Situated in downtown Nashville, First Baptist Church (FBC) frequently finds itself in the middle of city events. So in the summer of 2009, the church decided to take evangelistic advantage of the annual Fourth of July parades. We printed what is typically referred to as “the plan of salvation” on hundreds of Frisbees, which volunteers then handed out with bottled water to the sweaty masses who passed by our doorstep. While many in our community lauded this salvation strategy, others (myself included) were, for varying reasons, either dubious or even outright disdainful of it. As Miriam put it, “Anything that fits on the back of a Frisbee, it’s just not complicated enough to build a life around.” A graspable set of rules to order one’s existence (something that can fit on the back of a Frisbee) can be attractive to many. We find that desire, or at least one like it, in all churches, organizations, institutions, and even the academy. But the group of thirty-plus church members at FBC who took the Sunday night theology classes that I taught consistently articulated a desire for more than the Frisbee’s list (which is, of course, itself a particular theology). Or, better put, they wanted to keep wrestling with what the Frisbee says. As Miriam put it, “We all know the rules, but no one picks apart the rules.” The people who came to our Sunday night classes, it seemed, didn’t necessarily want to break those rules; they just wanted to pick them apart.

In this chapter, we continue imagining how academic theology can intervene in the everyday to help with this picking apart of the rules, to reassemble them and perhaps, even, to aid the production of something new out of them. To do so, I construct a reflexive
Ecclesiology—that is, an ecclesiology constructed using the objectified participation methods outlined in the previous chapter. To ensure that reflexivity, I follow Wacquant’s work, endeavoring, like him, not to slip into autoethnography, a form of subjectivist ethnography that largely focuses the ends of its research on the internal workings of the researcher herself. Therefore, neither I nor any one of my research partners is the main character of this chapter. Rather, the main character is FBC itself, complete with the complexity of its workings. We pay attention to the ways in which my research partners and I contribute to those workings with our shared labor so that my “socialized body” can provide “a visceral knowledge of the universe under scrutiny.”

I also try to maintain appropriate reflexivity by endeavoring to avoid the type of reflexivity that characterizes poststructuralist or postmodern anthropologies. As Wacquant points out, this reflexivity is concerned appropriately with analyzing the researcher’s biases, but unfortunately it stops there. Subjectivist anthropologists, he argues, deploy epistemic reflexivity only at the beginning of the project (to isolate bias) or at the end (in the final report’s drafting). But a project is only truly reflexive when it is reflexive from start to finish: “From the selection of the site and the recruitment of informants to the choice of questions to pose or to avoid, as well as the engagement of theoretic schemata, methodological tools and display techniques.”

I seek to understand my own subjective responses and biases in relation to the action I analyze, not merely to evaluate those biases but rather to construct theoretical, theological, and methodological apparatuses that provide me with a “way of elucidating the praxeology of the agents under examination.” Expanding our focus beyond the classes I taught in this chapter thus allows me also to position how our Sunday night group functioned in relation to the broader ecclesial system as well.

I therefore describe disagreements and debates in this chapter in which, for the most part, I participated directly during my time at FBC. They are recorded from worship times, prayer meetings I attended, and committee meetings in which I participated, all of which are part of my life as a member of FBC and my inquiry for my research. This means that my telling of these narratives is far from disinterested. In interviews, people frequently knew where I stood on issues and, given that most of the people who took the classes I taught stood in similar camps as me, our conversations would sometimes take on the tone of conspiratorial planning. Each of us clearly loved our community, even as we also saw multiple ways we wanted it to be reformed and wanted to contribute to that reformation. This also means that the