

Font of All Blessings: Constructing Christian Identity through Technologies of the Self

Elaine Schnabel

*Assistant Professor of Organizational Communication
Weber State University*

Suggested Citation:

Schnabel, E. (2024). Font of all blessings: Constructing christian identity through technologies of the self. *Utah Journal of Communication*, 2(1), 6–12. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.11193426>

Abstract

“Thank you Jesus” yard signs offer an invitation for all who pass by to express gratitude toward the Christian God. This article conceptualizes the signs both as a technology of the self, a practice by which people discipline themselves into becoming a particular kind of person, and a material artifact in the United States culture wars. Using a close reading grounded by a Foucauldian perspective, I show that these signs reshape residential areas into a neighborhood shibboleth, wherein the person interpellated by the sign is forced to confront their faith–status according to the various subject positions offered by the sign. As disciplinary technologies, these signs normalize a Christian faith that is childlike, happy, grateful, and proclamatory. The sign simultaneously renders other faith identities, such as ungrateful Christians or the grateful person of a different faith, aberrant and therefore less welcome in this movement. While their materiality offers a repeated invitation to join a movement predicated on gratitude, the invitation perpetually creates a subject position—the judge—who is unable to answer the proffered invitation to become one of the childlike faithful.

Keywords: *materiality, technology of the self, religion, identity, Christianity*



Introduction

I came across my first thank you Jesus yard sign at a low point in my faith journey. The bright yellow and orange coroplast yard sign was perched in front of a dilapidated house alongside dying plants and garden kitsch. It was the same size as more political yard signs that read, “Let’s Go Brandon,” but this one reminded me of a spiritual practice I had done while in seminary, listing at least three things I was grateful for every day. This practice drew me closer to God. Every time I drove past that sign, I was invited to take that spiritual practice back up again. As a Christian and a critical scholar, I realized that the sign operated as what Foucault described as a technology of the self, a practice by which a person intentionally disciplines themselves into becoming a particular kind of person (Foucault, 1988). Prayer, confession, and listing out gratitudes are practices individuals might choose to do in order to become a better Christian. Some days I would drive past the sign and welcome the chance to thank Jesus for the good things happening in my life, to discipline myself into being a person defined by gratitude. Other days I resented the invitation—and immediately felt the sting of recognizing myself as an ungrateful, suboptimal Christian.

I take the signs to be a technology of the self that disciplines the passerby by offering several options for how that person can identify. Because of their public-facing nature, I also take these signs to be part of the ongoing culture war, in which Christians in America have sought to reassert their primacy in public spaces as the presumption of secular dominance has increased (Taylor, 2004, 2009). Originating in rural Asheboro, North Carolina in 2014 as the project of a local Christian teenager, these signs have become a popular mechanism of self-identification in American Christianity today: 23,000 signs had been sold by 2016 (Wilson 2016) and over 100,000 had been sold and placed in lawns located in all 50 states by December 2017 (Hildyard 2017). These signs purport to be an expression of Christian identity and a public invitation to “join the movement” based not on polarizing opinions but something positive and healthy: gratitude (About the Movement). But by acknowledging that this isn’t just a sign – it’s also a disciplinary technology—this project provides insight on who is more and less welcome to join that movement. In this case, interrogating which subject positions these signs make possible can provide insight on what kind of identity Christians see as good and which as aberrant.

I argue these signs use the invitation to express gratitude to reshape residential areas into a neighborhood shibboleth, wherein the person interpellated by the sign is forced to confront her

faith-status according to the various subject positions offered by the sign. As disciplinary technologies, these signs privilege a Christian faith that is childlike, grateful and happy. The sign simultaneously renders other faith identities, such as ungrateful Christians or the grateful person of a different faith, aberrant and therefore less welcome in this movement. While their materiality offers a repeated invitation to join a movement predicated on gratitude, the invitation perpetually creates a subject position—the judge—who is not only unwelcome but unable to answer the proffered invitation to become one of the childlike faithful.

Disciplinary Technologies of the Self: The Spiritual Labor of Christian Identity

The thank you Jesus lawn sign operates as what Foucault described as a technology of the self. A technology of the self is a practice by which a person comes to label themselves in a particular way and thereby “become[s]... an object [of knowledge] who learns to effect changes to himself” (Dreyfus and Rabinow 2014: 175). Technologies of the self are the means by which people choose to shape themselves in ways that often challenge the status quo (Besley, 2021; McNay, 2009) such as the intentional training of the body in women’s sports to resist dominant patriarchal ideologies (Markula, 2003) or techniques by which chess players can master themselves in competition (Aycock, 1995). This phenomenon is also known as subject formation, when individuals are disciplined through verbal and nonverbal communication practices to act a certain way (Foucault, 1980, 2012). At the heart of all disciplinary systems like a technology of the self exists a “penal mechanism” (Foucault, 2012, p. 177) that uses reward and punishment to normalize some subject positions as good and others as aberrant. My feeling of guilt at being unwilling to express gratitude when I passed by the sign indicates that I experienced that mechanism disciplining me to act differently in the future. Repeatedly accessing the penal mechanisms of a technology initiates the “indefinite discipline” Foucault wrote of: “an interrogation without end, an investigation that would be extended without limit” (Foucault 2012: 227) wherein, the subject-made-object-to-themselves disciplines themselves to be a particular kind of person (e.g., the ‘right’ kind of Christian). Intentional use of this endless interrogation allows religious individuals to discipline themselves into particular kinds of people (Smith, 2006). The thank you Jesus signs offer a repeated opportunity for passersby to engage with the sign’s practice of gratitude, an invitation to enact discipline on one’s self.

Although this discipline might begin at an individual level, its repetition and widespread use organizes people by creating different subject positions or identities (Mahmood, 2005). By creating both positive and negative subject positions (e.g., grateful or ungrateful), a technology of the self operates like material rhetoric: it persuades people who engage with it which sociocultural roles are appropriate for them to act out without a speaker, speech, audience, occasion seeming to be present (McGee, 1982). The power of these technologies is in their capacity to frame some subject positions as negative and others as positive: outsourcing identity regulation from an organization to an individual who disciplines themselves (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). When individuals manage their emotions at work (Hochschild, 1983) and religious persons manage their spirituality in religious organizations (McGuire, 2010; Schnabel, 2015), they are enacting this discipline on themselves. Doing so intentionally allows someone to identify as a member in good standing of the social group in which they want or need to identify (Alvesson, 2010; McNamee, 2011) or get by at work (Hochschild, 1983). Disciplinary technologies influence which kinds of emotional and spiritual labor individuals want to do by offering up a way for someone to attain a positive identity or subject position. Such discipline therefore troubles the distinction between the performance of identity and the reality of identity: the performances of identity can be the means by which faithful individual use material artifacts or practices to shape their religious identities.

Unlike more typical forms of discipline, however, these signs are posted publicly and interpellate passersby who have not elected to subject themselves to this technology (Althusser, 1970). The sign can therefore be connected to the broader sociocultural movement to bring the Christian religion back into American public life. As the presumption of secular dominance has increased (Taylor, 2004, 2009), Christians in American have sought to reassert their primacy in public spaces like courthouses (Popp, 2010), popular media (Dreyer, 2023; Lundberg, 2009), education (Baker et al., 2020; Perry et al., 2022), and politics proper (Lee, 2022; Whitehead & Perry, 2022). White Christian nationalism is on the rise (Whitehead & Perry, 2022), and so the conversation about Christian identity is often sensationalized, with references to purity culture, trauma, and Christian groups' political work. While these issues remain highly relevant, the main thing Christians do together—in terms of where they spend the most time and money—is worship (Chaves, 2004). And worship, as James K.A. Smith has written (Smith, 2006, 2009, 2013), is an intentional usage of Foucault's disciplinary mechanism to "enact countermeasures, counter-disciplines that will form [themselves] into the kinds of people that

God calls [them] to be" (p. 106), attempting to be a people defined not by more dominant ideologies but by their faith (Smith, 2009).

The signs' rapid dissemination in the later half of the 2010s (Hildyard 2017) indicates that this particular disciplinary technology is a popular mode of worship among Christians. Examining its disciplinary mechanism therefore provides insight what kind of identity Christians see as normal or good and which as aberrant. This paper thus investigates the following question:

RQ: What subjectivities do these signs suggest are normal and which are aberrant?

Methods

To explore this research question, I performed a close reading of the signs and the website selling them (Brummett, 2018). To do so, I took a "top-down, theory-driven approach" to the text (p. 27), performing the close reading through a Foucauldian lens. This means that I examined the signs to see what kinds of subject positions the signs discipline people in to and through what disciplinary mechanisms. Rather than investigating how people actually interact with the signs, this close reading investigates what subject positions the sign makes possible. I sought to understand what rewards and punishments were offered, to answer the question of what faith identities are regulated as normal and which as aberrant. In doing so, this analysis provides insight on what kind of identity Christians see as good and which as aberrant and therefore who is more and less welcome to join the Christian side of the culture war. I used a close reading of the website to corroborate that analysis, treating it as the cultural context of those for whom the sign is persuasive and positive (DeCloedt Pinçon, 2017). Below, I will first provide a detailed description of the sign before then articulating the four subject positions made possible by the sign.

thank you Jesus

The thank you Jesus signs look much like most yard signs in form and shape: 18x24 inches, made of coroplast, with a double-sided message stuck into the ground at knee-height (see Appendix A). In these signs, the sun is rising in the background—a yellow half-circle dominates the bottom half of the sign with two curved rows of darker yellow and light orange fading into a deeper orange sky. In the foreground, the words "thank you Jesus" lack any punctuation. This profession of faith—"thank you Jesus"—is minimal and simplistic, lacking all complexity that a religious tradition with thousands of years of history and writing has accumulated. The comma between "you" and "Jesus" is dropped.

The “t” of “thank” is a Christian cross, squared off at its edges, more solid-looking than any of the other letters, which are in Comic Sans font. “JESUS” is spelled out in all capital letters, but the edges are softened, friendly. Unlike the cross for the initial “t,” it looks as though someone took a paint brush to a piece of paper—a child, perhaps—and swiped through the letters J-E-S-U-S. They are rickety: the J is slightly larger than any other letter; the tips of the U are uneven at the top; and a little tail sticks out of the stem of the E for its middle horizontal line.

The sign signals a certain happiness or joy in the light of the sun—a brand new day, perhaps, brightness, and light being born—and explicitly states gratitude. The sunrise in the background shows signs of inconsistency between the layers; the edges between all four colors are imperfect. Despite having been mass-produced, the backdrop is designed like the letters to appear painted on. The lines aren’t clean because the brush is also imperfect, a few of its hairs trailing too far to the right or the left and leaving scratches of “paint” outside of a boundary. It is, perhaps, too neat for a child’s painting skills, but the ethos of the child remains in the uneven lines and simple shapes and happy yellows and oranges.

Neighborhood Faith Shibboleth: An Invitation Designed to be Rejected

As disciplinary technologies, the signs execute a “constantly repeated ritual of power” (Foucault, 2012, p. 186) that reshapes neighborhoods into a shibboleth, wherein the person interpellated by the sign is forced to confront her faith-status according to the various subject positions offered by the sign. An individual’s response to this invitation subjects them to the penal mechanism (Foucault, 2012) of the sign and determines the extent of their ability to identify positively as Christian. The sign makes four subjectivities possible: the childlike Christian, the ungrateful Christian, the improperly grateful person, and the judge. The penal mechanism that creates the good Christian as childlike is constituted in part by the gaze of the dismissive judge. Through the production of these subject positions, these signs offer an ongoing invitation for a passerby to join the Christian community but it also recreates a subject position from which an individual will forever be unable to accept the invitation.

Four Subjectivities Produced by Thank You Jesus Signs

The only fully normative subjectivity created by the sign is docile and obedient to its explicit purposes: the childlike Christian who believes in Jesus and wants to self-discipline themselves to grow closer to God through gratitude. Perhaps she buys a sign or tells her pastor about them in order to “join the mission” and more

comprehensively engage in both the disciplinary and evangelistic goals of the sign. Perhaps she, like one verified owner of the signs whose words are quoted on the website, shouts out loud ““Thank You Jesus!!”” every time she sees one (Product, 2024). Like thousands of others who bought the sign, this person experiences their neighborhoods as a space to confess gratitude. This gratitude is directed toward the Christian God, specifically Jesus, and it is an enthusiastic gratitude, full of childlike joy. These Christians are also engaged in proclamation through sign-buying and posting. Although there is no mandate to buy a sign, the final piece of text on the sign is the website address in the bottom right. Once there, an interested party can “become part of the movement” and confess her own faith via her property by “cover[ing] the land in Thank You Jesus signs” (About the Movement, 2024). As the website states, “Our goal is quite simple. To spread the name of Jesus throughout the world and share with others how thankful we are for what he does every day in our lives.” The normal form of faith produced by this sign breaks out of the private sphere of individual belief and into the public sphere to challenge secular assumptions about the role of religion in everyday life. This first subject position is the ideal self the sign encourages (Wieland, 2010), an ideal which thereafter organizes people according to the three other subject positions in relation to it.

A second subjectivity made possible by the sign is the ungrateful Christian. This subjectivity is aberrant, a person who believes in Jesus, but fails to perform gratitude appropriately. This person doesn’t buy a sign; they ignore them and perhaps even considers changing their route to avoid the invitation to childlike gratitude. The invitation comes every time they pass by the sign—and some days they are just not feeling grateful. Each day, they can choose to accept this statement of gratitude and instead experience strength or joy customers profess to experience when they drive by the sign during difficult circumstances. The ungrateful Christian, however, who resists the call to be grateful, to be happy and childlike must repeatedly give herself the title of “ungrateful,” a person of deformed faith or perhaps not even a person of faith. Unlike the grateful, childlike Christian who experiences the joy of having performed her faith correctly (according to the sign), the ungrateful Christian experiences guilt or shame of a substandard faith. This experience of the penal mechanism encourages the individual to regulate herself (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

A third and closely related subjectivity made possible by the sign is that of the grateful person who does not seek to attribute that gratitude to Jesus. This person might be religiously

unaffiliated or differently affiliated. Although not affiliated with Jesus per se, they feel gratitude and express it. Like the second subject position, this person is not fully obedient to the sign's purposes, but they might take a moment to consider their blessings or bask in a sense of gratitude toward nature, an unnamed spiritual force, or even gratitude toward their loved ones. The penal mechanism of the sign requires they admit that they are not wholly what the sign and its owner hope them to be. The person who is organized into this subjectivity might be willing to regulate themselves (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), but might also simply consider themselves forever fully unwelcome.

A fourth and final subjectivity is perpetually made unwelcome in Christianity by the sign: the judge, the passerby who surveils the property, conducting the examination that enables them to dismiss the homeowner as childish. This person does not recognize Jesus as a source of blessing and might not see any particular reason to give thanks. Because there is no particular obligation toward the deity to give thanks nor any inclination toward gratitude in that moment, the invitation is one to surveil and pass judgement on the proclamation of gratitude. The disciplinary mechanism for the judge is thus more subtle: it comes in the form of the satisfaction in a proper categorization, perhaps dismissive of the childish proclamation, disbelieving of the irrationality of the faithful, or annoyed at the homeowner's preference for gratitude, an opiate of the masses. The sign disciplines the judge to be arrogant, to hold a position of power, to be the objective "expert" over and against the childlike faithful (Foucault, 2012). Indeed, the first subject position benefits from this gaze and its judgment. Thus, in this sign and the work that it does on the neighborhood landscape, dismissive judgment from the judge and childlike joy and celebration of gratitude are in definitional tension with one another.

Normalizing a Happy and Proclamatory Christian Identity

These signs organize Christian identity by suggesting that a normal Christian is supposed to be childlike, happy, grateful, and proclamatory. The three other subject positions the sign makes legible—the ungrateful Christian, the grateful non-Christian, and the surveilling judge—experience their identities as aberrant and therefore suboptimal. In this way, the sign normalizes one way of practicing Christianity over other ways. Because of the sign's normalization of a proclamatory faith, the faith of someone who sees faith as a private matter is rendered aberrant or invisible by the sign's mechanism. A faith checkered by doubt or complexity is likewise illegible in the Christian social identity

shaped by this sign. Like the three subject positions the sign makes legible, these other ways of practicing faith are suboptimal ways of identifying as Christian, according to the sign.

Additionally, by recreating a judge surveilling the faith identity of simplistic gratitude, these signs recreate the logic of the culture wars in which some persons are perpetually dismissive of Christianity's beliefs. This sign which proclaims gratitude and invites others to do likewise is, in religious terms, spiritually formative: it creates particular identities, ways of being in the world (Mahmood, 2005). Through an emphasis on Jesus and childlike simplicity, the signs create a subject position—the judge—that is not just unwelcome but unable to answer the proffered invitation because they are shaped into inspecting, knowledgeable judges over and against the childlike faithful. Such a formation recreates the culture war, actively discouraging some people from becoming Christian.

Conclusion

These signs are just one example of a technology of the self used by religious persons in the United States to perform their faith. Prayer, clothing, tattoos or lack thereof, and other physical practices like fasting or avoiding certain foods or drink are all religious technologies of the self with material presence in everyday American culture. Visible church buildings and temples likewise reshape the material landscape in which they sit. Although these practices are intended primarily for the spiritual formation of religious insiders, their materiality makes them proclamatory in a way that is similar to the thank you Jesus signs. As explored in this paper, such practices can create unintended effects. Therefore, people of all religious faiths need to take seriously the productive power of such material religious technologies for spiritual formation, asking what unintended and counterproductive subject formations their public practices of religious identity are creating. Who, in other words, do certain material artifacts or practices of faith both perpetually invite and reject?

References

- Althusser, L. (1970). *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes toward an Investigation* (B. Brewster, Trans.). <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/althusser/1970/ideology.htm>
- Alvesson, M. (2010). Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, surfers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies. *Human Relations*, 63(2), 193–217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726709350372>

- Alvesson, M., & Willmott, H. (2002). Identity regulation as organizational control: Producing the appropriate individual. *Journal of Management Studies*, 39(5), 619–644. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-6486.00305>
- Aycock, A. (1995). Technologies of the self: Foucault and internet discourse(1). *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 1(2), JCMC121. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1083-6101.1995.tb00328.x>
- Baker, J. O., Perry, S. L., & Whitehead, A. L. (2020). Crusading for moral authority: Christian Nationalism and opposition to science. *Sociological Forum*, 35(3), 587–607. <https://doi.org/10.1111/socf.12619>
- Besley, T. (2021). Foucault, Truth-Telling and Technologies of the Self in Schools. In M. A. Peters, T. Besley, & H. Zhang (Eds.), *Moral Education and the Ethics of Self-Cultivation* (pp. 241–254). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-13-8027-3_16
- Brummett, B. S. (2018). *Techniques of Close Reading* (2nd edition). SAGE.
- Chaves, M. (2004). *Congregations in America*. Harvard University Press.
- DeCloedt Pinçon, D. (2017). Internet as Cultural Context. In M. Allen (Ed.), *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Communication Research Methods*. SAGE. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483381411>
- Dreyer, C. J. (2023). The right to believe: Constructions of white Christian victimhood in the God’s Not Dead series. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 40(4), 242–255. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2023.2249076>
- Dreyfus, H. L., & Rabinow, P. (2014). *Michel Foucault: Beyond structuralism and hermeneutics*. Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings, 1972–1977*. Pantheon Books.
- Foucault, M. (1988). Technologies of the self. In L. H. Martin, H. Gutman, & P. H. Hutton (Eds.), *Technologies of the self* (pp. 16–49). University of Massachusetts Press.
- Foucault, M. (2012). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group.
- Hildyard, C. (2017, December 26). NC Teen’s “Thank you Jesus” Yard Signs become Big Business. WRAP News. <https://www.wral.com/asheboro-teenager-s-thank-you-jesus-yard-signs-top-sales-of-more-than-100k-across-the-country-and-is-now-reaching-foreign-countr/17213729/>
- Hochschild, A. R. (1983). *The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling*. University of California Press.
- Lee, K. M. (2022). “In God we trust?”: Christian nationalists’ establishment and use of theist normative legislation. *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02773945.2022.2062435>
- Lundberg, C. (2009). Enjoying God’s death: The passion of the Christ and the practices of an Evangelical public. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 95(4), 387–411. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00335630903296184>
- Mahmood, S. (2005). *Politics of piety: The Islamic revival and the feminist subject*. Princeton University Press.
- Markula, P. (2003). The technologies of the self: sport, feminism, and Foucault. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 20(2), 87–107. <https://doi.org/10.1123/ssj.20.2.87>
- McGee, M. C., & McKerrow, R. E. (1982). A materialist’s conception of rhetoric. In *Explorations in rhetoric: Essays in honor of Douglass Ehninger*, (2–48). Scott-Foresman.
- McGuire, T. (2010). From emotions to spirituality: “Spiritual labor” as the commodification, codification, and regulation of organizational members’ spirituality. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(1), 74–103. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318909351432>
- McNamee, L. G. (2011). Faith-based organizational communication and its implications for member identity. *Journal of Applied Communication Research*, 39(4), 422–440. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00909882.2011.608697>
- McNay, L. (2009). Self as enterprise: Dilemmas of control and resistance in Foucault’s the birth of biopolitics. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26(6), 55–77. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409347697>

Perry, S. L., Braunstein, R., Gorski, P. S., & Grubbs, J. B. (2022). Historical fundamentalism? Christian nationalism and ignorance about religion in American political history. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 61(1), 21–40. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jssr.12760>

Popp, R. K. (2010). Visual culture, public space, and piety in Focus on the Family's Citizen Magazine. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 27(5), 498–518. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295030903583622>

Schnabel, E. (2015). Spiritual tyranny at Mars Hill: A rhetorical analysis of Mark Driscoll's relational metaphors. *Journal of Communication and Religion*, 38(4).

Smith, J. K. A. (2006). *Who's afraid of postmodernism? (The church and postmodern culture): Taking Derrida, Lyotard, and Foucault to church*. Baker Academic.

Smith, J. K. A. (2009). *Desiring the kingdom (cultural liturgies): Worship, worldview, and cultural formation*. Baker Academic.

Smith, J. K. A. (2013). *Imagining the Kingdom (Cultural Liturgies): How Worship Works*. Baker Books.

Taylor, C. (2004). *Modern Social Imaginaries*. Duke University Press.

Taylor, C. (2009). *A Secular Age*. Harvard University Press.

Thank You Jesus Signs. (2019). *About the Movement*. <https://www.thankyoujesussigns.com/about-the-movement/>

Thank You Jesus Signs. (2019). *Thank you Jesus Signs*. <https://www.thankyoujesussigns.com/>

Thank You Jesus Signs. (2019). *Product*. <https://www.thankyoujesussigns.com/product/thank-you-jesus-yard-sign/>

Thank You Jesus Signs. (2019). *Thank You Jesus Mission*. <https://thankyoujesusmission.org/>

Whitehead, A. L., & Perry, S. L. (2022). *Taking America Back for God: Christian Nationalism in the United States*. Oxford University Press.

Wieland, S. M. B. (2010). Ideal selves as resources for the situated practice of identity. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 24(4), 503–528. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0893318910374938>

Photo Credit:

Pitman, R. (2018). Travis' Barber Shop. Photograph, <https://flic.kr/p/29v1FGD>.