



“Thank God, He Didn’t Answer My Prayer!” (Failed) Healing as Boundary Maintenance

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Abstract

Divine healing is an emotionally and theologically conflictive field where actors communicate positions and draw boundaries by engaging in certain practices and renouncing others. In this article, I analyse how a progressive evangelical megachurch, faced with the dominance of conservative evangelicalism, uses healing and the failure of healing for boundary maintenance and identity construction. Drawing on ethnographic field research, interviews, and the analysis of sermons, I argue that the church develops and communicates its position in the evangelical field by developing and presenting healing practices that directly address the supposed shortcomings of other evangelical churches. To achieve this, the church makes failed healing an integral part of religious practice and encourages its followers to speak openly about this failure while continuously managing their expectations.

1. Introduction: from healer to therapist

According to Judah Smith, head pastor of the Seattle-based megachurch Churchome, when God asks humans a question, He does not need the answer. As God is omniscient, there is only one explanation for why He even asks: He wants you to reflect on the question. Like a therapist, He will see through your “I’m fine,” make you think about how you are *really* feeling, and nudge you towards connecting with your emotions. For Churchome and its followers, Jesus is a healer, but He has evolved from *Christus medicus* to one that makes you lie on the couch.

The emphasis that Churchome and other evangelical churches today place on mental, emotional, and relational “health” shows how congregations, churches, or denominations adapt healing, a central part of Christianity since its beginnings, to its needs and aesthetic preferences. The anthropology of Christianity has shed light on the broad diversity of Christianities across the globe and its locally and historically specific expressions. Healing is no exception: There are, for example, very different ideas about what it means to be healthy and what requires healing (Brown 2011; Klassen 2014), healing can be performed in many ways in many different places, such as during services or as a private silent prayer (Brown 2006), and believers connect a range of different expectations to healing practices (Marty 2005). As a result, how a group of Christians thinks about

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healing, how they practice healing, and how they react when healing rituals do not lead to the desired results serves as a means to explore and articulate group identities and boundaries.

I understand religious healing as a field of conflictive practices and doctrines where groups, by engaging in certain practices and commenting on others, communicate affiliations and distinctions regarding styles, theologies, or other factors. As evangelicalism in the US and elsewhere has become almost synonymous with a political Christian Right, churches that do not understand themselves as politically conservative, such as my case study Churchome, struggle with their public identity. Healing is a particularly conflictive field, as it is not only a deeply emotional issue but also touches on aesthetic and performative preferences and theological questions. Therefore, healing and the ways of dealing with the failure of healing serve as a crucial part of identity construction and boundary maintenance in evangelicalism.

In this article, I argue that Churchome develops and communicates its position in the evangelical field by engaging in healing practices that directly address the hypocrisy and the overwhelming pressure on believers they see at work in other churches. To achieve this, Churchome makes failed healing an integral part of religious practice and encourages its followers to openly speak about failure and to continuously manage their expectations. Churchome's followers reject big promises about healing that leave no room for doubt, less for theological reasons but more because they perceive these as potentially harmful to their own or other believers' faith and mental health. Some of my interviewees labelled such high expectations as "unhealthy." By developing "healthy" healing practices, meaning transparent, pressure-free, individualised, and open to failure, Churchome can stick to evangelical core beliefs while carving out a unique position as a "different" or progressive evangelical church.

Churchome diplomatically distances itself from other churches and often softens this boundary-making through humour and irony. The church does not attack particular churches, pastors, or practices but constructs an unspecified other that believers can fill with their own experiences and cultural background knowledge. In doing so, they often draw on common Protestant critiques, such as the hypocrisy or inauthenticity of other Christians.

In the following, I will first touch upon the recent developments in US evangelicalism that have led to a self-proclaimed "identity crisis" for many evangelicals. After presenting my case study and method, I will analyse how different healing practices at Churchome work as a means to make the church stand apart from other evangelical churches and to develop and shape progressive evangelical identities. I identify four different areas in which healing can take place and analyse these in subchapters: First, church members believe in physical healing but do not expect it to happen. Healing rituals are not publicly performed, which can be traced back to a particular understanding of the authenticity of religious emotions. Second, Churchome emphasises therapeutic healing, which can be found in individual relationship with God. Third, Churchome sets transparency and openness as ideals in one's relationship with God and among other people. Here, failed healings are perceived to open up spaces to improve relationships.

Fourth, Churchome presents the US as politically and socially divided and calls its followers to bring about social healing by countering these polarising processes. I will show that Churchome's followers are required to manage their expectations regarding healing, which in turn influences the church's self-presentation, and develop the concept of expectation work as part of the church's everyday identity management. I conclude with an outlook on how Churchome's healing practices resonate with larger societal developments.

2. Churchome in the context of evangelical boundary maintenance

Along with the growth of the Christian Right in the past two decades, the term "evangelical" has, in public perception, become almost synonymous with "politically conservative."¹ Christians whose beliefs and practices fit within the category of evangelicalism or who see themselves as evangelicals but who do not identify with the Christian Right thus find themselves in a self-proclaimed identity crisis. Conservative evangelicals call these more progressive evangelicals "un-Christian" and claim they lack any competence on Biblical matters, meanwhile, non-evangelical liberals often fail to distinguish them from their conservative counterparts. These believers, whom Schuurman (2019: xiii) calls "reflexive evangelicals," are highly aware of the public image and stereotypes surrounding their faith and both actively and self-reflexively engage in the debate about what evangelicalism should and should not be. In this process, they construct new evangelical identities and lifestyles.

I first understood the consequences of this struggle over identity for progressive or reflexive evangelicals when a pastor mentioned in a conversation that Churchome was the first church where he was not embarrassed to bring his friends to a service. For him, countering negative stereotypes against his faith was not a theological exercise but an everyday issue of protecting and presenting his identity. Also, many followers themselves have negative views of certain evangelical theologies, practices, and aesthetics, some of them due to bad experiences with churches in their upbringing. Therefore, they look for a church that does things differently.

In this quest, Churchome and its members follow in the footsteps of the Emerging Church movement and of socially committed young evangelicals from the beginning of the 21st century. The Emerging Church was a label given to pastors, church officials, and concerned laity who publicly expressed their frustration with contemporary evangelicalism (Bielo 2011: 5–6). Beyond these more intellectual contestations of evangelicalism, young Christians explored new ways of expressing their identity through lifestyle and habitus. In 2010, evangelical author Brett McCracken (2010: 97–98) described the emergence of the "Christian hipster": someone who is critical of church involvement in partisan politics and instead engages in social and environmental

¹ A 2020 poll of the Pew Research Center showed that Muslims, Hindus, or Orthodox Christians who identified with the G.O.P. increasingly self-identified as "evangelical" or "born-again" (Pew Research Center 2021). Political scientist Ryan Burge (2021) concluded that "many Americans are coming to the understanding that to be very religiously engaged and very politically conservative means that they are evangelical, even if they don't believe in the divinity of Jesus Christ".

projects, who is embarrassed by megachurch services, and who loves breaking traditional Christian taboos such as drinking alcohol or getting tattoos. Another more recent string of critiques can be found in the ex-vangelical or faith deconstruction² movement, which encourages believers and nonbelievers alike to reflect on their religious upbringing and to re-evaluate their faith, often from a therapeutic viewpoint.

The ideas and criticisms of the Emerging Church movement, the openness towards non-Christian popular culture promoted by Christian “hipsters,” and the impulses towards a therapeutic re-evaluation of theologies by the faith deconstruction movement have since then entered more conventional megachurches and changed the evangelical “mainstream.” At Churchome, for example, many former evangelical taboos regarding clothes or lifestyle merely serve as targets of ridicule rather than symbols of reform inside evangelical disputes over authenticity. As believers discuss and reflect on new ideas and adapt them to their own religious experience, concepts and terms often lose the original context in which they have first been voiced. Hence, most of Churchome’s members might never have heard of the Emerging Church movement but are familiar with its concerns and would probably support at least some of them.

Churchome does not officially identify as evangelical. As a pastor stated in an interview with me, the church could best be described as evangelical from a theological viewpoint but avoids this term due to its association with the Christian Right (interview 3). Instead, Churchome employs terms such as “Jesus follower” or simply “Christian.” I argue that the label “evangelical” still serves as a useful identifier for the church in light of my research, as I am interested in the boundary maintenance and identity work that takes place precisely due to Churchome’s position in the larger evangelical discourse. I do not understand the term “evangelical” along doctrinal positions, as any theological definition would risk participating in the very struggle over identity I am researching (Brenneman 2014: 158). Evangelicalism is a movement so broad and diverse that it might be more accurate to consider speaking of *evangelicalisms* in the plural (Cooper 2022: 10). Both insiders and outsiders often draw the line of who is in and who is out not along doctrine but along political positions, media consumption, or stylistic and habitual preferences (Brenneman 2014: 159–160; Du Mez 2020: 5–6). Following Cooper (2022: 15), I refrain from coining a definition and instead direct my focus on “how the boundaries of evangelicalism are created, maintained, debated, and patrolled.” I argue that practices, emotions, and aesthetics are essential aspects of evangelical boundary maintenance, both in the construction of shared identities and in the identification of and distancing from “others,” and thus opt for a practice-centred aesthetics of religion approach.

² “Faith deconstruction” encompasses a broad range of intentions to rethink Christian beliefs, practices, and theologies, usually in the form of therapeutic self-help. The faith deconstruction movement loosely connects those interested in such rethinking primarily through social media (Fekete/Knippel 2020).

3. Case study and method

The case study for my analysis is the Seattle-based global nondenominational megachurch Churchome. Churchome was founded in 1992 as “City Church” in the Seattle suburb of Kirkland. Since Judah Smith, the founder’s son, took over the role of head pastor, the church has undergone profound changes. Together with his wife Chelsea, Smith has adapted the church concept to attract a young, academic, mobile, and middle-class audience, which has not only increased church membership but also brought the church to a global audience, making him, in the process, a celebrity among evangelicals.

In 2019, Churchome’s membership had increased expansively, exceeding the infrastructural limits of the Seattle campus. In hindsight, the church’s solution for this problem was perfect preparation for the Covid-19 pandemic that began soon after: Churchome decided not to erect another building but instead to digitise aspects of church participation by not only live-streaming services online but also by developing an app and providing digital ways to meet. Together with the name change to “Churchome,” a portmanteau of “church” and “home,” the church presented the vision of enabling its followers to practise their faith outside of designated buildings and service times.³ Home groups, friends, or families are encouraged to stream the service together and chat about it afterwards. Home groups exist globally and include many members who have never been to a physical Churchome location. Now, in 2023, the Smiths preach live only once a month in both Seattle and the second church location in Los Angeles. From time to time, they travel to other parts of the US where many followers are located to hold a “Churchome live experience” there.

Membership and attendance at Churchome are even harder to track than at other megachurches, as small groups are fluid and their attendance short-lived. Members’ physical locations become increasingly irrelevant, and Smith regularly encourages people to stay home and tune in on Sunday mornings. Nevertheless, statistics taken from digital platforms can give some insights: As of January 2023, Judah Smith has more than 700,000 Instagram followers. Churchome has some 130,000 Instagram followers and 248,000 YouTube subscribers. Sermons usually reach several thousand views on YouTube, with some of them reaching tens of thousands of views. For my research, however, Churchome’s overall size is perhaps less important than its

³ Evangelicals have long struggled to reconcile a need for institutionalisation and a desire to grow their church with a personal, relationship-centered approach to religious practice. Home groups are used as a means to strengthen relationships among members of a congregation and can be traced back at least to 17th century Pietism. As the “church growth movement” led to the implementation of megachurches all over the US (Maddox 2012), these churches used small groups to counter the anonymous atmosphere of the services held in large auditoriums or stadiums. More recently, criticism against institutionalized churches was voiced by the Emerging Church movement, whose representatives traded large services for “house churches” (Bielo 2011: 13). Therefore, Churchome’s approach of emphasising small groups is not a new idea. However, Churchome goes one step further than other megachurches by increasingly reducing the number of live services and providing several online features beyond a one-way livestreaming of services, such as a “pastor chat”.

extensive influence on progressive evangelical discourse.

My research draws on several forms of data. Interviews with church members and participant observation in home groups give me an understanding of believers' positions and practices. Participant observation in church services as well as in other activities, interviews with pastors, sermon analysis, and church self-help literature help me trace the church's theology and self-presentation. I work with a Grounded Theory methodology and have thus engaged in several feedback loops that led to an iterative re-evaluation of my research design. First, I was a participant observer in a digital Churchome home group based in Germany and conducted interviews with several of the members. Then, I conducted digital interviews with home group leaders worldwide. As a third step, I travelled to Seattle and Los Angeles in April and May 2022 to take part in in-person services and church events and to conduct further interviews. In total, I conducted and analysed 19 interviews with Churchome members and pastors and one interview with a former Churchome pastor between December 2020 and December 2022. Additionally, I analysed 97 sermons from February 2021 until November 2022 and three self-help books by pastor Judah Smith.

4. Healing practice as boundary maintenance at Churchome

In the following, I will analyse how healing is being practised at Churchome and how these practices form part of Churchome's boundary maintenance as a progressive evangelical church. While other churches explicitly make healing their core identity, the word "healing" does not feature prominently in sermons at Churchome. Similarly, church members did not frequently use the phrase, neither during the activities I observed nor during the interviews I conducted. Daniel Ellwanger (2024), also in this special issue, similarly noted a related discrepancy: Although the French Marian apparition site Lourdes, where he conducted fieldwork, is famous for many supposed healing miracles, neither the site nor the pilgrimage organisations advertise this fact.

Nevertheless, healing practices are omnipresent at Churchome and the reluctance to label them as such is precisely part of Churchome's continuous struggle with evangelical identity. This tendency to avoid the term "healing" might be understood in the context of megachurches' efforts to renounce any elements that could scare off those unaccustomed to evangelical Christianity (Thumma/Travis 2007: 17; Sødal 2010: 39). At the same time, Christian understandings and expectations of healing are diverse. Thus, using the term "healing" might open up associations with large healing events that the believers perceive as unauthentic and awkward or with a "health and wealth" gospel the church intends to distance itself from, while "praying for someone" and "being well" might sound more neutral inside Christian vernacular.

For my analysis, I have split up healing practices and discourses according to what is supposedly being healed. In this, I am following my interviewees, who usually understand healing as holistic but identify different areas in need of healing: First, *physical healing* is not publicly practised at Churchome. This decision is not only a matter of personal preference but is grounded in moral understandings about the authenticity of emotions and religious experience. Second, Churchome

emphasizes psychological or *therapeutic healing* but intentionally steps away from detailed life advice that other churches give to emphasize spontaneity and individuality. Third, Churchome presents failure and negative experiences as opportunities for the *healing of relationships*. This includes not only relationships with other people but also the believers' relationship with God. Fourth, Churchome takes on the growing political polarisation in the US and employs strategies to present itself as "a-political" and a reconciler through a rhetoric of *healing the nation*.

Physical healing: healing illness as reflexive Christians

Compared with other megachurches, the healing of physical illness takes up little public space at Churchome. Instead, those who search for healing can privately pray with a pastor in person or via the digital service "pastor chat," file a prayer request in the Churchome app so that others can pray for them or pray with their home group. The idea of head pastor Judah Smith publicly laying hands on someone seems so out of place that when reading a Bible passage about miracle healings, Smith joked about the improbability of such spontaneous healing happening at Churchome rather than utilizing the passage to speak about God's healing power (When the Boat Breaks, 15:20–15:39).

From the way Churchome presents itself, one could gain the impression that the absence of physical healing practices at Churchome can easily be traced back to the socio-demographic aspects of the church's audience. The majority of the followers seem to be well-off, well-qualified, and therefore well-insured twenty- and thirty-somethings that would not have to depend on a church service for physical healing (or even the hope to get physically healed). However, when I visited in-person services at both Churchome locations over a period of two months, I was surprised to find many elderly people and people with disabilities, an audience more diverse than I had anticipated. This suggests that healing practices at Churchome are not shaped by an actual lack of illness but rather, as I will show, by a shared understanding that public healing rituals might be inauthentic or even harmful to the participants.

As a global megachurch, Churchome includes members with different theological and cultural background knowledge and leaves room for a broad range of faith expression. While all of my interviewees expressed strong belief in God's power to heal physical illnesses, even spontaneously, they had different experiences and opinions on the practice of healing. Some, especially Churchome members from the US who had grown up in evangelical churches, recounted many instances from their own or family members' lives where God had healed spontaneously. They further claimed that such a healing was possible for everyone. Others, especially Churchome members from Europe, had heard stories but had never witnessed miracle healings. They also explained that healing could be spontaneous or a long process but that they had only experienced the latter.

All of my interviewees at some point placed an explicit or implicit disclaimer: setting high expectations for healing and prayer could be harmful. Prayer always helped, but doctors, therapists, and medication helped as well, and it was dangerous to insist in every case on prayer

as the sole method for healing. Even one interviewee who told me about numerous miracle healings she experienced or brought about herself, including the resuscitation of a dead family member through prayer, expressed concerns about people trusting only God with their mental health and refusing to see therapists (interview 4). Most importantly, for my interviewees, healing happened in God's "timing," which is not always congruent with what people desire and pray for, or to put it differently, you cannot force healing, not even through prayer. One of my interviewees contrasted believers' reliance on God's "timing" with miracle healings happening on stage at other evangelical churches and events that he visited:

Well, I strongly believe that God heals and that He can heal very quickly, too, but at these large events, I sometimes feel like that's kind of being forced, like, that it just has to happen now. And [...] to be honest, I have a problem with that. When healing happens, [...] it will happen in His timing and in the timeframe that He sets and not because a pastor jumps around on stage and says, okay, now, yeah, everyone [who had problems] with their right knees has been healed and done. [laughs] Yeah, well, no. Could be, yes, but I'm not convinced by that. (Interview 1, translated from German)

This position, which would probably resonate with many of Churchome's members, shows why the decision to not publicly practice healing at Churchome is not a matter of personal preference or practicability but the result of a specific understanding of authentic religious practice. When a pastor publicly prays for instantaneous healing, he does not leave the healing and the timeframe in which it happens to God's will and therefore, if healing happens, its authenticity is dubious at least. This reflects a particularly Protestant distrust of any kind of mediator between human beings and God (Scheer 2014, 2020; Cooper 2022). Protestants critically screen religious emotions and experiences to evaluate whether these stem from actual religious experience or the material and atmospheric circumstances of their practices.

At the same time, the mention of a pastor who "jumps around" on stage is an aesthetic judgment which relates to the collective knowledge of "suspicious" miracle healers shared by many evangelicals. Prosperity gospel teachings around healing have influenced the evangelical mainstream and continue to shape a "popular religious imagination" today that is focused on God's "blessings" for his followers (Bowler 2013: 7). Since scandals shook several famous televangelists in the 1980s, prosperity gospel has earned a reputation as greedy, infantile, and corrupt, or short, "bad religion." For many evangelicals today, a preacher proclaiming healing on stage embodies exactly the misuse of the gospel they try to distance themselves from.

When Churchome avoids public displays of physical healing and Judah Smith jokes about the improbability of miracles, the church leaders thus draw on the varied yet connected background knowledge shared by their followers. Like this, the church can present itself as a place for the authentic expression of faith and distance itself from an unspecified other to whom believers can contrast their own experiences, such as an "unconvincing" healing event. The relevance of shared background knowledge or "popular religious imaginations" in healing practices can also be noted in Ellwanger's text in this special issue: Lourdes, as he shows, has become famous in part through

its representation in mass media, which forms pilgrims' expectations and ideas regarding both healing and authentic faith expression. Although healing is not part of the shrine's official self-presentation, it draws visitors because of a shared Catholic background knowledge of healing practices and miracle expectations.

Therapeutic healing: when God becomes your therapist

Over the course of the 20th century, evangelicalism has integrated therapeutic and self-help or self-improvement ideas and developed a "therapeutic style" (Rakow 2015: 50; Illouz 2018: 33). This "therapeutic evangelicalism" is shaped by a focus on the practicality of the Christian message and a conceptualisation of religion as an individual and interior experience (Brenneman 2014: 23–25). Scholars have explored this therapeutisation of evangelicalism both historically (e.g., Rakow 2013) and through contemporary case studies (e.g., Luhrmann 2012). At Churchome, implicit therapeutic elements become explicit. Pastor Judah Smith, as shown in the introduction, presents God as a therapist who will never tire of hearing about your problems and worries but who will also challenge you to become your best self. Believers have therapy sessions with Jesus, which sometimes even replaces the act of going to a human therapist.

The healing of mental health issues features prominently in sermons. Usually, sermons centre around psychological everyday experiences (such as "feeling overwhelmed" or "being sad"), which are sometimes explicitly framed in therapeutic language (e.g. "trauma" or "anxiety") and presented as something "we all" experience from time to time. By emphasizing the "everydayness" of these problems, pastor Smith presents himself as a vulnerable role model and underlines that his sermons "work" for everyone.

The sermons then use narratives from the Bible to explore solutions. In re-telling them, the pastor identifies or constructs parallels between the biblical stories and the believers' potential distress and then uses the reactions of biblical characters as a guideline for psychological healing, or as he explains:

“ [...] I want us to go to the Scripture and say, okay, Lord, show me another Christian in the Bible who's gone through unpredictable catastrophe and trauma and show me how they respond to show me how you want me to respond. (When the Boat Breaks, 9:31–9:53)

To find these parallels, the pastors freely attribute emotions and thoughts to biblical characters. In a sermon on "trauma," Judah Smith's wife Chelsea Smith, who co-pastors Churchome with her husband and preaches occasionally, uses a story about Paul in the book of Acts as an example of a traumatic experience that can be overcome with God's help. After Paul had been thrown into prison during his travels, he was extremely cautious in later situations, because, according to Chelsea Smith, he had been "traumatized." She directly draws parallels to possible traumatic experiences and listeners' avoidance behaviours:

“ He went through a traumatic event, a traumatic experience, and something changed on the inside of him. [...] He’s just like, I don’t wanna go through that again. [...] Have you found yourself in that place, feeling, I don’t want to go through that again? Maybe you’ve gone through breakup after breakup after breakup and you’ve just decided, I’m not gonna go through that again. Maybe you took a risk in business and not only once but you did it twice and your business let you down and you feel like, I don’t want it to let me down again, so I’m just going to stop, I don’t wanna go through that again. [...] That is a normal human reaction and response that even the incredible apostle Paul felt when he went through trauma. (Unburned by Fire, 9:03–10:40)

At the end of the story, God tells Paul to go on and not to be afraid. According to Smith, God told Paul exactly what he needed to hear, which leads her to ask the audience, “what do you need to hear from Jesus today?” (17:37). Thus, Smith does not only include the listeners by framing a biblical story in present-day, relatable terms but also by posing a question that encourages believers to relate the story to their own lives and to think about their religious practice.

The Smiths strengthen the adaptability of the solutions they offer by presenting not only themselves but also the biblical characters as average people. According to the pastors, they overcame difficulties and showed super-human strength not because they had it in them but because God provided them with it. Thus, if they can do it, you can, too — with God’s help.

Sometimes biblical insights speak for themselves, sometimes the pastors build of them to develop tools to achieve a certain goal. In a sermon titled “Loving Yourself,” Smith presents three steps to learn and practice self-love: being honest with yourself, being “here” with God, and “heaping” negative emotions onto Him. Smith then shortens his toolbox to the alliteration “honest, here, and heap” (21:25). In other sermons, he suggests saying “Jesus” out loud. However, Smith usually keeps these tips and tricks relatively vague. His advice consists of a combination of introspective questions and incentives for prayer. Whereas other pastors publish workbooks for their followers to fill out, give detailed instructions on how to start a devotional journal or present ready-made prayers or affirmations for the followers to repeat, the Smiths leave the exact methods for healing to their audience. The followers I interviewed notice this and prefer it to structured, or, as one interviewee put it, “pre-chewed,” detailed instructions.

To the Churchomians I spoke with, one-size-fits-all methods were not only uninteresting but potentially inauthentic. Judah Smith often cautions that if someone follows a method, they risk relying too much on themselves or other people and too little on God. When Smith teaches therapeutic healing, he therefore walks on a thin line: His listeners want a self-help takeaway from a sermon, but if his advice is too detailed and structured, he might risk losing his authenticity. An important reason why believers perceive Smith’s advice to be authentic is his on-stage persona. Smith presents himself not only as imperfect and vulnerable but also as chaotic. His sermons are usually longer than those at similar churches and often lack a clear structure. Even though he is the pastor of a megachurch that he grew into a global organization, in his sermons, Smith often claims to be neither strategic nor particularly knowledgeable or business-savvy. In

the home group I participated in, members often made endearing jokes about Smith's chaotic and spontaneous character.

Just as believers suspect large healing events to not express true, "authentic" faith, they perceive "pre-chewed" five-step instructions, at least potentially, as an illicit addition to an individualised faith that is supposed to be grounded in complete trust in and surrender to God. Here, Churchome's pastors' ideas and criticisms and Churchome's members' opinions are mutually influential. In the end, the therapeutic healing work needs to be done by the believers in their relationship with God, making the congregants responsible for some of the usual pastoral functions of spiritual care. This resonates both with the evangelical individualistic nature of faith and its general rejection of rituals.

Healing relationships: failure as a chance of growing together

At Churchome, failed healing is an integral and decisive part of religious practice. Believers do not agree on the question of whether healing can truly fail, as healing might just arrive to you in a different way or much later than expected. However, all of my interviewees had experienced praying for something that just had not seemed to happen and believers openly spoke about their experiences in the home group in which I participated.

Churchome does not offer a theological explanation as to why some prayers get answered and others do not or to why bad things happen to good people beyond the idea that God might have some greater and better plan and that humans cannot understand his mysterious ways. Pastor Judah Smith suggests that believers should learn instead to deal with what happened rather than endlessly dwell on the question of why it happened. To believe that anything negative is a spiritual attack from Satan or that bad things happen because one has done something bad is, to him, "bad theology" (When the Boat Breaks, 22:32; Shake it Off, 16:20–16:41). Interviewees mentioned that they struggled with this question but ultimately either found a solution for themselves or decided that "those are questions that I'll just ask God one day in heaven" (interview 3).

When negative things happen, they are, according to pastor Judah Smith, a unique and even necessary opportunity to grow in one's faith. When everything goes to plan, people trust so much in themselves and their abilities that they cannot see how much they depend on God. God's power is "perfect" when humans are "weak," as this allows them to open themselves up towards God and let Him take control over their lives (Heard and Happening, 45:10–45:27). The emotional work demanded from Churchome's followers aims at complete surrender: By giving up control over everything in one's life and letting God take over, one can achieve a feeling of "peace" independent from any worldly circumstances.

These ideas suggest that a deep relationship with God can only be reached through crisis and failure, or to put it differently, that negative experiences offer chances for growth and are a necessary part of religious practice. In this regard, the language in Smith's sermons and books

resembles discourses of resilience found in self-help literature that speak of crises as opportunities for “growth” (Graefe 2019). Accordingly, both resilience self-help books and Judah Smith suggest focusing one’s energy not on avoiding negative situations but on dealing with them or, even better, making the most out of them. This way, believers can find meaning in individual experiences, or as a pastor I interviewed expressed it, “not to focus on why am I not being healed, in a bad way, [but on] why am I not being healed, in a good way” (interview 2). These meanings are usually tied to a strengthening of relationships, either with God or with one another.

Regarding the relationship between believers and God, Judah Smith describes God as a superhuman father and believers as small children, similar to what Brenneman (2014: 28–35) identifies as a common trope of contemporary evangelicalism. In this perspective, God’s children depend on God and need to learn patience and tranquillity from Him. Prayer naturally fails sometimes, as the believers do not know what is good for them. God as a benevolent father can distinguish stupid, selfish, or even harmful requests from reasonable ones. Hence, unanswered prayers become a reason to celebrate, or as Judah Smith exclaimed on stage: “Woo, thank God, He doesn’t answer all the prayers!” (Heard and Happening, 27:06).

Given the appreciation of failure, it is not surprising that believers spoke openly about feelings of failure and not being good enough in home groups. Thereby, they follow the pastors’ examples, who publicly share their struggles in life. Like this, unanswered prayers sustain and produce an “emotional style” (Scheer 2020: 24) at Churchome that rewards vulnerability and transparency and in which believers actively work towards being open about their failures and shortcomings.

Home groups provide a space for individuals to share and evaluate the introspective work they do on themselves and to practice vulnerability in their relationships with each other. Believers are encouraged to “bring all of them,” meaning to share even the things they are most ashamed about. The home group I participated in developed various intentional and unintentional strategies to put this into practice, or to “keep it real,” as they would say: They reacted more and more positively to stories of failure than to stories of success, they added humble caveats (such as, for example, “but I am sure I could do even better”) to every statement that portrayed them and their religious practice in a positive light, and the group leader even intervened in one case when he felt that one group member showed too little vulnerability.

In an interview, a Churchome member described this intimacy created in the home group as an act of “healing” in itself (interview 1). Judah Smith also refers to the “healing power” of confession, which does not serve one’s relationship with God, as He has already forgiven human sins, but human relationships and communities (Feeling Incomplete, 22:04). Another member explained that in her view the “transparency” the pastors stand for departs from a century-long tradition of hypocrisy in Christianity (interview 4). In the home group, believers regularly shared experiences from other churches and home groups where they noticed that people were not honest with each other or where they felt forced to only share success stories. Thus, believers and pastors alike construct a negative other that can be filled with personal experiences and

culture-specific background knowledge. Interviewees contrasted their experiences at Churchome, for example, with their own upbringing at evangelical churches or with Catholic or Jewish orthodox practice.

By shaping religious practice around experiences of “failure” and “not being good enough,” Churchome can present itself as conscious and sensitive about mental health, which also resonates with the Christian virtue of humility. The believers, many of whom have switched to Churchome from more conservative evangelical churches, learn to adapt their religious emotions and practice to Churchome’s emotional style which in turn feeds back to the church’s public image.

Healing the nation: listen to your neighbour

Just as interpersonal relationships require healing, on a larger scale, the whole nation does. The Bible calls believers to put their faith into action. The specifics of how to act in the world, however, have long been a topic of debate and conflict for Protestants, with some arguing that the world can only be helped through personal salvation and others supporting social commitment and striving for structural change. The notion of healing on a national or even global scale has been employed by both positions. At Churchome, a rhetoric of healing on the national scale can be noted in two areas: social justice and polarisation.

Smith connects social justice issues to the “healing power” of confession, calling his audience to not only confess “your racism” to God but to “tell one of your brothers and sisters in community so you can pray for each other and start getting healed,” as “healing comes by ‘I want you to see me for who I am, here’s what I’m really going through’” (Feeling Incomplete, 22:20–22:46). Thus, healing on a larger scale can happen when individuals are transparent and honest with each other and when they listen to each other’s positions.

Smith’s antidote to societal polarisation works similarly. He regularly portrays the US as divided and constructs the social figure of an ardent supporter of any party, which he sometimes satirically imitates. According to him, people have made everything about politics, even their relationships with others, as they stop talking to their neighbours only because they vote for the “wrong” party. The divisions in the country can be healed by countering these processes, which means listening to people who might have a different opinion than one’s own without judging them. Also, believers should realize the limited impact and minute importance of politics and nations in light of the power of Jesus. The church presents these mechanisms to counter polarisation as a difficult task that believers are called to engage in. Members of the home group I participated in regularly emphasized that they wanted the group to be a place where difficult and uncomfortable conversations could take place.

The image of a country pointlessly divided by partisan choices helps Smith as an evangelical pastor and Churchome as an evangelical church to create a viable position in the minefield of intersections between religion and politics in the US. Smith presents himself as someone who can

see through the meaninglessness of “playing politics” of worldly actors but also as someone who is overwhelmed by current events and insecure about his position. The following quote from a 2021 sermon, in which Smith explains his reasons for getting the Covid-19 vaccine, is a good example:

“ I am a community leader and I felt like I was to do that, I didn’t know it would offend some of you, I really am sorry about that, [...] it wasn’t a political statement, it was like, I have to travel and I fly a lot and I thought it would be like maybe the best option. [...] And I’m like, I didn’t know when I [got the vaccine,] I was making a declaration about my view of God. [Audience laughs.] I didn’t know. I really, honestly, I’m being so serious, guys, like, I’m trying to raise teenagers right now, I don’t have time to get into the theological nuances of vaccines, it’s just not where I’m at. (When the Boat Breaks, 3:52–4:48)

Smith not only apologizes, expresses his insecurity, and explicitly states that his getting the vaccine was not a “political statement,” but also uses his apology to joke about people who perceived it as such. His comment on the vaccine as “a declaration about my view of God” can be understood as a humorous comment on evangelicals using religious arguments in their protest against Covid-19 measures. The irony and humour often present in Smith’s sermons serve as a means to diplomatically soften the boundaries he maintains towards other churches and theologies. Smith also uses humour by intentionally playing with the expectations church-experienced visitors might bring to a service: “I’m sorry, I’m not here tonight to tell you that America is a Christian nation” (Lacking Nothing, 41:59–42:13).

Religious studies scholar Leslie Dorrough Smith (2020: 452) describes “politics” and “religion” as flexible emic categories that actors can adapt to fit their interests. After a conservative backlash resulting from Judah Smith’s endorsement of the Black Lives Matter movement in 2020, he responded with an Instagram post in which he explained that his position was not “political” but “gospel” in the sense of helping the weak and marginalized (Instagram @judahsmith, 08/12/2020). Conversely, in 2016, Smith used similar rhetoric to avoid taking a position. In an interview, he stated that he was unwilling to comment on the topic of LGBTQ rights, as this was a “divisive” topic, whereas he wanted to focus on “love” (Handler 2016). Thus, Smith uses the language of “love” or “gospel” to include issues and terms such as “divisive” or “political” to exclude issues from the church.

By self-reflexively and sometimes ironically addressing the political involvement of evangelical churches, Churchome can take the “political” out of its position and criticise other churches for engaging in partisan politics. By engaging healing in ways that might surprise visitors familiar with the rhetoric at other evangelical churches, Churchome can carve out a viable position for itself and explore ways to engage in highly charged and sensitive issues without offending a portion of its followers. This is particularly relevant as Churchome, as a global megachurch, reconciles or at least tolerates diverse political positions to keep high membership.

5. “Expectation work” and boundary maintenance

By emphasizing relational and emotional over physical healing, distancing itself from “political” churches, and paying special attention to failed healings or unanswered prayers, Churchome intentionally and unintentionally creates, maintains, and protects boundaries against other evangelical churches, theologies, and practices. At the same time, it sticks to evangelical core beliefs, represented for example by the steadfast belief in God’s ability to heal every illness spontaneously that my interviewees voiced.

Churchome sticks to the belief that miracles did happen in biblical times and that the biblical God is the same today. Ergo, they believe that miraculous healings can potentially occur today. In most cases, however, miracle healings simply do not happen, as the pastor, although jokingly, reminds believers during his sermons. Churchome thus requires its followers to open themselves up to the possibility of miracle healing but to not expect it to happen. Marty’s (2005) typology of healing expectations differentiates clearly between Christians who believe in prosperity gospel-style “divine laws” and Christians who do not believe in miracles but expect God to be there with them in times of illness. My interviewees, however, fit into both categories. They express steadfast belief in God’s power to heal and recount stories of miracle healings of themselves or others. At the same time, my interviewees often experience healing as a gradual, long, and sometimes difficult process that does not only involve faith and prayer but also other aspects such as medicine and psychotherapy. During this process, they experience God as an emphatic, personal actor, similar to what Marty describes for Christians of his non-miracle-believing type.

Healing is not the only aspect of life where believers should not set their expectations too high. When Judah Smith says that being with God, whether you’re happy or sad, is more important than working on changing the circumstances that are making you sad, he reminds his followers to lower their expectations about life in general. Picking up Hochschild’s (2003) concept of “emotion work,” this could be described as “expectation work.” Following Scheer’s (2012) approach to emotions as practices in a Bourdieusian sense, emotions are always “learned” and “performed” and learning and pretending are intertwined. When adding a humble “but I’m still not where I want to be” to a story of progress in mental health during a home group session or when trying not to be too enthusiastic about the possibility of a miracle, the believers are not only working on convincing others but also working on changing their own emotions and thoughts in accordance with the church’s emotional style and the “expectation work” it entails.

This expectation work performed by individual members shapes Churchome’s identity. On a larger scale, Churchome has found a viable and unique position in the evangelical field and strategically works on protecting its own identity. As divine healing is, at least in evangelicalism, not only a sensitive topic charged with an ambivalent history but also a field where theologies, aesthetics, and institutional entanglements intersect, when they practice or speak about healing, evangelical churches will always also communicate positions or affiliations. Churchome uses this to maintain boundaries with other evangelicals and carefully curates the church’s practices,

theologies, and aesthetics in order to cope with the identity crisis it finds itself in as a progressive evangelical church.

6. Conclusion

Understanding healing as a conflictive field opens up perspectives on how progressive or reflexive evangelical churches deal with their self-proclaimed “identity crisis.” To “un-spoil” its evangelical identity, Churchome does not only critically and sometimes self-reflexively engage in criticism regarding how Christianity has “gotten it wrong” but also makes two aspects of continuous accusations against evangelical churches their core identity, both of which are connected to practices or rhetoric of healing: mental health and political (non-)commitment. As the church and its followers avoid public displays of healing and instead shape their religious practice around experiences of failure and not being good enough, they engage in expectation management. Through this process, they expose “unhealthy” healing practices of other evangelicals and distance themselves from them without giving up evangelical core beliefs, such as the truthfulness of the Bible.

Speaking about strategic positioning and the management of emotions might evoke an image of a church only focused on its public image, subordinating its beliefs to whatever “sells.” The strategic making of a public image, however, cannot be separated from unintentional preferences, aversions, and habits. Carving out a position for oneself is often rather an intuitive “survival strategy” than a consciously chosen path to success (Goffman 1956: 132–135; Scheer 2012: 203). This is true for the church as an institution as well as for individual believers who are not only confronted with undesirable stereotypes regarding their faith but also themselves aware of evangelicalism’s flaws, exemplified by the pastor who mentioned that Churchome was the first church where he was not embarrassed to invite friends to a service.

Reflecting on the introduction of this special issue (Bigalke et al. 2024) and the questions raised by the corresponding research project, failed healing and unanswered prayers more generally do present irritations or dissonances for many believers at Churchome. However, as the believers work on their expectations, these irritations become an integral and productive part of Churchome’s belief system and proof of “good religion.” The expectation work, as part of Churchome’s self-presentation, is a resource both for the individual believers who see their faith under attack and for the church as an institution that struggles to find a viable position in the evangelical field. In this regard, Churchome might thus also be described as resilient to the identity crisis experienced by progressive evangelicals.

The particular ways in which Churchome practices healing not only reflect and define the church’s position in the evangelical field but also match larger societal developments. Churchome’s intention to openly speak about failure and difficulties reflect a specific therapeutic style or culture that has become prominent in recent years and that encourages people to welcome and feel all emotions, even the bad ones. With the United States Capitol attack in 2021, the Covid-19 pandemic, and the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the past years have been perceived by many,

including pastor Judah Smith as he frequently states in his sermons, as particularly crisis-laden and exhausting. Here, a church that invites negative emotions, addresses mental health as an everyday and every-person issue, and encourages people to speak up about their feelings of not being good enough seems particularly timely. Churchome's healing practices offer both something to do for individuals in the face of overwhelming problems such as climate crisis or war and the relief that one can give up control to God.

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