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Making Sense of Miracles: Institutionalizing the Unpresentable

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MAKING SENSE OF MIRACLES: INSTITUTIONALIZING THE UNPRESENTABLE

By

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HEADING 1

INTRODUCTION

The representation of miracles is central to the experience of faith for some Christians. For some, they believe that they have personally had such an experience. A direct encounter with the supernatural is the firm foundation of their faith. However, Christians do not need to have had this personal experience with miracles for them to be important to their faith. These Christians view their faith has having fundamentals that cannot be challenged. One of these fundamentals is that the Bible functions as a factual history. Echoing Paul in 1 Corinthians, they argue, "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then Christ has not been raised; and if Christ has not been raised, then our proclamation has been in vain and your faith has been in vain" (1 Corinthians 15:13-14, NRSV). For the Bible to be factual, miracles must be factual as well. This makes it necessary for all that believe in miracles to make sense of them.

In order to make sense of miracles, Christians have created a sensemaking institution; what I will call *the institution of miracles.* In order to protect Christianity, the institution engages in sensemaking. This sensemaking is conducted by self-reinforcing institutional scripts regarding miracles. Being able to sense-make is inherently tied to institutional membership; individuals that are not members will arrive at different conclusions than those on the inside.

This institution, however, is not parallel with Christianity as a whole. It is impossible to speak of one Christianity, let alone one *conservative* Christianity. U.S. American Christianity is so incredibly broad and diverse that it would be unproductive to refer to it as a singular institution. Christianity as a global grouping has no overarching institutionalization. At least not outside the cosmological understanding of *the Church* or *the body of Christ*. The denominations of Christianity are as diverse as the people that are a part of them. Even within denominations,

splits over foundational understandings of scripture have become commonplace (Gilbert, et al., 2019). Likewise, individual congregations, localized in a building, do not necessarily have discrete means of membership. Gailliard and Davis (2017) state in their research, "absent a formal membership process, and sometimes even *with* a formal process, the delineation between member and nonmember may be more fluid and complex and perhaps defined by other markers of assimilation" (p. 118).

In order to speak productively about a conservative Christian identity, new identity markers need to be identified and explicated. This paper marks the institutionalized sensemaking of miracles as one such identity marker. While this is not a brick and mortar institution with positions and hierarchies, it is a set of symbolic commitments and communal interpretive practices that bind a group of people together. These commitments and interpretations are best found in the rhetorical artifacts created by the institution of miracles.

I will be using two separate rhetorical artifacts that each illustrate different aspects of the institution of miracles. *It's a God Thing: When Miracles Happen to Everyday People* shows how miracle narratives form an institutional script for sensemaking. *The Case for Miracles* will show how the sensemaking of miracles is a matter of identity creation.

In the end, miracles will be uncovered for what they are—God's act *within* those that believe. While attempting to maintain modernist rationalism as a way to represent miracles, the institution of miracles fails to produce a rationalist argument for the existence of miracles that concludes anything more substantive than: *something happened.* It remains up to sense-makers to make meaning out of the event. Yet, the institution of miracles must still represent the unrepresentable. This is the postmodern condition of the institution. This condition leaves making sense of miracles as solely a matter of identity. In order for members of the institution of

miracles to represent miracles, they have to (re)present themselves as witnesses. By becoming witnesses, the sense-makers make the meaning of miracles by their conviction alone. In becoming the meaning-makers, the sense-makers become the miracle.

HEADING 2

RHETORICAL ARTIFACTS

It's a God Thing

The first rhetorical artifact I am analyzing is, *It's a God Thing.* The book is a collection of 46 separately authored miracle stories collected by Don Jacobson and K-Love, a national Christian media group. This rhetorical artifact was selected because it is not much more than a collection of miracle stories. Aside from a list of recommendations and an introduction, the only rhetorical content of *It's a God Thing* lies in the writing of miracle stories. In and of itself, the existence of such a collection serves to prove of the reality of an institution of miracles.

As an example of one of these narratives, I will use the first story in the book to illustrate the general narrative found in *It's a God Thing.* The story begins with Brenda Jacobson taking her son Blair to the United Kingdom for a study abroad program. They arrive early to enjoy the sights of London before Jacobson heads back to the United States. One day, the two decide to split up and find secluded spots in a park to read quietly. This is the setting for Jacobson's own miracle. As Jacobson is sitting in the park, a man with apparent ill-intent is walking directly toward her with a red rope in hand. Jacobson immediately fears for her life. She is in front of some bushes and fears that she could easily be drug inside of them without anyone noticing. In response, Jacobson hears mental prompts to get up and quickly walk away from her secluded location. After walking a short distance, she turns to see that the man is gone. After this encounter she leaves the park and meets up with her son again. She enjoys the rest of her trip and doesn't think much about the event in the park. Later, after arriving back in the United States, Jacobson is called by one of her friends that says, "Last Wednesday the Lord woke me up to pray for you because you were about to be murdered" (Jacobson, p. 4). Jacobson then states that,

"Could it be any clearer that God was protecting me?" (Jacobson, p. 5). Before the close of the story Jacobson ascribes the prompting thoughts to God as she states her belief in his constant protection and the power of prayer.

That is just one miracle story that I'll be referencing in this project. *It's a God Thing* is full of many other short stories describing how God has intervened in people's lives. Since being released, a second volume of *It's a God Thing* has been produced with even more miracle stories from everyday people. Apparently, there is a demand for these miracle narratives.

The Case for Miracles

New York Times bestselling author, Lee Strobel, is well known in conservative Christian circles. His famous first work, *The Case for Christ*, told the story of his journey from skeptic journalist to ardent believer. In the book, Strobel used his skills as a journalist to lay out the rational argument for belief in the biblical Christ. *The Case for Christ* sold millions of copies and was eventually made into a feature length film of the same name (About, n.d.).

Lee Strobel's *The Case for Miracles* is a continuation of the "case for" series of which there have been multiple previous entries. Like his other books, *The Case for Miracles* produces the pretense of journalism as Strobel writes about his interviews with, "leading authorities so [he] could tap into their lifetime of experience and expertise" (Strobel, p. 31). Initially, Strobel makes a distinction between contemporary miracle narratives and those found in the Bible. He claims that he is not concerned with biblical miracles, but whether God is still acting out miracles today (Strobel, p. 24). However, the book develops into a defense for Strobel's rationalist Christianity writ large, including arguments to prove that we can trust the gospel accounts and Christ really died on the cross.

The Case for Christ contains interviews with multiple people and is written from the

perspective that we—the audience—are *in situ* with Strobel as he travels across the United States to conduct his research. In total, Strobel interviews eight individuals from various backgrounds. Most of the interviewees have some kind of academic credentials. At the start of their respective chapters their titles as Drs. or PhDs are clearly displayed. Besides those with academic credentials, a missionary and a former detective are also interviewed.

I should note here the choice of style that Strobel makes in the presentation of his interviewees. Strobel reconstructs the interviews on the page in a way that gives him a great deal of control over the final rhetorical message. While it certainly makes for easy reading, Strobel chooses to selectively paraphrase and quote the interviewees. At times, Strobel will give us the thoughts he is having at a moment in an interview. In the instance of the skeptic Michael Shermer, Strobel even interjects counterarguments to Shermer's statements in post. This creates uncertainty to the authorship of ideas that are not provided as direct quotation as indicated by quotation marks. What is clear is that Strobel streamlines the interviews to make the points that he needs it to make for his larger "case" for miracles. I say this to show that the citation of some ideas is tenuous as I pull from *The Case from Miracles.* Likewise, while this style is not inherently problematic, it should not be mistaken for journalism.

Within *The Case for Miracles,* only one of the interviewees is expressly against the idea of the miraculous: Dr. Michael Shermer, editor of *The Skeptic* magazine. Strobel claims to include him in order to provide "…the best possible case against the miraculous, free from emotion and backed with studies and reasoned arguments" (Strobel, p. 37). Shermer is the first interview of the book and is the only interview under the section notably titled, "The Case *against* Miracles" (Strobel, p. 33). For the rest of *The Case for Miracles,* Strobel uses his other interviewees to directly counter Shermer. It is clear from the beginning that Shermer is present in

the book as an inoculation against the opposition. By being this external force, Shermer is the most important person in *The Case for Miracles.* His presence ultimately illuminates the existence of the institution of miracles.

HEADING 3

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Defining Miracles

It's a God Thing and *The Case for Miracles* present their own definitions for miracles; however, we should approach those definitions with a general understanding of miracles. I will briefly cover here how miracles have been defined and how their function has been explained. There is not singular definition for a miracle. Here, I will be focusing on just three major definitions: miracles as breeches of natural law, miracles as divine presence, and miracles as contextual.

One of the simplest definitions of miracles is that they are violations of the laws of nature (Yandell, 1976, p. 392). This definition doesn't necessarily require the intervention of a divine being. Other definitions explicitly include the agency of a divine being as criteria for a miracle. In these cases, miracles are described as the outcome of an event being changed by divine presence from the outcome that would have occurred if there was not divine presence (Young, 1972, p. 123). A third definition of miracles is based in context. By this definition, events occurring within certain contexts are considered miraculous when in others they may be perfectly mundane. The defining quality of this kind of miracle is that someone holds an event to have religious significance (Schulz, 2017, p. 10). These definitions are not necessarily mutually exclusive and each of these understandings of miracles make an appearance in the two rhetorical artifacts. If anything, this shows how difficult it is to strictly define something that is meant to be beyond description.

While these three definitions are straightforward, they can also quickly fail at defining anything at all. For example, if a miracle is a violation of a natural law, it could be possible that

what was once assumed to be natural law was actually just a suggestion. If, on the other hand, there are unbreakable natural laws, it is impossible for a miracle to ever transcend the unbreakable. In either case, a miracle, then, is just another natural event (Yandell, 1976, p. 392). If a miracle is a manifestation of divine presence, who can determine such a concept? This kind of miracle begins and ends with a person saying, "God did it" and it is up to others to either believe or not believe. Miracles by divine presence can never extend beyond the realm of unsubstantiated belief (Young, 1972, p. 126). In a similar fashion, the idea of miracles only being miracles within certain contexts also falls totally within the realm of human perception. This leads Schulz (2017) to claim that "…perceiving God is not only necessary, but also sufficient for perceiving a miracle…" (p. 17). Epistemically speaking, miracles exist solely within the individual that experienced the miracle. Even though the miracle experiencers are ascribing their experiences to God, the epistemic work is still entirely focused within them. In human invocation, God is the nameable-unnameable that cannot be produced (Derrida, 2002, p. 65). This naming inevitably returns to the self.

There are also particular accounts of miracles studied within miraculous contexts. Higgins and Hamilton (2016) explore one such miraculous context when they interviewed pilgrims to the French village of Lourdes. Many of the individuals they interviewed experienced what Higgins and Hamilton call "mini-miracles" (p. 28). As the name implies, mini-miracles are less spectacular than what might typically be understood as miracles. Rather than being a breach in the laws of nature, mini-miracles are personally experienced transformations that are attributed to divine power (Higgins and Hamilton, p. 28). Much like with Schulz's definition, the experience of the witness to the miracle is what truly defines a miracle. Another context for miracle stories is the Greek island of Lipsi as researched by Papachristophorou (2014). In this

case, the islanders connected their own lives to the sacred narratives of their worldview (Papachristophorou, 2014, p. 66). In terms of miracle stories, many mothers on the island used narratives of experienced miracles and visions as a socially acceptable way of gaining agency. For example, a mother might have a vision of a saint during a rough pregnancy. This then gives the mother the supernatural authority to name their child after that saint rather than use a predetermined family name (Papachristophorou, 2014, p. 68). As the above suggests, miracle stories can be used in various ways to explain and direct the realities of those that witness them.

In each of the aforementioned cases, the making of a miracle ultimately comes down to the interpretation of the individuals that experience, tell, and hear about miracles. The question then, is not whether miracles happen or not, but what leads people to interpret events as such?

The Institution of Miracles

The driving force behind the interpretation of miracles is the institution of miracles. As an institution, the force of interpretation is sensemaking. Sensemaking makes the most sense in this context for a variety of reasons. The first of which is that we are *not* dealing with the truth when it comes to miracle narratives. A miracle is a product of personal experience, and nothing else. Sensemaking is about coming to a decision about how to understand something regardless of some sort of *universal truth.* According to Weick *et al*. (2005), "Sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right. Instead it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of criticism" (p. 415). *It's a God Thing* and *The Case for Miracles* will illustrate this emerging story as the institutional members are building and being built by it.

Why bother with the abstraction of an institution when I could just as easily have formulated a discourse, narrative, or any other kind of analysis? Firstly, the modes of thinking

found in sensemaking and institutional theory match well with this subject matter. Sensemaking analyzes what happens to people when they encounter the unusual and unexpected. Simply put, that is a reasonable description of what happens when someone encounters an event worthy of being called a miracle.

Secondly, viewing miracle narratives as a sensemaking will bring out the most interesting results. Each method encourages a researcher to weigh ideas differently. The intersubjective nature of institutions allows us to view miracle stories as a human creation. The concept of an institution allows us to have a closer look at how these narratives are produced, circulated, and accepted. Miracles are not only experienced, but they are made (by God), told, and then heard by others that can then either choose to believe or not to believe.

Thirdly, and perhaps most importantly, institutions match better with the ontological nature of what these conservative Christians believe. As I argue later, the view that God holds dominion over the universe is an integral part to miracle sensemaking. Saying that God is in control of the universe is not a matter of discourse or narrative to people that believe it; it is a description of reality. With this ontological consideration in mind, I felt that it would be best to follow the same line of thinking for this project. If our goal is to understand the communication of others, it would be wasteful to construct our understanding in a way that disregards the way they understand the world. In this way, I see this project as a broad application of Warren's (2008) call for more ontological research concerning difference. Each new miracle experience and narrative is just that: *new*. It is a new moment, even if it is a historically informed repetition (Warren, 2008, p. 297). This prevents us from viewing the world as clearly divided along our lines of identity. The institution of miracles certainly does not allow for such clear lines.

Overview of Sensemaking and Institutional Theory

Sensemaking is an analytical mindset focused on heuristics. In this case, the heuristic being how groups and individuals come to particular understandings of miraculous events. Because of this, sensemaking is concerned more with generating explanations than creating a body of knowledge (Weick, 1995, p. xi). Sensemaking operates on the basis that human experience is a constant flow. So long as what is being experienced is expected and ordinary, no one needs to spend time figuring out *why* the expected and ordinary is occurring. However, when the unexpected and out of the ordinary occurs, individuals will notice and begin to account for what was unaccounted. In those situations, individuals begin the sensemaking process.

Sensemaking is about bringing unordinary events into the fold of the explainable. Experiences that are ordinary can be called such because meaning has already been created to account for their existence. Therefore, sensemaking is the process of creating new meanings vis-à-vis institutional discourse. As Weick, *et al*. (2005) note, "Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (p. 409). The individuals that engage in sensemaking are as much creators as they are experiencers. No event is meaningful until meaning is assigned to it (Gabriel, 1991, p. 858). Likewise, no process of meaning creation is instantaneous.

As Weick (1995) describes it, the process of sensemaking is intuitive. It begins with noticing and bracketing. The disturbance in the flow of ordinary events is noticed by an individual and recognized as being out of the ordinary. The event in question is then bracketed; or, pulled out from the flow of time as something of significance. Once the event is set apart from the flow of the everyday, it can be labeled. An event that is named can be remembered, analyzed, and shared. Presumptions can then be made about the event. The sense-maker attempts to connect the unknown with the know, or as Weick *et al.* (2005) state, "To make sense is to connect the abstract with the concrete" (p. 412). Lastly, once the situation is presumed, the

sense-maker will act upon the conclusions drawn during the sensemaking process.

There are two important factors at work during the previously described sensemaking process. The first is that sensemaking occurs retrospectively. As I previously stated, sensemaking regards lived experience as an unstoppable flow. This means that the entire sensemaking process begins *after* the unaccounted-for event has occurred. The event can only be noticed *after* it has happened. Likewise, it can only be set aside and labelled as significant in the retrospective of the future. This ultimately means that individual sensemaking is oriented not toward the event itself, but toward the present circumstance in which the sensemaking is *actually occurring*. Individuals make sense of past problems by aligning them with present solutions. That is why sensemaking is about *explanations* not *truth*; *consistency* over *actuality* (Weick, 1995, p. 10).

The second important factor is that sensemaking relies on previously established meanings. It is social and systemic (Weick *et al*, 2005, p. 412). Noticing is impossible without contextual knowledge. How can an individual determine something is unaccounted without prior knowledge of the ledgers? It is even clearer that presumption is derived from already accepted meanings. The consideration of local context and cues when drawing conclusions is what separates making presumptions from making wild guesses. Sensemaking occurs when predictions break down (Weick, 1995, p.5). When this occurs, sense-makers pull from already conceived frameworks. These frameworks come from institutions, organizational plans, and accepted justification and tradition (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 409). It is in this way that sensemaking can show how macro-level entities affect individuals and vice versa (Weick, et al., p. 417).

Weber and Glynn (2006) define an institution as "…akin to a coherent symbolic code, while sensemaking is the practice of using the code" (p. 1643). These symbolic codes are made up of defined roles and scripts that encourage the members of the institution to sense-make in

particular ways. The content of this kind of symbolic institution is best illustrated as a kind of constellation:

> We further suggest that, from a sensemaking perspective, the 'content' of an institution pertains to a constellation of identities (typified actors), frames (typified situations) and actions (typified expectations of performance or conduct). The combination of identity and frame approximates the concept of a situational 'role' (i.e. actor-in-situation), and the combination of frame and actions approximates the concept of a situational 'script' (i.e. actions-in-situations). This conceptualization retains the sensemaking perspective's focus on situational and identity-based priming of action, while opening up space for an institutional emphasis on typification and normative commitment. (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1644)

This constellation model for sensemaking institutions makes labeling each of the parts of an institution a quick process.

Rather than just treating institutions as purely created by discourse or as an object, the understanding of institutional theory, as I use it here, attempts to balance action and structure. This view of institutions sees institutions as grounded in a continuous flow of discourse (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 16). "This view extended the becoming approach by demonstrating how structure is found in action, how the historical is situated in the present, and how the global is firmly anchored in the local" (Fairhurst & Putnam, p. 17). At the same time, "…the organization never assumes the form of an identifiable entity because it is anchored at the level of social practices and discursive form" (Fairhurst & Putnam, p. 16). One articulation of this phenomenon was Boden's (1994) lamination. In lamination, members of an organization

draw from past experiences and organizational rationalities to make decisions in their current circumstances (Fairhurst & Putnam, p. 17). This mode of institutional theory is indifferent to the macro-micro distinction. The two are in tension, not opposition. Most importantly, this allows for individuals to have agency in the creation of institutions without ignoring the external forces at work in those individual decisions. An example of this in the institution of miracles would be when the individuals showcased in *It's a God Thing* comes to the conclusion that they experienced a miracle. In order to come to that conclusion, they have to have prior knowledge of miracles, including what is generally considered to be the *criteria* of a miracle. Their classifications are informed by these previously existing structures but the decision to name their experience remains their own.

Considering institutions as grounded in action allows for sensemaking to play a role in institutional creation and maintenance. According to the constellation model created by Weber and Glynn (2006), "Institutions are antecedent to (as contextual mechanisms) and emergent from sensemaking (via transformational mechanisms)" (p. 1640). Given that institutions are antecedent and emergent, the focus of analysis can be on "how actors make sense *with* institutions, not outside them and despite them" (Weber & Glynn, p. 1642). As institutional members learn the institutional discourse, they shift their sensemaking to match with that of the institution. Working as an antecedent structure, institutions "constrain sensemaking by making some actions unimaginable and others self-evident" (Weber & Glynn, p. 1641). These self-evident actions, with repetition, become solidified as scripts. Scripts are institutionalized, then self-reinforcing, so that sensemaking is less varied and stabilized. As scripts continually work, it becomes less likely that sense-makers within an institution can create radically different presumptions (Weber & Glynn, p. 1642). In this way, new meanings created in sensemaking

only serve to reify the already existing institution. *Institutionalization* creates a feedback loop; therefore, "…not only can sensemaking be the feedstock for institutionalization as others have suggested, but that *institutions may be the feedstock for sensemaking*" (Weber & Glynn, p. 1655).

A closed loop of meaning creation inevitably leads to closed meaning. McWhinney (1984) describes a closed-meaning-making worldview as a unitary system of reality. Along with its counterparts in McWhinney's paper, the unitary system has its own understanding of, "causality, sources of knowledge and meaning, moral judgement, will power, and influence processes" (McWhinney, p. 8). Members of unitary systems believe that their belief system is eternally true. The unitary system provides explanatory power to its believers in allowing them to feel that every part of the universe, including themselves, fits within the boundaries of the system (McWhinney, p. 13). As McWhinney states, "The fundamental criterion of reality is truth—whether a relationship is true, right or correct within the system of belief" (McWhinney, p.15). The unitary system also eliminates any need for causal explanations. Since everything belongs to the system, the only cause is the First Cause that created the system. As stated by Boyce (1995), "The unitary reality is sustained by a process of filtering out whatever is not recognized as truth; and, as long as a unitary believer can dismiss or deny anything that contradicts the truth, his/her understanding of reality is intact" (p. 132). For a believer, the world is empty of moral choice and doubt, because the universe is well-ordered and lacking any dilemma. There is no alternative to *the* truth.

Even within such a rigid system, there is still room for sensemaking. Boyce offers two possible ways in which sensemaking occurs in a unitary system. Firstly, Boyce suggests that sensemaking is occurring whether members are aware of it or not. Although members have

decided to align themselves with the predetermined collective meaning, they still made the initial choice to do so. Afterwards, the decision to align with collective meaning is so ephemeral that they are not cognizant of the choice they made to join the unitary system in the first place. Members then experience all phenomena as *bare* reality (Boyce, p. 131). There is no separation between them and the events of the world; they are *one*. The second way that sensemaking can occur in a unitary system is by filtering new ideas through the canonized collective meaning. New ideas that align with the already in place system are brought in uncritically. Since it fits in the collective meaning, there is no need to waste active sensemaking energy on defending against and idea that can easily be assimilated (Boyce, p. 131).

HEADING 4

ANALYSIS

Explanation of Method

Sensemaking begins with chaos. Sensemaking only ends when the flux, the stream of undivided experiences, is organized (Weick *et al*., p. 411). Sensemaking is of utmost importance to those with a unitary view of reality because their worldview requires stability. For group members, the development and following of institutional scripts becomes an important part of identity maintenance. As Weber and Glynn (2006) note, "Making sense of 'something out there' is self-referential because what is sensed, and how it is seen, bears on the actor's identity" (, p. 1645). Put otherwise, identity is repetition (Warren, p. 297). I will be pinpointing these moments of sensemaking and identity maintenance in the rhetorical artifacts of *It's a God Thing* and *The Case for Miracles.* The institutionalization of the scripts serves as the basis for the institution of miracles.

Making Sense in *It's a God Thing*

It's a God Thing is a prime example of how contemporary miracle narratives have become an institution. The book is indicative of the institution of miracles at two overlapping levels. Firstly, the existence of the book is a fact of reality. *It's a God Thing* is a published work of collected miracle narratives. The process of collecting, selecting, and writing these stories is a work of institutional sensemaking. Each narrative within the book was submitted by a person who experienced a miracle. These people not only had to have a miraculous experience, but also interpret it as a miracle. *Then* they had to be confident enough in that interpretation to share it publicly to become a part of this book. The aspect of individual experience in miracle narratives leads to the second indication of a miracle institution in *It's a God Thing.* A recurring structure

of elements appears in many of the narratives. These repeated elements take the form of institutionalized scripts. At some point or another, the miracle-experiencers noted that their experience matched the scripts of the institution of miracles and others—such as the editors of the book—verified this belonging. Together, these two elements show how an institution of contemporary miracle narratives has been, and is continued to be made.

The very existence of *It's a God Thing* reifies the existence of miracles as a matter of sensemaking. The reality that these stories could be connected enough to be published in a single book shows a singular miracle identity has been sedimented. The collection of stories for this book is a work of lamination, using past knowledge—of miracle stories in this case—to define new miracle stories. In doing so, *It's a God Thing* is now an additional artifact of the institution of miracles that will be added to the institutional feedstock for future sensemaking.

Many of the miracle stories presented in *It's a God Thing* have repeated elements that constitute institutional sensemaking. I will be labeling and analyzing them using a constellation of sensemaking institutions: typified actors, typified situations, typified actions, institutionalized roles, and institutionalized scripts (Weber & Glynn, 2006, p. 1644).

The first of these institutional segments is institutionalized identities or typified actors. In terms of actors, there are a couple of actors that are always present and a few that are sometimes present. There is always a miracle-experiencer. This is the person or persons that becomes the miracle-teller as they explain in first-person what happened to them. The miracle-experiencer doesn't have to be a Christian, but, in *It's a God Thing*, the miracle-*teller* is always a Christian. For example, in Alison Wilson's miracle narrative, her becoming a Christian and having a spiritual experience in prison is defined as a miracle (Jacobson, p. 13). While she was not a Christian at first, it is a Christian Wilson that is telling the story. Without the miracle-

experiencer/teller, there would be no perspective to these miracle narratives.

The next institutionalized identity is the miracle-doer. This is another identity that is present in every narrative in some way. In *It's a God Thing,* the miracle-doer is always the Christian God. This would make all miracles within the book *at least* fit the definition of miracle as a manifestation of divine presence. While God can hardly be described as a *character* in these stories, his presence is made evident through the experience of the miracle-experiencer. The act of the miracle is always attributed to God as having caused it in some way. In that sense, God as an actor is more a force of nature than a character.

These narratives also contain incidental actors that are not always present in every situation. At times, there are witnesses that verify that a miracle has occurred. One of the more powerful examples of this is Jacobson's friend Sheri Rose that calls her and explains that God told her she was going to be murdered (Jacobson, p. 4). Rose not only verified God's hand in the event, her independent knowledge of the event serves as evidence that it was truly a miracle. Jacobson describes her realization:

> I was stunned. We talked a little more and did the time calculations between the West Coast and England. It quickly became clear: God had awaken[sic] Sheri Rose at the exact moment I was alone in Hyde Park., lying on a secluded bench, while a man with a rope in his hands walked toward me. Could it be any clearer that God was protecting me? (Jacobson, p. 4).

The next part of the constellation found within miracle narratives are typified situations or frames. The frame of miracle narratives is twofold. There is an improvement and God is involved. The kind of situation found in *It's a God Thing* varies broadly. In some cases, the situation is quite dire. In Kris Heckman's story, her daughter Micah has a fatal car accident while

she is on a cruise with her husband. The narrative centers on them coping while they wait for means to get quickly back home. In other cases, like that of Donald L. Jacobson Sr., the situation is generally good. Jacobson is taking his son, Donnie, to his first professional baseball game. The significant similarity of these situations is that they were improved by a miracle. Heckman and her husband met a Christian couple on their cruise on the first night. When they receive the news of their daughter's accident, the other couple is there to pray with them (Jacobson, p. 7). Likewise, Jacobson hopes that he could catch a baseball for his son and prays for it to happen. Within the moment, a ball is hit in their direction and he is able to get it. Regardless of the beginning situation, it was made better by the miracle.

The two previous example narratives also illustrate the other aspect of frames found in *It's a God Thing.* The Heckman's meet a Christian couple that was able to offer religious support. Jacobson's prayer for a baseball is immediately answered. These religious circumstances define the miracle narrative. Strobel, in *The Case for Miracles,* echoes this exact sentiment in one of his definitions for miracles. He states, "For me, when I see something extraordinary that has spiritual overtones and is validated by an independent source or event, that's when the 'miracle' bell goes off in my mind" (Strobel, p.28). As defined above, this kind of frame fits the definition of miracle as contextual. The religious context made them miraculous rather than serendipitous. In some way, God has to be invited, or called into the situation. That sets the stage for the miracle.

The primary typified action, or expectation, of these miracle narratives is straight forward. In each of these instances, God is the one acting. Even if it appears that someone else is doing the action, that is subsumed under the actions of God. For example, in an anonymous story, a woman is dealing with the recovery of her husband after a failed suicide attempt. She

repeats the mantra, occasionally in doubt, that, "God will provide" (Jacobson, p. 122). In the end, she receives a check from a friend that will help support them financially through this time. The miracle-teller describes this as confirmation that God provides. While those outside the institution of miracles may interpret the miracle-experiencer as acting in these narratives, that is not a typified action of the institution. The actions of individuals are inconsequential in comparison to the acts of God. In some stories an individual prays for a miracle, in others God acts without any action preceding it. The common institutional expectation is that God acts. The narrativization of God as omnipresent comes to the forefront in the existence of roles and scripts.

An institutionalized role is the actor-in-situation. In this case, there are multiple roles because there are multiple actors. There is, however, only one situation, the religiously-centered frame that improves. The first example of a role is the miracle-experiencer turned miracle-teller. They exist to experience the action and the change in situation in order to then share that experience with others. Their role is *sense-maker.* It is their responsibility to share their story so that others may experience the miracle along with them. The entirety of *It's a God Thing* exists to propagate that role.

The second, and most important role is that of God. God is the ever-present actor-in-situation. In each narrative, God is called to the context by religiously *framing* the event. Then, God is held responsible for the improvement in the situation, regardless of any other minute action by humans. God's role is to be ready for the greatest script: the miracle.

The last element of the constellation is the script: the action-in-situation. God is present in the situation in order to act out the miracle. He is the only one that acts *in situ.* The other role, the sense-maker, only exists to *describe* the action of their situation. The script of all miracle narratives can be reduced to: God acts, we tell.

The institutionalization of these roles and scripts is what allows members of the institution to sense-make together. Once institutionalized, the attributes of these stories form expectations for all members and direct them to certain courses of action (Weber & Glynn, p. 1651). It is important to note that the only major definition of a miracle to *not* appear in the constellation was miracle as a breach of natural law. This absence, along with the presence of the other two definitions, shows the importance of experience in miracle narratives. *It's a God Thing* is not concerned with natural law, but the presence of a God that responds to religious framing. The most important aspect of miracle narratives, then, is the sensemaking of the *sense-maker*. The sensemaking of miracles turns back to God, because it truly is a God thing.

Sensemaking an Institution

Sensemaking is the process of creating new meanings. In the end, these created meanings can coalesce into their own institution. As stated by Weick *et al*. (2005), "Situations, organizations, and environments are talked into existence" (p. 409). In the case of the institution of miracles, we are seeing an example of an institutions as grounded in a continuous flow of discourse (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 16). The idea of miracle stories already exists in the world, it isn't being constructed from nothing before us. That is why *It's a God Thing* could be made in the first place: the sensemaking framework already existed. The writing and publishing of the book are just continuations and laminations of that already existing institution.

With that in mind, I will show how sensemaking is taking place in *It's a God Thing* by returning to Jacobson's story. All of Weick's steps of sensemaking take place in this miracle narrative: noticing, bracketing, labeling, presuming, and acting. By Jacobson's account, while the event in the park of being approached by a person with apparent ill-intent was certainly odd, she didn't think about it for some time. That was until her friend Sheri Rose called after she had

returned to the United States. Rose asked her what happened while she was in England, as if she knew something significant happened. The fact *that time had passed* since the miracle event aligns with sensemaking. Sensemaking, after all, "is about labeling and categorizing the streaming of experience" (Weick *et al.*, 2005, p. 411). In other words, life is a constant flow, but at times we are asked—literally in this case—to extract meaning from events and label and explain it. This call to search for meaning caused Jacobson to search her memory and notice and bracket the events in the park as a significant happening. Rose stated that God had woken her up in the middle of the night to pray for Jacobson because she was about to be murdered. This labeled the event as a potential murder, a moment where things were about to take a turn for the worse for Jacobson. After considering the time difference, the two conclude that Jacobson was in the park at roughly the same time that Rose was awoken to pray. This leads them to the presumption that the two events were connected, and that God was acting in that moment. This conclusion is a presumption that turned into a re-labeling of the event as a miracle. As Weick *et al,* (2005) describes, this is a moment of connecting, "the abstract with the concrete" (p. 412). Knowing what they know about the concrete event—the moment in the park—they can connect it to the abstract concept of miracle. Finally, we can assume at some point, Jacobson decided to share this story as a miracle story to others. This being the final step of sensemaking: acting.

The acting is the ultimate expression of being part of the institution of miracles. Returning to the last section, the final expression of miracle sensemaking can be articulated as *God acts.* The institution of miracles, through the sensemaking of God's actions in the world, call members to mimic that act. Essentially, God's role was to manifest the miracle as a script, the role of the miracle-experiencer is to become the miracle-teller. God is the writer of the script and the miracle-teller must follow it. Following the script is the final proof of membership in the

institution of miracles. It is not only a line of sensemaking, it is a sensemaking that has a radical understanding of the cosmology of the world: God acts.

HEADING 5

FINDINGS

The Case for Miracles and Institution Formation

So far, I have argued that contemporary miracle narratives constitute an institution. Now, I will elaborate on what kind of institution it is. I need to reiterate that this institution is *not* simply a recreation of "the Church" as it exists in the world. The institution of miracles is not limited to one physical church body or even to a larger denomination. This is religious acculturation at the institutional level (Gailliard and Davis p. 124). The institution of miracles cuts across different belief systems and affects the way that members see their faith in the world. As I claimed in the last section, membership in this institution is granted by sensemaking. The sensemaking is so central to the identity of these individuals that it has become a closed loop of meaning making—creating a unitary view of reality. To define this institutionalized unity view of reality, I will be using Lee Strobel's *The Case for Miracles* because it is an articulation, to the point of polemic, for the belief in miracles.

Fundamentalizing the Institution of Miracles

A major element of the institution of miracles is its own reification. Strobel works to build and validate the existence of the institution of miracles in several ways. Strobel casts the institution of miracles as a fundamental force within Christianity. The first of these is by statistically proving that the institution has sense-makers. Secondly, Strobel shows that the institution of miracles has a cosmological basis in all of Christianity. If the institution of miracles was equivalent with the Church as institution, this connection would not be necessary. Lastly, Strobel indicates a more specific criteria for membership within the institution of miracles. As the sensemaking loop continues, scripts that fail to work are cast as outsiders to the institution.

These elements, beginning as lamination, align with the concept of fundamentalism within contemporary Christianity.

The first way that Strobel builds the institution of miracles is by showing that it already has sense-makers. Strobel does this work is by arguing that many Americans see the world through some form of the institution of miracles already. In the introduction of *The Case for Miracles* Strobel mentions that he commissioned a national survey to see how Americans felt about the idea of miracles. From a survey with 1000 people and a 55% response rate, Strobel claims that 2 out of 5 Americans believe they have personally experienced a miracle. Strobel elaborates on this statistic saying, "…which means that an eye-popping 94,729,000 Americans are convinced that God has performed at least one miracle for them personally" (Strobel, p. 30). In the end, however, this statistical argument has limited use in *The Case for Miracles* compared to the cosmological argument.

Before his interview is finished with the skeptic, Michael Shermer, Strobel begins presenting the view that creation was the first miracle. The point is articulated in one of Strobel's unstated points that was added after the interview. Strobel argues that if God could create the universe, of course he could also intervene in the world. He states, "The granddaddy of all miracles is the creation of the universe from nothing…In other words, if God can command an entire universe and even time itself to leap into existence, then walking on water would be like a stroll in the park and a resurrection would be as simple as a snap of the fingers" (Strobel, p. 61).

The same argument is reiterated by the other interviewees in the book. Dr. Craig S. Keener, a professor at Asbury Theological Seminary, states that if God created the universe, certainly, he could act upon it (Strobel, p. 88). The same cosmological argument is given a scientific tone later in the book when Strobel interviews Dr. Michael G. Strauss, a creationist

scientist, in a chapter titled, “The Astonishing Miracle of Creation” (Strobel, p. 163). Strauss states, “…I’m privileged to be a scientist. I can see the nuances and subtleties and intricacies of nature in a way that others can’t. And invariably, they point me toward one conclusion: the God hypothesis has no competitors” (Strobel, p. 188). This theme of a rationalist, scientific institution will be continued later. Until then, we should discuss how the institution of miracles defines a miracle.

Through sensemaking, institution members validate their own interpretations while labelling and dismissing non-members. At times, this demarcation occurs between human actors, at others, it is the content of sensemaking that is called into question. The first question of the content of sensemaking is how the institution of miracles defines a miracle. In *The Case for Miracles*, Strobel initially uses the definition of Richard L. Purtrill: “A miracle is an event that is brought about by the power of God that is a temporary exception to the ordinary course of nature for the purpose of showing that God is acting in history” (Strobel, p.49). In most cases, and in most arguments, however, Strobel defaults to the experiential definition that we articulated with *It’s a God Thing*. He states, “For me, when I see something extraordinary that has spiritual overtones and is validated by an independent source or event, that’s when the ‘miracle’ bell goes off in my mind” (Strobel, p.28). As an example, Strobel uses an event from his own life that he views as a miracle. Strobel and his wife knew that a woman in their church was struggling financially. In order to help her out, the Strobels wrote a check for $500 and sent it to her in the mail. The check would not reach her until Monday. That Sunday, in church, the women to whom they sent the check made a prayer request because her car was in need of repairs and she couldn’t afford to pay for it. The cost of the repairs would be roughly $500. While some could classify this as mere coincidence, Strobel believes that the *specificity* and spiritual backdrop push this

instance to the side of being a miracle.

The example of a miracle that Strobel provides falls fairly in line with the sensemaking of miracles found in *It's a God Thing*. However, Strobel also works to explain what happens when all the pieces seem to be in place and a miracle doesn't happen. During his interview, Shermer brought up a study of healing prayer that found that prayer made no difference in the recovery of sick individuals. Strobel returns to this study in his conversation with Dr. Candy Gunther Brown, a scientist that researches the validity of miracles. He begins the chapter by describing Shermer's use of the study as a "taunt" (Strobel, p. 121). Then, once he is with Brown, Strobel asks about the validity of the study. Brown has two major issues with a lot of healing prayer studies. Firstly, they aren't consistent in the kind of prayer used in the study. She believes that prayer with physical contact and other charismatic aspects work the best. Secondly, Brown discredits by saying that the Christians in the study, members of Silent Unity of Lee's Summit Church, that Shermer cited aren't really Christians. The members of this church have differing views on things such as the divinity of Christ and the meaning of sin and salvation. Strobel goes far enough to call them a, "classic new age cult" (Strobel, p. 129). Even if it can be reasonably argued that members of Silent Unity are not typical Christians, the existence of the argument shows the rhetoric of belonging and unbelonging of the institution of miracles.

The boundaries of the institution of miracles not only constrains how miracles can occur but also what relationship people can have with the institution. Like many institutions, it is important for the institution of miracles to identify which individuals are assets and who are potential threats. We have already seen this taking place with which kind of Christians can reliably do miracles in the case of the Silent Unity of Lee's Summit Church. For Strobel, this most likely means Christians that identify as "born again." Strobel states that, "As born-again

believers, they would have faith in a personal God who is loving and who possesses the power and inclination to supernaturally intervene in people's lives" (Strobel, p. 128). This mindset is characterized by the fundamentalist movement within Christianity. In order to understand some of the implications of being a fundamentalist institution, I will describe what fundamentalist Christians believe.

Fundamentalists are defined by four central features: evangelism, inerrancy, premillennialism, and separatism.[1] The first element, evangelism, is integral to the self-identity of fundamentalists. As Ammerman (1991) states, "When fundamentalists describe how they are different from other people, they begin with the fact that they are saved" (p. 4). While setting themselves apart, this also marks outsiders as targets for evangelism. One mission of fundamentalism is to bring the *lost* to salvation. The second feature of fundamentalism, inerrancy, focuses on how fundamentalists understand the Bible. As fundamentalists see it, if there is any error within the Bible the entirety of their worldview suddenly is open to uncertainty. This is why fundamentalists, miracle institution aside, have a unitary view of reality. Only a text that holds the truth of all things, from science and history to morality, can truly guarantee salvation. While this may appear to make the Bible the absolute authority in all things, in fact, it makes the group interpretations of fundamentalists the final judge of truth (Ammerman, 1991, p. 5). The third element of fundamentalism, premillennialism, is a description of how fundamentalists look to the future. Taking particular scriptures form the New Testament, fundamentalists believe that a Rapture will come in a singular event to take all of the faithful to heaven (Ammerman, 1991, p. 6). For the time being, this idea adds urgency to the mission to evangelize non-Christians as it could come at *any moment.* The fourth and final element of

[1] This is from Marty and Appleby's *Fundamentalisms Observed*. This is the most complete study of fundamentalism in the world. For religious scholars, it is the final word on the subject of fundamentalism.

fundamentalism is separatism. Of all of the four characteristics, separatism is the most defining for fundamentalists. While other conservative Protestants might believe in the inerrancy of the Bible or the premillennial Rapture, separatism is strictly a fundamentalist trait. Separatism, in spite of its name, is as much about unity as it is difference. As Ammerman states, "Fundamentalists insist on uniformity of belief within the ranks and separation from others whose beliefs and lives are suspect" (p. 8). In practice, this leads fundamentalist churches to focus on strict adherence to doctrines. For individual fundamentalists, it often means avoiding people seen as *other* in order to maintain one's own salvation (Ammerman, p. 8).

The institution of miracles is not analogous with the fundamentalist movement within Christianity. However, the institution of miracles is tapping into similar forces with its sensemaking. It cannot be denied that the institution is concerned with the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Keener states as much when he argues against "…brilliant liberal scholars who questioned the fundamentals of the faith" (Strobel, p. 80). In the case of the institution of miracles, the existence of miracles would be one such fundamental element of the faith. That aside, there are several implications from Ammerman's description of fundamentalism that also highlight attributes of the institution of miracles.

Firstly, Christian fundamentalism began as a reaction to modernist Christianity (Marty and Appleby, 1992, p. 13). Strobel continues this in his interview with Dr. Roger E. Olson. Olson describes evangelical's embarrassment with the supernatural as a major problem within the church today. He ties this embarrassment with the secularization of the church beginning with the theologians like Friedrich Schleiermacher (Strobel, p. 223). This is another example of how the institution of miracles is separate from the Church at large. Secondly, the institution of miracles is separatist in nature. People that do not belong to the institution should be avoided or

chastised for their disbelief. Those that deny the possibility of miracles in *The Case for Miracles* are repeatedly decried as close-minded. This is a product of the institution's unitary view of reality. Third, the institution of miracles is evangelical in nature. Outsiders can always join the institution. All they would have to do is change their sensemaking. Regardless, even with unwilling subjects, the institution of miracles still lays claim to people that would deny its existence. The perfect example of this is the way Michael Shermer is portrayed in *The Case for Miracles.*

The Institution of Miracles and Opposition

Michael Shermer, editor of the *Skeptic* magazine, is interviewed as, "the case against miracles" (Strobel, p. 33). Strobel claims that he included Shermer in the book so that the case for miracles could be made. In order for the case to be valid, it requires an opposing side to argue against. Strobel states, "After all, if it's rational to believe in the miraculous, then that case surely should be able to stand up to his challenges" (Strobel, p. 32). According to Strobel, Shermer was chosen over other atheist commenters because he was known to not have a mocking attitude of religion. Reading the interview, it seems that Strobel recognizes some of Shermer's points as valid, and doesn't spend much time countering anything that he says. However, Strobel doesn't counter Shermer much during his interview because he uses the other interviewees to do that in his stead. The most significant way that Shermer is used in *The Case for Miracles,* however, has nothing to do with his arguments. Instead, Shermer is brought into the closed sensemaking loop in a way that he becomes part of the unitary view of reality.

Strobel situates Shermer in such a way that the sensemaking of the institution of miracles would assimilate him; regardless of his orientation to the supernatural. This assimilation occurred as a result of the way Strobel narrativized Shermer's life around his relationship to

Christianity and miracles. Before he can be assimilated, however, Shermer has to be seen as a strong opponent. Strobel begins by describing Shermer as, "the most famous doubter in the country…" (Strobel, p. 32). Upon entering the office of *Skeptic* magazine, Strobel portrays it in contrast to a church stating, "In a sense, I was visiting the anti-church, a shrine to the science and reason that—in the view of many skeptics, anyway—squeeze out the legitimacy of faith in God" (Strobel, p. 35). Likewise, Shermer's argument against miracles is labeled, "the knockdown argument" (Strobel, p. 47). All of this characterization occurs before Shermer's interview even begins.

It isn't long after the interview begins, however, that Shermer's role as the staunch anti-Christian is abruptly reversed. Strobel learns that Shermer was once a Christian that had lost his faith. In light of Strobel's vision of himself—a skeptic that used his skills of journalism to become a Christian—Shermer is his, "polar opposite: someone whose journey has taken him form faith to doubt, turning him from a proselytizer for Jesus into an apologist for disbelief" (Strobel, p. 36). The first chapter of the Shermer interview is titled "The Making of a Skeptic," and begins with Shermer describing how he was a believing Christian until he gradually lost his faith. Although Shermer makes it clear he was slowly losing his faith as just another part of his life, Strobel uses his writing of the interview to ensure that the miraculous aspect of Shermer's story is of utmost importance. Strobel reduces Shermer's life experience to a trope and states, "The miracle that doesn't happen can be the impetus for faith to dissipate to nothing. That's what happened to Michael Shermer" (Strobel, p. 44).

The miracle-that-didn't-happen occurred after Shermer finished graduate school when he had already all but lost his faith. His college sweetheart, Maureen, was in a terrible car accident. She broke her back and was paralyzed from the waist down. In his despair, Shermer asked God

to heal her. He said, “It wasn’t like I was putting God to a test, I just felt so bad for her that I’d try anything” (Strobel, p. 45). When nothing happened for Maureen, he wasn’t really surprised, but it was the final act of the Christian part of his life. Strobel makes the point to return to Maureen later in the book and let us know, (if we were worried, she has kids now). The-miracle-that-didn’t-happen is Strobel’s first move to make Shermer a pitiable character that is ignorant of what he has left behind.

At the end of Shermer’s interview, after he has delivered most of his actual arguments presented in this book, Strobel returns to Shermer’s spiritual life. After losing his faith *because* of a miracle and becoming an atheist, Strobel shows his audience how Shermer is still spiritual. Shermer describes how when he visits the cathedral in Cologne, Germany that he lights a candle with his wife out of respect for the universe. Strobel is surprised that this atheist could have any sense of spirituality and moves to asking if he is concerned about his own mortality. Shermer says he isn’t, and that any good god wouldn’t torture him forever for using the brain that he was given. Shermer’s interview ends with a description of an experience that, “sent tremors through Shermer’s skepticism” (Strobel, p. 68). Shermer’s wife had a broken radio that was important to her because she used to listen to it with her grandfather. Before they got married, Shermer had attempted to fix the radio to no avail. During the wedding, however, Shermer and his wife went into the room where the radio was and it started playing without any cause. When Strobel asked Shermer if he had ever sought an explanation for the event, Shermer said that the moment was too special to need an explanation for it. Shermer’s interview ends with him considering the possibility of the afterlife stating, “And if God is a part of it, I’d welcome that” (Strobel, p. 69).

In spite being only a small section at the beginning of the book, Shermer remains a looming figure for the rest of *The Case for Miracles.* Strobel repeatedly mentions Shermer in the

interviews as they attack the character that was set up as their opposition. Before talking about the arguments against Shermer, however, we need to talk about how counternarratives are created to battle the figure of Shermer. The personal stories of some of the interviewees when it concerns miracles were used to contrast the narrativization of Shermer. It begins immediately when Strobel leaves his interview with Shermer and makes his way to Kentucky to interview Dr. Craig Keener. In spite of his claim to desire to deliver a balanced argument free from emotion, Strobel's first comment upon entering Keener's town is to mock secular groups. He states, "Apparently… lawsuit happy atheists have yet to discover this hamlet of 1,638 households; its municipal water tower is topped with a giant white cross" (Strobel, p.74). The creation of opposition continues when Strobel makes it to Keener's house. The very first direct quote from Keener is him stating, "I'm living proof that God doesn't always perform miracles…I'm still nearsighted and suffering from male pattern baldness—which is spreading!" (Strobel, p.74). It is hard to believe that Strobel didn't see how this reduces the tragedy of Shermer's girlfriend Maureen to a punchline. Continuing, Keener says, much like Strobel did, that his life experience is the opposite of Shermer. Like Strobel, Keener was a skeptic until he used reason to eventually become a Christian.

The use of conflicting life stories is a perfect example of organizational folklore being developed and defended. Conflicting interpretations and narrativizations lead to the taking of sides. As Gabriel (1991) stated, "Anyone who challenges the verity of the myth...is frequently cast with the forces of darkness, thus reinforcing the hold of the myth over the group" (p. 865). The institutional folklore of the institution of miracles not only dismisses any arguments that outsiders like Shermer can make, it also makes them a part of the institutional myth that they are opposed to. In other words, Shermer is sense-made into an institutional script. The character of

pitiable atheist that lost his faith is used to laminate Shermer into an easily integrated script. Besides highlighting the evangelical character of the institution of miracles, this lamination shows how quickly sensemaking occurs in a unitary view of reality.

The quick repetition of oppositional identities illustrates how the sensemaking of the institution of miracles has reached the point of a unitary view of reality. While Strobel, at least wrote himself, as being respectful during the interview, he spends the rest of *The Case for Miracles* quickly dismissing Shermer. Despite originally viewing Shermer as someone that wouldn't mock religion, Strobel described Shermer's tone at the start of the next chapter as, "…self-assured and almost cocky at times" (Strobel, p. 74). Strobel painstakingly paired many of his quotations from scholars with a sense-made identification. Mostly it was used to indicate individuals not associated with the institution of miracles. For example, there are "liberal Jesus scholar," (p. 57), "atheist philosopher" (p. 65), "self-described agnostic" (p. 122), and "outspoken atheist," (p. 171), to name just a few. Members of the institution can quickly identify from an adjective or two how the testimony of an individual is going to be used. For example, when outsiders are cited as agreeing with institutionalized beliefs, the citation justifies those beliefs because even *without institutional sensemaking*, they are arriving at similar conclusions. While identity, and the sensemaking used to get to identity are clearly important to the institution of miracles, they ultimately serve to discredit Shermer's knockdown argument. The next section shows how the institution of miracles combats the rationality of Shermer with a rationality of their own creation.

The Case for Modernist Miracles

Perhaps the most important element of the institution of miracles is its belief in modernist rationality. By modernist rationality, I mean a reasoning that, "…legitimates itself with reference

to a metadiscourse… making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative…" (Lyotard, 1984, xxiii). In *The Case for Miracles,* this metadiscourse is that of modernist rationality. Strobel believes that modernist rationality can be made part of the institution of miracles. Strobel states, "These days, I'm convinced that science and history—indeed reason itself—actually support the Christian worldview" (Strobel, p. 35). While Strobel and his interviewees attempt to assimilate rationality into the institution of miracles, their indecisive understanding of rationality makes this a failure. Throughout *The Case for Miracles* Strobel never settles on, or bothers to define, the kind of reason he is proposing for an institution of miracles. It seems that Strobel is also unsure about laying claim to modernism. While he may claim that modernism is on his side, at other times, however, he is willing to cast science as an opposition that is resistant to the truth of miracles.

Strobel paints the instituting of miracles as a modernist entity from the beginning of *The Case for Miracles*. Much like with the lamination of Shermer into a script, Strobel uses the plurality of voice provided by his interviewees as a means to take hold of modernism. The first person to be associated with reason is Strobel himself. As previously mentioned, Strobel makes it clear that it was his skepticism, and rational inquiry, as a journalist ultimately made him a Christian (Strobel, p. 23). Strobel illustrates that the entirety of *The Case for Miracles* is a continuation of this modernist project. At the conclusion of the book, Strobel directly references his first famous first work stating, "After nearly two years of research, I came to my own verdict about miracles: they're often credible and convincing, and they contribute powerfully to the cumulative case for Christ" (Strobel, p. 265). Strobel offers himself as the first example of what a member of the modernist miracle institution should look like.

Strobel is not the only individual in this book to call upon reason to lift the institution of

miracles. In his interview, Craig Keener also sets himself up as having come to Christ as an issue of reason. When Keener was fifteen, he experienced the presence of God as he was dealing with the question of faith. He later claims that this feeling was a miracle because it was brought about by God's power (Strobel, p. 81). Having originally believed that it was all foolishness, he decided to write out his questions about Christianity and rationally answered them one by one. Eventually, "…especially after he gained access to academic libraries, he emerged with a firm and confident faith, not just based on his personal experience with God but also grounded in history, science, and philosophy" (Strobel, p. 80). This reason-based faith continued afterwards as he came into conflict with, "…brilliant liberal scholars who questioned the fundamentals of the faith" (Strobel, p. 80). This leads to the first consequence of the institution of miracles being grounded in modernist-rationality: competing metadiscourses. For the institution of miracles, other Christians that are not part of the institution of miracles are just as dangerous as atheists.

Since rationality is on the side of the institution of miracles, Keener and Strobel argue that their opposition is irrational. Keener states that he was able to easily refute the arguments of the liberal scholars. When he read their responses to his questions Keener discovered that their positions were weak and unbelievable. Strobel concludes from this that, "Maybe…it wasn't simply about the evidence or arguments, but a predisposition against the miraculous" (Strobel, p. 80). Keener agrees and brings up a time when he argued with a professor that was a former Christian. Keener said that he refuted every argument that the professor gave with evidence. Eventually he asks him, "If somebody were raised from the dead in front of you, would you believe it?" (Strobel, p. 80). The professor said no. Keener explained his frustration stating, "Here he was accusing me of being closed-minded because I'm a Christian, but he very clearly had an anti-supernatural presupposition that was shutting him off from a full consideration of the

arguments and evidence" (Strobel, p. 81). The institution of miracles lays hold to the rationalist high ground while casting all non-members with the forces of irrationality.

The utilization of modernist rationality for the institution of miracles continues in other interviews, making it clear that the methods of modernism aren't suitable for the work. The eleventh chapter of *The Case for Miracles* is an interview with Detective J. Warner Wallace. In parallel to the life trajectory of Strobel and Keener, Wallace names himself as another skeptic that used reason to come to Christianity. Much like Strobel, Wallace used the expertise of his career path to pave the way to faith. In his case, Wallace used the methods of a detective to prove that the gospels occurred as historical events. The first of these methods is a kind of testimony analysis described as follows:

> …he subjected the gospels to months of painstaking analysis through various investigative techniques…this skill involves critically analyzing a person's account of events—including word choice and structure—to determine whether he is being truthful or deceptive. Eventually Wallace became convinced that Christianity is true beyond any reasonable doubt. (Strobel, p. 190)

In other words, Wallace took a translated, ancient religious text and treated it like the transcript of a testimony from a suspect in the interrogation room. Wallace's methods, however, are not limited to reading in between the lines. He also used his understanding of corpses to prove that Jesus factually died on the cross. An example of this is the stabbing of Jesus with a spear to ensure that he is dead as described in the Bible. Upon being stabbed, the Bible claims that blood and water came from the wound. Wallace argues that this description is proof that he was actually stabbed with a spear as he was dead on the cross. The water was accumulated fluid around the heart and lungs due to being tortured. Wallace argues that while we know this, the

authors of the Bible would not be aware of this medical fact (Strobel, p. 203). After this, Wallace continues to detail other methods he used to *prove* the factuality of the Bible. Wallace is another sense-maker brining modernism into the fold of the institution of miracles. The chapter with Wallace is also a shift in *The Case for Miracles* as Strobel begins to shift his sensemaking of miracles to Christianity as a whole.

As I noted previously, Strobel is not only concerned with proving that miracles are possible, but also supporting a larger epistemic interpretation of Christianity. Strobel claims, "These days, I'm convinced that science and history—indeed reason itself—actually support the Christian worldview" (p.35). In particular, we can see from this quote that Strobel isn't talking about some vague concept of reason. It is a modernist for reason, which is concerned with the legitimacy of rational inquiry. While it can be argued that modernist rationalism is in tension with faith, Strobel doesn't believe so. When Shermer describes faith as believing something *without* evidence, Strobel makes the unspoken retort that, "I was tempted to point out that biblical faith is taking a step in the same direction that the evidence is pointing, which actually is rational and logical" (Strobel, p. 55). While Strobel might be arguing about Christianity as a whole, this still relates directly to the institution of miracles. For Strobel his work in creating *The Case for Miracles* is important work in preserving the Church. The institution of miracles, as a sensemaking entity, is necessary to Strobel's Christianity. Strobel outlines his view that Christianity is concerned with modernist truth, stating

> …Christianity isn't merely concerned with moral meaning and value; it makes specific factual claims about events—including miracles such as the resurrection—that occurred in history. If those claims aren't actually true, the faith collapses and its moral authority evaporates. (Strobel, p. 123)

If, by being a claim to secular legitimacy through rationalism, the institution of miracles can prop up Christianity. As far as Strobel is concerned, the institution of miracles is necessary to the survival of the faith. While modernism may seem like the best defense for Christianity, upon further reflection on the institution of miracles itself, the cracks begin to show.

Rationality, while made into a blanket defense for Christianity, is also the best defense for miracles. The seventh chapter of *The Case for Miracles*, titled, "The Science of Miracles," is an interview with Dr. Candy Gunther Brown who empirically studies miracles. As Strobel begins the interview, his indecision around science continues. He begins the chapter with considering the actual power of science to know the truth. Strobel states, "Science, of course, is not the only route to certainty. Believing that science is the sole arbiter of truth is called scientism, which is self-refuting" (Strobel, p. 122). In spite of this admonishment, Strobel also claims:

> Certainly, the use of scientific expertise can help in investigating whether claims of the miraculous are valid or not. Even if science cannot definitively prove God exists or that something supernatural has occurred, it can provide empirical evidence that either supports or undermines miracle accounts. (Strobel, p.123)

After describing what he believes science can do for miracles, Strobel goes into Brown's account of prayer studies. As mentioned earlier, Brown brought to Strobel's attention how the prayer study Shermer referenced was conducted with people that weren't *really* Christians. Here, she offers the value of studies of prayer on healing:

> Let's face it: people get sick, and when they do, they often pray for healing. Whether scientists or medical doctors think this is a good idea or not, it's going to happen. So it only makes sense to find out what occurs when there are prayers for healing. Are they beneficial, whether for natural of supernatural reasons? Or do

> they cause people to get worse? Policy makers, scientists, physicians, patients—it's relevant to all of them. (Strobel, p. 125)

In order to accomplish this sort of study, medical records and tests can be compared from before and after the prayer has occurred. Even more so, the studies on healing prayer need to pay more attention to the details of prayer. Prayer is broken down and considered from several different areas including the idea that some people might be anointed to heal and whether or not the person in need of healing knows they are being prayed for. Brown concludes that prayer that makes physical contact and is directly asking God for healing work the best (Strobel, p. 132). The specificity of the requirements to be a *genuine* miracle doesn't mesh with the subject of miracles. While Brown is convinced that there should be more study around miracles, she makes it clear that these studies aren't knockdown arguments either.

After this explanation of the scientific method applied to miracles, Brown refrains from claiming that this is definitive work on miracles. Brown reminds Strobel that science is much better at proving when something *isn't* the case rather than when it *is* the case. In the implications of her own study she leaves it at "s*omething* is going on" (Strobel, p. 137). This conclusion, however, is good enough for Strobel. He leaves the interview with Brown stating, "…Brown's work and analysis have already undermined Shermer's claim that when research is conducted scientifically, it shows 'zero' evidence for the miraculous" (Strobel, p. 138). Strobel's response begins to unravel the claim that he is concerned with the truth. Instead, Strobel's quest seems to be more akin to Weick's definition of sensemaking:

> Sensemaking is not about truth and getting it right. Instead it is about continued redrafting of an emerging story so that it becomes more comprehensive, incorporates more of the observed data, and is more resilient in the face of

criticism. (Weick, et al, p. 415)

Sensemaking, not modernist rationality, is the driving force of the institution of miracles. Strobel's concern with rationality is not for rationality's sake, but for institutional identity. That is why the institution of miracles casts all its detractors as being irrational and closed-minded. It is not because they are, it is because they oppose the institutional myth. Strobel, is not *actually* bending the knee to the metadiscourse that is required of to be an adherent of modernism. He is only trying to further laminate the *idea* of modern rationality into the script of the institution of miracles.

This appropriation of rationalism is why Wallace conducting a testimonial analysis on the gospels sounds ridiculous to anyone that knows what goes into academic biblical interpretation. It is not interpretation, but sensemaking. The things that matter to interpreters are irrelevant. Wallace doesn't need history to know differing socio-cultural contexts, he doesn't need linguistics to know the nuances of Aramaic. All that Wallace needs is to align the phenomena in front of him with the institutionalized scripts already at his disposal. The unitary view of reality does the interpretive work for him while allowing institutional members to accept the sensemaking because it is all a repetition of previous sensemaking. Now, I will show how this sensemaking was used against Michael Shermer in *The Case for Miracles.*

The Case Against Michael Shermer

The sensemaking of the institution of miracles is brought to bear on the arguments presented by Shermer in the opening chapters of the book. The quick sensemaking of a unitary view of reality ensures that Shermer's arguments are negated through the rest of the book. These arguments—like the ones already shown—are unlikely to convince non-members to join the institution of miracles. While it could be argued that this is nothing more than a poor application

of reason, that does not account for the construction of institutional identity. The sensemaking of the institution of miracles is not an argument, but the self-reinforcing of institutional scripts. In order to address each of the counters to Shermer fully, I think it would be best to follow Strobel's own template that, "…science and history—indeed reason itself—actually support the Christian worldview" (Strobel, p. 35).

Science is as utilized by the institution of miracles as it is disdained. The main scientific argument used to counter Shermer is the study of miracles by Brown. Shermer cited a miracle study that showed that prayer made no difference to the healing of patients and Brown thoroughly dismantled it. In the end, however, even Brown admits that believing something is a miracle will always be a matter of interpretation. She states, "And of course, everyone brings their own assumptions when they interpret the data, depending on where they are on the spectrum" (Strobel, p. 126). By the spectrum, Brown means how often people feel like miracles happen. On one end, some people believe that miracles happen all the time, and will see them in everything. On the other end, there are people that believe that miracles can absolutely never happen and will never see a miracle in the results. Regardless, Strobel has already defended against the interpretation question by leaving it at that science cannot disprove miracles (Strobel, p. 49). After detailing the ways that at least the *effects* of miracles can be proven by science, Strobel leaves this argument at it would be illogical to forgo the conclusion that miracles are impossible.

In terms of history, Shermer argues that the authors of the Bible were never trying to write a history, it was more of a myth attempting to convey non-scientific truth. In response, Strobel raises the question, "If the gospels didn't intend to report actual history… then what was their purpose?" (p.58). This question is brought up in the Keener interview as Strobel asks him

whether the gospels could be considered mythology. Keener responds:

> Certainly not, the gospel accounts are a far cry from tales in the mythological genre, which tend to deal with the distant past rather than more recent historical individuals. They addressed mythic topics, were set in primeval times, and featured fantastical creatures. No, mythology is a decidedly different genre than the gospels, no question about it. (Strobel, p. 84)

Keener continues by stating that clearly the author of Luke was bound to the facts because the book opens with the words "carefully investigated" and "orderly account" (Strobel, p. 84). Furthermore, there were eyewitnesses to the events of the gospels. However, even if the gospels are not mythology, that doesn't make them history, especially a modernist sense of history. Even if the individuals took care to report the *truth* that doesn't mean that they did by our standards. Consequently, the institution of miracles has an undeveloped sense of history. What matters then, is not historical integrity, but the ability to use the power of the institution to call to previous sensemaking.

The matter of reason focuses on how the work of David Hume appears in *The Case for Miracles.* During the interview with Shermer, Strobel labels Shermer's "knockdown argument" as his use of Hume. Shermer believes that Hume's argument against the possibility of miracles is really all that is needed to not believe in miracles. The argument, as Shermer describes it, is, "Which is more likely, that the laws of nature be suspended or that the person telling you the story is mistaken or has been deceived?" (Strobel, p. 54). Strobel, not convinced by this argument, asks Shermer to elaborate. In brief, Shermer tells Strobel that when he was a Christian, he would see God acting in almost anything. He has come to realize that that was nothing more than interpretive bias because he would ignore any evidence that didn't fit his

Christian narrative. This is precisely the same argument presented about Brown and the spectrum of interpretation. It seems that Shermer's understanding really isn't that different than the case presented by the institution of miracles.

However, this middle ground is not good enough for Strobel. In response, he doesn't address Hume's argument directly; rather, he attempts to discredit him by citing scholars that discredit Hume's work in general. In a section of Keener's interview titled, "Emperor Hume Has No Clothes," Strobel cites several scholars, specifically philosopher John Earman, that say that Hume's arguments aren't that good. Strobel, articulating Earman, states that the basis for Hume's argument against miracles was his dislike of organized religion (Strobel, p. 91). This is also articulated by Keener as a matter of supernatural bias.

Keener uses the cosmology argument to disprove Hume. Essentially, if God made the universe, certainly he can interact with it. Keener illustrates this with a ballpoint pen. He states, "If I drop this pen, the law of gravity tells me it will fall to the floor. But if I were to reach in and grab the pen in midair, I wouldn't be violating the law of gravity; I would merely be intervening" (Strobel, p. 88). Keener continues this reasoning to say that certainly many things that are named as miracles are just anomalies or coincidences. But he does remain certain that not all stories of miracles are false. With so many, some must be true. He believes that in some cases, a miracle is the best explanation for events. To deny that would, "simply def[y] reason—and ignores the evidence" (Strobel, p. 90).

This defying of reason is due to what Keener and Strobel identify as "anti-supernatural bias" (Strobel, p. 88). Saying that miracles can't happen because they aren't natural is close-minded. What Strobel and Keener are proposing, then, is the allowance of the supernatural into the natural. While they do not offer an explicit explanation, at a certain level they believe that the

boundary between the natural and supernatural should not exist. If this is the crux of the argument for the institution of miracles, the question becomes, why does *The Case for Miracles,* as a *modernist rational* argument, exist? If believing in miracles is a matter of *logical inquiry*, why arrive at the conclusion that destroys the metadiscourse of modernism by allowing the supernatural world into the natural world? As mentioned earlier, the institution of miracles is not actually modernist, it just is coopting it as a matter of legitimacy. This is *sensemaking*, not *interpretation.* So, what is the *modus operandi* of the institution of miracles?

Strobel is willing to admit that the subject of miracles is beyond the realm of reason, "I didn't see why the faithful and the faithless couldn't sit down and talk rationally, even about a topic that in its very nature transcends mere rationality" (Strobel, p.38). In order to do the sensemaking of the institution of miracles, and embrace institutional identity, one must accept the postmodern nature of the institution. Miracles are truly beyond reason; rationalism only got the institution of miracles to the point of *something is happening.* In order to make the institution of miracles *fundamental* to Christianity it is a matter of becoming an institution that straddles the realm of the natural and supernatural—pulling the boundary apart.

The Case for the Postmodern Miracle Institution

The structure of the institution of miracles is a postmodern one. The study of miracles in and of itself is open to this interpretation. As Schulz (2017) claimed, "…perceiving God is not only necessary, but also sufficient for perceiving a miracle…" (p. 17). This is in line with a postmodernist understanding of truth. Using Lyotard's (1984) conception:

> The postmodern would be that which, in the modern, puts forward the unpresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively

> the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable. (p. 81)

Taking these ideas one at a time, we begin with an institution that, "…denies itself the solace of good forms…" (Lyotard, p. 81). While the institution of miracles did not fully deny itself modernist rationality, it drops it almost immediately in Olson's interview. In his chapter, Olson articulates that many Christians, even those with a fundamentalist background, aren't really interested in seeing miracles happening. In part, he believes that this is because American Christianity has become too fond of modernist rationality. He states, "My point is that American evangelical Christianity has accommodated to modernity's rationalism and naturalism… the truth is, they don't really expect God to do anything except in their interior spiritual lives" (Strobel, p. 218). Olson concludes his argument with his belief that no Christian really wants to see miracles occurring. That would be frightening and upset the status quo.

The next element is, "…the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable…" (Lyotard, p. 81). Developing consensus is the basic function of sensemaking. As has been shown, the institution of miracles laminates scripts so that they can be quickly used by sense-makers. The script has been laminated into a unitary of view of reality so tightly, that a miracle narrative can be reduced to *God acts.* This script is self-reinforced by the existence of rhetorical artifacts like *It's a God Thing.* The sharing of collective nostalgia, however, is not limited to the creation of miracle narratives as scripts. It is also why *The Case for Miracles* became an encore of the *Case for Christ* by the end of the book. The consensus of taste is beyond just that of miracles, but a sensemaking institution that can prop up all of Christianity.

Lastly, "…the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (Lyotard, p. 81). The institution of miracles, through its sensemaking, is presenting the unrepresentable nature of miracles. For example, the miracle narratives of *It's a God Thing* return to the unitary understanding that *God acts.* There is no other way to present God acting, based off of the definition of a miracle, than by just believing it. It's not something that is particularly persuasive to those that don't believe. In the same sense, Strobel, Brown, and Keener concluded, the proof for miracles is unattainable; it cannot be presented. The use of modernism rationalism wasn't enough; it would never be able to attain the miracle. It did, however, serve as a new presentation. In adopting modern rationality, the institution of miracles attempted to represent itself in a way that rises to the dominate discourse of science. Both *It's a God Thing* and *The Case for Miracles* are representations of miracles. In the first, they are self-reinforced scripts that laminate the telling of miracle narratives. In the second, it is the rapid sensemaking of the unitary reality of miracles sensemaking the world as a supernatural one. All the effort of the institution of miracles leads to the representation of miracles in a way that can be tangible through rationalist methodology.

The postmodern institution of miracles is attempting to recreate the miraculous through miracle narratives and miracle polemic. The modernist rationality cautiously lifted by Strobel collapses into the postmodern desire of the institution of miracles. This desire to represent miracles supersedes any commitment to a metadiscourse of modernism. In doing so, the institution uncovers its own Otherness. It must present the unpresentable; it must make sense of the miraculous.

Testifying Miracles

As we have seen, the miracle institution is a postmodern one. Knowing that, how does this postmodern sensemaking occur? This requires stepping outside of the strictly ontological to the level of institutional discourse. For this, I will be using Ricoeur's discourse theory of performatives and his interpretation theory as it relates to testimony. Ricoeur's definition of discourse is sympathetic to the definition of sensemaking I have been following so far. He states, "An act of discourse is not merely transitory and vanishing… It may be identified and reidentified as the same so that we may say it again or in other words" (Ricoeur, 1975, p 9). As can be seen above, the repetition of meaning is significant in sensemaking. Ricoeur's ideas, particularly on the concept of testimony, will show what the representation of miracle narratives does.

Ricoeur's Interpretation Theory

An interpretation theory is necessary to understand any discourse due to the nature of human communication. The distance between communicators is massive to the point of being insurmountable. As Ricoeur explains, "My experience cannot directly become your experience… Yet, nevertheless, something passes from me to you…This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle" (Ricoeur, 1975, p. 16). Ricoeur has a detailed interpretation theory centered around the idea of semantics. The basis of semantics is that discursive meaning occurs at the sentence level rather than the level of individual words. Ricoeur states that, "discourse is the event of language" (Ricoeur, 1975, p. 9). This places discourse in a unique position between the dialectic of *parole* and *langue* because it engages with both. *Parole* is the act of using language while *langue* is the system of language. For example, the act of speaking with a person is *parole.* If you and your conversational partner can understand each other, you are both making use of a common system of language. In the case of this paper, the

langue of U.S. American English is being used. Between the *speaking* of *English* is the event of discourse. The liminal space between *parole* and *langue* allows for discourse to be a mixed structure of *identification* and *predication*. Together, the identifying and predicting processes project a world through the event of discourse. This world is a new mode of being.

One of the primary tools of Ricoeur's discourse theory is his reinterpretation of speech act theory. Speech act theory begins with the performatives. Performatives highlight the active quality of language in its ability to *do* without leaving the plane of the utterance. The first performative is the locutionary act; the act of speaking itself. The second performative is the illocutionary act; the act directly accomplished by the speech. The third performative is the perlocutionary act; the effects generated by the speech act. In addition to these, Ricoeur added the interlocutionary act. The interlocutionary act stands between meaning and event. This appears in discourse as the delay between the *meaning* of a message being received and the *event* being acted out. For that reason, the interlocutionary act draws attention to the tension inherent in discourse.

Understanding the performatives of miracles is important because it reveals the origin of their meaning. Above, the script of a miracle narrative was reduced to *God acts, we tell.* The action of God is a privileged meaning of the script. It is primary to the extent that human actions are credited solely to God. Ricoeur uncovers the second part of this script. During the *act of speaking* a miracle story, what occurs? As I will argue, speaking miracles can only be a matter of testimony.

Ricoeur on Testimony

In his work, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation*, Ricoeur analyzes the role of testimony in the Bible as a kind of hermeneutic. In many significant ways, these miracle narratives serve as a

kind of testimony. Ricoeur states that testimonies are a kind of report. Not all reports, however, are testimonies. A testimony must have a close relationship to the idea of a trial. A testimony makes explicit reference to the trial for which it is attesting. In the case of *It's a God Thing*, there is no doubt that a trial is occurring. In the introduction, Jacobson directly addresses the idea of an opposition. He states, "You hear a lot of talk about miracles these days. Are they real? Skeptics will say that miracles are nothing but wishful fairy tales" (Jacobson, p. xvii). It becomes even clearer in *The Case for Miracles* that a trial is occurring. Aside from the title of the book indicating that a *case* is being made, Strobel makes it clear what the stakes of this trial are, "If [the factual claims of the Bible] aren't actually true, the faith collapses and its moral authority evaporates" (Strobel, p. 123). These representations of miracles are not just scripts; they are testimony.

The idea of testimony falls somewhat in line with the modernist arguments put forward by Strobel. However, in much the same way, they cannot carry the burden of proof alone. Testimony is quasi-empirical because it is not the perception that is being transferred but the report. We cannot see through the eyes of another, we can only listen to their mediated representation of the phenomena. Testimony takes things that are seen and transforms them into things said, and finally, things heard (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 4). Ricoeur describes this relationship saying,

> Testimony is a dual relation: there is the one who testifies and the one who hears the testimony. The witness has seen, but the one who receives his testimony has not seen but hears. It is only by hearing the testimony that he can believe or not believe in the reality of the facts that the witness reports. Testimony as story is thus found in an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and

> a belief assumed by another on the faith of the testimony of the first. (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 5)

Just as the creation of testimony requires a witness, the interpretation of testimony requires a judge. Testimony has the inherent goal of judgement. Testimony works to justify an ontological claim that must be decided by the hearer of the testimony. This aspect of testimony means that the report itself cannot make meaning manifest. Testimony is an alienation of meaning, "external to all the arguments that the orator can invent" (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 22). The interpretive act is inherent to testimony, just as a judgement is needed in a trial.

In a trial, the person giving testimony—a witness—is bound to the person that they are giving testimony for. Ricoeur states that the quasi-empirical nature of testimony means that a witness must bind themselves to the cause for which they are speaking (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 9). The potential to be found guilty gives more meaning to the witness' role in the production of a testimony. To be bound to a testimony means that the witness is putting themselves at personal risk to bring meaning to the testimony. Ricoeur is quick to use this connection as a reminder that *witness* in Greek is *martus*; from which the word *martyr* is derived.

Considering a trial being a martyr is not an argument or a proof, it is a test of conviction. The conviction of the witness is the beginning of meaning in a testimony. This creates a tension within the witness. The meaning of their testimony is produced by their inner conviction, even though their testimony is a perception of the external. Testimony always reaches outside of the witness, "In this sense, it proceeds from the *Other"* (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 23). In the testimony of miracles—if the witness is indeed a witness to the *Other*—they are tapping into historic signs and narrations of acts of deliverance (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 13). In the testimony of miracles, witnesses are witnesses to God. This is apparent in *It's a God Thing* where the final script is that

God acts. To become a convicted *martus* for a miracle is no minor undertaking.

A witness does not testify about miniscule things. Witnesses attest to the radical meaning of the human experience, not mundane facts. The internal and external tension of testimony renders it as a kind of interlocutionary act. It inhabits the space between the event of what is witnessed and the meaning of the judgement. In the space of the interlocutionary act, the most significant parts of testimony occur.

Performing Testimony

Now that testimony has been established as an interlocutionary act, the rest of the performatives can be applied to the representation of miracles from the perspective of sense-makers. The locutionary act is the telling of the miracle narrative. In speaking, they are conducting the speech act. However, we must remember that this process is heavily mediated. For example, in *It's a God Thing,* it is highly unlikely that we are reading the first telling of these stories. Certainly, the sense-makers told the story to individuals near them in conversations. Then, at some point, they decided to share it so that it might be published. Even after this sharing, the stories went through an editor before making into the book. Along with chain of mediations, we must also consider the locutionary role in light of the miracle tellers as witnesses. If they are witnessing the *act* of God in the world in the form of a miracle, they cannot claim agency to that event. In spite of witnessing the event, the witness is alienated from it. They are not bonded to the cause of the event. They are however, bonded to the *meaning* of performative speech.

The creation of meaning is the illocutionary act of representing miracles. This is sensemaking. In speaking, the sense-maker is trying to laminate their institutional script on the event. Before testifying, the miracle *event* is just something that is perceived. It is just an event,

no miracle necessary. The direct act of speaking is to ascribe the event to God. It is to arrive at the script that *God acts.* This is not an unintended consequence of speaking. This is necessary to continue the self-reinforcing of the institution of miracles. Without this continuous lamination, the unitary view of reality, which values stability above all else, will become unstable.

While the illocutionary act is to continue sensemaking, the perlocutionary act creates the witness. The direct action of representing miracles is to *make sense* of what is perceived in a way that aligns with the institution of miracles. Another effect of this, however, is that the sense-maker becomes a witness. The sense-makers don't necessarily intend to change themselves when they speak their miracle, but they are indeed changed. In order to testify, they have been *convicted* as a martyr. Thinking that they are reporting about the world, they are truly only generating meaning from themselves.

Here lies the interlocutionary act: The miracle is created, not by God, but by the witness. The miracle is the testimony of the witness, which is created *within* the witness as a matter of conviction. This is the moment of meaning creation. Before this, there is no miracle to speak of, only a perception still in the flow of daily life. Meaning lags behind event. The bridge between the two is the witness.

Having determined the creation of meaning in testimony, who is the judge of these proceedings? God is the judge. Sense-makers witness to God, about God. God is the only one that can truly render judgement in the matter of miracles. As seen in the institutional script, miracles are *his* acts, after all. Aside from being the source of miracles, God is the only one that can access the interlocutionary source of meaning. The interior process of meaning-making is visible to him. This ability, to know the human heart, is generally accepted among Christians, and can be seen in Hebrews: "…the word of God is living and active…it is able to judge the

thoughts and intentions of the heart. And before him no creature is hidden, but all are naked and laid bare to the eyes of the one to whom we must render an account" (Hebrews, 4:12-13, NRSV). It is for God's sake that believers are convicted. And, it is only God that can truly judge that conviction. Put differently, the unpresentable is presentable to God.

If the telling of miracles is fully *a God thing,* and begins and ends with him, why then bother with modernist rationality? God requires modernism to know the hearts of believers just as much as witnesses need science to become convicted. The purpose of modernist epistemology within the institution of miracles is to create testimony not for God, but for a false judge. This false judge is collectively made up of individuals outside of the institution of miracles: those that can be proselytized. The institution of miracles believed that its self-reinforcing scripts existed for others, so that they would join the fold. As a result of being caught up in the meaning-making loop of a unitary reality the institution forgot its purpose: to tell of the acts of God, *for the glory of God.*

There is, however, a counter-argument that outsiders should be considered a judge of miracles. An example of it appears prominently in the afterword of *It's a God Thing* claiming that proselytizing is a reason for miracle narratives to exist. Jacobson states, "For any reader who does not have a relationship with God through Jesus, we pray that these stories have persuaded you of His love and His power in the lives of His children and that you will come to know and love Him as we do" (p. 209). While they may believe this to be the case, this cannot be true on two levels. Firstly, the institution of miracles is engaged in a unitary reality of sensemaking. They are not able to produce convincing interpretations for outsiders that are not already inclined to believe. Secondly, this would mean that not God, but Michael Shermer, is the judge in *The Case for Miracles.* All of his arguments are refuted as a means to change his *judgement.* I don't

believe this elevation of Shermer to be Strobel's intention, nor should it be. However, it is the case that Strobel argued. In the use of modernist rationality, the institution of miracles forfeited their only true evidence: their conviction as witnesses.

Implications

The interlocutionary act of the witness radically changes the sensemaking of the institution of miracles. The creative tension of being a witness is what was missing in *The Case for Miracles.* Where modernist rationality ended, the institution of miracles was left with presenting the unpresentable. This presentation is possible as a matter of personal conviction in meaning-making. The quasi-empiricism of testimony is irrelevant. While a sense-maker may not be able to witness perfectly for God, Christ is the perfect witness, because he witnesses to himself (Ricoeur, 1980, p. 16). The call of the witness then, is to be like Christ.

The interlocutionary act of being a witness combines with the sense-making notion of *God acts.* The sense-making of the institution of miracles was not incorrect in believing that God acts to create miracles. It was only oversimplified. God's act is not to create the miracle; that requires the creation of meaning. *God's act is to create the witness.*

Being a witness is a matter of identity. *Being born again* is not far from the act of becoming a witness. The witness is bound to what they testify. What they testify is made by taking an event and *making sense of* it with conviction. The sense-making of the institution of miracles, as a unitary reality, takes advantage of this process. The stability of the unitary reality demands that sensemaking is a self-reinforcing of institutional norms. The needs of institutional sensemaking confront the only meaning-making process that can handle it: witnessing. The internal change of sense-makers into witnesses reflects this as the locutionary act occurs: "…you do not really know what you think until you *do* say it. When you hear yourself talk, you see more

clearly what matters and what you had hoped to say" (Weick *et al*, 2005, p. 416).

The goal of the institution of miracles then, is not to represent miracles, but to *(re)present the inner-condition of the sense-maker as witness.* This is why Strobel is fine conceding that the final *articulated* argument for miracles being that *something* is happening. A fundamental criterion of sensemaking is plausibility (Weick *et al*, 2005, p. 416). Strobel and his interviewees are less concerned with what is actual. It is not about proving that miracles *do* happen, but about proving that they *can* happen. This is a satisfactory conclusion, *because they have separated the sense-making process from the process of becoming a sense-maker.* Becoming a witness is to be radically transformed at the individual, personal level. For the institution of miracles, the transformation of the self has been jettisoned in favor of modernist epistemology scripted for a false judge. Making sense of miracles returns to the self, attempting to present the unpresentable to the only Judge that can perceive it. Being the witness *is* the miracle. This is the postmodern condition of the miracle institution.

HEADING 6

CONCLUSION

I set out to identify and explicate a new identity marker of U.S. American Christianity. This identity marker is the institutionalized sensemaking of miracles. While not analogous to any established church, denomination, or creed, the institution of miracles has its own membership and mission. Existing as a closed loop of sensemaking, the institution of miracles has developed self-reinforcing scripts for its members. Taking part in this sensemaking identifies members with the institution of miracles and its unitary view of reality. The sensemaking and the sense-makers are inseparable. In turn, identifying the sensemaking of the institution of miracles allows future research to focus on what the rhetoric of U.S. American Christianity is *doing* instead of who is speaking.

Miracles exist, not as God's act in the world, but as his act in sense-makers. Defining miracles requires reducing miracles to a matter of personal experience. Making this experience tangible leads to the creation of an institution of miracles. The institution of miracles uses sensemaking to arrive at scripts that can be used to create more miracle narratives. The sensemaking script of miracles can be reduced to *God acts, we tell.* That is, an ontological commitment that God is an active agent in the world and believers must testify to this reality. These miracle narratives are produced by miracle-experiencers turned miracle-tellers. Becoming a miracle-teller—by labeling an experience as a miracle—requires engaging in the sensemaking of the institution of miracles. This makes those that experience miracles sense-makers; those that make sense of miracles.

Being sense-makers, rather than interpreters, highlights how meaning is created by the institution of miracles. Sense-makers understand the phenomena around them based from the

self-reinforcing scripts of the institution. Miracles being labeled through institutional lamination makes sensemaking miracles a matter of identity. Those that are outside of the institution of miracles will not arrive at the same conclusion as those that are on the inside.

Not understanding how others can deny their unitary sense of reality, sense-makers of miracles take on the auspices of modernist rationality to produce new representations of miracles. People like Strobel do this work as a matter of propping up their understanding of Christianity. The institution of miracles is bound in Christianity as the facilitator of closed meaning-making. It is not Christianity as a whole, but an aspect of it that has solidified to make certain fundamental arguments about Christianity. The representation of these arguments using modernist rationality can go no further than *something* is happening. Despite, coming to no concrete *scientific* conclusion, Strobel concludes that those who disagree with the interpretation of this *something* are close-minded and illogical. Identifying and sensemaking with the institution of miracles is still necessary to conclude that miracles are real.

The failure to represent the unrepresentable opens the institution of miracles to its postmodern condition. The creation of consensus and meaning-making still rests on identity, rather than an external metadiscourse like modernism. Sensemaking allows for institutional members to make miracles tangible for those that are also part of their unitary reality. Sensemaking allows for the representation of miracles. This reality, for stability's sake, must defend itself from any challengers to its authority, regardless of its inability to produce sense for non-members. This puts the institution of miracles on trial.

In the trial of the institution of miracles, the representation of miracles is offered as testimony. In becoming testimony, the sense-makers of miracles become witnesses. Being a witness means bearing the tension of creating meaning by conviction. This process of meaning

making is an interlocutionary act between the *event* and the creation of meaning. This means that miracles are made, not by God, but by his witnesses. Becoming a witness, however, is the act of God in the world. Witnesses testify before God as judge because he is the only one that can rightfully judge a witness's conviction. This is in direct contrast to the modernist rationality presented as evidence by the institution of miracles. The presentation of modernism, rather than the (re)presentation of the witness's conviction, is a product of the institution of miracles privileging the process of sensemaking over the process of becoming a sense-maker.

The institution of miracles is about sensemaking through identity. This allows scholars to be able to identify this kind of sensemaking as well as to know what sensemaking can and cannot produce. It *cannot* be about making an argument to outsiders because it requires an internal transformation to be able to see. The final role of the institution of miracles is to *be* God's miracle in the world.

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