

ABSTRACT

Salience and Congregational Growth: Revisiting the Strictness Thesis

Todd W. Ferguson, M.A.

Thesis Chairperson, Kevin D. Dougherty, Ph.D.

Since Kelley's (1972) *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, scholars have examined the relationship between congregational strictness and growth. This paper seeks to further develop the strict church thesis by suggesting that strictness leads to growth when it addresses salient issues. Using binary logistic regression to analyze data from the 2000 Faith Communities Today survey, I find that, while overall strictness continues to be positively associated with congregational growth, only prohibitions that are salient within a religious tradition have an impact on congregational growth. Therefore, this study supports a more nuanced understanding of strictness. Strictness does not always lead to congregational growth. Instead, growth is contingent upon an issue's salience.

Salience and Congregational Growth:
Revisiting the Strictness Thesis

by

Todd Williams Ferguson, B.A., M.Div.

A Thesis

Approved by the Department of Sociology

Charles M. Tolbert, II, Ph.D., Chairperson

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
Baylor University in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree
of
Master of Arts

Approved by the Thesis Committee

Kevin D. Dougherty, Ph.D. Chairperson

Paul Froese, Ph.D.

Charles M. North, Ph.D.

Accepted by the Graduate School
May 2013

J. Larry Lyon, Ph.D., Dean

Copyright © 2013 by Todd W. Ferguson

All rights reserved

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I.	List of Figures	v
II.	List of Tables	vi
III.	Acknowledgments	vii
IV.	Dedication	viii
V.	Chapter One: Introduction	1
	The Strict Church Thesis	1
VI.	Chapter Two: Salience and Strictness	5
VII.	Chapter Three: Testing the Hypothesis	8
	The Salience of Alcohol and Premarital Sex for Protestants	8
	Testing the Contingent Nature of Strictness and Growth	15
	Dependent Variable	17
	Independent Variables	17
	Congregational Control Variables	18
	Community Control Variables	20
	Method	20
VIII.	Chapter Four: Results	21
IX.	Chapter Five: Discussion and Conclusion	25
X.	Appendix	28
XI.	References	30

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1:	Individual Views on the Consumption of Alcohol	10
Figure 2:	Individual Views on Premarital Sex	13

LIST OF TABLES

Table 1:	Denominational Discourses on Alcohol	12
Table 2:	Denominational Discourses on Premarital Sex	14
Table 3:	Congregational Discourse on Abstaining from Alcohol	18
Table 4:	Congregational Discourse on Abstaining from Premarital Sex	19
Table 5:	Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Congregations with Anti-Alcohol Discourse Growing 5% or More	23
Table 6:	Binary Logistic Regression Predicting Congregations with Anti-Premarital Sex Discourse Growing 5% or More	24

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my thesis chairperson, Dr. Kevin Dougherty, as well as my committee members, Dr. Paul Froese and Dr. Charles North for their guidance in this project.

DEDICATION

For Emma

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Since the 1970s, scholars have proposed that strict churches are more likely to experience congregational growth (Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000; Thomas and Olson 2010). One way in which congregations build strictness is by prohibiting certain behaviors, such as consuming alcohol or having sexual relations outside of marriage. Yet there is a gap in the strict church research. The concept of strictness as prohibition is not well-defined. Do prohibitions work uniformly for all congregations? In other words, if a congregation prohibits a certain behavior, does this increase in strictness necessarily lead to church growth, as stated in traditional strict church theory?

This paper seeks to answer these questions and show that congregational prohibitions are not monolithic avenues towards growth. The strictness that leads to growth must be defined in a more nuanced way. I show that the prohibited issues that lead to congregational growth must be “salient” issues. First, I describe a method for measuring salience. Then, using binary logistic regression, I test whether congregations with higher levels of prohibition discourse on two issues (premarital sex and alcohol) are more likely to experience growth. The results demonstrate that prohibition discourse only affects growth when the issue is salient to the congregation.

The Strict Church Thesis

In the 1960s and early 1970s Liberal and Moderate Protestants were struggling to find a reason why their churches were declining in numbers. For much of the history of

the United States, Presbyterians, Methodists, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists were at the center of American religious life. Yet, in the mid-twentieth century, these denominations found their churches losing members and losing prominence. At the same time, churches in conservative denominations, such as the Church of the Nazarene, the Southern Baptist Convention and the Assemblies of God, were growing both in number and in their percentages of the total population. To help understand this change, Dean Kelley, a researcher with the National Council of Churches, proposed the strict church thesis. Going against the predominant assumption that modern individuals would gravitate toward an open-minded and tolerant religion, Kelley put forward the opposite. Strict congregations are stronger, and therefore are more likely to grow, because they are better than the more lenient churches at offering meaning for their members (Kelley 1972). Strict churches' strength (and therefore growth) derives from their ability to gain higher levels of commitment from their members. Members are more willing to "sacrifice status, possessions, safety, life itself for the cause or the company of the faithful" (Kelley 1972:84). Strict churches also offer higher levels of disciplined control over their members; their congregants are more willing to both obey their leaders' commands and to suffer the social sanctions for any violations. Finally, strict churches are more likely to grow because they exhibit a "missionary zeal," or what Kelley refers to as having their communication outputs be greater than communication inputs (1972:84). These churches are able to minimize contact with divergent views by putting their messages out more than they receive other messages.

According to Kelley, commitment, control, and communication are key elements in the provision of meaning by religious groups. When a congregation is strict in its

demands of time, beliefs, or behaviors, the organization is better able to offer meaning to its congregants. As Kelley puts it, “What costs nothing, accomplishes nothing. If it costs nothing to belong to such a community, it can’t be worth much” (Kelley 1972:53).

Laurence Iannaccone (1994) furthers Kelley’s theory by incorporating economic mechanisms. He suggests the reason why strict churches grow is because they reduce the problem of free-riders. Religion can be viewed as a commodity that is produced with others in community. The satisfaction an individual derives from religious practice depends on the quality that others produce. Free-riders are those who do not add anything to the collective religious product but nevertheless reap its benefits. Free-riders, therefore, lower the benefits-per-individual in the congregation. Strict churches reduce free-riders because they raise the cost of participation. These churches “penalize or prohibit *alternative* activities that compete for members’ resources” (Iannaccone 1994:1187 emphasis in original). These prohibitions serve as entry fees for participation and screen out members who might not fully add to the collective religious product. Consequently, strict churches have fewer free-riders, have higher benefits-per-individual, and experience more congregational strength.¹

There is some debate as to whether strictness is the actual cause of growth within a church. Michael Hout, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa Wilde (2001) offer a demographic explanation to church growth. After controlling for differences in structure, ideology, and conversion, they show that conservative churches are growing because

¹ Both Kelley’s and Iannaccone’s arguments are focused mainly on religious strength, not necessarily growth, although Kelley does use church growth as a signifier of strength. I, too, recognize that congregational growth is not the only variable related to strictness. Instead, it is one characteristic among many that might indicate organizational vitality.

their women have higher rates of fertility and lower ages of childbearing than Mainline Protestants. In essence, conservative churches “have grown their own” (Hout et al. 2001:468). However, Thomas and Olson (2010) find that church strictness still matters. While fertility does have an impact, strictness positively and directly affects church strength and church growth.

How does one define strictness? One approach is to use a distinctiveness-based or cost-based definition (Iannaccone 1994). Religious organizations are strict when they require their members to be distinctive from the surrounding culture or when the members must pay some sort of price for membership. One way congregations create distinctions and increase costs is by prohibiting certain behaviors. Religious groups often restrict dress, diet, time use, sexual behavior, and marriage. These prohibitions increase the costs of membership and therefore increase the group’s strictness.

Kelley posits that any increase in strictness will necessarily lead to an increase in strength and growth; as he puts it, “strong organizations are strict...the stricter the stronger” (Kelley 1972:95). However, Iannaccone refutes this idea that increased strictness *always* leads to more strength and growth. Strictness exhibits the law of diminishing returns. A religious organization may not necessarily prohibit any behavior or issue and expect a return in growth or strength. Instead, strictness depends on “the socioeconomic characteristics of the members” (Iannaccone 1994:1201). There is a gap in previous research on the diminishing return of strictness. When exactly does a religious organization prohibit something, and thereby increase strictness, without seeing a return in growth?

CHAPTER TWO

Salience and Strictness

As suggested by Iannaccone, there are limits to strictness. I suggest that the key to these limits is *salience*. A prohibited issue must be a salient issue for a religious organization in order to affect congregational growth. By salient, I mean that an issue must be meaningful. The issue must matter and connect with the congregation.

Prohibitions vary by religious group (Cochran, Beeghley, and Bock 1988; Gay, Ellison, and Powers 1996; Regnerus 2007). Not all prohibitions are relevant to all congregations. For instance, the prohibition of certain foods is a salient, meaningful issue for Orthodox Jews and Seventh-Day Adventists, but it is probably not salient for United Methodists. Therefore, even if a Methodist church prohibited eating certain foods, this increase in strictness might not necessarily lead to church growth. Dietary restrictions are not a salient issue for Methodists. They are most likely not willing to pay this cost. Thus, dietary prohibitions would raise the costs of being a part of the Methodist congregation to the point that the costs outweighed the benefits. The same is not true for a Seventh-Day Adventist congregation which actively maintains dietary restrictions. Diet is a salient issue for this religious group, and so this increase in strictness would increase growth.

Salience, or meaningfulness, is an abstract concept that is not easily measured. How do we know if an issue is salient for a religious group? I believe one method of measuring salience is by observing a potentially salient issue's relationship with the organizational layers above and below a congregation: the *denomination* and the

individual adherents. Individual adherents make up the congregation. They are the ones who attend worship and do much of the congregational work. Without them, there is no congregation. Yet, congregations are not isolated gatherings of individuals; they exist within denominations or larger faith traditions. Denominations set policies and establish norms which guide affiliated congregations. Denominations also maintain seminaries that educate clergy for leadership in congregations. Even non-denominational churches are located within larger traditions, such as Evangelicalism, that have patterns of beliefs, norms, and practices.

So in order to understand if an issue is salient to a congregation, it is necessary to look “above and below.” First, is the issue meaningful to the individual adherents? Do they discuss the issue, or do they hold views about it that are significantly different from others? If so, the issue is likely to be salient, and may have potential to affect congregational growth. If a church increases its strictness through an issue that is salient to its members, the increase in costs will not be so high as to overcome the benefits. A congregation may “profitably” prohibit this issue because it is in line with its members’ views. Conversely, if the individual members do not act or think about an issue any differently than others, the issue might not be meaningful to them. Therefore, if a congregation prohibits a non-salient issue, it will not be meaningful to the individual congregants and will raise the costs of attendance without raising the benefits. The church will not grow even though the level of strictness increases.

Second, salience can be understood at the level of the denomination or larger tradition. An issue is salient if it is in the tradition’s discourse -“the spoken and written documents” (Ritzer 2000:594). Denominations actively take stances on issues. They

commission reports, make declarations, and even hire lobbyists to further their views on certain issues. Whether the issue is environmental sustainability, the doctrine of the Trinity, or gambling, many denominations uphold boundaries for behavior and belief. These issues are salient to the denomination and therefore are meaningful to the local congregation. Other issues are not settled for the denomination. Instead, they are actively *debated* within the tradition. Although there are no set guidelines or policies, these issues remain within the denominational discourse. Therefore, debated issues are also salient issues. If a church increases its strictness by prohibiting one of these salient issues –either settled or debated - it will increase the likelihood of growth. The prohibitions of salient issues resonate with the larger tradition; they are meaningful to what it means to be a part of the denomination. So, an increase in strictness using the salient issue would not be so costly to its members that it would negate the benefits. Therefore, I offer the following hypothesis: *Strictness increases congregational growth to the extent that it addresses salient issues.*

CHAPTER THREE

Testing the Hypothesis

The relationship between church strictness and growth is contingent upon an issue's salience, and one can measure salience by observing the issue's relationships to the individual adherents and the larger denominational tradition. In order to test this hypothesis, I follow a two-step process. First, I ascertain the salience of an issue using the method described above. Second, I test to see if salience makes a difference on the relationship between congregational strictness and growth.

The Salience of Alcohol and Premarital Sex for Protestants

Two issues of historic importance to American Protestants are alcohol consumption and premarital sex. However, there is not one single view across churches or denominations. After long histories with these issues, Protestant congregations now vary in their levels of prohibition for these two issues. For some, alcohol and premarital sex are highly salient issues; for others, these two are non-issues. In order to determine how salient these two are for Protestants, I examine attitudes of individual adherents and stated positions of denominations.

Individual views on alcohol vary widely within Protestant churches. Following the end of the Civil War, many Protestants, especially Methodists and Baptists, turned their attentions to reforming the misuse of alcohol (Butler, Wacker, and Balmer 2003). They created temperance movements across the country and succeeded in pushing for the Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution which prohibited alcohol in the United States in 1919. Although the Twenty-first Amendment overturned Prohibition and alcohol use

has been legal ever since, the trajectory begun by the temperance movement still remains in much of Protestant life. Some consider all alcohol use to be wrong; others do not think drinking alcohol is an issue.

The 2005 Baylor Religion Survey (BRS) is a useful data set to determine how individuals within religious traditions view alcohol. This survey is a national random sample of 1,721 individuals in the contiguous United States which the Gallup Organization administered using a mixed-mode method in October and November 2005. Bader, Mencken, and Froese (2007) outline the full methodological information. Others have used this survey successfully to understand how various religious groups differ in their views of moral issues (Froese and Bader 2010).

Figure 1 shows how Americans in three Protestant traditions- Liberal, Moderate, and Evangelical²- compare with Americans with no religious affiliation when answering the following question on the BRS: “How do you feel about the consumption of alcohol?” Individuals could respond (4) Always wrong, (3) Almost always wrong, (2) Only wrong sometimes, and (1) Not wrong at all. The mean responses plus or minus one standard deviation are displayed. Evangelical and Moderate Protestants hold significantly different views than individuals without religious affiliation on alcohol consumption, while Liberal Protestants show no difference. Alcohol is more likely to be

² Each category—Liberal, Moderate, and Evangelical Protestants—represents individuals from the denominations and traditions as stated in the Faith Communities Today survey that will be used in the analysis below (Dudley and Roozen 2001:5). Liberal Protestants are Congregational, Episcopal/Anglican, Presbyterian, Unitarian Universalists, and United Church of Christ. Moderate Protestants are: American Baptists, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church of America, Mennonite, United Methodist, and Reformed Church of America/Dutch Reformed. Evangelical Protestants are Assemblies of God, Southern Baptist, Christian Reformed, Church of Christ, Church of the Nazarene, Seventh-Day Adventist, and Non-denominational Christian.

a meaningful and salient issue for individual Evangelicals and Moderates than it is for Liberal Protestants.

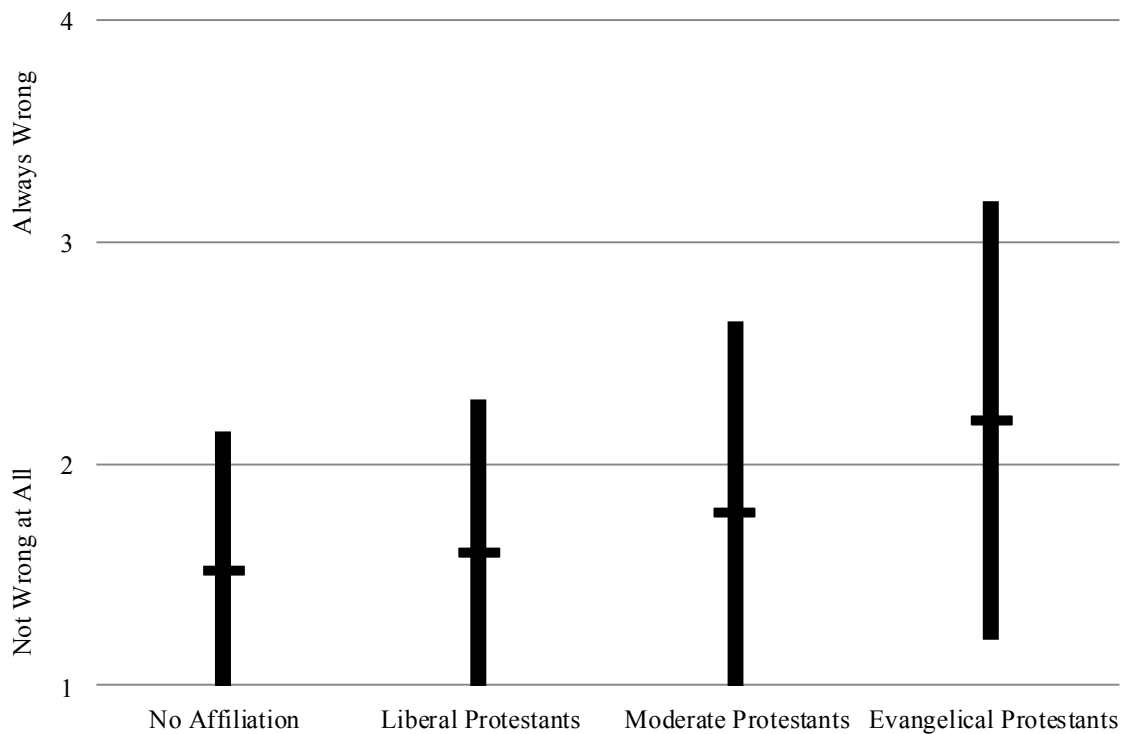


Figure 1. Individual Views on the Consumption of Alcohol (Means of responses \pm 1 standard deviation) All differences are significant at the .05 level except *No Affiliation—Liberal Protestants* and *Liberal Protestants—Moderate Protestants*. Source: Baylor Religion Survey, 2005

Similarly, Protestant denominations vary in their positions concerning alcohol. Many continue to have official policies against alcohol consumption. For instance, the Assemblies of God has an official positional paper that states:

Alcoholic beverages should have no place in the life of the Christian. Let there be no doubt about the Assemblies of God stand [*sic*] on this critical issue. We declare unequivocally our conviction that total abstinence from alcoholic beverages is the only acceptable way of life for the Christian (General Council of the Assemblies of God 1985:5).

In addition, the messengers (i.e. voting delegates) to the 1997 Annual Meeting of the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Evangelical denomination in America, passed a

resolution that stated “We promise total abstention from all alcoholic beverages (Southern Baptist Convention 1997).” They continue to pass similar resolutions prohibiting alcohol every few years at their annual meetings. Other Protestant denominations, however, consider the consumption of alcohol a non-issue. For example, neither the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, the Episcopal Church, nor the United Church of Christ prohibits alcohol use in their official discourses.

Table 1 shows a content analysis of how Protestant denominations vary in their responses to prohibitions of alcohol from 1995 to 2005. Salient issues are those which were in the denominational discourse during these years, that is, if the denomination had an official statement on the issue or if it was in debate within the organization. An issue is not salient if there is no evidence of discourse during those years. As shown, drinking alcohol is not a meaningful issue for Liberal denominations; they neither debate it nor prohibit it. Evangelical groups, however, actively have alcohol in their discourse. They either debate the issue or have statements against it. Moderate Protestant views are mixed. Alcohol is a salient issue for two denominations, the United Methodist Church and the Reformed Church of America, but is a non-issue for the rest. Therefore, by looking at the level above the congregation (the denomination) and the level below (the individual), I propose that *alcohol is highly salient for Evangelical congregations, less salient for Moderate Protestant congregations, and not salient for Liberal congregations.*

The beliefs of individual Protestants indicate that premarital sex is another salient issue. Traditional Christian teaching has placed sexual activity within the confines of heterosexual marriage. However these boundaries have been challenged beginning in the late 1960s with the sexual revolution. Figure 2 shows how individuals without religious

affiliation and Protestants from Liberal, Moderate, and Evangelical denominations answered the following question from the 2005 Baylor Religion Survey: “How do you feel about sexual relations before marriage?”

Table 1. *Denominational Discourses on Alcohol*

Was the issue of alcohol anywhere in the denominational positions, resolutions, or discussions from 1995 to 2005?	
Denomination	Salience
<i>Liberal Protestant</i>	
Episcopal Church	-
Presbyterian Church, USA	-
Unitarian-Universalist	-
United Church of Christ	-
<i>Moderate Protestant</i>	
American Baptist Churches	-
Disciples of Christ	-
Evangelical Lutheran Church	-
Mennonite Church USA	-
Reformed Church in America	*
United Methodist Church	*
<i>Evangelical Protestant</i>	
Assemblies of God	*
Christian Reformed Church	*
Church of the Nazarene	*
Seventh-Day Adventists	*
Southern Baptist Convention	*
* Salient Issue	
- Not a Salient Issue	

Figure 2 shows the ordering of the groups’ beliefs about premarital sex is the same as alcohol. The average responses for people without religious affiliation and Liberal Protestants are lower than Moderate Protestants, who in turn, are lower than Evangelical Protestants. The difference between beliefs about alcohol and premarital sex, however, is that all three religious groups are more likely to believe that premarital

sex is wrong. Liberal, Moderate, and Evangelical Protestants are all significantly more likely to classify premarital sex as wrong than those without religious affiliation.

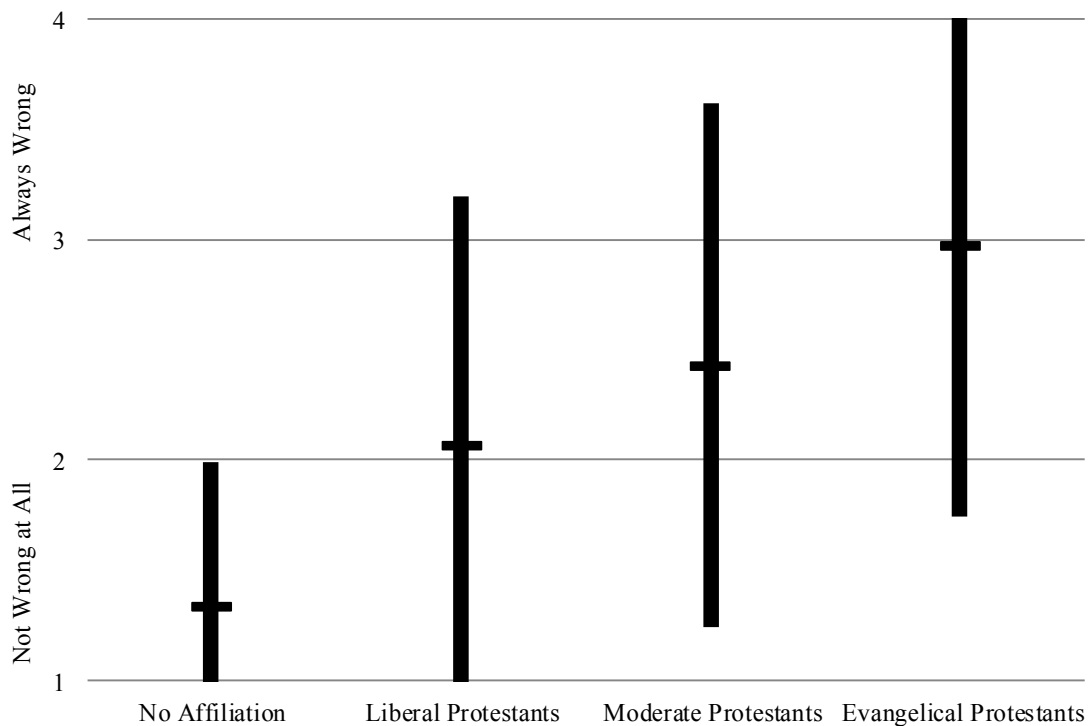


Figure 2. Individual views on Premarital Sex (Means of responses \pm 1 standard deviation)
All differences are significant at the .05 level. Source: Baylor Religion Survey, 2005

American Protestant denominations have responded in a range of ways to the issue of premarital sex (Gay et al. 1996; Butler et al. 2003; Regnerus 2007). Some denominations have intense debates over the nature of sexuality. For example, the Episcopal Church's 73rd General Convention in 2000 debated the role of human sexuality extensively. The result of the debate was a resolution titled, "Acknowledge Relationships Other Than Marriage and Existence of Disagreement on the Church's Teaching," which stated "Resolved, That we acknowledge...the issues of human sexuality are not yet resolved" (General Convention 2001:emphasis in original). The United Church of Christ (UCC) and the Unitarian-Universalists have jointly supported a sexual education curriculum for

teenagers which leaves the issue of premarital sex open for individual judgment (Wilson 1999).

Table 2. *Denominational Discourses on Premarital Sex*

Was the issue of premarital sex anywhere in the denominational positions, resolutions, or discussions from 1995 to 2005?	
Denomination	Salience
<i>Liberal Protestant</i>	
Episcopal Church	*
Presbyterian Church, USA	*
Unitarian-Universalist	-
United Church of Christ	*
<i>Moderate Protestant</i>	
American Baptist Churches	*
Disciples of Christ	-
Evangelical Lutheran Church	*
Mennonite Church USA	*
Reformed Church in America	*
United Methodist Church	*
<i>Evangelical Protestant</i>	
Assemblies of God	*
Christian Reformed Church	*
Church of the Nazarene	*
Seventh-Day Adventists	*
Southern Baptist Convention	*
* Salient Issue	
- Not a Salient Issue	

Still other denominations, particularly in the Evangelical tradition, have well-defined boundaries for sexual activity. For instance, The Assemblies of God's General Presbytery adopted a statement on human sexuality which says, "The consistent sexual ideal in the Bible is chastity for those outside a monogamous heterosexual marriage and fidelity for those inside such a marriage" (General Council of the Assemblies of God 2001). Evangelical denominations also support official resources to help educate their

members on the issue. The Southern Baptist Convention provides its members with the pro-abstinence curriculum “True Love Waits” to be used with Southern Baptist teenagers (DeVries 1997). Table 2 shows the anti-premarital sex discourse within Protestant denominations from 1995 to 2005. Unlike alcohol consumption, premarital sex is a topic discussed in nearly all of the Protestant denominations examined. Therefore, I propose that *premarital sex is a salient issue for all three Protestant traditions*.

Testing the Contingent Nature of Strictness and Growth

The next step in testing my hypothesis is to see if the relationship between strictness and growth is contingent upon the salience of alcohol and premarital sex. To do this, I use the Faith Communities Today (FACT) survey from 2000, which I obtained from the Association of Religion Data Archives (www.TheARDA.com). Coordinated by the Hartford Institute for Religion Research, this survey is the largest study ever conducted on congregations in the United States (Dudley and Roozen 2001). FACT data represent 41 denominations and faith groups. Each faith group’s survey included core questions on six areas of congregational life and structure: worship, location, programs, leadership, participants, and finances. An informed respondent, usually the senior pastor, filled out the survey. The survey response rate for the denominations averaged just over 50 percent. A total of 14,301 congregations completed surveys.

FACT data are useful to test my hypothesis. First, these data are from a very broad sample. While not all faith groups in the U.S. participated, most of the largest denominations are included. Because of this breadth, FACT represents 80% of all U.S. congregations (Dudley and Roozen 2001). Second, FACT is a survey of some depth. Each congregation reported on church growth, how much they address social issues, how

active they are at outreach, and the demographics of the congregants. In addition to the congregational questions, FACT includes United States Census data at the ZIP code level for 1980, 1990, and 2000. This allows me to test the surrounding ecological influences for each congregation that might influence growth, such as a growing community population.

FACT divides American Protestants into four groups: Liberal, Moderate, Evangelical, and Historically Black. The survey instrument for Historically Black Protestant congregations did not contain many of this study's variables. Therefore, I restrict my analysis to Liberal, Moderate, and Evangelical Protestants. Liberal Protestants are Episcopal Church USA, Presbyterian Church USA, Unitarian-Universalist, and the United Church of Christ. There are 2,565 Liberal Protestant responses. Moderate Protestants are American Baptist Churches, Disciples of Christ, Evangelical Lutheran Church in American, Mennonite, Reformed Church in America, and the United Methodist Church. There are 3,263 Moderate Protestant congregations in the study. Evangelical Protestants are Assemblies of God, Christian Reformed Church, Church of the Nazarene, Churches of Christ, Independent Christian Churches (Instrumental), Mega-churches, Nondenominational Protestant, Seventh-Day Adventist, and the Southern Baptist Convention. There are 3,610 Evangelical Protestant responses. The FACT 2000 public data file from the Association of Data Religion Archives did not include a denomination variable. Therefore, I am forced to use categories described above.

Dependent Variable

To measure congregational growth, FACT asked each congregation, “Since 1995, has the number of regularly participating adults:” Decreased 10% or more; Decreased 5% to 9%; Stayed about the same (+/-4%); Increased 5% to 9%; Increased 10% or more? I create a binary church growth variable for (1) congregational growth of 5% or more and (0) congregational stability or decline. The appendix shows the descriptive statistics for each variable.

Independent Variables

Congregational strictness is measured in two ways. I measure the overall strictness of a congregation using the FACT question: “Which one of the following three statements best describes your congregation?” The responses are: (1) “Our congregation has only [implicit/vague] expectations for members that are seldom, if ever, enforced.” or (2) “Our congregation has fairly clear expectations for members, but the enforcement of these expectations is not very strict.” or (3) “Our congregation has [explicit/definite] expectations for members that are strictly enforced.” I create a series of dummy variables for each of these responses representing congregations with no rules, loosely enforced rules, and strictly enforced rules.

The second way I measure strictness is the level of discourse surrounding alcohol use and premarital sex within a church. The FACT survey asked, “How much does your congregation, in its worship and education, emphasize the following home and personal practices?” Practices included personal prayer, family devotions, fasting, observing a special diet, abstaining from alcohol, observing a weekly holy day, displaying icons, and abstaining from premarital sex. I focus on abstaining from alcohol and premarital sex.

Each congregation could respond “Not at all,” “A little,” “Some,” “Quite a bit,” or “A great deal.” Tables 3 and 4 show how congregations in each Protestant tradition responded. The distributions of anti-alcohol and premarital sex discourses within congregations mirror both the individual and denominational responses to these prohibitions. Evangelical Protestant churches are the most likely to actively emphasize anti-alcohol and premarital sex messages. Liberal Protestant churches are the least likely.

Table 3. *Congregational Discourse on Abstaining from Alcohol*

Amount	Liberal Protestant		Moderate Protestant		Evangelical Protestant	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Not At All or A Little	88.4	2219	62.1	1985	28.3	1005
Some	8.8	222	20.5	655	23.1	820
Quite a Bit or A Great Deal	2.8	69	17.5	558	48.5	1721
<i>Total</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>2510</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>3198</i>	<i>100</i>	<i>3546</i>

Source: Faith Communities Today, 2000

Totals do not equal exactly 100% due to rounding.

In the analysis that follows, I create binary variables for anti-alcohol and anti-premarital sex to measure congregational emphases on these two behavior issues. Coding is (1) Congregations that emphasize the topic “Quite a bit” or “A great deal” and (0) congregations that emphasize the topic at the other levels.

Congregational Control Variables

I control for other congregational factors that might contribute to church growth. The age of a church is held constant by using the year founded. Congregation size is measured by the natural logarithm of the number of adults (18 years and older) who regularly participate in religious life at the congregation, regardless if they are members

or not. I also control for the demographics of a church by holding constant the percentage of younger adults (under 35), older adults (over 60), and females participating in church life. These three variables range from 1 to 7 with the responses being (1) None 0%, (2) Hardly any 1-10%, (3) Few 11-20%, (4) Some 21-40%, (5) Many 41-60%, (6) Most 61-80%, and (7) All or nearly all 81-100%. Because the responses 1 through 7 are not meaningful as a numeric scale, I use the midpoints of each response (0, 5, 15, 30, 50, 70, and 90) to create interval variables.

Table 4. *Congregational Discourse on Abstaining from Premarital Sex*

Amount	Liberal Protestant		Moderate Protestant		Evangelical Protestant	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Not At All or A Little	62.9	1574	28.3	908	8.2	292
Some	21.9	549	30.1	965	19.7	702
Quite a Bit or A Great Deal	15.2	379	41.6	1334	72.1	2566
<i>Total</i>	100	2502	100	3207	100	3560

Source: Faith Communities Today, 2000

Totals do not equal exactly 100% due to rounding.

I also control for congregational outreach activities. The FACT survey asked: “In addition to the outreach activities of your denomination, did your congregation do any of the following during the past 12 months to reach out to new or inactive participants, or to make your congregation better known in your community?” I hold constant three types of marketing approaches: newspaper ads, radio and television ads, and direct mail promotions. Each of these is a binary variable: (1) Yes, done in the last 12 months and (0) No.

Community Control Variables

Besides controlling for internal factors within a congregation, I hold constant environmental variables. I control for ZIP-code population in 2000 (natural logarithmic transformed) and the percentage change in ZIP-code population from 1990 to 2000. This variable is a discrete, 1 percent interval measure of the percentage change (e.g. -12% or 5%). The upper and lower ranges are capped off at “-20% or lower” and “30% or higher” (coded as -20 and 30, respectively). Finally, region of the country is held constant by a series of binary variables, with South as the comparison group.

Method

Binary logistic regression is the most appropriate method because the dependent variable of church growth is dichotomous. Because of the high correlation between anti-alcohol and anti-premarital sex discourses ($r=.52$), I separate these independent variables in the models. I estimate six models, separating the three Protestant traditions by how anti-alcohol or anti-premarital sex discourses affect church growth. For salient issues, any significant and positive estimate supports my hypothesis. Conversely, for non-salient issues, I expect non-significance.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

As posited, Table 5 shows anti-alcohol discourse affects the probability of congregational growth in both Moderate and Evangelical Protestant churches, but *not* in Liberal Protestants congregations. Liberal churches that actively emphasize anti-alcohol messages are no more likely to grow than those who do not maintain this prohibition. By comparison, Evangelical churches with high levels of anti-alcohol discourse are 67% more likely to grow, while Moderates with the same level are only 41% more likely.

Overall congregational strictness has a significant, positive relationship to growth within all three traditions. Having congregational rules, even if they are not tightly enforced, increases the odds that the congregation is growing by at least 25% for Evangelical congregations and over 100% for Liberal and Moderate churches. Other congregational characteristics also affect church growth. Churches founded more recently and larger congregations (i.e. those with more regularly participating adults) are more likely to grow. Churches with higher percentages of females and older adults have lower odds of growth. Advertising through radio, television, and mail outs only affects growth for Evangelical congregations. Liberal and Evangelical churches in populated areas (ZIP population) have lower odds of growth, but a growing ZIP code population increases the odds for all three traditions. Liberal and Evangelical churches in the Midwest are less likely to grow compared to Southern Liberals and Evangelicals.

Unlike anti-alcohol discourse, which did not affect congregational growth in all traditions, anti-premarital sex discourse does. Table 6 shows Liberal, Moderate, and

Evangelical Protestant congregations that have high levels of anti-premarital sex discourse are 48%, 25%, and 48% more likely to grow, respectively. The general level of strictness also increases the odds of having a growing congregation. Even a church whose rules are not strictly enforced is more likely to experience growth than a church with no such rules. Like other models, newer churches and larger churches are more likely to be growing, while the percentage of older adults lowers the odds of growth for all three traditions. The percentage female only lowers the odds of growth in Liberal Protestant congregations. The gender ratio has no effect in Moderate and Evangelical churches in this model. Advertising through radio, television, and the mail increases the odds of growth in Evangelical congregations, but has no effect for Moderates and Liberals. Community variables also affect the odds of congregational growth. Liberal and Evangelical Protestant churches in ZIP codes with large populations have lower odds of growth. This is not true for Moderate congregations where ZIP code population does not make a difference. However, the growth in congregational ZIP codes does affect the odds for all three traditions. For each percentage increase in ZIP code population change, the odds that a church is growing increase by either 1 or 2%. Finally, congregations in all traditions are less likely to grow if they are located in the Midwest as compared to the South.

Table 5. *Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting Congregations with Anti-Alcohol Discourse Growing 5% or More*

Variables	Liberal		Moderate		Evangelical	
	Protestants		Protestants		Protestants	
	Estimate	Odds Ratio	Estimate	Odds Ratio	Estimate	Odds Ratio
<i>Prohibition Discourse</i>						
Anti-Alcohol	0.19	-	0.35**	1.41	0.51***	1.67
<i>Strictness</i> ¹						
Loosely Enforced Rules	0.32**	1.37	0.30***	1.35	0.23*	1.25
Strictly Enforced Rules	0.72**	2.06	0.90***	2.46	0.46**	1.59
<i>Congregational Variables</i>						
Year Organized	0.002**	1.00	0.002*	1.00	0.006***	1.01
# Regular Adults (Log)	0.67***	1.95	0.31***	1.36	0.53***	1.70
% Young Adults	-0.003	-	0.001	-	0.002	-
% Older Adults	-0.02***	0.98	-0.02***	0.99	-0.01***	0.99
% Female	-0.02***	0.98	-0.01	-	0.001	-
Newspaper Ads	0.07	-	0.04	-	-0.09	-
Radio/TV Ads	0.14	-	0.14	-	0.22*	1.24
Mailout Ads	0.19	-	0.09	-	0.24**	1.27
<i>Community Variables</i>						
ZIP Population (Log)	-0.18***	0.83	0.04	-	-0.13***	0.88
% ZIP Population Change	0.02***	1.02	0.02***	1.02	0.01***	1.01
<i>Region</i> ²						
North	-0.11	-	0.09	-	0.20	-
Midwest	-0.55***	0.58	-0.23	-	-0.22*	0.81
West	0.01	-	-0.20	-	-0.10	-
Intercept	-3.58*		-5.18***		-13.97***	
<i>n</i>	2170		2535		3113	
<i>r</i> ²	0.21		0.12		0.16	

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

¹ "No Congregational Rules" is comparison group

² South is comparison group

Source: Faith Communities Today (2000)

Table 6. *Binary Logistic Regressions Predicting Congregations with Anti-Premarital Sex Discourse Growing 5% or More*

Variables	Liberal Protestants		Moderate Protestants		Evangelical Protestants	
	Estimate	Odds Ratio	Estimate	Odds Ratio	Estimate	Odds Ratio
<i>Prohibition Discourse</i>						
Anti-Premarital Sex	0.39**	1.48	0.22*	1.25	0.39***	1.48
<i>Strictness</i> ¹						
Loosely Enforced Rules	0.29**	1.33	0.27**	1.31	0.27**	1.31
Strictly Enforced Rules	0.74**	2.09	0.95***	2.58	0.51***	1.66
<i>Congregational Variables</i>						
Year Organized	0.002**	1.00	0.002*	1.00	0.01***	1.01
# Regular Adults (Log)	0.65***	1.92	0.29***	1.34	0.48***	1.62
% Young Adults	-0.003	-	0.001	-	0.002	-
% Older Adults	-0.02***	0.98	-0.02***	0.99	-0.01***	0.99
% Female	-0.02***	0.98	-0.01	-	0.002	-
Newspaper Ads	0.07	-	0.05	-	-0.12	-
Radio/TV Ads	0.12	-	0.11	-	0.26**	1.30
Mailout Ads	0.18	-	0.09	-	0.24**	1.28
<i>Community Variables</i>						
ZIP Population (Log)	-0.17***	0.84	0.04	-	-0.12***	0.89
% ZIP Population Change	0.01***	1.02	0.02***	1.02	0.01***	1.01
<i>Region</i> ²						
North	-0.08	-	0.07	-	0.17	-
Midwest	-0.55***	0.58	-0.26*	0.77	-0.27**	0.76
West	0.03	-	-0.23	-	-0.13	-
Intercept	-3.62*		-4.94**		-12.90***	
<i>n</i>	2163		2548		3119	
<i>r</i> ²	0.22		0.12		0.15	

*p<.05. **p<.01. ***p<.001.

¹ "No Congregational Rules" is comparison group

² South is comparison group

Source: Faith Communities Today (2000)

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusion

This study seeks to better understand the relationship between church strictness and congregational growth. As others have found before, strictness still matters (Kelley 1972; Iannaccone 1994; Stark and Finke 2000; Thomas and Olson 2010). The boundaries that churches create by establishing rules raise the costs of being a member, even if these rules are loosely enforced. These increased costs allow the church to generate higher levels of meaning (Kelley 1972) and reduce the number of free-riders (Iannaccone 1994). Moreover, strictness is not a factor for only Evangelical Protestants; it is important across all three traditions. Even Liberal congregations that have only loosely enforced rules are more likely to experience growth of 5% or more.

However, this study modifies the traditional strict church thesis. Congregational strictness does not *always* lead to church growth. Instead, growth via strictness is contingent upon the salience of an issue. A church cannot prohibit any behavior and expect this increase in strictness to lead to growth. The issue used to increase strictness must be meaningful and relevant to both the individuals within the congregation and resonant with the larger tradition. This is why the Liberal Protestant congregations that have high levels of anti-alcohol discourse are not growing. These churches, by definition, are stricter churches than their fellow Liberal congregations. Nevertheless, this strictness does not affect growth because alcohol is not a salient issue for either individual Liberal Protestants or their denominations.

The Moderate Protestant congregations point out a weakness in this study. While Moderate Protestant individuals viewed alcohol as a salient issue, the larger denominational traditions did not match up. Alcohol was a salient issue for only two Moderate denominations in my study: the Reformed Church of America and the United Methodist Church. Anti-alcohol discourse still remained a significant influence on church growth. I suspect that the United Methodist congregations are driving this finding. First, the Methodists were one of the major forces behind prohibition in the early 20th century. This history continues to have some weight among United Methodist congregations, especially in the South. Second, United Methodists are the largest Moderate Protestant denomination in the United States. Therefore, their history of official anti-alcohol discourse could have a greater influence on this study's results if they comprise a large proportion of the Moderate Protestant churches in FACT. Unfortunately, the FACT data set does not allow me to separate the various denominations that make up each tradition, so I am unable to see if the relationship between anti-alcohol discourse and growth is the same for each of the Moderate denominations.

This study has other limitations, as well. FACT is not a random sample of congregations throughout the United States. Instead, it is a very broad survey of participating faith groups. Positively, this means that the number of congregations in this study is quite high. Negatively, it means that, while strongly suggestive of how strictness works within congregations, these findings are not nationally representative of all American Protestant churches. Finally, the 2000 FACT survey asked about only two prohibitive discourses that are salient for Protestant Christians: alcohol and premarital

sex. These are by no means the only salient issues for Protestants, and Protestantism is by no means the only religious tradition in America. This study could be strengthened by examining other issues, such as theological beliefs, economics, race, gender, or sexual orientation. It could also be strengthened to see if the salience strictness theory holds true for other religious traditions. Does salience (and even the strict church thesis) matter for religious traditions that are not as congregationally focused, such as Hinduism?

This study contributes to the strict church thesis by showing the contingent nature of church strictness and growth. Future studies on strictness should examine not only how many behaviors a congregation prohibits, but also the salience of prohibited behaviors. When an issue is salient and meaningful to the congregation, strictness will lead to growth.

APPENDIX

APPENDIX A

Appendix A.1 *Descriptive Statistics for Variables*

Variables	Mean	Std Dev	Range
<i>Dependent Variable</i>			
Growing Church	0.48	0.50	0-1
<i>Independent Variables</i>			
No Congregational Rules	0.33	0.47	0-1
Loosely Enforced Rules	0.55	0.50	0-1
Strictly Enforced Rules	0.07	0.25	0-1
Anti-Alcohol	0.25	0.44	0-1
Anti-Premarital Sex	0.46	0.50	0-1
<i>Congregational Variables</i>			
Year Organized	1921	57.3	1629-2000
# Regular Adults (Log)	4.56	1.20	-0.69 - 9.62
% Young Adults	35.32	18.46	0-90
% Older Adults	38.33	18.14	0-90
% Female	53.79	10.72	0-90
Newspaper Ads	0.70	0.46	0-1
Radio/TV Ads	0.24	0.43	0-1
Mailout Ads	0.31	0.46	0-1
<i>Community Variables</i>			
ZIP Population (Log)	9.42	1.25	1.38 - 11.62
% ZIP Population Change (90-00)	7.84	12.23	-20 - 30
North	0.19	0.39	0-1
Midwest	0.37	0.48	0-1
West	0.16	0.37	0-1
South	0.27	0.44	0-1
<i>Religious Tradition</i>			
Liberal Protestant	0.27	0.44	0-1
Moderate Protestant	0.35	0.48	0-1
Evangelical Protestant	0.38	0.49	0-1

Source: Faith Communities Today (2000)

REFERENCES

- Bader, Christopher D., F. Carson Mencken, and Paul Froese. 2007. "American Piety 2005: Content and Methods of the Baylor Religion Survey." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 46(4):447–463.
- Butler, Jon, Grant Wacker, and Randall Balmer. 2003. *Religion in American Life: A Short History*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Cochran, John K., Leonard Beeghley, and E. Wilbur Bock. 1988. "Religiosity and Alcohol Behavior: An Exploration of Reference Group Theory." *Sociological Forum* 3(2):256–276.
- DeVries, Mark. 1997. *True Love Waits*. Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman Publishers.
- Dudley, Carl S., and David A Roozen. 2001. *Faith Communities Today : A Report on Religion in the United States Today*. Hartford, CT: Hartford Institute for Religion Research, Hartford Seminary.
- Froese, Paul, and Christopher D. Bader. 2010. *America's Four Gods : What We Say About God-- & What That Says About Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Gay, David A., Christopher G. Ellison, and Daniel A. Powers. 1996. "In Search of Denominational Subcultures: Religious Affiliation and 'Pro-Family' Issues Revisited." *Review of Religious Research* 38(1):3–17.
- General Convention. 2001. *Journal of the General Convention of...The Episcopal Church, Denver, 2000*. New York: General Convention.
- General Council of the Assemblies of God. 1985. *A Biblical Perspective on Abstinence*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House.
- General Council of the Assemblies of God. 2001. *Homosexuality*. Springfield, MO: Gospel Publishing House.
- Hout, Michael, Andrew Greeley, and Melissa J. Wilde. 2001. "The Demographic Imperative in Religious Change in the United States." *American Journal of Sociology* 107(2):468–500.
- Iannaccone, Laurence R. 1994. "Why Strict Churches Are Strong." *American Journal of Sociology* 99(5):1180.
- Kelley, Dean M. 1972. *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing; A Study in Sociology of Religion*. 1st ed. New York: Harper & Row.

- Regnerus, Mark D. 2007. *Forbidden Fruit: Sex & Religion in the Lives of American Teenagers*. 1st ed. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Ritzer, George. 2000. *Sociological Theory*. 5th ed. New York: McGraw Hill.
- Southern Baptist Convention. 1997. *Resolution on Drug Abuse*. Dallas, TX: Southern Baptist Convention Annual Meeting.
- Stark, Rodney, and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith: Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. 1st ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Thomas, Jeremy N., and Daniel V. A. Olson. 2010. "Testing the Strictness Thesis and Competing Theories of Congregational Growth." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49(4):619–639.
- Wilson, Pamela M. 1999. *Our Whole Lives: Sexuality Education for Grades 7-9*. Boston, MA: Unitarian Universalist Association.