

THIS GREAT PRAYERFUL TRADITION: AMERICAN PRESIDENTS PREACHING
PUBLIC THEOLOGY AT THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

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THIS GREAT PRAYERFUL TRADITION: AMERICAN PRESIDENTS PREACHING
PUBLIC THEOLOGY AT THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

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In thanksgiving to God, who speaks the Word of new life
in many and various ways,
whose Love renews the universe
and calls us into the beloved community,

I dedicate this dissertation

to the memory of

Mitchell J. Rosenholtz

Sandy Rathbun Rosenholtz

and

Liz Schmidt.

Solo Dei Gloria

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THIS GREAT PRAYERFUL TRADITION: AMERICAN PRESIDENTS
PREACHING PUBLIC THEOLOGY AT THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST

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ABSTRACT

This study presents a comprehensive analysis of the speeches delivered by American presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast (NPB) from its inception in 1953 until 2016, as well as the rhetorical context of the NPB. Taking a dual-disciplinary approach that combines public theology and presidential studies, this study delineates a generic pattern in the presidential prayer breakfast address built around five narratives. In their speeches at the NPB, presidents construct narratives of faith, connecting divine and human stories in ways that move beyond personal piety, civil religion, or a politicized use of religious language. Presidents serve as public theologians through their prayer breakfast speeches, engaging in transformative rhetoric to communicate their messages. The annual NPB creates a unique liminal space for the president to experiment with speaking theologically.

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE

It says something about us - as a nation, as a people - that every year, for 61 years now, this great prayerful tradition has endured. It says something about us that every year, in times of triumph and in tragedy, in calm and in crisis, we come together, not as Democrats or Republicans, but as brothers and sisters and as children of God. Every year, in the midst of all our busy and noisy lives, we set aside one morning to gather as one community, united in prayer.

President Barack Obama, 2013 Address to the National Prayer Breakfast

Twelve days after his inauguration in 1953, President Dwight D. Eisenhower was baptized in the Presbyterian Church, the only president to receive this sacrament while in office (Inboden, 2008). Four days later, on February 5, 1953, he spoke at the first of what has since become an annual event: the National Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C.. His words were brief and clear: "I think that prayer is just simply a necessity" (Eisenhower, 1953). Eisenhower would soon thereafter introduce the practice of beginning cabinet meetings with prayer, and it was during his administration that "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and "In God we trust" became the national motto, added to all currency (Espinosa, 2009). Eisenhower's administration actively promoted the idea that national governance is strengthened by religious faith, and that, indeed, the United States needed to be grounded in prayer in order to counter the menace of godless Communism (Espinosa, 2009).

Although the National Prayer Breakfast may have emerged during the particular cultural moment that was the Eisenhower era, it has continued through six decades of

debate in the United States about the place of religion in the public square and the role of faith in political life. In fact, since it began under President Eisenhower, the annual National Prayer Breakfast has become a microcosm of the potent intersection of religion, power, and politics in America. Sponsored by a quasi-religious organization known as The Fellowship, yet bearing the trappings of an official presidential event, the annual breakfast draws a crowd of several thousand people from around the world, including heads of state, diplomats, business, and military leaders (Goodstein, 2010), many of whom see the event as an opportunity to speak with powerful American political leaders outside of the normal channels of access (Getter, 2002; Lindsay, 2006, 2010; Sharlet, 2008, 2010). The President of the United States is centrally featured at the prayer breakfast each year, giving a substantial speech and often meeting individually with those who attend. Every president since Eisenhower has addressed the National Prayer Breakfast¹ in remarks that have drawn the attention of journalists (e.g., Aitken, 2009; Bailey, 2014; Goodstein, 2010; "President gets personal," 2011).

Some reporters, in fact, have a rather pointed interest in what the president has to say at the National Prayer Breakfast, according to Carl Cannon of the *National Journal*. Speaking at a forum on "Religion, Rhetoric, and the Presidency" sponsored by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2004, Cannon quipped:

if reporters want to know when presidents are going over the line, we
always go to the prayer breakfasts, because there are all these evangelicals

¹ President Eisenhower only attended in 1953 and 1956. Since then, every sitting president has addressed the National Prayer Breakfast each year of his presidency.

in the room and Christian radio, and they tend to get carried away and so then we can nail them. (Pew Research, 2004, para. 66)

Beyond a humorous look at "gotcha" journalism, Cannon's words echo a societal ambivalence about how much religious talk by civic leaders is "too much." Where exactly is this "line" that the presidents might be crossing, and why does it exist? An increasing percentage of respondents to a regularly-conducted survey by the Pew Religion & Public Life Project (Pew, *More See "Too Much" Religious Talk by Politicians*, 2012) indicate that politicians are engaging in too much religious expression.² Yet, even in this recent (2012) survey, 30% of respondents still say that politicians speak about religion too little.

Whether viewed as engaging in too much or too little religious talk, it is clear that when the President of the United States speaks at the National Prayer Breakfast, his speech is watched by many beyond the immediate event. Website tracking by C-SPAN, for example, shows that in 2012, President Obama's full prayer breakfast speech was viewed on the C-SPAN website over 150,000 times (C-SPAN, 2012). Lively chatter about the speech, and the wider event in which it takes place, can be found across the internet, from online newspaper articles that draw reader comments (e.g. Bailey, 2014; Dias, 2014; Larson, 2014) to blog posts and ensuing discussion (e.g. Kaleem, 2013; McCarty, 2014; Seidel, 2014). The 2013 National Prayer Breakfast generated a flurry of coverage, particularly on politically and religiously conservative websites, due to what commentators saw as an upstaging of President Obama by the keynote speaker, Dr.

² The percentage indicating that politicians engage in "too much" religious talk rose from 29% in 2010 to 38% in 2012.

Benjamin Carson, who critiqued Obama's policies directly, and later claimed his words were meant to "please God" (*Amazing conservative speech upstages Obama*, 2013; Edwards, 2013; Weber, 2013). As a result of Dr. Carson's prayer breakfast speech, a PAC was created to encourage him to run for president, and Carson quickly made the short list of tea party favorites for a 2016 presidential bid (Sherfinski, 2014). As a Republican candidate for president, Carson continued to provoke attention with controversial remarks (Rappeport, 2015), including his contention that a Muslim should not be president of the United States (Martin, 2015). Clearly the National Prayer Breakfast draws significant attention from interested political constituencies, from journalists, and from the broader American public, interest that can even generate political outcomes.

The popular and journalistic response to the presidents' addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast is an indication of an ongoing cultural fascination with the contested place of religion in American public life. As the United States has negotiated the societal ramifications of the First Amendment, seeking wide latitude for the free exercise of religion while not establishing an official faith, public religious speech, particularly by political or civic leaders, has often tread the fault line of this fundamental American tension. The president, serving in an increasingly rhetorical office (Tulis, 1987), can become a lightning rod for struggles over the place of religion in the public square (Espinosa, 2009; Kaylor, 2011). When a president engages in religious speech in public, especially if his expression is made in the language of a particular faith tradition, his words can be heard as inappropriate and even alienating (Seidel, 2014). Yet in times of national loss and grief, it is expected that the president will speak to the American public with words of comfort that often invoke religious language (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

Interestingly, just after the attacks of 9/11, when Pew conducted its October, 2001 survey about religious talk by political leaders, 60% of respondents said that the amount of religious talk was "just right" - the highest that figure has ever been in the Pew study, fully double what it would be two years later (Pew, *More See "Too Much" Religious Talk*). It is one thing for a frightened country to receive religious words of assurance from its president, and another for that same leader to be speaking of holy war (Bumiller, 2002) when the initial grief has faded.

Contributing to American societal ambivalence about presidential religious speech, and central to the debate about the place of religion in our democracy is the question of whether public religious talk is too closely aligned with right wing politics (Wald, & Calhoun-Brown, 2007), a concern reinforced by a media tendency to equate the two (Winston, 2007). Media coverage of the intersection of religion and politics often focuses on evangelical conservatives, who assert that their views speak for all "faith voters" (Rosenholtz, 2011). Within this media coverage, those who disagree with evangelical viewpoints are often cast as secular liberals, a simplistic division that ignores religious progressives and secular conservatives, and promotes the very kind of conflation of religion and politics that the founders sought to forestall with the First Amendment. Yet there is no doubt that presidential candidates seeking those "faith voters" have, increasingly, made public statements of their own religious beliefs, often with the point of appealing to the religious right (Kaylor, 2011). Once elected, presidents who engage in religious speech, particularly at prayer breakfasts and similar events, could be read only as posturing to a powerful evangelical constituency. However, in this project I explore the possibility that something of broader significance may be occurring in the

presidents' addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast, something that does indeed say "something about us - as a nation, as a people," (Obama, 2013) as well as saying something about the presidents themselves.

Specifically, in this dissertation I analyze the presidents' speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast as examples of public theology - that is, as religious language articulating the relationship of God to public life (Pearson, 2014). It may be surprising to suggest that a president could be "doing" theology, especially if one assumes that such work belongs to religious professionals, theologians, and philosophers, but my findings suggest that the presidents' prayer breakfast speeches contain many of the marks of sermonic discourse, and that, together, the speeches potentially form a genre of theological speech that is unique to the presidency. This genre forms a window into the presidents' understanding of their own faith lives, and how their faith in God relates to their exercise of the presidential office, and thus elucidates their view of the public role of religion in our American democracy. Public theology, as practiced by the presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast, is a uniquely powerful example of the continuing ability of religious rhetoric to provide categories of meaning that have the potential to shape our country's self-understanding. Furthermore, the longitudinal nature of the proposed project allows an examination of the changing nature of that rhetoric and resultant categories of meaning.

The remainder of this introductory chapter discusses, first, the rationale for my decidedly cross-disciplinary approach to this project, and why I see it as important to include insights from religious studies and theology in a communication dissertation. Next, I briefly define some key terms that highlight central theoretical approaches to

public religious speech, leaving a more extensive discussion of the scholarship for the second chapter of this prospectus. With those terms defined, I provide more background on the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1968) in which the speeches take place - the National Prayer Breakfast, concluding with a summary of the rationale for the dissertation project as a whole.

The Rationale for a Cross-disciplinary Approach

Communication as a Porous Field

The discipline of communication often finds itself at the crossroads of human endeavors, embracing multiple research methods, varying interests and foci, and welcoming insights from other fields whose scholarship enriches our understanding of meaning making, symbolism, and communication. In many ways, a communication dissertation is ideally positioned to explore the possibilities of cross-disciplinary work, finding in this approach a conversation that can provide deeper insight than what may be possible from a more myopic lens. There is no doubt that different disciplines have their own languages and problem fields, and thus can define reality in differing ways (Kuhn, 1962/1996), perhaps rendering their insights incompatible, but a communicative approach, I believe, should welcome a robust and productive dialogue, even one that challenges definitions central to the field. This is a belief that is grounded in philosopher Richard Rorty's (1979/2009) argument that the role of philosophy, rather than seeking some sort of rationalist basis for truth, is to help society find "new, better, more interesting, more fruitful ways of speaking" (p. 360). For Rorty, a society that can bring all voices to the public conversation, not privileging any one perspective, is a society made richer by its dialogue. Communication scholars (e.g., Stroud, 2012; Youzoung,

2011) have drawn on Rorty, and the earlier pragmatist John Dewey, to outline a vision of democratic conversation that includes wide public input, where deliberative democracy, in fact, is built on direct communication between citizens.

Religious Conviction and Public Dialogue

When one or several of the voices engaging in the democratic conversation is a religious voice, however, particular challenges arise regarding parameters of the discussion and definition of terms. In fact, there has been an ongoing debate among some of the same pragmatic philosophers cited by communication scholars, as to whether public deliberation is enriched or hindered by the expression of explicitly religious claims and warrants. In his original definition of the ideal speech situation, Habermas (1962/1989) excluded the possibility that religious claims have a place in the public sphere, but his more recent work has indicated an openness to and even the necessity of listening to religious voices in a pluralistic democracy (Frega, 2012; Platt & Majdik, 2012; Portier, 2011). Rorty himself drew a limit on his grand vision of a public conversation, excluding religious conviction as a legitimate basis for argument (Bradstock, 2012).

For several of these scholars, the question is a communicative one. Citing the quintessential theorist of liberal democracy, John Rawls (1971, 1996), they draw epistemic restraints around what is allowed in public argument, with the main idea being that participants in civic dialogue “should refrain from referring to beliefs that cannot be directly ascribed to their role as citizens” (Frega, 2012, p. 269). In other words, for religious voices to participate in the public conversation at all, they need to “translate”

their claims into arguments that any rational person could accept based on reason (Platt & Majdik, 2012). Habermas wrote:

the separation of church and state calls for a filter between these two spheres – a filter through which only 'translated,' i.e., secular contributions may pass from the confused din of voices in the public sphere into the formal agendas of state institutions. (As quoted in Frega, 2012, p. 272)

The assumption of a need to translate religious reasons places an asymmetrical burden on religious citizens, who must speak a different language in order to participate in the public dialogue. A particularly provocative question for the present project is what it means if the president is the one using religious language in laying out his reasoning.

Disagreement over the place of such religious convictions in our American public life has occurred since the founding of the republic (Library of Congress, 1998). Clanton (2008) argued that the American experiment has long had a tension between its liberal and democratic foundational aims, with the liberal emphasis on reasoned agreement consistently challenged by the democratic belief that "the commitments, convictions, and the voices of the citizens should be taken and heard as they stand" (p. 3). Faith commitments in the public square challenge any liberal claim to bland universals or reductionist rationality, because those holding these commitments in all their specificity refuse to bracket out what they believe – that is, they refuse to "translate" into acceptable language what might be seen by others as non-rational beliefs.

Rhetorical scholar Crowley (2006) proposed that such non-rational beliefs should not be excluded from a truly civil dialogue, because to do so would be to ask believers to be less than who they are, and also to limit the possibilities of invention generated in

rhetorical exchange. In her discussion of rhetoric and fundamentalism, she asserted: "the point of ethical rhetorical exchange is never to shut down argumentative possibilities, but to generate all the positions that are available and articulable in a given moment and situation" (Crowley, 2006, p. 56). Crowley's assertion echoes the concerns of public theologians and underlines the central communicative question posed by religious conviction in public dialogue: does religious language need to be "translated" into rational claims, or at least into generic terminology, in order to be acceptable in public, or can it be taken as it stands as a legitimate contribution to our common life? Understanding this communicative question gives crucial context to an analysis of the presidential prayer breakfast addresses.

Incorporating theological and religious studies scholarship into a dissertation that is examining the public articulation of religious beliefs allows a more informed understanding of the communicative challenge of public religious language, thanks to the lengthy, ongoing conversation that is already taking place in those disciplines regarding faith in American society. In other words, religious studies and theology have much that is productive and interesting to offer any analysis of presidential religious speech, particularly a project that seeks to understand what that speech is communicating at the intersection of church and state. The last several decades, coinciding with the time period that the National Prayer Breakfast has been in existence, have seen an intensification of interest in the fields of religious studies and theology in discussing what function religion has in the public square (e.g., Audi & Wolterstorff, 1997; Marty, 2001; Neuhaus, 1984; Stackhouse, 2004; Thiemann, 1991), where the demarcation between public and private should be drawn (e.g., Cady, 1993; Marty, 2001; Smit, 2007), and what role, if any,

particular religious claims should have in public deliberations (e.g., Audi & Wolterstorff, 1997; Bradstock, 2012; Maddox, 2007; Smit, 2007; Storrar, 2007). As will be seen below in the section where I define how I am using terms and theories in this dissertation, defining what we mean when we talk about public religious language in American democracy is clarified and enriched by incorporating scholarship from those fields whose primary purpose is religious study, especially the emerging field of public theology.

Situating this Dissertation at the Dialogic Intersection

For all of these reasons, then, this dissertation situates itself in a dialogue among disciplines as it analyzes presidential religious speech from a multidisciplinary perspective that welcomes faith commitments as they stand. It is perhaps natural that an ordained minister pursuing a doctorate in communication would seek to blend theological and communication claims and methods in her research. But I am not alone in seeing the need to do interdisciplinary work in presidential studies. Over a decade ago, esteemed presidential communication scholar Roderick Hart (2002b) published a critique of the research on presidential rhetoric and suggested a research agenda that paid more attention to theory-building. He examined the extant literature for answers to the question "why do presidents speak as they do?" and argued that, overall, scholars are historically focused and have "absented themselves from important contemporary discussions about the public sphere, about new democracy movements, about gender politics, about the ravages of modernism, about the poststructural sensibility" (p. 702). Hart called for scholars to engage in completely new theorizing about the presidency and to be willing to cross disciplinary lines in doing so. According to Hart, a new generation of scholars needs particularly to focus on, and make an argument for, the theoretical contribution that their

scholarship is making to the field of presidential studies. In the decade since his article, it has been cited only a handful of times (cf. Austermuhl, 2014; Collier & Towle, 2010), and no one appears to have accepted his challenge in the particular area of presidential religious rhetoric. This project makes such a theoretical contribution, as a cross-disciplinary understanding of presidential religious speech at the National Prayer Breakfast serves as a helpful window into the larger public conversation about the place of religion in American democracy.

Approaching Presidential Religious Speech: Defining Central Concepts

In order to move forward with a basic understanding of this project, it is essential to clarify the central concepts under consideration. The literature review chapter will discuss at more length the various approaches to presidential religious speech, but preliminary definitions can be laid out here in order to set the context for the dissertation. In truth, each of these concepts is rich in nuance and complexity, making any proposed definition a rhetorical choice, but there are general patterns to the scholarship that warrant the interpretation of terms explicated here. I start with civil religion and the related civil-religious contract, terms used in much of the political communication scholarship, which tends to approach presidential religious speech as either evidence of the civil-religious contract at work, or of the breakdown of that contract under pressure from an increasingly polarized political atmosphere. As noted above, however, to limit the concepts employed in this dissertation to those found in communication literature would be to miss the important work that is being done in religious studies and theology. Thus, this section will end with an initial definition of what is meant by public theology.

Civil Religion and the Civil-Religious Contract

Presidential scholarship in political communication often uses a civil religion lens to analyze religious speech by presidents (e.g. Curry, 2007; Erickson, 1980; Frank, 2011; Goldzwig, 2002; Gring, 2002; Kaylor, 2008, 2011; Lee, 2002; Marvin, 2002; Medhurst, 2002; Roof, 2009), usually citing Bellah's *Civil Religion in America* (1967). Bellah (1967) explicated the concept of civil religion as a “public religious dimension” of American civil life that “is expressed in a set of beliefs, symbols, and rituals” (p. 4), including references to God by civic leaders, the inclusion of “under God” in the pledge of allegiance, and an undergirding conflation of American values (freedom, democracy) with the concept of God. Bellah saw civil religion as “an understanding of the American experience in light of ultimate and universal reality” (p. 18), but recognized that, however genuine this religious understanding might be, it could be used for manipulative and self-serving purposes. Since Bellah’s time, writers have used the term civil religion in a variety of ways, often with the purpose of highlighting the problematic aspects of conflating civil and religious values. As a result, defining what is meant by civil religion can be elusive (Hill, 1988; Marty, 2001; Pew, *God bless America*, 2002; Weed & von Heyking, 2010; Yoder, 1988). In fact, some scholars (Weed & von Heyking, 2010; Yoder, 1988) suggest that the term civil religion can be used as a catch-all category for an ill-defined blend of the political and religious that has usurped the rightful role of religion in society, thus serving as a foil for those who would advocate for a clearer distinction between church and state. It also can be used as a convenient shorthand for ceremonial use of religious language at civic gatherings.

For the purposes of this dissertation, I will be following Stackhouse (2004) in using the term civil religion to indicate "a projection by a civic order of its experiences and values onto the cosmic order for the sake of social solidarity. It is, so to speak, society worshipping the image of itself" (p. 291). This definition is a sharpening of Bellah's original definition, arguing that civil religion in America is basically American exceptionalism writ large, sprinkled with enough Judeo-Christian language and symbols to call it religious. That is, whereas Bellah was willing to concede that civil religion was a genuine apprehension of a universal deity by a religious public, I am following more recent scholarship to take a more critical view, seeing civil religion more as projection than apprehension. Civil religious language speaks of a God who supports the nation, and a nation that enjoys a special relationship with that God. Its central values are freedom, democracy, and justice for all, guaranteed by a non-specific deity and expressed in religious universals meant to unify the people (Hill, 1988; Stackhouse, 2004; Yoder, 1988). The president serves as "high priest" of civil religion (Curry, 2007; Ofulue, 2002), a symbol of a unified America addressing a universal deity. Occasionally, the prophetic strain of civil religion (Wood & Collins, 1988) can serve to challenge the nation to better live out its ideals, but always with the goal of forging a more unified, democratic America, not with a particular religious agenda in mind.

Another term, sometimes used interchangeably with civil religion, but actually developed as a nuanced critique of the concept, is Hart's (1977) civil-religious contract. In his seminal work, Hart spelled out what he argued was implicit in the smooth functioning of the church/state relationship in America, literally drawing up a contract between "the United States Government" and "Organized Religion." In particular, the

contract's wording specified that governmental "rhetoric will refrain from being overly religious" and organized religion's rhetoric "will refrain from being overly political" (p. 44), wording that has often been cited by political communication scholarship (e.g., Curry, 2007; Friedenberg, 2002; Kaylor, 2008, 2011; Smidt et al, 2010). Hart's contract, with its institutional focus, reflected the modern era in which it was proposed, and recent efforts have questioned its continuing utility in a more fragmented age (Domke & Coe, 2008; Gring, 2002; Kaylor, 2008, 2011; Lee, 2002; Marvin, 2002; Medhurst, 2002), but, as noted earlier, the underlying sense that some "line" has been crossed when political leaders are indeed "overly religious" in their rhetoric continues to find resonance in social scientific and popular commentary on church/state relations.

Defining Public Theology

In order to understand religious language on its own terms, I turn now to an initial definition of public theology. Public theology is an emerging field or movement that seeks to contribute to the common good for all of society by providing theological resources and insight, especially but not only to people of faith (Bradstock, 2012; Pearson, 2008). As with the term civil religion, public theology is also a complex concept that defies simple definition. According to Smit (2007), "there exists no single and authoritative meaning of public theology and no single normative way of doing public theology" (p. 443). Instead, there is growing energy in the fields of religious studies and theology around the concept (Storror, 2007), with the establishment of centers for the study of public theology in Europe (The Centre for Theology and Public Issues at the University of Edinburgh) and America (the Center of Theological Inquiry at Princeton), and a flagship journal (the *International Journal of Public Theology*) in 2007. Public

theologians, including both those who study and practice it (with no strict line between those tasks), seek to contribute to the common good by bringing insights from theological reflection to the public conversation. Their vision is not one of regaining a lost Christian hegemony (what theologians call "Christendom"), but about contributing to societal dialogue in a mutual way. Public theologian Bradstock (2012) summarizes the goals succinctly:

what I suggest we need now is a new type of political conversation, one which respects the secularist requirement that religious voices enjoy no privileged right to be heard, but which does allow those voices actually to be heard and their perspectives and thinking to contribute to shaping responses to the challenges we face. (p. 153)

Public theology, then, is seen by its practitioners as a gift to a wider societal dialogue, one which not only contributes to moral deliberations about important public issues, but that also encourages a consideration of what is meant by such concepts as public, private, religion, and secularism (Bradstock, 2012; Maddox, 2007; Smit, 2007; Storrar, 2007). While the idea of analyzing what has traditionally been called "church in society" by theologians is not new, in the past the field of theology has tended to assume that the audience for its insights would be primarily the church or the theological academy. Public theology, instead, is aimed at wider reception (Fourie, 2012) and with the concomitant recognition that theological insight is a legitimate part of public conversation.

Of particular relevance to this dissertation, public theologians do not assume that one must be a religious professional or academic theologian in order to be "doing" theology. According to Storrar (2007), public theologians are committed to

interdisciplinary work, not only in word, but in deed. Duncan Forrester, founder of the public theology center in Scotland "insisted that the presence and voice of those most affected by the public issue under scrutiny be welcomed and heard for their expert opinion" (Storrar, 2007, p. 18) with a particular concern for those most marginalized. Brown, Pattison, and Smith (2012) indicated that public or political figures can be engaged in public theology, suggesting in particular that President Obama is one such figure. In an in-depth analysis using Foucault's concept of discourses, Graham (2009) discussed four politicians and their perspectives on religion and public life as examples of public theology: Tony Blair (U.K.), Helen Clark (N.Z.), Barack Obama (U.S.), and Kevin Rudd (Australia), concluding: "My argument is that the various statements on the part of these figures represent interventions in complex, multi-layered 'discourses' about the nature of faith in public life" (p. 163). Two decades earlier, Thiemann (1991) stated: "American presidents have been among our most important public theologians, interpreting our history in theological categories, invoking the judgment of God over the actions of the American people" (p. 31). According to these scholars, presidents can be, and in fact are, engaged in public theology, as significant voices in "a collaborative exercise in theological reflection on public issues" (Storrar, 2007, p. 6). Thus I argue that a public theology approach is particularly appropriate for a comprehensive analysis of the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast. In order to lay the groundwork for that analysis, next we turn to a description of the event where the speeches take place.

The National Prayer Breakfast

The National Prayer Breakfast creates a unique rhetorical situation for the presidents' construction of public theology. Johnson (2012), in the one journal article to

examine a presidential address to the event, discussed why he finds it worthwhile and interesting to focus on President Obama's prayer breakfast address: "While in other speeches, Obama must create the space for faith language, the National Prayer Breakfast comes as an 'always already' constructed and completed space and place for religious rhetoric" (p. 47). But this space and place comes with its own history and connotations that need to be examined to get a fuller sense of the context in which the president speaks. At the heart of any investigation of the National Prayer Breakfast is The Fellowship, the group that sponsors the event (cf. Lindsay, 2006, 2007; Sharlet, 2008, 2010). One scholar (Lindsay, 2006), who has conducted extensive research on The Fellowship, noted "it is surprising that not a single academic investigation has been conducted to date on the National Prayer Breakfast" (footnote, p. 393). However, there are well-done and informative journalistic pieces on the event (Getter, 2002; Goodstein, 2010) that, combined with investigative reporting on The Fellowship (Green, 2011; Sharlet 2008, 2010), help sketch a picture of the rhetorical situation in which the president gives his prayer breakfast speeches. This project will discuss the contextual details of the National Prayer Breakfast more fully in Chapter Four, but an overview is offered here.

The Fellowship, also called The Family (Green, 2011; Sharlet, 2008) is a quasi-religious organization that was begun with a political motive. It was established by Abraham Vereide, a Methodist minister in Seattle in the 1930's, who responded to the labor movement of the time by seeking to create a group of elite leaders who would re-instill order in society by invoking a "polite fundamentalism" (Sharlet, 2008, 2010). Since the beginning, the group has operated with secrecy, insisting that it is only a way for leaders to meet "man to man for Jesus," and that it is not an organization per se

(Lindsay, 2006, 2010; Sharlet, 2008, 2010). The leader of the Fellowship through recent decades was Doug Coe³, a man who exercised a tremendous amount of influence while simultaneously disavowing the idea that he was the organization's head (Getter, 2002; Lindsay, 2006, 2010; Sharlet, 2008). Among other signs of his influence, it was Coe through whom access to the President and other American leaders was granted to attendees at the National Prayer Breakfast (Lindsay, 2006).

As noted, the Fellowship has been very careful to operate without drawing public attention to itself. Some of those attending the prayer breakfast, and some media covering the event, might not even realize that the Fellowship is its sponsor. Lindsay (2006) noted: “Many attending the National Prayer Breakfast believe Congress or the federal government is the event’s sponsor” and “At the Breakfast, the platform, commemorative program, entrance ticket, invitation, and registration signs are all festooned with presidential seals” (p. 395). Getter (2002) reported the interesting wording on the ticket itself: “The embossed invitation comes from ‘members of the Congress of the United States of America.’ It asks guests to join the president, vice president, ‘and other national leaders in the executive, judicial, and legislative branches of our government’ for a morning of prayer” (para 38). In 2002, more than 8000 people from 170 countries were invited, and 3000 accepted (Getter, 2002). According to several writers (Getter, 2002; Lindsay, 2006; Sharlet, 2008) the Fellowship pays for guests from foreign countries who might not be able to afford it otherwise. It is not clear to what extent these guests even recognize who or what has sponsored their attendance.

³ News of Coe’s recent death came to this author’s attention in the final month of work on this dissertation. Comment will be made in the future research section of Chapter 6.

What has been recognized, especially by foreign diplomats and leaders, was that access to the president and other powerful American leaders came through Doug Coe (Sharlet, 2008, 2010; Lindsay, 2006). Particularly for attendees from countries not high on the list of American interests abroad, the National Prayer Breakfast may be seen as a road to access that they would not otherwise be granted. One conservative publication (Aitken, 2009) decried this aspect of the breakfast, noting "there were moments when the proceedings seemed to have turned into a diplomatic networking exercise for B-list embassies" (p. 60). The Fellowship carefully develops this aspect of the event, seeing such one-to-one connections between leaders as an essential part of its mission (Green, 2011; Sharlet, 2008, 2010). Whether one takes that mission to be what they declare ("man-to-man" connections "for Jesus") or one agrees with the more critical perspective of Sharlet, it is clear that Coe functioned as an intermediary between a wide range of leaders and the president of the United States, all in the midst of an event that appeared, on the surface, to be sponsored by the president and national legislators. The fascinating and troubling mix of power, secrecy, and religion present at the National Prayer Breakfast and its potential impact on the event's presidential address is considered and discussed in this project.

Summary of Project Rationale

To summarize, then, the National Prayer Breakfast was begun by The Fellowship under President Eisenhower, and it has continued yearly since then, meeting in early February each year in a hotel in Washington, D.C.. The president speaks at the event in substantial comments that run to about 20 minutes in length, drawing on biblical passages and American history to touch on themes of faith, governance, and prayer. My findings

indicate that the rhetorical space afforded the president by the event is a unique and valuable setting for engaging in public theology, allowing an in-depth consideration of how faith applies to public life and the role of president as public theologian. The complex intersection of power-laden political dynamics and religious expectations at the National Prayer Breakfast provides a particularly provocative context for the speech, and must be taken into account in any analysis. Yet I argue that the specificities of the event and its sponsor should not be allowed to overshadow the wider societal implications of these presidential speeches. As noted earlier, public theology, as practiced by the presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast, is a uniquely powerful example of the continuing ability of religious rhetoric to provide categories of meaning that have the potential to shape our country's self-understanding, making this project worthy of investigation.

This dissertation thus approaches the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast as an example of public theology. To set the context for the project, the next chapter provides a literature review, followed by a chapter outlining my methodology. In the literature review chapter, I will review various approaches to public religious speech by civil leaders, especially presidential religious language. I will also give a fuller background on the concept of public theology. In the methods chapter I will discuss my methodology in approaching the National Prayer Breakfast address as an example of public theology. As noted earlier, I will be arguing that the presidents' prayer breakfast speeches contain many of the marks of sermonic discourse, and that, together, they form a potential genre of theological speech that is unique to the presidency. Thus the methods

chapter will include a discussion of the methodology (genre) and the methods (homiletical and rhetorical analysis).

Chapter Four provides an analysis of the National Prayer Breakfast, based on a close reading of all available transcripts. That is followed by the main substance of this dissertation, the analysis of the presidential speeches in Chapter Five. That analysis is presented in what I call five narrative movements and two interludes, examining the narratives constructed by the presidents in their speeches, and an underlying theme of faithful leadership. Lastly, in Chapter Six I discuss my findings and research questions, with a particular focus on the central question of genre.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

When a president quotes the bible, speaks of God or other religious themes, or alludes to values shaped by faith, what is this language doing? Is it merely decorative, a quick nod to the historic religiosity of the United States? Is it a public acknowledgment of the religious foundation, beliefs, and values of the country? Is it an unwelcome intrusion of personal beliefs into the political realm? Is it a manipulative attempt to appeal to a particular subset of the American population? Could it ever be viewed as a public theological contribution to a wider civic conversation about weighty matters that confront our society? Scholarship in political communication, presidential rhetoric, and public theology has taken each of these positions regarding religious language by presidents. This chapter will trace the substance of this scholarship, reviewing literature that can be broadly grouped into the following approaches to presidential religious speech: the president 1) functioning as high priest of an American civil religion, 2) strategically using religious speech as political tool, 3) expressing personal/private beliefs, and lastly, 4) articulating a public theology. In presenting this review of the literature, I build a case for examining the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast as a body of work, through the lens of public theology.

The President as High Priest of American Civil Religion

A president that speaks about America as a beacon of hope and freedom to the world, perhaps using the biblical expression "a city on a hill," and then ends his speech with "God bless America" would be read by many scholars as performing the function of high priest of an American civil religion. Bellah's *Civil Religion in America* (1967), who built on theoretical underpinnings from de Tocqueville, Rousseau, and Durkheim,

produced perhaps the most concise and best-known explication of the term and laid the foundation for a generation of scholarship that has approached presidential religious speech through a civil religious lens. This section of the literature review will begin with a discussion of Bellah's concept of "American civil religion," then explore literature that applies that lens to presidential religious speech, and then discuss the limitations of a civil religion approach to the use of religious rhetoric by presidents.

Civil Religion in America

At the time of Bellah's *Civil Religion in America* (1967), he was responding to what appeared to be a societal move towards secularization, and a dismissal by some pundits and scholars of any place for religious rhetoric in modern society. The so-called "secularization thesis" dominated scholarship in the social sciences at mid-century, holding that modern societies would inevitably evolve into secular cultures, with no need for "primitive" beliefs (Casanova, 1994; Grasso & Castillo, 2012; Hecllo & McClay, 2003). Meanwhile, popular understanding of politics held that church and state were so thoroughly separate that modern "man" could move beyond religious trappings to pursue the hard-headed matters of government, while giving, at most, perfunctory lip-service to religion. The occasional use of the term "God" in presidential speeches was seen by those of the cynical modernist school as merely decorative, a ceremonial nod to the private convictions of an ever-decreasing segment of the American population (Bellah, 1967). It was against this backdrop that Bellah (1967) proposed his conception of "American civil religion," drawing on Rousseau's original idea of civil religion to argue that religious language, symbols, and rituals enacted within the state context constituted a genuine expression of the understanding of American experience in light of a universal "God."

Bellah (1967) wrote "there actually exists alongside of and rather clearly differentiated from the churches an elaborate and well-institutionalized civil religion in America" (p. 1), citing as examples: "references to God are almost invariably to be found in the pronouncements of American presidents on solemn occasions" (p. 2), the recognition of God's sovereignty in phrases such as "in God we trust" and "under God" (p. 3), and the explicit connection of biblical concepts such as the promised land to the American experience in founding documents such as the Declaration of Independence. According to Bellah, civil religion unifies the country by ritualizing shared American experience and imbuing it with religious significance.

Bellah (1967) outlined the history of the concept of civil religion, locating its primary formative periods in the early years of America and in the Civil War. Religious references by American founders portrayed a God with special interest in the United States, a country seen as "the new Israel," called to be a chosen people, a light of freedom and democracy to the world. Bellah (1967) traced the theme of America as the "new Israel" from the first inaugural address of President Washington to President Jefferson's more explicit comments in the second inaugural where he spoke of God leading the people out of exile into a richly endowed promised land, to more recent words by then President Kennedy, who referred to the American founders making a "covenant with this land" (p. 8). Hill (1988) ascribed the image of the "new Israel," as well as other religious motifs such as "special Providence" (meaning God's particular care for America) to the Mainline Protestant influence in the formative years of the republic. That is, Christian denominations such as Episcopalians and Presbyterians, well represented in the founding era's leaders, helped shape American civil religion both by creating a society that

expected a certain basic religiosity, and by providing specific symbols or images that became central to civil religious expression.

Bellah argued that, while civil religious concepts were drawn primarily from Christianity, American civil religion itself was "neither sectarian nor in any specific sense Christian" (p. 8). It was more than "simply 'religion in general'" (p. 8) however, because of its specific expression of American concepts and values. Civil religion, in Bellah's explication, "served as a genuine vehicle of national religious self-understanding" (p. 8). That is, while biblical images such as the exodus, chosen people, and promised land could be traced to Christian influence, their use in civil religion was focused on America, not on Christ. In other words, the point of civil religion in Bellah's estimation was not to instill Christian belief, but to strengthen central American values.

Civil religion was not without its Christ-figure, however. According to Bellah (1967), "with the Civil War, a new theme of death, sacrifice, and rebirth enters the civil religion. It is symbolized in the life and death of Lincoln" (p. 10). Lincoln's death served as the symbolic moment of expiation for the broken country that had fractured along the Mason-Dixon line. In his life and death, Lincoln came to symbolize the importance of national unity, which was worth everything, even the giving of one's life. Memorial Day, with its remembrance of the war dead, according to Bellah (1967), serves to reinforce this theme of civil religion, "integrat[ing] the local community into the national cult" (p. 11) focused on sacrifice for the cause of country. Moyer (2011), in discussing Bellah's conception of civil religion, noted that such ritualized moments are significant because they evoke a national unity that comes from the people, as the public "interprets its historical experience in the light of transcendent reality" (Bellah, 1975, p.154). According

to the theory of civil religion, Lincoln's reunifying action gives meaning anew with each ritualized expression that evokes the virtue of sacrifice for the sake of America, such as annual Memorial Day gatherings.

The president functions within the rituals of civil religion as the high priest (Bellah, 1975; Gonzalez, 2012), the one who articulates the shared convictions of the American public, binding them together into a people, much as a religious priest functions to represent the people to God and God to the people. I propose that this presidential function of high priest of an American civil religion dovetails with the rhetorical task of forging the "one" out of the "many" that, according to presidential scholar Wayne Fields (1996), faces American presidents after election. Presidents fill a symbolic unifying role for the American people, according to Fields, needing to move beyond the divisiveness of campaigns to reunite the people, and to be for them a symbol of their unification. Civil religion can be one mode of symbolizing such unity. When a president presides over a ritualized occasion of state, and specifically when he invokes civil religious language that speaks of God's special providence over America as a "promised land" where the people are called to be a united light of freedom to the world, he can function not only as symbol but as priest, the one whose action and words actively forge the unifying moment.

Although Bellah (1967) focused on the positive, unifying aspects of civil religion, he was not unaware that civil religion, and the presidential role within it, could be used negatively to justify an unjust status quo, or to squash dissent. Writing in the late 1960s, he critiqued "an American-Legion type of ideology that fuses God, country, and flag" (p. 14), and noted the way the "new Israel" theme had been conflated with the idea of

manifest destiny, and thereby used to justify the mistreatment of American Indians. Bellah spoke of a need for a civil religion that included self-criticism: "Without an awareness that our nation stands under higher judgment, the tradition of the civil religion would be dangerous indeed. Fortunately, the prophetic voices have never been lacking" (p. 17). In his 1975 book *The Broken Covenant: American Civil Religion in a Time of Trial*, Bellah spoke of the "fracturing" of civil religion, recognizing that the pressures of cultural change in the intervening years had called into question the possibility of enacting the central concept of national unity found in the original theory. In the end, though, Bellah continued to argue "that the American people authentically express their profoundest values as a people through a civil religion" (Moyer, 2011, p. 16). His conception of civil religion, and its related prophetic critique, has influenced assessments of presidential religious rhetoric for the last four decades. I turn next to some of that scholarship, for it provides both important background context and contrast with the approach I take in the dissertation.

Civil Religion Scholarship on Presidential Religious Speech

In 1983, sociologist of religion Cynthia Toolin published the results of her content analysis of all inaugural speeches by United States presidents, from Washington to Reagan (a total of 49 speeches), in which she analyzed the presence of civil religion. Her methods themselves are an interesting commentary on what constitutes civil religion, for, drawing on her reading of Bellah, she counted not only explicitly religious words such as God, or biblical references such as promised land, but also references to American touchstones such as Abraham Lincoln and the constitution, and concepts central to American civil religion such as sacrifice and destiny. The inaugural addresses of U.S.

presidents proved to be fertile ground for the cultivation of a civil religion, focused around four themes Toolin investigated: Exodus, Sacrifice, American Destiny, and International Example (p. 44). According to Toolin, "the presence of American civil religion, as found in the presidential inaugural addresses, performs the three functions of culture building, culture affirmation, and, most importantly, legitimization of international and domestic actions" (p. 45). Toolin also noted: "From the findings concerning these themes, we can see that the American civil religion is a self-congratulatory religion" (p. 46).

Toolin's specific comments about the president indicate that the inaugural address is particularly conducive to viewing the president as high priest, since in the inaugural moment "we see a president addressing his citizens, in much the same way as a priest addresses his parish" (p. 47), considering what has brought them together, the destiny that God has for the country with the new president as its leader, and how they are called to be a light to the world. In the inaugural address, the president brings together the themes of American civil religion in a particular rhetorical moment that highlights his symbolic role. Toolin's work suggests that investigating presidential speeches for repeated patterns of religious expression could be an informative and interesting path to take in this dissertation. The inaugural address proved to be fertile ground for a discussion of civil religion. The National Prayer Breakfast address may push the boundaries of that discussion towards a more theological reading of presidential religious language.

Civil Religion Scholarship on Individual Presidents

Scholars have also applied the civil religion lens to individual presidents, sometimes focusing on a particular speech and its religious themes. Such scholarship

shows in more detail how civil religious themes were enacted by presidents, and the ways that civil religion has functioned to support both national identity and the individual serving as the high priest (that is, the president) at a given time. Erickson (1980) discussed how President “Carter’s religious-political discourse reaffirmed our civic piety and faith in America; his religious discourses communicated trustworthiness” (p. 222). According to Erickson, Carter’s religiosity enhanced his ethos in a post-Nixon world, and it was precisely this religious trustworthiness that was needed by a country wounded by Nixon's betrayal. Personal religiosity is not always central to acting as high priest, however. Roof (2009) argued that President "Reagan brought Americans together less because of his visible religiosity than through his appeal to generalized mythic realities, and particularly when he described the United States as a God-fearing nation locked in a struggle with atheistic Communism” (p. 290). Speaking in a time when national religious rhetoric had become more fervent, noisy, and combative, with a distinct influence from conservative evangelical Christianity, Reagan chose to invoke national myths such as America the "chosen nation," somehow managing to simultaneously appeal to an increasingly powerful religious right, while also fulfilling the unifying rhetorical expectations of civil religion.

President Clinton

President Clinton's religious rhetoric was discussed through the lens of civil religion by Ofulue (2002), who focused on Clinton’s speech to the National Day of Prayer Breakfast in September 1998. This prayer breakfast was organized by Clinton at the White House, taking place each year in the autumn - a different event than the National Prayer Breakfast on which I am focusing in this dissertation. The president gave

brief opening remarks at the White House breakfast after the invocation by the clergy. President Clinton's speech garnered particular attention in 1998, starting even before the event took place, because it occurred after the Lewinsky scandal, and after what was perceived to be an unsuccessful previous attempt at a public apology (Ofulue, 2002). After discussing a brief history of the concept of civil religion, highlighting the president's symbolic role "as the nation's king, prophet, and priest, the guardian of the national civil religion" (p. 50), Ofulue traced "Clinton's attempt to regain a moral voice befitting a king, priest, and prophet by speaking through the biblical persona of King David" (p. 50) in his prayer breakfast remarks. Ofulue emphasized the intermediary role of the president - like a priest, serving as "symbolic intermediary between the people and the order of civil virtues" (p. 52). Clinton, tarnished by the scandal, needed to find a way to restore his credibility as that priestly intermediary for the American people, which, according to Ofulue, Clinton attempted to do by means of his speech at the White House Prayer Breakfast in 1998.

In a detailed yet brief analysis, Ofulue described the way Clinton adopted in his speech what she called the "persona and voice of King David" (p. 55) to draw connections between his own situation and the biblical story of David's affair with Bathsheba and responsibility for the death of Bathsheba's husband, the subsequent confrontation by the prophet Nathan, and then King David's contrition, apology, and restoration. Claiming Davidic authorship for Psalm 51, Ofulue drew parallels between Clinton's words in his 1998 remarks and the psalm to show how Clinton moved through the steps of confessing his sin, showing contrition, asking forgiveness, and submitting to the authority of the clergy assembled at the breakfast. She then cited Clinton's address

from the subsequent year's prayer breakfast to show how "Clinton enacted the persona of the restored leader" (p. 60) in 1999. Although one could arguably categorize Ofulue's analysis under the "religious speech as political tool" section of this literature review, Ofulue herself was at pains to emphasize that she wrote the piece "in order to understand the religio-symbolic dimension of the American presidency" (p. 61), that is, how the president functions in the role of high priest (she would say prophet, priest, and king), and thus I have included it as a particular example of a civil religious approach to analyzing presidential religious rhetoric.

President George W. Bush

The next president whose religious rhetoric has been studied through the lens of civil religion is George W. Bush, although his specifically Christian language has been seen by some scholars as stretching or even breaking civil-religious expectations. In fact, a strand that runs throughout the scholarship on religion and the presidency is the attempt to delineate a turning point in the late twentieth century when religion started to be more prevalent in political discourse. Different scholars locate that turn with different presidents, from Carter (Erickson, 1980; Boase, 1989; Balmer, 2008; Espinosa, 2009) to Reagan (Boase, 1989; Balmer, 2008; Espinosa, 2009; Roof, 2009) to George W. Bush (Curry, 2007; R. M. Smith, 2008), depending on what aspect of discourse they are emphasizing. In her master's thesis *Civil Religion and Pastoral Power in the George W. Bush Presidency*, Curry (2007) cited the concept of civil religion to argue that Bush used religious rhetoric differently than his predecessors, crossing the church/state line. "It appears that President Bush may have transgressed the limits of civil religion, which serves as a unifier of the American people, forsaking civil religion for theological religion

and highlighting one kind of faith in particular, Christianity” (p. 17). Curry argued that Bush's specifically Christian language invoked what Foucault would call "pastoral power" by mixing a particular religion's authority into the act of governing. By doing so, Curry contended, Bush fractured the unity of the American people, and threatened the separation of church and state. Leaving aside her powerful conclusions about whether Bush inappropriately used religion in his presidency, her citation of civil religion is noteworthy for her emphasis on civil religion's role in unifying the country. This understanding of the unifying role of civil religion also influences scholarship that approaches President Obama's religious rhetoric through a civil-religious lens.

President Obama

Scholarship focusing on President Obama and the theme of religion has proliferated in recent years (e.g. Crick, 2012; Espinosa, 2012; Frank, 2011; Johnson, 2012). Perhaps as an indication of this being the right time for my work to be contributing to the scholarly conversation on these matters, many of the articles directly focus on Obama's theology as expressed in his use of language. Some of that work will be examined later in this literature review, but three pieces fall here, under the category of a civil religion approach. Frank (2011) lifts up what he calls Obama's "cosmopolitan civil religion" in his first inaugural address, Melchin's (2009) master's thesis in theology discusses Obama's use of prophetic and priestly traditions of civil religion, and Moyer's (2011) doctoral dissertation in communication pushes the edges of the civil religion concept to examine what he calls a "civil theology" in Obama's religious rhetoric.

Frank (2011), in a fascinating and well-argued piece, discussed the way President Obama's 2009 inaugural speech "establishe[d] the symbolic signature of his presidency"

(p. 606), revealing a mixture of what Frank calls two strands of American civil religion. Drawing on John Murphy (in Aune & Medhurst, 2008), Frank described the two strands as the “language of being” (emphasizing eternal principles, authority, more Republican and religious right oriented) and the “language of becoming” (emphasizing justice, a revolutionary Jesus, change, more Democratic and civil rights oriented). Both Obama’s language –embracing faith and science in public, reasoned conversation – and the way his inaugural was bookended by prayers exemplifying the two strands of civil religion (the opening prayer was by conservative evangelical Rick Warren, and the closing prayer was by civil rights leader Joseph Lowery) demonstrate the way Obama sought to bridge the gap in a “cosmopolitan civil religion” (p. 606). According to Frank, this cosmopolitan civil religion, reasoned yet prophetic, committed yet open, expressed in language of sacred responsibility to others “recalls and draws from the more universal expression of American civil religion first described by Robert Bellah in 1967” (p. 609). In Obama's rhetoric, Frank argued, the political gap between two dominant strands of civil religious expression was being bridged.

In his master's thesis in theology, Melchin (2009) also suggested that Obama's religious rhetoric bridges divides found within the civil religious tradition. According to Melchin, “Obama's language draws upon both the prophetic and priestly traditions within civil religion in order to communicate a message of change and reorientation of America towards its so-called 'founding ideals'” (p. 4). Obama's skillful rhetoric and personal commitments seem to point towards a message that incorporates both the symbolism of president as high priest, and also the prophetic call to be a better and more united nation. In Frank’s and in Melchin’s work one can see the insightful results of a theological

exploration of Obama's rhetoric, pointing to the rich possibilities of a public theology approach to the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, which would focus on several presidents, and not be limited to a civil religious lens.

I turn now to another student project that demonstrates the benefits of taking in account and then moving beyond a civil religious frame. In some ways, Moyer's (2011) doctoral dissertation in communication might seem like it does not belong under the civil religion section of this literature review, titled as it is: *Not Just Civil Religion*. But I am starting with it here, even though I will touch on it again later in the literature review when I am discussing theological approaches, because Moyer himself starts with the concept of civil religion as a theoretical lens, purposefully differentiating it from other approaches that would detach religion from politics. Specifically in the case of President Obama, Moyer notes the way that Obama constructed a parallel from the outset of his campaign between himself and President Lincoln, "the president who most symbolizes national unity" (p.140). Moyer then pushes the edges of the idea of civil religion, proposing that Obama uses what Moyer terms a "civil theology" to weave together elements of his denominational and philosophical background in the way he uses religious language. The details of this new proposal will be discussed later in this literature review when I make a case for my own use of public theology as an analytical lens.

The Limits of a Civil Religion Approach

Overall, approaching presidential religious speech through a civil religion lens has been a productive and helpful line of scholarship, particularly in analyzing the presidential task of forging the one out of the many through rhetoric. At particular

moments in American public life, presidents have been able to call upon the resources of religious language, symbols, and rituals to express a unifying understanding of the people's experience in light of a "universal God." Scholars focusing on the words of presidents falling within the time period the National Prayer Breakfast has been in existence have found evidence of the use of civil religious rhetoric in each president studied. Yet increasingly, scholarship and the words of the presidents themselves have pushed at the boundaries of the civil religious frame, questioning its continued usefulness. Post-modern scholarship questions any assumption of a unified "public" or shared religio-political identity (Heidt, 2012; Smit, 2007). Meanwhile, critical scholarship in the field of public theology (Stackhouse, 2004) has noted that civil religion often functions to uphold the status quo through a quasi-religious projection of national values onto a religious framework. Newer scholars such as Melchin (2009) and Moyer (2011) have pushed beyond a civil religion lens to look more broadly at theology, but they still tend to see religious rhetoric in the service of the state, what public theologians (Stackhouse, 2004) would call political theology. Lastly, some scholars have questioned the usefulness of the concept of civil religion in an increasingly fractious political age, where religion seems to be used as a divisive weapon far more than as a unifying force. Scholarship that focuses on the use of religious language for political gain is the focus of the next section of this literature review.

Religious Speech as Political Tool

In a moment that political communication scholars Domke and Coe (2008) called "grand political theater" (p. 3), Ronald Reagan ended his acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in 1980 by departing from his prepared remarks to

speak of divine providence over America and to ask the assembled crowd to engage in silent prayer as they began their "crusade" together (Domke & Coe, 2008). Such moments, calculated to appeal to a particular subset of the American people through the use of what some might call coded religious language (Pew Research, 2004), are the subject of the next area of scholarship reviewed here: that which approaches presidential religious speech as political tool. While all rhetorical scholarship recognizes that language is strategic, the scholars who see religion as a political tool tend to emphasize the instrumental use of religion for political gain. Many scholars who work in this area voice concern with what is argued to be an escalation of such rhetoric in the latter part of the twentieth century, often citing Roderick Hart's (1977) civil-religious contract theory in doing so. Thus, this section will begin with an overview of Hart's theory, before moving on to scholars that discuss how Hart's contract fares in the increasingly fractious age of political rhetoric in recent decades. Next, I will review Domke and Coe's (2008) proposal that religion is increasingly being used as a political weapon - what they call "the God strategy." I will then discuss two scholars who express concern with political use of religious rhetoric: Boase (1989) and Kaylor (2008, 2011). The next subsection of this portion of the literature review will focus on several rhetorical analyses of presidential (and candidate) religious speech that treat it as a political tool, showing a variety of theoretical lenses that nonetheless share a common instrumental approach to religious speech. Lastly, I will discuss the limitations of treating religion as a political weapon, and why a theological reading of presidential religious speech may be a more illuminating approach to the National Prayer Breakfast addresses.

Hart's Civil-Religious Contract

Writing ten years after Bellah, Hart (1977), in his book *The Political Pulpit*, developed a new theory of the relationship between church and state that proposed the existence of a productive tension between the two that was built on something of a rhetorical dance. According to Hart, there exists in the United States an implicit contract between organized religion and the government, whereby both parties maintain a guise of separation but in reality engage a mutually reinforcing relationship. As noted in my first chapter, Hart literally drew up a contract, specifying that governmental "rhetoric will refrain from being overly religious" and organized religion's rhetoric "will refrain from being overly political" (p. 44). The realm of the religious is solely rhetorical, according to Hart, whereas the state can "enforce its will directly" (p. 57). Hart critiqued Bellah's concept of civil religion because Hart contended that it had been reified into a construct that limited what could be seen and analyzed at the intersection of religion and politics. Hart preferred to focus on the rhetorical dimensions of that intersection, rather than saying that there is such a thing as a "civil religion." Instead, with his civil-religious contract, he argued that he maintained flexibility for understanding and critiquing the ongoing dance between the two partners.

In 2002, on the 25th anniversary of Hart's publication, the *Journal of Communication and Religion* published a special issue examining whether his contract theory still held. Friedenber (2002) found that the central concepts of Hart's contract still largely applied, although he suggested that religious leaders had been more active in the political realm than Hart had envisioned. Goldzwig (2002) also argued that there continued to be evidence of an implied contract between the state and religion,

particularly Christianity, and that Hart made a distinctive contribution by encouraging a rhetorical analysis of the intersection of church and state. When the scholarship from the special issue was compiled into *The Political Pulpit Revisited* (Hart & Pauley, 2005), Hart summarized his original argument as follows: "the American people are too pragmatic to let religion overwhelm them" (p. 11), contending that the reason his contract still held was that:

To talk about such matters (loudly, brashly, concernedly) rather than do anything about them is the United States' special solution to its church-state difficulties. The resulting hand-wringing lets politics and religion stay in touch with one another and the mass media's celebration of this hand-wringing keeps their relationship alive and flourishing. (p. 9)

Notably absent from Hart's comments is any sense that religious speech might have something substantive to contribute to American public deliberations.

I include the lengthy "hand-wringing" quote from Hart before moving on to a critique and expansion of his contract theory because it clearly illustrates concepts I will be critiquing. First, it is important to note certain basic assumptions of Hart's contract - that religion is not really to wield any direct power in the political realm, that religious rhetoric is to be largely ceremonial (Friedenberg (2002) says "decorative"), and that the state can maintain a certain ironic detachment from the substantive contributions of religion. Next, it is interesting to note the conflation of church/state separation with an assumption that religion and politics are to remain similarly separate. It is one thing for "organized religion" and "the government" to go through the motions of a rhetorical dance, but that is different than assuming that "religion" and "politics" are to be kept

detached from one another. The latter assumption, however, is how Hart's contract has been read by some communication scholarship in ensuing decades. I will discuss such scholarship in more detail later in this section of the literature review.

In discussing the continuing utility of his contract theory in the 2005 book, Hart expressed great confidence that his original thesis finally explained what has been true about America from the beginning - basically that religion and politics, church and state, publicly tussle with each other all the time, and thus maintain a tension that is productive for them both (as long as neither violates Hart's contract). It is not clear, however, what is productive for religion in the contract. Interestingly for my project, Hart (2005) quotes President George W. Bush's 2001 National Prayer Breakfast speech and then says "Remarks like these, of course, are largely ceremonial" (p. 9). Such a quick assessment reflects the limits of approaching religious speech through the lens of Hart's contract theory, which must see remarks like President Bush's as ceremonial if they are not to breach the church/state line. My dissertation project is exploring what we find if we approach such speech as an expression of public theology – that is, as religious speech that could be making a contribution to deliberative democracy.

According to Hart's civil-religious contract theory, the interplay between church and state is predicated upon a balance whereby the political sphere does not get "too religious" and if religious language is used by civil leaders, it is subservient to a political purpose. In other words, his theorizing assumes that in the dance between church and state, the state is the lead partner, and any analysis of the use of religious language in the political process will thus privilege a political reading. Several scholars follow that line of reasoning in their rhetorical assessments of presidential (and, particularly, candidate)

religious speech, and it is to their work that I now turn, beginning with Domke and Coe's (2008) discussion of the use of religious language as a political weapon, which they coined "the God strategy."

Uncivil Religion: Divisive Religious Appeals as Weapon

Domke and Coe (2008) traced the development of polarized politics in the later part of the twentieth century, epitomized in the rise of the Religious Right and the increasing use of religion as a political weapon, particularly by the Republican Party, but also by Democrats. The authors of *The God Strategy: How Religion Became a Political Weapon in America* acknowledged the presence of the civil-religious underpinnings of the country discussed by Bellah, but then argued that religion has in recent decades become an increasingly divisive and potent political tool. "Religion has always been part of the political subtext in the United States, but it is now a defining fault line" (p. 7), the authors declared, and "political leaders have taken advantage of and contributed to these developments through calculated, deliberate, and partisan use of faith. We call this the God strategy" (p. 7). Domke and Coe delineated what they call four "signals" of the God strategy used by political rhetors (p. 19):

- 1) Acting as political priests by speaking the language of the faithful
- 2) Fusing God and country by linking America with divine will
- 3) Embracing important religious symbols, practices, and rituals
- 4) Engaging in morality politics by trumpeting bellwether issues

The authors then devote a chapter to each signal, showing how politicians make use of religious themes, language, and actions to gain the support of religiously identified citizens, especially the so-called religious right. In so doing, according to Domke and Coe,

most politicians seek to walk a fine line, using the signals to appeal to a certain subset of Americans while not alienating the rest. Moyer (2011) termed this strategy "dog whistle" politics, indicating that such rhetoric functions as code language for religious conservatives while flying under the radar (or over the heads) of those who do not get religious signals.

According to Powell and Neiva (2006), such calculated use of religious appeals can backfire in what they called "the Pharisee effect." Because much of the electorate is religious, some use of religious signaling can be effective, but when it is perceived as excessive by voters, there is a boomerang effect that is damaging to the political rhetor engaging in the religious appeal. Powell and Neiva named this the "Pharisee effect" after the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the New Testament Gospel of Luke, chapter 18, which they contended Jesus told in order to contrast the self-aggrandizing Pharisee with the humble tax collector. According to Powell and Neiva, elements of the Pharisee effect that contribute to the negative assessment by the public and resultant boomerang on the politician include the presence (or perception) of the following in the politician using the religious appeal:

- 1) self-serving motivation
- 2) hypocrisy in the use of religion (the politician doesn't believe or abide by it)
- 3) inappropriateness
- 4) fanaticism
- 5) holier-than-thou attitude

Echoing Hart's assessment of the civil-religious rhetorical dance, Powell and Neiva suggested that the boomerang effect happens because "the use of religious appeals in politics is a finely tuned balancing act that teeters around a religious-political fulcrum" (p. 73) that is transgressed by a politician who overuses (or is perceived to overuse) religion.

At times one can see hints of a boomerang reaction among the scholars analyzing the politicized use of religious rhetoric by presidents or presidential candidates. One such piece is Boase's (1989) *Moving the Mercy Seat into the White House*, written by a respected communication scholar but which comes across as a polemical diatribe against the increasing use of religious appeals by Presidents Carter and Reagan. Boase casts the use of religious language solely in instrumental terms, as an appeal to an increasingly powerful Christian Right. Throughout Boase's article, which he called an "exegesis," usually a term reserved for a close reading of biblical texts by scholars familiar with the original languages, he repeatedly used loaded rhetoric to convey a sense of danger around the presence of religion in the presidents' language, for example: "Religion, during the past 60 years, has often dogged the presidential campaign trail, even invading the White House" (p. 1). He was also emphatic in his contention that religion is a private matter that does not belong in the public speech of presidents, asking at one point "Is it legitimate for a President to bare his piety publicly - even for political advantage?" (p. 2), and at another remarking of Reagan: "One address that he delivered to the National Religious Broadcasters (NRB) was more than even the editor of the New York Times could stomach. 'You don't have to be a secular humanist to take offense at that display of what in America should be private piety'" (p. 5). Boase's chief concern was with what he called

the rise of Christian fundamentalism in politics. He did provide helpful distinctions between Carter and Reagan's efforts to appeal to religious conservatives, but his overall tone is an indication of an undercurrent I have found running through some communication scholarship: basically, religion belongs in private, and when the civil-religious contract is breached, democracy is threatened.

Kaylor (2008, 2011), who examined the push towards confessions of faith on the part of presidential candidates, also expressed concern with the use of religious language as a political tool and what that might mean for American democracy, basing his critique on a reading of Hart's civil-religious contract, which he claimed had been breached in recent decades. Kaylor (2011) found "A dramatic shift in the nature of religious rhetoric in presidential campaigns" (p. 21) since the time of Kennedy, and that, particularly since the time of Carter, "religion has played an increasingly important role in electoral voting behavior, and candidates have been openly confessing their faith as religious leaders interject themselves into political campaigns" (p. 21). Kaylor argued that these changes call Hart's civil-religious contract into question, and he proposed a new framework that he called "confessional politics." According to Kaylor, far from keeping personal religion out of the public sphere, candidates since Carter have been sharing religious testimony, engaging in the partisan use of religious rhetoric, breaching the church/state line through sectarian appeals, and publicly using "liturgical," rather than ceremonial, language. Kaylor used extensive quotations from presidential candidates, and sitting presidents, to support his case, showcasing their confessions of faith, use of religion in a worshipful style, and willingness to claim publicly that they were basing policy decisions on their beliefs. It is this last concern that raises a crucial issue for my dissertation.

Kaylor's detailed and well-supported arguments reveal critical choices that distinguish his project from mine and get at the central theoretical question I am trying to raise. While he argued convincingly that Hart's contract had been breached by recent campaigns and presidents, he then went on to lament the "demise" (2011, p. 223) of a contract that kept politicians from getting "too religious." Kaylor also de-facto categorized appeals to religious beliefs as "partisan" when presidential candidates cited religious values to explain their stance on an issue: "The first type of partisan religious-political rhetoric occurs when candidates use their religious beliefs to explain and justify their public policies or political philosophy" (2011, p. 126). In other words, Kaylor's argument works from the idea that religion's presence in presidential politics is being used to gain advantage, and that American democracy would be better served if Hart's contract had not been breached. Hogan (2012), in a review of Kaylor's book, found substantial support for his critique in the recent shifts in presidential campaigns, but she challenged his concluding remarks about the problem this breach in the civil-religious contract presents to American democracy. She did not explain her critique except to say that she found Kaylor's conclusion overly sweeping, but in this project I raise the question as to whether any appeal to religion must be seen as instrumental, a partisan "use" of religion to gain advantage, or whether, instead, we could approach presidential religious rhetoric, particularly language that is being used to explain deeply held values, as potentially an expression of public theology that can contribute to, rather than detract from, American democratic conversation.

The Power and Limits of an Instrumental Approach to Religious Speech in Presidential Politics

A public theology approach is not naïve, however, regarding the power of using religion instrumentally in politics. In other words, it is important to discuss literature that takes an instrumental approach to presidential religious language in order to recognize the possibility of similar patterns in the speeches I analyze in this dissertation, and also to distinguish my theoretical approach from such scholarship. Therefore, this subsection focuses on several studies that approach the use of religious language by presidents or presidential candidates from an instrumental perspective. Unlike the scholarship I outlined in the previous subsection, these scholars do not cite Hart's civil-religious contract (at least not as their primary theoretical lens), and do not make the question of whether the religious speech they are analyzing breaches the church/state divide the primary focus of their study. Instead, they focus on the specific ways that religious language functions to gain rhetorical (or even electoral) advantage, and in so doing reveal both the power and the limitations of an instrumental approach to presidential religious rhetoric.

It is natural that scholars interested in the strategic or instrumental use of religion would focus on campaign rhetoric, for it is in campaigns that candidates need to use every advantage at their disposal to gain votes. As noted earlier in the civil religion section, by the time presidents are elected, they have a task of unifying a divided electorate, indicating that the process of campaigning is one of highlighting partisanship. Thus the study of religious rhetoric by presidential candidates often emphasizes its strategically partisan use. For example, Marietta (2009) and Stecker (2011), in their

respective presidential debate studies, both cited Lakoff's (2008) distinction between the way Republicans and Democrats use language, centered on a metaphor of the nation as family. According to Lakoff, Republicans tend to emphasize a "strict father" metaphor, to their advantage in public debates, while Democrats, or liberals more generally, do not do as good a job connecting their "nurturant parent" image to their policy proposals.

Marietta built on Lakoff to contend that it is not just the strict father metaphor that advantages the GOP: "The Republican advantage is grounded in more than the invocation of strict father morality. It is grounded in the greater use of sacred rhetoric, invoking sacred values, their boundaries, and moral outrage at their violation" (p. 389). Sacred in this sense does not mean religious, although it often includes religious values. According to Marietta:

A sacred value is a principle that is held to be absolute, resisting tradeoffs with other values. Sacred rhetoric is the political expression of this form of belief. (p. 390)

As opposed to sacred rhetoric, nonsacred or negotiable political rhetoric emphasizes consequences and outcomes; it cites figures and data rather than principles or authorities...it employs consequentialist reasoning. (p. 391)

Marietta analyzed language used in presidential debates from 1976-2004 and found that Republicans use sacred rhetoric more - hence their absolutist advantage (they get to frame the debate, and they are perceived as firmer). Her discussion of the absolutist advantage of sacred rhetoric is worth keeping in mind as I approach presidential speeches that cite ultimate values. Is the citing of non-negotiables, particularly using religious

language, always a strategic move, or could it also be a genuine expression of the moral grounding of a president's views?

Stecker (2011), an ordained Episcopal priest, wrote *The Podium, the Pulpit, and the Republicans* based on his dissertation, in which he also used Lakoff's theory of parent language, specifically focusing on how the distinction between the "strict parent" rhetoric of Republicans and the "nurturant parent" rhetoric of Democrats is connected to the use of religious language in debates. A strict view of parenting and a literal view of religion go hand in hand according to Stecker, so that presidential candidates who use religious language that emphasizes God's unchangeable truth will appeal to evangelical Republicans whose strict family structures and religious views translate to their political worldview. Stecker's work helps to delineate the nuances of the partisan use of religious rhetoric, highlighting the problematic conflation of religious and political viewpoints. As a Mainline clergyperson, Stecker is concerned with separating these strands of thought, and recognizing the consequences of identifying religious language with conservative political advantage, concerns that I share in my own scholarship, including this project.

The instrumental use of religion is not limited to conservative politicians, however. Recognizing the broad appeal of religious themes, candidates at various locations across the political spectrum have worked to secure the votes of the faithful. In so doing, they have at times drawn on conflicting definitions within religions themselves in order to emphasize what would best help their campaigns. Scholar of presidential religious rhetoric Maddux (2013) used the concept of dissociation, first discussed by Perelman & Olbrechts-Tyteca (1969) as that which "resolves the tension within a seemingly unified concept by revealing its constituent parts and dividing it into those

parts" (p. 356) in order to discuss how particular presidential candidates in the 2012 campaign attempted to associate themselves with "true" Christianity in order to appeal to voters. Maddux noted a long history in the Judeo-Christian tradition, going back to its biblical roots, of distinguishing "real" religion from "false" religion, for example calling those who define Christianity differently "false prophets." Religious changes in the U.S. have raised anxiety, Maddux argued, so there is now more use of dissociation, "influencing also how Christians assert themselves in U.S. politics" (p. 358). According to Maddux, the Christian Right and Left have each asserted that they are the "true" expression of Christianity. Maddux used these concepts to analyze the 2012 presidential campaign. In 2012 neither candidate (Obama, Romney) was traditionally appealing to the evangelical right, and "both parties stood to benefit by reconstituting an accessible and palatable Christian identity, a rhetorical task for which dissociation is uniquely suited" (p. 360). Maddux argued that each of the two presidential campaign camps "negotiated the religious tensions resulting from recent election cycles by dissociating *authentic* Christianity along the faith/works binary" (p. 360), by which she meant that each campaign argued that the truly faithful would be doing good works. One can see in Maddux's analysis that an instrumental approach to religious rhetoric can delve deeply into the meaning of religious symbolism and does not need to focus solely on the political contest. Her work highlights the definitional power of religious language.

More often, though, the nuances of religious language take a back seat to the needs of the political contest. Selby (2013) cited the Burkean concept of the rhetoric of proportion to argue that 2012 Republican presidential candidate and Baptist minister Mike Huckabee used the rhetoric of proportion to unite the audience at the Republican

National Convention against their common enemy (Obama), in order to affirm their nominated candidate (Mitt Romney) without highlighting the internal divisions in the GOP over Romney's Mormon religion. In his discussion section, Selby observed that religious fine points can be influential and argued in primaries, but when it comes to defeating an opponent, the need to unite overcomes differences, at least strategically. This study is noteworthy for the clarity with which it discusses the way political strategy minimizes the importance of religion.

Not all studies that take an instrumental view of religious language focus on campaign discourse. For his political science dissertation, Kradel (2008) conducted a content analysis of religious rhetoric in presidential speeches from Truman to George W. Bush's first term. Although not a rhetorical study, his findings point to some interesting conclusions about the use of religious speech that relate to my interest in the National Prayer Breakfast. For example: "beginning with the Reagan administration there was a sharp and sustained shift in presidents offering prayers as part of their public speeches. That shift perpetuated itself to the end of George W. Bush's first term" (p. 57). Kradel also reported a very steep rise in the use of prayers by presidents in policy speeches during the time period he studied. The religious makeup of presidential electoral coalitions was correlated with the use of religious rhetoric by presidents once in office: with a "strong relationship between the proportion of evangelicals in a president's electoral coalition and presidential use of religious rhetoric" (p. 44) and a similar, but smaller correlation with mainline Protestants in a president's coalition. Kradel also found "that the more a president enjoyed public approval, the more religious rhetoric a president used" (p. 44). Kradel's study points to a growing use of religious language, including

prayer, in presidential speeches in recent decades and the importance of that speech in a political process that includes significant numbers of religious supporters. Of particular note is the way that religious language is correlated with evangelical support.

The final study I discuss in this section on instrumental approaches to presidential religious speech is Shogan's (2006) *The Moral Rhetoric of American Presidents*. Shogan was quite explicit in her instrumental view of rhetoric, contrasting it with a historic, constitutive analysis of rhetoric. Using content analysis, Shogan analyzed presidential inaugural and annual addresses (to 2003), and then focused on 10 of them for rhetorical analysis. She was interested in the strategic use of religious appeals, and the rhetorical situations in which such appeals are used, "focusing on how political context either restrains or promotes opportunities for presidential moral leadership" (p. 7). Shogan contrasted her comparative approach to previous studies of presidents' use of moral/religious language that have tended to focus on individual presidents. In a comment that also argues for what I am hoping to contribute through this dissertation, Shogan contended: "by examining a number of presidents across time, we can move toward building a general theory about the complex relationships between moral and political leadership, as well as presidential rhetoric and political authority" (p. 12).

Shogan's emphasis on strategy, however, limits her contribution towards building such a theory of religious or moral rhetoric. The language she chose reflects her instrumental focus. She was interested in how religious language functions strategically for presidents:

Instead of viewing moral leadership as separate from political demands, I illuminate the powerful historical interplay between them by relating

rhetoric to the strategic exercise of power and demonstrating that some presidents have used moralistic rhetoric instrumentally as a tool to enhance their constitutional position." (p. 9)

Shogan's use of "moralistic" instead of "moral" in the previous sentence is consistent with the interchangeability of those terms throughout her book. In another telling quote, Shogan wrote: "I hope to facilitate a discussion about the strategic timing of moral posturing" (p. 12). That is, with an instrumental view of moral rhetoric, she saw religious language as posturing, or moralizing, rather than claiming it is taking a moral stance.

In his review of Shogan's book, Gring (2009) questioned her focus on strategy. "My concern with this book is that Shogan's underlying assumptions ultimately privilege a utilitarian strategy rather than a true moral commitment" (p. 160). Echoing the concern I voiced above, he also asked whether Shogan's book is really about "moral rhetoric or *moralizing* rhetoric" (p. 160). Gring wrote:

I contend that the American presidency is still about moral character...A president whose actions are limited by his moral rhetoric is one who is willing to limit his own power...It is only when presidents recognize that there is a moral system / greater than themselves that the American public will be willing to trust the political system again." (pp. 160-161)

A public theology approach to presidential religious rhetoric, while not uncritical about the interplay of religion, morality, and political power, allows for the possibility that something more than instrumental moralizing is happening when moral claims, such as those articulated by presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast, are made.

Moving Towards a Theological Reading of Presidential Religious Speech

Thus far in this literature review we have seen, broadly speaking, two approaches to presidential religious speech that emphasize its usefulness in serving other ends: a civil religious approach that underlines the way religion can be used to unite the American people and uphold their sense of national identity, and an instrumental approach that sees religion as one more tool in the politician's war chest. A utilitarian approach to the presence of religious language in the public square, however, will not present a full picture of the function of that rhetoric for large numbers of the people who hear it, and arguably not for the president uttering it either. Religious language is a complex phenomenon and as such, it seems overly narrow to assume that its presence in presidential public address is always at the service of either civil religion or political expediency. If rhetoric is the use of symbols to communicate (Foss, 2009), and if genre approaches to rhetoric recognize the common humanity that calls forth the recognition of shared symbols and patterns (Gunn, 2004), surely our conversation about religion can go deeper than seeing how it supports the flag or a particular political party. Part of my impetus for conducting this National Prayer Breakfast project has been to ask the following: what if public religious speech could be studied for its deep patterns of religious meaning, and then those resources could be brought to bear on our societal deliberations about matters of significance?

I am not alone among political communication scholars in looking for a more robust approach to public religious language, specifically presidential rhetoric. This section will begin with Medhurst's (2002, 2004c, 2009a, 2009b) scholarship calling for, and modeling, a fuller discussion within political communication and presidential

scholarship of religion, religious language, and religious citizens. I will then discuss several articles by other scholars of presidential rhetoric that delve into biblical and other theological themes in presidential religious speech. Lastly, I will turn my attention to contributions from the field of public theology that guide my work in this dissertation on the National Prayer Breakfast addresses.

Medhurst on the Importance of Religion in Public Life

When respected scholar of presidential rhetoric Martin Medhurst was asked to respond to Pauley's (2002) call for an assessment of Hart's civil-religious contract at 25 years, Medhurst (2002) presented a powerful critique of the contract metaphor, summarizing his argument by saying that Hart's contract "never should have been ratified in the first place because it makes of religiously inclined people second-class citizens. It presumes a wall of separation not only between Church and State, but also between religion, government, and the citizenry – a wall that should not be erected and cannot be sustained" (p. 98). Although the inclusion of brief religious remarks during "ritualized occasions of state" (p. 93) may be appropriately read as merely ceremonial, Medhurst noted, such an understanding of religious rhetoric is insufficient to explain either the content or the contribution of a wider use of religious language in the public square. Medhurst's argument echoes concerns I raised in my first chapter in the philosophical discussion of the place of religious language in our society. It is a concern that he has raised in a consistent way in his publications. In his article *Religious Belief and Scholarship: A Complex Relationship* (2004), Medhurst wrote:

Part of my problem is that I have never been able to separate religion from life, particularly public life. We may legally separate Church from State,

but we have never separated religion from government or public policy. And we never can - for the simple reason that all law, all policy is ultimately grounded in values and values must come from somewhere. (p. 41)

Medhurst's focus on the deeper meaning of religious language in public life, particularly presidential (or candidate) rhetoric, has resulted in exceptional scholarship that demonstrates an informed and interesting take not only on the language itself, but on the wider religious context in which it is embedded. His work is a model I hope to emulate in this project.

In his article *Evangelical Christian Faith and Political Action* (2009a), Medhurst began with a discussion of what he called "the political coming to maturity of the evangelical movement" (p. 201), and then he engaged in a close reading of the work of three persons who combine serious theological and political perspective: Jim Wallis from the evangelical left, David Kuo from the evangelical right, and John Danforth, Episcopal priest and Republican former senator. Medhurst distilled from each of these a set of five criteria by which to judge how well politicians exemplify the Christian faith that they espouse, and then Medhurst used those 15 criteria to develop a lengthy discussion and assessment of the 2008 presidential campaign rhetoric and actions of Mike Huckabee, Baptist preacher and former governor of Arkansas. Such an approach is novel, taking seriously both moral and rhetorical questions raised by the criteria. Medhurst concluded that if Huckabee had "taken to heart" the criteria, he could have reshaped evangelical and presidential politics, but instead "Huckabee let the politics reshape him," (p. 232), opting

for political expediency and pandering to various audiences, compromising himself and the gospel along the way.

In another article that models a larger perspective on religion in politics, Medhurst (2009b) discussed 2008 presidential candidate Mitt Romney's "Faith in America" speech, using it "as a lens for analyzing, interpreting, and commenting upon the place of religious discourse in American politics" (Abstract, p. 195). In a moment that many commentators compared to Kennedy's 1960 speech regarding his Roman Catholic faith, Romney gave his "Faith in America" speech in December 2007 to address the issue of his Mormon faith and presidential candidacy. Medhurst used the rhetorical situation of the speech, and the subsequent public response, to raise and discuss "the five basic issues that all Americans must face when making civic decisions: 1) Is talk about religion either necessary or desirable in American politics? 2) If such talk is necessary or desirable, what aspects of religion are relevant to the political process and, especially, to the office of President of the United States? 3) Are there some aspects of religion or some uses of religion that are simply inappropriate, and if so, why? 4) How do we reconcile the constitutional issues...5) Can religious and democratic attitudes toward such intangibles as truth, knowledge, virtue, and belief ever be reconciled, and if so, how?" (pp. 198-199). These large questions articulate well some of the central concerns I bring to the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, and why I approach the speeches through the lens of public theology.

Medhurst (2009b) began his article on Romney's "Faith in America" speech with a discussion of the media response, finding that generally the media were quite negative about the speech, and about the mix of religion and politics it represented. In the end, the

general tenor of their commentary on Romney's speech suggested that religious truth and democratic theory cannot coexist (p. 210). Medhurst begged to differ. In a rather impassioned discussion, he made several important assertions, the most powerful being: "Religion is part of American politics for the simple reason that most Americans want it to be" (p. 211). He traced the history of the intertwining of religion with public life, giving some historical and constitutional background to the claim (also made in his earlier article (2002) on Hart's contract) that the separation of church and state is not the same thing as the separation of religion and politics. Medhurst also raised the issue of those who would "seek to marginalize the faithful through undervaluing religion's potential in the public square" (p. 212). Interestingly, he then moved into a section that directly revealed some of his own faith commitments as part of the discussion, in some ways echoing his assertion about Romney's speech and response that "attempts to explain how one's religious views affect one's thinking and policymaking are not only appropriate, they are necessary" (p. 214). If it is appropriate for politicians, maybe it is for scholars also? This is a theme that Medhurst clearly pursues in one part of his prolific scholarship: in 2004 he published the essay mentioned earlier (*Religious Belief and Scholarship*), and he also invited, edited, and wrote for a special issue of *Rhetoric & Public Affairs* (cf. Medhurst 2004a & 2004b) in which each article was from a scholar commenting on the connection between religious conviction and rhetorical invention. Each of those articles came from a particular faith or denominational perspective, and could be of use in analyzing the potential denominational influences evident in the presidents' prayer breakfast speeches

Does Welcoming Religious Voices Mean Being Uncritical?

Medhurst has made a strong argument for taking religion seriously in the public square, and for recognizing that large percentages of the American people already do so. Other scholars have agreed. Gonzalez (2012) claimed "religion and politics have become inextricably interwoven in the past sixty years" (p. 569) and states "U.S. citizens are comfortable with their presidents speaking in religious terms because religion impacts how they think politically" (p. 577). Historian G. S. Smith (2015), in his new book on faith and presidency, argued "Presidents also frequently use biblical and moral discourse because Americans, who are much more religious than citizens of other postindustrial nations, expect it" (pp. 3-4). As noted in my first chapter, there is a robust conversation about these matters already taking place in the field of public theology, to which a communication analysis could contribute an informed perspective on the use of rhetoric. One question that must be considered here, though, is how the rhetorical critic will evaluate religious language.

One of the concerns raised by those who seek to exclude religious voices from politics is the incommensurability of sources of authority. If religious truth is considered by believers to be revealed from a divine source, how can it be critiqued? If others do not accept the idea of revealed truth, how can they engage in serious discussion with those who do? So a major question for this project is how to deal with actually evaluating the discourse. Medhurst's model of using criteria distilled from theologically serious and simultaneously politically knowledgeable sources seems quite promising. In addition, the transparency in revealing one's own perspective - a technique common to qualitative research, but not usually a part of rhetorical criticism - seems particularly important in a

project like this. I suspect that my own Lutheran background is part of my willingness to welcome a public conversation in which theology plays a substantive, but not uncontested, role. Lutherans do not believe that the Christian voice is due special treatment in the public square, but we do believe that the church has a vital role to play in reminding the state of its primary obligation to serve the public good. Ultimately, “Lutherans are committed to the integrity of church and state, to their practical interaction, indeed cooperation for the common good in a constitutional order that guarantees religious freedom for all” (Stumme & Tuttle, 2003, p. 69). Such a perspective informs my interest in, and approach to this dissertation.

The question of evaluating religious rhetoric was discussed helpfully by R. M. Smith in his 2008 article on President George W. Bush's speeches. Smith articulated well the issue I am raising: "My chief concern is to consider whether positions that seek to be more welcoming to official religious expression in general must welcome Bush's dominant mode of religious discourse in particular" (pp. 273-274). After reviewing the debate about whether public conversation can include religious perspectives as is (which I discussed in my first chapter - he cited much of the same scholarship and issues) and making clear that he takes the welcoming position, Smith analyzed previous studies, both quantitative and qualitative, to show that Bush used more religious rhetoric and used it in a particular way. Drawing on Coe and Domke's (2006) study that proposed a distinction between what they called a prophetic and a petitioner stance in public religious expression, Smith showed that Bush used the prophetic stance consistently, tending to use religious rhetoric to claim moral authority for specific policies, and thus his rhetoric had "anti-democratic features discouraging deliberation and dissent" (p. 273). According to

Coe and Domke (2006), the prophetic presidential stance is a "distinct discursive posture" (p. 315) that tends to declare God's wishes, whereas the petitioner stance is "distinguished by requests and gratitude for divine guidance" (p. 315). Smith found Bush's use of the prophetic stance unethical because of the way it discourages dissent by claiming divine authority, but in leveling this critique, Smith was not trying to claim that all reference to divine authority is problematic in public discourse. These complex considerations are an important background to this, or any project that seeks to discuss presidential religious speech.

Rhetorical-Theological Scholarship on Presidential Religious Speech

Recent scholarship, taking into account the growing interest in and influence of religion in the post-modern political context, increasingly is focusing on religion and theology as expressed by presidents. As noted earlier, there are several excellent articles on President Obama (e.g., Crick, 2012; Espinosa, 2012; Johnson, 2012; Siker, 2012), whose presidency seems to have coincided with, or perhaps even helped invite the "kairos time" for taking religious language seriously from a theological perspective in politics and scholarship on presidential rhetoric. One of those articles (Johnson, 2012) is the only scholarly piece to analyze a National Prayer Breakfast speech as theology, bearing direct relevance to this project. All of the scholarship in this vein points towards the potential new insights to be gained by taking a theological approach to presidential religious speech.

In a fascinating and well-written article, Espinosa (2012) drew on Obama's writing in *The Audacity of Hope* to trace the roots and influences of what he called Obama's "political theology." Those influences include Obama's Chicago pastor Jeremiah

Wright, his mother, social gospel theologian Walter Rauschenbusch, as well as Obama's early work community

organizing in church circles. According to Espinosa:

Obama argues that 'religiously motivated' people must learn the art of compromise, a sense of proportion, and how to translate their religious concerns and vision for American public life into universal rather than religion-specific values, which must be subject to debate, amenable to reason, and applicable to people of all faiths and lifestyles or no faith at all. They have to be willing to sublimate their theological and religious beliefs for the common good. He calls on secular people to take a similar approach but in their case with religion in public life. (p. 622)

In other words, Obama recognizes that America is a nation of believers, but he also recognizes that in a changing age, the way those beliefs are expressed in public may look very different than it did in ages past. Espinosa's comments highlight once again the tension around presidents using specific religious language, and engage the theoretical communication issue of whether religious language needs to be "translated" to be acceptable in public – concerns that I address in the present project.

Siker (2012), in a piece that models the kind of analysis possible in this area of research, showed how President Obama exemplifies "liberal Protestant tradition rooted in the social activism of the black church" (p. 604). Siker highlighted the way Obama approaches the Bible "first and foremost as a set of wisdom texts grounded in a people's story" (p. 607), emphasizing "faith that has a clear narrative arc" (p. 604). Such faith allows Obama to connect with a broadly pluralistic public, while at the same time being

grounded in a particular religious tradition and background. Again, touching on the theoretical concern I have repeatedly mentioned, Siker noted Obama's belief that "when it comes to public discourse all arguments grounded in faith claims must be translated into reasoned discourse" (p. 607). Clearly I am not alone in recognizing the issue of "translation" but both Espinosa and Siker mentioned it in passing, and seemingly in the affirmative, whereas I would like to question its baseline assumptions.

Crick (2012), in a challenging and helpful piece of scholarship, drew a Deweyan distinction between the rhetoric of religion and the rhetoric of religious experience to discuss President Obama's use of religious language. According to Crick, the rhetoric of religion is based on authority of a supernatural being and points towards the religious institution, which is different from the rhetoric of religious experience "whose aim is not to justify doctrine or appeal to the authority of a supernatural being but to produce in the audience a feeling of dramatic movement toward a shared experience in which one feels connected, through conjoint action, to a wider universe which reflects common values and aims" (p. 37). The rhetoric of religious experience is primarily epideictic, centering on stories/narratives that show "genuine adaptive responses to shared contingencies" (p. 41). Crick argued that Obama uses the rhetoric of religious experience, rather than rhetoric of religion, and thus Obama appeals to a more diverse audience. In so doing, Obama connects with the tradition of black church prophetic preaching, which is in contradistinction to the mainline civil religion tradition. Crick's article is excellent, and his thesis is a challenge to my dissertation, but he misses a couple things that could provide an opening for my work: his definition of religion is overly modern, focused on the institutional expression of religion, and his discussion of the rhetoric of religious

experience as focused on individual narrative begs the question of how common moral obligations can be discussed.

In the one journal article to examine a presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast, Johnson (2012) discussed the "rhetorical theology" of President Obama's 2012 address to the breakfast. Johnson argued that Obama's theology is "profoundly rhetorical" (p. 44), which Johnson believed is in keeping with the core of what theology is or should be (he contrasted that with systematic theology, which is textbook theology taught in seminary, built into a cohesive, defined system or structure). As Johnson noted: "theology started as a collection of communal arguments, grounded in contextual concerns of everyday life and navigated by a group's collective consensus on texts...which makes theology at its core a rhetorical act" (p. 46). According to Johnson's analysis, President Obama constructed in his prayer breakfast speech a rhetorical theology that counters prevailing cultural assumptions that faithfulness equals conservative social positions, instead focusing his theology on the poor and marginalized, and the need for responsible action by those more well off, including those in attendance at the prayer breakfast. Johnson claimed that scholars have not sufficiently studied presidents' use of religious rhetoric, and that "one type of speech has gone noticeably absent from examination" - the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast (p. 45). In a reference to the National Prayer Breakfast speeches that encouraged the direction of my dissertation, Johnson wrote: "I believe that scholars of both rhetoric and religion would do themselves a huge favor by examining these speeches" (pp. 52-53). This is the challenge I take up here.

Although no one else has studied the National Prayer Breakfast addresses as a body of work, there is scholarship on presidential rhetoric from a theological perspective that takes a comparative or wider-range approach. Moyer's (2011) communication dissertation proposed that presidents use what he called "civil theology" - specific theological discourse - in their efforts to persuade the American people, and that this rhetoric will be read theologically by a religiously diverse set of publics. He saw the use of theological discourse by presidents as a necessary part of presidential rhetoric. Moyer analyzed the speech of Presidents Wilson, Kennedy, and Obama because of their use of liberal Christian theology. According to Moyer, "Secular commentators that look for how presidents strategically use God-language to appeal to voters do not recognize that words-about-God are involved in theological networks of meaning-making that compete to define national morality" (Abstract, p. 1). Moyer's emphasis on competitive discourses, and some of his focus on strategy and the church/state line distinguishes his interests and focus from mine. That is, although his dissertation delves deeply into the theological underpinnings of presidential rhetoric, his focus on the way those theologies compete in the public square is different from my interest in taking a genre approach to the National Prayer Breakfast speeches and the role of public theology in contributing to democratic conversation about weighty social matters.

Another interesting theological approach is Bailey's (2008b) political communication dissertation that looked at presidents' use of biblical rhetorical forms. Bailey sought to identify "how presidents use the rhetorical resources of religion by employing religious argument patterns stemming from the Jewish and Christian religious traditions in presidential speeches" (Abstract). He examined the use of religious rhetoric

by Presidents Carter through George W. Bush, showing how presidents use “religious rhetorical forms in attempts to strike a symbolic chord within the larger American public” (Abstract). According to Bailey, when presidents use such religious rhetoric, they tap into core myths that function to encourage identification on the part of the American people. Bailey (2008a) also published an article from his chapter on G. W. Bush that is a good example of his method: “the 2000 Bush campaign highlighted certain elements of the candidate's conversion while minimizing others in order to bring Bush's / conversion account into closer conformity with the Pauline conversion narrative” (pp. 215-216) - he said that this pattern is widely recognized by evangelicals. More specifically, Bailey argued:

My thesis is that Bush's adaptation of the Pauline conversion narrative to tell his own conversion story provided his campaign with a compelling explanation for his admitted indiscretions with alcohol, and even more importantly, served a narrative evidence of a divine commission upon his life that would ultimately culminate in his election to the presidency. (p. 216)

Bailey's methods and focus are quite interesting, and I could draw on his discussion of biblical forms in particular in my analysis of the way presidents use biblical references in the National Prayer Breakfast speeches, but his overall focus is on how those biblical forms are used by the individual presidents, and my focus is more on the way theological discourse can contribute to public discussion of the common good.

Heads of State as Public Theologians

Theological approaches to presidential rhetoric find their fullest expression in the emerging field of public theology, as was discussed in chapter one. Public theology highlights the way that religious language participates in networks of meaning-making that can inform and enlighten public democratic deliberation without dominating the discussion. Public theologians seek to contribute to the common good of society by “engaging in the politics of democratic transformation” (Storrar, 2007, p. 12) through “a collaborative exercise in theological reflection on public issues” (p. 6). As noted in the first chapter, the concept of public theology embraces the idea that people other than professional religious leaders or academic theologians can contribute to this collaborative theological reflection. Heads of state, who have the opportunity to use religious language in their comments on societal matters in a way that is heard and considered seriously by many of their people, can end up having a significant theological voice in the public discussion.

A public theology analysis of presidents and other heads of state was undertaken by Graham (2009), who discussed the approach to religion and public life of Tony Blair (U.K.), Helen Clark (New Zealand), Barack Obama (U.S.), and Kevin Rudd (Australia). Using Foucault's concept of discourse, Graham examined how faith serves as a form of discourse, forming a web of meaning that shapes thought and action. Graham's approach not only allowed her to delve deeply into the theology of each leader, drawing interesting connections between their public comments and specific theological commitments, but it also provided a context for discussing broader issues of the place of religious language in the public square. Echoing concerns I am raising here in this project, Graham noted:

"Any politician, or religious figure, wishing to engage with questions of religion and public life does so against the context of a dominant tradition in western political thought that wishes to separate faith and public reason" (p. 146). Citing scholars such as Rawls, Audi, and Wolterstorff on the issue of public reason, Graham gave a detailed analysis of the arguments for and against the need for "translation" in the public square, arguing in the end that the liberal state has confused not privileging one religion with keeping religion entirely private.

Graham then built on this background to discuss the public religious language and theological commitments of the four world leaders. Her analysis of Rudd's theological approach was powerful, showing how he drew on the theologian Bonhoeffer to advocate for speaking truth to power. Graham concluded regarding Rudd: "he was arguing for people to be able to bring religion into their political activism and moral reasoning in the name of a healthy democracy" (p. 155). In her analysis of Obama, Graham focused on the way religion provides a needed "narrative arc" for the American people, connecting people across divides. According to Graham, "[Obama's] interest in the moral legacy of Niebuhr's Christian realism for contemporary international affairs" is an example of "a deliberate effort to communicate across gulfs of religious and moral pluralism into a shared public discourse, in ways that manage to respect the pluralism of the intended audience without selling short the speaker's integrity" (p. 159). In the end, Graham argued:

My use of the terminology of 'discourse' serves to draw attention to the fact that such statements are doing more than simply describing a set of convictions: they are performing a political function, by importantly

providing a set of publicly articulated values that are capable of connecting with the electorate in a particular way, creating alignments and meanings about the nature of politics that go beyond specific questions of religious affiliation to the very well-springs of shared values that make up the body politic. (p. 163)

Graham's work, together with other public theologians, shows the intriguing possibilities of approaching presidents as public theologians, and analyzing their articulation of religious convictions as something more than the "use" of religion in service of state or self. In this dissertation, I engage in a public theology approach to the presidents' National Prayer Breakfast speeches, asking whether the specifically religious language of those speeches can be seen as contributing to American conversation about values that are important to our democracy.

Conclusion

In this doctoral project on the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast, it is clear that I build upon generations of significant scholarship at the intersection of rhetoric, theology, politics, and religion. In particular, bringing the resources of the emerging field of public theology to bear on the body of speeches delivered to the National Prayer Breakfast may allow us to see anew the function of religious language in our democracy. While it is possible that what will be found is nothing more than the expression of civil religion, or the political strategizing of a leader who wants to appeal to powerful religious constituents, it seems to me that the overall body of presidential speeches at the National Prayer Breakfast has the potential to be doing something more than that. That is, I approach this project open to the possibility that the president could be making a theological contribution to the American

conversation about weighty societal matters. In the next chapter I will lay out the methodology and specific methods that I use in this public theology approach to presidential religious rhetoric at the National Prayer Breakfast.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

This project approaches the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology, seeing the president in the role of public theologian. As such, this dissertation is interested in the theological themes present in the speeches, the means through which those themes are articulated, and the hermeneutical influence of religious narratives and traditions on rhetorical choices made by the president. The political context of the speeches is crucial to any analysis, and thus this project also analyzes the rhetorical situation of the prayer breakfast itself, and considers the broader public and political issues that might influence what the president chooses to say in a given year when he addresses the National Prayer Breakfast. Ultimately, this dissertation seeks to discern the uniquely presidential role in articulating public theology and how, if at all, the combination of that unique role, the rhetorical context, and the resultant speeches form a discrete genre of presidential speech.

Methodological Approaches and Philosophical Entailments

In order to lay the groundwork for the specific methods I have employed, it is important to first discuss the philosophical assumptions of the methodological approaches guiding this project. Embracing the insights of public theology means recognizing certain baseline assumptions of that approach that might not be normative in rhetorical or communication scholarship, and it is important to discuss all such assumptions clearly from the outset. Thus, this chapter begins with a discussion of public theology and rhetorical methodology as distinct methodological approaches, and their respective philosophical entailments, with attention to those tensions that could arise between a rhetorical emphasis on strategy and a theological emphasis on the active presence of

God's Word in the hermeneutical process. After the philosophical discussion of the two methodological approaches, I lay out the specific methods used in selecting and analyzing the presidents' National Prayer Breakfast speeches and the rhetorical situation in which they were delivered.

Public Theology, Homiletics, and Divine Communicative Agency

I begin by discussing the methodological approach of public theology. As noted in previous chapters, public theology is an emerging field that seeks to bring the insights of theology to a wide set of publics in order to serve the common good and enrich societal conversation, particularly about those issues that involve moral deliberation. Rather than staying within the walls of religious institutions, public theologians seek to engage people on the ground, those who are involved in the pressing issues of the day, and those whose material circumstances are impacted by the matters being deliberated. Thus the "doing" of public theology is not limited to professional religious leaders or academicians. The presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast, I believe, is an example of a civic leader engaging in public theology.

Those who engage in public theology take theological truth claims seriously and seek to apply the insights of theology to contemporary situations. Clearly, if a wide variety of persons are engaging in public theology, addressing diverse publics, there are likely a variety of ways of expressing theological insight. Academic theologians might discuss the phenomenon with technical theological language and religious leaders might preach in recognizable homiletic forms, while civic leaders might express their theology more colloquially. The homiletic form is in many ways public theology's natural home, for preaching at its best seeks to transform speaker and hearer alike through the power of

religious truth, with the hope of contributing to a transformed and thriving world. Brief discussion of homiletical theory is thus useful to set the context for the public theology approach I take in this project and to allow us to examine the philosophical entailment of divine agency.

A history of theories of preaching is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Instead, recognizing the time period that the National Prayer Breakfast has been in existence, I focus on what is usually called "The New Homiletic" (Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995), a post-interpretive turn approach to homiletics that came to prominence in the latter half of the 20th century. This approach works from the belief that human lives are shaped by story, that narrative is the "grammar" of faith (Hauerwas, 1976). Particularly in the western monotheistic traditions, the biblical narrative is the lens through which people of faith come to understand themselves and their world (Lowry, 1980; Craddock, 1985). The preacher then re-articulates that understanding, making it new, in order to help create an experience for both speaker and hearers of being actively shaped by the story (Lowry, 1980; Craddock, 1985; Long, 1989; Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995). In other words, at least as it has come to be seen in the latter 20th and early 21st century, homiletics is profoundly influenced by Gadamer's (1960/1991) hermeneutic circle (Kisner, 1989). In this view, the sermon is not seen as a laying out of a persuasive argument built on rationalist presuppositions, but as the creation of an experience of understanding where text, context, speaker, and people exist in communicative relationship with one another, all informed by the presence of the divine (Craddock, 1985; Long, 1989; Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995). The hermeneutic view of homiletics highlights the living, active nature of the Word of God, and the way that active Presence changes people, "not by making them

more informed but by encouraging them to become more fully themselves" (Burgess, 1994), or more fully expressive of God's will for them (Craddock, 1985). In other words, through the active agency of the Word of God, working in and through the homiletic experience, speaker and hearers alike are transformed.

For most, if not all, of those engaging in public theology, the transformative power and agency of the divine is a given, a philosophical entailment of their theology. Whether they are specifically preaching or more generally sharing theological insight with a broad set of publics, they view their work as shaped by the divine agent. In other words, grounded in Christian tradition (Storrar, 2007), public theologians assume God is at work in the world, and that the Word of God is living and active. That is, according to a public theology approach, the divine acts, speaks, and moves, expressing agency that has transformative power.

Approaching the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology entails more, therefore, than simply applying homiletic analysis to the speeches, looking for typical preaching moves or theological assertions. It means taking seriously the claim of divine agency that underlies the entire theological enterprise and enlivens the practice of preaching. Yet doing so presents certain challenges for a communication dissertation, for making theological claims without some sort of qualification is not normal practice in communication literature (Schultze, 2005; Buzzanell & Harter, 2006). A "secular hegemony" (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006) has dominated communication studies, as communication has come of age in the context of post-Enlightenment rationalism (Schultze, 2005). Perhaps the most notable aspect of this secular hegemony has been an unwillingness to consider the communicative agency of

God, which Schultze (2005) terms “the ‘God-problem’ in communication studies” (p. 1). The divine is studied with rational detachment, and those who claim to be animated by the divine presence are regarded as quaint anachronisms of a simpler age, or even deluded. Schultze suggests that such a naturalistic view of the world may be “one of the most pervasive intellectual biases of our time” (p. 4), but also notes that post-modernism may have opened a space for a reconsideration of divine agency because of the willingness within post-modernism to embrace ambiguity and complexity of meaning. This openness within a post-modern perspective will be discussed below in the rhetorical methodology section.

The other philosophical challenge presented by a public theology approach involves the purposes of religious or theological speech, particularly the purpose of the homily. Traditionally, following Aristotle, rhetoric has been divided into three purposes: informative, persuasive, or ceremonial. Framing religious speech as "religious rhetoric" encourages scholarship to view it as persuasive in intent, with the primary agent being the public speaker who chooses to persuade by means of religion. Yet a theological approach to religious speech, especially homiletical speech, sees it as something more than persuasion, and even something more than a combination of informative, persuasive, and ceremonial. If we take seriously the possibility that the divine agent, the living Word, is actively working through such speech to transform both speaker and listeners, then it follows, I believe, that we take seriously the possibility that we need to move beyond the traditional categories of rhetoric, adding the category of "transformative." Homiletics in particular is not primarily about a public speaker seeking the rational assent of a

persuaded audience (Buttrick, 1987), but about a divine agent working through the homiletical experience to transform the world.

As this dissertation analyzes the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology, I do so using homiletical as well as rhetorical categories of meaning, the details of which will be outlined later in this chapter when I discuss specific methods. As a central aspect of discerning whether the prayer breakfast address forms a distinct genre of presidential address, I examine whether the traditional categories of rhetoric indeed are sufficient to explain what is happening in the speech. That is, I ask the following methodologically focused research question: How do the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast express or defy the traditional categories of rhetoric?

The Rhetorical Presidency: the President as Interpretive Agent

Having examined the philosophical entailments of a public theology approach to public religious speech by the president, I now turn to a rhetorical approach. As will be seen, rhetorical methodology emphasizes the interpretive agency of the president, yet recognizes that this agency is always conditional. In the end, the philosophical contrast between a theological methodology that accepts the divine agency of God as a given and a rhetorical methodology that emphasizes the agentic powers of the president may not be as clear cut as may first seem the case.

Political leaders have long relied on the power of rhetoric to persuade their followers. Tulis (1987) described the modern American presidency as a rhetorical office, increasingly defined through the 20th century by the necessity of rhetorical appeals to the public. Stuckey (1991) argued, in fact, that the president serves as "interpreter in chief."

Presidents exercise their rhetorical power as interpretive agents in a complex give-and-take dynamic with the American public. Tulis (1987) indicated that the president must "understand the true majority sentiment" and "explain the people's true desires to them in a way that is easily comprehended and convincing" (p. 129), while also encouraging effective deliberation on matters of policy that the president believes are good for the whole country. Yenerall (2006) described the power of the rhetorical presidency thusly: "[A] virtual 'rhetorical branch' exists within the executive branch: an arsenal of speeches, symbolism, and myriad institutional and communication resources at the presidents' disposal to advance domestic and foreign policy" (p. 147, as cited in Coe & Neumann, p. 728). The president draws on these resources, exercising his agency to select, shape, and deliver rhetoric that will maintain his position as interpreter in chief.

While the president has great agency to shape his rhetoric, there are significant challenges to its power to persuade - challenges that have sharpened throughout the late 20th and early 21st centuries with the rise of the modern media and the subsequent post-modern fragmentation of new media. As McKinney (2011) has argued, the president and the media often battle for "interpretive dominance." In an increasingly image-driven age, public discourse, and presidential politics in particular, has focused on the immediate popular response to the president's rhetorical appeals, all of which is filtered through media repackaging. And with the rise of social media, the entire landscape of agency has changed. In other words, in the time period in which the National Prayer Breakfast speeches have been delivered by the presidents, we have seen a complexification of the concepts of agency, interpretation, public speech, and "the American public." Some theoretical exploration of that complexity follows.

The President as Post-modern Pastiche

In some ways, speaking of "interpretive dominance" is to employ modern conceptions of rhetorical influence that may no longer be tenable. Increasingly, in our post-modern culture, the lines between influencers and influenced, among rhetor, text, context, and audience, have been blurred. Even as far back as 1990, McGee argued that, in many ways, there are no more "texts" but rather discursive fragments that the rhetorical scholar weaves together in the process of making claims. In our post-modern era, I would argue, it is not so much that the world has become fragmented, but rather that the present cultural situation makes the living quality of symbolic exchange even more apparent. That is, texts, contexts, audiences, and speakers, to the extent that they have been formed by living symbols at work, have always interpenetrated, but now our interconnected new media landscape makes that interpenetration an ever-present reality.

Heidt (2012) argued that presidential scholars need to reconceptualize the presidency as "pastiche" in order to account for the fragmentation and circulation of texts that surrounds any instance of presidential rhetoric. While he did concede that "presidential rhetoric is distinct from other forms of public address in that a single speech is a publicized event that lives on beyond the moment of its appearance" (p. 625), he also claimed that those same speeches are apprehended by the audience through a process of atomization and circulation that renders the president an unstable subject. In a provocative move, Heidt suggested that presidential scholars conceive of "the presidential subject as a 'permeable space'...always partial, both reactive and proactive, constituted in discourse and self-fashioned by personal history, party affiliation, and the rhetorical legacy of the presidential office" (p. 628). Such permeability, I argue, is not so different

from a hermeneutical approach to homiletics, which has long recognized that the preacher is a complex subject, shaped by the divine agent, biblical texts, and community even as s/he in turn shapes a new expression of religious convictions in the homily.

The Fragmentation of the Second Persona: Postmodern Publics and the Hermeneutic Influence of Community

A post-modern rhetorical willingness to recognize the fragmentation and circulation of texts also means paying attention to the publics or audiences that interact with those fragments and the ideological influences that shape text, context, and people. McGee (1990) recognized that ideological influence can shape not only how texts are conceived, but how they are understood, and how fragments of text and context are circulated. In an earlier work, Edwin Black (1970) argued that the audience is best described in ideological, rather than demographic, terms. Through the ideological choices of the discourse, “the critic can see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditor become” (p. 335). In a post-modern context, however, such an implied "second persona" is no longer as clearly defined, nor is the boundary between rhetor and audience, for both are formed and informed by the recirculation of texts to which they both contribute.

To revisit the modern terminology, if the modern presidency has been defined by rhetorical appeals to the public, then some critique of the concept of "public" is in order. Stuckey (2010) argued that scholars need to be focusing on the missing voices in the construction of the public being addressed, and the structures of power that enable such omissions. As she pointedly noted: "what does it mean that certain citizens are sometimes props for presidential speech, sometimes even the subject of it, but are rarely the actual

audience for it" (p. 42). She built off of this question to examine issues of race, class, and sexuality as they intersect with the rhetorical presidency. Given the origins, sociopolitical motivations, and organizational constraints of the National Prayer Breakfast, such a critical stance should be an essential part of any analysis of the rhetorical situation and the rhetoric that takes place at the event. It also should factor into any consideration of presidential agency in interpretive choices - that is, how does a post-modern conception of the audience or publics act as a mutually recursive influence on presidential agency? Again, such a recognition of the influence of the community is not unlike a homiletical approach which, at its best, engages as fully in a hermeneutics of community as it does in a hermeneutics of text. In the end, the contrast and combination of methodological approaches proposed in this project, I believe, allows for a fruitful exploration of how agency is conceived and to what purposes religious language is put by the permeable presidential subject, speaking to an equally permeable listening public.

Towards a New Genre of Presidential Speech?

The central question explored in this dissertation is how, if at all, the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast constitutes a new genre of presidential speech. Certainly it is of interest that every sitting president since Eisenhower has addressed the breakfast, and not simply with a perfunctory few words, but rather with well-developed speeches that reflect common elements that can be analyzed. This dissertation, as noted earlier, seeks to discern the uniquely presidential role in articulating public theology, and whether the combination of that unique role, the rhetorical context, and the resultant speeches form a discrete genre of presidential speech.

Campbell and Jamieson (2008), in their substantial work on genres of presidential address, argued: "Generic criticism is particularly suited to exploring the relationship between rhetorical action and the development and maintenance of the presidency, because...rhetorical form follows institutional function" (p. 10). In their examination of inaugural, state of the union, and farewell addresses, as well as speeches given at the time of war, Campbell and Jamieson (2008) highlight the common elements called forth by the particular rhetorical situations (Bitzer, 1999), as well as the ways that each president made a particular speech his own. One of the advantages of such a generic approach is the ability to study patterns over time, akin to the use of longitudinal analysis in quantitative research. Subtle changes in wording or emphasis from one president to the next can signal unique emphases of that administration, interests of that president, or even an overall expansion of executive power (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008).

As noted, a core assumption of a generic approach to presidential rhetoric is that certain presidential functions constitute repeated, similar rhetorical situations. Bitzer (1999) described the "rhetorical situation" as one where an exigence that can be addressed by rhetoric cries out for response. Specifically, a *rhetorical* exigence is an exigence that can only be addressed by discourse that will move people to address that which needs to be changed. Bitzer argued that the rhetorical situation, in other words, is determinative of the need for rhetoric. Whereas some situations provide a unique and perhaps unexpected tension or opportunity, situations to which the president responds, to some extent, are repeated and predictable, such as the State of the Union, the Inaugural, and the victory speech the night of the election. As Bitzer (1999) also argued that rhetorical situations are marked by constraints, it could be argued that the generic

expectations of these presidential functions provide certain limits on the rhetorical response. Knowing the generic expectations and constraints allows the critic to see how particular presidents inhabit the role, how they see executive power, and whether they are fulfilling the call of the particular rhetorical situations in which their generic mandates are expressed. At times, the critic may also note that presidents employ their rhetorical powers to break through generic constraints to make the address uniquely their own, or a uniquely memorable or powerful moment of rhetoric.

Beyond the adaptation of traditional presidential rhetorical opportunities, sometimes a particular rhetorical situation emerges, through repetition, as a new pattern that is worth studying. Campbell and Jamieson (2008) argued that such new genres, or potential genres, often mark expansions of the role or powers of the president. In the second edition of their book *Presidents Creating the Presidency* (2008), they added national eulogy and de facto item veto as new genres of presidential rhetoric because of the repeated institutional need for those situations to be addressed by the president. Including these new genres built off of their earlier work (1978) on rhetorical hybrids, their term for what happens when elements of two genres are mixed into a new pattern, not yet called a genre. Schrader (2009) drew on their conception of the rhetorical hybrid to discuss what she calls "teachable moments" in presidential eulogies, arguing that "teachable moments are used throughout presidential eulogies in order to add deliberative and forensic elements to an epideictic speech" (p. 216). By using a ceremonial occasion to also convey a lesson, presidents are able to focus attention on the possibilities emerging from the tragedy.

Such work at the intersection of genres, or at the emergence of a new genre, is directly relevant to the study of presidential speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast, particularly because of the mix and expansion of traditional categories of rhetoric that is found at this church/state event. As noted earlier in the section on philosophical entailments, there is potential here not only for a new genre of presidential rhetoric, but for a reexamination of what it means for a political figure to engage in religious speech - a reexamination that is willing to consider a theological conception of rhetoric.

At the heart of generic criticism is an element that both binds genres into coherent sites of analysis, and also constantly pushes at the edges of what a particular genre entails. Campbell and Jamieson (1978) speak of “one or more patterns that inhere in symbolic action” (p. 294) and note that “*generic* rhetorical criticism aims at understanding rhetorical practice over time by discerning recurrent patterns that reflect the rules that practitioners follow” (p. 295). To some extent, as discussed above, the exigencies and constraints of particular situations or institutional expectations call forth the genres. However, at a deeper level, all human communication is marked by “shared patterns or social forms that inhere in the popular imagination” (Gunn, 2004, p. 6). The study of genre is a way of recognizing the communal nature of our rhetorical existence. Genres themselves are recognizable because of the social nature of human life, including language, situation, and symbolic use. In the context of examining an event - the National Prayer Breakfast - that includes quotations from scripture and direct address to the divine, taking such deeper patterns seriously necessitates the consideration of the way religious symbolism permeates and shapes the occasion, beyond a surface treatment of religious formalities.

Such a project is potentially vast. As Campbell and Jamieson (1978) noted, the generic critic examines the way that “all rhetoric is influenced by prior rhetoric” (p. 26). There are parameters, however, located in the occasion itself, and in the individual speeches under consideration (although a post-modern recognition of our fragmented symbolic world would question the boundaries of the discrete address). Ultimately, the generic critic “seeks to recreate the symbolic context in which the act emerged so that criticism can teach us about the nature of human communicative response” (p. 27). In their own work, Campbell and Jamieson (1978, 1986, 2008) focused on the state occasions and emerging national situations that evoke genres of presidential rhetoric, with an eye to the political realities that shape patterns of expectation. This dissertation focuses on the rhetorical space created by the National Prayer Breakfast as a window into the deeper patterns of human symbolism, religious belief, and theological imagination that, together with the political realities of the day, shape the presidential address.

Selection of Texts and Methods

The National Prayer Breakfast speeches are available digitally at The American Presidency Project (<http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/>). I downloaded all available speeches, from President Eisenhower's first speech the year the breakfast was founded in 1953, to the final speech by President Obama in 2016. There are no presidential National Prayer Breakfast addresses available on the American Presidency Project website for the years 1954, 1955, 1957-1960. Further research indicated that all transcripts of the entirety of the prayer breakfast were available through the Congressional Record. Those transcripts were downloaded and analyzed, revealing that President Eisenhower did not

speak during the years noted above. I analyzed the entire census of presidential speeches from 1953-2016, and all available transcripts of the prayer breakfasts in this dissertation.

I conducted an initial rhetorical analysis of the speeches (from 1953-2012) for a graduate class paper in 2012, using a thematic approach. In the pilot project I identified sufficient repeated themes to suggest that a more comprehensive investigation of the body of speeches might prove fruitful. Themes included (a) a recognition that the president is “standing in the need of prayer” (a nod to a traditional spiritual song), (b) the need for humility on the part of the gathered assembly (and America as a whole), (c) the idea that divine power relativizes all temporal authority (including U.S. power), and (d) the way that gathering for prayer puts Washington infighting in perspective and points towards a greater purpose for the powerful people in the room – following religious calls to work for good in the world. While presidents speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast certainly have evoked the traditional ceremonial expectations of civil religion, the repeated patterns of more in-depth theological reflections that I identified in the pilot project suggest that something of greater substance is happening in their yearly addresses. What follows is an outline of the methods I used in the current project to study the presidential speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast, as I seek to discern the uniquely presidential role in articulating public theology, and whether the combination of that unique role, the rhetorical context, and the resultant speeches form a discrete genre of presidential speech.

Examining the Public Theology of the Speeches: Homiletical Methods

Homiletical methods are the starting point for a project that is interested in the theological themes present in a body of speeches, the means through which those themes

are articulated, and the hermeneutical influence of religious narratives and traditions on rhetorical choices made by the speakers. Thus the theoretical lens through which I approach the presidential speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast is public theology and its homiletical expression. Public theology finds its natural home in the homiletical form, for preaching at its best seeks to transform speaker and hearer alike through the power of religious truth, with the hope of contributing to a transformed and thriving world. As noted earlier, the history of the sermon as form is rich and extensive, with a wide variety of perspectives on what constitutes homiletical speech. In the “new homiletic” of the latter 20th century, narrative came to be central, and homiletical moves came to be seen as more inductive than deductive. The intention of preaching, according to the “new homiletic” theorists, was to connect the divine and human story in such a way that hearers would experience the transformative power of the connection, rather than to present a deductive argument aimed at logical assent. The specific methods I used in this dissertation center on the inductive process of the new homiletic.

In order to examine the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast as public theology, then, I began by looking for the overall narrative being constructed by the individual speeches, and then move more specifically to discern the divine story being connected to the human story. Biblical background, especially of specific references to the bible in the speeches, is examined and discussed. Homiletical moves that connect the divine and human story are delineated, using homiletical scholarship such as Craddock (1985), Long (1989), Lowry (1980), and Buttrick (1987). In order to fully investigate the construction of the human story in the speeches, it is necessary to pay attention to the contextual elements of the prayer breakfast event itself, but also the larger narrative of the

particular time period in which the president was speaking. That is, the “human story” being connected by the speaker to the divine story will always have specific elements that influence homiletical choices.

As noted earlier, a philosophical assumption of public theology is the divine communicative agency of God. Therefore, a central focus of my investigation was to look for the ways that God's agency is presented in the speeches. How is God imaged? How does God “work” in the context of the speech? How does the narrative arc of God's story intersect with the narrative arc of the story the president is creating through his words? Does the agency of God serve to relativize presidential agency or the power of political leadership? What might this tell us about the president's perspective on divine agency?

Having examined the homiletical elements of the individual speeches, the next step in a discussion of public theology is to trace common theological themes or narratives across the body of speeches. In the pilot project, as noted earlier, common themes were found, many of which were articulated by all the presidents that have addressed the National Prayer Breakfast. This dissertation expands upon those themes based on what is found through a homiletical analysis and guided by the work of public theologians such as those discussed in chapter two (c.f. especially Graham, 2009). Attention is paid to how the expression of public theology changes over time – that is, longitudinal analysis is part of the overall analysis of the presidents' public theology, with an eye to the changing societal expectations of public religious speech by civic leaders, as well as the broader public and political issues that might influence presidential rhetoric at the National Prayer Breakfast. For a close look at the political and rhetorical

aspects of this project, we turn now from the homiletic methods to a discussion of the rhetorical methods I employ.

Rhetorical Methods

The methods of rhetorical criticism both reflect and contribute to an understanding of the place of symbolism in human culture. Traditionally, rhetorical analysis has focused on persuasion, following Aristotle's (2007 edition) view of rhetoric as the ability to discern the use in any given situation of all available means of persuasion, but a wider view of rhetoric as "the use of symbols to communicate" (Foss, 2009, p. 3) is more conducive to the kind of analysis in which this dissertation engages, especially as I explore a theological reading of the speeches.

Rhetorical criticism is a systematic process of analyzing rhetoric in order to interpret and make claims about the way the rhetoric functions in the text and in the context in which it was created and delivered, with implications and connections beyond the immediate event. Rhetorical criticism does not simply describe and interpret, it also evaluates (Campbell, 1971). In so doing, rhetorical criticism functions in an epistemic way, making knowledge claims (Zarefsky, 2008). The process of doing rhetorical criticism is not one of avoiding rigor – quite the opposite. In the end, the claims made by the rhetorical critic must be able to stand the test of coherence and evidentiary support.

Keeping in mind the fluidity of text, context, rhetor, and publics discussed earlier in this chapter, it should be noted that any process of rhetorical criticism can be done in an iterative way. Although the steps of the process may be listed in a particular order, they may in fact operate as a spiral, with the critic moving in and through one or more steps only to cycle back, or choosing to start with a latter step before engaging an earlier

one. Furthermore, although the language of the process may reflect a modernist sensibility about text and context, the reality of most rhetorical analysis is far more fluid. In this particular case, while the National Prayer Breakfast address by the president is a bounded text delivered in a specific context, the presidents' expression of public theology at the prayer breakfast can be seen as a window into a wider societal conversation about the place of religious rhetoric by civic leaders and its contribution to the public square.

Rhetorical Criticism is uniquely marked by the way that imagination is employed as the first step in the process. According to McKinney (2011), the critic starts with the critical impulse – the question, situation, curious inkling, or other imaginative application of intellect to a world of symbolic communication. The critic examines what might be crying out for interpretation, perhaps because of the rhetorical situation (Bitzer, 1999), or because of something that does not quite “fit” or begs research and interpretation. Next, the critic makes an argument for specific textual choices, perhaps weaving together textual fragments in order to investigate the original critical impulse. As has been noted by other scholars (Johnson, 2012; Lindsay, 2006), it is puzzling that no one has yet studied the corpus of presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast, given their potential as a window into broader themes of presidential religious speech and its place in the public conversation. This dissertation is taking up that challenge and choosing to look at the entirety of the available presidential prayer breakfast speeches in order to make a thorough analysis with the hope of drawing significantly supported conclusions.

Having justified the choices, the critic's next step is to describe, in detail, the chosen texts, paying close attention to tone, purpose, structure, supporting materials, strategies, the construction of the audience through the rhetoric choices, and the identity

of the rhetorician (Campbell, 1971). The next step (and again, in a recursive, hermeneutical process, these steps could occur in an iterative spiral) is to do extrinsic analysis of the rhetorical situation or context. Bitzer (1999) described the “rhetorical situation,” – the contextual moment marked by exigencies and constraints – as determinative of the need for rhetoric. Medhurst (2008) contended that the rhetorical situation reveals the “powers of the rhetor” to address the situation – that is, how the rhetor is able to summon skill in the use of rhetoric in this particular context. The analysis of the rhetorical situation includes a thorough examination of those contextual elements – the essential discursive fragments or pieces of historical and cultural material that surround and interpenetrate the chosen texts, without which the texts would not be interpretable. One of the great advantages of doing rhetorical criticism, in fact, is the opportunity to examine the larger historical and cultural forces that might be at work in the discursive moment.

Studying text and context at the National Prayer Breakfast involves several levels of examination, including a more extensive discussion of the research on The Fellowship, and a consideration of what it is about the rhetorical situation of the prayer breakfast that calls the president to speak each year – that is, what exigencies of the situation evoke a rhetorical response from the president? The next level is to examine the contextual elements of the political situation in which presidents find themselves, and the possible ways they might seek to influence that situation through their use of rhetoric. That is, although I do not want to privilege an instrumental reading of presidential religious rhetoric, I do plan to pay attention to the political realities that may shape what the president chooses to say in a given year. Beyond these contextual levels, however, the

speeches are studied for the way they interact with the larger conversation about the place of religion in our public life. It is here that I concentrate my efforts, using the methods of theological and homiletic analysis outlined above.

A piece of the contextual examination is an investigation of the audience implied by the rhetoric. Black (1999) argued that rhetoric in some ways creates or constructs both rhetor and auditor. McGee (1999) argued even more forcefully that the audience or public is a “fiction,” created out of the rhetor’s ability to articulate the corporate longings of the persons who experience the rhetoric. Burke (1969) and Gunn (2004) theorized a more organic sense that rhetoric names or calls its hearers into identification and consubstantiation. In the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast, studying the audience again means looking directly at the organizers and attendees of the event, and also at the larger “public” implied by the rhetoric. Further, in choosing a homiletical lens and working with theological themes, I am choosing to look at the hermeneutical influence of the religious communities that have shaped the presidents, and to whom the rhetoric may speak in a particularly pointed way.

The next step in the process of rhetorical criticism is the choice of an interpretive or theoretical method. That is, one decides to apply the rhetorical theory and process that might most fruitfully address the texts and research questions, carefully delineating how the method will be applied, and explaining the steps that will be taken. Here I am working with a combined theoretical lens, seeking to discern the uniquely presidential role in articulating public theology, and whether the combination of that unique role, the rhetorical context, the implied and influential community, and the resultant speeches

form a discrete genre of presidential speech. That is, I am bringing together homiletics and genre approaches in a combined effort to illuminate this unique body of speeches.

It is not enough, however, for the critic simply to apply a theoretical perspective. The final part of the process of rhetorical criticism is to evaluate the rhetoric (Campbell, 1971). Did the rhetoric work? Did it address the rhetorical situation? What values are implied by the choices the rhetor made? Is the rhetoric ethical? From an aesthetic point of view, is it elegant? Effective? Evocative? In the process of making these evaluative claims, the rhetorical critic makes clear the standards by which (s)he is evaluating and interpreting, as well as showing how the evidence of the rhetoric itself supports her claims. Zarefsky (2008) suggests that what the critic is doing is making truth or knowledge claims through argumentation. Each interpretive or evaluative claim needs to be properly and thoroughly textualized so that the scholar can truly answer: what is happening in this rhetoric and what does this mean? In the end, a carefully written piece of rhetorical criticism is itself rhetoric. Public theology as a theoretical lens pushes these questions in the direction of public moral reasoning and gives the context of a religious interpretive community to this critic's evaluation of the presidents' speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast.

Conclusion: A New Genre?

In the end, after having examined the rhetorical and homiletical aspects of the president's speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast and their rhetorical context, I seek to discern whether there is sufficient warrant to argue that they form a new genre of presidential rhetoric. At the same time, I evaluate and critique the speeches via homiletic and rhetorical methods. I have done this by examining recurring patterns, theological

moves and themes, and responses to the rhetorical situation, and then contrasting these with other genres that have been previously discussed by presidential scholars, primarily Campbell and Jamieson (2008). In so doing, I have paid particular attention to the theological question of divine communicative agency, as well as the philosophical question of the place of religious speech in the public square. Chapter Four details my analysis of the rhetorical context at the National Prayer Breakfast, including the ritual pattern of the prayer breakfast, recurring rhetorical themes, and the unique space the event creates for presidential religious discourse. Chapter Five contains my analysis of the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, focusing on the narratives presidents construct. In Chapter Six I discuss my findings regarding genre, transformative rhetoric, and the president as public theologian.

**CHAPTER FOUR: PRAYING AND MEETING “IN THE SPIRIT OF JESUS”:
THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST AS RHETORICAL CONTEXT**

The National Prayer Breakfast was started in 1953, when the Members of Congress invited President Eisenhower to join them for a fellowship breakfast “in the spirit of Jesus.” Because of the warm environment of that first gathering, the breakfast has continued each year, hosted and directed by members of the prayer groups in the U.S. Senate and U.S. House of Representatives. Annually, the House and Senate groups take turns inviting people from every state and many nations to join with the President of the United States for this special time of fellowship and prayer together. The breakfast typically is attended by more than 3000 people of all races, cultures and faith traditions. To facilitate the details of the event, a group of Associates and dedicated volunteers from around the country provide the organizational effort.

(<http://thefellowshipfoundation.org/activities.html>)

The annual NPB in Washington D.C., usually held on the first Thursday in February, creates a unique rhetorical context for the presidents’ construction of public theology. As Johnson (2012) has noted, “the National Prayer Breakfast comes as an ‘always already’ constructed and completed space for religious rhetoric” (p. 47). In order to set the context for the analysis of the presidential speeches to follow in Chapter Five, this chapter describes and analyzes the rhetorical space of the NPB, paying particular attention to the way the Fellowship, the self-styled “movement” sponsoring the NPB, rhetorically constructs the event. As can be seen in the description of the prayer breakfast

quoted above, the Fellowship describes the event as a “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus” where public leaders, particularly the president, can experience the support of prayer and fellowship with others. The NPB, as rhetorically constructed by the Fellowship, is the public face of a private movement, where the offer of support to the president comes with the expectation that he will attend their most high-profile event. At the same time, the religious content of the breakfast, especially at its most authentically powerful moments, provides a genuine opportunity for the president to respond with his own articulation of public theology.

This chapter begins with a description of the history and development of the NPB from its beginnings in 1953. Next I examine the prayer breakfast program structure as it has ritually developed over the years, and then analyze those aspects of the program that most clearly articulate Fellowship rhetoric. I then engage in a sustained analysis of the way Fellowship leaders rhetorically construct and enact “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus” at the prayer breakfast, and the implications of their rhetoric for the presidents. In that analysis, I include critical scholarship and reflect on the potentially generative space created by the intentional liminality of the Fellowship. Lastly, this chapter delves into the expectation that the President of the United States will attend and speak at the NPB, and the context this sets for the yearly presidential address.

History and Development of the National Prayer Breakfast

This section describes the first prayer breakfast, including some detail about the event and its program, which set the tone and structure for all the years to come. Then I discuss the growth and development of the event. As will be seen, over the six decades of its existence, the NPB has expanded and solidified into a yearly tradition.

Beginnings: the 1953 Prayer Breakfast

The “Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast,” as the first event was called in 1953 (99 Cong. Rec. A571, 1953), was held at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC and was presided over by Senator Frank Carlson, chairman of the International Council for Christian Leadership (ICCL). The founder of the ICCL, Abram Vereide, also was present to offer prayer. At the request of President Eisenhower and in consultation with the ICCL leadership as well as evangelist and public figure Billy Graham, the breakfast was organized so that the president could meet with both the House and Senate prayer groups at the same time. It was also in keeping with the Eisenhower administration’s emphasis on the importance of “a deeply felt religious faith” (Eisenhower, 1953) to the strength of America. The first breakfast took as its theme “Government Under God” and began a multi-day conference on the same theme. Carlson, who would be pivotal in the establishment of the prayer breakfast as a major yearly event, spoke favorably in his introduction of President Eisenhower in 1953 as someone who shared the ICCL’s concerns for getting back to principles founded on “Holy Writ” (that is, the Bible). As would be the case for years to come, the rhetoric of the first prayer breakfast contrasted an American reliance on God with a communist reliance on the state and rejection of religious belief.

The program of the first year’s prayer breakfast (99 Cong. Rec. A571, 1953) began to set a pattern that would be solidified over the next decade, forming a ritual that has continued through the years with only slight modifications, even as the language has evolved in a changing culture. An opening prayer led by the chair of the House Prayer Group began the event, followed by breakfast itself, then a welcoming talk by the

presider. In his remarks, Carlson recounted the history of what he called the prayer group “movement,” telling of its beginnings in Seattle, and growth through small groups of leaders praying together throughout the United States and beyond. Mention was made of who had come to be a part of the event – leaders from all three branches of the United States government, from around the U.S., and the world. Scripture was read, a talk was given, special prayers were said for the president and other leaders, and lastly the president spoke, followed by a benediction. In this first year, some elements were less formal or structured than they would become in later years, but the beginnings of the pattern were there, based, according to those who spoke, on what the smaller ICCL prayer groups, such as the House and Senate prayer breakfasts, did in their private meetings. In the coming years the expansive growth of the yearly prayer breakfast would solidify and elaborate on this initial structure and would provide a forum for an expected address from the President of the United States.

The Growth and Development of the Prayer Breakfast

When President Eisenhower finished his remarks at the first prayer breakfast in 1953, he noted his surprise at the large attendance:

Until I started over I had the picture that was remaining with me which [Senator] Frank Carlson gave me last summer of a small congressional group of Congressmen and Senators who met on a morning each week. I had an idea of coming over to see 20 or 25 or maybe 50 people. I had no idea that our host had such a party as this. (Eisenhower, 1953)

In fact, the *Congregational Record* says “over 500” were in attendance (99 Cong. Rec. A571, 1953) that first year. The size, structure, and reach of the event have only grown in

the years since. Attendance reached 1000 by the end of Eisenhower's years, 3000 during the Nixon era, and was recorded as "nearly 5000" in the Congressional Record in 2016 (162 Cong. Rec. S648), the final transcript I analyzed. Each year at the event, one of the organizers has made a point of remarking on how many people have gathered from all around the world, and, in noticeable historic steps along the way, how many were being reached beyond the walls of the hotel where they gathered, either through simultaneous events, or through broadcast of the Washington, D.C. breakfast.

As the event has developed over the years, the name has changed, marking certain rhetorical choices on the part of prayer breakfast organizers. For the first few years, it was called the Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast. This title was not to indicate it being the first of its kind, as might be supposed in 1953, but rather because the event, as it was described by spokespeople, was meant to facilitate a dedication, or re-dedication, to spiritual principles. This "dedicatory" rhetoric was found within the language of the event itself, and was used by Senator Carlson in his official remarks asking to have the transcript entered in the Congressional Record. Starting in 1960, the event began to be called the Presidential Prayer Breakfast in the record, although Carlson had already begun using that term as early as 1957 during the breakfast itself. The first recorded use of the title "National Prayer Breakfast" is in the Congressional Record of 1971. In his description of the history of the prayer breakfast in 2006, Representative Lincoln Davis gave this rationale for the name change: "This gathering became known as the Presidential Prayer Breakfast until 1970, when the name was changed to the National Prayer Breakfast in order to put more emphasis on the gathering rather than the individuals involved" (152 Cong. Rec. 21973, 2006). It is a noticeable rhetorical choice,

however, that the decision to change the title came during President Nixon's years in office, a time marked by presidentially-coordinated prayer services in the White House, and also by deep ethical concerns about his presidency (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). It has been known as the National Prayer Breakfast ever since, although, as will be discussed below, it draws a widely international crowd.

In the early years of the prayer breakfast, specifically from 1961 through at least the end of President Johnson's administration in 1968, there was a separate gathering for women. According to a *Cleveland Plain Dealer* news article entered in the Congressional Record (113 Cong. Rec. A467, 1967) this event was known as the Congressional Wives Prayer Breakfast. One of several events throughout the week of the prayer breakfast, it was also the site for a brief presidential address. President Kennedy and President Johnson both addressed the women, and their words are recorded as part of their yearly prayer breakfast speeches by the American Presidency Project. As will be seen in the next chapter, both presidents encouraged the integration of the men's and women's breakfasts, and both shared substantial and detailed messages in their speeches to the women. By the time of President Nixon, no mention is made in the record of a separate event for women.

As one reads through the transcripts of the NPB and watches the decades unfold, one sees, in fact, the increasing presence of female leadership at the event, and the slow development of a more inclusive language. In the early years, "men" were encouraged to religious devotion and leadership through this typical prayer from Fellowship founder Abraham Vereide:

This morning, O God, we present our people, our leadership, and especially our beloved President, and ask for their anointing power with Thy Holy Spirit invasion that we indeed may go forth and to acquit ourselves like real men, without fear, without weakening for any problems.

(110 Cong. Rec. 2897, 1964)

By 1978, in what was overall a noticeably more inclusive and progressive message than what had been heard at the breakfast before, Congresswoman Barbara Jordan included these words in her prayer for national leaders: “Since You can do all that we cannot do, give us the good sense to work with You in partnership for the benefit of all humankind” (124 Cong. Rec. 3275, 1978). She would serve as the first female keynote speaker in 1984. Keynote speakers have since included Elizabeth Dole (1987), Carol Moseley-Braun (1996), and Hillary Clinton (2010), and women such as Senator Amy Klobuchar have co-chaired the event.

As the event has grown in inclusion of women, it has also grown in other kinds of diversity. District of Columbia Mayor-Commissioner Walter Washington’s keynote address in 1972 was a noticeable change in tone and content from what had come before, as was his presence at the podium as the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city. As he spoke about the poor and hungry claiming what was rightfully theirs, what he said America had promised them, and said “Fear...is father to suspicion, to hate, to racism, and to emotions that drive men apart one from another...Courage is a divine force urging us toward unity” (118 Cong. Rec. 3575, 1972) he challenged the status quo rhetoric, both visual and verbal, of the yearly event. International participation has also increased over the years, both in the number of people attending from across the world,

and in persons on the official program – for example, Prince-Ambassador Bandar Bin Sultan from Saudi Arabia read a passage from the Quran in 1988. Religious diversity has also become more visible, with another reading from the Quran in 1990, and a female Jewish leader giving the pre-breakfast prayer in 1992. In recent years, Jewish, Muslim, and Catholic voices have been more noticeable in the prayer breakfast leadership, but the overall tenor of the event has continued to center in an assumed conservative Protestantism. This dynamic will be analyzed more closely in a subsequent section of this chapter.

One notable change, as the prayer breakfast has grown and developed over the years, is a shift from feeling like a prayer meeting to feeling like a convention. In 1956, Senator Carlson set the tone for the breakfast by saying:

We meet this morning at a breakfast of prayer and devotion. In order that we may be in keeping with the reverence and dignity of this occasion, I am going to ask that you withhold your applause during this entire period.

(102 Cong. Rec. 2005, 1956)

By 1978, one congressman described a much different feel to the event, even as he admonished the crowd to focus on prayer:

This morning's breakfast can only be worth the time if we value it not for the excitement of the crowd, or the fame of the occasion, but for the opportunity it gives each of us to strengthen our own faith, and to help one another to be a little closer to his God. (124 Cong. Rec. 3275, 1978)

By 1990 the NPB had taken on a fully convention-like feel, with applause after each portion of the program, including after the reading of scripture passages. It is a noticeable

change from the early years and could be seen as reflecting not only the increased size and media coverage of the event, but perhaps also the changing makeup of who attended, or a changing religious culture – that is, people were now attending who would not necessarily be bound by assumptions of mid-century Protestant church culture. It is also possible that the NPB truly had come to be seen more as political convention than prayer meeting, but the reality is that the program itself had remained remarkably stable over the years. It is to that program structure and its central messages that I now turn.

The National Prayer Breakfast Program Structure and Ritual Language

While a detailed analysis of all six decades of the individual portions of the prayer breakfast program is beyond the scope of this dissertation, certain rhetorical elements are essential background to interpreting the presidential speeches at the event. I begin with an outline of a typical program, and then discuss the growth and development of the breakfast over the years. Next, I examine in a more detailed way those aspects of the prayer breakfast ritual that particularly exemplify the rhetoric of the Fellowship, thus constructing the rhetorical space and situation in which the president delivers his address.

The National Prayer Breakfast Program “Ritual”

The NPB takes usually takes place on the first Thursday in February, at the Washington DC Hilton, starting at 8:00am and running for about two hours. As the prayer breakfast program has developed over the years, it has come to have a ritual feel and structure, containing the following elements:

- Opening prayer
- Welcome by the person or persons presiding at the breakfast (bipartisan co-chairs were added in recent decades)

- Statement of purpose of the NPB, often with comments about the history and purpose of the prayer breakfast “movement”
- Prayer before meal
- Breakfast
- Introduction of people (especially spouses, important persons not in the written program, dignitaries from other countries, government leaders, and some notables from the Fellowship), usually with comments about how many people are gathering at the same time around the world in similar prayer breakfasts, or who are connected through the media to the main event
- Greetings from the Senate and House prayer breakfast groups
- Old Testament reading
- New Testament reading
- Message from featured speaker that year
- Prayer for national leaders
- Address from the President
- Closing Prayer

Interwoven with the program are musical offerings, hymn singing, and occasional briefer messages or prayers. The Vice President has spoken regularly in some administrations, and not at all in others. In recent decades, a prayer for world leaders has been added, as well as occasional readings from scriptures outside the Bible, as noted earlier. Those performing a specific function in the program, such as reading scripture or singing, quite often share a message, sometimes with personal faith testimony, in addition to their primary task.

In my closer analysis below, I concentrate especially on those elements that have taken on a ritual-like sense of repetition over the years, meaning that most, if not all, presidents would have experienced them. First, I look at the statement of purpose of the NPB, often given by a major leader of the Fellowship, and some of the typical comments that are made in the description of the worldwide “movement.” Then I examine typical greetings from House and Senate prayer group leaders, who ritually enact the Fellowship’s message that their prayer movement brings people together across divides. Lastly, I comment on the repeated use of certain biblical scriptures and civil religious stories that function as a thematic core of the NPB.

The Purpose and Growth of the Prayer Breakfast Movement

In the early years of the prayer breakfast, Fellowship leaders, including Senator Carlson, Rev. Billy Graham, ICCL leader Richard Halverson, founder Abram Vereide, and Congressman Albert Quie articulated the purpose and reach of the “movement” in words that still have been used in recent years. From 1953 until 1969, Senator Frank Carlson presided at the prayer breakfast. Over the years, his description of the purpose and reach of the event exemplified certain repeated themes. First, he usually would say how the prayer breakfast movement began in Seattle, and how long it had been since the first event: “This annual breakfast is in commemoration of the organization of the breakfast prayer group of over 25 years ago, which first met in Seattle, Washington” (107 Cong. Rec. 3149, 1961). Carlson would almost always also say something about the growth of the movement and its current reach, sometimes referring back to the first national event for the number of years, as in this comment from 1966:

The growth of the prayer breakfast movement during these past 14 years has been remarkable. As a result of this breakfast, practically every State in the Union now holds an annual Governor's prayer breakfast with the leaders of that State and others, and literally hundreds of smaller groups are meeting to foster faith and freedom in this land and around the world.

(112 Cong. Rec. 3832, 1966)

Increasingly, mention was made by Carlson of prayer breakfasts and groups being formed in "leading cities throughout the world" (113 Cong. Rec. 3355, 1967). Year by year, the sense was that the prayer breakfast movement was inexorably expanding and being welcomed across the globe for its positive effects.

While the growth of the movement was portrayed as part of its appeal and strength, there was also an equal emphasis on the sense of personal prayer and intimacy found in the weekly prayer breakfasts that Fellowship leaders said were the heart of the movement. Senator Carlson, and Congressman Albert Quie, who followed him as president for many years, consistently connected the NPB with the weekly House and Senate groups. In 1972, Quie shared this perspective:

We like to think of this breakfast as a continuation of what happens in weekly group meetings, not a great public independent expression or witness, but primarily a fellowship among ourselves by which we seek to find through Christ a better way for everyday living. (118 Cong. Rec. 3575, 1972)

In this and other ways, Fellowship speakers have constructed the liminal space of the NPB, portraying the big event as one more example of the smaller, less publicized, ostensibly confidential, weekly gatherings.

A central aspect of the fellowship of the weekly and yearly prayer breakfasts, according to movement spokespeople, has been prayer support for public leaders. That is, the NPB statement of purpose has included a message about being together in order to pray for the president and for others who need divine help in order to fulfill the responsibilities of their offices. Perhaps no one has articulated that aspect of the purpose statement more consistently than the Rev. Billy Graham. In 1981, after mentioning the hope he saw in the new Reagan administration and the “feeling of warmth and spiritual renewal” (“warmth” would be a repeated adjective used by Fellowship leaders to describe their meetings), Graham stated “This Prayer Breakfast is dedicated to praying for those in authority not only here in Washington, but throughout the world” (127 Cong. Rec. 2367, 1981). Senator Chiles, speaking that year, underlined Graham’s statement with a scriptural reference, praying “Father you tell us in your Word to pray for the king and all who are in authority so that we might live a good and peaceful life” (a reference to I Timothy 2:1-2). Thirty-one years later, Graham referenced the same scripture in a note he sent to the 2012 prayer breakfast to be read aloud: “Though age and health prevent me from being there in person, I am with you in spirit and you are in my heart. I want to say a special word of encouragement to the many friends meeting today from across the country and across the world, especially President Obama and his wife Michelle and Vice President Joseph Biden and his wife Jill, for whom I pray every day as the Scriptures command us to do” (158 Cong. Rec. 3804, 2012). With scriptural backing and the

authority of being the elder statesman of the NPB, Graham clearly articulated through the years that the primary task and privilege of the event was to pray for public leaders, especially the president.

House and Senate Prayer Group Greetings: Unity across Divides

As evident in the description of the event quoted at the beginning of this chapter, presidents enter in to a space at the NPB that is officially hosted by the House and Senate prayer groups. In their yearly greetings from the House and Senate prayer groups, various senators and representatives have spoken with great appreciation of the weekly prayer breakfast meetings and their shared experience of fellowship and prayer. It has been an essential part of the messaging of the NPB, as the congressional leaders enact and speak of the unity that is found in praying together. Most often, this enactment and language of unity centers on the way the prayer groups bring people together across the partisan divide in Congress. Congressional leaders of different political parties stand up together at the NPB to say how much it means to them to gather in the House or Senate prayer groups for weekly prayer with those from the other side of the aisle, to share in prayer concerns and real, honest talk, to hold hands and sing and pray, and to hear a personal testimony from a Democrat one week, a Republican the next. Often those speakers say that the weekly prayer gatherings are the most meaningful part of their week, and give them strength, and that they appreciate that it is the one part of the week free of political rancor. Congresswoman Liz Patterson gave eloquent voice to this theme in 1990:

While we're together at breakfast, there is no exclusiveness. We are all alike in God's eyes...During the meal, we forget party preference. We forget about pending legislation that may divide us. And we share

similarities...Our breakfast group is truly an example of God's love and teaching, as is this gathering today. (136 Cong. Rec. 3672, 1990)

Senator David Boren said forthrightly in 1982:

I think all of us would say...that the hour that we spend together on Wednesday morning is for us the most important hour of the week. It's the hour of the week in which we are most ourselves, and in which we have the most real communication between each other as human beings. (128 Cong. Rec. 2291, 1982)

In both of these comments one gets a glimpse of a theme that is heard repeatedly throughout the years of the NPB from House and Senate leaders: not only are they grateful for the opportunity to pray together, but also to be able to simply be real and be human with those on the other side of political divides. In articulating this theme in their greetings, they help to enact a similar unity at the yearly prayer breakfast.

Starting in 1983, and consistently every year since 2006, not only have the House and Senate group leaders brought greetings, they have also co-chaired the NPB, further demonstrating unity through an intentional pairing of leaders from both houses, and from both sides of the political aisle. Democratic Senator Amy Klobuchar, standing with GOP colleague Senator Johnny Isakson in 2010 to bring greetings from the Senate prayer group, expressed appreciation for their weekly prayer meetings, even as they together enacted the unity she described:

[I] always come away from it [Senate prayer breakfast] a better person...Our prayer breakfasts are real and refreshingly honest. And just when I am ready to give up on working with maybe a few of my

colleagues, it reminds me that we all share a common purpose and a common humanity, and that with faith and forgiveness, we can start anew.

(156 Cong. Rec. 10803, 2010)

Such bipartisan unity is further enacted at the NPB by the choice of keynote speaker, again reflecting a tradition from the weekly congressional prayer groups. In 1980, the chair, Senator Mark Hatfield, in his introduction of the main speaker, goes into some length to describe how the previous year's speaker, a Democrat, had intentionally suggested the speaker for the 1980 breakfast, a Republican "because, as you note before you today, this is a very nonpartisan, nonsectarian group" (126 Cong. Rec. 4023, 1980). The Fellowship theme of unity across divides is articulated and enacted at the NPB by congressional leaders from the House and Senate, who bring their experience of the weekly heart of the prayer breakfast "movement" into their rhetoric and their actions at the yearly event. This emphasis on unity, centered in "fellowship in the spirit of Jesus," rhetorically constructs a "warm welcome" for the presidential speech.

Fellowship in the Spirit of Jesus: the Central Theme of the Movement

If there is one repeated mantra at the NPB, cited in the statement of purpose, enacted by program presiders, and often present in even the most casual of passing references from Fellowship leaders, it is that the prayer breakfast movement brings people together "in the spirit of Jesus." Often articulated as "fellowship made possible by the spirit of Jesus" (or Jesus Christ, or Christ), the mantra has been heard repeatedly through the years. Senator Stennis, presiding in 1974, noted the following in his opening remarks: "Though many political, economic, philosophical and religious viewpoints are here today, this fellowship hour is a meeting of friends, as people have reached out in the

spirit of Jesus Christ to discover each other” (120 Cong. Rec. 4635, 1974). General Silverthorn used the phrase in 1966, presider Senator Everett Jordon in 1971, presider Congressman Dellenback in 1975, presider Senator John Stennis again in 1981, and many more up to the present day. The phrase, in fact, is part of the current (April, 2018) Fellowship website description of the NPB cited at the beginning of this chapter. I contend that “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus” has been an essential part of the identity of prayer breakfast organizers, and crucially shapes the context in which the president speaks. Therefore, it is important to examine more closely what is connoted in this potent phrase.

Interpreting Fellowship in the Spirit of Jesus

Fellowship in the spirit of Jesus, as the central theme of NPB organizers, is purported to be a welcoming, inclusive approach to a movement and an event where everyone can join together in prayer. Yet the language of the phrase is decidedly Christian, raising the question of whether the NPB is a Christian event, perhaps even an evangelical one – that is, meant to bring people to faith in Christ. While there is certainly evidence of such Christian language use at the prayer breakfast, there is also a significant civil religious component to this national event, so much so, in fact, that some have critiqued what they see as not enough emphasis on traditional Christian themes. According to Fellowship leaders, however, what they are portraying in their identifying phrase is neither traditional church language, nor typical civil religion. Instead, they purport to be focused on forging personal relationships through prayer so that “godly” leaders will be moved to help the world, no matter what those leaders’ personal beliefs. Intentionally liminal, this approach leaves open several questions about the inclusiveness

of their welcome, and the political ramifications of their activities. Given the prominence of the presidential speech at the event, it is important to interrogate the meaning of this central identifying phrase of the Fellowship, a crucial aspect of the rhetorical context that will be associated with his speech.

In this section, I will examine, first, the Christian language of the NPB, and those speakers, especially Billy Graham, who have indeed conveyed an evangelical message “in the spirit of Jesus.” Next, I will look at civil religious rhetoric at the prayer breakfast, and those who have critiqued it as not sufficiently “in the spirit of Jesus.” Next, I will turn to the Fellowship’s self-description directly and look more closely at what they mean by the phrase, especially their emphasis on bridging divides and raising up godly leaders. I then will turn to a critical unpacking of the welcome they purport to provide – that is, are persons other than evangelical protestants indeed welcome at the NPB? Lastly, I will engage in a critical examination of the issues raised by their liminal approach, with a particular focus on the political and power concerns.

The Spirit of JESUS: Christian language at the National Prayer Breakfast

Throughout the years of the prayer breakfast, traditional Christian language has been quite noticeable, sometimes sounding like a liturgical church service, and sometimes more like an evangelical tent revival. Program leaders have been named using “churchy” words, prayers have been offered in the name of Jesus, and people have been invited to give their hearts to Christ. For some, most particularly the Rev. Billy Graham, fellowship “in the spirit of Jesus” has decidedly meant unabashedly sharing a Christian message. As we will see in the next chapter, presidents have not necessarily reflected all

of this Christian language in their own addresses, but it provides important context for their speech.

Language of the liturgical church. From the first, the language used at the 1953 prayer breakfast was notably liturgical. In the program, Carlson was described as “presiding,” rather than “chairing.” The structure of the program included a “prayer of consecration” and a “benediction.” Prayers were offered in the lofty language of the King James Version of the bible with such phrases as “We beseech Thee to grant unto them Thy grace.” Over and over, the name of Jesus was invoked, and the whole assembly prayed the Lord’s Prayer. In later years, words like “congregation” (128 Cong. Rec. 2291, 1982), “service” (136 Cong. Rec. 3672, 1990), and “homily” (152 Cong. Rec. 21973, 2006) would fall naturally from the lips of those speaking at the event, in reference to the crowd, breakfast, and keynote speech, respectively. In other words, for many who have organized and/or spoken at the prayer breakfast, it has been natural to conceive of the event as akin to a church service.

At times the Christian language has echoed or been directly drawn from the Episcopal *Book of Common Prayer*. Senator Mark Hatfield in 1979, in his prayer for national leadership directly quoted the Sanctus and a prayer from BCP Morning Prayer in his wording: “Holy, holy, holy Lord God Almighty, who made of one blood all the peoples of the earth” (125 Cong. Rec. 2949, 1979). In that same year, the closing prayer made reference to the liturgical seasons of the church year, and the person reading from the Old Testament chose two psalms also drawn from BCP Morning Prayer. In these churchly references, a liturgical interpretation of “spirit of Jesus” was made manifest in decidedly Episcopalian tones.

Praying in the name of Jesus. Whether in formal liturgical tones, or more informal low church inflections, many prayers have been offered in Jesus' name at the NPB. At the first prayer breakfast in 1953, the Rev. Abraham Vereide prayed in King James English, ending his "prayer of consecration and devotion" with a decidedly Christian closure: "for Jesus' sake, and in His name" (99 Cong. Rec. A571, 1953). Other prayers over ensuing years have been similarly unabashedly Christian. In his "invocation" in 1965, Marine Corps General Silverthorn opened "Our heavenly Father, we come before Thee with thankful hearts. We thank Thee for our Christian heritage" (111 Cong. Rec. 2616, 1965). Senator Harold Hughes opened the 1981 prayer breakfast with a pre-meal prayer "in the name of Jesus Christ," and the person giving the opening prayer that year used the typical Evangelical "we just" language throughout her prayer, saying "we just thank you for being our Father," "we just have a burden this morning," and "We pray, right now, no matter what our backgrounds, affiliations, republicanism, democratness, we just release ourselves from that right now," finally ending with "We praise your name and we just lift up the name of Jesus Christ today, Lord as one nation under God" (127 Cong. Rec. 2367, 1981).

Evangelical "Come to Jesus" Rhetoric. At times the churchy feel to the prayer breakfast has been brought to a fever pitch, finding expression in altar-call style sermons by Billy Graham and other speakers. In 1955, Graham, in a sermon centered on the Ten Commandments, declared that the answer to the world's problems was Jesus Christ. In 1963, he called on the leaders in the room to repent and call upon the Lord, and in 1964 he told the crowd they need to turn to Jesus and obey him. At a particularly intense prayer breakfast in 1966, when much of the rhetoric from all speakers focused on difficult

decisions regarding the conflict in Vietnam, Graham preached a fiery Jesus who was willing to be rejected to do what was right. Then, three years later, perhaps reflecting a faltering war effort, Graham encouraged the leaders in the room to stop focusing on shortcomings and failure, and instead focus on Jesus Christ and be born again.

Nor was such rhetoric limited to Graham, or even to the designated religious figures in the room. In 1972, Democratic Senator Harold Hughes included an altar call in his closing prayer: “Jesus stands with his hand outstretched hoping you will grasp it. Let him into your life, let him in your heart” (CR 1972, p. 3578). The next year Hughes was the featured speaker, giving a Christian sermon on how Jesus forgives and transforms sinners, himself included. In 1975, Republican Representative Al Quie testified in his address that the answer to all the divisions of society is “Christ in us, that we love each other” (CR 1975). Although such overtly Christian appeals lessened in frequency over the years, they did not disappear entirely. Graham attended and spoke at the NPB regularly until failing health prevented him starting in the late 1990s, and even after that, as noted earlier, he sent messages to be read aloud. Graham, who dedicated his life to spreading an evangelical message of salvation in Jesus Christ, was clearly seen as an elder statesman of the NPB, shaping program and content in a decidedly Christian direction. The question this raises for the presidential speeches is whether they would be heard as Christian messages because of the context, no matter what their actual content.

Uncle Sam Kneeling in Prayer in the Spirit of Jesus

Even though some of the rhetorical interpretation of “in the spirit of Jesus” has been very Christian in content, American civil religion is also decidedly on display at the NPB. Over the years much of the rhetoric uttered at the event fits neatly within the

parameters of such discourse, with a generic God serving to unify the country around the highest ideals, and to strengthen the president at its head. Starting the first year, the host, Conrad Hilton, in remarks connecting prayer to the Constitution and Declaration of Independence, evoked potent images of civil religion, specifically “a picture of Uncle Sam kneeling in prayer...entitled ‘America on Its Knees’” that he had published in the Saturday Evening Post, Life, Time, and Newsweek magazines in the previous year (99 Cong. Rec. A571, 1953). Senator Frank Carlson, who more than anyone in the early years of the prayer breakfast emphasized Fellowship themes, when intentionally constructing a farewell address in 1968, “this being the end of 40 years of public service” (although not the end of his years leading the prayer breakfast), chose to go the civil-religious route, citing everything from the Mayflower Compact to the Declaration of Independence to President Washington (114 Cong. Rec. 3135, 1968). With an emphasis on America being a “nation under God,” speakers at the NPB have evoked traditional civil-religious language and themes.

For many prayer breakfast leaders, civil religion was evoked through themes of prayer, tying it in with a central goal of the event, to provide prayer support for the president “in the spirit of Jesus.” Carlson, in his 1968 remarks, declared “Our Presidents have, to the man, called upon almighty God to help them meet the awesome responsibilities vested in them as President of the United States” (114 Cong. Rec. 3135, 1968). Year after year, speaker after speaker cited Benjamin Franklin calling for prayer at the Constitutional Convention and quoted President Lincoln regarding the necessity of falling on one’s knees in prayer, two favorite civil-religious “scriptures” that would also appear in presidential addresses. Senator Stennis shared the Franklin story in 1968:

At another uncertain time in history when our Constitution was being written, Delegate Benjamin Franklin addressed the Convention with these words: “I have lived a long time, and the longer I live the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of man. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?” The Convention thereupon adopted Mr. Franklin’s motion that the sessions be opened each morning with prayer. (114 Cong. Rec. 3135, 1968)

The Franklin story, cited multiple years, including 1970, 1974, and 1982, was a favorite for showing that, from the beginning, people had needed faith to build America, and therefore the NPB was building on that long tradition. In addition, speakers would turn to the image and stories of Abraham Lincoln, transparently citing him as civil religious icon and even Christ-figure, as in this quote from Senator Lausche in 1961: “Lincoln, the pleader in prayer, became America’s immortal President” (107 Cong. Rec. 3149, 1961). Speakers often showed Lincoln to be a person of faith and prayer, weighted down by the immensity of the responsibilities before him, and clear that only with the help of God would his task be possible. Although certainly more civil religion than “spirit of Jesus,” nevertheless Fellowship speakers could, and did, portray the prayer breakfast as fostering the kind of faith and prayer that Lincoln had shown to be so necessary.

Critiquing Civil Religion

Fellowship speakers have been aware of the tension between the “spirit of Jesus” message and “one nation under God” civil religious rhetoric present in their prayer breakfast gatherings. At times speakers at the NPB have consciously contrasted what they

are trying to do with civil religion, sometimes specifically in light of the biblical call to a more personal, religious message. In 1973, Republican Senator Mark Hatfield, in his greetings from the Senate Prayer Group, challenges the assembled leaders:

My brothers and sisters, as we gather at this prayer breakfast, let us beware of the real danger of misplaced allegiance, if not outright idolatry, to the extent that we failed to distinguish between the god of civil religion and the God who reveals himself in the Scriptures and Jesus Christ. For if we as leaders appeal to the god of civil religion, then our faith is in a small and exclusive deity, a loyal spiritual adviser to power and prestige, the defender of only the American nation, the object of a national folk religion devoid of moral content. But if we pray to the Biblical God of justice and righteousness, we fall under God's judgment for calling upon His name but failing to obey His commandments... God tells us that acceptable worship and obedience are expressed by specific acts of love and justice.

(119 Cong. Rec. 4174, 1973)

Senator Hatfield, who consistently preached powerfully in his messages, here provided an important critique of civil religion that helpfully explicates the way it differs from a public theology rooted in the bible. In 1977, House Democratic Majority Leader James Wright critiques the "pretense" of "being a covenant nation," the daily prayers in Congress and the Supreme Court, and the use of "In God We Trust," saying "We speak of ourselves as one nation under God, indivisible. On occasions I am not completely sure whether this is religion or religiosity, humility or presumption" (123 Cong. Rec. 4340, 1977). And in 1984, in his prayer for national leadership, William Hudnut, mayor of

Indianapolis, prayed in words that seemed perhaps more aimed at the crowd than the One being addressed:

As we vow to make ours a nation under God, help us to understand the difference between this and making a god of our nation, between looking upon You as the Lord of all nation as and regarding You as the ally of one, between affirming my country for God and boasting God for my country, between praying humbly that we might be on your side and self-righteously asserting that You are on ours. (130 Cong. Rec. 2855, 1984)

In all of these critiques, prayer breakfast leaders appear to be openly struggling with, and challenging the crowd to consider, the central tension between the specificity of a God who has spoken through scripture, and the tendency in American civil-religious tradition to substitute national symbols for religious truths. Although Fellowship leaders have at times leaned towards either an evangelical style overtly Christian message, or towards the civil religious side of the fence, their particular contribution to this ongoing tension has been to strive for a liminal embrace of “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus.” It is to that purportedly welcoming message that I now turn.

Strengthening Godly Leaders in the Spirit of Jesus

The way the Fellowship describes themselves is something different than either evangelical Christianity or American civil religion. Using Christian language, they evoke a particular approach of person-to-person impact, not so much for the sake of traditional Christian ends, but rather to bring about understanding and strengthen leadership, especially elected leadership, in the United States, and throughout the world. Fellowship leaders talk about the effect of prayer groups to bring people together across all sorts of

divides – political, partisan, philosophical, different countries, even religions. Fellowship in the spirit of Jesus, as they interpret it, means all are welcome, even those who do not share their particular Christian beliefs. The phrase “spirit of Jesus” can be interpreted quite broadly – that is, acting like Jesus with love or other positive spiritual attributes, or it can take on more specifically Christian connotations, but according to Fellowship leaders, the end is the same: forging small group communities where “godly” leaders can be strengthened.

As speakers talk about forging relationships “in the spirit of Jesus” in their various prayer group meetings, sometimes they share personally at the NPB, revealing the workings of the weekly groups. One way that godly leaders have been strengthened is apparently through direct intervention. Congressman Gunn McKay referred to this process in 1977: “We have seen some examples in the House of Representatives where a member of the prayer breakfast has taken a brother in trouble and has assisted him to recovery with a great firm reliance on a divine being” (123 Cong. Rec. 4340, 1977). Interestingly, this most personal aspect of what such fellowship means has drawn some of the most sustained scrutiny, due to the investigative reporting that has focused on the various Fellowship group homes where such interventions might take place (Sharlet, 2010).

The NPB is intentionally constructed by the Fellowship as existing in the liminal space created between public and private, as it exemplifies what the group portrays as the power of small group meetings where people can be transformed into godly leaders. Congressman Richardson Preyer articulated that idea with clarity in 1976:

These once-a-year gatherings are not an end in themselves. They are not intended to become institutions but they are a glimpse at what is happening at these other meetings during the year. Many meet privately for a deeper sharing of their lives, their needs, their love and understanding, with the desire to draw on the power and wisdom of God, the Creator. What we see this morning would be impossible if these more intimate gatherings were not taking place. They are the heartbeat of the visible event here today” (122 Cong. Rec. 3420, 1976).

According to Fellowship leaders, the NPB demonstrates, but is not the primary locus for, the powerful effect of the kind of small group, one-to-one ministries that they promote.

Godly Leaders Can Transform a World in Need. When the Fellowship suggests that their work is powerful, and that the spiritual strength of fellowship in the spirit of Jesus can give leaders what they need to do godly work, they tie this message together with the image of a world in need of exactly that kind of leadership. A repeated theme at the NPB, especially in the first few decades, was an impending sense of dire need. Senator Carlson gave voice to this refrain in 1966, as he once again cited the familiar Fellowship mantra:

In these days, when there’s so much confusion and misunderstanding, it is unfortunate that there’s still a lack of communication, especially among the leaders of the world, and it’s our hope that, through the spirit of Christ and the spirit of prayer, we might bridge the gap between the desire for peace and peace itself. (112 Cong. Rec. 3832, 1966)

According to speakers at the NPB, the movement they represented could help leaders tap in to the source of power they needed to transform the world. Congresswoman Marjorie Holt encouraged the crowd in 1977 with this thought:

There is abroad in this land a thirsting after unity and love and understanding. And we believe that this morning will be a step in that direction. One of the most exciting things about being here is the thought that we represent small, intimate groups meeting weekly all over the world, to pray for God's strength and guidance. Think of it, think of what a source of energy that is. (123 Cong. Rec. 4340, 1977)

Over the years, the theme of a world in need of godly leaders, energized by the prayer breakfast movement, centered in “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus,” continued to find traction at the NPB. Although occasionally more progressive messages were shared, the ongoing theme has remained. In 2008, keynote speaker Ward Behm, chair of the United States Africa Development Fund (engaging in micro-investments), sounding a very different note from U2 singer and humanitarian Bono's very justice-oriented keynote two years before, gave a recent example of the ongoing Fellowship understanding of the need for godly leadership: “All across the world, including America, things are continuously falling apart for the truly poor...The leaders that God anoints are their only hope” (154 Cong. Rec. 5450, 2008).

Diplomacy “in the Spirit of Jesus”: the Fellowship around the world. At the prayer breakfast, particularly in recent decades, you also get glimpses of the way the Fellowship operates to encourage the establishment of prayer groups and develop leadership across the world, hoping to help God with those anointed leaders. In 2007,

Democrat Mark Pryor and Republican Mike Enzi, in their greetings from the House and Senate prayer groups, described these worldwide efforts “in the spirit of Jesus”:

I want to tell you about our global outreach. We are willing to help any parliament or group of elected leaders to start a prayer breakfast. We only participate when we are asked. We send a senator and some prayer supporters to meet anywhere the leaders seek the uniting power of the teachings of Jesus. (153 Cong. Rec. 24502, 2007)

As Jeff Sharlet critiqued in his analysis of the Fellowship, these international trips and meetings are not officially sanctioned by the U.S. government, making for a “quiet diplomacy” that could be interpreted as problematic. Perhaps the most direct description of such a trip took place in Ambassador Tony Hall’s keynote in 2005, when he described how he “took a private trip as a Congressman with a couple of friends” and talked about Jesus with a Muslim leader in “a country” (left unnamed) despite having been asked not to speak in a Christian way by the U.S. ambassador to that country. The point Hall was leading to was that, according to his reading of the situation, the Muslim leader liked the Christian message he shared, and was interested in the idea of a prayer breakfast. Hall concluded “That is an example of what happens when two or three go together quietly, making friends, loving each other, and there is power in it” (151 Cong. Rec. 12595, 2005). According to Fellowship speakers at the NPB, such encouragement of godly leadership around the globe would only benefit a world in need.

Who is really welcome in the spirit of Jesus?

Having examined the use of explicitly Christian language, civil-religious rhetoric, and the Fellowship’s preferred definition of “in the spirit of Jesus,” I turn now to a

consideration of whether their rhetorical choice truly includes anyone else besides Christians at the NPB. From the beginning, despite the “come to Jesus” rhetoric of Graham and some other speakers, the stated goal of the Fellowship has been to welcome all people “in the spirit of Jesus,” including those who do not share the organizers’ particular approach to Christianity.

Are Roman Catholics welcome? In the early years of the breakfast, specifically during the election and presidency of John F. Kennedy, a question was evident about whether the stated inclusive ethos of the Fellowship would stretch to include Roman Catholics. In the midst of his greetings from the House Prayer group in 1957, Congressman Utt appeared to articulate a comfortable assumption of Protestantism: “We have a considerable amount of banter between the denominations there, more than we do over any political problems. And I might say that it generally revolves around the Baptists and the Presbyterians” (103 Cong. Rec. A988, 1957).

By Kennedy’s first Presidential Prayer Breakfast as president in 1961, several speakers were making a point to reach out in their rhetoric. Vice President LBJ stated clearly “America needs fear no man who fears God and the nation who fears God needs fear no man” (107 Cong. Rec. 3149, 1961), and quoted John Adams as saying he wanted to be a fellow disciple with all, in a listing that included Catholics. Billy Graham that year cited Pope Leo XIII and mentioned that the cross was to be found on every Catholic and Protestant church in his sermon about the influence of Jesus. The following year, in a markedly frank moment, the host of the Presidential Prayer Breakfast, William Jones, in the midst of a speech about how Jesus changed his heart, shared the following:

Mr. President, there's one other incident that concerns you, and were it not for how it turned out, I'm afraid that I would be ashamed to even mention it. But on election night, when you were elected President, I was very angry and resentful, because I had a prejudice against you because you were of the Catholic faith. And it scared me, because 3 months later I had to stand up here and talk to you about the love of God, and I knew I couldn't do it. And I prayed. Two months later this whole thing dissolved...to have it disappear and replace itself with a concern that found itself in the family joining with me in prayer. This, to me, is the reality that Jesus Christ brings into a life. When even prejudices and all these things can be dissolved in prayer. Jesus Christ. What an experience.

Mr. Vice President, I know that this has been a great crusade on your part, and I understand now, through my own personal experience, what you covet for every American, that we might all share this oneness. (108 Cong. Rec. 4930, 1962)

Although the attitude towards Roman Catholics appeared to open up in Kennedy's time, there still tended to be an overall assumption that the prayer breakfast movement was mainly Protestant. In 1975, Congressman Preyer revealed this assumption in an interesting moment in his greetings from the House prayer group. Unique among such greetings, he literally listed the various faiths and denominations by how many of each were in congress, with numbers, and then still quipped that the weekly prayer group was "thoroughly bi-Protestant," notwithstanding the contrast to the list of the congress, in which the single largest group, by far, was Roman Catholic (121 Cong. Rec. 5232, 1975).

Things have changed over the years, with more and more Catholics present at the NPB. Mother Teresa was the keynote speaker in 1994. In 2000, a papal representative read a substantial message from Pope John Paul II, containing Catholic social teaching on the need for a communal focus to balance American individualism, centered on an “objective morality” of communal standards (147 Cong. Rec. 8530, 2001). By 2006, there were several Roman Catholic speakers on the program, freely sharing from their own faith perspective, from one of the senators bringing greetings from the weekly prayer group to the Chief of Naval Operations, Admiral Mike Mullen, who gave the prayer for world leaders.

Welcoming Jews and Muslims “in the Spirit of Jesus.” It is one thing for the prayer breakfast welcome “in the spirit of Jesus” to extend to Roman Catholics, but what about those who are not Christian? Does the Fellowship’s stated welcome include them? Jewish speakers such as Senators Norm Coleman and Joseph Lieberman have been regularly present in recent decades and indicated that they have been active in the weekly prayer meetings. Not only have there been more Jewish participants, such as Lieberman, Coleman, and Diane Feinstein, reference has been made to their Judaism. For example, Coleman shared the following in 2005 as he reflected on being involved in a movement that gathered “in the spirit of Jesus”: “as a Jew, I am learning a lot of new things which challenge me. I have a profound respect for the tangibility and accessibility of God that my colleagues find in Jesus” 151 Cong. Rec. 12595, 2005). He then went on to talk about how important it is to listen to one another, and how at the weekly prayer breakfasts in his experience they really did listen and talk about what matters.

In recent years, prayers have started to be offered by more diverse voices, and to end in more inclusive ways than “in Jesus name.” Senator Norm Coleman offered a prayer partially in Hebrew, quoting the identity-forming, central prayer of the synagogue, the Shema, in 2006 (152 Cong. Rec. 21973, 2006). Senator Amy Klobuchar, who offered a prayer for world leaders in 2008, spoke of the people of Nepal in her prayer, and closed with what she said was a Nepalese greeting meaning “I praise the God that lives within you. Namaste. Amen” (154 Cong. Rec. 5450, 2008). Several persons praying in recent years have used a careful ending that could be heard as Christian, but not necessarily, as here in 2001: “It is in your Holy Name that we pray. Amen” (147 Cong. Rec. 4282, 2001). There has been outreach to Muslims as well, as noted earlier. The Quran has been read, with King Abdullah of Jordan sharing a brief message more than once. In recent years, the inclusive expansion has been stretched even further by the “nones” – those who profess no faith. For example, in his opening prayer in 1994, Senator Harris Wofford addressed the “God of...” each of the five major world religions, and “those with no church” (140 Cong. Rec. 8920, 1994). Overall, at least as it is portrayed at the NPB, the welcome “in the spirit of Jesus” is meant to extend to those who do not share the organizers’ particular approach to Christianity.

Critique of the Fellowship’s Construction of their Mission

Thus far in this chapter I have examined the rhetorical situation of the NPB through the lens of the Fellowship’s own rhetoric at and about the event. While the rhetorical construction provided by the Fellowship is essential context for the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, it is also important to be cognizant of a more critical view of the event and its sponsors. Scholars who have investigated the Fellowship offer important

critiques of their program and rhetoric, a perspective that also provides background to my analysis of the presidential speeches.

As noted in my first chapter, according to investigative scholarship, The Fellowship, also called The Family (Green, 2011; Sharlet, 2008) is a quasi-religious organization that was begun with a political motive. It was established by Abram Vereide, a Methodist minister in Seattle in the 1930's, who responded to the labor movement of the time by seeking to create a group of elite leaders who would re-instill order in society by invoking a "polite fundamentalism" (Sharlet, 2008, 2010). Since the beginning, the group has operated with secrecy, insisting that it is only a way for leaders to meet "man to man for Jesus," and that it is not an organization per se (Lindsay, 2006, 2010; Sharlet, 2008, 2010). The Fellowship has been very careful to operate without drawing public attention to itself. Some of those attending the prayer breakfast, and some media covering the event, might not even realize that the Fellowship is its sponsor. Lindsay (2006) noted: "Many attending the National Prayer Breakfast believe Congress or the federal government is the event's sponsor" and "At the Breakfast, the platform, commemorative program, entrance ticket, invitation, and registration signs are all festooned with presidential seals" (p. 395). This visual rhetoric provides crucial context for the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, because it may communicate that the president endorses the totality of the event and its messaging.

Scholars have also been deeply critical of what they consider the clandestine diplomatic efforts of the group, and the power that Fellowship leaders have exercised in Washington and abroad (Sharlet, 2008, 2010; Green, 2011). Doug Coe, who until he died earlier this year, was the key gatekeeper not only for those diplomatic efforts, but also for

attendees' access to the president at the prayer breakfast (Sharlet, 2008, 2010; Lindsay, 2006), drew particular critique from scholars. Interestingly, the current website does not list any official head of the organization, nor has it commented on Coe's passing. This is in keeping with what critical scholars have cited as the organization's secrecy, but which Fellowship leaders insist is a fundamental part of their mission:

The Foundation operates within a collaborative rather than a hierarchical structure... There is not a single set of executives with overall responsibilities... Directors engage with the understanding that they truly "serve," and do not "run" the work of the Foundation. As such, they do not list their service as a resume credential so as to not confuse their motivation. (<http://thefellowshipfoundation.org/about.html>)

As critical scholars have noted, such lack of transparency shields the activities and leadership of the Fellowship from scrutiny (Sharlet, 2008, 2010; Green, 2011). If the NPB functions to "legitimate lesser-known, more questionable aspects" of the Fellowship's work (Lindsay, 2006, p. 412), and the president is seen as endorsing the event and its legitimizing function by his presence there, there are problematic implications.

One aspect of scholarship on the Fellowship, however, focuses precisely on what Lindsay (2010) called the "formalized liminality" of the group, and provides a particularly intriguing theoretical perspective for the present project. According to Lindsay (2010), the way the Fellowship enacts liminality as an "intentional organizational strategy" produces "unique resources and liabilities for the group" (p. 163). In this dissertation, I consider whether the liminal ethos of the Fellowship permeates the

NPB itself, providing important context for the presidents' articulation of public theology. That is, the very liminality of the way the event is both public and yet suffused with the rituals and culture of the confidential small group prayer meetings, may provide a unique space for the president to experiment with religious rhetoric as public theology. I will engage this analysis more deeply in my discussion chapter.

Expecting the President at the National Prayer Breakfast

The NPB, as discussed in this chapter, is a yearly event with a large attendance and developed ritual, an event where every president has spoken since its founding under President Eisenhower, yearly since President Kennedy. The NPB, as rhetorically constructed by the Fellowship, is the public face of a private movement, where the offer of support to the president comes with the expectation that he will attend their most high-profile event. This section analyzes the status of the event as the public face of the prayer breakfast movement, the offer of prayer support to the president, and, finally, the expectation that the President of the United States will attend and speak at the National Prayer Breakfast.

Public Face of a "Private" Movement

The NPB serves as the public face of the prayer breakfast movement, and as such it is a window into their priorities and rhetoric. As discussed above, generally the Fellowship has operated without drawing attention to its members and their activities. The NPB, however, is an exception to this mode of operating. In fact, the legislators who serve as organizers and hosts of the event have consistently made a point of establishing permanent public access to the event. With few exceptions, the entirety of the transcript of the event has been entered into the Congressional Record each year, often with the

wording of its accompanying printed program. Starting in 1953, and for years afterwards, Senator Frank Carlson made sure to have the program and transcript included in the record. A typical entry is found in 1964:

Madam President, on Wednesday morning, February 5, 1000 persons, including the President of the United States, members of the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of our Government, delegates to the conference and representatives of the Council of Christian Leadership groups attended the Presidential Prayer Breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, D.C.

This gathering of the leaders in Government, the clergy, and lay leaders at a prayer breakfast, where we rededicated ourselves to the spiritual values which have been and are basic in our Nation's history, was most inspirational. It should create confidence among peoples everywhere.

I ask unanimous consent to have printed in the RECORD a copy of the program and the statements made by the President of the United States, Dr.

Billy Graham, and others who participated. (110 Cong. Rec. 2897, 1964)

Similar wording and thinking were evident decades later when Representative Emmanuel Cleaver entered the transcript in the Record in 2007, including the clear use of Fellowship rhetoric: "This annual gathering is hosted by Members of the U.S. Senate and the U.S. House of Representatives weekly prayer breakfast groups. Once again, we were honored to have the participation of our President and the First Lady" (153 Cong. Rec. 24502, 2007). Making the prayer breakfast transcript and program available in the public record not only puts a permanent public face on the event, but the rhetoric of

congressional leaders serves to underline the priorities of the Fellowship. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to delve fully into the implications of having the transcripts and their accompanying wording in the Congressional Record, but for the purposes of the present study, I highlight the fact that the event is promoted in public as important to the life of the country, and thus puts added weight on the attendance and remarks of the president.

Praying for the President

The NPB was first established, according to Senator Carlson and other leaders who have spoken over the years, as a way of supporting the president through prayer and fellowship. At that first breakfast in 1953, in addition to the formal prayer offered by Abram Vereide for President Eisenhower (“the man who in Thy providence has become our Chief Executive”), Senator Carlson spoke directly to the president of the need they all shared for prayer and the hope that Eisenhower would experience in “the quietness and simplicity of such meetings as this” the strengthening effect of God’s help. In 1966 Fellowship leader Richard Halverson prayed for President Johnson with deep understanding: “We join our hearts this morning in praying for our President, his family, his staff and colleagues, for all who serve with him. Especially would we remember him in the lonely hours when, after all the counsel has been received, the final decision is his alone” (112 Cong. Rec. 3832, 1966). Such prayers were offered year after year, often strikingly attuned to the expressed needs of the current president. Occasionally those prayer and other expressions of support exhibited a frankness that highlighted the interesting confluence of public and private at the event, as when the prayer breakfast chair addresses President Clinton in 1999: “Mr. President, I would just add that our

prayer is that while you are here with us, you will have a sense of peace and rest and will understand that as you leave here that there are people all over the world that are praying for you” (147 Cong. Rec. 6144, 2001).

Expecting the President to Be There

Although the NPB has expressed support and offered prayer for the presidents over the years, the combined effect of its rhetorical construction, growth in size, and status as a matter of public record has certainly created the expectation that the president will attend. This expectation has been highlighted by the repeated moments when prayer breakfast leaders have praised presidents for their attendance at the event – not just thanking them for being there, but also highlighting the tradition of presidents attending. In his remarks from the House and Senate prayer groups in 1998, Rep. Bobby Scott (VA), noted:

President Dwight D. Eisenhower attended that first National Prayer Breakfast, and every President since has attended each year’s breakfast. President Clinton and Vice President Gore have continued that unblemished record through their presence here today, reflecting their recognition of the value of prayer in our professional and personal lives. (144 Cong. Rec. 6913, 1998)

Such comments have been heard over the years, and also echoed in presidential remarks as they speak at the prayer breakfast. Clearly, there is a sense that presidents are expected to attend and speak at the NPB.

Setting the Context for Presidential Religious Speech

In this chapter I have described and analyzed the rhetorical context in which the President of the United States offers his prayer breakfast address. The NPB, as it has been

rhetorically constructed and enacted by the Fellowship, is a remarkable confluence of political, religious, civic, public, and private. The event is deeply marked by the rhetoric of the Fellowship, particularly their “fellowship in the spirit of Jesus” identifying phrase. Yet it also, in its liminality as a public event that displays a sense of personal care and fellowship for government leaders, provides an intriguing space for presidential religious rhetoric. In the next chapter I will examine what the presidents have said when they step into the rhetorical space of the NPB.

CHAPTER FIVE: PRESIDENTS PREACHING AT THE NATIONAL PRAYER BREAKFAST: CONNECTING HUMAN AND DIVINE STORIES

When the President of the United States addresses the National Prayer Breakfast (NPB), his speech functions much as a sermon in the context of the event. As preacher, the president connects the narrative arc of the divine story with the human story. This chapter will discuss my analysis of their prayer breakfast addresses, using the theoretical lens of public theology and its homiletical expression. A brief review of that theoretical approach will serve as prelude to the main substance of this chapter. First, though, I provide a preview of the chapter as a whole, laid out in five narrative movements and two interludes.

A Chapter in Five Narrative Movements and Two Interludes

This chapter details the findings of my study of all presidential speeches to the NPB, from the first speech by President Eisenhower in 1953, to President Obama's final NPB address in 2016, studied as a body of work with a goal of discerning how, if at all, they constitute a separate genre of presidential speech. The analysis in this chapter is put forward in five main sections, focused around the narratives presidents construct that my analysis suggests constitute key markers of a potential new genre. First, I examine the story the presidents tell about the prayer breakfast itself, usually as they convey their thanks for being there. Next, I look at the narratives presidents present about their own faith story. Then I engage in the first of two interludes to raise the question of faithful leadership – that is, what are presidents saying in their prayer breakfast addresses about being faith-filled leaders? The first answer to that question is given in a civil-religious idiom, with presidents repeating many of the same stories as other prayer breakfast

speakers - stories of faithful American founders and other civil-religious figures, shared as models which they hope to follow. The civil-religious interlude on faithful leadership then leads into the next major section of the chapter, in which I examine the way presidents tell the American story at the prayer breakfast. As will be seen, a substantial aspect of presidents' prayer breakfast addresses is their construction of a civil-religious narrative about America and religion.

Personal faith narratives and civil religion, however, do not tell the whole story of the presidential address to the NPB. This chapter next turns to public theology in earnest, examining the way presidents tell the divine story – that is, how they construct God-consciousness in their prayer breakfast speeches. Then comes the second interlude on faithful leadership, this time focused on what I believe is the unique contribution of this speech in the presidential canon: the opportunity, in light of the divine, to consider faithful public leadership in the context of the wider community of human beings, and what that might mean for faithful living for all people. The fifth and final narrative section then follows, examining the story presidents tell about faithful leadership and faithful living – that is, their public theology approach to being human in the world.

Prelude on Preaching: The Narrative Approach of the New Homiletic

To set the context for my analysis, I begin with a brief review of the narrative-based “New Homiletic” (Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995), a post-interpretive-turn style of preaching that came to prominence in the latter half of the 20th century. This approach to preaching works from the belief that human lives are shaped by story, that narrative is the “grammar” of faith (Hauerwas, 1976). Particularly in the western monotheistic traditions, the biblical narrative is the lens through which people of faith come to understand

themselves and their world (Craddock, 1985; Lowry, 1980). The preacher then re-articulates that understanding, making it new, in order to help create an experience for both speaker and hearers of being actively shaped by the story (Craddock, 1985; Long, 1989; Lowry, 1980; Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995). Homiletical theorist David Buttrick articulated the distinctive power of this approach to the sermon: “Preaching can rename the world ‘God’s world’ with metaphorical power, and can change identity by incorporating all our stories into ‘God’s story.’ Preaching constructs in consciousness a ‘faith-world’ related to God” (Buttrick, 1987, p. 11). As part of my examination of public theology in the presidential prayer breakfast address, this chapter will discuss the ways presidents construct narratives of faith in their speeches, including their construction of God-consciousness. As part of that analysis, the presidents’ citation and interpretation of scripture will be discussed.

This dissertation takes a hermeneutical view of the relationship between scripture and homiletics, and thus of the presidential address to the NPB. The homilist interprets scripture in the sermon, but also reveals his/her background worldview that has been shaped by scripture and tradition. That is, the speaker interprets and is interpreted by scripture. Even though most presidents who spoke at the NPB were not trained preachers, theological themes and homiletic moves evident in their prayer breakfast speeches nevertheless appear to reveal aspects of their religious background. Being able to identify religious influences in their speeches supports a hermeneutical reading of the president’s language choices, showing how he, as speaker, is as much shaped by the religious narratives that have formed him as he seeks, as rhetorical agent, to shape the religious narrative of his speech.

Narrative One:

This Great Prayerful Tradition: Presidents telling the story of the NPB

Presidents speaking at the NPB enter in to a rhetorical space created by the Fellowship, and, not surprisingly, almost all presidents include words of appreciation for the event and its organizers in their remarks. In so doing, they construct a narrative of the prayer breakfast itself, establishing common ground with event organizers and attendees. Ranging from standard opening expressions of gratitude to full-fledged articulations of the history of the prayer breakfast movement, presidential remarks acknowledge that part of telling the human story at the NPB is connecting with those who have made the event possible. With encomium typical of epideictic rhetoric, some presidents have lauded the role of the prayer breakfast and its organizers, saying it exemplifies the best of America and plays an important role in Washington, strengthening them and other public leaders for their work. Presidents have also taken the opportunity to recognize particular figures in the prayer breakfast movement, especially Billy Graham. Lastly, some presidents have included in their expressions of appreciation a more personal reflection on what it means to them to speak at the event, and even how they approach preparing their remarks. This window into their thinking about their NPB address shows that the event does indeed provide a rhetorical space for reflecting on faith that at least some presidents find to be uniquely helpful.

Praising the Prayer Breakfast: Epideictic Rhetoric at the NPB

First, in this narrative, every president who has spoken at the NPB has expressed appreciation for the event, sometimes directly thanking Fellowship leaders. This rhetoric has served to establish common ground with the audience, and to acknowledge the value

of the prayer breakfast to the president, to the Washington leaders gathered, and to the country as a whole. Often, but not always, these remarks form the opening to the president's address.

Although words of praise and thanks for the prayer breakfast may have appeared in all presidential addresses, each president made the comments their own. In 1962, President Kennedy opened his speech: "I want to, as President, express my appreciation to all those whose efforts make this breakfast possible." He went on, in the formal, even distant, language typical of his addresses, to suggest that what he appreciated about the prayer breakfast was its work as part of:

a worldwide effort, I believe, to build a closer and more intimate association among those of different faiths in different countries and in different continents, who are united by a common belief in God, and therefore in a common commitment to the moral order. (Kennedy, 1962)

In thanking them and expressing his sense of the movement's value, President Kenney, uniquely among presidents, thus connected the Fellowship with such important ecumenical movements as the World Council of Churches. Reflecting his era's concern for the place of religion in valuing individuals and their personal beliefs, in contrast with communist statism, Kennedy expressed his appreciation in formal tones.

In contrast, President Johnson, four years later, sounded a personal note at his second prayer breakfast as president, declaring: "I am pleased to return again to our annual prayer breakfast and to be among so many of my old friends." President Johnson would, year after year, find the Presidential Prayer Breakfast (as it was called at that time) a place where he could speak personally among a sympathetic crowd about the

burdens of public leadership, and the “sustaining strength” of prayer. In so doing, he showed the emerging value of the yearly event, even in this early era. Johnson began his 1965 speech by saying: “I am very grateful for the opportunity to participate again in an occasion which already has come to be a very valued place in the life of Washington, our Capital City, and in the lives of so many of us who must labor here.” Such praise would be echoed by subsequent presidents.

For several presidents, their praise of the prayer breakfast included personal words of thanks to organizers from the Fellowship. President Carter each year expressed appreciation of, and a comfortable sense of familiarity with, the previous speakers on the program. In 1979 he mentioned that the “very same congressional and other leaders who put this breakfast together” helped coordinate prayer support for the Middle East peace process, hinting at the larger role of the Fellowship in diplomatic efforts. Perhaps no president spoke more clearly about such efforts than the elder President Bush, who acknowledged Fellowship leader Doug Coe by name every year, and in 1990 shared the following: “this breakfast is the result of years of quiet diplomacy – I wouldn’t say secret diplomacy – quiet diplomacy by an ambassador of faith, Doug Coe. And I salute him.” He was not alone in recognizing Coe by name. In 1996, President Clinton expressed direct gratitude to “Doug Coe and all of his associates” – the “people who work their hearts out every year so we can have this prayer breakfast.” Such words of praise, while standard fare for such events, nevertheless could be read as a signal of support for the goals of the Fellowship and a public legitimization of their private activities.

None of the presidents has walked the line between public and private recognition of the Fellowship more than President Reagan who, in an extended passage unique to his

speeches, gave a full history of the prayer breakfast movement in 1985, recapping it in a briefer form in 1986. As noted in chapter four, such a telling of the history has usually been the role of the chair of the event or other Fellowship leader, but Reagan took on that role in two of his addresses, perhaps reflecting the assistance of Billy Graham in his speech preparation (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). Reagan (1985) echoed typical Fellowship language, talking about their early history of “informal,” “off the record” meetings “in the spirit of Christ” and showing an intimacy with the inner workings of the beginnings of the presidential prayer breakfast, including this note about President Eisenhower:

just a few days after he was sworn in as President, Eisenhower invited Frank Carlson over to the White House. He said: “Frank, this is the loneliest house I’ve ever been in. What can I do?” and Carlson said “I think this may be a good time for you to come and meet with our prayer group.” And Eisenhower did. (Reagan, 1985)

Reagan also carefully balances what appears to be his intimate knowledge of the inner workings of the Fellowship with a respect for their privacy, and by so doing, reinforces their self-image:

Some wonderful things have come out of this fellowship. A number of public figures have changed as human beings, changed in ways I’d like to talk about, but it might reveal too much about the membership.

While Reagan’s extensive discourse about the prayer breakfast movement is unique, other presidents have also related some of the Fellowship history, or at least their own history with the movement, in their remarks. It has been a clear way of establishing common ground. President Obama included a brief history of the NPB, referenced twice

in his 2009 speech, going back to its origins in Seattle, and noted that its growth into a worldwide movement, reflected in the diversity in the room, was a sign of hope to him. And several presidents have spoken of their memories of the prayer breakfast, going back to when they first started attending either the breakfast itself (Ford, Clinton, Obama), or other events sponsored by the movement, such as governor's prayer breakfasts (Reagan, Clinton). President Nixon (1973) gave a brief nod to the history of the NPB, and his recollection of it back to Eisenhower. President Ford (1975) spoke of his memories of the prayer breakfast's value to him before he became president, and how he enjoyed being able to come and pray. And President Bush, Sr. (1989) expressed clearly his comfort at the event: "coming to the prayer breakfast is, for us at least, like coming home."

Paying homage to Billy Graham. For President G.H.W. Bush, the sense of coming home to the prayer breakfast was centered in his close personal friendship with the Reverend Billy Graham (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). It feels appropriate to be finishing this dissertation just shortly after Graham's death, for his passing is the end of an era for the breakfast. Most presidents have directly paid homage to Graham, often with words that bear a ring of real affection and gratitude. Recognizing Graham appears to be a part of establishing presidential bona fides with the prayer breakfast crowd, and a window into the mix of personal, pastoral, and political that underlies the entire event. Evangelist Billy Graham had a decades-long role in the NPB, attending almost every year until health limitations prevented him, giving sermons many years, and helping shape the programming and overall messaging of the event. In addition, according Gibbs and Duffy (2007), Graham had a direct hand in shaping several presidents' speeches to the NPB, including all of President Reagan's (p. 281), President Nixon's final speech in 1974 (p.

229), and President G.H.W. Bush's 1989 speech (p. 300). Graham repeatedly complimented President Clinton's abilities as a preacher, saying he was a "natural" in his affinity for scripture (Gibbs & Duffy, p. 315). Graham was a person who expressed his appreciation and support of presidents. Telling their stories of connection to Billy Graham and expressing appreciation for him has been a repeated part of the epideictic element of praising the NPB in presidential speeches at the prayer breakfast.

Many presidents thanking and recognizing Graham did so with a palpable sense of warmth. President G.H.W. Bush unvaryingly referred to Graham as a "dear friend" (1989, 1990, 1992) and often recognized Graham's wife Ruth as well. President Clinton also, in his first speech as president in 1993, addressed opening thanks "to my friend Reverend Billy Graham and Ruth." In 1995, after Graham was absent in 1994, President Clinton welcomed him back: "It's always wonderful to see our friend Billy Graham back here. This is the 40th of 43 prayer breakfasts he has attended. I'd say he's been faithful to this as he has to everything else in his life, and we are all the richer for it." And then, in 1996, marking the turn towards increasing frail health that would affect Graham's ability to attend in subsequent years, President Clinton asked for prayer for his good friend: "Hillary and I join all of you in praying for Billy Graham and for his wonderful wife, Ruth, and for their family."

Perhaps as a result of Graham's failing health, President G.W. Bush did not publicly speak of or to him at the NPB, although he would in other venues attribute his personal conversion to evangelical Christianity to Graham (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007, pp. 326-330). The only other presidents who did not recognize Graham in their prayer breakfast remarks were Presidents Ford and Carter. This was likely due, in Ford's case, to

Graham's careful retreat from being associated with presidents after the Nixon debacle (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). President Carter, an anomaly among presidents due to his extensive church leadership background and carefully guarded personality, did not seem to need Graham (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007), nor did he seem interested in using his prayer breakfast speech to establish a public connection with him.

Presidents Kennedy and Nixon, however, made a point of recognizing Graham in remarks characteristic of each. In his 1962 speech to the women's breakfast⁴, President Kennedy gives kudos to Graham in a formal vein:

I think of Reverend Billy Graham, who has served this cause about which I speak so well here and around the world. He has, I think, transmitted this most important quality of our common commitments to faith in a way which makes us all particularly proud. (Kennedy, 1962)

President Kennedy's words about Graham closed his speech that year, serving as a firm final word of praise, not only for Graham, but for the women who he depicts as joining Graham in setting an example of "conviction and effort" (Kennedy, 1962).

President Nixon spoke of Graham twice, in passing comments that seemed almost a transparent effort to associate himself with Graham, a puzzling choice given how public Graham's association with Nixon was (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007). In 1969 Nixon mentions "talking to Billy Graham" in preparation for his first NPB speech, and in 1974, Nixon notes that Graham has come back from a much-needed vacation to attend the NPB,

⁴ The records from the early era of the prayer breakfast, through the time of President Johnson, show that the president made two speeches – one to the main gathering, and one to "the ladies." Both Presidents Kennedy and Johnson protested against this practice, and it appears to

saying “And I rode up with him in the car.” Gibbs and Duffy (2007) suggest that Graham was disappointed not to have more of an influence in the end on Nixon’s ability to be open and honest with his story, including his story of faith.

President Johnson, who turned to Graham again and again as a personal chaplain (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007), publicly recognized the preacher in his opening notes of thanks many years at the prayer breakfast. He also echoed Graham’s cadence, themes, and even exact words in his speeches, starting with his first address in 1964. Not long after President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Graham offered words of encouragement to Johnson: “God will be with you. There will be times when decisions come hard and burdens too heavy to bear – that is when God will be nearest to you” (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007, p. 115). In his 1964 speech to the prayer breakfast, Johnson honors Graham obliquely in his choice of words: “In these last 70 days, prayer has helped me to bear the burdens of the first office which are too great to be borne by anyone alone” (Johnson, 1964). Such echoes of Graham would characterize Johnson’s speeches in years to follow, even if not attributed directly to Graham, nevertheless bearing the mark of his influence.

Among all the tributes to Graham, two, coming from the two presidents who have consistently sounded most like preachers, stand out. Both stories are extensive and filled with moving detail, giving a window into each of the presidents’ personal faith, and their reverence for Billy Graham, and showing the genuineness of their words of appreciation. President Clinton in 1993, in a story he told often (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007), recalled his first contact with Graham:

have ended by the time of President Nixon, or at least we no longer have a separate address in the record as of 1969.

I thought about the first time I ever saw Billy Graham – appropriate to mention now. He came in the 1950s, in the heat of all our racial trouble, to Arkansas to have a crusade. And the white citizens council tried to get him, because of the tensions of the moment, to agree to segregate his crusade in the fifties in the South. And he said, ‘If I have to do that, I’m not coming.’ And I remember I got a Sunday School teacher in my church – and I was about 11 years old – to take me 50 miles to Little Rock so I could hear a man preach who was trying to live by what he said. And then I remember, a good while thereafter, trying to send a little bit of my allowance to the Billy Graham crusade because of the impression he made on me then. (Clinton, 1993)

And President Obama, in 2012, told a moving story also shared by his chaplain Joshua DuBois (2014) of visiting Graham at his mountaintop home, a story filled with affirming words about Graham and about the whole experience of being in his presence. After a wonderful visit, Graham prayed for President Obama, and then Obama, moved by the Spirit, prayed for Graham. President Obama, who told the story with a sermonic power that marked all his prayer breakfast addresses, concluded his reflection:

And the fact that I would ever be on top of a mountain, saying a prayer for Billy Graham, a man whose faith had changed the world and that had sustained him through triumphs and tragedies and movements and milestones, that simple fact humbled me to my core. (Obama, 2012)

In the decades of accolades, acknowledgements, and heartfelt stories told by presidents about the Rev. Billy Graham at the NPB, one can see Graham's remarkable impact on the annual event, and on the numerous presidents who have spoken there.

Praising this great prayerful tradition. Presidential narratives of praise about the prayer breakfast and its organizers have expanded beyond the immediate event and crowd in front of them to encompass the history and value of the event. President G.W. Bush (2001), in a comment that showed a particular rhetorical development in presidential epideictic rhetoric about the NPB, said:

Every President since the first one I can remember, Dwight Eisenhower, has taken part in this great tradition. It's a privilege for me to speak where they have spoken and to pray where they have prayed. (G.W. Bush, 2001)

Starting with Reagan, presidents began referring to the "tradition" of the prayer breakfast, often with words like "great" or "important" as descriptors. From the first, these words have encouraged, even pressured future leaders to maintain the tradition, such as these words from President Reagan in 1982: "I hope that down through the centuries not only is this great land preserved but this great tradition is preserved." In his final speech to the prayer breakfast in 2008, President G.W. Bush, after referring to the "great tradition" in his 2001 speech, and the "fine tradition you continue" in his 2006 words, began with a comment that spoke for his unknown successor:

Every President since Dwight Eisenhower has attended the National Prayer Breakfast, and I am really proud to carry on this tradition. It's an important tradition, and I'm confident Presidents who follow me will do the same. (G.W. Bush, 2008)

President Obama, in words that form the title of this project, referred to the prayer breakfast on its 60th anniversary in 2013 as “this great prayerful tradition.” Two years earlier, he connected his own faith journey with the history and goals of the prayer breakfast:

For almost 60 years, going back to President Eisenhower, this gathering has been attended by our President. It’s a tradition that I’m proud to uphold not only as a fellow believer, but as an elected leader whose entry into public service was actually through the church. (Obama, 2011)

In praising the NPB as a great tradition, American presidents have acknowledged the power of the yearly event, obliquely recognized the expectation that presidents will speak at the breakfast, and connected it to what is important about their own faith journeys, and about the country.

Praising the NPB as America at its best. For some presidents, the tradition of the NPB has been portrayed as representing what is best about America. In the early days, the language with which the presidents expressed this thought was unabashedly religious. President Eisenhower (1956) declared that through the prayer breakfast “we are telling people that this nation is still a nation under God,” which he contrasted with communism. By the time of Johnson, the emphasis was placed on the role of godly leaders:

I believe that these annual prayer breakfasts serve a most useful purpose in both reminding and reassuring the people that those who hold their trust are themselves godly and prayerful men and women. (Johnson, 1964)

Johnson would consistently emphasize the issue of people's trust in the country's leadership, and the need for leaders, himself included, to be people of prayer.

For President Nixon, what was best about America, and what struck him about the prayer breakfast gathering, was power and strength. In 1971, he opened his speech in a strikingly odd fashion, wondering what would happen if an "explosive were detonated in this room," in order to make the point that it was filled with important people. He transitioned from that opening with these words of praise:

Perhaps it would be impossible to find any audience in America in which more power, in the best sense of the word, was gathered in one room than here at this prayer breakfast this morning. This tells us something, it seems to me, about the strength of America. (Nixon, 1971)

Although Nixon would go on in his speech to connect that strength with the idea of moral and spiritual values, his opening focus on power demonstrated a perspective on the prayer breakfast, and on America, that was notable in its emphasis on power.

As the NPB has grown in diversity over the years, several presidents have spoken about how gathering people of various faiths and cultures to pray together represents the best of America. President Ford in 1975 noted: "the beauty of these prayer breakfasts is the many faiths they bring together," and President Reagan, in a nod both to diversity and, obliquely, to the Christian overtone of the event, commented in 1988 on "the uniqueness of how all of us, from so many different heritages, have come together here in the name of that one man." President Obama, in complexly developed, sermonic speeches, consistently pointed to the diverse faiths of America and how, at the prayer

breakfast, “we set aside one morning to gather as one community, united in prayer” (Obama, 2013).

For Presidents Clinton and both Bushes, the political diversity of the room was described as a strength, and a vision of America at its best. President Clinton, in words that echoed the Fellowship’s self-description, and with a certain irony, given that this comment occurred in the midst of the impeachment process, said in 1999 “when we come here, we set party aside, and there’s absolutely no politics in this.” The elder President Bush commented in 1991 “This is a diverse group. I’ve never seen anything quite like this – politically or anything else. But we do have one thing in common: We stand together in prayer.” In 2005, his son noted “When we come together every year, we leave aside the debates of the working day” and stated simply in 2007 “I think a breakfast such as this speaks to the true strength of the United States of America.”

President G.W. Bush was consistent in delivering well-crafted messages affirming the place of faith in America, and the role of the NPB. In 2001, his first speech, he summarized:

These are some of the crucial contributions of faith to our Nation: justice and compassion and a civil and generous society. I thank you all here for displaying these values and defending them here in America and across the world. (G.W. Bush, 2001)

For President Bush, faith was seen as a living and active force. In 2002, his most potent speech, delivered within months of the September 11 attacks, he spoke to the important work of faith and the role of the prayer breakfast as symbol:

For half a century now, the National Prayer Breakfast has been a symbol of the vital place of faith in the life of our Nation. You've reminded generations of leaders of a purpose and a power greater than their own. In times of calm and in times of crisis, you've called us to prayer. (G.W. Bush, 2002).

In his words, we see another important aspect of how presidents have spoken words of praise at the NPB. For several presidents, the prayer breakfast serves to remind those gathered of a greater purpose.

Praising the NPB's purposeful example. Presidents at the NPB express thanks for the way the NPB reminds civic leaders of a greater purpose. President Kennedy, who emphasized responsibility and service in his three brief messages, spoke forthrightly to the prayer breakfast gathering in 1963: "This is not an occasion for feeling pleased with ourselves, but, rather, it is an occasion for asking for help to continue our work and to do more." This would be his last speech before he was assassinated that fall. Twenty years later, not long after an assassination attempt on his own life, President Reagan spoke of the renewed spiritual purpose he felt and affirmed the prayer breakfast group's role: "We need you now more than ever to remind us that we should be doing God's work on earth" (Reagan, 1982). President Clinton, who almost every year challenged the gathering with pointed words about "this town" (that is, official Washington) and its problematic focus on political one-upmanship, suggested in 1997 that the prayer breakfast crowd could pray for a changed outlook:

Pray for the people in public office that we can rid ourselves of this toxic atmosphere of cynicism and embrace with joy and gratitude the phenomenal opportunity and responsibility before us. (Clinton, 1997)

Perhaps no other president has preached more clearly the message that the role of the prayer breakfast is to remind the leaders in the room of their shared purpose than President Obama. The theological content of these messages will be explored later in this chapter. Typically, an aspect of his sermon-like delivery was the use of “we” – here, in reference to the gathered assembly of the NPB in 2009:

We come to break bread and to give thanks, but most of all to seek guidance and to rededicate ourselves to the mission of love and service that lies at the heart of all humanity. St. Augustine once said: “Pray as though everything depended on God, then work as though everything depended on you.” So let us pray together on this February morning, but let us also work together in all the days and months ahead. (Obama, 2009)

At this, his first prayer breakfast as president, President Obama does not so much praise the role of the breakfast and its organizers in reminding leaders of their purpose, as reaffirm, through a sweeping gesture that gathered all into its embrace, their shared dedication to the work set before them by God. Such a sermonic closing would be typical of his speeches.

Gratitude for the Opportunity to Reflect Spiritually

As they tell the story of the NPB, Presidents not only praise the prayer breakfast and its organizers, they also express appreciation for the invitation to speak and the space that it gave them for reflection. Most of the presidents at some point in their speech have

expressed such thanks. In particular, year after year at the NPB, President Obama expressed gratitude for the opportunity to reflect, prepare, and speak at the event. Speaking of his experience at the prayer breakfast as senator and as president, he told the gathering in 2012: “it’s always been an opportunity that I’ve cherished. And it’s a chance to step back for a moment, for us to come together as brothers and sisters and seek God’s face together.” That year, and others, President Obama spoke of being grateful for being able to step back from the daily grind and get a deeper perspective. He often connected that thought with a theme of humility: “each time we gather, it’s a chance to set aside the rush of our daily lives; to pause with humility before an Almighty God” (Obama, 2014). President Clinton struck a similar note in 1998: “For 5 years now, Hillary and I have looked forward to this day. For me it’s a day in which I can be with other people of faith and pray and ask for your prayers, both as President and as just another child of God.” President Ford, in reflecting on his experience over the years at the prayer breakfast before becoming president, shared this in 1975:

In the past, I have found it an opportunity for reflection and for rededication and an occasion to pray for our country and its leaders, for my friends and my loved ones, for the courage to do what is right, and forgiveness for my own shortcomings and trespasses. (Ford, 1975)

Such thoughts of gratitude for the gift of praying with others at the breakfast were shared by almost every president studied for this project.

In words that give shape and impetus to this project, President Obama spoke with clarity more than once about the opportunity his NPB address presented to him. In 2010:

I'm privileged to join you once again, as my predecessors have for over half a century. And like them, I come here to speak about the ways my faith informs who I am as a President and as a person. But I'm also here for the same reason that all of you are, for we all share a recognition – one as old as time – that a willingness to believe, an openness to grace, a commitment to prayer can bring sustenance to our lives. (Obama, 2010)

In his final speech to the NPB in 2016, President Obama gave a window into his approach to thinking about the speech: “on this occasion, I always enjoy reflecting on a piece of scripture that’s been meaningful to me or otherwise sustained me throughout the year.” Obama did, indeed, cite scripture fluidly and often in his speeches, usually with a depth of reflection that made the biblical quotes more than a passing reference, but rather the substance of his main points. This final year, he continued by saying “And lately, I’ve been thinking and praying on a verse from Second Timothy: ‘For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind.’” He then built an entire sermon around this scriptural passage. Obama seemed, always, genuinely grateful for the opportunity for spiritual, scriptural reflection afforded by the NPB.

Narrative Two:

Giving All Thanks and Praise to God: Presidents telling their faith stories

In this next section of the chapter, I examine the way presidents narrate themselves as persons of faith in their prayer breakfast speeches. The opportunity for spiritual and scriptural reflection afforded by the expectation of a presidential speech at the NPB would seem to create a space where presidents could freely share their own faith journey, speaking personally about how they came to their present beliefs. While it is the

case that the presidents at the NPB speak openly about spiritual topics and the power of prayer, at times quote scripture or other religious narratives, and then apply their thinking about faith or spiritual matters in sermonic reflection on public leadership, nevertheless, presidents rarely share at any length their own personal faith story in their address to the prayer breakfast. This is of particular note, given that the time period of the NPB encompasses the era marked by an increasing pressure on presidential candidates to “confess” their faith (Kaylor, 2011). Once in office, and at an event where such personal testimony has been the norm for many other speakers, it is notable that the presidents do not necessarily seem to feel the need to engage in such personal faith-story-telling. However, some do share aspects of their journey, none more than President Obama. In this section, I analyze the personal testimony of the presidents, with a particular focus on the use of specifically Christian language, and the way several presidents attribute the strength of their faith to female family role models. Lastly, I examine the way presidents present themselves as persons of prayer. Even if presidents do not share their own personal journey of faith in detail, most presidents do construct a narrative of themselves as persons of prayer.

Personal Christian Testimony at the NPB

Some presidents speaking at the NPB have testified to their personal faith using specifically Christian language. In particular, Presidents Obama, Reagan, and Carter each shared faith narratives in this way. For President Obama, speaking about his personal spiritual story appeared to come naturally in response to the invitation to address the NPB. In his first speech as president in 2009, Obama shared the narrative of his faith journey:

I didn't become a Christian until many years later, when I moved to the south side of Chicago after college. And it happened not because of indoctrination or a sudden revelation, but because I spent month after month working with church folks who simply wanted to help neighbors who were down on their luck, no matter what they looked like, or where they came from, or who they prayed to. It was on those streets, in those neighborhoods, that I first heard God's spirit beckon me. It was there that I felt called to a higher purpose, His purpose. (Obama, 2009)

In addition to this faith narrative presentation, President Obama, in a strikingly powerful Christian image, made this theological claim in 2013: "As Christians, we place our faith in the nail-scarred hands of Jesus Christ." Later in the same speech, still using "we," he stated "I also believe that we are united in the knowledge of a redeeming Savior, whose grace is sufficient for the multitude of our sins and whose love is never failing." Obama, more than any president surveyed for this project, did not hesitate to use Christian language in his addresses to the NPB, nor did he shy away from telling his own story of coming to faith as a committed Christian. As quoted earlier, President Obama drew a direct connection between his life in public service and his early work with church-based community organizing. In 2014, President Obama testified:

And here we give thanks for His guidance in our own individual faith journeys. In my life, He directed my path to Chicago and my work with churches who were intent on breaking the cycle of poverty in hard-hit communities there...It led me to embrace Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior. (Obama, 2014)

This was not the only year he used “Lord and Savior” language about Jesus (he used this language also in 2011), the only president to do so at the NPB. In telling his story of faith, though, even as he seemed comfortable sharing details of the narrative, and in using “we” to embrace believers in the room, President Obama nevertheless was careful always to embrace people of all faiths, of no faith, and those who follow humanist philosophy, showing how all could contribute to a thriving social compact and commitment to the common good. After his claim about the “nail-scarred hands” in 2013, for example, his next sentence speaks of the way Americans of all faiths have a “deep abiding faith in this Nation.”

President Obama, although the most narrative in his presentation, was not the only president to share aspects of his faith journey or a sense of purpose from God. President Reagan, in his speech shortly after recovering from an attempt on his life, tells the audience that he has felt carried by the Lord (a reference to the familiar Christian “Footprints in the Sand” story he related that year and the year before) through the prayers and support of the people. He then spoke of the renewed sense of spiritual purpose in his life, stating “I always believed that we were, each of us, put here for a reason, that there is a plan, somehow a divine plan for all of us. I know now that whatever days are left to me belong to Him” (Reagan, 1982). Gibbs and Duffy (2007) suggest that this idea of a divine plan was a crucial part of Reagan’s family narrative, shared by an aunt who also narrowly escaped death, and that it was formative for Reagan from the 1981 assassination attempt on through the rest of his life. Typically for Reagan, he shared his story by telling a somewhat trite narrative not his own (in this case,

Footprints in the Sand), yet the personal meaning is there underneath, made clearer by his testimony to being carried and final words of dedication.

The other president who shared a personal faith story at the NPB, using Christian language, was, perhaps not surprisingly, President Carter. In his second address to the breakfast, Carter testified to his faith while explaining the term “born again” – a designation that came to public consciousness during his campaign for president, as he openly claimed to be a “born-again Christian,” a first for a presidential candidate (Espinosa, 2009; Kaylor, 2011). In his speeches, Carter did not tend to build a sermonic narrative, but rather to give teaching talks. Even his sharing of his faith perspective in 1978 was less story than lesson, but it was nonetheless one of his most personal moments at the NPB:

To me, God is real. To me, the relationship with God is a very personal thing. God is ever-present in my life – sustains me when I am weak, gives me guidance when I turn to him, and provides for me as a Christian through the life of Christ, a perfect example to emulate in my experiences with other human beings. My wife and I worship together every night, and often during the day I turn to God in a quiet and personal way. A few months back, the words ‘born again’ were vividly impressed on the consciousness of many Americans who were not familiar with their meaning. They’ve been used in many headlines and on the front covers of many magazines. But for those of us who share the Christian faith, the words ‘born again’ have a very simple meaning – that through a personal experience, we recommit our lives as humble children of God, which

makes us in the realest possible sense brothers and sisters of one another.

(Carter, 1978)

Although Carter testified to Christian commitment in this passage, he intentionally universalized what it meant to be “born again” as he sought to make a point about all people being one family, his main theme in that year’s speech.

Female Family Figures Passing on Faith

Family ends up being an important part of presidents’ approach to their faith stories at the NPB. Notably, for several presidents, sharing their journey of faith meant telling stories about strong female role models, both blood relatives and family-like figures. Although male family members may be mentioned, the focus of the stories or comments is on the women. With the public/private split starting in Victorian times, faith came to be associated with the home, due to its subtraction from the public square. Therefore the province of faith came to be seen by those subscribing to this public/private split as belonging to the mothers, grandmothers, and other saintly, compassionate figures in the home, from whom children learn the faith at their mother’s knee. Presidents at the NPB, repeatedly, speak of learning faith from such female figures. In the era when men and women formed separate audiences at the prayer breakfast, President Johnson, speaking to the female gathering, gives direct support to the idea of faith being taught in the home. President Reagan sounds a similar note in a fond recollection of his mother, and in the influence of his aunt, as noted earlier, who provided a model for him in the belief that being spared in the assassination attempt meant his life had renewed religious purpose. For Presidents Carter and Obama the faith learned and modeled from their mothers led to a commitment to the common good and to public service. Even President

Nixon, not generally given to personal reflection (he even referred to himself in the third person most of the time), spoke of his “saintly” Quaker grandmother in his final prayer breakfast speech, although he mainly used this to make a point about silent prayer.

Lastly, President Obama pointed beyond his blood family to “Mama Kaye,” his daughters’ godmother, who was organizing prayer circles for him all around the country.

President Johnson gave a heartfelt address to the women’s gathering his first year as president at the NPB, sharing a touching story of prayer, and testifying to his belief that “the men of public life have a very special debt – a special debt – to the strong women” who through their care of the home and family make possible men’s public service (Johnson, 1964). Reflecting the time period of the mid-1960s, he was unabashed in addressing the women as caretakers of the home. For him, such care included the instilling of faith, especially since that allowed it to be kept separate from state control (the spectre of communism ever present). He told the female audience in 1964: “I believe, as I know you believe, that our children should be taught to pray; but I know and I believe, as I think you believe, that this teaching is our task in our homes – a task much too sacred to ever be touched by the state.” President Johnson (1964) also related his own story about such teaching, remembering his mother while simultaneously referring to another speaker on the program who had spoken about his own faith upbringing: “In my childhood – Mike your children had the great blessing of a devout and faithful mother – In our home, as in yours, there was always prayer – aloud, proud, and unapologetic.” Almost two decades later, President Reagan would sound a similar note in remembering his mother while simultaneously underscoring his faithful upbringing:

I have a very special old Bible. And alongside a verse in the Second Book of Chronicles there are some words, handwritten, very faded by now. And believe me, the person who wrote those words was an authority. Her name was Nelle Wilson Reagan. She was my mother. (Reagan, 1983)

For President Johnson and President Reagan, faithful mothers passed along their praying and bible-reading ways to their sons, helping shape their future faith, and even contributing to their presidency by giving them a source of strength on which to rely.

Presidents Carter and Obama also spoke of their mothers at the NPB, telling stories that helped shape who they are as people of faith. For both of these presidents, their mothers were shown to be role models encouraging public service. President Carter, who tended to present an instructional, even hortatory tone in his prayer breakfast addresses, cited the story of his mother as an example of his main point in his 1980 speech. Nonetheless, it is a striking window into a person with clear resonance in his own life of service. His central point that year was that all people need to grow in their understanding so that they try to see things from a more universal perspective – from a God’s-eye view. In making that point, President Carter tells a remarkable story of his mother joining Peace Corps at age 68, where she took care of a girl with leprosy, at first afraid to even touch her, and then getting more comfortable with physical closeness, in the process having her understanding expanded, so that she saw the girl as a fellow human, not just as her disease. Typically for Carter, he is making a teaching point with this story, not sharing personally for the sake of sharing. However, one can clearly see the precedent and example for his life of dedicated, faith-filled service.

President Obama, in a manner typical for him, is more explicit in making the connection between the story of his mother and his own faith journey. In his first speech to the prayer breakfast as president in 2009 as he is talking about his faith background, he shows his mother's powerful influence on his favorite theme from scripture: the Golden Rule. "Do unto others" would be a theme he would cite again and again at the NPB, as will be discussed later in this chapter. For President Obama, his call to public service, rooted in the scripture, found a crucially formative example in a non-religious mother. Here is his testament to her in his 2009 speech:

I was not raised in a particularly religious household. I had a father who was born a Muslim but became an atheist, and grandparents who were non-practicing Methodists and Baptists, and a mother who was skeptical of organized religion, even though she was the kindest, most spiritual person I have ever known. She was the one who taught me as a child to love and to understand, and to do unto others as I would want done.

(Obama, 2009)

In his description of his upbringing, President Obama challenges traditionalist expectations that might be present at the NPB, while simultaneously doing what several presidents before him had also done: praise the formative influence of his mother on his faith and life of service.

While not every president at the NPB has spoken about female family role models, it is notable that President Nixon, who was so formal, even stiff, in most of his speeches, speaking about himself in the third person most of the time, would, in his final speech, show a little of his personal faith background by talking about his "saintly"

Quaker grandmother. President Nixon had been encouraged by Billy Graham to be more personal, confessional, and to speak more directly of his faith in his 1974 speech. Graham even went so far as to send a full draft of what he hoped Nixon would say (Gibbs & Duffy, 2007, p. 229). In the Graham proposal, rejected by Alexander Haig for being too confessional about Watergate (Gibbs & Duffy, p. 229), Nixon's speech would have ended "I want to take this opportunity today to rededicate myself to the God that I first learned about at my mother's knee" (p. 229). Although the confessional apologia was not present in the final version of the speech, Nixon did talk about his mother and grandmother in this, his last prayer breakfast address as president. He did so in order to make a point about prayer, connecting silent prayer to Lincoln, and thus connecting himself to the image of a president who prays, even if it is not visible on the surface:

My father, who was a Methodist, believed very strongly in spoken prayer, and my mother, who was a Quaker, believed in silent prayer, and both agreed that there was a place for both.

When I was 8 or 9 years old, I asked my grandmother – a very saintly woman, a little Quaker lady who had nine children – I asked her why it was that the Quakers believed in silent prayer... Her answer was very interesting, and perhaps it relates to why Lincoln prayed in silence. My grandmother spoke to me on this occasion, as she always did to her grandchildren and children, with the plain speech. She said, "What thee must understand, Richard, is that the purpose of prayer is to listen to God, not to talk to God. The purpose of prayer is not to tell God what thee wants but to find out from God what He wants from thee." (Nixon, 1974)

President Nixon ends his speech that year, not with a personal comment, but by connecting the image of silent, listening prayer to the strength of America, and by encouraging everyone at the prayer breakfast to pray silently, rather than being “arrogant” in telling God what to do. Yet even as he walked away from Graham’s advice to go confessional in his 1974 address, nevertheless the contrast of the personal story of his grandmother stands out as a rare moment in Nixon’s formal speeches, a moment that connects him to a pattern visible in several presidents’ testimonies at the NPB.

The final story of an influential female figure is once again from President Obama. With this story, we turn the corner to the next aspect of president’s telling their story of faith at the NPB, a focus on prayer. In 2011, with deft ability to be making a point about how roughly he was being treated in the public square, President Obama shared this about a family-like figure important to him and his journey:

I’ve got friends around the country – some who I know, some who I don’t know, but I know they’re friends who are out there praying for me. One of them is an old friend named Kaye Wilson. In our family we call her Momma Kaye, and she happens to be Malia and Sasha’s godmother. And she has organized prayer circles for me all around the country. She started small with her own Bible study group, but once I started running for President and she heard what they were saying about me on cable, she felt the need to pray harder. [*Laughter*] By the time I was elected President, she says ‘I just couldn’t keep up on my own.’ [*Laughter*] ‘I have to pray eight, nine times a day just for you.’ [*Laughter*] So she enlisted help from around the country. (Obama, 2011)

Here we get a glimpse into a world of the African-American church tradition, where strong women organize prayer circles, and serve as godparents for the president's family. We also see a president signaling both his own faith, and his awareness of the need for it amidst the rough-and-tumble of an increasingly partisan public square.

The Praying President

Although not all presidents have shared extended stories at the NPB about their personal or family faith background, most have spoken about what prayer means to them, a natural topic for the event. In reflecting on their prayer life, they help construct a narrative of who they are as people of faith. Some have testified to their belief in the power of prayer and in divine guidance, help, and sustenance. Some have led the prayer breakfast crowd in prayer as part of their talk. All presidents have shared a need for prayer, and gratitude for the prayers of others, topics that will be explored subsequently.

President Eisenhower gave only two brief talks at the "Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast" as it was called at that time. The prayer breakfast group, meeting together to support the president, seemed to welcome him as a fellow believer without a need for him to give a lengthy testimony. Eisenhower was known to support the public place of prayer, as noted at the beginning of this dissertation. He introduced the practice of beginning cabinet meetings with prayer, and it was during his administration that "under God" was added to the Pledge of Allegiance, and "In God we trust" became the national motto, added to all currency (Espinosa, 2009). At his inauguration, he began with a prayer he had written himself. President Eisenhower's 1956 remarks to the prayer breakfast, in fact, were given in response to the presentation of a gift commemorating that prayer (he had not originally been scheduled to speak). In explaining his thinking about the prayer and

the enthusiastic response it received from the American public, President Eisenhower positioned himself as a faithful layperson who was witnessing to the power and necessity of prayer:

I know very few people that tell me they are atheists or they are even agnostics, but we find among the laity a curious diffidence in merely stating the fact that they believe there is a God and He is more powerful than I and I am dependent upon Him. That is what the prayer did, and it was because a layman as I see it, did do so – and of course, in such a position – that this response came in. (Eisenhower, 1956)

President Eisenhower, raised in a home with lay-led prayer meetings typical of the Bible Student Movement (Jehovah's Witnesses) tradition of his parents (Smith, 2006), reflected that upbringing in his description.

Presidents throughout the decades of the prayer breakfast have, whether with lofty practiced words or briefer reflections, shown themselves to be people of prayer. Some, including Presidents Johnson, Ford, Reagan, and Obama, have led prayers or used doxological turns of phrase as part of their speeches, sometimes ending in the name of Jesus Christ. President Johnson quoted a prayer he had heard in the context of a trip to Vietnam as the final part of his prayer breakfast speech in 1967, saying that it was meaningful to him and that since he “returned home, it has not lost its power to speak to me, and to speak for me”:

O God, Who has bound us together in this bundle of life, give us grace to understand how our lives depend upon the courage, the industry, the honesty, and the integrity of our fellow men, that we may be mindful of

their needs, grateful for their faithfulness, and faithful in our responsibilities to them, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Johnson, 1967)

He was not the only one to include such prayer in the name of Jesus in his address. In 1975, President Ford ended his speech with an interesting prayer/not-prayer:

It had been my intention to suggest we have a prayer together at this point, but Harold Hughes will follow. Let me just say, I hope at some time during this day, each in your own way, if you think it appropriate, will pause to ask God's blessing up our Nation, our leaders in the executive, the legislative, leaders in all forms of government throughout this country, and yes, to all our people. And when you have finished, I think we can say that we should thank our Father for listening, in Jesus' name, amen. (Ford, 1975)

Both President Johnson and President Ford also shared personally about their prayer lives. Year after year, Johnson demonstrated a heartfelt embrace of faith and prayer, while also being careful to embrace the diversity of faith perspectives of the American people. In 1968, he opened his speech with a somewhat dark and grim sense of the country being in a difficult time of decision, and then said:

In this great office of all the people, it is not my right or my privilege to tell citizens how or when or what they should worship. I can – and I do – tell you that in these long nights your President prays. (Johnson, 1968)

President Ford, in an address that centered on the theme of prayer, told the 1975 prayer breakfast that prayer was personal for him as well: “Prayer is a very, very personal thing,

at least for me. Yet, to me, as many of my predecessors, it is a terribly important source of strength and confidence.”

Standing in the Need of Prayer

Although not all presidents pray out loud at the breakfast, or share about their personal prayer practices, most have spoken of their need for prayer, especially given the pressures on the role of president. In 1964, with perhaps a uniquely powerful reason for feeling this way, President Johnson began his address to the NPB by saying: “No man could live in the house where I live now or work at the desk where I work now without needing and without seeking the strength and the support of earnest and frequent prayer” (Johnson, 1964). Only a few short weeks into a presidency thrust upon him with the assassination of President Kennedy, Johnson showed a heartfelt need for support in his speech, expressed in characteristically straightforward language: “In these last 70 days, prayer has helped me to bear the burdens of this first office which are too great to be borne by anyone alone” (Johnson, 1964). It was a theme to which he would return the following year, with a deepening recognition of the burdens of the office after a year as President:

In these times, more than any other, the public life is a lonely life. The burden of every vote, of every decision, of every act, and yes, even of every utterance, is too great to be shared and much too great to be borne alone. (Johnson, 1965)

After delivering this remark, Johnson went on to say that he found “a sustaining strength from the moments of prayer” (Johnson, 1965), whether alone or with others as at the breakfast. His clarity in expression gives a uniquely frank look at the practical and

rhetorical burdens of the presidency, and places those burdens in the context of a sustaining faith.

Johnson was not alone in his sentiment. President after president examined for this study expressed the need for the sustenance of prayer. The prayer breakfast address appears to be a natural place for presidents to share such need in a vulnerable way, thus contributing to their narrative of faith. That is, they show themselves to be in need of prayer, just as all human beings are. At the first address in 1953, President Eisenhower, after indicating that he would not be giving an official address, but rather sharing some thoughts “in a very informal and homely way,” started his reflections with “First, there is a need we all have in these days and times for some help which comes from outside ourselves” (Eisenhower, 1953). President Ford, in a moment not unlike Johnson’s, shared that “on the day that I suddenly became President of the United States” he stopped at a mantle in the White House in which was carved a prayer written by John Adams “I pray to heaven to bestow the best of blessings on this house, and all that shall hereafter inhabit it” (Ford, 1975), and then indicated that he was grateful for that prayer. It was Ford who uttered, in echo of a traditional Christian spiritual, that he, along with the attendees at the prayer breakfast, were “standing in the need of prayer” (Ford, 1975), giving the title to this section of my analysis.

President George H. W. Bush made explicit in his 1989 address the source of the outside help needed through prayer, focusing his remarks on the need to pray not for what we want, but “for what is in the heart of God for us individually and as a nation” and sharing “I can also tell you from my heart that I freely acknowledge my need to hear and to heed the voice of Almighty God.” President Reagan before him declared in 1988 “His

comforting hand – well, I could never carry the responsibilities of this high office without it.” President Clinton, at his first address to the breakfast, spoke with clarity and eloquence of the need for prayer in the face of a contentious Washington, a theme he would return to over and over in his speeches, noting the need for faith and strength, and how touched he was “by the living example of Jesus Christ and moved particularly by all the religious leaders of His day who were suspicious of Him” (Clinton, 1993). With characteristic aplomb, and a touch of humor, Clinton mentioned in this speech that, at the time of his inauguration when he said “so help me God,” he was thinking “So, help me, God” (Clinton, 1993). For different reasons than Johnson, but with a similar level of frankness, Clinton saw that he was standing in the need of prayer, and that only divine sustenance would help. President Obama, also with a touch of humor, echoed that theme in his 2011 speech, evoking laughter from the audience: “The Presidency has a funny way of making a person feel the need to pray.” On a more serious note in 2014, President Obama shared: “the longer I serve, especially in moments of trial or doubt, the more thankful I am of God’s guiding hand.”

Telling the story of who they are as persons of faith allows presidents at the NPB to be vulnerable, to stand in need of prayer, and to be open about their struggles. In fact, the ethos of the Fellowship has been to encourage such sharing in their private meetings, despite it being an odd confluence to be asking that of the president at such a public gathering. Yet presidents have dared to do so, in particular President Johnson, who repeatedly spoke of the difficulty of bearing the weight of the presidency, and the loneliness of every decision, how much he needed the guidance of God and the comfort of prayer. And President Reagan, with somewhat surprising candor in both 1983 and

1984, talked about how God, scripture, and prayer encouraged him to get beyond personal “animus” in his dealings with those who disagreed with him politically. Finally, President Clinton showed vulnerability and gratitude when he thanked the prayer breakfast group in 1998 “for the prayer, the letters, the scriptural instruction that I have gotten from so many of you...in recent weeks,” a reference to his very public time of trial.

Grateful for the Prayers of Others. Many, although not all, of the presidents who have addressed the NPB in the last 65 years expressed the need for prayer or showed some sense of vulnerability, but every single one expressed gratitude for the prayers of others. President Kennedy in 1963, in what was to be his final address to the breakfast, shared that, of all the letters with good wishes received in his office, “none, I am sure, have moved any of the incumbents half so much as those that write that those of us who work here in behalf of the country are remembered in their prayers.” President Ford, after the first few months in office, said in 1975: “I have learned how important it is to have people pray for me,” and President Nixon expressed his gratitude directly: “I wanted to thank the people of this Nation, the people of this world who are praying for us” (Nixon, 1969). President Reagan included what he called a “personal note” in his 1987 speech to the prayer breakfast:

When I attended the commencement ceremonies at the Air Force Academy, I was surprised at how many of the graduating cadets came up to me, hand extended – 930 in all – and told me they were praying for me.
(Reagan, 1987)

President G.W. Bush sounded a similar note in February of 2001 when he made his first address to the breakfast: “Over the last several months, Laura and I have been touched by the number of people who come up and say, ‘We pray for you’ - such comforting words” (G.W. Bush, 2001). In 2007 he declared: “The greatest gift a citizen of this country can give those of us entrusted with political office is to pray for us.” The take-away from the various presidents’ remarks at the NPB is that the president stands in need of prayer as a human being facing challenging work in the context of massive pressures and accepts with gratitude the prayers of ordinary citizens on his behalf. While the critic would also note that he utters those sentiments as the most powerful person in the room, nevertheless the weight of the office is clear in the presidents’ words, and a unique aspect of the prayer breakfast speech in the presidential canon.

The President Shares with Other Public Leaders the Need for God’s Guidance

Presidents’ narratives of prayer and faith at times expand to embrace all the leaders in the room. When presidents express gratitude for the prayers of others, or say that they are in need of prayer, their messages at the NPB have often portrayed their need for God’s guidance, and how that need for guidance applies to all public leaders. From President Eisenhower’s “informal and homely” remark in 1953 that “there is a need we all have in these days and times for some help which comes from outside ourselves” to the sermonic rhetoric of President Obama, every president surveyed for this project touched on the need for leaders to seek divine guidance.

President Nixon noted the “necessity for divine guidance” due to the “awesome position of power of the Presidency,” and that “all of the assembled people from Government” need the spiritual strength that he contended has been a hallmark of

American society (Nixon, 1970). For President Carter, the need for divine guidance on the part of leaders was particularly rooted in their role as public servants:

Almost everyone in this room is a leader, trusted by others, looked up to by others, respected by others, influential among others. And I pray that doesn't give us a sense of pride or exaltation or a sense of self-satisfaction, but that it gives us a sense of humility and that we turn to God through prayer, so that we might better serve those who have placed their faith in us as we place our faith in God. (Carter, 1978)

President Reagan cautioned the leaders in the room in 1983 not to be too proud to pray as he emphasized the guidance found in the Bible. President G.H.W. Bush stated firmly "All of us should not attempt to fulfill the responsibilities we now have without prayer and a strong faith in God" (G.H.W. Bush, 1989). The faithful humility needed by leaders was a favorite theme of President Clinton, who remarked in his first prayer breakfast speech:

But perhaps most important of all for me, we need our faith, each of us, President, Vice President, Senator, Congressman, General, Justice, as a source of humility, to remember that, as Bishop Sheen said, we are all sinners. (Clinton, 1993)

President Clinton, more than any other president, sharpened the message about the need for leaders to seek a divine perspective, pointedly drawing memorable contrasts between Washington political culture and the biblical call to service. This inside-the-beltway focus will be discussed further below.

In more recent times, presidents have continued to speak at the NPB on public leaders' need for God's guidance. In fact, Presidents G.W. Bush and Obama share a

common emphasis on the need for humility, civility, prayer, and a commitment to the common good, communicated in well-written remarks. In his first address to the prayer breakfast, President G.W. Bush ended his speech:

I hope Americans will continue to pray that everyone in my administration finds wisdom and always remembers the common good. When President Harry Truman took office in 1945, he said this: “At this moment, I have in my heart a prayer. I ask only to be a good and faithful servant of my Lord and my people.” This has been the prayer of many Presidents, and it is mine today. (G.W. Bush, 2001)

President Obama, noting with a certain humorous sharpness the need for leaders humbly to seek guidance, included this passage in his reflections on the value of the NPB in 2014:

So each time we gather, it’s a chance to set aside the rush of our daily lives; to pause with humility before an Almighty God; to seek His grace; and mindful of our own imperfections, to remember the admonition of the Book of Romans, which is especially fitting for those of us in Washington: “Do not claim to be wiser than you are” (Obama, 2014)

Presidents have demonstrated in their prayer breakfast address that they, together with all public leaders, are in need of God’s help and guidance.

Washington political culture needs divine help. At times, presidential comments on the need for divine guidance have focused specifically on the contentious atmosphere in official Washington. According to presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast, elected leaders need to get beyond political infighting and remember that there

is more to life than getting ahead or getting even – specifically, a divine call to humble service. President Clinton in particular poked at the power brokers in the room at the NPB, repeatedly noting the need for all (including himself) to pray and seek God’s guidance. In a related but less pointed fashion, Presidents G.W. Bush and Obama spoke on the theme of civility, and the desire for a more humble and open political culture. The need for a divinely-inflected humility that presidents tie in with these comments will be discussed at more length in the public theology section of this chapter, but here I will look more closely at the call for civility and prayer that presidents invoke especially over official Washington.

President Clinton’s repeated use of the phrase “here in Washington” was noticeable in his speeches at the NPB. He did not hesitate to speak of what he portrayed as the need for a Washington political culture, including himself and others in the room, to get their priorities in divine order. He did not mince words. In 1997, he told the crowd “This town is gripped with people who are self-righteous, sanctimonious, and hypocritical; all of us are that way sometimes. I plead guilty, from time to time. We...spend an enormous amount of time here in Washington trying to get even.” In 1996 Clinton suggested that prayer was needed to help overcome the problems and divisions: “I ask you to pray for us to have a more charitable attitude toward one another, leaders and citizens alike, and in 1994, he called the crowd to “give our bitterness and resentments up” and instead turn towards divine priorities as revealed in scripture.

President Clinton was not the only president to comment on the need for official Washington to come to terms with its incivility, and to do so in the light of divine guidance. President Obama, also surrounded by an intense political culture in his time in

office, spent his 2010 speech focused on civility. “Now, for those of us here in Washington, let’s acknowledge that democracy has always been messy” he said, but noted “the sense that something is different now, that something is broken, that those of us in Washington are not serving the people as well as we should.” Both President Obama and President G.W. Bush before him called for a prayerful return to civility. Bush noted eloquently:

We will have our disagreements. Civility does not require us to abandon deeply held beliefs. Civility does not demand casual creeds and colorless convictions. Americans have always believed that civility and firm resolve could live easily with one another. But civility does mean that our public debate ought to be free from bitterness and anger and rancor and ill will. We have an obligation to make our case, not to demonize our opponents. As the Book of James reminds us, fresh water and salt water cannot flow from the same spring.” (G.W. Bush, 2001)

Presidents speaking at the NPB, sharing their perspectives on personal faith, prayer, and the need for divine guidance, have included as part of that narrative an appeal to other leaders in the room to join them in humbly seeking God’s help and guidance, sometimes in almost prophetic tones.

The First Interlude:

Faithful Leadership, Part I: the Great American Tradition

I now turn to the first of two interludes focused on the way presidents reflect on faithful leadership in their prayer breakfast addresses. In articulating the narratives I describe in this chapter, presidents also express an underlying concern with what it means

to be a faithful president, a faithful leader. As we have seen, presidents at the NPB tell their own story of faith, portray themselves as persons of prayer, and preach on the need for all leaders to seek divine guidance. They also turn to models of faithful leadership found in tradition and scripture. A substantial portion of this discourse fits clearly within the parameters of civil religion. Presidents cite American founders and pivotal figures as models of faithful leadership repeatedly at the NPB, often lifting up the same civil-religious “scriptures” cited by other speakers at the event. George Washington, Benjamin Franklin, and, above all, Abraham Lincoln are quoted as examples of faithful leadership, and founding documents are turned to for precedents that might support the presidents’ comments on what it means to be a public servant in America. Over the years, the repetition of some of the exact same stories – of Lincoln “falling to his knees in prayer” and Franklin calling for prayer at the constitutional convention – take on a hermeneutic, even mythic quality that seems to shape the various presidents’ speeches to the NPB.

America’s Founders were People of Faith

From the very first presidential address to the prayer breakfast, American founders were described as people of faith – real, gritty faith dealing with actual problems, not plaster saints. President Eisenhower made a point in his 1953 speech to debunk the idea of the “good old days,” showing the struggles the early American leaders went through to establish the republic. And he also showed these leaders turning to faith and prayer to get them through, citing what would become a favorite civil-religious story for presidents and other speakers in the ensuing decades at the NPB: the story of Benjamin Franklin calling for prayer at the Constitutional Convention. President Johnson

would cite that same story in 1965, making a particular point of Franklin's concern about the framers needing prayer to bring them together across divides:

Dr. Franklin told the framers of our Constitution, and I quote him:

‘Without His concurring aid, we shall succeed in this political building no better than the builders of Babel. We shall be divided by our little partial local interests. (Johnson, 1965)

President Reagan, speaking on the 200th anniversary of the Constitutional Convention, casts the story into scriptural-sounding tones as a significant moment of remembrance:

Two hundred years ago another group of statesmen gathered together in Philadelphia to revise the Articles of Confederation and bring forth our Constitution. They often found themselves at odds, their purpose lost in acrimony and self-interest, until Benjamin Franklin stood up and said: “I have lived a long time, and the longer I live, the more convincing proofs I see of this truth – that God governs in the affairs of men. And if a sparrow cannot fall to the ground without His notice, is it probable that an empire can rise without His aid?” And then he called upon the convention to open each day with prayer. (Reagan, 1987)

In quoting this favorite story, presidents at the NPB simultaneously speak the language of the Fellowship and undergird a traditional theme of civil religion: the faith of America's founders. In so doing, they provide a model of faithful leadership for themselves and the other leaders in the room.

Benjamin Franklin is not the only praying American founder cited by presidents at the prayer breakfast. President Washington has been another favorite, with his prayers

cited by Presidents Kennedy, Johnson, and Ford. President Ford, in the most quintessentially civil religious speech among the whole body of presidential addresses to the NPB, referred to America's founding Washington, among a whole host of founders and their documents, in his speech in America's bicentennial year, 1976. Strikingly, he cited Washington and other founders in a series of sermonic "let us" statements late in the speech:

Let us make it our "earnest prayer," as George Washington did two centuries ago that "God would graciously be pleased to dispose us all to do justice, to love mercy, and to demean ourselves with charity and humility, and a peaceful temper of mind, without which we can never hope to be a happy nation." (Ford, 1976)

Founding fathers Franklin and Washington, among others, are cited by presidents as models of prayer and faith at the NPB, but the American civil religious figure most often quoted is Abraham Lincoln.

If there is an NPB civil religious "scripture," it is the story of Lincoln being "driven to his knees" in prayer. Presidents have not cited it as often as other speakers at the event, but nevertheless it is repeated quoted in their speeches, starting with President Johnson in 1966, particularly fitting with his consistent expression of the personal heartfelt need for prayer:

There are times when I recall the wisdom of Abraham Lincoln when he said 'I have been driven to my knees many times by the overwhelming conviction that I had nowhere else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seem insufficient for the day. (Johnson, 1966)

Nixon alluded to the story in his 1974 speech, when he suggested that Lincoln was praying in silence on his knees. President G.H.W. Bush used the same words as Johnson in both 1989 and 1992. Interestingly, when President Obama mentioned the story in 2011, it evoked laughter from the crowd, as he cited it in the context of pointedly funny comments about the pressures of his first two years driving him to faith and prayer.

President Obama turned to Lincoln in a more serious vein repeatedly. He, along with Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Clinton, remembered how President Lincoln counseled that one should pray not that God is on our side, but we are on God's side, because both the union and confederate sides in the Civil War prayed to the same God and cited the same scriptures. Lincoln pointed to an Almighty God whose purposes could not be constrained by human injustice, and who called the president to align himself and the country with God's purposes.

Presidents reflecting on faithful leadership at the NPB, as we have seen, find models for such leadership in the American traditions, citing stories of founders such as Washington and Franklin, and especially by turning to the great civil religious example of Lincoln. In so doing, they have repeated stories familiar at the NPB, stories also cited by Fellowship speakers. Presidents have also, by reflecting on these American role models of faith, connected themselves to the civil religious heritage of their office.

Narrative Three:

Telling the American story: Civil religion at the NPB

Presidents' civil religious discourse at the NPB goes beyond portraying faithful leadership or showing how they adhere to a long line of praying presidents. I turn now to the next major narrative constructed in presidential prayer breakfast addresses. Part of

telling the human story for presidents at the prayer breakfast is telling the story of America. In their rhetoric, presidents construct a narrative about America and religious faith, showing how religious faith strengthens America, that freedom of religion is at the heart of who America is, and that America's rich blessings carry great responsibility. The prophetic tradition of civil religion is also present in presidents' prayer breakfast speeches, as they speak on the imperfections of America, describing a country with problems and struggles that need to be met with faith and prayer. Presidents who preach in the prophetic vein of civil religion cast a vision of a better America. In recent decades, this has included specific faith-in-action policy proposals. Lastly, at times presidents have indeed fulfilled the role of high priest in American civil religion, especially when their speech at the NPB has come close on the heels of a national tragedy.

Religious Faith Strengthens America

Many American presidents speaking at the NPB have claimed that religious faith strengthens the country. President Johnson declared "America never stands taller than when her people go to their knees," while being careful to note that such strength came from "our many faiths" (Johnson, 1968). President Nixon (1969), in his first presidential speech to the prayer breakfast the following year, claimed that religious faith brings the nation together despite our differences, and focused his message on the spiritual heritage of America, as found in previous presidents' inaugural addresses. In his bicentennial address to the prayer breakfast in 1976, Ford was clear that America's strength was to be found in its faith, saying: "we are gathered here this morning to recall and to renew that faith – faith in God and belief in the future of our country." As noted earlier, Ford's

speech that year was a sustained civil religious meditation, using well-crafted rhetoric to convey his message of a country shaped for 200 years by an active religious faith.

Ford would be followed by other Republican presidents who would use their speech at the NPB to preach a civil religious message in carefully crafted rhetoric, sometimes making political points along the way. There are some memorable moments, like this one from President Reagan in 1987, when he said that intercessory prayers in the homes of the country

are building high and strong this cathedral of freedom that we call America; those prayers, and millions like them, that will always keep our country secure and make her a force for good in these too troubled times.

(Reagan, 1987)

President Reagan's image of a "cathedral of freedom" was echoed in less lofty terms in President G.H.W. Bush's 1992 address, when he said "Four principles, four ideas really, inspire America...freedom, family, faith...fellowship." Both President Reagan and President Bush 41 supported signature aspects of their administrations' philosophies and approaches to governing in their prayer breakfast speeches, using such civil religious messaging. In 1984, President Reagan claimed:

America began as a God-loving, God-fearing, God-worshiping people, knowing there is a spark of the divine in each one of us. It is this respect for the dignity of the human spirit which keeps America invincible.

(Reagan, 1984)

In such words, President Reagan echoed traditionalist speakers at the prayer breakfast and his evangelical base, putting forth a version of America founded on, and strengthened

by, the individual faith of its citizens. Also emphasizing the individual and touting one of the signature efforts of his administration, President G.H.W. Bush lifted up his “Thousand Points of Light” in his 1990 speech, saying: “Americans are finding their soul, finding their God, by reaching out to their brothers and sisters in need.” For certain Republican presidents at the NPB, the opportunity to preach a civil religious vision of America allowed them to align themselves and their programs with what they portrayed as a grand heritage of faith.

In recent decades, Presidents G.W. Bush and Obama have also spoken about how religious faith strengthens America. Both of these more recent presidents, one Republican and one Democrat, have emphasized service, justice, and compassion. In the majority of his speeches, President G.W. Bush showed the power of prayer, faith, and compassion to move people to service to their neighbors. In 2007 he summarized many of his repeated themes in a substantial, theological message that will be further analyzed in the public theology section of this chapter. He began that passage with these words, affirming the strengthening effect of faith in America, and its role in serving those in need: “Many in our country know the power of prayer. Prayer changes hearts; prayer changes lives; and prayer makes us a more compassionate and giving people” (G.W. Bush, 2007). In 2012, President Obama, in one of his repeated themes, spoke about the biblical image of being “my brother’s keeper...my sister’s keeper” and how it influenced his thinking about policy, and his vision of America, stating “as a country, we rise and fall together.” In 2014, in an affirmative description of the progressive role of religion, President Obama spoke at some length about the contribution faith makes to our country, declaring clearly: “religion strengthens America. Brave men and women of faith have challenged our

conscience and brought us closer to our founding ideals, from the abolition of slavery to civil rights, workers' rights." For President Obama, a just and faithful American society is one that lives by its values: "If we leave our values at the door, we abandon much of the moral glue that has held our Nation together for centuries and allowed us to become somewhat more perfect a union" (Obama, 2012). President Obama was consistent in tying those American values in with the diversely-lived religious values that motivate so many citizens to serve the common good.

Freedom of Religion is at the Heart of who America is

In speaking about the strengthening effect of religious faith in America, presidents have often been careful to acknowledge the diversity of faiths present in our country. American freedom to practice a religion according to one's conscience, and the constitutional support for freedom of religion is a repeated theme of presidents speaking at the NPB. In fact, the combined effect of their rhetoric on this topic leads to the claim that heads this subsection: presidents at the prayer breakfast, together, preach that freedom of religion is at the heart of who America is. Every president analyzed for this study, with the exception of Nixon, conveyed this message.

In the early era of the prayer breakfast, as noted previously, presidents claimed that freedom of conscience and religion was part of what demarcated the United States from communist countries that tried to control their citizens. President Eisenhower spoke on such freedom in his first address, with an emphasis on what he called a free government "founded in a deeply-felt religious faith" (Eisenhower, 1953). President Kennedy highlighted the dialectic between religious freedom and religious conviction, which he located in the First Amendment:

This country was founded by men and women who were dedicated or came be dedicated to two propositions: first a strong religious conviction, and secondly a recognition that this conviction could flourish only under a system of freedom. (Kennedy, 1961)

President Johnson would repeatedly affirm the diversity of religious belief in America, the freedom of people to worship how they want, and not to have anyone tell them what to believe, as noted in an earlier section of this chapter. In 1964, he said “the separation of church and state has served our freedom well,” noting a similar dialectic to President Kennedy in continuing: “because men of state have not separated themselves from church and faith and prayer.” President Carter would say something similar 15 years later, teaching that American law requires the separation of church and state so that one cannot dominate the other, but claiming that “there is no way for a human being to separate in one’s own heart and mind” the responsibilities “of a secular life” and “responsibilities to God” (Carter, 1979). President Clinton would state simply in 1994: “in this Nation where we have freedom of religion, we need not seek freedom from religion.”

President G.W. Bush paid an eloquent tribute to the freedom of religion in America and his commitment to that value in his first address to the prayer breakfast:

Our country, from its beginnings, has recognized the contribution of faith. We do not impose any religion; we welcome all religions. We do not prescribe any prayer; we welcome all prayers. This is the tradition of our Nation, and it will be the standard of my administration. (G.W. Bush, 2001)

Both he and his father before him praised “the great American tradition of religious tolerance” (G.W. Bush, 2004), and both noted the freedom not to believe at all:

a truly religious nation is a tolerant nation. We cherish dissent, we cherish the fact that we have many, many faiths, and we protect even the right to disbelieve. (G.H.W. Bush, 1990)

In our country, we recognize our fellow citizens are free to profess any faith they choose, or no faith at all. (G.W. Bush, 2006)

American presidents, in fact, have consistently shown a greater openness to the diversity of belief in the country than other speakers at the NPB, and even to those who do not profess religious belief.

President Obama has also praised the freedom of religion and its central role in American identity in his remarks. He in fact summarizes clearly the theme as it has developed over the years at the NPB:

The United States is one of the most religious countries in the world, far more religious than most Western developed countries. And one of the reasons is that our Founders wisely embraced the separation of church and state. Our Government does not sponsor a religion, nor does it pressure anyone to practice a particular faith or any faith at all. And the result is a culture where people of all backgrounds and beliefs can freely and proudly worship, without fear or coercion. (Obama, 2015)

Freedom of religion, the separation of church and state, an America that did not and does not establish a particular religion, is cited as a central value by almost all presidents at the NPB. Nixon, an outlier among the presidential speakers at the prayer breakfast, referred

to America as “a Christian nation” in 1972, and never directly discussed First Amendment freedoms. But otherwise, a central part of the civil-religious message of the presidential address to the NPB is that freedom of religion is at the heart of who America is. As a final note to this section, and leading in to our next topic, we will consider the one president we have not heard from. For President Reagan, with his “cathedral of freedom” image of America, the great tradition of religious freedom was considered foundational to the nation, and an indication of God’s blessings:

I also believe that this blessed land was set apart in a very special way, a country created by men and women who came here not in search of gold, but in search of God. They would be free people, living under the law with faith in their Maker and their future. (Reagan, 1982)

Freedom of religion, for President Reagan and several other presidents who have spoken at the prayer breakfast, was seen as a gift of God, a blessing meant to be shared.

America’s Rich Blessings Carry Great Responsibilities

America, a beacon of freedom richly endowed by its Creator with life, liberty, and abundance, has a role to play in a world beset by difficulty and need. This message, the next theme in our consideration of civil religion in the presidents’ speeches at the NPB, is not articulated by all the presidents, but it has been given voice by both Democrats and Republicans, sometimes in powerful ways.

Following on Reagan’s image of a blessed land, President G.W. Bush preached in 2006 “from these prayerful beginnings, God has greatly blessed the American people, and through our prayers, we give thanks to the true source of our blessings.” He also tied this image of blessing with the need to be a blessing to others, and the call to public

service: “What I’ve found in our country, that whatever our faith, millions of Americans answer the universal call to love your neighbor just like you’d like to be loved yourself.” President Obama referred to the “duty” of sharing, casting this vision in a biblical idiom, even as he connected it with the role of citizen, saying in his 2009 speech that feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, comforting the afflicted, making peace, and lifting up the fallen is “our duty as citizens of America and our duty as citizens of the world.”

Two other Democratic presidents also emphasized the sense of responsibility that they said is connected with the religious and constitutional foundation of America. According to President Kennedy, America has had an obligation to God, since its founding, because of the way the country is marked by religious conviction, “which must carry with it a sense of responsibility to others if it is genuine” (Kennedy, 1963). And President Clinton, in the midst of a speech emphasizing the biblical call to service, also claimed that the powers given in the constitution are “for the purpose of helping others” (Clinton, 1994).

Lastly, President Nixon, with a particular focus on the threat of nuclear weapons, and his diplomacy efforts in China and Russia, claimed that America had a destiny “to give to other nations of the world an example of spiritual leadership and idealism which no material strength or military power can provide” (1970), and that America had a peacemaking role to play in light of nuclear weapons. “Our role may be to help build a new structure of peace in the world, where peoples with great differences can live together, talk about these differences, rather than fight about them” (1972). With President Nixon, the sense of responsibility conveyed in the rich spiritual blessings

bestowed upon America had real, practical consequences that could benefit the whole world.

We are not Perfect: Seeking a Better America through God

Although at least some presidents have presented a glowing image of America as a God-blessed model to the world, all presidents have spoken about the problems, struggles, and imperfections of the United States in their prayer breakfast messages. Echoing other speakers at the event, some presidents have focused on the noble tradition in America of facing challenges through the strength of faith. Occasionally, presidents have used their prayer breakfast message to engage in a weaponized use of religious rhetoric as they articulated what they saw as the problems of the country, none more so than President Reagan. Several presidents have engaged in the prophetic function of civil religious rhetoric in their speeches to the NPB, speaking with a sense of humility about America's shortcomings in light of a religious ideal, and a faith-filled vision of hope about the possibility for a better America.

Facing challenges with faith: an American tradition. It is perhaps not surprising that the early years of the prayer breakfast saw presidents sounding very similar notes to other speakers at the event, with a common concern for the challenges, problems, and worries of modernity and the cold war. President Eisenhower began in 1953: "First, there is a need we all have in these days and times for some help which comes from outside ourselves as we face the multitude of problems that are part of this confusing situation." Although he does not name communism, he does say that "these problems are part of all of us...because we are a free country" and suggests that the challenge of freedom is needing to bear "responsibilities equal to [one's] privileges"

(Eisenhower, 1953). President Kennedy each year spoke of the challenges America was facing, for example telling the breakfast crowd in 1961 “our Nation is passing through another time of trial,” and he also, as noted above, sounded memorable themes of service, responsibility, and faith.

In 1963 President Kennedy noted the limits of human efforts in the face of the enormous challenges America was facing:

The problems we face are complex; the pressures are immense, and both the perils and the opportunities are greater than any nation ever faced. In such a time, the limits of mere human endeavor become more apparent than ever. (Kennedy, 1963)

Instead, he said, “We need the faith which has sustained and guided this Nation for 175 long and short years” (1963). President Johnson continued this theme of the need for faith in the face of the complex challenges of modernity – in this case, the challenges of war and what he portrayed as the grim tasks of defending freedom (he does not name Vietnam, but that seems to be his focus in 1967 and 1968), with his signature addition of “many faiths”:

It is for such seasons as this one that man was given by his Creator the saving strength of faith – the strength we summon to sustain us when we pray. Once again, this is a season now when America needs to draw upon the strength of our many faiths. (Johnson, 1968)

Two decades later, President G.H.W. Bush described the “tough problems and opportunities” facing America, and also said that such challenges necessitated the work of faith, specifically prayer: “I believe that a wonderful resource in dealing with them is

prayer – not just prayer for what we want but prayer for what is in the heart of God for us individually and as a nation” (G.H.W. Bush, 1989). His son, giving what was essentially a war speech to the prayer breakfast in 2003, also summoned the need for faith and prayer in the face of the challenges America was facing:

In this hour of our country’s history, we stand in the need of prayer. We pray for the families that have known recent loss. We pray for the men and women who serve around the world to defend our freedom. We pray for their families. We pray for wisdom to know and do what is right. And we pray for God’s peace in the affairs of men. (G.W. Bush, 2003)

For several presidents, then, outlining the challenges facing America, the problems, needs, and struggles, meant showing America engaging in a noble cause, necessitating a recognition of the way human endeavors, no matter how responsibly undertaken, would not be sufficient, and thus the need for Americans to call on the resources of faith.

Back when it was better: Reagan’s politicized rhetoric. As presidents have articulated the challenges and commented on problems facing America in their prayer breakfast speeches, the opportunity to use the moment for political gain has been ever present. And while several presidents have tied in their vision of faithful living with their own signature programs, as will be seen in a subsequent section on faith-based programming, nevertheless I have found it notable how seldom presidents have engaged in what Domke and Coe (2008) would term “weaponized” religious rhetoric. The primary exception to that was President Reagan, who repeatedly hit the culture war alarm bells in his speeches. In 1982, after saying he believed that America was a “blessed land,”

President Reagan, in a noticeable change in tone from presidential prayer breakfast speeches before him, said:

Sometimes, it seems we've strayed from that noble beginning, from our conviction that standards of right and wrong do exist and must be lived up to. God, the source of knowledge, has been expelled from the classroom. He gives us His greatest blessing, life, and yet many would condone the taking of innocent life. We expect Him to protect us in a crisis, but turn away from Him too often in our day to day living. I wonder if He isn't waiting for us to wake up. (Reagan, 1982)

Nor was such rhetoric a one-time choice for Reagan. In 1983 he opened his speech with: "You know, on the way over, I remembered something that happened a long time ago when teachers could talk about things like religion in the classroom." In his speeches, President Reagan cast a vision of a better America, but it was a vision that looked back, to a time when he claimed people were more faithful to their God

America is better than that: prophetic civil religion at the prayer breakfast.

Although it could be argued that President Clinton used his prayer breakfast speeches to score political points in his sharp comments about Washington "gotcha" culture, his lament did not appear to be aimed at one side or the other in the political fights. Rather, he challenged everyone to engage with one another, on behalf of a biblical vision of justice, service, and community. In so doing, Clinton carried on the prophetic tradition of civil religion (Bellah, 1975), focused on calling America to live by its highest ideals, and casting that vision in a religious light. In 1996 Clinton declared: "We would be a better country if our communities and our country acted more like the best family, where we all

played our part including the Government.” As he talked about the challenges facing America, he was willing to challenge the people in the room to step up. In 1997 Clinton spoke of a “time of great change and challenge” and how the economy was booming, there was no war, and that therefore “this country has the most astonishing opportunity we have ever had.” And then Clinton lamented “half of us want to sit down, and the other half of us want to get in a fight with each other.” He concluded “The United States is better than that” (Clinton, 1997). Clinton was consistent in his messages, not only in presenting such challenging words, but also in pointing to the biblical call to serve those in need, a theme that will be explored further in the public theology section of this chapter.

Other presidents have also engaged in the prophetic strain of civil religion in their prayer breakfast addresses. President Carter in particular was willing to speak of where America could be better, and to directly confront the limits of status quo civil religion. In his very first prayer breakfast speech as president, he focused on sinfulness and the need for humility, saying at one point:

We as individuals – and we as a nation – insist that we are the strongest and the bravest and the wisest and the best. And in that attitude, we unconsciously, but in an all-pervasive way, cover up and fail to acknowledge our mistakes and in the process forgo an opportunity constantly to search for a better life or a better country. (Carter, 1977)

He followed that with a Christian admonition against pride, and then presented a unique moment in presidential prayer breakfast speeches, telling the NPB: “In effect, many of us worship our Nation” (Carter, 1977). President Carter, more than any other president who has spoken at the event, challenged any assumptions of God-blessed privilege that might

be present in the room, or in the country. In so doing, Carter exemplified the long tradition of prophetic civil religion. “America is better than that” is a civil religious message, no matter how challenging, because the focus is on being a better America, rather than a call to a particular religion’s agenda.

For President Obama, whose prayer breakfast messages often contained a positive portrayal of the way faith-filled people have addressed struggles with a focus on the common good, the prophetic challenge to listeners was to recognize the way America still falls short of its highest ideals. Among many examples of this type of speech, in 2010, President Obama spoke about the spirit of sacrifice present when Americans unite in time of trouble or crisis, but then said “that spirit is too often absent when tackling the long-term, but no less profound, issues facing our country and the world.” Whereas President Carter sometimes left his speeches on a pessimistic note, and President Clinton challenged the room over and over with a lament over political infighting, for President Obama, the tone was challenging but hopeful as he cast a vision and talked about action steps being taken to create the better America he envisioned. President Obama joined several other presidents in articulating those action steps in terms of specific faith in action policies.

Faith in Action Initiatives: A Better America

Noticeably in recent years, but going back to President Johnson, presidents speaking at the NPB have used the opportunity to describe, announce for the first time, or even propose faith-in-action initiatives that help constitute the American story. With the prayer breakfast speech occurring so soon after the State of the Union, sometimes these initiatives had just been announced, and the prayer breakfast becomes an opportunity to

flesh them out. But other times, presidents appear to be “floating” a religious proposal for the first time. For at least one of these proposals, it is not clear that anything came of it, but others became signature parts of the president’s time in office. This has particularly been the case in the last two presidencies studied for this project: George W. Bush and Barack Obama. Whether central or peripheral to their administrations, though, it is a notable that presidents would make such faith-based initiatives a point of their addresses to the NPB. It appears to have been a natural location for such announcements, and an opportunity both to connect with a religiously-inclined audience, and to discuss their own thinking about the initiatives.

President Johnson was the first president to float a faith-based proposal at the NPB, and the only one whose idea never appeared to have come to fruition. At his first prayer breakfast as president, he made this proposal in 1964:

In this Capital City today we have monuments to Lincoln and to Jefferson and to Washington, and to many statesmen and many soldiers. But at this seat of government there must be a fitting memorial to the God who made us all. Our Government cannot and should not sponsor the erection of such a memorial with public funds. But such a living memorial should be here. It should be a center of prayer, open to all men of all faiths at all times. If I may speak this morning as a citizen and a colleague and a friend, I would like to suggest to this group, which has done so much through all the years, that it undertake the mission of bringing together the faiths and the religions of America to support jointly such a memorial here in this federal city – the capital of the free world. (Johnson, 1964)

The “memorial” was never built, and at least one Episcopal journal of the time period, while noting what they deemed Johnson’s sincerity in the proposal, nevertheless pointed out that the city already had Washington National Cathedral, and that a “memorial” might not be the most appropriate word to apply to a living God (*Unnecessary Necessity*, 1964, p. 15).

President Reagan had more success with his faith-based announcement: the Year of the Bible. At the 1983 NPB President Reagan declared that he was glad to serve as the “honorary chairman for the Year of the Bible.” This designation did not come from him, but from Congress, but it was Reagan who announced it for the first time at the NPB. At the end of his speech, which focused at least partially on the value of scripture, he ended:

Now I would like to sign a proclamation which will make 1983 the Year of the Bible. And I want to thank Senator Bill Armstrong and Representative Carlos Moorhead and all those inside and outside of Congress who assisted them and made this all possible. Thank you, and God bless you. And I’m going down and sign the proclamation. (Reagan, 1983)

In a similar fashion, President G.H.W. Bush declared February 3, 1991 a national day of prayer in his NPB address three days earlier. That address was very much a wartime speech, and his designation of a day of prayer was specifically encouraging “all people of faith” to pray

a prayer for peace, a prayer for the safety of our troops, a prayer for their families, a prayer for the innocents caught up in this war, and a prayer that

God will continue to bless the United States of America. (G.H.W. Bush, 1991)

As mentioned earlier, President Bush would also use his prayer breakfast speeches to lift up his “Thousand Points of Light” initiative, encouraging individual acts of service.

Starting with President Clinton presidents have consistently discussed specific policies, offices, or government positions related to religion in their NPB address. President Clinton, who tended towards detailed policy-oriented speeches at the breakfast, was clear both about the biblical call to serve “the least of these” and about the particular policies or actions his administration was taking to encourage such service. He noted partnerships with faith-based organizations in this work. In 1998, discussing his signature AmeriCorps program, he said: “We now have 5000 Americans working with religious organizations earning the AmeriCorps scholarship.” In 1999, President Clinton’s attention turned to religious freedom, and he mentioned the Religious Freedom Act of 1998, and the Ambassador-at-Large for International Religious Freedom.

Promotion of faith-related government efforts was a signature effort of President G.W. Bush, as he announced in his first speech at the NPB in 2001: “In my second week in office, we have set out to promote the work of community and faith-based charities.” Bush was clear in his rhetoric: “My administration will put the Federal Government squarely on the side of America’s armies of compassion.” In 2005, President Bush connected the work of faith-based charities in America with the memory of Abraham Lincoln calling people to “humble themselves before their Maker and to serve all those in need,” saying “our faith-based institutions display that same spirit of prayer and service in their work every day.” President Bush, while praising his administration’s support of

faith-based charities, even drawing a connection to the central civil religious icon, nevertheless did not go into explicit detail about the program itself. The president to follow him would.

President Obama talked about his Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships Office almost every single year he spoke at the NPB, among other faith-related initiatives. He announced the creation of the office at his first prayer breakfast speech in 2009, saying he would be announcing later that day the “White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.” He put this effort in the context of serving the common good, a repeated theme in his rhetoric, declaring “this is not only our call as people of faith, but our duty as citizens of America and our duty as citizens of the world” (Obama, 2009). Year by year, President Obama would discuss the work of his faith-based office, explaining in detail their efforts, and putting those efforts in theological context. He also repeatedly, and with heartfelt appreciation, praised the Director of the office, Joshua DuBois, who in some ways served as personal chaplain and go-to religious consultant for President Obama. In 2011, President Obama highlighted the necessity of partnerships to being able to care “for the least of these” fully:

Now, sometimes faith groups can do the work of caring for the least of these on their own; sometimes they need a partner whether it’s in business or government. And that’s why my administration has taken a fresh look at the way we organize with faith groups, the way we work with faith groups through our Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.
(Obama, 2011)

The next year, his focus was on the interfaith aspect of the work, saying that:

Since we've expanded and strengthened the White House faith-based initiative, we've partnered with Catholic Charities to help Americans who are struggling with poverty, worked with organizations like World Vision and American Jewish World Service and Islamic Relief to bring hope to those suffering around the world. (Obama, 2012)

In 2014, after giving a heartfelt farewell to Joshua DuBois in his 2013 speech, President Obama commended the new Director, and also announced that he looked “forward to nominating our next Ambassador at Large for International Religious Freedom,” a position that had existed for some time, but he would be the first to appoint a rabbi to the post. He announced the new Ambassador the next year: Rabbi David Saperstein.

Throughout Obama's presidency, you see him expanding on the idea of supporting faith-based efforts – an idea he inherited from President G.W. Bush – and making that idea his own. In President Obama's rhetoric, the tradition of lifting up faith-based ideas, programs, and initiatives at the NPB takes on new life, and an expansive, interfaith purview.

President as High Priest of American Civil Religion

In this last section focusing on the presidential civil religious narratives of America at the NPB, I turn to two speeches that bear the marks of civil religion in a particular way: the president rising to the occasion of a national tragedy to fulfill the role of high priest. President Reagan's address shortly after the shuttle tragedy in 1986, and President G.W. Bush's speech a few months after the September 11, 2001 attacks both stand out from the rest of their respective speeches, both contain elements of the genre of national eulogy (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008), and in both speeches, the presidents

functioned as high priest of American civil religion. As noted in my literature review, in civil religious theory, presidents serve a symbolic unifying role for the American people, functioning as a “high priest” that represents the people to God, and God to the people (Bellah, 1975; Gonzalez, 2012). President Reagan and President G.W. Bush both exemplified this role in the particular prayer breakfast speeches discussed here.

President Reagan’s NPB speech in 1986 was delivered one week after the space shuttle Challenger exploded, a tragedy witnessed by the entire country as it was broadcast live. His speech at the prayer breakfast drew directly on remarks he had shared on national television the week before, as he again recited the poem with its memorable lines: “I’ve slipped the surly bonds of earth and danced the skies” and “I’ve trod the high untrespassed sanctity of space, put out my hand and touched the face of God.” Reagan in his prayer breakfast speech reflected on why he chose the poem the week before, and then he turned to scripture, saying “Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning” (Psalm 30:5). The president then drew on words the minister at the recent memorial service had spoken, reflecting both on grief and the hope that all would remember “the grandeur and the grace of life.” President Reagan developed that theme in his prayer breakfast address in his usual story-telling style, and then turned to a closing that I found strikingly different than his other speeches, with a kind of tender sense of urgency, and a liturgical closing:

We have so much in common – we share an anchor that roots us in the heavy seas, and that anchor is the joy that God gave us. Let our thoughts today be of how man harnesses his sadness and turns it into triumphant work. And that’s what I wish for all of us in this room – that in our

individual work this year, we will fight on for what's right and good and resist the badness that is in us and that we'll do it with joy, because God gave that as a gift to be used.

If I had a prayer for you today, among those that have all been uttered, it is that one we're all so familiar with: The Lord bless you and keep you; the Lord make His face to shine upon you and be gracious unto you; the Lord lift up His countenance upon you and give you peace. (Reagan, 1986)

In his words speaking of God-given joy that turns sadness into "triumphant work," President Reagan expressed in religious terms the turn from past to future that is a mark of the national eulogy genre (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008). Reagan also, in quite a literal way, enacted the role of high priest of American civil religion in reciting the Aaronic blessing/Christian doxology as the close of his speech.

President G.W. Bush, in his 2002 prayer breakfast address, was several months out from the terrorist attacks of 9/11, but the day was still fresh in his words. He recognized several people by name directly connected with the attacks, particularly Lisa Beamer, whose husband helped bring down the flight over Pennsylvania, and whom Bush calls "a model of grace." President Bush meditated on prayer as he often did in his speeches, but this time it was with some of his most powerful rhetoric, and his one most specifically Christian moment, mentioned earlier, about hope and comfort found in the cross. He directly connected his reflections on prayer with the tragedy, saying "The prayers of this Nation are part of the good that has come from the evil of September the 11th." Then President Bush presented a four-step sermon on faith, embracing the powerful themes raised by the attacks while transforming them through the power of a

religious faith that he rhetorically connected with the diversity of America, and with the NPB: “Faith gives the assurance that our lives and our history have a moral design,” “faith shows us the reality of good and the reality of evil,” “faith shows the way to self-giving,” and “the promise of faith is not the absence of suffering; it is the presence of grace.” Finally, President Bush quoted the bible in his closing, saying “And at every step we are secure in knowing that suffering produces perseverance, and perseverance produces character, and character produces hope, and hope does not disappoint.” Notably, in this speech, for the first time at the NPB, the president ended with “may God continue to bless America.” In his rhetorical transformation of suffering into hope, President Bush exemplified one of the functions of the national eulogy, and in his sustained sermonic delivery and final blessing, he enacted the role of high priest of American civil religion.

Beyond personal piety and civil religion – public theology at the NPB

When Presidents speak in religious language at the NPB, as we have seen, they tell the story of the “great tradition” of the prayer breakfast, they construct personal narratives of faith, and they connect the narrative arcs of America and religion in civil religious ways. The narratives we have examined so far in this chapter, however, do not tell the whole story of the presidential address to the NPB. In the remainder of this chapter I will examine the way presidents engage in public theology, through how they construct the divine story, and how, finally, they speak of what it means to live faithfully in response to a living and active God. As Thiemann (1991) noted, “American presidents have been among our most important public theologians” (p. 31). At the NPB, a public

theology that seeks to contribute to the common good by bringing theological insight to bear on shared human concerns is evident in presidents' preaching.

Narrative Four:

Constructing God-consciousness: Telling the Divine Story at the NPB

My analysis suggests that as presidents have spoken at the NPB, even as they tell faith-based stories of the NPB, themselves, and America, they also have constructed a divine narrative in their speeches. That is, they have turned to scripture or other religious sources to tell a story of God. In so doing, they have engaged in what homiletical theorist David Buttrick (1987) referred to as constructing "God-consciousness." According to Buttrick, the preacher incorporates the human story into God's story through the act of preaching. In this section, I will lay out the themes I have found in the presidents' telling of the divine story – that is, how they have constructed "God-consciousness." As will be seen, each theme, in telling the divine story, also says something about humanity.

Presidents speaking at the NPB have preached of a God who is infinite, while humans are finite. They have also preached of a God who is perfect, while humans are imperfect. Presidents have portrayed God as the source of all good, giving gifts of wisdom and guidance needed by humanity, especially public leaders. And presidents have spoken of God as living and active, at work in the world – a God whose presence relativizes all human claims to power, and who calls people to a life of purpose, lived in humility.

God is Infinite, Humans Finite

The divine being pictured by presidents at the NPB is One who is infinite, vast as the universe, and yet takes notice of finite human beings. President Eisenhower in his first speech, when he said that "prayer is just simply a necessity" explained his comment

by saying “because by prayer I believe we mean an effort to get in touch with the infinite” (Eisenhower, 1953). President Kennedy agreed, depicting the limits of human endeavor and saying “we must reach beyond ourselves if we are to seek ultimate courage and infinite wisdom” (Kennedy, 1961). According to Kennedy, in order to fulfill the weighty responsibilities before them, humans need faith, prayer, and the guidance of the infinite (Kennedy, 1963). President G.W. Bush also noted the limitations of a finite humanity in his 2004 speech, encouraging listeners to prayer: “as we meet whatever test might come, let us never be too proud to acknowledge our dependence on Providence and to take our cares to God.” For President Bush, the ability for finite humans to approach the infinite God was due to God’s care for humanity: “we are small in God’s universe, yet precious in His sight” (G.W. Bush, 2001). Compared to an infinite God, according to President Bush, finite humans are equal, and equally loved: “at this annual gathering, we are reminded of an eternal truth: When we lift our hearts to God, we’re all equal in His sight. We’re all equally precious; we’re all equally dependent on His grace” (G.W. Bush, 2008).

In considering an infinite God, President Clinton repeatedly turned to a scripture passage from the Apostle Paul’s First Letter to the Corinthians, saying that humans were limited in their ability to see what God could see, and needed to recognize that limitation in their dealings with one another: Because ‘now I see through a glass, darkly...now I know only in part.’ None of us know all that we need to know to do what we need to do” (1993 – Clinton would cite the passage again in 1995, 1996, and 2000). President Obama also acknowledged the limits of a human perspective in his speeches at the prayer breakfast, declaring in 2011: “The full breadth of human knowledge is like a grain of

sand in God's hands. And there are some mysteries in this world we cannot fully comprehend. As it's written in Job, 'God's voice thunders in marvelous ways. He does great things beyond our understandings'" (Job 37:5). According to at least some presidents preaching at the NPB, an infinite God relativizes finite humanity, who can be reassured by the grace, love, and care with which they are regarded, and turn to that infinite God in prayer.

God is Perfect, Humans Imperfect

Presidents have the opportunity at the prayer breakfast to step back from the relentless drive to be right that characterizes so much of political culture and consider common human imperfection in relation to a perfect God. Only God is perfect, according to several presidents speaking at the NPB – humans are imperfect, even sinful, and need to remember their flaws. Some presidents portray a God of forgiveness and grace, offering redemption in response to sinful humanity. But most simply draw the contrast between divine perfection and the way humans fall short of God's glory, and the cautionary note that reality sounds for human self-regard and humility.

President Eisenhower, continuing his thought about finite humans approaching an infinite God in prayer, was frank about the limits of that prayer: "We know that even our prayers are imperfect. Even our supplications are imperfect. Of course they are. We are imperfect human beings" (Eisenhower, 1953). For President Obama, it is precisely human imperfection that drives us to prayer, to seek communion with God: "It's in these moments, when we feel most intensely our mortality and our own flaws and the sins of the world that we most desperately seek to touch the face of God" (Obama, 2011).

Presidents speaking at the NPB, from the first to the last, have been willing to speak of a divine perfection before which humanity recognizes its own imperfect limitations.

President Clinton, who cited scripture often in his addresses, and seemed particularly fond of the Pauline corpus, made a startling choice for his first biblical quote, given where his presidency ended up. Speaking on the theme of the various reasons why humans need faith at his first prayer breakfast as president in 1993, Clinton quoted St. Paul in support of the idea that “we need our faith...as a source of humility” because “we are all sinners.” The Pauline quote (Romans 7:15) as he stated it was “The very thing which I would not do, that I do, and that which I would, that I do not.” Clinton would return again and again to Paul’s scriptures that contrast human imperfection with divine perfection, sometimes quoting chapter and verse, and sometimes simply incorporating Pauline insights into his own wording, as in this remark in 1995: “We are here because we are all children of God, because we know we have all fallen short of God’s glory” (a reference to Romans 3:23). When he spoke about sinfulness, as he did in 1993, he was not alone in doing so at the prayer breakfast. Clinton was masterful at building off of the other speakers in the program and seemed comfortable incorporating their themes and wording into his own speech on the fly. In 1993, he echoes Billy Graham in encouraging the crowd, saying “each of us is capable of redemption” and that the goal was “progress, not perfection” (Graham’s wording).

President Clinton was not the only Democratic Southern Baptist comfortable with “sinner” language. In what was the first use of that language at the NPB by a president, President Carter freely talked about sin in his first address to the gathering in 1977, as he developed his theme of humility that year. According to Carter, humans need to be able

to “admit our sinfulness and our mistakes” and see God as the “ultimate source of goodness” (Carter, 1977). He began his talk that year quoting a scripture that has been repeated by Fellowship speakers, and would also be quoted by President Reagan:

If my people who are called by my name shall humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from Heaven and forgive their sins and heal their land. (II Chronicles 7:14)

President Carter presents here a God who forgives and heals in the face of human sin and imperfection. He had no qualms about challenging traditional assumptions of civil religion in his development of this theme. This was the year he challenged the group: “In effect, many of us worship our Nation” (Carter, 1977). More complexly, he critiqued the idea of president as high priest (without naming it as such), and swept all politicians in the room into his criticism of “excessive patriotism” and the way presidents and other leaders can justify the love of the people by taking on the attributes of those they represent. Instead, he encouraged humility and being a servant. President Carter was quite willing to delve into human imperfection in his talks, starting with this first address to the prayer breakfast, and also to portray God as the answer to human sinfulness.

President Obama, as noted earlier in discussing his personal faith testimony, affirmed Jesus Christ as his saving Lord, and his belief “that the acceptance of Christ promises everlasting life and the washing away of sins” (Obama, 2016). The word grace arises repeatedly in President Obama’s speeches to the NPB as he considers human imperfection in the light of God’s perfection. He also, much as the two recent Democratic presidents before him, spoke on the need for humility in the face of divine perfection. As

he stated clearly in 2012: “It is God who is infallible, not us.” Interestingly, given the historic concerns about presidents citing biblical precedents for their policy positions (Smith, R.M., 2008), Obama utters this firm word after he has given an extended talk on the biblically-influenced values that underlie his approach to specific policy. His larger point: “Our goal should not be to declare our policies as Biblical. It is God who is infallible, not us...But each and every day, for many in this room, the Biblical injunctions are not just words, they are also deeds” (Obama, 2012).

In what was to prove his strongest speech to the prayer breakfast, President Nixon also voiced a concern with human claims of perfection in his 1972 address, declaring clearly “what is very important about this gathering is that we would not be here unless we all recognized in our hearts that we were not perfect.” His focus that year was on the need to work together for peace, and his upcoming trip to China and Russia. President Nixon expressed particular caution about human imperfection in light of the power now in human hands: “We all realize that because of the new sources of power that have been unleashed in the world that we all must learn either to live together or we shall die together” (Nixon, 1972). He would, that year, and in other years, point to the civil religious story about Lincoln saying “I am more concerned not whether God is on our side, but whether we are on God’s side” to ask for prayer that his efforts, and those of the whole nation, would be on God’s side. Although Nixon would never use clear theological language in the way Carter, Clinton, G.W. Bush, or Obama would, he nevertheless presented a contrast here between human imperfection and limitations and an image of God.

God as the Source of All Good

Many presidents speaking at the NPB have turned to God as the source of all good – wisdom, strength, courage, freedom, peace, and love. In their addresses, presidents have spoken of the many blessings that come from God. In particular, several presidents have cited scripture to show God as the source of wisdom, especially the biblical story of Solomon asking for wisdom.

In the early years of the prayer breakfast, presidents drew a clear distinction between God as the true source of blessing, and the communist (or “materialist”) claim that the state filled that role. President Kennedy, in his first speech to the prayer breakfast, built on this theme from his inaugural: “our strong conviction, as I attempted to say in my inaugural, that the blessings which come to us come not from the generosity of the state but from the hand of God” (Kennedy, 1961). President Eisenhower before him made a point that it was the Creator, as named in the Declaration of Independence, who endowed citizens with their rights (Eisenhower, 1953), not the state, whose role was to protect those rights. In these early years, presidents were clear: God was the source of all good, including goods that could easily be attributed to the state.

President Johnson, with his characteristic focus on the stresses of public life and the need for guidance, strength, and compassion, portrays God as the source of all these gifts. Quoting the biblical book of Isaiah, a scripture that several presidents cite over the years, President Johnson preached in 1966: “The Prophet Isaiah tells us, ‘They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.’” His brief speech that year centered on the “terrible decisions” that fell on his shoulders regarding the war, and

for him, God was the source of strength he needed to meet those difficult, even overwhelming responsibilities. In his 1967 speech, a powerful, even liturgical-sounding meditation on faith, difficult decisions, the great civilization for which they were responsible, and the need for faith, President Johnson spoke of God's spirit that "moves men to compassion and courage, that calls forth the best within them in the darkest hours" (Johnson, 1967). President Johnson, ever mindful of the weight of the presidency, portrayed a God whose merciful strength was enough to bear him up, and to call all people to give of their best.

For several presidents facing the demands of the presidency and the many decisions before them, the biblical story of King Solomon asking for wisdom seemed to be of comfort. In 1998, President Clinton said that they were facing a difficult decision regarding protecting children from chemical and biological warfare. Clinton asked the group to keep in mind Solomon's prayer:

I am only a little child, and I do not know how to carry out my duties.

Your servant is here among people you have chosen, a great people, too numerous to count or number. So give your servant a discerning heart to govern your people and to distinguish between right and wrong, for who is able to govern this great people of yours. (I Kings 3:7-9, as quoted by Clinton, 1998)

Each president who has cited this story has done so in a slightly different way, citing different translations and for different purposes, but all have portrayed God as the source of needed wisdom. In 1978, President Carter spoke of this divine source, accessed through prayer: "In our rapidly changing world, we need to cling to things that don't

change – to truth and justice, to fairness, to brotherhood, to love, and to faith. And through prayer, I believe we can find those things.” He then goes on to cite the story of Solomon asking for wisdom, concluding somewhat colloquially: “And God said, ‘That’s such a fine prayer that I will not only grant you wisdom, but I will grant you the other blessings of life as well.’” For Carter, the point was to encourage the leaders in the room to “turn to God through prayer,” for in humility, they needed the gifts that came from God. This theme built on his message from the previous year, when he testified that if they turned to “the ultimate source of goodness and kindness and humility and love – and that’s from God – then we can indeed be good leaders and servants” (Carter, 1977).

President Nixon also quoted the biblical story of Solomon, in his case to emphasize the gift of the understanding heart, concluding:

And so, let that be our prayer. Let us have an understanding heart in our relations with other nations, an understanding heart in our relations between races and religions and parties and generations, and in our relations with each other. (Nixon, 1971)

For Nixon, the gift of wisdom and understanding exemplified in the story of Solomon was to be lived in a modern world with an increasingly global focus.

President Ford also spoke of God as the source of wisdom, drawing on a different biblical text – his favorite scripture, which he related to his service as president. “Often, as I walk into the office, I realize that man’s wisdom and strength are not sufficient. So, I try to practice the truth of Proverbs 3:5-6 ‘Trust in the Lord with all thine heart; Lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct thy path.’” (Ford, 1976). According to Gibbs & Duffy (2007):

Ford began each day in the White House by quietly repeating the same verses from Proverbs that his mother had taught him years earlier for help in times of trouble...It was the same verses he had thought of as he clung to the side of an aircraft carrier in a December 1944 typhoon...it was the passage he and Betty cited in their prayers the night before he became president. (p. 236)

God the source of wisdom and strength had been made present to Ford through this favorite scripture and formed the bedrock of his testimony at the NPB.

President Reagan also testified to the gifts of God, to the many blessings bestowed by God. Sometimes those comments were expressed in a civil religious idiom, claiming that America was a “blessed land.” And sometimes he shaded his praise of God with a politicized use of rhetoric that overshadowed any theological claims about the divine. However, in one of his later prayer breakfast addresses, a speech marked by a more open embrace of diversity than some of his other talks, with a moving story reflecting Reagan’s concern for religious revival in Russia, the President widened his usual “God bless America” rhetoric to share the following: “God has truly blessed this country, but we never should fall into the trap that would detract from the universality of God’s gift. It is for all mankind. God’s love is the hope and the light of the world” (Reagan, 1988).

For President G.W. Bush, prayer itself was seen as a gift of God, one of God’s many blessings. In 2006, he preached: “In this country, we recognize prayer is a gift from God to every human being. It is a gift that allows us to come before our Maker with heartfelt request and our deepest hopes” (G.W. Bush, 2006). According to President

Bush, “God listens to the voice of His children and pours His grace upon those who seek Him in prayer” (G.W. Bush, 2007). In President Bush’s speeches, we see a God who is a generous giver of spiritual gifts.

For President Obama, who more than once opened his prayer breakfast address with “I begin by giving all praise and honor to God for bringing us together here today” (cf. 2012, 2014, 2015, 2016), God was named as the source of all gifts using the language of the black church tradition. “Giving all praise and honor to God” for the various gifts God bestows has been “a traditional salutation” in that tradition, and it signaled Obama’s comfort with black church language (Cooper & Smidt, 2013). President Obama repeatedly spoke of God as the source of life, of gathering people together, of grace, of strength, and of forgiveness, and showed what that God meant to him, as in this testimony from his 2011 speech:

When I wake in the morning, I wait on the Lord, and I ask Him to give me the strength to do right by our country and its people. And when I go to bed at night I wait on the Lord, and I ask Him to forgive me my sins, and look after my family and the American people, and make me an instrument of His will.

Presidents speaking at the NPB have pointed to a loving, giving, generous God, the source of all good gifts.

The gift of guidance. As we have seen, presidents turn to the biblical story of Solomon to suggest that current leaders, themselves included, can and should ask God for wisdom, admitting that they do not have all the answers. Some presidents in their NPB speeches have also spoken specifically of the way God’s guidance is provided in and

through scripture. That is, not only to presidents speak generally of the need for wisdom and the gift of insight provided by God, they show that God has given the specific guidance of scripture, guidance that it would be wise to follow.

In President Kennedy's prayer breakfast speeches, the powerful concerns of the cold war and nuclear proliferation were visible. In 1961 President Kennedy, in his most sermon-like passage, cast those concerns in light of the limits of human understanding and the need for divine guidance, pointing specifically to religious tradition and scripture:

It is an ironic fact that in this nuclear age, when the horizon of human knowledge and human experience has passed far beyond any that any age has ever known, that we turn back at this time to the oldest source of wisdom and strength, to the words of the prophets and the saints, who tell us that faith is more powerful than doubt, that hope is more potent than despair, and that only through the love that is sometimes called charity can we conquer those forces within ourselves and throughout all the world that threaten the very existence of mankind. (Kennedy, 1961)

For President Kennedy, the wisdom of scripture, found in the voices of "prophets" and "saints," was not only needed, it had the potential to keep humanity from self-destructing.

President Reagan, in his "Year of the Bible" prayer breakfast speech, unsurprisingly, promoted the idea that scripture had been given by God to guide human beings:

Can we resolve to reach, learn, and try to heed the greatest message ever written – God's word and the Holy Bible. Inside its pages lie all the answers to all the problems that man has ever known...In its lessons and

the great wealth of its words, we find comfort, strength, wisdom, and hope. (Reagan, 1983)

Reagan did not delve into scripture for specific guidance in his speeches to the extent that some other presidents did, but his words of support for the “Year of the Bible” initiative, and his personal affirmation of scripture found in his 1983 speech were unmistakable.

President Obama, who cited scripture in his prayer breakfast speeches more than any other president studied for this project, in particular pointed to one piece of divine guidance: the Golden Rule. As noted earlier, he had been brought up by a mother who modeled “do unto others,” and it was this scriptural advice he would turn to repeatedly in his addresses to the NPB. Notably, he located this divine guidance not only in the Christian scriptures, but also in scriptures of other religious traditions. President Obama cited those diverse scriptures knowledgeably, using appropriate terminology such as “Torah” for the Hebrew scriptures, and “hadith” for particular sayings from the Quran, as well as quoting those scriptures verbatim (2009). In 2012 he summarized:

I believe in God’s command to ‘love thy neighbor as thyself.’ I know that a version of that Golden Rule is found in every major religion and every set of beliefs, from Hinduism to Islam to Judaism to the writings of Plato.

(Obama, 2012)

President Obama not only cited the Golden Rule, he explained in some detail how he saw it guiding his own work, and how it could and should guide human interactions.

President Obama, whose speeches to the NPB sounded the most like sermons, shared a substantial passage about divine guidance through and beyond scripture in his 2013 address, going in to specific, Christian detail about where God’s guidance was to be

found. After speaking at some length about the call to humility and saying “all we can do is live our lives in a godly way” and assume others were doing the same, Obama preached:

And in that pursuit, we are blessed with guidance. God has told us how He wishes for us to spend our days. His Commandments are there to be followed. Jesus is there to guide us, the Holy Spirit to help us. Love the Lord God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. Love your neighbor as yourself. See in everyone, even in those with whom you disagree most vehemently, the face of God. For we are all His children. (Obama, 2013)

He then spoke about the bibles on which he took his second oath of office, one from Lincoln and one from the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King – the image of those bibles formed the heart of his message in 2013 – concluding, “those words of God are there for us as well, waiting to be read any day that we choose.” For President Obama, scripture, guided by Jesus and the Holy Spirit, is a source of divine guidance that can transform public life into a place where everyone is seen as a child of God. His sermon that year was striking, especially given that 2013 was the year that Ben Carson attacked Obama in his keynote. President Obama, in his prepared remarks, showed himself to be taking the words of divine guidance to heart, and provided a model for others at the breakfast.

God is at Work in the World

President Obama, although singular in his rhetorical style, was not alone among presidents speaking at the NPB in pointing to an active, living divine presence in the world, involved in the life of humanity. The God portrayed by presidents in their prayer

breakfast speeches not only acted in the past, but is still acting. One of the questions I have raised in this project is the divine communicative agency of God – that is, can scholars argue that God is communicating? At least some presidents speaking at the NPB, as attested by President Obama above, would answer yes to that question. According to presidents in their prayer breakfast addresses, God is at work in the word, changing hearts, transforming lives, and giving humans guidance and purpose. The God pictured by presidential speakers communicates through word and action.

President Johnson, quoting theologian Reinhold Niebuhr, envisaged a distant, yet still active God in his rather intense war-focused address to the prayer breakfast in 1967. He was making the point that, as Abraham Lincoln said, “the Almighty has his own purposes,” and quoted this striking thought from Niebuhr: “the whole drama of human history is under the scrutiny of a divine judge who laughs at human pretensions, without being hostile to human aspirations.” This God is not the warm friend of nighttime prayers, yet nevertheless is involved in human affairs, reacting to human action. President Johnson shared the image as a way of saying that “men must be firm in the right, as God gives them to see the right.” Having begun the speech that year with words that invoked the U.S. as a “great civilization” but that such civilizations “have crumbled to dust” in the past, Johnson appeared to be conveying the seriousness of the present situation, and encouraging leaders to serve faithfully in the midst of “the gravest questions of war and peace,” despite not being able to see all that God could see. The God he evoked in his words is One who does give people the ability “see the right,” in however limited a fashion, and One who is paying attention to how humans make their choices and live their lives, even as that God laughs at human claims beyond their limited purview.

In a developed teaching on what he called “God’s laws,” President Carter spoke of a God active in moving people to a more universal understanding of themselves, and of what it means to live by God’s peace, truth, and love. In this 1980 address to the prayer breakfast, President Carter gave examples of the way God “transformed” people, stretching them to a more universal point of view, and indicated that he saw such movement as a “requirement” if one is to follow God’s laws. For the second year, Carter raised the issue of racial segregation in the south, declaring “and now we all thank God that that difficult transformation was made.” He then pointed to other challenges encouraging human growth, presenting what was itself a rather challenging message, ending with a call to thank God for the difficulties in one’s life:

But this is what I would like to leave with you. To set a time in each day to list all of the things that you consider to be most difficult, most embarrassing, the worst challenge to your own happiness, and not only ask God to alleviate it but preferably thank God for it. It might sound strange, but I guarantee you it works. (Carter, 1980)

President Carter did not give this counsel from a dispassionate position, but gave an example of from his own life of praying for the Ayatollah Khomeini in the midst of the hostage crisis. He also pointed to an active God who helped stretch people precisely through difficulties and conflicts, declaring of those challenges: “Without God, they’re almost impossible. With God, the difficulties fade away.” President Carter’s God is not One satisfied to leave people the way they are or to support the status quo, but pushes people to a kind of spiritual growth that has real consequences in society. Carter’s ending words that year underline his central, challenging message: “And the basis of that growth

is an understanding of God's purpose, and a sharing of difficult responsibilities with God through prayer" (Carter, 1980). Typical of Carter, there is no sermonic wrap-up, nor even a closing salutation, as was the case each of the years he spoke. In his rhetoric, President Carter was willing to let God challenge the NPB to an open-ended, complex relationship with a living Presence bent on transforming them into better people.

President G.W. Bush shared a series of messages over his years at the NPB that built a picture of a living God who transforms hearts, opening people to divine priorities, thus making them more compassionate and giving. A United Methodist who had experienced a profound personal spiritual transformation at midlife (Espinosa, 2009; Gibbs & Duffy, 2007), President Bush echoed Methodism's focus on the "heart strangely warmed" by God. The word "hearts" is noticeable in President G.W. Bush's prayer breakfast speeches, often associated with the presence of God. In speaking about meeting with families after a tragic loss, he said "My impressions of the meeting was that there was – that Almighty God was present in their hearts" (G.W. Bush, 2003). Also common in his speeches was his description of prayer as "opening ourselves to God's priorities," which for Bush meant "especially by hearing the cry of the poor and the less fortunate" (G.W. Bush, 2005). He summarized his repeated themes in a simply expressed yet eloquent passage in 2007:

Many in our country know the power of prayer. Prayer changes hearts; prayer changes lives; and prayer makes us a more compassionate and giving people. When we pray, we surrender our will to the Almighty and open ourselves up to His priorities and His touch. His call to love our neighbors as we would like to be loved ourselves is something that we

hear when we pray. And we answer that call by reaching out to feed the hungry and clothe the poor and aid the widow and the orphan. By helping our brothers and sisters in need, we find our own faith strengthened and we receive the grace to lead lives of dignity and purpose. (G.W. Bush, 2007)

President Bush, without sharing the story of his own transformation of heart, nevertheless was consistent in his prayer breakfast speeches in portraying a living, active God who seeks to open people to a compassionate life of service.

God has a Purpose for Everyone. The God portrayed by presidents at the NPB is a purposeful God, one whose ways and plans are beyond human understanding, but who yet includes humans in the divine purpose. Some presidents specifically mention this divinely-given purpose as a part of their messages. As noted earlier, President Reagan found renewed spiritual purpose in his own life after the assassination attempt in 1981, and communicated that purpose in a theological claim for all people in his 1982 address: “I’ve always believed that we were, each of us, put here for a reason, that there is a plan, somehow a divine plan for all of us. I know now that whatever days are left to me belong to Him.” President G.W. Bush spoke often of the idea of God’s plan, which he sometimes named Providence:

We can also be confident in the ways of providence, even when they are far from our understanding. Events aren’t moved by blind change and chance. Behind all of life and all of history, there’s a dedication and purpose, set by the hand of a just and faithful God. And that hope will

never be shaken.

(G.W. Bush, 2003)

I pray that our Nation will always have the humility to commend our cares to Providence and trust in the goodness of His plans. (G.W. Bush 2006)

For President Bush, even though God's plans "are far from our understanding," they are accessible through prayer. In his first speech to the prayer breakfast, Bush preached: "No matter what our background, in prayer we share something universal, a desire to speak and listen to our Maker and to know His plan for our lives" (G.W. Bush, 2001).

President Obama also spoke of the divine plan in his powerful 2013 speech, as part of his meditation on humility:

And so my hope is that humility, that that carries over every day, every moment. While God may reveal His plan to us in portions, the expanse of His plan is for God, and God alone, to understand: 'For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face; now I know in part, but then shall I know even as also I am known.' Until that moment, until we know and are fully known, all we can do is live our lives in a godly way and assume that those we deal with every day, including those in an opposing party, they're groping their way, doing their best, going through the same struggles we're going through. (Obama, 2013)

President Obama was not alone in suggesting a healthy dose of humility in relation to a God whose understanding and plans are so far beyond human ability to comprehend. The theme of humility in presidential prayer breakfast speeches will be explored

subsequently, as I turn to analyzing the concomitant implications for human living that flow from presidents' theological claims about God.

The Second Interlude:

Faithful Leadership, Part II: A Public Theology Approach

This project explores how, if at all, the presidential address to the NPB constitutes a discernable genre of presidential speech, and takes a public theology approach in doing so. In order to do that, I have engaged in the narrative approach of the “New Homiletic,” searching the presidents' speeches for the stories they tell. I have been laying out the narratives that presidents construct in their prayer breakfast speeches – personal narratives of faith, the story of America and religion, their portrayal of God, and now I am turning to their portrayal of humanity. Here I pause and, for the second time, consider what presidents are saying in their speeches about faithful leadership. While earlier I looked at the civil religious narratives presidents build on the models of faithful American founders and presidents before them, here I turn to what I believe is the heart of the contribution of this unique speech. No matter what our conclusions about genre, the prayer breakfast speech is a uniquely powerful, and it seems, welcome opportunity for the president to consider faithful public leadership in the context of the wider community of human beings and what that might mean for faithful living for all humans.

Narrative Five: Presidents Portray Faithful Human Response to God

The presidents' portrayal of faithfulness is done theologically, a reflection of the claims they have made about God. It starts with humility, and an awareness of the way the reality of God relativizes all human power. Presidential speeches to the NPB then issue a series of what I term “calls” – a term from my own Lutheran tradition that exists

somewhere between an invitation and a command, with a theological claim of originating from God. Presidents speak of the following calls in their prayer breakfast speeches, calls that apply to faithful leaders, and to all human beings: the call to interpret their lives through the lens of scripture and faith, the call to follow God's will, the call to prayer, the call to service and a life purpose larger than ourselves, the call to get beyond all divides and see the inherent dignity and worth of all human beings. In the process of talking about these calls, presidents lift up a vision of the common good that connects directly with current thinking about the contribution of public theology.

Humility as Human Response: God relativizes all human claims

In light of the theological understanding of God presented in their prayer breakfast speeches, many presidents have preached that the only human response can be humility. In light of the infinite, perfect God, all human claims to power are relativized, as President G.W. Bush stated in 2005: "We acknowledge that all power is temporary and must ultimately answer to His purposes." Earlier in this chapter, in the section on civil religion, we have seen the way presidents have spoken of this relativizing effect of the divine in relation to the country as a whole, and to the sometimes fraught political life in Washington. Presidents have also spoken of their personal need for humility, and how they have relied on faith and prayer and God's sustaining hand to be able to bear the responsibilities of the office. And presidents have also cast their vision of the relativizing effect of God's presence, power, and perfection in wider terms, encompassing all of humanity:

We are here because we are all the children of God, because we know we have all fallen short of God's glory, because we know that no matter how

much power we have, we have it but for a moment. And, in the end, we can only exercise it well if we see ourselves as servants, not sovereigns.

(Clinton, 1995)

Although there may be other contexts where presidents have spoken of humility, the NPB seems uniquely suited to the message that many presidents have shared: relative to God, humans are called to be aware of their status as humus – humble earth-creatures, created by the One whose glory far exceeds even their firmest grasp. In light of this humble realization, humans are called by presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast to a life of faith, where people interpret their lives in the light of scripture, try to follow God's will, bow before God in prayer, and serve others with purpose and dedication.

The Call to Faith: Interpreting one's life through scripture

The first call in response to God is the call to faith, specifically the faith to interpret one's life in the light of the scripture. That is, presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast have shown that an element of humble faith for themselves as leaders, and for all human beings, is to recognize that God's word has claims on human life. One of the reasons I have been so interested in this project has been the opportunity to see presidents reflect on scripture in their prayer breakfast speeches. For some presidents speaking at the event, scripture has been central to their messages. President Obama, as noted, cited scripture more than any other president who has spoken at the breakfast, with President Clinton a close second. Both of them developed their speeches in substantial ways around scriptural themes, often sounding much like preachers as they did so. In particular here, I focus on the way they modelled faith by interpreting human lives through the lens of scripture. In addition, although he did not do as much of this type of interpretation,

President Reagan provided a clear example of the call to faithful application of scripture in his “Year of the Bible” speech. I begin with that quote:

I’m so thankful that there will always be one day in the year when people all over our land can sit down as neighbors and friends and remind ourselves of what our real task is. This task was spelled out in the Old and the New Testament. Jesus was asked, ‘Master, which is the great commandment in the law?’ And He replied, ‘Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. This is the first and great commandment. The second is like unto it, thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets. (Reagan, 1983)

President Reagan presented the scripture as a source of authority, spelling out the “real task” of human life, and commended the people in the room for reminding the country of that task. He set the call to heed scripture in the context of reflecting on the way he, and other leaders, sometimes forgot that everyone was loved equally by God, and even commented personally on a prayer that helped him remember to get beyond resentment of others. Interpreting one’s life through scripture, as shown by President Reagan, was a task shared by humanity, and one with personal consequences.

President Obama, with his repeated themes of being his brother’s/sister’s keeper and following the Golden Rule, consistently built his prayer breakfast speeches on biblical imagery. More substantially, he delved into scripture as the guiding theme of several of his talks, much as sermons are built around lectionary texts, and expressed gratitude for the opportunity to do so. He also reflected on the strength to be found in

scripture and the call to live one's life in its light. As President Obama told the prayer breakfast in 2012: "The Bible teaches us to 'be doers of the word and not merely hearers.' We're required to have a living, breathing, active faith in our own lives." The palpable sense of dynamism in President Obama's reflection on scripture, and the living God at its heart, animated all of his speeches at the NPB, exemplifying the "living, breathing, active faith" to which he called his listeners.

President Clinton, as Billy Graham affirmed, was a natural preacher, citing scripture fluently and often. In particular, his prayer breakfast speeches were noteworthy for the way he turned to scripture as a lens through which he examined the world, himself, and the political leaders in the room, often focusing on Pauline scriptures that invited reflection on the undeserved grace of God. Those moments could be powerfully revealing. Sometimes President Clinton built a sermon around a particular scripture, as he did when he explicated Isaiah 58 with its call from God to be "repairers of the breach" in 1997. He then spoke of those in the breach, sharing powerful words about poverty, but also about the spiritual poverty engendered by the political atmosphere in Washington, two of his favorite themes. Consistently, and often prophetically, President Clinton pointed people in the room at the NPB to the powerful call of scripture with its clear expression of the will of God.

The Call to Follow God's Will

In light of an infinite, active, loving God, the giver of all good gifts, and the source of wisdom and guidance, Presidents throughout the years of the NPB have counseled that people need to follow God's will as part of their faithful response to God. In his final prayer breakfast speech in 1974, President Nixon built upon his theme of

silent prayer and listening to God to say that all leaders needed to listen to what God wants, rather than arrogantly telling God what they wanted. Twenty-five years later, President Clinton issued the call to follow God's will in terms of prayer: "And finally, I ask you to pray for all of us, including yourself, to pray that our purpose truly will reflect God's will, to pray that we can all be purged of the temptation to pretend that our willfulness is somehow equal to God's will" (Clinton, 1999). For both Nixon and Clinton, human beings, in particular strong-willed leaders, needed to be careful to curb their own tendency to substitute their will for God's.

Both Presidents Bush suggested that God's will could be revealed in prayer. In 1989, President G.H.W. Bush highlighted prayer as a resource to meet challenges and opportunities – "not just prayer for what we want but prayer for what is in the heart of God for us individually and as a nation." For the second President Bush, prayer provided the connection to God's will – an idea that followed on his concept of prayer as a gift. In memorable words, he preached in 2006: "In prayer, we open ourselves to God's priority...By surrendering our will to God's will, we learn to serve His eternal purposes." In father's and son's speeches, the call to follow God's will is seen as itself a gift of God, revealed in prayer. It is a comforting and optimistic view of the relationship with the divine.

In keeping with their reflection on the way God's understanding surpasses all human understanding, some presidents emphasize the humility needed to follow God's will, and the need to recognize the value in doing so. President Clinton preached in 1999: "the Almighty has His own designs, and all we can do is pray to know God's will" and President Obama in 2015: "Our job is not to ask that God respond to our notion of truth;

our job is to be true to Him, His word, and His commandments.” In 1994, President Clinton built his prayer breakfast speech around the theme of doing God’s will, saying “we should all seek to know and to do God’s will, even when we differ,” and that seeking and doing God’s will took humility, being honest and fair, not bearing false witness, giving up resentment, forgiving, and focusing on other people. Clinton concluded his powerful and detailed exposition by saying:

we will always have our differences; we will never know the whole truth.

Of course, that is true. But if we have learned today, again, that we must seek to know the will of God and live by it...then perhaps we can do honor to the faith and to the God who has brought us all here today.

(Clinton, 1994)

Presidents who have issued clear calls to follow God’s will at the NPB have done so with powerful, biblical, theological claims about God, yet they have also done so in a way that includes people of diverse backgrounds and faiths.

The Call to Pray

The next call to faithful living that I will analyze is the call to pray. As presidents have spoken at the prayer breakfast, they have portrayed themselves as persons of prayer, spoken about their need for prayer, and thanked people for praying for them. They have also spoken in theological terms about God’s call to all people to pray, and what that prayer can do in their lives. In this section I discuss several examples of such moments in presidential addresses to the NPB.

At the end of what, sadly, was to be his last speech at the prayer breakfast, President Kennedy issued this ringing call to prayer in 1963:

This morning we pray together; this evening apart. But each morning and each evening, let us remember the advice of my fellow Bostonian, the Reverend Phillips Brooks: “Do not pray for easy lives. Pray to be stronger men! Do not pray for tasks equal to your powers. Pray for powers equal to your tasks.”

In Kennedy’s articulation of the call to prayer, we hear his repeated theme of responsibility, woven in to an energetic confidence in the power of the One who answers prayer. We also see him issue a call to the leaders in the room, and through them, to all listeners, to rise up to the challenges before them in the power of that confident prayer.

President Johnson, two years later echoed a favorite prayer breakfast scripture when he told the crowd: “I think we could find no more appropriate way to begin our day today and our duties in this hour than to pray – for, as we are taught: ‘Except the Lord build this House, they labor in vain that build it’” (Johnson, 1965). In his quoting of Psalm 127, Johnson underlined the call to pray as a way of aligning with what God was already doing in the world, and specifically reminded the leaders in the room that such prayer was necessary for their work. The call to prayer, in other words, was for President Johnson deeply connected to the sense that God was the one who had set before them their tasks.

Some presidents who have spoken theologically about prayer and God’s call to pray have reflected on how human beings do not always know how to answer that call. President Clinton included such thoughts in his 1999 speech when he called people to a think of prayer as listening, sharing a Pauline scripture that addressed human limitations and provided a creative connection to his theme: “In another way, St. Paul said the same

thing: ‘We do not know how to pray as we ought, but the Spirit, Himself, intercedes for us with sighs too deep for words.’” President Clinton, always focused on the contrast between limited humans and the biblical image of God, turns to scripture for a vision of what happens when humans trust and answer the call to prayer, even when they feel like they do not know how.

For President Obama, the call to prayer was ever-present in his speeches. He often spoke of the importance of prayer, and more than once reflected scripturally and theologically on its power and meaning. In 2010 he focused on civility in his speech, telling the gathering that prayer “can touch our hearts with humility...it can remind us that each of us are children of an awesome and loving God.” As he called people to prayer, President Obama did so with a focus on the grace of God, saying that “an openness to grace” could be transformative as people listened to God’s voice. Ultimately, the call to humble prayer that President Obama issued in his prayer breakfast speech could unite people and call them to “a higher purpose.”

The Call to a Life of Purpose and Service

According to presidents speaking at the NPB, God calls and challenges people to love, serve, and help others, and gives humans the means to fulfill this call. In many ways, this call to service is a natural part of the overall message of the prayer breakfast, as Fellowship speakers repeatedly speak of a hurting world’s need for “godly” leadership. Presidential speeches both fit within the Fellowship ethos, and push beyond it, especially in the presidents’ willingness to embrace a more diverse and empowering view of what service means, and ultimately calling people to a sustained life of common purpose.

In the early years of the prayer breakfast, presidents spoke of responsibilities and burdens, and President Kennedy, consistent with other speeches he gave, did not hesitate to call both the men's and the women's audiences to public service. The responsibilities and service that Kennedy emphasized seemed related to the grand questions of the day, and he rarely touched on specifics, yet the call is there unmistakably:

We are all builders of the future, and whether we build as public servants or private citizens, whether we build at the national or the local level, whether we build in foreign or domestic affairs, we know the truth of the ancient Psalm, "Except the Lord build the house, they labour in vain that build it." (Kennedy, 1963)

In choosing this scripture, Kennedy echoed a favorite prayer breakfast biblical citation and theme: according to the Fellowship, leaders acting in concert with God would succeed in their efforts. For Kennedy, those efforts included a robust call to public service.

President Johnson located the call to service in a New Testament scripture, continuing the theme of responsibility in public life. Speaking to the women in 1965, where he often seemed comfortable talking about responsibilities in specifics, President Johnson cited the Gospel of Luke:

We have won our way to an economy of abundance, and today we know that the wise use of our great wealth can contribute to the betterment of life for us all. Surely the words from Saint Luke have lost none of their meaning: "For unto whosoever much is given, of him shall be much required." (Luke 12:48) (Johnson, 1965)

The theme of God's call to share abundance in service to others, even the obligation as it is given in the words of Jesus in the scripture, found resonance not only in Johnson's time, but also in future presidents' speeches at the prayer breakfast. In 2006, President G.W. Bush suggested that it is in prayer when God calls people to remember their obligation to serve:

In prayer, we offer our thanksgiving and praise, recognizing our lives, our talents, and all that we own ultimately flow from the Creator. And in these moments of our deepest gratitude, the Almighty reminds us that for those to whom much has been given, much is required. (G.W. Bush, 2006)

Interestingly, President Bush delivered those words the same year that U2 singer and humanitarian Bono delivered in his keynote an impassioned challenge to a more justice-based attitude about service, and Bush directly interacts with Bono in what appear to be ad-libbed comments at the beginning of his speech. Later in the speech, President Bush gave specifics about the "millions of Americans" who had "answered the call to love your neighbor just like you'd like to be loved yourself," talking about a variety of actions, including disaster response, and "help for HIV/AIDS victims" (Bush was the first to mention HIV/AIDS at the NPB, in 2005). Although President Bush does not push as far as Bono that year, the combined effect of their words is a call to service that is more open than the usual Fellowship emphasis on "godly" leaders saving the world.

President Obama also referred to the Luke passage cited by Presidents Johnson and G.W. Bush, and also in a speech that talked about specific acts of service. In his 2012 prayer breakfast address, in which he gave the biblical basis for some of his policy

priorities, President Obama shared his thinking about a particular kind of sacrificial service:

And I think to myself, if I'm willing to give something up as somebody who's been extraordinarily blessed and give up some of the tax breaks that I enjoy, I actually think that's going to make some economic sense. But for me as a Christian, it also coincides with Jesus' teaching that "for unto whom much is given, much shall be required." (Obama, 2012)

President Obama's comments bear their own challenge, given that the specific example he cited was not a feel-good image of citizens serving those in need, but a fiscal policy that might actually pinch many of the people in the room at the breakfast. Putting it in the context of a biblical call sharpens the point, but also calls into question the limits of what presidents (or any preacher, truthfully) can say with specific certainty is a call from God.

Presidents have spoken with clarity about the divine mandate of the call to service, often citing scripture in their pronouncements, and usually with a focus on calling people to a purpose and vision larger than themselves. President Clinton, who emphasized the biblical call to service in many of his speeches, challenged listeners:

If Christ said we would all be judged by how we treated the least of these – the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the strangers, the imprisoned – how can we meet that test in a town where we all spend so much time obsessed with ourselves and how we stand on the totem pole and how we look in the morning paper? (Clinton, 1994)

Year after year in his speeches, President Obama articulated a vision of service and a commitment to the common good that he grounded theologically in his understanding of

scripture. This vision was one that unabashedly embraced justice for the oppressed as part of what service means:

Our faith teaches us that in the face of suffering, we can't stand idly by and that we must be that Good Samaritan. In Isaiah, we're told "to do right. Seek justice. Defend the oppressed." The Torah commands: "Know the feelings of the stranger, having yourselves been strangers in the land of Egypt." The Koran instructs: "Stand out firmly for justice." (Obama, 2014)

President Carter also was clear that the call to service meant fullness of life for those whom the bible calls "the least of these," a scripture that is repeatedly cited by presidents and others talking about service at the prayer breakfast, but Carter states the critical implications of the biblical mandate most boldly:

We must avoid a distortion or a rationalization because of materialistic inclinations in our own hearts, of our own religious faith and its beliefs. When any religion impacts adversely on those whom Christ described as 'the least of these,' it can have no firm foundation in God's sight. (Carter, 1979)

Presidents citing a biblical mandate for their calls to a life of purpose and service point to a God-given vision for a world where all can flourish, and where humans are called to look beyond self-interest towards that wider vision of community.

Presidents were also clear in saying that such a life of purpose and service would be a meaningful one, where God would provide. President G.W. Bush repeatedly conveyed the belief that God equips as well as calls people to serve:

Father Mychal's humble prayer reminds us of an eternal truth: In the quiet of prayer, we leave behind our own cares and we take up the cares of the Almighty. And in answering His call to service, we find that, in the words of Isaiah, "We will gain new strength. We will run and not get tired. We will walk and not become weary." (G.W. Bush, 2007)

According to President Bush, "millions of Americans serve their neighbor because they love their God" (G.W. Bush, 2001). In other words, God calls people to serve, equips them, and invites them into a love that gives them the energy to carry out their acts of service.

In the end, the presidential depiction in their speeches at the NPB of God's call to a life of purpose and service speaks with biblical fluency of a divine call to "do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with your God" (Micah 6:8, a scripture several presidents refer to in their speeches). The call to a divine purpose found in their speeches has pointed the leaders in the room, the president himself, and the whole of humanity to a wider vision where all persons are connected to each other and to God, a vision of the beloved community.

The Call to the Beloved Community

At their most expansive, presidents speaking at the NPB paint a picture of what the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr. called "the beloved community" – a connected world of human beings of inherent dignity and worth, where people recognize in each other the face of God. Republican and Democrat, early in the prayer breakfast era or late, presidents have lifted up the idea that "we are all God's children" (Reagan, 1985; Clinton, 1995), and that "We recognize in one another the spark of the Divine that gives

all human beings their inherent dignity and worth, regardless of religion” (G.W. Bush, 2005). According to President Johnson, the “spark of divinity” was an “inner compass” given by God (1968), a faith that could overcome despair, and President Obama affirmed that all people were “wonderfully made” by God as he also spoke of their “inherent dignity and worth” (2014). The consistency with which presidents have lifted up a belief in the inherent dignity and worth of God’s beloved children is notable, as is the power and simplicity of their language when they have done so.

For many presidents speaking on this theme at the prayer breakfast, the affirmation that all people are created by God has been intimately connected to the idea that humans are therefore one community. President G.W. Bush made the connection in his thoughtful post-9/11 prayer breakfast address in 2002: “Once we have recognized God’s image in ourselves, we must recognize it in every human being,” a message that was present in several of his other speeches. President Carter built his 1978 prayer breakfast address around the theme of one family of human beings, preaching that being part of the human family crossed all religious and cultural lines. And President Obama, in typically memorable language, preached the following in 2010: “Progress comes when we open our hearts, when we extend our hands, when we recognize our common humanity. Progress comes when we look into the eyes of another and see the face of God.”

When presidents have lifted up the theme of the beloved community, it has indeed evoked powerfully evocative rhetoric. It seems appropriate to end the public theology analysis portion of this chapter with one of the more notable examples. In his final address to the NPB as president in 2000, Clinton reflected on the farewell discourse in

which he was engaged, and took the opportunity to lift up a vision for the future: “as time and space contract, the wisdom of the human heart must expand. We must be able to love our neighbors and accept our essential oneness.” He then spoke about global warming and human responsibility for the planet, expanding his vision beyond human beings to embrace the whole earthly community. He then reminded the group not only of his own finality, but also of theirs: “the truth is, we’re all here today because, in God’s timetable, we’re all just like Senator Mack and me. We’re all term-limited.” President Clinton’s final words at his last NPB are a fitting presidential finale to this section on public theology and its vision of the beloved community:

I leave you with the words of a great prayer by Chief Seattle. “This we know: All things are connected. We did not weave the web of life. We are merely a strand in it. And whatever we do to the web, we do to ourselves.”
(Clinton, 2000)

Summary of Findings

This chapter has, in five narrative movements and two interludes, detailed the findings of my study of all the presidential addresses to the NPB, from the first speech by President Eisenhower in 1953, to President Obama’s final address to the event in 2016. The first narrative I examined was the story presidents have told of the “great tradition” of the NPB, as they have established common ground and thanked leaders of the prayer breakfast movement. Next, I discussed the presidents’ construction of their personal faith narratives, how they portrayed themselves as persons of faith and prayer. Then I engaged in the first of two interludes to examine what presidents were saying in their prayer breakfast addresses about being faith-filled leaders. The first answer to that question was

given in a civil-religious idiom, with presidents citing many of the same stories of faithful American founders and other civil-religious figures, shared as models which they hope to follow. The next major section of the chapter examined presidents' construction of a civil-religious narrative about America and religion, a substantial aspect of their prayer breakfast addresses.

Then I turned to public theology, examining the way presidents have constructed God-consciousness in their prayer breakfast speeches. In response, I engaged in the second interlude on faithful leadership, focused on what I believe is the unique contribution of this speech in the presidential canon: the opportunity, in light of the divine, to consider faithful public leadership in the context of the wider community of human beings, and what that might mean for faithful living for all people. The fifth and final narrative section examined the story presidents have told about faithful leadership and faithful living – that is, their public theology approach to being human in the world.

The rhetorical space afforded the president by the NPB has been a unique and valuable setting for engaging in public theology, allowing an in-depth consideration of how faith applies to public life. Presidential prayer breakfast addresses have proven to be a rich source of narrative construction, reflection on public leadership, and theological imagination. In the next chapter I will take up the question of how, if at all, the combined effect of their narrative construction could be argued to constitute a new genre, and whether they can be said to be engaging in “transformative” rhetoric as they preach.

CHAPTER SIX: GENERIC PATTERNS AND TRANSFORMATIVE RHETORIC

In this dissertation I have analyzed the presidents' addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast as examples of public theology - that is, as religious language articulating the relationship of God to public life (Pearson, 2014). In the previous chapters I have examined the rhetorical space created by the prayer breakfast and then identified patterns common to the various presidential addresses, including the way presidents have constructed narratives of faith and articulated theological themes. I have done so in order to discern how, if at all, the speeches form a unique genre of presidential speech. As we have seen, the presidential prayer breakfast address forms a window into the presidents' understanding of their own faith lives and how their faith in God relates to their exercise of the presidential office. In so doing, the speech elucidates their view of the public role of religion in our American democracy. Public theology, as practiced by the presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast, is a uniquely powerful example of the continuing ability of religious rhetoric to provide categories of meaning that have the potential to shape our country's self-understanding.

In this final chapter, I will address the research questions raised in this project and discuss the surrounding implications regarding the presidents' articulation of public theology. The first part of the chapter addresses the stated research question about what I have called "transformative rhetoric" – that is, how do the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast express or defy the traditional categories of rhetoric? Next, I turn to the central question of genre. After laying out my argument for why it is appropriate and fruitful to consider the presidential prayer breakfast address as a new genre, I then discuss the elements of the generic pattern. Finally, I look more closely at

what the presidential speech might be doing in the wider society as presidents preach public theology at the National Prayer Breakfast. I close with comments on limitations, strengths, and the potential for further research engendered by this project.

Transformative speech: Rhetorical theology and categories of rhetoric

As I have examined the presidential speeches delivered to the National Prayer Breakfast, I have focused on the narratives created in their rhetoric. My decision to focus on the stories presidents construct – of themselves as persons of faith, of America and religion, of the divine, and what it means to be a faithful leader in a faithful human community – grew out of the “New Homiletic,” a post-interpretive turn approach to preaching that emerged in the latter half of the twentieth century (Reid, Bullock, & Fler, 1995). As discussed earlier, this approach to preaching centers on narrative as the “grammar” of faith (Hauerwas, 1976). Presidents speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast have engaged the power of religious narrative in their addresses, speaking their “grammar” of faith in various dialects, and at times sounding much like preachers. The presidential prayer breakfast address has been a place where presidents can unabashedly speak the language of faith, and do so for the purposes of preaching. In this sense, the speech differs from most other instances where presidents might speak in a religious way. While it would be naïve to think that the National Prayer Breakfast is truly a place where there is “no politics,” as the Fellowship and some presidents have averred, nevertheless, the focus is not on making a campaign-style political speech. And while at times the prayer breakfast address has been a locus for the president to function as high priest of

American civil religion⁵, and civil religious rhetoric is significantly present in the body of presidential speeches, my analysis suggests that the prayer breakfast has allowed space for a consideration of faith that moves beyond civil religion.

When presidents “get to preaching” at the National Prayer Breakfast, their language of faith moves beyond the “use” of religion into an engagement with the dynamic, living reality of the encounter between divine and human. In their prayer breakfast addresses, presidents have pointed to a living God who is active in the world, who interacts with human beings, and who has provided guidance through scripture and religious tradition. They have then spoken of what it means to live as faithful human beings in response to this living God. Some of their speeches have lifted up powerful examples of this dynamic encounter between divine and human. Many presidents have spoken personally about what that encounter means to them and what it means for their work as leaders.

As I have analyzed the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology, with a focus on homiletical narrative construction, I have also remained cognizant of the philosophical issue raised in chapter three: that of the divine communicative agent. That is, a theological approach to religious speech, especially homiletical speech, takes seriously the possibility that the divine (God, the living Word) is actively working through such speech to transform both speaker and listeners. Following Jamieson (1973), who noted “the Aristotelian taxonomy must strain

⁵ According to Bellah (1967, 1975), civil religion unifies the country by ritualizing shared American experience and imbuing it with religious significance. The president functions within the rituals of civil religion as the high priest (Bellah, 1975; Gonzalez, 2012), the one who articulates the shared convictions of the American public, binding them together into a people.

to account for the sermon” (p. 162), I had suggested that traditional categories of rhetoric – deliberative, forensic, and epideictic – might not be sufficient to encompass this transformative action of the divine as it found expression in presidential homilies at the National Prayer Breakfast. Framing religious speech as "religious rhetoric" encourages scholarship to view it as persuasive in intent, with the primary agent being the public speaker who chooses to persuade by means of religion. Preaching, however, is not primarily about a public speaker seeking the rational assent of a persuaded audience (Buttrick, 1987), but about a divine agent working through the homiletical experience to transform the world. In order to examine this larger philosophical question from a methodological point of view, I proposed the following research question: How do the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast express or defy the traditional categories of rhetoric?

Presidents have expressed traditional categories of rhetoric in their prayer breakfast speeches repeatedly. Unsurprisingly, my analysis indicates that ceremonial, or epideictic, rhetoric has been substantially present in presidential addresses, with words of praise often aimed directly at the organizers of the Fellowship, the self-styled prayer breakfast “movement,” and in particular lauding the Rev. Billy Graham. Presidents have also praised family members, clergy, Sunday School teachers, and others who have brought them to faith. In their images of models of religious faith, presidents have simultaneously engaged in epideictic encomium and also at times moved into a deliberative meditation on virtue, especially as they have pointed to what it means to live according to the example set by those models.

Deliberative rhetoric has also played a role in presidential speeches at the National Prayer Breakfast. Increasingly in recent decades, presidents have spoken of specific policy in their addresses, especially faith-based actions or offices. In the prayer breakfast context, talking about such policies or government offices appears to be a natural fit and a means of identification as presidents connect with people who care about faith and share a vision for accomplishing good ends through religion. It has also allowed presidents to support their policy programs, especially those in the areas of service, and to do so by showing how those programs exemplify faith-based values.

But considering policy in the light of faith has also allowed for some substantial theological reflection, including a homiletic application of biblical insight to the act of governing. Such reflection was particularly visible in President Obama's speeches, but also in Presidents G.W. Bush, Clinton, and Carter. In their reflection, these presidents have gone beyond praising, informing, or persuading, although they may have been doing all three of those things in the process. In addition, they have each spoken of being transformed by the divine and of the way that transformation leads to changed living in the world – including specific policies or actions, especially those that involve compassion, sacrifice, service, and justice. Is this sense of being changed or transformed by the divine enough to say that the presidents are engaging in “transformative rhetoric”? Is it just persuasive personal witness and praise of the divine?

To look more closely at transformative rhetoric, I turn to homiletical theory. David Buttrick, in his classic work on homiletics (1987), presented a compact, evocative image of the transformative power of preaching, specifically Christian preaching. I include the original quotes in full because they point towards both the beauty and the

difficulty of talking about what preaching does and what I mean by transformative rhetoric:

Preaching can rename the world “God’s world” with metaphorical power, and can change identity by incorporating all our stories into “God’s story.”

Preaching constructs in consciousness a “faith-world” related to God. (p. 11)

Christian preaching has a unique self-understanding – being-saved – that plots all human episodes into the purposes of Gratuitous Love. The hermeneutic of Christian preaching is astonishment of being-saved in the world. (p. 16)

Now we live in the momentum of a denouement when the prose of everyday is shot through with the poetry of consummation. (p. 16)

What is preaching? Christian preaching tells a story and names a name. If narrative consciousness confers identity, then preaching transforms identity, converts in the truest sense of the word, by rewriting our stories into a God-with-us story – beginning, Presence, and end. But, in view of the great disclosure of Gratuitous Love, by metaphor, preaching renames the human world as a space for new humanity related to God. What preaching may do is to build in consciousness a new “faith-world” in which we may live and love! (pp. 16-17)

With astonishing power, Buttrick in these brief passages not only explained the act of preaching, he also enacted its dynamic, transforming understanding through his poetic, compact wording. Trying to summarize Buttrick, much like trying to explain transformative rhetoric, is like attempting to explain a poem, when the poem both contains and points beyond itself to a reality that can only be seen through its evocative wording. Buttrick contended that preaching, echoing the scripture on which it is based, is an action whereby “story grasps symbol and symbol opens stories” (p. 279). Through preaching, the transformative action of God in the world is made present and real to speaker and listener, changing their identity through the action of what Buttrick called “Gratuitous Love” (that is, the grace of God made manifest in Christ). The human story is transformed by being understood in the context of God-in-the-world.

Preaching, as it is described by Buttrick, is a hermeneutic act, whereby the preacher addresses the community as a community of “double-consciousness” (p. 277), having been shaped by the communal witness of scripture to the astonishing reality of God’s action in the world, and thereby both conscious of themselves as “being-saved” and of being in the world in a transformed way. For Buttrick, such preaching is not about individual human interpretation, but about a communal consciousness of a transformed reality. As will be discussed further later in this chapter, Buttrick does not limit such transformative preaching to that which occurs within the walls of the church, but sees a place for what he calls “out-church preaching” – that is, preaching that “names God in the world,” addressed to particular occasions outside the walls of the church (p. 228). In other words, it is possible within Buttrick’s theoretical framework to see presidents as

preachers engaging in “out-church preaching” in the context of the National Prayer Breakfast.

When presidents have engaged in building narratives of divine and human in their prayer breakfast speeches, and especially when they have drawn from scripture and religious symbolism, I believe it is possible to say that they have at times broken through to a transformative rhetoric, one that “names God in the world” and speaks with astonishment of “being-saved,” somehow enacting this transformed reality in a way that moves beyond rational persuasion. I do not just mean when President Obama gave a specifically Christian witness in his speeches, but rather of those rare moments when presidents, through their words, created the experience of being part of a community transformed by the power of a God who acts in the world. In my previous chapter, exemplars of such rhetorical power were seen in several presidents’ prayer breakfast speeches. Significantly such moments are not primarily about personal faith, but about being-faithful-in-the-world. If presidents are engaging in transformative rhetoric as they name God in the world and connect the divine story with the human story, such a finding has implications for research in the areas of presidential rhetoric, public theology, and homiletics, for it suggests that the president, as public theologian, is engaging in the act of preaching. Specifically for the central project of this dissertation, the recognition of transformative rhetoric in presidential prayer breakfast speeches is directly connected to my discussion of genre.

Presidential Preaching at the National Prayer Breakfast – A New Genre?

This dissertation has analyzed the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology to see if they can be argued to form a

unique genre of presidential rhetoric. A generic approach has not only allowed for a comprehensive approach to the prayer breakfast speeches, it has been particularly suited to theological questions I have brought to the project. The study of genre is a way of recognizing the communal nature of our rhetorical existence. All human communication is marked by “shared patterns or social forms that inhere in the popular imagination” (Gunn, 2004, p. 6). Genres themselves are recognizable because of the social nature of human life, including language, situation, and symbolic use (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978; Gunn, 2004). As I approach the central question of this dissertation, I begin with this wide view of genre because it best reflects the direction I want to take my discussion of whether the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast forms a new genre of presidential speech. While I will also draw on the work of Campbell and Jamieson (2008) to speak specifically about genres of presidential addresses, a deep symbolic view of human communication allows a consideration of the theological that I believe is crucial to this discussion.

According to Campbell and Jamieson (2008), genres of presidential rhetoric are “defined by their pragmatic ends and typified by their substantive, stylistic, and strategic similarities” (p. 9). Certain types of presidential rhetoric, such as the State of the Union, Inaugural, or Farewell speeches, serve to define the institution of the presidency and are generically constrained by the occasion in which they are delivered, that is, by the history of previous presidential addresses in that genre. Presidents delivering these speeches are “fulfilling constitutional roles and exercising their executive power” (p. 7). Despite the institutional focus, the genres of presidential rhetoric identified by Campbell and

Jamieson are also shown to be significantly shaped by the deeper needs and patterns of human social imagination.

The National Prayer Breakfast, over the six and half decades it has been in existence, has come to be an expected yearly speaking engagement for the president. The rhetoric of the event organizers has remained quite stable over the years, with its emphasis on “meeting together in the spirit of Jesus” and its declaration of overcoming divides to bring leaders together for prayer. In the midst of a changing culture, presidential speeches at the event have, in ways reflective of the era in which they were delivered, constructed a set of faith narratives that are also consistently discernable. Presidents have praised the prayer breakfast organizers, portrayed themselves as persons of faith and prayer, and constructed a story of America and religion. In addition to these narratives, presidents have also responded to the unique opportunity presented by the rhetorical space of the National Prayer Breakfast to engage in public theology, telling a divine narrative – constructing faith-consciousness through their description of God-in-the-world – and then connecting that divine story with a narrative of faithful leadership and what that might mean for faithful living for the human community.

Some presidential speeches to the National Prayer Breakfast have exemplified genres already defined by Campbell and Jamieson. We see war rhetoric from President Johnson during Vietnam, and both Presidents Bush during their respective Iraq conflicts. President Reagan echoed his national eulogy after the Challenger disaster in his prayer breakfast speech a week later. President Johnson included elements of the national eulogy genre in his first speech as president after President Kennedy died, as President G.W. Bush also did in his 2002 speech after 9/11. President Obama ended his eight years at the

prayer breakfast with a resounding farewell address delivered in memorable sermonic style in 2016.

While previous generic elements are evident in presidential speeches at the prayer breakfast, overall, the National Prayer Breakfast address does not fit neatly within any previous schema. Given the evidence of what I am calling transformative rhetoric, the repeated patterns of narrative construction, and the unique engagement in public theology found in these speeches, I am proposing that it would be appropriate and fruitful to consider the National Prayer Breakfast address a distinct genre of presidential speech. As Campbell and Jamieson (2008) noted, any claim of genre is not necessarily definitive, as there could always be another way of seeing the discourse in question. Rather, “if the use of particular genre...proves illuminating, or offers insights otherwise unavailable, then it is true by definition” (p. 15). While I am making no claims about “truth,” I do see the potential in making a generic claim here to be its heuristic value for future research at the intersection of presidential rhetoric and public theology. In particular, seeing the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast as a genre of presidential speech may allow its construction of public theology, with its attendant use of transformative rhetoric, to be a site for inquiry and potential new insight. That is, rather than assuming that when presidents “use” religious language it is subsumed under the heading of civil religion or campaign-style persuasion, instead we can examine their articulation of public theology as having a potentially substantive contribution to make to larger societal conversations, including the ongoing contested question of the place of religion in American public life.

Identifying the Generic Pattern

In this section, I will review the elements of the generic pattern that I have identified in the presidential National Prayer Breakfast address (see table 1). The effort to identify common themes, patterns, and rhetoric use is not meant to suggest that there is one definite schema to which all presidents have adhered, nor is it meant to suggest that future presidents will necessarily encompass all elements of the generic pattern in their prayer breakfast addresses. It is meant, rather, to examine the central elements of the National Prayer Breakfast address and see what they can tell us about the generic expectations of the speech, and, more deeply, about the shared communal nature of our rhetorical existence.

Table 1.

Generic Elements in Presidential Prayer Breakfast Speeches
<u>Structural Narrative Elements</u>
Narrative of the NPB
Narrative of Personal Faith and Prayer
Narrative of America and Religion
Narrative of the Divine
Narrative of Faithful Human Living
<u>Underlying Concern</u>
Faithful Leadership

Narrative of the NPB

In the previous chapter, I identified several narratives constructed by presidents in their prayer breakfast speeches. In addition, I noted an ongoing focus on the question of what constitutes faithful leadership. Presidents speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast, first, engage in epideictic rhetoric as they tell the story of the prayer breakfast and its

organizers, its role in Washington, and its value to the president and other leaders present. In so doing, presidents, to a greater or lesser degree, establish identification with Fellowship leaders and the goals of the prayer breakfast movement, as well as signal their support for the role of faith in public service. Presidents have varied in the degree to which they engage in this part of the generic pattern. Some have given brief words of praise in standard opening remarks, while others have seemed to go out of their way to make sure they showed their personal connection to Fellowship leaders. Still others have shown a kind of natural affinity, even genuine affection, for those leaders, for the language of the movement, and for its goals, even going so far as to repeat standard Fellowship verbiage about the history of the prayer breakfast. Some presidents have built off of the opening provided by the National Prayer Breakfast to describe their own perspective on what it means to pray together publicly and to encourage faithful leadership. Some of those presidential comments have not necessarily hewed to Fellowship expectations or rhetoric, showing the reality that a generic expectation is not necessarily perceived as a constraint by the presidents.

Narrative of Personal Faith and Prayer

The second part of the generic pattern that I identified is the opportunity provided within the rhetorical situation of the prayer breakfast for presidents to construct a narrative of themselves as persons of faith. For some presidents, particularly President Obama, this generic element has meant actually telling a personal faith narrative, giving specific witness to theological commitments and sharing the story of coming to hold those commitments. Other presidents have given more of a passing glimpse into their personal narrative of faith or presented their beliefs in a didactic or even oblique manner.

Many presidents, as part of constructing a narrative of themselves as persons of faith, have shown themselves to be persons of prayer, even leading the breakfast crowd in prayer. Most presidents have also described themselves as needing prayer in order to be able to faithfully serve in their high-pressure office. All presidents have expressed gratitude for the prayers of others. Overall, it is clear that one aspect of the generic pattern at the National Prayer Breakfast is the invitation to share a personal narrative of faith, to which presidents have responded with a mix of individual testimony, prayers, and gratitude for the place of prayer in their life.

Narrative of America and Religion

Presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast also construct a civil religious narrative of America. Their story of America and religion, in fact, forms a substantial element of the generic pattern of the prayer breakfast speech. In their rhetoric, presidents show how religious faith strengthens America, that freedom of religion is at the heart of who America is, and that America's rich blessings carry great responsibility. All presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast have included civil religion as part of their speech. Some have emphasized the status quo affirming vision of a shining city on the hill, a "cathedral of freedom," to quote President Reagan's memorable phrase. Others have critiqued ways that the country has fallen short of its stated values. Rarely, and most clearly in President Carter's speeches, presidents have critiqued the idea of civil religion itself. Several presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast have taken the opportunity to reflect on what religious freedom means in America and to connect that with the religious and cultural diversity present at the prayer breakfast, especially in recent years. Presidents have also treated the National Prayer Breakfast as a welcome venue for announcing faith-

in-action initiatives led by their administrations. Presidents preaching civil religion at the prayer breakfast have generally sought to hold America to its highest ideals, and occasionally to ask whether the country could do even better by living up to scriptural mandates.

Narrative of the Divine

But presidents speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast have not solely cast a vision of a better America. They have not only preached civil religion. Presidents have also engaged in public theology. They have told the divine story, speaking in scriptural and theological images of a living God who is active in the world, and they have reflected on what that means for faithful leadership, and faithful living for all humanity. In their prayer breakfast rhetoric, presidents have created a narrative of the divine as the infinite, perfect source of all good, who yet cares about and pays attention to finite, imperfect human beings. A central aspect of this part of the generic pattern is the recognition that divine power relativizes all human power, including the power of the leaders represented at the National Prayer Breakfast. Presidents emphasize this recognition in various ways, and most lift up the virtue of humility as the proper human response. This leads to the final part of the generic pattern: a vision of what it means to live faithfully in light of the divine.

Narrative of Faithful Human Living

Faithful living in response to God is portrayed by presidents speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast in a series of divine “calls.” All humans, and especially the leaders in the room, are called to interpret their lives through the lens of scripture, to follow God’s will, and to come before the divine in humble prayer. They are then sent out,

called to service and to a higher purpose beyond self or country. Lastly, presidents cast a vision of a connected humanity, where all are children of God, and called to view each other as such. Not all presidents engage in this theological visioning with equal fervor or rhetorical power, but the overall pattern of presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast includes an element of public theology that moves beyond civil religion and personal piety to contribute a unique presidential perspective on what it means to live faithfully as a human community in response to the divine.

Considering faithful leadership

Generic patterns do not consist solely of recurring structural elements, but also of underlying motivational or even archetypal concerns that manifest in the surface discourse (Freeman & Medway, 2003; Harrell & Linkugel, 1978). An underlying aspect of the generic pattern exhibited by presidents at the National Prayer Breakfast is a consideration of what constitutes faithful leadership. In some ways, this underlying concern echoes the stated purpose of the Fellowship, whose leaders portray the movement as supporting and encouraging “godly” leadership through meeting together “in the spirit of Jesus.” Yet presidents have responded to the opportunity presented by their prayer breakfast address to engage in a more substantial and at times even critical consideration of what faithful leadership means. Generally, their discourse about faithful leadership can be categorized as civil religious or as public theology.

In the civil religious vein, presidents have repeatedly cited stories of American founders or other major figures, especially Abraham Lincoln, as models of faith. Often, presidents have shared the same civil religious “scriptures” favored by other speakers at the National Prayer Breakfast, such as Benjamin Franklin calling for prayer at the

Constitutional Convention and Lincoln falling to his knees in prayer. Presidents engaging in this rhetoric have articulated the underlying interest in faithful leadership in a language constrained both by the civil religious tradition in America and by the particular narrative construction of the Fellowship and their chosen speakers at the event, who have decisively favored certain civil religious imagery of faithful leadership. Yet even recognizing these constraints, presidents have at times found ways to push beyond them. President Obama in particular repeatedly cited Lincoln as a model, yet did so in a way that connected him with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and lifted up the theme of justice and equality.

Presidents have also considered faithful leadership from the perspective of public theology. The National Prayer Breakfast address, in fact, seems uniquely suited to giving the president the opportunity to reflect on what being a faithful leader looks like in light of the divine story. Presidents have done so, and have articulated gratitude for the opportunity. In particular, presidents speaking at the prayer breakfast have reflected on the need for humility and a willingness to recognize the limits of human understanding and how that might impact discernment about matters of leadership. At times, this reflection has led presidents to ponder aloud in their speeches about the lack of civility in political life and to encourage the humble possibility that all leaders, even those across the aisle, are children of God, and all are striving to do their best. Faithful leadership, as it is constructed in the presidents' preaching of public theology, recognizes that, in light of the divine, all human pretensions to perfection are short-sighted and ultimately, unfaithful. Furthermore, faithful leadership is portrayed by presidents as willing to sacrifice to follow God's will, and to bend in service to the "least of these." As presidents

preach about faith and reflect on what it means to be a faithful leader, they point towards a reality bigger than Washington that calls them to a vision and a life of purpose that relativizes the political exigencies that seem so pressing in the rush of their daily lives. At times, presidents appear to be preaching to themselves on these matters. Nevertheless, their words bear relevance beyond their personal story of faith, or even of being a faithful leader. In their speeches, presidents connect their vision of faithful leadership with what it means to be a part of the human community living in faithful relationship with one another and with the divine, and they do so in a way that, at least sometimes, can serve to inspire other leaders in the room.

Implications for Future Research in this Genre

Any generic description is going to lay out a systemic view, one that does its best to reflect the actual circumstances of the rhetoric in question, but which nevertheless may not be fully embodied in each and every instance of the speech (Campbell & Jamieson, 1978). In this case, presidents preaching at the National Prayer Breakfast have varied in the way they have embodied the generic pattern I have described, and there has been a longitudinal development over the decades the prayer breakfast has been in existence. Even if particular presidents did not “fit” the generic framework, however, the deeper patterns of considering the intersection of divine and human stories, of reflecting on faithful living and leadership, are often present in their prayer breakfast speeches. In certain instances, departures from the pattern of narrative construction are themselves instructive regarding the personal exigencies of that particular president. While a full description of how each president has or has not articulated the generic pattern I have identified in each and every one of their prayer breakfast speeches is beyond the scope of

this dissertation, I have indeed begun that work, and view it as a future direction for my own research on this genre. As I pursue this line of research, I will do so with a particular focus on the longitudinal development of the generic elements, and with the goal of delving more deeply into the hermeneutic influence of denominational background and other religious influences on the individual presidents. In so doing, I hope to contribute to the kind of scholarship exemplified by Medhurst (e.g. 2009b), who has engaged in a sustained inquiry into the influence of religion on political and rhetorical invention, with a particular focus on presidential religious rhetoric. My contribution to this research centers in my focus on presidents as public theologians, a line of research being actively pursued in the field of public theology by such scholars as Graham (2009).

Public Theology at a Liminal Event

One of the primary reasons I have been interested in pursuing this dissertation has been to investigate what it looks like for a communication scholar to take presidents seriously as public theologians, rather than automatically categorizing all presidential religious speech as an instrumental or decorative “use” of religion. As Thiemann (1991) noted, “American presidents have been among our most important public theologians” (p. 31). The role of public theology is to contribute to societal conversation about the common good, not only because many people are motivated personally by religion, but more importantly because the “discourses” (Graham, 2009) of public theology create “alignments and meanings about the nature of politics that go beyond specific questions of religious affiliation to the very well-springs of shared values that make up the body politic” (p. 163). In the context of this project, this stance means that when presidents speak theologically, it is possible to read their discourse as doing more than revealing

their personal faith commitments, but instead to inquire what it might mean for public conversation about “shared values that make up the body politic.” As I have engaged in a close reading of the presidential prayer breakfast speeches, I have paid careful attention to their articulation of public theology. In this final section, I would like to inquire what it might mean for the body politic that presidents are making these statements specifically at the National Prayer Breakfast, and how that could contribute to the communication question of “translation” of religious voices in the public square.

As discussed in my rationale and literature review, a central philosophical question about the presence of value-laden religious discourse in the public square is the question of “translation.” That is, do religious voices need to “translate” their claims into arguments that any rational person could accept based on reason in order to participate in the public conversation (Platt & Majdik, 2012). According to Medhurst (2002), the assumption of a need to translate religious reasons places an asymmetrical burden on religious citizens, who must speak a different language in order to participate in the public dialogue. As I noted earlier, a particularly provocative question for the present project is what it means if the president is the one using religious language in laying out his reasoning. And here I would like to suggest what might be a provocative possibility: what if it is precisely because of the “liminal” space created by the National Prayer Breakfast that presidents are free to articulate such religious language?

As noted in chapter four, the Fellowship operates as a “liminal” (Lindsay, 2010) entity, intentionally, even problematically, evading categorization as an official organization. From their perspective, such liminality allows the leaders involved to experience a space where they can share the burdens of leadership in community and

receive support. Yet, as Sharlet (2008, 2010) has investigated, such liminality could be read as a convenient secrecy that allows the group to wield behind-the-scenes power in problematic ways. From a communication perspective, the status of the National Prayer Breakfast as the public face of a liminal “movement” is quite interesting. The event clearly has drawn sustained attention, especially in recent years, with media coverage and prolific social media commentary. Videos are available online of the president and other speakers. Yet, still, in the context of the event, inside that room, the president is invited by the overall pattern provided by the event organizers to feel free to share deeply and personally about faith and his own need for prayer support. The presidential speech is not addressed to the whole body politic, but it will be available for them to “overhear” through its atomization and circulation (Heidt, 2012). In some ways, the liminal space afforded by the prayer breakfast may free the president to experiment with public theology, knowing his comments will be widely “overheard,” yet also be recognized as addressed to a religious audience. In other words, the president is given permission at the National Prayer Breakfast to speak without “translating,” and in so doing, may be showing us what can happen when public theology is articulated and allowed to become a part of the wider societal conversation in this post-modern age.

Homiletical theorists Craddock (1978) and Buttrick (1987), writing in an earlier, modern era, nevertheless point us towards this post-modern possibility. Craddock, in his *Overhearing the Gospel* (1978), took Soren Kierkegaard’s idea of indirect communication to suggest that the preacher is most effective when communicating indirectly – that is, not by rational persuasion or the presentation of information, but by finding creative ways to allow a jaded public to “overhear” the transformative good news.

Buttrick (1987), in his discussion of what he called “out-church” preaching, found that such communication venues allow for a very different kind of presentation of the Christian message than what happens on Sunday morning. Specifically, Buttrick asserted that “out-church speaking will combine secular style, the style of our age, with a kind of theological impudence as it gossips the gospel” (p. 229). Without making a definitive assessment of whether all presidential prayer breakfast messages embody the Christian “gospel,” nevertheless I see an intriguing communication possibility here: does the American public get to “overhear” what public theology sounds like because the presidents are “gossiping” it at the National Prayer Breakfast? This question is one that I believe would be a fruitful site for future inquiry at the intersection of presidential rhetoric, communication theory, and public theology. It is my hope that, by opening the door to this inquiry, my project has made a contribution to a new way of seeing and hearing presidents’ expression of public theology, and of conceptualizing its place in the public conversation of our deliberative democracy.

Strengths, Limitations, and Further Research

This dissertation has examined the presidential addresses to the National Prayer Breakfast through the lens of public theology in order to see if they can be argued to constitute a new genre of presidential speech. I have suggested that it would be appropriate and fruitful to so consider them, and I have delineated the outlines of the generic pattern that I see in the speeches. I have also addressed a research question about types of rhetoric, and suggested that presidents at times in their prayer breakfast speeches are engaging in what I have called “transformative rhetoric.” Lastly, I have begun a conversation about the presidential articulation of public theology within the context of

the National Prayer Breakfast and its liminal connection to the public square. In this concluding section, I will comment on the strengths and limitations of this project, and additional possibilities for further research.

Strengths

This dissertation has taken a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of presidential rhetoric. Situated at the dialogic intersection of the fields of communication and public theology, I have intentionally sought to take up Hart's (2002b) call for scholars to engage in new theorizing about the presidency, and to be willing to cross disciplinary lines in doing so. It is a strength of this project that I have focused on the construction of public theology in the presidents' prayer breakfast speeches because the field of public theology has much that is productive and interesting to offer any analysis of presidential religious speech. In particular, my findings point to the potential to view at least some presidential religious speech as a legitimate theological contribution to our public dialogue.

The question of how public the presidents' comments at the National Prayer Breakfast may or may not be points to another potential strength of this project: the intriguing possibility that it is precisely the liminality of the event and its organizers that may allow a space for the president to speak theologically without "translating" – that is, to speak in specifically theological terms – in a way that can contribute to our deliberative democracy by being "overheard" by the public. Lindsay (2010) has done work on the liminality of the Fellowship, but I am more interested in, and hope my work might contribute to, a consideration of what can happen in our post-modern context if theological speech is able to circulate freely because of the liminal space in which it is

first generated. Work in this area would not only have implications for presidential rhetoric and theology, but also could potentially be fruitful for work in organizational communication, as it may suggest new spaces and enactments of hidden organizing (Scott, 2013). It also has implications for communication research in new media, as the circulation of religious voices, often commenting on political matters and the presidency, has been significantly liberated and amplified by such forums as Twitter.

Returning to the area of presidential rhetoric, a significant strength of this project is the fact that I examined not only the whole body of speeches that presidents have delivered at the National Prayer Breakfast, but also the transcripts of all available breakfasts. Being able to read and comment on the entire context added strength and depth to my analysis. It also revealed repeated patterns in the rhetoric on the part of both Fellowship speakers and presidents that would not have been visible otherwise, and could be the site for further inquiry. Johnson (2012) and Lindsay (2006) had both suggested that it would be fruitful to study the body of speeches and the event as a whole, and my findings have born that out.

By identifying a generic pattern in the presidential address to the National Prayer Breakfast, my dissertation could contribute to future analysis of other presidential speeches at the event, and it could also open an inquiry into whether there are other venues where the president is similarly free to speak in such a theological way. Work in genre has already revealed that presidents speak theologically in their inaugural addresses, farewell speeches, and in national eulogies (Campbell & Jamieson, 2008), but I think my particular contribution is to look for patterns of theological imagination that may be liberated by contexts other than those that are structurally expected. In our post-modern

world, at least from the perspective of this theologian, it may be increasingly important to see how, if at all, presidents can construct a theological narrative arc that can be heard and can make a difference. The president, as public theologian, is potentially a uniquely influential voice in defining what it means to be a faithful religious person and leader, whether that definition is specifically Christian, or in more universal terms. Such a contribution to the public dialogue could influence the public's understanding of religion in powerful ways, as well as have political ramifications.

Taking the president seriously as a public theologian opens up new lines of inquiry in presidential rhetoric, public theology, political communication, and religious studies. For example, is there a relationship between presidential articulation of public theology and other speeches in which they speak in non-religious terms of serving the common good? How does the theological space created by presidents interact with political, even partisan, pressures and concerns? Would it be possible, in America, for a non-Christian president to be accepted as a public theologian? Is there an expectation that the president will fulfill the role of public theologian, and, if so, how might an agnostic or atheist president (or candidate) interact with such an expectation?

Limitations

As I noted early in this dissertation, a project at the intersection of church, state, presidential rhetoric, and theology is “potentially vast.” I have had to fight my own innate tendency towards the huge philosophical questions as I have written this communication dissertation, yet I see those questions, beyond the horizon of what is possible to cover here, and I want to note that they remain to be explored. With a generic focus, this project also had limited space to discuss the individual presidents' meaning-making and style in

their prayer breakfast addresses. In addition, it is possible that the focus on genre, while it allowed a pattern of “seeing,” also limited what could be seen and explored. Furthermore, my perspective as an ordained minister with a background in the study of religion, while contributing to the theological focus, may have, paradoxically, limited what I ended up focusing on. Lastly, time did not permit doing original archival research, so the question of speechwriters could not be investigated.

Further Research

It is my hope that this project opens up several areas of further research, and I am deeply interested in pursuing them. First, it would enhance the discussion to engage in archival research to determine the process by which the presidential prayer breakfast addresses were written. That is, to what extent did the presidents write them personally, and to what extent did speechwriters contribute? Especially in an exploration of public theology, I think it would be fascinating to examine a collaborative process for articulating theological claims. It would add, rather than detract, from the idea that such value-laden discourse is about more than personal belief. It would also be interesting to discover what the personal presidential contribution to the process actually was, and what that reveals about the presidents’ faith perspectives.

Work could continue on the genre itself, testing it against future presidents’ prayer breakfast speeches. I have not chosen to analyze the current president’s discourse, for a number of reasons, but I have briefly examined his two addresses, and, despite his gleeful flouting of convention, I found him to enact at least some portions of the generic framework, especially in his second speech. An interesting aspect of continued work in this area will be to see if there are any seismic shifts in the overall event, given the

passing of major figures in the movement: in addition to Billy Graham, Doug Coe had died sometime before this year's breakfast, and was briefly memorialized by the president in his speech. A further issue that could contribute to a shift in the role and "voice" of the National Prayer Breakfast centers in the glaring concern raised by the current president's presence and speaking at the event. It is a concern that was also present in Nixon's era, but it is exacerbated by our current polarized climate and all-or-nothing politics. To what extent is the event undermined, or even dismantled, by a president who speaks religious words at the breakfast, yet exhibits behaviors that are the antithesis of moral authority? And what happens when some persons who have claimed to speak for evangelical Christianity publicly declare that his speech at the prayer breakfast shows that we have a "real Christian" back in the White House, patently ignoring the deeply Christian rhetoric of President Obama? If the National Prayer Breakfast is perceived as just one more example of evangelical hypocrisy, will even substantial future presidential speeches matter as public theology contributions, or will the event fade from any role in public life beyond serving to further divide the body politic?

On a more positive note, I do think that, in the body of speeches I have examined, there is deep potential for exploring fine examples of presidents as preachers. That is, some of the prayer breakfast addresses would bear individual study as examples of presidential religious rhetoric, and it would be particularly fruitful to do so, as this dissertation has done, at the intersection of communication, presidential studies, and public theology. Further research could also be done on the set of speeches by individual presidents to explore their theological imagination and perspective on governing. In

particular, President Obama's substantive preaching at the National Prayer Breakfast remains as a shining example of the genre, and would be remarkably generative for the whole area of study.

Conclusion

In light of my final comment about President Obama, I am going to take the liberty to end this dissertation with the closing remarks from his final address to the National Prayer Breakfast in 2016. In his words, I believe we see not only President Obama's remarkable oratorical skills and deep faith, we see encapsulated the contribution that this genre of presidential speech has made to the life of the presidents, and to the life of our country:

For God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind. I pray that by His grace, we all find the courage to set such examples in our own lives, not just during this wonderful gathering and fellowship, not just in the public piety that we profess, but in those smaller moments when it's difficult, when we're challenged, when we're angry, when we're confronted with someone who doesn't agree with us, when no one is watching.

I pray that our leaders will always act with humility and generosity. I pray that my failings are forgiven. I pray that we will uphold our obligation to be good stewards of God's creation, this beautiful planet. I pray that we will see every single child as our own, each worthy of our love and of our compassion. And I pray we answer scripture's call to lift up the vulnerable and to stand up for justice and ensure that every human being lives in

dignity. That's my prayer for this breakfast, and for this country, in the years to come.

To that, this pastor, citizen, and communication scholar can only say "Amen."

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APPENDIX A

Presidential speeches accessed from The American Presidency Project
(www.presidency.ucsb.edu)

Presidential names as they appear in the database

Dwight D. Eisenhower (1953, February 5). *Remarks at the Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast of the International Christian Leadership.*
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Dwight D. Eisenhower (1956, February 2). *Remarks at Annual Breakfast of the International Council for Christian Leadership.*
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=10682

John F. Kennedy (1961, February 9). *Remarks at the Dedication Breakfast of International Christian Leadership, Inc.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=8211

John F. Kennedy (1962, March 1). *Remarks at the 10th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9080

John F. Kennedy (1963, February 7). *Remarks at the 11th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=9548

Lyndon B. Johnson (1964, February 5). *Remarks at the 12th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=26057

Lyndon B. Johnson (1965, February 4). *Remarks at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast.*
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=27185

Lyndon B. Johnson (1966, February 17). *Remarks at the 14th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28092

Lyndon B. Johnson (1967, February 2). *Remarks at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast.*
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=28361

Lyndon B. Johnson (1968, February 1). *Remarks at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast.*
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=29060

Richard Nixon (1969, January 30). *Remarks at the 17th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast.* www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=1986

Richard Nixon (1970, February 5). *Remarks at the Presidential Prayer Breakfast.*
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=2646

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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=3243
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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=5877
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- Jimmy Carter (1978, February 2). *National Prayer Breakfast Remarks at the 26th Annual Breakfast*. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=30006
- Jimmy Carter (1979, January 18). *National Prayer Breakfast Remarks at the Annual Breakfast*. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32335
- Jimmy Carter (1980, February 7). *National Prayer Breakfast Remarks at the Annual Breakfast*. www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=32897
- Ronald Reagan (1981, February 5). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=44356
- Ronald Reagan (1982, February 4). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=43075
- Ronald Reagan (1983, February 3). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=40717
- Ronald Reagan (1984, February 2). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=39211
- Ronald Reagan (1985, January 31). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=39099

Ronald Reagan (1986, February 6). *Remarks at the Annual National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=36746

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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=33479

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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=18097

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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=19261

George Bush (1992, January 30). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=20552

William J. Clinton (1993, February 4). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=46711

William J. Clinton (1994, February 3). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=49132

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www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=50676

William J. Clinton (1996, February 1). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=51934

William J. Clinton (1997, February 6). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=53402

William J. Clinton (1998, February 5). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=55104

William J. Clinton (1999, February 4). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=56624

William J. Clinton (2000, February 3). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58733

George W. Bush (2001, February 1). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=45721

George W. Bush (2002, February 7). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58750

George W. Bush (2003, February 6). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=58749

George W. Bush (2004, February 5). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=72544

George W. Bush (2005, February 3). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=62981

George W. Bush (2006, February 2). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=65126

George W. Bush (2007, February 1). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=24477

George W. Bush (2008, February 7). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=76765

Barack Obama (2009, February 5). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=85733

Barack Obama (2010, February 4). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=87473

Barack Obama (2011, February 3). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=88960

Barack Obama (2012, February 2). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=99207

Barack Obama (2013, February 7). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=103241

Barack Obama (2014, February 6). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=104675

Barack Obama (2015, February 5). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=109363

Barack Obama (2016, February 4). *Remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast*.
www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/?pid=111564

APPENDIX B

Transcripts of the National Prayer Breakfast (and prior names)
from the Congressional Record
listed in order by year of the breakfast
(some were not entered into the record until a later year)

- 1953: 99 Cong. Rec. A571 (1953). (Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.).
- 1954: 100 Cong. Rec. A955 (1954). (Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel, Washington, D.C.).
- 1955: 101 Cong. Rec. A636 (1955). (Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast).
- 1956: 102 Cong. Rec. 2005 (1956). (Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast).
- 1957: 103 Cong. Rec. A988 (1957). (Fifth Annual Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast at the Mayflower Hotel).
- 1958: 104 Cong. Rec. A1269 (1958). (Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast).
- 1959: 105 Cong. Rec. 4418 (1959). (Seventh Annual Dedicatory Prayer Breakfast).
- 1960: 106 Cong. Rec. 3591 (1960). (Eighth Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1961: 107 Cong. Rec. 3149 (1961). (Ninth Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1962: 108 Cong. Rec. 4930 (1962). (Tenth Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1963: 109 Cong. Rec. 2099 (1963). (Eleventh Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1964: 110 Cong. Rec. 2897 (1964). (Twelfth Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1965: 111 Cong. Rec. 2616 (1965). (Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1966: 112 Cong. Rec. 3832 (1966). (Fourteenth Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1967: 113 Cong. Rec. 3355 (1967). (The 15th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1968: 114 Cong. Rec. 3135 (1968). (The 16th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1969: 115 Cong. Rec. 4485 (1969). (The 17th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).
- 1970: 116 Cong. Rec. 3249 (1970). (The 18th Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast).

- 1971: 117 Cong. Rec. 2549 (1971). (The 19th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1972: 118 Cong. Rec. 3575 (1972). (The 20th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1973: 119 Cong. Rec. 4174 (1973). (The 21st Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1974: 120 Cong. Rec. 4635 (1974). (National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1975: 121 Cong. Rec. 5232 (1975). (The 23^d Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1976: 122 Cong. Rec. 3420 (1976). (The 24th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1977: 123 Cong. Rec. 4340 (1977). (The National Prayer).
- 1978: 124 Cong. Rec. 3275 (1978). (The 26th National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1979: 125 Cong. Rec. 2949 (1979). (The 27th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1980: 126 Cong. Rec. 4023 (1980). (The National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1981: 127 Cong. Rec. 2367 (1981). (The National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1982: 128 Cong. Rec. 2291 (1982). (The National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1983: 129 Cong. Rec. 6669 (1983). (National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1984: 130 Cong. Rec. 2855 (1984). (The National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1985: 131 Cong. Rec. 4211 (1985). (The 33^d Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1986: 132 Cong. Rec. 4147 (1986). (The 34th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1987: 133 Cong. Rec. 4884 (1987). (The 35th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1988: 134 Cong. Rec. 10833 (1988). (The 36th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1989: 135 Cong. Rec. 5669 (1989). (The 37th National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1990: 136 Cong. Rec. 3672 (1990). (The 38th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1991: 137 Cong. Rec. E1055 (1991). (The 39th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1992: 138 Cong. Rec. 2470 (1992). (National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1993: 139 Cong. Rec. 14953 (1993). (1993 National Prayer Breakfast).

- 1994: 140 Cong. Rec. 8920 (1994). (The 42nd Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1995: 141 Cong. Rec. 24994 (1995). (A Transcript of the National Prayer Breakfast Proceedings).
- 1996: 143 Cong. Rec. 19548 (1997). (1996 National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1997: 143 Cong. Rec. 6856 (1997). (The National Prayer Breakfast).
- 1998: 144 Cong. Rec. 6913 (1998). (National Prayer Breakfast 1998 Transcript).
- 1999: 147 Cong. Rec. 6144 (2001). (The 47th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2000: 147 Cong. Rec. 8530 (2001). (Transcript of the 48th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2001: 147 Cong. Rec. 4282 (2001). (The 49th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2005: 151 Cong. Rec. 12595 (2005). (53rd National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2006: 152 Cong. Rec. 21973 (2006). (National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2007: 153 Cong. Rec. 24502 (2007). (The National Prayer Breakfast 2007).
- 2008: 154 Cong. Rec. 5450 (2008). (56th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2009: 155 Cong. Rec. 12641 (2009). (Commemorating the 57th Annual National Prayer Breakfast, February 5th, 2009).
- 2010: 156 Cong. Rec. 10803 (2010). (58th Annual National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2011: 157 Cong. Rec. 12521 (2011). (59th National Prayer Breakfast) – in 4 parts.
- 2012: 158 Cong. Rec. 3804 (2012). (60th National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2013: 159 Cong. Rec. S2552 (2013). (61st National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2015: 161 Cong. Rec. S2514 (2015). (63rd National Prayer Breakfast).
- 2016: 162 Cong. Rec. E1299 (2016). (64th National Prayer Breakfast) – in 4 parts.

VITA

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