

# **RELIGIOUS DISCOURSE AMONG EVANGELICALS IN SANTA CATARINA PALOPÓ**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In the past fifty years, the popularity of Evangelicalism has increased in Guatemala. There are many reasons for this, including social pressure, political reasons, and personal and spiritual reasons. For three weeks, I studied two Evangelical churches in Santa Catarina Palopó, Guatemala. I investigated how the people felt about their churches and what the churches did for them. I looked at members' discourse about the importance of their churches, why they came to church, and how the church has changed their life. I found that men share a discourse and use many similar words and ideas when speaking about their churches. Women, by contrast, do not use a single discourse about their church and their lives in the church. When women do use a discourse, it seems that they use the discourse of men. Women do not elaborate with this discourse like men, who use the discourse to understand and explain their lives. For men, the discourse is very important. For women it is not as important. However, it is also possible that the reasons that women are in the church is not reflected in a discourse but in prayer and song, aspects which were not researched in present work. However, this research does show that there is a salient discourse in these churches.

## **RESUMEN**

En Guatemala, las numeras de las iglesias de evangélica son incrementándose muy rápido. Hay muchas razones por este, incluyen presiones sociales, razones políticas, y razones personal y espiritual. Por tres semanas, yo estudié dos iglesias evangélicas in Santa Catarina Palopó, Guatemala. Para esta investigación, era interesado en como la gente en las iglesias sintieron de sus iglesias y que las iglesias hicieron para ellos. Para saber este, yo mire en como la gente hablan sobre la importancia de las iglesias, porque vinieron a una iglesia, y como sus vidas cambiaron en las iglesias. Yo encontré que los hombres comparten en un discurso y usan mucha palabras e ideas similares cuando esta hablando de sus iglesias. Pero, las mujeres no tienen un discurso sobre sus iglesias e y sus vidas en las iglesias. Cuando las mujeres usan una moda de hablando, parece que sean usando el discurso de hombres. Las mujeres no elaboran con este discurso como los hombres, quien usan este moda de hablando para entender y explicar sus vidas. Para los hombres, el discurso es muy importante. Pero para las mujeres, no es tanto importante. Es posible que las mujeres tienen otras razona para ser in la iglesia que no sea reflejado en un discurso y es mas obvio en las oraciones y las canciones de los cultos. Pero, esta investigación presta que hay un discurso definible en estas iglesias. Discurso religioso entre Evangélicos en Santa Catarina Palopó.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Sometimes, on my way back from Panajachel, I would park my bike at the top of the hill just before it dips down into Santa Catarina Palopó. From here, one gets a good view of the town. The road curves steeply down towards Lake Atitlan and after a couple galleries selling the typical weavings of the area, the road opens up into the plaza and there stands a large tree next to a Catholic church. On a Saturday morning, one might find here a few trucks being washed under the tree, a fried chicken stand, and a few stores selling the basics: candy, soda, beer, toilet paper, fruit, and other snacks. To the right is Calle Principal which descends down the lake, past a few women selling their various weavings.

Indeed, the amount of locally made clothing and textiles for sale is a decent indicator of the economy. Once a fishing village, Santa Catarina's main source of income now comes from selling these items. And it is this part of Santa Catarina that most tourists here will see, as well as the two restaurants by the lake, the large hotel, and the beach. Yet this is a town of over 2000 residents, most of whom do not live close to the plaza or the lake. But this is not necessarily a closed community, and if one is brave enough to take on a few stray dogs, a walk up the hill through the maze of trails can be quite revealing and exhilarating. For me, the trails that make up most of this town are a childhood fantasy come true: a world of secret passageways that are only reached by foot and cars are not allowed. People here are friendly and will always smile when you say hi. Back in those trails one finds many houses quite close together. The air is filled with the music of many transistor radios and the tap-tap-tap of tortillas being made. One may also catch a glimpse of women weaving with backstrap looms.

One will also find churches, and one they are not the Catholic churches that Latin America is so famous for. These are Evangelical churches, which are gaining popularity here in Guatemala. Most nights, music can be heard blasting out of these churches all over this country. This is what brought me here. I had heard that Evangelical churches were growing in numbers in this area, and I was curious to find out why, not from the perspective of social or political pressures and the influence of missionaries that often guides anthropological studies of this subject, but from the people themselves. I wanted to see what these churches did for people by looking at how people talked about their churches and their religion.

## **THEORIES AND PERSPECTIVES**

My main concern when I began this research was to look at collective expressions of agency utilized by individuals in religious settings. My basic assumption throughout this project has been that people subscribe to a certain religion in order to solve the basic problems of suffering in their lives. In this sense, religion is used as a tool to make sense out of, and bring order to, one's life. Because religion always has a social element which binds any sect together, some religious beliefs and interpretations must also be shared. Thus, all religious groups must have some sort of communal understanding regarding suffering and solutions to suffering that binds that group together.

In order to get at these communal understandings, I focused my research on religious discourse among Evangelical Christians in Santa Catarina Palopó. My hypothesis is that similar understanding should be reflected in the discourse people use to talk about their religion and their life. Discourse in this sense is defined not only by the use of similar expressions and themes, but also entails the relations of those themes in a uniform pattern. Such continuities in speech constitute a salient discourse. Through an analysis of this discourse, the communal perspectives of these churches can be ascertained as concerns the ideas of suffering, solutions, and the churches role in people's lives. Furthermore, this discourse should be recognizable in both formal settings, like sermons, and informal settings, such as casual conversations. My findings do reveal a recognizable discourse at the informal level, specifically among males. This discourse is mainly concerned with the practical, secular life changes that one must go through when he or she becomes a member of the church. Specifically, most members defined suffering being outside of the church, which is characterized by addiction to drugs and alcohol, robbery, adultery, and not providing for their family. The discourse suggests that such actions were abandoned upon entry into the church, providing solutions to these problems through the Bible, the word of god, and the "good road" of following Jesus Christ. Thus, these changes are understood to reflect the inner-change that occurs when one accepts the teaching of Jesus Christ

This research does show a definite continuity of discourse among male members. This continuity extends somewhat to female members as well, but to a lesser degree. Strictly among females, I was not able to find a significant amount of recognizable discourse. There is also some continuity between the formal and informal settings, although the data in this area are less conclusive. Nevertheless, there is a discourse which can be categorized and defined within Evangelical churches in Santa Catarina Palopó.

## **METHODS: APPLICATIONS AND PROBLEMS**

For this project, I used participant observation and interviews. As a participant, I tried to become as involved as possible with the churches. This often meant just being in the church, although at one point I was carrying a bag of sand that was strapped to my forehead up a steep hill to become more involved. Interviews were everything from structured question and answer sessions to casual conversations. Because I was interested in the discourse is utilized by church members, I needed to hear and record, as often as possible, people speaking. Yet I was unable to gather data from people speaking between themselves because of my lacking Kekchikel abilities.

I began entrance into the churches by trying to meet the pastors before showing up, not only so they would know what I was doing, but so I could possibly get their sponsorship in talking to members of the church. I feared this first step, largely because I was not sure how people would react to an outsider with only an intermediate mastery of Spanish. I started at the Santo Pacto church because it was large and near my house. I stopped by several times with no

luck. Then one Sunday afternoon, there was somebody in the house under the church. This was Emiliano [pseudonyms used throughout], the pastor of the church. To my relief, Emiliano was not only unafraid to have me in his church, but excited. He had friends from the United States and had even spent fifteen days there himself. The moment I met him I was able to conduct a quick interview and he drew me a map showing me the location of the other churches. I attended the service at the church, called a *culto* that night. My induction into the Asemblea de Dios was equally friendly. Urbano, the pastor, was at the house behind the church one Wednesday afternoon and told me to come to the culto that night, which I did. Of course these two examples were not the only reactions I got. At one church, I was met by skepticism. After explaining my project to the pastor several times using different combinations of the same words, he finally told me he was not sure if I could attend. He thought that people there may not be comfortable with me. He said he would find out how people felt and would call me. He never did.

Participating in Santo Pacto and the Asemblea de Dios was easy with the pastors' permission. In fact, the main reason for studying these two particular churches was that they were so open to letting me come in the churches and talk to them. When I first stepped into the culto at Santo Pacto, the pastor greeted me. Later, during the sermon, he officially announced me by name. He told everyone my intentions while at the church. Later, everyone would shake my hand. Likewise, at Asemblea de Dios, Urbano would tell everyone that I was here from the United States to investigate Evangelical churches in Santa Catarina. Again, I was welcomed by handshakes.

I tried to participate as fully as possible. My initial approach was simply to show up and see what happens. Yet this also meant becoming a participant, and I took a "when in Rome ..." approach to my systematic observations. I had no desire to be the gringo standing in the corner coolly observing with his notebook. I stood and sat with everyone, clapped along to the songs, and bent my head to my knees when others were praying. I did not take notes at first but tried to rely on my memory. I did not feel that people would be comfortable with my taking notes yet. I found this to be quite ineffective. Luckily in Santo Pacto the pastor asked me the first night if I had brought my big note book to write in. I knew by this gesture that it must be acceptable for me to take notes. After this, I did not put my notebook away for the sermons and was constantly writing. I started taking notes my second night in the Asemblea de Dios because the pastor was very friendly and open to my presence, and explained to the members of the church the nature of my project.

The cultos provided a decent amount of data for my research. Much of the data were limited, however, because of language problems. In Asemblea de Dios, entire cultos are often in Kaqchikel, excluding songs. When the pastor speaks, however, it is a different situation. He grew up speaking Quiche and cannot speak Kaqchikel, so his sermons are in Spanish. These sermons were thus very helpful to me. In Santo Pacto, all cultos were a mix of Spanish and Kaqchikel. In this case, I found that even following the Spanish was difficult. Nevertheless, I was still able to gain some data from active listening and note taking. In both churches, all the songs and Bible passages were in Spanish.

From my observation I gleaned as much discourse as I could. The final product, because of the language problem and that of note taking, is mostly a collection of phrases and sound bites coupled with larger ideas that I wrote down as I went. This information alone is not very conclusive. The most important part of the cultos, however, was the people I met and would later interview. My presence there, I believe, portrayed me as a genuinely curious outsider (which I was) who spoke better Spanish (I hope) than the average gringo. The short time after

the services allowed me to get into casual conversations with members and set up times for interviews. I left most cultos with one or two interviews scheduled. The casual conversations also provided me with interesting information and gave members a chance to ask me some questions of their own, one often being “Are *you* an Evangelical?” I answered this by saying that I am not, but I do believe in Jesus, even though I do not attend a particular church. This answer seemed adequate, although one pastor, after knowing me for three weeks, did express concern that this was not enough.

My second method was interviews. This provided the bulk of my data concerning discourse, partly because in this context people would only speak Spanish. All the people I interviewed I first met at the church. Earlier interviews were shorter and I realized that I just needed more questions on hand. Later interviews were longer as I asked more probing and effective questions. The last interviews were short, partly because of time restrictions, but also because I was interviewing women. The reason for this discrepancy is initially based on the structure of the church, although my own ethnographic abilities are certainly at fault as well. When I first walked into the churches, I noticed that they were split down the middle with women on the left and men on the right (the sides were the same in all churches I encountered). This marks a clear-cut division of the sexes, and I made sure to sit on my designated side. Although men would approach me directly after cultos, women would not. Thus, I found it hard to approach women for interviews because it did not seem culturally acceptable for a strange man to approach women in this setting. I remedied this problem by talking to men I had interviewed to see if I could talk to their wives. In addition, women were rarely as forthcoming as men. In the short amount of time I had, I was not able to restructure my interviews to find out if I was just asking the wrong questions, if women were uncomfortable with interviews, or if this was just a cultural trait. Nevertheless, I was able to elicit some meaningful data from these sessions. I intend to demonstrate that this is a result itself, albeit limited.

## **CHURCHES AND CONTEXT**

There are seven churches in Santa Catarina. By far, the most popular and oldest church is the Catholic Church, which stands on the plaza in the center of town. This structure is relatively new for a Latin American Catholic church; it just commemorated its 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary in May, 2004. According to the Catholic priest in Panajachel, who also administers mass to this church, 80% of the population of Santa Catarina claim to be Catholic. However, he went on to say that those who claim Catholicism and those who actually practice it are different, and that the number of Catholics may indeed be much less. He also mentioned the Charismatic Catholic Church, a version of Catholicism that emphasizes a more up-beat mass and more music. According to him, the Charismatics believe in the same doctrine as traditional Catholics. These account for two churches, and the Evangelical churches that I am concerned with here account for the remaining five churches.

Evangelicalism is a form of Protestantism which is characterized in Guatemala by its upbeat services, praying aloud, singing, and sometimes fainting. Protestantism itself was first introduced to Guatemala in 1873 by then Guatemalan president Justo Rufino Barrios. In this area, Protestantism truly arrived with John Franklin, who established a seminary school in Panajachel in the late 1930s (Carlsen: 16). In Santa Catarina, dates are not so clear. The Santo Pacto church has been around for seven years. The Asamblea de Dios Church as it is now is only seven months old, although one member claims to have been a member in the church for 25 years. This was the oldest date I could find for Protestantism and Evangelism in Santa Catarina.

The five current churches include The Principe de Paz, located high on the hill above town, Santo Pacto, by far the biggest and located just up the trail from the Catholic Church, Nueva Jerusalem and Aposenta Alta, located near the center of town, and the Asamblea de Dios, near the east edge of town.

I spent all of my time in Santo Pacto and the Asamblea de Dios. At Santo Pacto, services begin around 7:00 PM, and music would already be playing when I walked in. The band consists in an electronic drum-kit, guitar, bass, keyboard and a singer. Often the singer would not always be singing a song, but would be rallying up the crowd with calls of “Gloria Dios!” (Glory to God!), or “Tocalos!” (Play them! or Touch them! - This seemed to be directed to God, asking Him to use the members of the church). The music is extremely loud, played through stacks of speakers that are eight feet tall. The building is about 25 feet by 25 feet, and the stage about 25 feet across and ten feet deep. On the ceiling are several artificial hanging flowers on the ceiling and some fans. On the floor are about 60 red and white plastic chairs arranged so there is an aisle down the middle. Men sit on the right, and women on the left. This division also includes children, although it is common to see a younger child with a parent of the opposite sex.

The first session of singing ends with a prayer. There is no clear division from the song to the prayer. The music slows down and the singing stops. People begin to fall to their knees, sometime putting their faces almost to the floor. Women often put their hands flat on the floor. Other people turn around and fold their arms in a chair and rest their face there. Some people, mostly men, will remain standing with their hands spread and lifted in the air or clasped at their heart. Everyone prays aloud, often moaning and crying. The whole room is sort of humming and very hot. As far as I could tell, there is no set time for how long this should last, nor a sign for when people should stop. It occurs at other times during the culto as well, when a member of the parish will take the stage and lead everyone in a song. At the end of the song, the person will drop behind the pulpit and disappear with the microphone and begin to moan into it addressing God and Jesus Christ.

After the initial music, the band will sit by their instruments as various people take the stage. There is usually a master of ceremonies who calls people to the stage in a pre-planned order. This person will speak in Spanish or Keqchikel. When a person takes the stage they will make some sort of introduction or say a short prayer. They will then lead the group in one or two songs. The church at this time is usually filling up with people, and after an hour of music, everyone who is going to come that night is present. Almost everyone participates in the songs, at least by clapping along. Some leaders ask the group to stand, and most usually do. After an hour of music, donations are collected and the service begins. The pastor says the sermon on Sunday nights. Other nights, various members of the church will lead the service, but always it will be a man. During the service, people are silent and respectful with all their attention on the speaker. Sometimes a person will call out “Gloria Dios!” from the men’s section. After the sermon, there are announcements and then everyone will shake one another’s hand and disperse. Many people do linger around after the service although not for too long. One member of Santo Pacto, who also attends another church near San Andreas, told me that the order just presented is the basic schedule for all Evangelical churches.

Santo Pacto seven years old has had the same Pastor for all of that time, Emiliano. There are approximately 40 to 50 members in the church, close to 100 if children are included. According to Emiliano, the central goal of this church is to help people. He does not mean this in a religious sense, but in a practical sense; when I asked what obstacles stand in the way of

being able to help people, he said a lack of medicine and volunteers. Although there is a strong emphasis on religious concerns, there is also an effort to help people with practical needs.

A service at the Asamblea de Dios church follows a similar structure to that of Santo Pacto, with an hour of music and prayer followed by a sermon. However, Asamblea de Dios does not have a full band. Instead there is a man on a keyboard (sometimes the pastor) and a ten year-old boy who plays a drum. There is no single person who leads the rest of the group in songs. At the very beginning of the service a person will take the microphone and act as the master of ceremonies. Various members will take the microphone and sing songs. Many of the songs are only in three cords but go on for up to ten minutes. Often a woman will sing, and will begin by saying a quick prayer in Kaqchikel. She will then begin her song, squeezing her eyes tightly closed and almost screaming into the microphone. These songs are often accompanied by hand clapping. Other songs are slower and people sit down and do not clap. Men also will sing songs, and I even saw a seven-year-old girl sing a song once. After the music, there is a time for collecting donations. Usually someone speaks during this time, while someone else plays the key board in the back ground and a collection basket is carried around. Next is the sermon, which lasts from thirty minutes to an hour. It is sometimes done by the pastor, but other times by another member of the church. After the service is another prayer and food is served. People will often linger around eating and talking for a half hour or more.

There are variations to this structure. I was present for the Father's Day celebration (Día del Papa) and the service was quite different. Instead of various people leading songs, two fathers had a sing-off in competition for prizes. There were also several games, including a race where fathers had to run up and down the church with an egg in their mouth, and a balloon blowing competition. These activities were still followed by a collection time and a sermon.

The building for this church is new. It has been under construction for seven months and is made of cinder blocks. There is no plaster over the cinder blacks which extend up to a tin roof fifteen feet above. There are open windows about three feet by three feet along the right side that are partially covered by wood and metal siding. A breeze usually blows through. The whole space is about 60 feet long, with the stage taking up the back quarter. It is about 30 feet wide. The floor is dirt and there are blue wooden benches with an aisle running between them. Although this building is new, I have been told the church is not. One member told me he had been attending for twenty-five years, another said ten years. Indeed the Asamblea de Dios churches have been around since John Franklin's first mission to Guatemala in 1937, a date mentioned by the pastor as being the foundation of the church. Yet this church traces its current manifestation here in Santa Catarina back seven months, when Urbano replaced the old pastor.

According to Urbano, the main goal of this church is "Salvation, to talk to the people about god. The bible says many things, no drinking, and no taking two women." Indeed, this seems a much more religious goal than that of Santo Pacto. Yet this is also very practical because in this statement, Urbano links salvation with practical aspects of life. To know about God is to know the rules that God has put forth and it is to know how to live life successfully. Thus, the two churches vary slightly in their official doctrines, but both have similar worldviews and services. Indeed, both pastors as well as other church members have said that all the Evangelical churches are part of the same church, and any person could easily switch from one to another without changing their religious views.

## DISCOURSE IN THE EVANGELICAL SETTING

Among Evangelicals whom I observed and interviewed, the most recognizable and salient discourse occurred among male members. When discourse did occur among females, it was less uniform and did not include all the elements that were present in the discourse of males. The one exception to this was a woman who was raising two children without a husband. From a social and economic standpoint, she was filling both male and female roles in her family. This woman, who I will call Edith here, did utilize the discourse in a way similar to males. Indeed, the following results were affected by my lack of data among female members, for reasons discussed above. Nevertheless, the data that I was able to collect do suggest that women do not participate in the same discourse as men. In the following presentation, I will delineate the more salient discourse of men and the more elusive discourse of women. This is followed by a short discussion of the discourse that I observed in sermons.

### Themes of Discourse Among Male Evangelicals

At the heart of the discourse among males in the two churches that I studied is the idea of change. Specifically, this change is that which happens upon the entrance into the church. For some, the need for change is the reason for coming to the church in the first place, although for others searching out God was the primary reason for entering the church, and change was the result. Part of entering the church and becoming a member is changing one's life in a very practical sense. This very outward change can be seen by other people and referenced in no ambiguous terms. I found that all the male members I talked to emphasized the change that happened in their lives. As one member put it,

*I came with a feeling of hunger for change, but when there is no change, there is nothing. .. Now I have 25 years in an Evangelical church. In this place I am thriving on the road of God. - Luis*

Another member said,

*There is change. Before I thought bad things, drank, did drugs, and bad words. There were many things lost before. When I knew I learned the word of God. There was change. – Roger.*

To use a term from linguistics, life before the church and life after the church form a minimal pair; the two are qualitatively different and cannot be confused. Thus, for the Evangelical, a discussion of life before the church is important as a way to emphasize the improvement of life upon entering the church. In my interviews, I found that the two were painted black and white. Life before the church is seen as being a time of ambiguity and confusion, as well as a time that is filled with drugs, alcohol, fornication, and robbery. In most cases, some or all of these elements are present. The time before the church, before Jesus Christ, is considered to be wholly bad and filled with what are often just referred to as *Malas Cosas*, bad things. When people talk about this time, it is usually juxtaposed to the life one led after joining the church. In most cases, the recounting of such bad times was a precursor to talk about a change that occurred after entering the church:

*I was a thief, a liar, a fornicator, before accepting Jesus Christ. And when I accepted Jesus, I repented with my whole heart. I knew what I was doing was not good. And I went to Jesus and said excuse me. - Marcelo*

*Before the church I drank and smoke. Now in the church I obey the way and the word of God. -Gilberto*

A Pastor said this about his church:

*You know Julio? He used to be a drunk, always in the street. Now he is better. The church helps people with their problems. - Urbano.*

In order to get people to talk about their lives before the church, I would have to ask more probing questions. In fact, sometimes when I was trying to ask more probing questions, respondents would quickly move through these early, bad times in order to get to the moment of change in the church. In this sense, discourse about personal history seems to revolve around a specific moment in time that defines the person. This is what seems to be happening in the following statement made by a pastor when I asked what his parents were like when he was born.

*My parents were born in San Lucas Toliman and they served the customs...witchcraft, spiritism, but they did not take us on a good road ... we lived, were not good ... a bad example for us. ... They had visions [drank] a lot of alcohol. My whole family did not live peacefully. All my family was almost always poor. ... For many years my father worked like that, my parents, my grandparents, my uncles, my aunts signified much witchcraft but my father at 57 years came to know faith is Jesus Christ, El Senor, in an Evangelical church and everything changed for my family. No customs, spiritism, nothing, all of that went away and there was only God. – Emiliano.*

When further pressed about this time in his life (his first ten years), he mentioned this as the good part that he can remember:

*When I was three years old, my mother was searching for God ... she always told me when I was 3, 4, 5, years old always she had guilt of God, she sang ... not yet [in an Evangelical church] all my family was still dedicated [to other customs] only my mother was not ... but my mother always passed it on to me ... but not in a church. This is what I remember as the best part of my first 3,4,5,6,7,8 years. My mother always mediating, always god, always obeying god, working, reciting, friendly. – Emiliano.*

The change that occurs from one's earlier life without the church to one's present life within the church is marked by the time when one accepts Jesus and repents. The phrase *Acceptar a Jesus* is often employed here, and the idea is that one accepts Jesus in ones heart. This is what brings the change, and the change is evidence of accepting Jesus in one's heart. This member illustrates the concept of accepting Jesus as the point of change:

*Before I accepted God I was lost, many liquors, many women, many drugs, drugs just a little. And I robbed because I didn't earn money to drink. – Marcelo.*

Another member recounts his conversion:

*When I had not yet accepted Jesus I was sad, desperate, I did not have peace, happiness. I always felt bitter... and I drank, drank liquor, robbed. And one day I drank for two days, and I was sick for fifteen days. Then in this moment I had a reaction and said this is not good and God wouldn't like it and I wanted to renounce this. I wanted to change but I couldn't. And one night I sat by the pila [public water facets where people often wash clothes] and I thought about my situation and I thought "I want to change, I want to change.*

*One day an evangelic came to me and kneeled with me and I asked for the pardon of God for what I had done. And I said to God that I repent everything I had done. And I felt like a child and I wanted to do good things. And he stayed with me. And that night I heard a voice that told me "Now I cure you and you must serve me." - Luis.*

The change that occurs when one comes to the church is marked by the abstinence from *Malas Cosas* and the practicing of *Buenas Cosas*, good things. Also juxtaposed are the *Buen Camino*, the good road defined by the practicing of *Buenas Cosas*, and the *Mal Camino*, the bad road defined by the practicing of *Malas Cosas*. *Buenas Cosas* include the preaching of the gospel and helping other people. In a sense, one becomes a servant to God after accepting Jesus. It is not enough to just avoid *Malas Cosas*, and once one has accepted Jesus into his heart, he cannot help be a servant of God:

*The whole life is to learn more and practice it. Many have it and don't work. One is to hear and work, practice, do it. Many people here in Santa Catarina know the bible, they know the word of God, but they don't do it. ... We are a light that people can see for the good road. - Marcelo.*

*Most important is to believe in Jesus Christ, and the baptism. And later you become a volunteer of God ... and you look for the things above and not the things below. - Marcelo*

*Because of my change, my parents, my brothers change and said I will go and preach ... I said thank you to god, I will go and teach. - Emiliano*

When this path is followed, members perceive many good effects:

*All of what you here, I had nothing before. But now with the thanks of God I earned a few things. This is the change ... and for change you need to go to the cultos. - Luis.*

Likewise, following the *Mal Camino* results in bad effects:

*Before I had four or five cars. I earned a lot of money. I thought, "I don't need God because I have money." ... but the word of God says that for him nothing is impossible. One day I did not like God but I received the punishment of God. The*

*cars crashed, were robbed, there was an accident. Six cars came to an end. Nothing, nothing, nothing. I didn't stay with nothing. I said, "Dear God I don't have money, there is no bread for the kids, there is no work." I said, "King, I ask for another opportunity." God gave me another car. Now I have two, but it is better with two than before. Because before I had money, "I don't need God." I didn't know how poor, poor. My heart didn't know. God helped me with this money. ... I learned to accept God. – Marcelo.*

Another important concept in the discourse that came up quite frequently is the *Palabra de Dios*, the word of God, as it is written in the bible. For members of these churches, this is the most important part of the Evangelical church as compared to other churches and is essential understanding the *Buen Camino*. Several members said that they were in this church because it taught from the Bible more than the Catholic Church.

*I go to the church to hear the word of God. – Julio*

*They come because this church, we are guides for the Bible. If there is no Bible, we can't do anything. - Urbano*

For the Evangelical, the Bible and the *Palabra de Dios* are important because they illustrate the way that Christ lived and thus how he should live:

*It says in the writing of the Bible to do, to copy what he did. ...No drunkenness, no adultery, don't rob, don't kill. - Marcelo*

Another member said that:

*The Bible is my weapon against the Devil. – Gilberto.*

Lastly, it should be noted that many members said that change, through means of accepting Jesus and the use of the Bible, is not the ultimate goal of being in the church. One member even said that:

*It does not have a goal. There is no goal. ... to arrive with God ... to climb foreword, to climb foreword, to climb foreword. Until you find the goal of God. There you come with struggle and proof of what you have done. – Luis.*

In this sense, the whole point of change is to ensure entrance into heaven. Change is important here on earth, but it is also a sign in and of itself that one has accepted Jesus and will enter heaven. Several members mentioned this as their ultimate goal.

*The main goal of the church is to learn a little more, to know Jesus a little more ... my goal is to accept or see more because all the wisdom Jesus gives. I want to die with God. This is my goal, to die with God. - Marcelo*

## **Themes of Discourse Among Female Evangelicals**

As was mentioned above, the themes of discourse among females are not as well defined as among males. Nor do I have the sheer amount of data, partly because of my interviewing approaches with women, partly because of technical difficulties, and partly because women did not seem as forthcoming as men. Nevertheless I was able to ascertain some themes from female members, even if they were not shared that much. For one woman the most important part of the church was the fact that they teach from the Bible more than when she was in the Catholic Church:

*We changed churches because there [in the Catholic Church] they do not speak of the bible, it is just a structure. ... [the cultos] are important because we have the Bible.*  
- Lucia.

*The cultos are important because they have the message of God.* - Angela

Change was mentioned by female members, but it was not as emphasized as it was with males. For this same woman, change did seem important:

*Before we had problems with everything...economic problems. But my husband changed.* - Angela

It is hard to say what the significance of this statement is, because before this she had said:

*There were a few problems but we changed, we are well.* – Angela

On the one hand, it sounds like there were some problems and they were remedied after joining the church. They do not sound very severe. Yet in the first statement, the problems do sound severe, and it was the husband's change that made the difference. Either way, this woman does acknowledge some sort of change as being an important part of entering the church.

Indeed, the idea of change did seem important among other women. One woman said that God,

*...changed my life. God helps with work and children.* - Rosario

This woman also noted that people not in the church,

*Drink and smoke and say bad things.* - Rosario

For another woman the major change in her life was a difference in the way she worshipped:

*In the Catholic Church you have to adore the virgins, the saints, but in reality they are not to be worshipped, they are not Christ...we only have to adore three people. ... They earned this to be virgins and we need to earn this like they did. But they are not to worship they are not correct.*- Lucia

Another woman also mentioned that the church provides certain rules. When I asked her what the difference was between Christians and non-Christians, she said that,

*There are many differences. When one is not Christian you can go to parties, and when one is not Christian you don't go ... because the Evangelical religion does not permit it. I never say bad words, but when you are Christian you cannot do this, they completely change. Other people have freedom to do, but when you are Christian you cannot. Sometimes it is good, sometimes it is bad. – Luisa.*

This woman expresses the idea that there are certain practical rules for life that are outlined by her religion. It is interesting, however, that she does not seem to be interested in these rules. She mentioned nothing about the religion changing her life for the better.

One theme that was shared among women was the benefit of the church for children. Many felt that the church taught kids how to live right and to grow up knowing how to live. One woman said that,

*It is good for children because many younger people are lost. – Lucia*

### **Themes of Discourse In Evangelical Sermons**

Gathering themes of discourse at sermons may have been the most difficult aspect of my research, because I was not able to record much and sermons were mostly in Keqchikel. The two themes that I was able to ascertain concerned the word of God, Pulabra de Dios, and social responsibility. The word of God was mentioned often at sermons in Santo Pacto. One phrase I often heard was “the word of God is power.” This concept seems also to be related to the idea that to know the word of God is to know God personally. The word of God is important because it teaches people how to live their lives, and in this is the power of God. In one sermon, it was also stressed that the congregation of the faithful should be the announcers of the word of God.

Social responsibility was often stressed in two sermons at the Asamblea de Dios church. One sermon spoke about the importance of being a father. Fathers were to be an example to their children by not smoking and not drinking. This is a great responsibility. Another sermon stressed the importance of marriage. It also stressed that it is sinful to have sex outside of marriage. These were the basic themes I was able to see in these two churches.

### **ANALYSIS**

Indeed, among the members of the two churches I studied, there is a salient discourse in the informal context regarding the nature of suffering and the solution to this problem upon entering the church. However, this discourse is not context independent. Most of the recognizable discourse only appears among males, and this same discourse appears only sporadically among females. Furthermore, where as all the males I interviewed would mention several identical themes and link these themes in a uniform matter, women would only mention single themes separate from any other themes, for instance the importance of the word of God *or* practical change. Strictly among females, there was little evidence of a recognizable discourse, and the discourse that was present seemed to be only a repetition of male discourse and women did not tend to elaborate on themes the way that men did. Except for brief mentions of the importance of church for children, women did not seem to have any discourse that was strictly

their own. I was not able to establish a continuous discourse between the concerns of individuals and the themes of the formal sermons. However, there was a discourse in the sermons that did seem to reflect similar ideas from male discourse, even if the two forms discourse were not necessarily identical.

One theme that did occur among males, somewhat among females, and in the sermons, was the importance of the Bible. Members stressed that what makes their church important and different from non-Evangelical churches is its adherence to the Bible. Many male members, and two female members, said that this was the most important part of coming to the cultos. An important aspect of the Bible that was alluded to by males was the *Palabra de Dios*, the word of God. In addition, males link these ideas with the *Buen Camino*, the good road. For many males passing on the *Palabra de Dios* was an important part of the *Buen Camino*, as well as a central part do being an Evangelical. Men said that it was the duty of Evangelicals to announce the *Palabra de Dios*, as well as acting as an example for others. Indeed, in the cultos, the *Palabra de Dios* was an oft mentioned topic and sermons revolved around a passage from the Bible.

The idea of practical change of one's life upon entering the church was an even more prominent theme that was also connected to the *Palabra de Dios*. Yet, although this discourse is more reified, it is only utilized by males. For men, change to an Evangelical church coincides with change in their personal lives, and it is this change which forms the basis for other aspects of discourse. Suffering is mainly defined as being outside the church is described as being a time of sadness and disparity, and often of poverty. By contrast, life in the church is described as a time of happiness, and is part of the *Buen Camino*, the good road. This life is characterized by adherence to the *Palabra de Dios*, resulting in the abandonment of certain behaviors deemed destructive and unchristian. Thus, the theme of change informs speech about life before and after entering the church. Thus, several themes are linked together in a uniform manner, creating a salient discourse.

Themes regarding suffering, positive change, and the *Palabra de Dios* are not as strong among women. Indeed, the importance of the Bible was mentioned, as was the strong connection between cultos and the *Palabra de Dios*. Yet among women, these ideas were not strongly or uniformly linked to ideas of change. One woman, Lucia, did mention that there were some problems in her house before they went to the Evangelical church, yet she did not elaborate on these problems like men did. One woman did relate life outside the church with drinking and smoking, and identified life within the church as being better because Evangelicals did not do those things. This woman, Luisa, is a single mother, filling a similar social position as men in this community as the breadwinner of the family, and her comments were more similar to those of men when she elaborated on the specific differences between life in and out of the church. In addition, she linked the ideas of joining the church with practical life change in the same way men do. Another woman, Gabriela, also mentioned that there were many things that Evangelicals could not do. Her comments do not seem to be applicable to the discourse of a positive change upon entering the church, because she did not necessarily relate the constrictions on Evangelicals as being an improvement for one's life. Although she recognized a difference, she did not specify the change as being an important aspect of the church.

There was even less of a basic discourse that strictly appeared in the female context. It was more common to find continuities among some females and males in general than among just females. Indeed, the idea of change could be seen among males and some females, as could the idea of the importance of the Bible. Although females did mention these things, it was only in passing and women did not elaborate on them. For example, all men spoke of the importance of

change and the importance of the Bible. By contrast, one woman mentioned the importance of the Bible, and another mentioned the importance of change. There was one woman who mentioned both. But women in general did not seem to mention both, nor did they share a uniform approach to linking theme to one another. Women did not seem to share a single discourse. One exception to this was the importance of the church for children. All females said that the church helped teach children how to live a good life. This single theme may thus be the only recognizable discourse between females.

Concerning the discourse that appeared in the more formal settings of the sermons, there are two themes that appeared, the *Palabra de Dios* and social responsibility. Indeed, there is continuity between the formal and the informal contexts concerning the *Palabra de Dios*. Many men spoke of the *Palabra de Dios* in private conversations and linked this idea to how one should live one's life. This idea appeared again in the public sermons when it was said that "*La Palabra de Dios es poder*" (the word of God is power). Like in the discourse among males, the *Palabra de Dios* was also linked with the *Buen Camino*, and thus how one should live one's life. This idea also is connected to ideas of social responsibility. Some sermons, specifically in the Asamblea de Dios, were specifically about how one should live one's life. These sermons mentioned how fathers should not smoke or drink and should be an example to their children. This discourse shows a resemblance to the discourse among males about the way they now live their life in the church. Indeed, there is a small amount of continuity between formal sermons and informal conversations. However, this continuity in the sermons seems to reflect male discourse rather than female discourse.

## **INTERPRETATION**

The shared discourse among members of Santo Pacto and the Asamblea de Dios does seem to reflect some shared ideas. Specifically among males, a communal understanding is applied to personal narratives as a way to give a collective meaning to individual lives. In this sense, these shared ideas about the meaning of life bind the group together. For men, the discourse employed seems to be a way in which they order, and give meaning to, their lives. The point of conversion to the Evangelical religion is a reference point in one's life. It is this point that marks the beginning of a life that is filled with meaning and happiness and separates this good life from one full of suffering and sadness. When people speak about their lives, the time before this point is viewed as being confusing and sad, filled with actions that are now seen as *Malas Cosas*. By contrast, everything after this point is full of happiness and *Buenas Cosas*. Discourse about life before and after this point in time defines the importance of the church, God, living a good life, and the nature of suffering.

Yet these basic ideas seem to be most reflected in the discourse of males, and do not appear to the same degree among females. There are two possible interpretations for this. One is that females do not participate in the same discourse to an equal degree as males. It may be that much of the discourse that is used is actually created and defined by males. Women may not employ the discourse to the same degree because, in a sense, it is not "their" discourse. When they do use it, they merely copy the discourse used by men and tend not to link the themes they mention to one another. By contrast, men may elaborate on the discourse more by linking together different themes as they use it to create a collective order and interpretation in their personal lives. Women, on the other hand, may only repeat the discourse in order to maintain it. That is to say that they are not actively using it as a way to order their experience, but are

repeating what they have heard men say. This is why women seem to share certain aspects of the discourse from men, but do not share a discourse between each other.

A second, and not necessarily opposed, interpretation is that women just do not have a use for the discourse. The cultos have many different aspects, and only part of the cultos utilize discourse: the sermons. Indeed, the sermons do reflect the discourse of men much more than anything I heard from women. The rest of the cultos are song and prayer, which women participate in very actively. It could be that what women perceive as the value of the church for them does not appear in the discourse, but at a much different level. Much of the meaning for women may occur in prayer, or in the performance of song. Indeed, the energetic performances I saw were by women.

## CONCLUSION

When I began this research, my main concern was to find out why people joined a particular religion. I wanted to know what religion did for people and how they used it to control their lives. Moreover, what did people do with religion? One of my basic assumptions was that people do actively pursue a certain religion as a way to make sense of their lives. In Santa Catarina I found several answers to my question, some of which did not always agree with others. Among men, I found a group of people who were truly using and manipulating their understandings of religion to make sense of their lives. For them, religion not only plays a central role in their lives, but is itself a vessel for understanding. These people have not merely joined a pre-existing religion in order to solve the problems of suffering. Instead, they use their understanding of God, the Bible, and the Buen Camino as a way to make sense of the everyday world. This is not a passive acceptance, but an active response to the world. The church does not give meaning to their lives; they use the church to give meaning to their own lives.

In terms of the women in these churches, the answer to my question is not so clear. Women also seem to have their own reasons for being in the church which are different from men's. On the one hand, some of the women did seem to agree with the ideas that were elaborated on (and possibly defined by) men. In this sense, there does seem to be a passive acceptance by women of the ideas that are created by men and seem to define more formal discourse. This stands in sharp contrast to the active role of men in ordering their lives. From this perspective, women do not seem active in defining the ideas that are important in the church and which are manipulated as a means of creating meaning in people's lives. Yet I am not prepared to make this conclusion. Indeed, it may be that women have their own reasons for being in the church and may be actively involved in using the church as way to interpret and give meaning to their own lives in a way that differs from males and is thus not reflected in the discourse. I believe that future research may reveal a discourse among women which does suggest that they too take an active role in their religion and their life. As I have mentioned, my research is much more reflective of male discourse than female discourse. This may be because of my interview questions or due to cultural reason. Either way, future research should focus more on discourse among women, as well as on formal discourse in public sermons. Furthermore, such research must utilize Kaqchikel, the primary language of both sermons and casual conversations. In a sense, my use of Spanish turned all my conversations into somewhat formal contexts.

Nevertheless, this research is a preliminary step. Evangelical churches are growing all over Latin America for a number of reasons. Indeed, the reasons for conversion vary greatly. This is true just within Santa Catarina, where men and women seem to have different roles in the

church, and different reasons for being there. Indeed, people here do seem to exercise their own agency when choosing a church, and do not just passively succumb to social pressures. Indeed, an understanding of how people take control of their lives is informative not just in this context, but in anthropology in general.

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