2.8) and high CRS (4.5) noted, *"The Bible states that one should not love the things of this world"* (P1, traditional). This component highlights the dynamic interplay between personality traits, religious centrality, and cultural engagement strategies among contemporary Christians.

**Personality Factors in Doctrinal Adherence.** This component explores how individual personality traits shape adherence to and interpretation of Christian doctrines. Findings show significant relationships between personality traits and orthodoxy, with agreeableness showing a positive relationship and neuroticism demonstrating a negative relationship. One participant emphasized communal aspects of faith: *"My faith is strengthened by the support and shared values of my church community"* (P5, traditional). Another participant with high neuroticism (4.1) and high CRS (4.5) described internal struggles, stating, *"Sometimes I think I am not good enough for God or I am falling short"* (P9, traditional).

**Cognitive Dissonance and Faith.** This component synthesizes qualitative themes with quantitative findings on neuroticism and its relationship to religious adherence. Traditional participants tended to be more cautious, with one stating, *"Music and media are becoming more blatant with demonic symbolism and attacks on Christianity"* (P1, traditional). Progressive participants were more open to integration, as exemplified by one who said, *"I see God's work in many aspects of culture, not just in explicitly Christian contexts"* (P2, progressive).

Traditional and progressive participants reported experiences of cognitive dissonance when their beliefs conflicted with their practices or societal norms. A participant shared,

*"Sometimes I find myself acting in ways that don't align with my beliefs, and it creates this internal tension I have to work through"* (P11, traditional). Another participant noted, *"Reconciling my faith with modern science is a constant challenge"* (P4, progressive). Another traditional participant stated, *"I struggle to balance my faith with the demands of modern life, and it often leaves me feeling conflicted"* (P8, traditional). By integrating these diverse data sources, this model explains the complex dynamics observed in how contemporary Christians negotiate their faith identities and practices within secular America.



**Table 18***Qualitative Coding Procedure*

Coding Stage	Category	Theme
Open Coding	Biblical Interpretation	Literal interpretation, Contextual interpretation, Historical-cultural context
	Cultural Engagement	Cultural resistance, Cultural adaptation, Balancing faith and culture
	Faith Identity Formation	Traditional identity, Progressive identity, Evolving faith identity
Axial Coding	Biblical Hermeneutics	Literal vs. contextual interpretation, Historical consideration
	Cultural Adaptation	Engagement with secular culture
	Faith-Identity Negotiation	Core beliefs and values, Integration with personal experiences
Selective Coding	Orthodoxy in Modern Context	Reinterpreting doctrines for relevance, Traditional vs modern application
	Centrality of Faith in Identity	Faith as core of identity, Integration of faith, Evolution of faith identity over time
	Integration of Secular	Caution in adopting secular practices, Incorporating cultural elements
	Psychological Factors	Influence of personality traits on faith practice, Emotions within faith
	Cognitive Dissonance	Reconciling faith with personal experiences, Evolving understanding of scripture
Thematic Coding	Orthodoxy Spectrum	Scripture interpretation, Influence of personality
	Faith Identity Formation	Faith integration in identity, Personality Traits
	Cultural Integration Approaches	Resistance to full embrace of secular culture, Influence of personality traits
	Personality Influence	Impact of individual traits on religious practices
	Cognitive Dissonance	Strategies for resolving faith-related conflicts, Influence of personality traits

## Summary

This chapter outlines the mixed-methods research methodology used to explore disagreements between traditional and progressive Christians regarding Christian identity in contemporary America. The study employs an explanatory sequential mixed methods approach, utilizing quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews within a grounded theory framework. Participants included self-identifying Christian adults aged 25 and older in Southwest and Southeast Florida, recruited through purposive sampling. Data collection involved an online survey (n=118) measuring demographics, personality traits, and religious beliefs/practices, followed by semi-structured interviews (n=16) exploring perspectives on faith, culture, and identity.

The study utilized several instruments, including the Big Five Inventory, Christian Orthodoxy Scale, Centrality of Religiosity Scale, and Aspects of Identity Questionnaire. Analysis methods encompassed descriptive statistics, correlation and regression analyses for quantitative data, and a grounded theory approach with open, axial, and selective coding for qualitative data. The chapter addresses ethical considerations, including informed consent, confidentiality protections, and IRB approval. It also acknowledges limitations such as geographic constraints, reliance on self-reported data, and the study's cross-sectional nature.

This comprehensive overview of the methodological approach details participant selection, data collection procedures, analytical techniques, and ethical considerations. The mixed-methods design aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics contributing to divisions between traditionalist and progressive Christians in contemporary America.

## CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

### Overview

This mixed-methods study explores the relationship between the beliefs and practices of Christians in Florida who self-identify as either progressive or traditional in their biblical worldviews, particularly in their perspectives on popular culture and church practices in modern America. The study investigates how personality dimensions—openness, conscientiousness, agreeableness, extraversion, and neuroticism—and religiosity and psychological factors influence these relationships. It specifically examines how these personality traits and psychological dimensions are associated with the beliefs and practices of progressive and traditional Protestants concerning the incorporation of popular culture into church services and the alignment of doctrinal beliefs with church practices. Additionally, the study investigates the moderating role of cognitive dissonance in these relationships. By integrating quantitative and qualitative data, the research seeks to develop a comprehensive explanatory framework that illuminates the psychological, cognitive, and social dynamics contributing to divergences between traditionalist and progressive Christians regarding biblical interpretation and adherence despite their shared foundational beliefs.

### Summary of Findings

The findings of this study reveal complex interactions between individual characteristics and religious beliefs and practices. Quantitative results showed significant relationships between personality traits and religious orientations. The BFI aspects of agreeableness and neuroticism emerged as significant predictors of CO, suggesting that more agreeable and emotionally sensitive individuals tend to adhere more strongly to traditional Christian doctrines. Additionally, CO and personal self-evaluation, measured by the AIQ, were significant predictors

of the CRS, indicating that individuals who strongly adhere to orthodox Christian beliefs and have a robust sense of personal identity are more likely to place religion at the center of their lives.

Qualitative findings complemented and expanded upon these quantitative results, revealing five key themes. First, the orthodoxy interpretation spectrum showed that participants demonstrated a range of biblical interpretation approaches, from literal to contextual, influenced by BFI personality traits such as openness and conscientiousness. Higher openness was associated with more contextual interpretations, while higher conscientiousness was linked to more literal interpretations. The faith centrality in identity theme highlighted the varying degrees to which faith formed a core part of individuals' identities, with some viewing faith as central and others as one aspect of a broader identity. The cultural integration approach theme revealed strategies for incorporating secular cultural elements into faith practices, ranging from cautious to open, influenced by personality traits and the centrality of religion in one's life. The personality factors in the doctrinal adherence theme indicated that individual personality traits shaped how participants adhered to and interpreted Christian doctrines. Finally, the cognitive dissonance and faith theme described participants' experiences of internal conflict when their beliefs and practices did not align with societal norms and the various strategies they employed to cope with this dissonance.

Integrating these quantitative and qualitative findings led to a theoretical model explaining how contemporary Christians negotiate their faith identities and practices within secular American culture. This model illustrates the dynamic interplay between orthodoxy interpretation, cultural integration, faith centrality, personality factors, and cognitive dissonance. It demonstrates that the formation and expression of Christian identity in modern America is a

complex process influenced by individual psychological factors and broader sociocultural contexts. Traditional Christians generally exhibited higher levels of Christian orthodoxy and centrality of religiosity, while progressive Christians tended to show more flexibility in biblical interpretation and cultural integration.

### **Discussion of Findings**

The findings of this study shed light on the complex psychological and social factors contributing to the growing divisions between traditional and progressive Christians in contemporary America. This research extends the understanding of the dynamics underlying these divergences by integrating quantitative data on personality traits, Christian orthodoxy, and the centrality of religiosity with rich qualitative themes.

Quantitative results revealed significant relationships between personality dimensions and religious orientations, resonating with prior research. The finding that agreeableness and neuroticism predicted Christian orthodoxy scores aligns with Saroglou et al.'s (2020) meta-analysis, which demonstrated connections between Big Five traits and religious variables across cultures. Their study synthesized data from 55 countries and found that agreeableness and conscientiousness were consistently associated with higher religious commitment. The present study's results corroborate these global trends within the specific context of American Christianity, suggesting that personality traits shape adherence to traditional doctrines.

The Big Five Inventory (BFI; John et al., 1991), comprising openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, offers a comprehensive framework for understanding individual personality differences. Using the BFI, this study found significant correlations between certain personality traits and participants' biblical worldviews. Specifically, traditionalists scored higher on conscientiousness and lower on openness. In

contrast, progressives exhibited the opposite pattern, suggesting that personality factors shape individuals' theological orientations and interpretations of biblical principles. Conscientiousness, associated with a preference for order, structure, and adherence to rules, aligns with traditionalists' tendency to favor a more literal and structured interpretation of biblical texts, reflecting their preference for doctrinal orthodoxy. Conversely, openness, linked to creativity, open-mindedness, and a willingness to explore new ideas, correlates with progressives' inclination towards contextual and metaphorical readings of the Bible, emphasizing practical orthopraxy and adaptability to modern sociocultural shifts.

The strong correlation between agreeableness and Christian orthodoxy suggests that more cooperative, empathetic, and harmony-seeking individuals tend to adhere more closely to traditional Christian doctrines. This relationship could be explained by agreeable individuals being more likely to value and maintain social norms and traditions, including religious ones. They may find comfort and meaning in established religious structures and teachings.

Conversely, the negative relationship between neuroticism and Christian orthodoxy is noteworthy. It suggests that individuals who experience more emotional instability and anxiety may struggle with rigid doctrinal adherence, possibly due to highly neurotic individuals who might question or doubt religious teachings more frequently, leading to a less orthodox stance. Alternatively, they might find strict religious orthodoxy anxiety-inducing, pushing them towards more flexible interpretations of faith.

The strong predictive power of CO on the CRS was expected. However, it is significant as it indicates that individuals who strongly adhere to traditional Christian doctrines are likelier to place religion at the center of their lives, which suggests a symbiotic relationship between

belief and practice. In contrast, strong beliefs lead to central religious practices, reinforcing those beliefs.

The fact that personal self-evaluation emerged as a significant predictor of religious centrality suggests that individuals with a stronger sense of personal identity tend to have higher levels of religious centrality. This indicates that religion serves as a critical component in identity formation for many Christians or that those with a well-developed sense of self are more likely to commit deeply to religious beliefs and practices.

Furthermore, the centrality of religion, as predicted by orthodoxy and personal identity aspects, resonates with Stephens' (2020) qualitative exploration of how conservative Christians construct a sense of self around their faith commitments. Stephens interviewed 30 evangelical college students and found that they often described their religious beliefs as central to their identity and decision-making. The current study builds on these findings by quantitatively linking orthodoxy and identity variables to the centrality of religiosity, providing empirical support for the interconnections between belief, self-concept, and religious engagement.

Qualitative themes added contextual richness to these statistical relationships. The orthodox interpretation spectrum, spanning literal to contextual approaches, reflects the hermeneutical tensions described by Alu (2020). Through a comparative analysis of biblical interpretation methods, Alu argued that literalist and contextualist positions represent key fault lines within contemporary Christianity. The present study's findings illustrate how these interpretive differences manifest at the individual level, with participants' strategies being molded by personality traits like openness and conscientiousness, aligning with Arterbury's (2022) assertion that hermeneutical choices emerge from an interplay of individual dispositions and sociocultural influences.

The theme of faith centrality in identity formation corresponds with social identity theory's emphasis on the role of group memberships in shaping self-concept (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). According to this framework, individuals derive a sense of meaning and belongingness from their social identities, including religious affiliations. The qualitative accounts in this study vividly illustrate how participants' Christian identities are interwoven with their personal values, relationships, and life narratives. This finding extends Dulin's (2021) qualitative study of 15 American Christians, highlighting how religious, personal, and social identities intersect and inform one another. The present research provides further evidence for the centrality of religious identity in structuring individuals' self-understandings and social interactions.

Notably, the theme of cultural integration approaches offers new insights into how Christians negotiate secular engagement. While existing literature has documented the polarized perspectives of traditionalists prioritizing doctrinal purity and progressives championing cultural adaptation (Uecker & Froese, 2019; Willey, 2019), this study reveals a more nuanced spectrum of integration strategies. Individual traits, religious centrality, and theological positions influenced participants' stances, suggesting the need for a more multidimensional understanding of cultural engagement.

This finding builds on Willey's (2019) qualitative interviews with 20 American Christians, which explored how they navigated tensions between their religious convictions and secular society. Willey found that participants employed a range of strategies, from strict separation to selective incorporation, depending on their interpretations of biblical teachings and cultural contexts. The current study extends this work by identifying specific psychological and religious variables that shape these integration approaches, moving beyond binary categorizations to capture the complexity of lived experiences.



The salience of personality factors in doctrinal adherence and cognitive dissonance themes resonates with prior research on the psychological underpinnings of religious beliefs and practices. McClintock's (2020) survey of 250 Protestant churchgoers found that conscientiousness and neuroticism were associated with different religious coping styles and meaning making. Highly conscientious individuals tended to emphasize doctrinal clarity and behavioral consistency, while those high in neuroticism reported more existential questioning and faith struggles. The present study's qualitative accounts align with these findings, illustrating how personality dimensions color participants' approaches to doctrinal commitment and negotiation of belief-behavior discrepancies.

Festinger's (1957) Cognitive dissonance theory posits that individuals are motivated to reduce inconsistencies between their attitudes and behaviors to maintain psychological equilibrium. This theory explains how individuals experience psychological discomfort when their beliefs and behaviors are inconsistent. This discomfort motivates them to either change their beliefs or behaviors to reduce the dissonance. Moreover, the cognitive dissonance theme directly speaks to the psychological tensions experienced by Christians when their beliefs and actions misalign. The study revealed that higher levels of cognitive dissonance were associated with more significant divergences between participants' professed beliefs and their actual behaviors and practices. This cognitive dissonance elevation indicates that the psychological tension arising from the incongruity between one's beliefs and actions contributes to the fragmentation observed within contemporary American Christianity.

The present study's findings provide vivid examples of these dissonance dynamics, with participants describing their internal struggles when their religious beliefs clash with personal experiences, relationships, or societal norms. These accounts resonate with Jenkin's (2021)

qualitative study of 20 British Christians, which explored how they navigated tensions between their traditional religious beliefs and progressive social views. Jenkin (2021) found that participants employed dissonance reduction strategies, such as compartmentalizing their religious and secular identities or reinterpreting doctrines to accommodate new perspectives. The current study affirms the prevalence of these psychological negotiations among American Christians and highlights the role of personality traits in shaping individuals' responses to cognitive dissonance.

### **Contributions to Theoretical Understanding**

The theoretical model emerging from these findings offers an integrative framework for understanding the multifaceted interplay of orthodoxy interpretation, cultural integration, faith centrality, personality, and cognitive dissonance in shaping contemporary Christian identities. This research study provides insights that contribute significantly to our understanding of cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) within the framework of contemporary American Christianity. It underscores the importance of considering individual differences, hermeneutical diversity, and cultural negotiation processes when examining intra-Christian conflicts and forming religious identities in a pluralistic society.

#### ***Cognitive Dissonance (Festinger, 1957)***

The findings from this study contribute empirical evidence for the manifestation of cognitive dissonance among Christians in modern America, particularly in how they navigate conflicts between their religious identity, beliefs, and secular cultural norms. The findings reveal a spectrum of dissonance experiences across traditional and progressive Christians, albeit in different ways. For instance, the transcript from the semi-structured interview of a traditional participant with high CO scores and high conscientiousness illustrates how even those with

strong orthodox beliefs wrestle with dissonance when their faith conflicts with other sources of knowledge or experience. Conversely, a progressive participant with lower CO scores and high openness noted that they have had to work through conflicts between their faith and their understanding of social issues, which led them to a more nuanced view of scripture and doctrine. This perspective of flexibility in biblical understanding demonstrates how cognitive dissonance can lead to a reinterpretation of religious beliefs to align with changing social values. These findings extend Cognitive dissonance theory by showing how individual differences in personality traits and religious orthodoxy influence the experience and resolution of dissonance in religious contexts.

Furthermore, this research illuminates various strategies Christians employ to resolve cognitive dissonance, which align with and expand upon Festinger's (1957) original theory. Progressive Christians often reported reinterpreting scripture or doctrine to align with their evolving understanding of social issues, demonstrating the "changing cognitions" strategy proposed by Festinger. Traditional Christians with high CO scores tended to be more cautious about cultural engagement, potentially as a strategy to avoid dissonance-inducing information. Some participants downplayed the importance of specific doctrinal points that conflicted with their personal experiences or societal norms. These findings contribute to Cognitive dissonance theory by providing a nuanced understanding of how religious individuals employ various strategies to maintain psychological consistency in a pluralistic society.

### ***Social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986)***

The research findings validate Tajfel and Turner's (1986) social identity theory and expand its relevance to developing and perpetuating religious identity. The study illustrates the role of Christian identity as a social identity, influencing self-concept and intergroup dynamics.

The strong correlation between Christian orthodoxy and scores on the CRS highlights how religious beliefs influence individuals' sense of self and belonging to a group. With this study's findings, traditional Christians often perceive their strict adherence to orthodox beliefs as a defining characteristic of their group while viewing progressive Christians as an outgroup with potentially conflicting views.

Social identity theory's concept of social creativity demonstrates how Christians negotiate their religious identity with secular society. This process aligns with social identity theory's concept of social creativity, where group members find ways to maintain a positive identity in the face of challenges (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This study explicitly highlights how Christians manage multiple religious, personal, and cultural identities and provides context to social identity theory by demonstrating the complex interplay between various social identities in a pluralistic society. The strong relationship between CO and CRS scores in the quantitative data supports social identity theory's assertion that the more central an identity is to one's self-concept, the more it influences behavior and attitudes.

### ***Integration with Biblical Foundations***

The findings from this research offer profound insights that integrate with and illuminate biblical foundations, particularly in the context of contemporary American Christianity. The study's results resonate with various scriptural themes, providing an understanding of how biblical principles appear in modern Christian experiences. The spectrum of biblical interpretation approaches revealed in the study, ranging from literal to contextual, reflects the ongoing Christian challenge of applying scriptures to contemporary life. This tension is reminiscent of Jesus' teachings, where He often reinterpreted Old Testament laws for His contemporary audience, as seen in the Sermon on the Mount (*English Standard Version*, 2001,

Matthew 5-7). The findings show how this hermeneutical challenge continues today, with traditional Christians often adhering to more literal interpretations, while progressive Christians tend towards more contextual readings. This divergence among Christians in biblical interpretation reiterates the words from the Apostle Paul written in 2 Timothy 2:15, urging believers to "rightly divide the word of truth" (*English Standard Version*, 2001).

The varying degrees of faith centrality in identity observed in the study aligned with biblical teachings on the transformative nature of religious belief. For instance, the Apostle Paul's words can be aligned with participants who described their Christian identity as core to their being when he stated, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 2 Corinthians 5:17). Conversely, the more fluid faith identities expressed by some progressive participants can be viewed as reflecting the biblical conception of growth and maturing in faith (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Ephesians 4:13-15).

The findings on cultural integration approaches among Christians, a concept highlighted in the literature review, are demonstrated within the biblical tension between being "in the world" but not "of the world" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, John 17:14-16). The cautious engagement expressed by some traditional Christians aligned with warnings against conformity to worldly patterns. At the same time, the more adaptive strategies of progressive Christians reflected Paul's approach of becoming "all things to all people" for the gospel's sake (*English Standard Version*, 2001, 1 Corinthians 9:19-23; Romans 12:2).

The experiences of cognitive dissonance reported by participants in the study resonated with biblical accounts of faith struggle as the internal conflicts described by some participants resounded the psalmist's wrestling with doubt and faith or the Apostle Paul's description of the war between flesh and spirit (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Psalm 73, Romans 7:14-25). The

various strategies employed by Christians to resolve this dissonance reflected the biblical call to "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Philippians 2:12).

The ingroup-outgroup dynamics observed between traditional and progressive Christians in the study reflected the ongoing challenge of maintaining unity within diversity, a theme addressed repeatedly in the New Testament and discussed in the literature review. The findings highlighted the continued relevance of Paul's exhortations to the early church to overcome divisions and maintain the "unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace" (*English Standard Version*, 2001, Ephesians 4:3).

The research findings provide a contemporary lens to view perennial biblical matters and trials. They illustrated how biblical tenets continue to shape and inform the lived experiences of Christians in modern America while also highlighting the ongoing tensions and diverse interpretations that depict the faith. This integration of empirical research with biblical foundations offered a methodical, multifaceted explanation for contemporary Christian identity and practice, grounding the study's results in the scriptural context established in the literature review.

### **Implications**

The findings of this study have significant implications for theory, research, and practice in the fields of psychology, religious studies, and Christian ministry. By highlighting the complex interplay of psychological, social, and theological factors shaping the divisions between traditional and progressive Christians, this research contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of religious identity formation and intra-group dynamics in contemporary American society. Theoretically, this research's integrative model of Christian identity formation

expands the existing frameworks by highlighting the multifaceted influences of personality traits, cultural engagement strategies, and cognitive dissonance experiences on individual beliefs and practices. This model provides a foundation for future research exploring how psychological dispositions, social contexts, and theological commitments intersect to shape religious identities and behaviors.

In scientific fields, such as the psychology and sociology of religion, this research offers empirical evidence for individual differences and social dynamics in shaping religious beliefs, practices, and group divisions. The findings underscore the importance of moving beyond binary categorizations of religious orientations to capture the spectrum of interpretive approaches, cultural engagement strategies, and identity configurations that characterize contemporary American Christianity. This nuanced understanding can inform future studies on religious diversity, intergroup relations, and the psychological processes underlying religious change and conflict.

The findings of this study provide insights into the cognitive, emotional, and social factors influencing religious identity formation and intra-group tensions that can guide psychological practice, clinicians, and counselors working with Christian clients navigating faith-related struggles. By recognizing the complicated relationship between personality and faith and navigating societal issues, practitioners can develop more culturally sensitive and effective interventions to support clients' psychological well-being and spiritual growth. The findings on cognitive dissonance and the negotiation of belief-behavior discrepancies can inform strategies for helping clients manage religious doubts, resolve internal conflicts, and cultivate a more integrated sense of self.

For churches and religious organizations, the findings offer valuable insights into the psychological and social dynamics fueling divisions between traditional and progressive members. This research can help church leaders develop more effective strategies for fostering unity, dialogue, and mutual understanding within diverse congregations by illuminating the role of personality traits, interpretive approaches, and cultural engagement strategies in shaping individual beliefs and practices. By acknowledging the diversity of religious expressions and the psychological factors underlying intra-group divisions, religious leaders can create spaces for open dialogue, empathy, and mutual understanding among clients from different Christian backgrounds. The findings on cognitive dissonance and the negotiation of religious identities in a pluralistic society can guide pastoral care and discipleship efforts to support members' spiritual growth and resilience in the face of cultural challenges. The findings on the spectrum of cultural engagement strategies can also guide churches in developing contextualized ministries that effectively bridge the gap between religious traditions and contemporary social realities.

The implications of this study extend beyond the academic realm to inform psychological practice, religious leadership, and community-building efforts aimed at fostering a more inclusive, compassionate, and harmonious religious landscape in America. By shedding light on the multifaceted relationship of identity, sociocultural, and theological factors defining Christian individuals and divisions, this research provides a foundation for developing evidence-based data to promote mutual understanding, spiritual growth, and social cohesion within diverse Christian communities. This research has the potential to contribute to the ongoing quest for unity amid diversity and the cultivation of a more authentic and transformative Christian witness in a rapidly changing world.

### **Limitations**



While this study provides valuable insights into the psychological, social, and theological factors shaping divisions between traditional and progressive Christians in contemporary America, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Although diverse in age, gender, and denominational background, the study's sample was geographically limited to Southwest and Southeast Florida. While this regional focus allowed for a contextualized exploration of Christian experiences, it may limit the generalizability of the findings to other parts of the United States or international contexts. Future research could benefit from expanding the geographical scope to examine the dynamics of traditional and progressive Christian identities in different cultural and regional settings.

Additionally, using self-reported data from participants in this research may be subject to social desirability bias. Given the delicate nature of religious beliefs and practices, participants may have been inclined to present themselves in a more favorable light or to conform to perceived expectations. While using confidential surveys and interviews aimed to mitigate this bias, recognizing the potential for inflating answers to satisfy what is perceived to be a better or superior response is possible. Future studies can incorporate more objective measures, such as behavioral observations or third-party assessments.

The study's cross-sectional design provides a snapshot of participants' religious experiences and perspectives simultaneously. While this approach allows for identifying significant associations between variables, it cannot establish causal relationships. Longitudinal studies that track changes in religious beliefs, practices, and identities over time could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the developmental trajectories and dynamic processes shaping Christian experiences in contemporary society.

While revealing noteworthy differences between these groups, the focus on traditional and progressive Christians may not fully capture the diversity within each category. While useful for analytical purposes, the dichotomous categorization based on orthodoxy and centrality scores may oversimplify the complex spectrum of religious orientations and expressions. Future research could explore more specifically the variations by denomination, including Catholicism and varying approaches to the faith.

The study's reliance on a single measure of personality traits, the BFI, may not fully capture the complexity of individual differences in religious contexts. While the BFI provides a well-established framework for assessing broad personality dimensions, it may not account for more specific traits or dispositions that could influence religious experiences and orientations. Future studies could incorporate additional personality measures or study the function of other individual variance variables, such as cognitive styles, motivational orientations, or emotional regulation strategies.

While the qualitative component of the study provides insights into participants' lived experiences, it is inherently interpretive and subject to researcher bias. Despite efforts to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings through member checking, triangulation, and reflexivity, the researcher's backgrounds, assumptions, and theoretical lenses may have influenced the analysis and interpretation of the data. Future studies could benefit from more extensive collaborations with participants and the incorporation of multiple coding teams to enhance the credibility and transferability of the findings.

Finally, the study's focus on the psychological, social, and theological dimensions of Christian experiences may not fully account for the broader sociocultural, political, and historical factors shaping religious identities and divisions in contemporary America. While the study

acknowledged the influence of cultural contexts on religious orientations, a more comprehensive examination of the complex interplay between religion, politics, media, social justice, gender equality, and other societal forces could provide a more complete understanding of the dynamics under investigation.

Despite these limitations, the study's findings provide valuable insights into the multifaceted nature of Christian identities and experiences in contemporary America, laying the groundwork for future research and informing practical efforts to foster mutual understanding and bridge divisions within diverse religious communities. Researchers can acknowledge these limitations to continue to refine and expand our understanding of the complex psychological, social, and theological processes shaping religious experiences in a rapidly changing world.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The findings of this study provide a basis for future research to explore further the factors shaping Christian identities and experiences in contemporary America. Several recommendations emerge. Future studies could expand the geographical scope to include diverse cultural and regional contexts. Moreover, utilizing diverse methodological approaches, such as behavioral observations, social network analysis, or physiological measures, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of religious experiences. Additional individual difference variables, such as cognitive styles, motivational orientations, and emotional regulation strategies, could offer further insight into the psychological processes underlying religious experiences and divisions. Delving deeper into the role of technology and digital media in shaping religious experiences and identities could provide valuable insights into the evolving landscape of religion in the digital age. Finally, adopting an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from

various fields, could contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of religious experiences and divisions.

In conclusion, the findings open numerous avenues for future research. By expanding the scope, employing diverse methodologies, and fostering interdisciplinary collaboration, researchers can refine and extend our understanding of the complex dynamics underlying religious identity formation, intra-group conflict, and the quest for unity amid diversity. Such endeavors have the potential to inform practical efforts to promote understanding, bridge divisions, and cultivate a more inclusive religious landscape.

### **Summary**

This study sought to investigate the psychological, social, and theological factors contributing to the growing divisions between traditional and progressive Christians in contemporary America. By employing a mixed-methods approach, the research highlights the role of personality traits, identity factors, hermeneutical approaches, cultural engagement strategies, and cognitive dissonance experiences in shaping religious beliefs, practices, and intra-group dynamics. The findings revealed significant associations between personality dimensions, such as agreeableness and neuroticism, and religious orientations, as well as the central role of orthodoxy and personal identity factors in determining the centrality of religiosity in individuals' lives. Qualitative themes further illuminated the spectrum of interpretive approaches, cultural engagement strategies, and identity negotiation processes that characterize contemporary Christian experiences, highlighting the multifaceted nature of religious identity formation and expression in a pluralistic society.

The implications of this study are far-reaching, extending beyond the academic realm to inform psychological practice, religious leadership, and community-building efforts aimed at

fostering a more inclusive, compassionate, and psychologically healthy religious landscape in America. This research lays the groundwork for developing evidence-based interventions, pastoral approaches, and educational initiatives that promote mutual understanding, spiritual growth, and social cohesion within diverse Christian communities by providing a nuanced understanding of the factors underlying religious divisions and the processes shaping individual beliefs and practices. While acknowledging the limitations of the current study, such as its geographic specificity and the challenges of capturing the full complexity of religious phenomena, the findings nonetheless offer valuable insights into the dynamic interplay of psychological, social, and theological factors shaping the contours of American Christianity in the 21st century. As such, this study contributes significantly to the ongoing quest for unity amid diversity and cultivating a more authentic and transformative Christian witness in a rapidly changing world.

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## APPENDIX A: CONSENT FORM

**Project Title:** Clash of Convictions: A Mixed-Methods Study of Contemporary American Christianity

**Principal Investigator:** Aimee Tarte, Graduate Student, School of Behavioral Sciences, Department of Social Psychology, Liberty University

**Invitation to be Part of a Research Study**

You are invited to participate in a research study. To participate, you must meet the following criteria:

- Self-identify as a Christian.
- Be over the age of 25.
- Reside in Southwest or Southeast Florida.
- Be proficient in English.

Taking part in this research study is voluntary. Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research.

**What is the study about and why is it being done?**

I am conducting research to better understand the growing division among Christians in contemporary America. The purpose of this study is to examine the underlying differences in beliefs and practices between traditional and progressive Christians, offering insights into the reasons for inconsistencies in perspectives.

**What will happen if you take part in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, I will ask you to complete the following:

- 1. Online Survey.**
  - Time Estimate: 30 minutes
  - Description: Complete an online survey to provide information on their background, beliefs, practices, and attitudes towards various social and cultural issues.
- 2. One-on-One Interview.**
  - Time Estimate: 60 minutes
  - Description: Participate in an audio-recorded interview (in-person or via Zoom), focusing on biblical interpretation, identity, and the alignment of beliefs and behaviors in contemporary American culture.
- 3. Member Checking.**



- Time Estimate: Variable
- Description: A written copy of the interview transcript will be provided for review. This step ensures accurate representation of your thoughts, opinions, and experiences. Your feedback, known as "member checking," is important for confirming the accuracy of the recorded information. Participation in this process adds to the reliability and trustworthiness of the research, confirming a true representation of the data in the study.

### **How could you or others benefit from this study?**

Participants should not expect to receive a direct benefit from taking part in this study.

Benefits to society include fostering unity among Christians and empowering participants, pastors, educators, policymakers, and the community with valuable insights for informed decision-making and interactions.

### **What risks might you experience from being in this study?**

The expected risks from participating in this study are minimal, which means they are equal to the risks you would encounter in everyday life.

### **How will personal information be protected?**

The records of this study will be kept private. Published reports will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely, and only the researcher will have access to the records.

- Participant responses will be kept confidential by replacing names with pseudonyms.
- Interviews will be conducted in a location where others will not easily overhear the conversation.
- Data collected from you may be used in future research studies. If data collected from you is reused or shared, any information that could identify you, if applicable, will be removed beforehand.
- Electronic data, such as digital recordings and typed transcripts, will be stored on a password-locked computer. Hardcopy data will be stored in a locked drawer or file cabinet. After five years, all electronic records will be deleted, and all hardcopy records will be shredded.
- Recordings will be stored on a password locked computer for five years until participants have reviewed and confirmed the accuracy of the transcripts and then deleted. The researcher will have access to these recordings.

### **How will you be compensated for being part of the study?**

Participants will not be compensated for participating in this study.

### Is study participation voluntary?

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relations with Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time.

### What should you do if you decide to withdraw from the study?

If you choose to withdraw from the study, please contact the researcher at the email address/phone number included in the next paragraph. Should you choose to withdraw, data collected from you will be destroyed immediately and will not be included in this study.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions or concerns about the study?

You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, **you are encouraged** to contact Aimee Tarte. You may also contact the researcher's faculty sponsor, Dr. Albert Pace.

### Whom do you contact if you have questions about your rights as a research participant?

If you have any questions or concerns regarding this study and would like to talk to someone other than the researcher, **you are encouraged** to contact the IRB.

*Disclaimer: The Institutional Review Board (IRB) is tasked with ensuring that human subjects research will be conducted in an ethical manner as defined and required by federal regulations. The topics covered and viewpoints expressed or alluded to by student and faculty researchers are those of the researchers and do not necessarily reflect the official policies or positions of Liberty University.*

### Your Consent

By signing this document, you are agreeing to be in this study. Make sure you understand what the study is about before you sign. You will be given a copy of this document for your records. The researcher will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after you sign this document, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

*I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.*

The researcher has my permission to audio-record/video-record me as part of my participation in this study.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed Subject Name

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature & Date

## APPENDIX B: QUANTITATIVE SURVEY QUESTIONS

**Clash of Convictions: A Mixed-Methods Study of Contemporary American Christianity****Invitation to Participate in Study**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you agree, it is important that you read and understand the following information.

Please click on the link below to open the consent form. This form provides key details about the study, what your participation entails, and your rights as a participant.

[\[CONSENT FORM\]](#)

After you have read the consent form thoroughly, please indicate your consent decision below. Please contact the researcher if you have any additional questions about this study or your rights as a participant. Thank you for your consideration! Your participation contributes meaningfully to this research.

---

Consent *I have read and understood the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers.*

- I consent to participate in the study
- I do not I consent to participate in the study

Age:

- 18-24 (1)
  - 25-34 (2)
  - 35-44 (3)
  - 45-54 (4)
  - 55 and above (5)
- 

Geographic Location:

- Southwest Florida (1)
  - Southeast Florida (2)
  - Other (3)
-

## Gender:

- Male (1)
  - Female (2)
  - Non-binary / third gender (3)
  - Prefer not to say (4)
- 

## Ethnicity:

- Caucasian/White (1)
  - African American/Black (2)
  - Hispanic/Latino (3)
  - Native American/Indigenous (4)
  - Other (5)
- 

## Education Level:

- High school diploma or equivalent (1)
  - Some college/Associate's degree (2)
  - Bachelor's degree (3)
  - Master's degree (4)
  - Doctoral degree (5)
  - Other (6)
- 

## Marital Status:

- Single (1)
  - Married (2)
  - Divorced (3)
  - Widowed (4)
  - Other (5)
- 

## Religious Background:

- Raised in a Christian family or community (1)
  - Converted to Christianity later in life (2)
  - Reverted to Christianity after a period of non-religiosity (3)
  - Other (4)
-

Length of Time as a Practicing Christian:

- Less than 1 year (1)
  - 1-5 years (2)
  - 6-10 years (3)
  - 11-20 years (4)
  - More than 20 years (5)
- 

Which denomination do you most identify with?:

- Baptist (1)
  - Lutheran (2)
  - Methodist (3)
  - Presbyterian (4)
  - Pentecostal (5)
  - Non-denominational (6)
  - Other (7)
- 

Church Attendance:

- Weekly (5)
  - Monthly (4)
  - Occasionally (3)
  - Rarely (2)
  - Never (1)
- 

### **Survey Instructions**

Please carefully consider each statement before choosing the response that you feel most accurately reflects some aspect of your identity, individual experiences, perspectives, or beliefs. Select answers thoughtfully and openly to best reflect your authentic self-appraisal for each statement according to the scales provided.

---

**To what extent do you see yourself as someone who...**

---

Tends to find fault with others

- Strongly disagree (5)
  - Somewhat disagree (4)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (2)
  - Strongly agree (1)
- 

Is original, comes up with new ideas

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Is original, comes up with new ideas

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Is outgoing, sociable

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Makes plans and follows through with them

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
-

Is curious about many different things

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Starts quarrels with others

- Strongly disagree (5)
  - Somewhat disagree (4)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (2)
  - Strongly agree (1)
- 

Can be cold and aloof

- Strongly disagree (5)
- Somewhat disagree (4)
- Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- Somewhat agree (2)
- Strongly agree (1)

Is ingenious, a deep thinker

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Has a forgiving nature

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
-

Worries a lot

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Is generally trusting

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Perseveres until the task is finished

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Is considerate and kind to almost everyone

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Is sophisticated in art, music, or literature

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
-



**Please indicate your level of agreement with the following statements concerning religious beliefs:**

God exists as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

Man is not a special creature made in the image of God; he is simply a recent development in the process of animal evolution

- Strongly disagree (5)
  - Somewhat disagree (4)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (2)
  - Strongly agree (1)
- 

The Bible may be an important book of moral teachings, but it was no more inspired by God than were many other such books in the history of Man

- Strongly disagree (5)
  - Somewhat disagree (4)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (2)
  - Strongly agree (1)
- 

God hears all of our prayers

- Strongly disagree (1)
  - Somewhat disagree (2)
  - Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - Somewhat agree (4)
  - Strongly agree (5)
- 

The Bible is the word of God given to guide man to grace and salvation

- Strongly disagree (1)

- o Somewhat disagree (2)
  - o Neither agree nor disagree (3)
  - o Somewhat agree (4)
  - o Strongly agree (5)
- 

Through the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, God provided a way for the forgiveness of man's sins

- o Strongly disagree (1)
- o Somewhat disagree (2)
- o Neither agree nor disagree (3)
- o Somewhat agree (4)
- o Strongly agree (5)

**Considering your values and priorities, how important are the following to you?**

---

My reputation, what others think of me

- o Not important to my sense of who I am (1)
  - o Slightly important to my sense of who I am (2)
  - o Somewhat important to my sense of who I am (3)
  - o Very important to my sense of who I am (4)
  - o Extremely important to my sense of who I am (5)
- 

My social behavior, such as the way I act when meeting people

- o Not important to my sense of who I am (1)
  - o Slightly important to my sense of who I am (2)
  - o Somewhat important to my sense of who I am (3)
  - o Very important to my sense of who I am (4)
  - o Extremely important to my sense of who I am (5)
- 

My personal self-evaluation, the private opinion I have of myself

- o Not important to my sense of who I am (1)
- o Slightly important to my sense of who I am (2)
- o Somewhat important to my sense of who I am (3)
- o Very important to my sense of who I am (4)
- o Extremely important to my sense of who I am (5)

---

My feeling of being a unique person, being distinct from others

- Not important to my sense of who I am (1)
  - Slightly important to my sense of who I am (2)
  - Somewhat important to my sense of who I am (3)
  - Very important to my sense of who I am (4)
  - Extremely important to my sense of who I am (5)
- 

Knowing that I continue to be essentially the same inside even though life involves many changes

- Not important to my sense of who I am (1)
  - Slightly important to my sense of who I am (2)
  - Somewhat important to my sense of who I am (3)
  - Very important to my sense of who I am (4)
  - Extremely important to my sense of who I am (5)
- 

**Please answer the following questions on your religious practices:**

---

How often do you take part in religious services?

- Once a week (5)
  - One to three times a month (4)
  - A few times a year (3)
  - Less often (2)
  - Never (1)
- 

How often do you pray?

- Once a day (5)
  - More than once a week (4)
  - One to three times a month (3)
  - A few times a year (2)
  - Never (1)
- 

How often do you experience situations in which you have the feeling that God or something divine intervenes in your life?

- Very often (5)

- Often (4)
  - Occasionally (3)
  - Rarely (2)
  - Never (1)
- 

How important is it for you to be connected to a religious community?

- Very much so (5)
  - Quite a bit (4)
  - Moderately (3)
  - Not very much (2)
  - Not at all (1)
- 

How interested are you in learning more about religious topics?

- Very much so (5)
- Quite a bit (4)
- Moderately (3)
- Not very much (2)
- Not at all (1)

**Participant Information**

- First Name \_\_\_\_\_
- Last Name \_\_\_\_\_
- Email \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX C: QUALITATIVE INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

### **Interview Questions (Time Estimate: 60-90-minutes)**

Semi-structured recorded interviews following the quantitative survey protocol with an allowance of 90 minutes of open-ended inquiry.

1. How do you personally identify as a Christian, and what specific labels or descriptors capture your Christian identity?
2. What is your approach to understanding the Bible? Do you view passages more literally, symbolically, or a combination of both? What influences your understanding of its teachings and messages?
3. In what ways do you see modern mainstream American culture aligned or misaligned with a biblical worldview?
4. Some people perceive a tension between Christian faith and certain scientific ideas like evolution. How do you navigate this potential tension in your own life and beliefs?
5. How important is prayer in your faith? In what ways, if any, do you engage in prayer practices?
6. What is your opinion on how well typical church services resonate with mainstream contemporary culture in their worship practices, culture, and messages? What changes, if any, could better align services with secular culture?
7. Can you share your thoughts on Jesus as the Son of God, salvation, and the concept of the Holy Trinity? How important are beliefs in heaven and hell to your faith?
8. How do you integrate your Christian identity within modern American culture and context? What aspects, if any, does your faith feel aligned or in conflict with cultural values?
9. Would you describe your faith as more personal belief or driven by external factors like church community or social pressures? Can you share examples?
10. How closely do your Christian beliefs align with your everyday behavior and choices? Do you feel social or cultural factors play a role?
11. How important is sharing your faith with others? In what ways do you engage in evangelism, if at all?
12. How did you choose your specific Christian denomination? What attracted you to it compared to other options?

13. What do you think causes disagreements among Christians about interpreting the Bible, even though they share the same scripture?
14. How important is your Christian identity and community in shaping your self-image, decisions, relationships, and life goals? Are there areas where it feels more or less connected?
15. As culture changes, what leads some people towards or away from traditional Christian beliefs? How have these changes affected the faith of people you know?
16. What is your understanding of grace, salvation as a gift from God, and the role of actions in our ultimate judgment?
17. What behaviors or mindsets do you consider clear sin? Do you judge others within Christianity for unrepentant sin or hypocrisy? Why or why not?