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Special Issue Reprint

Disclosing God in Action

Contemporary British Evangelical Practices

Edited by
Andrew P. Rogers, Helen Collins and Israel Olofinjana

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Guest Editors

Andrew P. Rogers
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About the Editors

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Andrew P. Rogers is Associate Professor of Practical Theology at the University of Roehampton, London, UK. His theological studies were at the London School of Theology and King's College London. Andrew co-convenes an ecumenical open access degree programme in Theology, Mission and Practice and teaches and supervises on a professional doctorate in practical theology. He also co-convenes the BIAPT Bible and practical theology special interest group and convenes the international Bible user research network (BURN). Andrew's research interests include the Bible and practical theology; faith, place, and urban planning; aspects of evangelicalism and pentecostalism; Christian worship; and diaspora church demographics and ecclesiology. He is the BIAPT representative for TRS-UK, is on the Editorial Board of the journal *Practical Theology*, and is a member of the International Academy of Practical Theology.

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Preface

Much is written about evangelicalism and evangelicals. Less is written about the particular dynamics and character of British evangelicals. This Special Issue Reprint takes a step into even less chartered territory—theological research that explores British evangelical practices today and how God may be disclosed in this.

As Guest Editors, we commissioned contributors who self-identified as evangelical to reflect theologically on practices that they had spent time researching. Our goals as Guest Editors were to see how such practice-engaged theologies might enrich and complexify understandings of British evangelicalism, alongside making space for a more explicit response to the 'what is God doing' question. Both critical and constructive, our authors responded robustly to this commission, offering accounts of a wide range of practices to which they had paid careful attention.

As anyone who has engaged in practice-based research knows, it has a tendency to defy categorisation. The practices addressed in this volume share this tendency—they include testimony, divorce, Bible engagement, rule of life, confession, youth ministry, entrepreneurship, prayers, and summer camps! Nevertheless, we have grouped the articles into three sections: firstly those relating to Christian worship; secondly, ministry and mission; and thirdly, method. These are approximate groupings and there are overlaps, and we also recognise that there may be other possible arrangements—we leave it for the reader to determine the internal logic of these sections!

It is our hope that this volume will be of great benefit to all those with an interest in evangelicalism, whether within the tradition or outside it, be they a church leader, congregant, academic, or interested observer. We believe that there is much here to stimulate thought, as well as to invite further academic enquiry into evangelicalism and divine disclosure through these reflective accounts of what people actually do.

Andrew P. Rogers, Helen Collins, and Israel Olofinjana
Guest Editors

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Editorial

Disclosing God in Action: The State of British Evangelicalism

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1. Introduction

Our aim in this Special Issue was to assess British evangelicalism through the lens of its contemporary practices. We invited evangelical scholars to offer critical, reflexive, and yet also constructive accounts of what British evangelicals actually do, and how God's action may be discerned in this. Meeting this aim has been possible due to the wonderful 18 authors who have given their time and effort to produce 14 insightful articles for this Special Issue, from a number of theological subdisciplines. The breadth of the practices addressed is captured in the table below:

summer camps	conversion and autism	Bible noise
divorce	Spirit in leadership discourse	entrepreneurship
rule of life in community	youth ministry origin stories	charismatic confession
celibate gay testimony	the doing of theology	African Pentecostal prayers
readings of Noah's Ark	denialism	

This surpassed our expectations. As guest editors, we offer a very big thank you to them all, as well as to the many peer reviewers and *Religions* journal staff who made this possible.

Our motivations for the journal arose out of our guest editor contexts and experiences. Israel Oluwole Olofinjana is a current staff member of the Evangelical Alliance in the UK leading an intercultural ministry called the One People Commission (OPC). His UK role is in close proximity to the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA), World Evangelical Alliance (WEA), Lausanne Europe and Lausanne Global Movement. This positioning and location gives a vantage point of sitting at the crossroads of global evangelicalism and has afforded Israel the opportunity to attend some of the global conferences reflected on in this article as well as a motivation for engagement with this journal. In addition, Israel was also interested in editing this Special Issue journal because as a practical theologian with a focus on intercultural theology (Olofinjana et al. 2025), intercultural missiology and public theology, he is interested in interrogating how evangelical Christians engage contemporary issues.

Helen maintains a particular interest in how evangelical convictions and concerns are engaged in practical theology. Her 2020 SCM publication *Reordering Theological Reflection: Starting with Scripture* examines the ways in which practical theology in the western

academy has been heavily influenced by liberal and liberationist theological convictions (Collins 2020). These are often seen as at odds with an evangelical focus on the authority of the Bible to determine matters of faith and praxis, and so practical theology can feel like an unfamiliar or even hostile space for Christians with evangelical convictions. Moreover, Helen's role in an Anglican theological college training ordinands for Christian ministry means that her research seeks to engage confessionally with academic theology for the strengthening of the church. Therefore, she was especially attracted to editing this Special Issue, with its focus on evangelical practices for disclosing God's action, because it brings together her concerns for developing evangelical practical theology and enabling confessional, academic theology orientated to Christian discipleship.

Andrew came to this project through an out-of-the-blue invite from the *Religions* journal for a Special Issue that suggested a focus on evangelicalism and practices. This caught his attention given his past research on evangelical practices (e.g., Rogers 2016), and more recent autobiographical reflections on his own journey in practical theology, as an evangelical, researcher and teacher in a university setting (Rogers 2022). Out of this research and experience, a focus on *British* evangelicalism seemed necessary, given its particular dynamics and distinctives in comparison to evangelical trends elsewhere. He has also observed a common tendency of practice-engaged academic theology to produce pieces of the form 'The trouble with this practice is…'; perhaps especially so of evangelical practices, undoubtedly sometimes with good reason. Thus, the push in this Special Issue is to encourage contributors to be constructive as well, where appropriate. This constructive nudge is bound up with the overarching title of the Special Issue which poses the question 'How is God's action disclosed in any practice?'

Andrew is located in a secular university with its associated norms, yet it also has three Christian foundation colleges and an ecumenical ministerial formation programme that he co-leads. The tension between these institutionally reflects wider disciplinary tensions around the question of how to speak of God in academic theological research. Asking and trying to answer this question has been noted as a 'spiritual turn' in practice-engaged theology (Watkins 2022) and reflects the work of a number of theologians working in this area. The upshot of all this is that we invited our contributors to ask the God question and try to answer it! More of this later.

2. British Evangelicals and Global Evangelicalism

Our contexts and concerns described above have informed our sense that British evangelicalism is at a critical crossroads at the moment. There are several reasons for this, but some of the major reasons are firstly, the contentious nature of evangelical identity and practices in a contested post-secular world. Secondly, there is the issue around western evangelical identity and its relationship with evangelicals of colour. Thirdly, there is confusion and conflation in some popular language and public discourse between British evangelicals and North American evangelicals. The renewed presidency of Donald Trump and the MAGA movement and the proximity of some American evangelicals have further exacerbated this conflation. These factors and many more have led to British evangelicals rethinking what it means to be an evangelical and how God might be disclosed through key evangelical practices. This in turn is leading to some evangelicals starting to disrupt the boundaries and reshape the contours of British evangelicalism, as will be seen in the fourteen contributions in this Special Issue. But this quest for an honest re-assessment of British evangelicals must not be treated in isolation from global conversations on evangelical identity and practices.

In 2024 alone, Israel attended two important evangelical conferences. These two conferences were significant because of the nature of their conversations on global evangelical

identity, mission and practices. The first was a European conversation on evangelical identity looking at the unity and diversity of European evangelicals. In August, in the beautiful city of Prague, Czech Republic, about 80 European evangelicals met together, drawn from different theological traditions, ecclesiastical traditions and different regions in Europe. The conference was organised by the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians (FEET) working in collaboration with the European Evangelical Alliance (EEA). The theme of the conference was *Evangelical Identity in Europe Today: Unity in Diversity*. An observation of the central theme that kept emerging through the plenary presentations and workshops was around evangelical identity and how that informs certain evangelical practices such as evangelical spirituality, evangelicals and populist political movements in Europe and evangelical mission. In this light, Bebbington's quadrilateral (Bebbington 1989), Larsen's pentagon (Larsen and Treier 2007) and McGrath's 'hexagon' (McGrath 1995) were all used to describe and not prescribe what evangelical identity is in the different European contexts. There is no one European evangelical identity, but there were shared learnings from history, sociology, theology and scripture. Another emerging theme from the discussions was the acknowledgement of the so-called 'migrant churches' now in Europe which seems to feature in almost every presentation, except there were not many participants who were people of colour in the room. The speakers and participants were mainly white Europeans. This gap is also reflected in this Special Issue comprising fourteen articles with only two articles from scholars of colour. More reflection on this is below, but returning to the theme of global evangelical identity and practices, the conference in Prague, despite its imperfections, points towards an evangelical search for renewed identity and practices in post-secular Europe.

A month after the FEET conference was the fourth Lausanne Congress in South Korea with the theme of *Let the Church Declare and Display Christ Together*. Lausanne, being an evangelical movement that started in 1974, organises global congresses exploring evangelical identity and mission. The congress had in attendance 5394 people from 200 nations of the world demonstrating global evangelicalism as a significant expression of Christianity. But the release of a theological statement referred to as the Seoul Statement just before the start of the congress raised critical questions. Firstly, there were questions about audience participation in the production of the statement. Many participants did not appreciate a theological statement being released on their behalf without their input. Secondly, there were questions around both the theological issues addressed in the statement and the ones the statement omitted. For example, the statement addressed key areas of evangelical practice such as the centrality of the gospel story, the role of the Bible in discipleship formation, engagement with technology, engagement with anthropology and with more to say on sexuality than any other issue. But the statement did not address in-depth issues such as colonisation, racism and more.[1] Lastly, there were questions about the process of how the statement was put together. These critical voices within global evangelicalism reveal something of a disruption to its tradition and boundaries—which some of the articles in this Special Issue certainly did as well.

3. British Evangelical Scholarship and Black Dissenting Evangelicals

Returning to the lack of diversity of contributors, it is important to say that efforts and requests were made to engage scholars who are evangelicals of colour in this volume—35 contributors in total were invited which included 8 evangelicals of colour. A major setback is that whilst there are many white British evangelical scholars in full-time academic positions, this is not the case with evangelical scholars of colour. The truth is that there are not many evangelical scholars of colour within the UK context. Added to this, is the fact that the few who do exist often do not have the luxury of full-time academic positions.

Many of these scholars are still very much in church ministry alongside part-time academic work. This is reflected in the struggle to find evangelical theologians of colour to contribute to this volume.

A further hypothesis identified, and one of the gaps in relation to what is discussed above concerning this Special Issue which needs picking up in future agenda and research work, is the lack of meaningful engagement between white British evangelical scholarship and black theological scholarship. Using black theological scholarship here as an example, there is a robust thriving black theological scholarship in Britain that is distanced from white evangelical scholarship. There are several reasons for this, but a major one related to this discussion is the lack of engagement of white evangelical theologians in developing decolonised theologies that can address historic injustices and ongoing racial injustices (Olofinjana 2025). This is partly why some black theological scholarship is committed to a black British liberative theological framework, but there is another strand of that scholarship which can be described as black dissenting evangelicals. Black dissenting evangelicals is a term coined here by co-guest editor Israel Oluwole Olofinjana to identify and describe the phenomenon of critical black evangelicals becoming reluctant to engage with white British evangelicals, as they feel their perspective and concerns have not been listened to or valued. This is an ongoing scenario that is being observed. Black dissenting evangelicals are therefore black theological scholars and leaders who will locate and identify their theological framework within evangelical and Pentecostal circles. Black dissenting evangelicals have emerged due to the lack of engagement of white British evangelical scholarship with issues of slavery, colonisation and racial injustice and this scenario has led to them finding friendship and home with black British liberation theologians. Black dissenting evangelicals are not at ease with British evangelicalism and therefore question its relevance in understanding the perspectives of black Christians and pursuing racial justice, as well as the more recent discussions on reparative justice. Racial justice and reparative justice are two examples of key practices among Black dissenting evangelicals.

4. Themes Within the Articles

This summary of trends within global evangelicalism is the broader context within which the Special Issue might be read and received. Israel's experiences note the tensions around what constitutes evangelical identity in the West (let alone in the rest of the world) and our hope is that the Special Issue shows what is distinctive about British evangelicalism within the global picture. However, as will be shown below, the articles demonstrate that there is a plethora of understandings even within the British context, which further evidences that attempts to establish global definitions and identities, such as the Lausanne Seoul Statement described above, are insurmountably complex.

For this Special Issue, we sought authors who are not only writing about evangelicalism but also somehow own that label for themselves in their own Christian identity. Therefore, this Special Issue is distinctive in having British evangelicals critically engaging with their own beliefs and practices (following Morris and Cameron 2022; compare Larsen and Treier 2007; McDermott 2010). It is clear from the Special Issue contributions that evangelicals are well able to identify the challenges within their tradition while still subscribing to the tradition. A number of contributors were clear about the potential of the British evangelical church to cause harm to others (compare critiques of evangelicalism by non-evangelicals Strhan 2015; Gaddini 2022; Sharp 2023). For example, Paynter's article examines the response of denial in the face of allegations, Williams/Cundill's article looks at the unhelpful focus on words in conceptualising conversion, Aylen analyses the ways in which gay testimonies may be misused and weaponised, Hornby explores damaging pastoral care practices among ministry to the divorced, Bennet considers the way in which

evangelical leadership discourse is not sufficiently trinitarian, and Rogers explores the deforming impact of limited opportunities for corporate confession of sin. Each of these authors are unafraid to expose the deficits they see within evangelical practice, but they also each contain hope that new, more faithful practices can be found within evangelicalism, which can enable its renewal. This is particularly seen in their willingness to continue to identify as 'evangelical' even amid the difficulties they identify.

Building on this theme, the Special Issue also bears witness to the way in which evangelicals are searching for more nuanced and interdisciplinary definitions of evangelicalism which diversify the traditional definitions. Bebbington's 1989 book *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain* identified four key characteristics of evangelicalism: conversionism, biblicism, activism and crucicentrism, which has come to entirely dominate discussions on evangelical identity. However, the authors in the Special Issue want to broaden and nuance this quadrilateral and offer new, descriptive accounts, much like was seen at the European conference on evangelical identity referenced above. For example, Scanlan, Schoon-Tanis and Lukabyo highlight youth relationships as a key defining marker of evangelical practice. Hutchinson explores the influence of contemporary culture upon evangelicals' interpretation of Scripture. Hornby advocates for the importance of kindness and compassion as an enactment of evangelical commitments. Aylen shows how encountering God through experience, and drawing on testimony, is an important evangelical method for interpreting and proclaiming the faith. Clark examines entrepreneurship as a site of divine disclosure. Dunlop, Williams/Cundill, Rogers and Nyanni/Andoh-Kesson explore close connections between evangelical and Pentecostal/charismatic commitments. Collins suggests that finding God in and through nature, and among the marginalised, are also central to evangelical commitments. Chandy offers creative ways in which the Scriptures can be engaged which moves evangelicals beyond narrowly cognitive understandings. Briggs highlights the ways in which new monasticism and a rule of life can also be faithful expressions of evangelicalism. This broadening and diversifying of evangelical markers is an important contribution of this Special Issue and we hope it inspires further work in complexifying definitions and evangelical characteristics.

A further recurring theme among the articles is identifying how God is disclosed as the agent of this broadening, nuancing and disrupting of evangelical identities. Authors propose seeing God at work in a range of ways which might not be commonly associated with evangelicalism. For example, while evangelicals might often be characterised by an assurance in their convictions, Collins, Paynter, Dunlop, Chandy and Aylen each examine ways in which God is at work disrupting some of those convictions, decentring rigid thinking and challenging fixed certainties. While evangelicals are commonly associated with firm boundaries between the church and the world (Gaddini 2022), Briggs, Williams/Cundill, Aylen, Collins, Hutchinson, Clark and Paynter each examine how the Spirit is often at work blurring boundaries, embracing outside perspectives and making use of 'secular' means to further the work of the kingdom. While evangelical associations with evangelism are deep rooted (Bebbington 1989), the Special Issue contributions show evidence of a much more integrated understanding of mission. Hornby, Williams/Cundill, Scanlan/Schoon-Tanis/Lukabyo, Briggs, Collins and Aylen all strongly advocate how God might be leading evangelicals to build solidarity with the marginalised and allow their mission to be shaped by compassion and difference. These conviction-disrupting, boundary-blurring, mission-inclusive trends may evidence an important way in which British evangelicalism differs from American evangelicalism. However, further comparative work would be needed to establish this distinction.

An emerging theme within the Special Issue is discussion of migrant evangelical churches in Britain: Clark examines the entrepreneurialism of evangelical immigrants,

and Nyanni/Andoh-Kesson highlight the prayer practices of African diaspora Pentecostal communities. However, as for the European conference on evangelical identity, there is much more work to be done to bring migrant experiences into the discussions on British evangelicalism. We note above the difficulties we had in securing more authors of colour to contribute to the Special Issue. We hope that the disruptive and nuancing work of the Special Issue might open up future opportunities for dialogue with black dissenting evangelicals and inspire further work on anti-racism and decolonisation.

5. Speaking of God?

Contributors were invited to speak about God, specifically what God was doing in the practices considered. This was a relatively unusual commission, even for theology, since it required contributors not just to report accounts of divine action, but to reflect as authors on what God is doing. The assumption here is that God really does things in the world, and it is possible to discern what this may be, theologians included. While it may surprise some that speaking of God in this way is an issue, this is a tension that all theologians, perhaps particularly evangelicals, need to navigate between faith, practice and academia.

We nearly did not speak of God in this way. Our first submission was by co-guest editor Helen Collins, who asked questions about what God was doing in evangelical camping. The reviewer responded that these statements 'cannot be present in a scientific text about religious phenomena'. This prompted a series of helpful exchanges with *Religions* journal personnel, since as guest editors we were concerned that such a response might invalidate all contributions to the Special Issue. We explained that theology is not a science in the narrow sense of the epistemology implied by the reviewer; furthermore, authorial theological reflection on divine action is increasingly part of the academic theological task (see this Special Issue Call for Papers)—it is not just phenomenology and not just being reflexive about authorial religious commitments. To put it another way, Helen was asking proper academic theological questions. Given that this Special Issue now exists, you will have worked out that this story has a happy ending. We were invited to put our case in a letter, which enabled *Religions* staff to better understand and embrace the approach we were taking.

Two things caught our attention as to how contributors spoke of God in action—the language used, and the vehicles identified. On language, authors often couched their reflections in tentative language using questions beginning with 'I wonder', 'Could', or 'Might' (with just a few employing a more confident tone). This was accompanied by a recognition that claims about God's action are subjective and should be open to testing, while at the same time taking seriously the reality of these claims.

Many vehicles for God's action are identified in these articles, both directly through an aspect of the practice considered, as well as through more methodological means. Unsurprisingly, the Bible is one of those vehicles. In speaking of an evangelical rule of life, Briggs emphasises that God's action is frequently in collaboration with human action. Faithful discipleship comprises daily human acts that are in response to the word of God by the power of the Spirit. Both Collins and Clark explicitly name Scripture as a vehicle for discerning God's action; in the case of Collins, it is the hermeneutical 'rhyme' between God's action in the text and today, particularly around the festival of Sukkot for evangelical camping; for Clark, the resonance of 'get up and walk' (Jn 5: 1–17) and 'blessing in exile' (Jer 29: 1–13) helped discern God's action in evangelical immigrant entrepreneurship. Chandy identifies how Bible Noise is a vehicle for God's action, through ordinary, embodied human voices speaking Scripture. On Noah's Ark, Hutchinson wonders whether God may be at work in popular cultural interpretations of this text, through its power to capture the imagination.

Beyond the Bible, Rogers suggests that God's action is disclosed in the willingness of charismatic leaders to be self-critical of their tradition regarding confession, also noting the significance of relationality as a standout vehicle. Similarly, Scanlan, Schoon-Tanis, and Lukabyo identify 'relationship' as the primary means of God's action in evangelical youth work, seeing an implicit sacramentality in this. Aylen contends that autoethnography itself can be revelatory, and through this methodology makes five claims to divine action in his testimony. Also employing autoethnography, Dunlop's article argues for a stance of expectancy for evangelical scholars, where they look for God at work in the world through 'rigorous paying attention'.

6. Concluding Thoughts

This editorial has focused on the different contexts of the co-editors, some of the wider issues and current trends within global discussions on evangelicalism, key emerging themes from the Special Issue articles, and the question of engaging with God's agency in academic writing. Our hope is that the articles in this Special Issue might shed light on what is distinctive about British evangelicalism and might give other researchers the confidence to pursue their own questions about divine disclosure within their empirical work. We think the focus on engaging with evangelicals through what they actually do, rather than just through what they believe, is a significant contribution which can nuance and complexify understandings of twenty-first century evangelicalism. We also hope to see other evangelical scholars inspired to write constructively, as well as critically, about their own tradition, such that evangelicalism can continue to be a significant contributor to global theological conversations.

The insights from the articles, summarised above, suggest a number of areas for further, fruitful research on the themes of evangelicalism, including (1) the relationship between black and white evangelicals, and the causes of disconnect; (2) the significance of black dissenting evangelicals to the landscape of evangelicalism in Britain; (3) comparisons between the trends identified within British evangelicalism and other global expressions of evangelicalism, particularly in the USA, to further gain a sense of Britain's distinctive contributions; (4) further engagement with evangelical practices not discussed in the Special Issue, for example, preaching, tithing, uses of technology, or political activism, to better understand evangelicals through the range of things they do; and (5) further research into concepts and understandings of divine action within practical theology, to enable more constructive theological contributions to be made through empirical work. We look forward to engaging with the outcomes of these labours in due course and express our thanks to *Religions* for making our contributions possible.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Notes

[1] Unlike the Cape Town Commitment of 2010, which did address some of these issues and also gave birth to the Lausanne Global Diaspora Network (GDN).

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Article

"Confession Is Good for the Soul?" Charismatics and Confession in Conversation

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Abstract: Scripture speaks of confessing our sins to God and to one another (e.g., Ps 32:5; Jas 5:16; 1 Jn 1:9). For a tradition that has been strong on sin and the Bible, how do evangelicals deal with confession? In this article, I explore practices of confession in UK charismatic networks based on interviews with five national leaders using a critical conversation methodology. These networks have largely adopted an informal and spontaneous 'liturgy' since they began in the 1970s, so this is also a case study of what shape practices take when traditional Christian practices have been put aside. As a semi-indigenous researcher, I offer an account of the 'what' of charismatic confession practice from a leader's perspective: as a network, in public worship, in small groups, and individually. I conclude that these confession practices can be characterised as relational, DIY, and 'as and when'. I then proceed to offer some 'whys' for these practices, including pendulum swings of recent tradition, the relation of confession to charismatic sung worship, and both emic and etic deformations. Finally, I ask, 'Whither charismatic confession?' and answer this through posing three questions for reflection around the Bible and confession, the retrieval of practices, and the formative power of practices. This leads into a response to the Special Issue question of how God's own action is disclosed through these conversations about confession with charismatics.

Keywords: charismatic; evangelical; network; confession; practices; sin; third wave; apostolic; restorationist; God's action

1. Introduction

After attending an evangelical Anglican church for 18 years, I moved with my family to a charismatic community church in 2021. Many things were new and different, and one of them was the absence of confession of sin in public worship. Despite being a practical theologian who is supposed to notice these things, it was my lifelong Anglican wife who actually made this observation. Curiously, when we tentatively mentioned this to the pastor, public confession quickly became much more frequent. I tell this story as it highlights one of my early prompts for this research.[1] Is there a lack of confession and, if so, does it matter?

This article considers how confession of sin works in churches that have very few, if any, formal confession of sin practices. At the big picture level, it might be considered a case study of what shape practices take when traditional Christian practices have been put aside. The particular focus of the article is to reflect theologically on conversations with five UK charismatic network leaders addressing the 'what', the 'whys', and the 'whither' of confession-like practices. This is all with a view to discerning how God might be disclosed through such practices, as per the theme of this Special Issue.

As my initial story indicates, I am a relatively new insider to a charismatic evangelical church that belongs to a network in this study (Pioneer). My family and I have, in this short time, found great benefit from being part of this community and have no doubt been formed by it in ways known and unknown to me. I have belonged to evangelical churches of different hues for all of my life, mostly in England but also in Kenya and Ethiopia (see Rogers 2022). British evangelicalism is the focus of this Special Issue, and its emerging distinctives are discussed in the closing editorial, taking David Bebbington's quadrilateral as a point of reference (Bebbington 1989), noting his historically descriptive intent and how more recent developments may complexify its meaning (Atherstone and Jones 2019), particularly disparate patterns of political alignment (Hatcher 2017).

Terminology is still in a state of flux when it comes to UK charismatic network churches, which have only existed since the 1970s. The terminological story is often told according to three 'waves' of the Spirit (Cartledge 2006, pp. 24–25; Kay 2016, pp. 6–7): the first wave referring to Pentecostal churches starting in the early twentieth century; the second wave being charismatic renewal amongst historic churches from the 1960s (so 'renewalists'); and the third wave the creation of independent churches that left historic denominations from the 1970s onwards. These 'third wave' or 'neo-charismatic' churches are the focus of this article. Originally meeting in homes, they were known as 'house churches', and then, with rapid growth, homes became too small, so they were named 'new churches' (although 'new' as a name can have a limited shelf life). The churches in this study were mostly restorationist, in that they saw themselves as restoring church to its New Testament pattern (Walker 1988, pp. 30–31). Most of these churches also took the form of networks gathered around or 'in relation with' an apostle; hence they were called 'apostolic networks' (Kay 2007, 2016, 2019). The language of apostle is not common to all the networks, however, so I name them here 'charismatic networks',[2] while also using some of these other terms descriptively. This broader term also reflects the mutual interactions and influence between the different waves as well as broader evangelicalism over recent decades (Guest 2007, p. 110; Kay 2019, p. 61).

Regarding the academic context of this research, I am not aware of any other fieldwork-based research on confession practices in UK charismatic networks. Three studies are in the vicinity. Kristin Graff-Kallevåg and Tone Stangeland Kaufman looked at the good confession experiences of young people in the Church of Norway, viewed through Harmut Rosa's concept of resonance (Graff-Kallevåg and Kaufman 2023). Perry Butler solicited responses from fourteen Church of England clergy known to him about auricular confession (Butler 1990), and Mandy Robbins and William Kay surveyed British 'charismatic new church Christians' on a range of issues, including prayers of private confession to God (Robbins and Kay 2015, p. 146).[3]

My practical theology methodology for this research takes the form of a critical conversation (see §3 below). My many conversation partners include academics *and* scholars writing from within evangelicalism for insiders, and they divide roughly into four overlapping research domains, namely charismatic networks (e.g., Walker 1988; Kay 2007), worship and formation (e.g., Smith 2009, 2013; Wilson 2018), material on confession of sin (e.g., Stott 1964; Turner 2020), and arguments about retrieval of tradition (e.g., Smail 1995; Walker and Bretherton 2007).

Having set the scene for this project, the next section will clarify what is meant by confession and the different forms it takes in Christian life, alongside its potential normative sources in scripture and tradition. I follow this by setting out the methodology and methods employed in this practical theology project, which then leads into a critical conversation with the five interviewees about confession of sin. Finally, I consider what has emerged

from this conversation in relation to what is disclosed about God's action in confession of sin.

2. Confession and Its Potential Normativities

'Confession' has a double sense in Christian theology (Turner 2020, p. 43). It can refer to confession of sin (e.g., Ps 32:5) but also to confession of faith (e.g., Phil 2:11). The Bible, Augustine's *Confessions*, and my interviewees, however, show that the two senses are interlinked (Stott 1964, p. 15). Augustine particularly holds these two senses together in his *Confessions*, as Espen Dahl argues, even from the opening lines 'You are great, Lord, and highly to be praised', yet also 'Man, a little piece of your creation, desires to praise you… carrying with him the witness of his sin' (C, I, i, 1; Dahl 2014, pp. 100–1). The relationship between knowledge of God and ourselves also runs through confession, so in Book X, it states, 'I will confess what I know of myself and what I do not know. For what I know of myself I know through the shining of your Light…' (C, X, v, 7; Tyler 2017, pp. 27–28).[4] Testimony is an evocative practice here that captures both senses of confession and is of particular interest for this project since it is a significant charismatic speech act (Collins 2023, pp. 98–100). The focus in this article, however, will largely be on confession of sin, but this double sense will serve as a clue for reimagining at the end.

What is meant by confession of sin? It is not one practice but a group of related practices that share a common core. I begin by doing something quite evangelical. I list in Table 1 below different types of confession that might be identified in the Bible. I do not do this as a (rather truncated) biblical theology of confession, because (a) there is not space to do this justice here, (b) others have already done so to varying degrees (Stott 1964; John 1990; Turner 2019), and (c) less traditionally evangelical, it is instead a 'wondering' about normative sources for charismatic networks. For networks that typically hold to the authority of scripture, (how) are these texts normative? To be clear, I am not saying these biblical texts necessarily justify the given confession practice but that they might or have done so for some Christians.

Table 1. Types of confession of sin.

Types of Confession Practice	Bible
Private confession only to God	Ps 32:5; 38:18; 51
Private confession to someone I have wronged	Mt 5:23–24; Jas 5:16
Public confession by an individual of unnamed sins	Mt 6:12; 1 Cor 11:28
Public confession by an individual of named sins	Mk 1:5;[5] Acts 19:18
Confession as part of church discipline	Mt 18:15–20; Gal 6:1
Corporate confession	Ezra 10; Neh 1, 9; Dan 9
Mutual confession	Jas 5:16
Auricular confession (i.e., to a confessor)	Mt 16:19, 18:18; Jn 20:23
All of the above	Jn 3:21, 8:32; 1 Jn 1:9

As Ps 51 makes clear, all sin is ultimately against God, so confession of sins to God, whether private or public, is at the core of all confession. Such a typology also raises the question: 'What is needed for a practice to be confession?' Some Christian traditions would have a more defined view of this than others—this is what I explore for charismatic networks in this article. For clarity, in this article, the one who confesses sin is a 'confessant' and the one who hears confessions is a 'confessor'.

Apart from the Bible, the confession practices of other denominations can also influence charismatic network churches positively and negatively, as was indicated in my interviews. Charismatic church leaders and congregants may be from a variety of ecclesial backgrounds and bring experiences and assumptions about confession with them (like

my family). Roman Catholics, Lutherans, and Orthodox all make provision for auricular confession, as does the Anglican Church, although it is uncommon in the latter.[6] Public confession (of unnamed sins) is practiced in a number of historic churches; indeed, it is required as part of the formal liturgy in some, yet at the discretion of the minister or worship leader in others.

There are historical precedents and examples of confession in the evangelical tradition that may have normative potential for charismatic network churches. A connection between confession of sin and revival is often noted (Smail 1995, p. 112), sometimes with public confession of specific sins, such as in the East African revival of the 1930s (Bruner 2012; Stott 1964, pp. 35–36). A significant historical example of mutual confession comes from John Wesley, one of the leaders of the evangelical revival of the eighteenth century. For the optional 'band societies' of early Methodism, Wesley stipulated rules, the fourth of which was

> To speak each of us in order, freely and plainly, the true state of our soul, with the faults we have committed in thought, word, or deed, and temptations we have felt since our last meeting. (Wesley 1738)

Five questions were given to aid this process. In some continuity with Wesley and other early evangelical leaders, Richard Foster and Dallas Willard popularised spiritual disciplines for evangelicals in the twentieth century, including confession (Schwanda 2017). Foster wrote 'We are sinners together. In acts of mutual confession we release the power that heals'. He offers an account of his own experience of auricular confession, describing it as 'Reality Therapy of the best sort' (Foster 1978, pp. 127, 129). Willard stresses that 'Confession is a discipline that functions within fellowship' and identifies confession as 'one of the most powerful disciplines for the spiritual life' (Willard 1991, pp. 187, 189). It is fascinating to see John Mark Comer looking to continue in this spiritual discipline tradition for evangelicals in the twenty-first century. He says, 'Confession is a core practice of the Way. . . it's not only about the confession of sin but also the confession of what is true—who you are, who Christ is, and who you truly are in Christ' (Comer 2024, p. 95).

There are three final potential normativities. The network churches all belong to the Evangelical Alliance, and its statement of faith includes the following relevant clauses:

> The atoning sacrifice of Christ on the cross; dying in our place, paying the price of sin and defeating evil, so reconciling us with God.
>
> The justification of sinners solely by the grace of God through faith in Christ.
>
> The ministry of God the Holy Spirit, who leads us to repentance, unites us with Christ through new birth, empowers our discipleship and enables our witness.

These are not unusual doctrinal statements for evangelical churches but highlight sin, reconciliation, grace, and the ministry of the Spirit in repentance, where the latter may be of particular significance for charismatics. A rather more surprising document in terms of confession is the Lausanne Covenant (1975), globally recognised within evangelicalism, whose 'chief architect' was John Stott. The covenant includes three corporate confessions (as counterpoints to affirmations): 'becoming conformed to the world' or 'withdrawing from it'; 'a sinful individualism and needless duplication'; and pursuing 'church growth at the expense of church depth'. I suggest this modelling of corporate confession (and the particular content) is remarkable for evangelicalism through incorporating confession DNA in one of its most pivotal documents. Finally, and not unrelated to the interests of the Lausanne movement, what is the influence of the wider culture on notions of sin, confession, repentance, and forgiveness? Some commentators (and my colleagues) observe a decline of confession across the church yet increasing interest in confession from the

secular world, giving examples such as Oprah (Tyler 2017, p. 2), and I might add the number of confession apps available online.

3. Methodology and Methods

This is a practical theology research project that reflects theologically on practices of confession in UK charismatic networks, as defined in §1. This was operationalised through interviewing five UK charismatic network leaders and collecting associated network documents, mostly available on their websites. The research interviews took place over the course of 2024 (see Table 2) and were quite conversational in tone. My reading of the relevant literature has also been experienced as a conversation between interviewees and literature and myself, but in my head and through my keyboard. A 'gamemaker' conversation, so to speak (Ideström and Kaufman 2018). As a small-scale exploratory project with 'expert' participants, I want an appropriately flexible methodology that does not overpower the accounts obtained. Therefore, I have chosen Stephen Pattison's model of critical conversation, where he imagines a three-way conversation between (a) the researcher's 'own ideas, beliefs, feelings, perceptions and assumptions', (b) similarly for the 'Christian tradition (including the Bible)', and (c) the 'contemporary situation' being considered, in this case charismatic network confession practices (Pattison 1989, p. 4). The model matches well the research process I have experienced, combining metaphorical and actual conversations, with the latter receiving particular methodological praise from Pattison in a more recent publication (Pattison 2020).

Table 2. Interviewees.

Interviewee	Network	Date of Interview	Location
RichardP	Pioneer	6 June 2024 (online)	Manchester
MarkGL	Ground Level	11 July 2024 (online)	Nottingham
TerryNF	New Frontiers	17 July 2024 (in person)	Sussex
TomV	Vineyard	6 August 2024 (online)	London
RichSLA	Salt and Light Advance	20 September 2024 (online)	Oxfordshire

I am an 'insider' to this research in the sense that I belong to a charismatic community church that joined the Pioneer network shortly after we arrived four years ago. However, I have had no direct engagement with Pioneer leaders nor any other network leaders prior to this research and have not been a congregant in any of the other networks. To that extent, I am a 'semi-indigenous' researcher (cf. Clifford 1986, p. 9), which has the benefit of easier access and not starting from subcultural scratch, but with the challenge of making the slightly familiar strange. Such a stance is not uncommon in practical theology research.

My initial 'lack of confession' experience narrated in §1 led to restricting this study to similar charismatic networks that were independent of historic churches. Aided by Kay's key work, *Apostolic Networks* (Kay 2007), I chose the six largest operational networks according to Peter Brierley's figures for 'New Churches' (Brierley 2020, §5.6–5.7, §7.1–7.3).[7] I opted for interviewing network leaders due to the network perspective they might offer on a fairly specific practice and also due to limited time and resources. Known as 'elite' interviewing (not a term the interviewees would appreciate) (Harvey 2011), I did not encounter any particular problems once the interviews were arranged, but access was an issue. One network declined to take part. For most of the other networks, it took many emails and phone calls to the network leader(s) or their office, and in most cases I was unsuccessful. However, after persevering further (and/or through helpful office staff), alternative members of the national leadership team agreed to take part, and all chose to waive pseudonymity.

Looking at Table 2, all are pastors of local churches except for TerryNF; all are white men;[8] all are national network leaders, except for TerryNF, who was the founder of New Frontiers but stepped down from leadership in 2011; RichardP, MarkGL, and TomV hold the theology brief for their networks; RichSLA is the actual leader of Salt and Light Advance; and all are in early middle age except for TerryNF, who is in his 80s. Interviews took roughly one hour via Teams or in person and the recordings were transcribed via otter.ai, which I then reviewed and corrected. I have added a network suffix to each leader's name to aid fieldwork clarity.

Analysis took a 'hermeneutics as art and science' approach for this relatively small data set. I read through the transcripts many times to immerse myself and to take time to reflect on what was being said. I combined this with a light touch thematic analysis (Bryman 2016, p. 584f) built on an ATLAS.ti-assisted coding schema from Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (Miles et al. 2020, p. 61f). I began with deductive codes, but then fairly quickly moved to inductive codes and question-specific codes, since interviewees tended to stick to the questions, so themes and questions had reasonable overlap. Nvivo coding was also very useful as interviewees used similar ecclesial and theological terms. Codes were then grouped together to make themes that in turn were grouped under the article structure that follows of 'what', 'why', and 'whither'.

Interviews and online documents (used mainly for prompts in the interviews) can only provide an 'espoused' voice (Cameron et al. 2010, p. 53–56). I did not observe or survey practices of confession—that is a different, perhaps subsequent project. My interviewees can only tell me about their perspective on confession of sin as national network leaders/founders and pastors of local churches. Despite their limited scope, however, they were nevertheless rich and reflective conversations. My conversational methodology will operate in different modes as the article progresses, beginning with primarily listening to the interviewees. The reader should remember that interviewees were speaking conversationally and that thought works differently in speech than in writing. Therefore, I have smoothed out transcript quotations slightly to better represent speech in writing (see Luhrmann 2012, p. ix).

4. 'What' of Charismatic Confession

I asked interviewees about confession practices in their church and/or network. This often required clarification, possibly due to this language being uncommon in the networks or just the multiple senses of confession given in Table 1. I adopted the language of 'confession-like' to help open up the conversations. We began with confession in public worship.

TerryNF stated 'I've never been in a context where there's been corporate confession', which is striking given he has attended very many New Frontiers churches and conferences since its inception. He qualified this by saying, 'literally, you kind of have to ask everybody', which aligns with the recognised limitations of this study. It became apparent that he understood 'corporate confession' to mean something formally liturgical, which 'we don't have' as 'there's no format for that to take place'. However, TerryNF did talk about preaching 'against sin. . . where it comes up in the text, and look for repentance'. He recalled occasions when people stood to acknowledge specific sins addressed in his sermons, adding 'I may have prayed a prayer. . . we have no objection to praying "Lord, forgive us"'. His concern with formal confessions was 'being genuine'; otherwise, it is not repentance. TerryNF also recalled instances of asking a congregation for forgiveness over specific sins, of (infrequently) witnessing confession of specific sins in small groups, of the need to confess to another person a specific sin, and of trying (unsuccessfully) to help someone repent of a particular sin in his church.

A perceived absence of public confession was marked in most of the responses. When asked how common a practice some form of confession was in their churches, RichSLA responded 'next to none. . . would be the reality'. He thought this would be the same for 'other similar churches' where 'it's always probably been, you do that through discipleship relationships, one on one with others, maybe in a small group setting'. For such churches, 'I imagine we've always pushed confession into that private discipleship sphere'. In a similar response, MarkGH said, 'it's a really good question, because does it happen?' There would be 'moments in talks or series where that topic will come up', but 'there is no. . . liturgical rhythm for it', although 'it will happen on an individual, personal basis'.

RichardP had recently taken a sabbatical and visited his local Anglican church where he found the 'corporate moment of confession. . . to the Lord. . . quite a refreshing experience' and thought, 'I wonder if we should. . . make space for this kind of thing a bit more?' This led to having 'more of a moment' when leading breaking of bread, and maybe 'giving a little more direction' to people leading the breaking of bread because

> . . .actually, a lot of people will find that really helpful to have that definite moment, maybe there's a pause, maybe there's a bit of quiet where they can just have a moment where they can explicitly deal with anything they might want to confess.

RichardP commented, 'as is often the case with the charismatic church, our informality is wonderfully refreshing, but can also mean that things get missed'. He then reflected, 'we probably don't have a very developed theology or practice of confession in a public worship setting', characterising their approach as 'hit and miss'.

TomV's response was less about absence but rather emphasising that within the 'Vineyard understanding of what happens in sung worship is the expectation that we encounter the Holy Spirit', who would 'prompt a conviction of sin for many'. Services would feature a 'response time' or 'ministry', similar to other networks, where people would 'come forward' to have someone 'hopefully helpfully' pray with them if there is 'something you're feeling convicted about'. TomV hoped that 'whoever prays for them would announce forgiveness', which is the fifth step of a 'five step model of prayer' they use, although he admitted that the 'percentage of it actually occurring is probably less than 50% but at least we're trying'.

Like TerryNF, other leaders said preaching may lead to private individual confession aided by a 'moment' in the service (MarkGL) or through a prayer ministry time following. RichardP clarified that this 'wouldn't be every week, but it wouldn't be unusual either to have moments like that'. TomV spoke of similar practices (see above) but thought repentance would be a more common language than confession in their services. At their smaller worship-and-prayer night services, 'it would be really unusual if somebody didn't say "God I repent of this" and name their sin', but this would not 'feel like a big event'. RichSLA identified prayer ministry as 'a point place' for confession-like moments in 'our types of churches'.

Other aspects of public worship included prophetic words/words of knowledge, which might include a 'call to repentance', although not normally 'directed at particular individuals' (RichardP). Typically, a response of confession would be individual and private. RichSLA, however, told of a significant 'word' being given at their network conference, which led to the leadership team 'doing a form of repentance together', which 'probably might have gone into the area of confession'. Regarding communion, like RichardP, other interviewees said they had no set confession practice at communion, so MarkGH commented, 'there's not necessarily anything formally done'. Instead, it would be 'about encouraging the individual to individually confess and receive forgiveness, but not in a corporate or led way'. TomV had written 'a kind of liturgy' using 'the prayer of

humble access', which was the 'centre of gravity' for people leading communion, although 'there isn't a specific moment for the church to say, "I confess my sins"'. RichSLA saw communion as an opportunity for 'quiet, repentance, reflection, confession' that was public yet private, where 'liturgical. . . prayers to go through are not something we've ever gone down really', although he acknowledged that it may have happened in their churches from time to time. He also wanted to put repentance and confession into the broader context of public worship 'with our form of church' by highlighting its 'informality' and 'spontaneity'. Confession of sin may happen in different ways, as the Spirit leads.

Outside of public worship, small groups were thought unlikely to be a place for mutual confession of sins, although they may

> . . .foster relationships where people become close enough where they feel able to confide in and confess with a trusted person from that group, maybe on a one to one basis. (RichardP)

In terms of language, MarkGL understood small groups to operate with a 'more generic sense of "I mucked up", rather than. . . a sense of confession'. In a similar vein, RichSLA recognised 'being honest about our failings' and being 'real about life' as 'the language we'd use'. MarkGL clarified that 'the James. . . approach, "confess your sins to one another" (Jas. 5:16), that. . . wouldn't necessarily be happening, but that might happen. . . within a prayer triplet context', which was 'another level down' from small groups. TomV explained how this worked at his church:

> . . .we would also try and encourage every single person to be part of a small group. . . And in those there should be once a month. . . everybody would. . . split into threes within that. . . and we call it a huddle. And within the huddle, it's like, "What's one thing in the last month that you're. . ." Really what we're trying to do is get to confession of sin from the last month. . . and acknowledgement of this is where God was at work in my life. And then here's what I would like to happen in the next month, like a specific request, so that again, should be identifying, bringing up to the surface, "Ah, I've been struggling with. . .", I don't know. . . "in my marriage, I'm shouting at my wife a lot", or. . . I mean, all kinds of things come up, which is great. So the whole range of the seven deadly sins we hope to see. . .

Of prayer triplets, MarkGL similarly saw them as having 'more a sense of accountability groups', which would 'tend to be the place where there would be more open conversations to each other'. At the one-to-one level, Salt and Light Advance had their own terminology, as RichSLA explained:

> A phrase which we have as a group of churches, have used for many years, is the phrase 'personal pastor', which another. . . organization might call mentor or help with spiritual formation. . . a personal pastor, that's been a key value of our churches for years, that if you join the church, we want each person to be cared for well. You aren't. . . necessarily cared for by the pastor who can't care closely for 40–50, 100 and 150 people, so we would always encourage different people in our churches to have a personal pastor, which is simply someone else to whom they are accountable, whom they meet with reasonably regularly. . . to whom they open up their lives. So it's definitely that space that we would push. . . confession into.

Other interviewees did not mention such specific arrangements for one-to-one mutual confession but similarly saw 'positive value in finding trusted people that we could confess things to', which would be understood 'in terms of accountability' (RichardP). MarkGL

recognised 'the importance of bringing to light the dark', although 'how that's done is the difficulty':

> I will always encourage people that will be within a confidential relationship. . . rather than in a public forum. . . We wouldn't have an open mike Sunday for confessing your sins.

TomV also stressed the need for right relationships as the context for confession:

> . . .you should be telling somebody about the stuff that's going on in your life. . . if you're carrying something, if it's a burden, it's really important you tell somebody. Don't just tell anybody, like, don't just kind of put it on social media. Don't just mention it to a random person, like, find somebody you really trust and say, "this is the thing". So we do that a lot.

RichardP thought 'there's some work to be done' on encouraging mutual confession, which requires 'safe relationships', where 'you're struggling with an area, you've confessed it to God, but you're not finding the breakthrough that you long for'. Interviewees expressed concerns, however, about safeguarding and power dynamics in mutual confession, so 'there's a careful line to be. . . walked' (RichSLA).

I asked interviewees about their personal confession practices. TerryNF tended to use the Lord's prayer as a structure for praying:

> So I do come to "forgive us our trespasses" as part of the shape. So I ask the Lord "Is there anything, please show me if there's any way I have offended you?", or if there's anything I have done, if I have, I apologize for it.

Some interviewees explicitly referenced their congregational practices. RichSLA had a 'personal pastor' (see above), which would 'definitely be a context' for confession. Indeed, this was a 'prerequisite' for all pastors in Salt and Light Advance, being a 'deep principle' for the network going right back to the founder, Barney Coombs. TomV spoke of being part of the congregation's confession practices, whether in public worship (e.g., the Lord's supper) or the 'huddle' (see above), where he would 'seek to be modelling' dealing with 'feeling convicted'. MarkGL said confession to God 'wouldn't necessarily be a daily thing' but would be about 'those moments where I feel there's a need to just seek that. . . fresh closeness with God'. In terms of relationships, he would want the 'sorry gap to be as small as possible'. There were just a few people to whom 'I've spoken very openly about me', in terms of 'an accountability partner'. RichardP, also using accountability language, had 'a guy that mentors me', where 'I might say to him that I'm struggling with something', although this would only be when 'I feel kind of convicted that I ought to confess to someone else'. Two of the leaders also said they would confess sin to their wives.

On private confession of sins to God, whether in a public-yet-private church setting or in private, interviewees were necessarily limited in what they knew. In 2015, Robbins and Kay surveyed 1645 British evangelicals, including 282 from 'charismatic new church groups', about specific prayer activity and found 28% of the 'charismatic new church Christians frequently confess and seek forgiveness for their sins' (Robbins and Kay 2015, p. 146). There was no statistically significant difference here from UK evangelicals more broadly. Whether that is considered too little, about right, or even too much, will depend on differing theological convictions, to which I will return. When asked about whether congregants are confessing their sins privately, MarkGL reflected:

> Well, in some sense, I wouldn't know. And so there's. . . an individual responsibility there. And so we would. . . see a lot of it by teaching the whole counsel of God, that you are bringing these topics up and people are sat under the Word and the conviction. . . of God. . . rather than being lead or shown. . . or exampled.

When asked, RichardP agreed that the actual practice of confession might be assumed and asked rhetorically 'Why don't we ever teach on this?' He continued:

> I think even. . . as we talk this through, I think our exhortations to confess and repent, would pretty much always imply that's something you're just going to do, either now instantly on your own, or you're going to do later. . . but we don't use words together. . . we don't use liturgy or we don't pray the same words together.

Zooming out a little, I asked how the national networks might mediate practices of confession. RichardP said he 'was not aware' of that 'ever having been a conversation'. This was more about the nature of the network, in that 'Pioneer doesn't, kind of, teach doctrine, really, to its churches'. Beyond the Evangelical Alliance basis of faith, 'we've never. . . said, "Oh, if you're a Pioneer church, then you're expected to have any particular view on confession"'. However, this was a live question for the network, in terms of 'How much responsibility does the network take for individual churches?' and where Pioneer sits on the freedom–control spectrum. On a similar mediation point, MarkGL was asking the questions, 'Where is the theology of our people in our churches? Who's speaking into that?' That was why he and others had started a theology forum for the network as a subgroup within leadership training. All the networks represented had their own training programmes, and interviewees thought confession might be covered in these, under topics such as 'personal walk with God', 'basics of faith. . . around salvation and forgiveness', 'gospel, and therefore. . . sin and repentance', and 'Alpha'. TomV was concerned about 'a lack of understanding of. . . "the Kingdom of God is at hand". . . that's like a real Vineyard thing', yet the next phrase in the biblical passage is 'repent and believe the good news' (Mk 1:15, from memory). Of his New Testament module for network training, he said:

> . . .we have to place death and resurrection at the core of our understanding of what it is to be the people of the kingdom. And so, Galatians, 2: 20. . . "I no longer live, but Christ now lives in me. I have been crucified with Christ". So that sense that whether it's by confession, whether it's by repentance, whether it's by anything, it doesn't really matter how it happens, but it has to be a death moment which is then followed by repeated death moments which lead to the resurrection.

For network-level events, such as conferences, RichardP thought confession would be similar to congregational practice, that is, less 'planned' but instead might happen if 'someone leading a meeting felt the Holy Spirit leading in that direction'. As has already been noted, a word given at a Salt and Light Advance network conference spoke of 'chains being broken', of receiving 'healing and forgiveness' in 'a place of repentance'. The Vineyard national co-leader, Debbie Wright, spoke on the 'fear of the Lord' at their recent leaders' conference and included reference to sin, awe, holiness, confession, and repentance. TomV was at this meeting and thought it timely to 'press on the pedal of the fear of God', which was 'a really helpful moment'. It is beyond the scope of this article to survey all network-level meetings and mediation mechanisms, but interviewees' recollections suggest that while confession was not entirely absent, it did not loom large either.

Characterising Charismatic Confession Practices

Up to this point, the conversation has largely been about listening to the five interviewees, albeit as selected and edited by me. From here on, other voices (mine and that of the Christian tradition) will have more involvement. The conversation has offered a textured account from the leaders, showing significant commonalities but also some variations of emphasis. It is by no means a complete picture of network confession practices, due to the scope of the research and the very nature of the networks, but it is nevertheless an

indicative picture that provides some characteristics of confession which I will draw out here.

No regular corporate confession of sin in public worship was reported. Confession takes place on an 'as and when' basis, with the exception of the very small group example given. That is, confession is of specific sins as and when convicted by the Holy Spirit. This could take place through prophetic words, preaching, sung worship, communion, prayer ministry, very small groups, or in one-to-one accountability relationships. These practices and contexts are more 'confession-adjacent' than 'confession-like', leading me to change to this terminology. Such confession is mostly private, i.e., between the individual and God, even if it takes place in a public worship setting. This means charismatic confession is quite 'do it yourself'—it is just something you do—'self-explanatory' in TerryNF's words. Such DIY confession appears to be interwoven with the informality of charismatic worship and practice often observed by interviewees and scholars (e.g., Cartledge 2006, pp. 56–57; Rogers 2016, pp. 121–22).

Relationality is at the heart of the networks. Congregations put themselves in relationship to the network apostle/leader, although this is a relationship that allows for the relative independence of the congregations (see also Kay 2019, p. 59). Interviewees expressed this in terms of 'autonomy' (RichardP, RichSLA), 'partnership without ownership' (MarkGL), or 'leadership by influence' (TomV). Network mediation of practices, particularly apparently low-priority ones such as confession, is therefore necessarily limited. As has been seen, relationality is at the heart of congregational life as well, particularly in terms of authentic relationships between God and each other. Such relationality frames confession-adjacent language, where accountability is a key relational term and practice. Accountability requirements seem to be greater for leaders, although TerryNF was unconvinced, saying 'I'm not terribly confident that accountability does what's it meant to do', because 'people cheat' and 'will just tell lies'.

5. 'Whys' of Charismatic Confession

The 'what' of charismatic confession practices above already combine to explain why confession in these networks is as it is, due to the nexus of 'as and when', individual, encounter, informality, and relational characteristics. On the latter, RichSLA in particular made the case for the 'efficacity of [confession] happening in a one on one relationship'. Here, the conversation turns to look more explicitly at the 'whys' of charismatic confession, drawing from across the spectrum of emic to etic explanations.[9] To aid this 'why' account, it will be useful to include the category of 'deformation' from Lauren Winner (alongside the more common talk of 'formation'). She argues that any Christian practice is tainted by sin, and when 'it goes wrong', it does so 'not incidentally' but sometimes 'in ways that have to do with the practice itself' (Winner 2018, p. 1). That is, practices have their own particular deformations that are characteristic of that practice. How this works for very fluid practices is less clear, but the language of deformation can still be apposite for charismatic confession.

Tradition could name many of these 'whys'; the broader operations of charismatic tradition provoked comment from a number in this conversation. There was a strong awareness from some interviewees about the 'pendulum swings' of charismatic tradition that impacted practices such as confession. RichSLA was the most explicit, saying 'these things often go in waves, don't they?' He then expanded:

> 1970s before I was born, 1980s, obviously a kind of new church movement gets going and in largely, for good and for bad, as a degree of reaction to the established churches. . . wanting to go, swing the pendulum completely to the other end. Confession, I guess, was one of those things, if they'd grown up in

> a particular, "Oh we don't want to do that, we want to do the opposite. We don't want formal worship, we want informal worship. We don't want the vicar on a pedestal, we want the priesthood of all believers", all those sorts of things where pendulums get swung back. So therefore, in our own liturgy, which, of course, charismatic churches have a degree of liturgy, it's just not written down, is it? We've... probably consciously... kept away from that. Definitely, my observation, the last 10 years, or 15 years, maybe there's definitely, amongst the younger generation a sort of, "Ah, have we thrown the baby out with the bathwater?" type question. So whilst I don't see lots of liturgy in our churches, I do definitely hear sometimes a sort of a sense of "Ah, have we lost something from what... our forefathers threw away?" Yeah, which would go then for an awful lot of other areas of church life as well.

The British theologian, Andrew Wilson, also a teaching pastor within New Frontiers, is in agreement with much of this characterisation, albeit expressed in stronger language. He identifies 'a visceral dislike of anything that seems routine or repetitive as opposed to spontaneous and free' and caricatures 'our version of Christianity' as one where 'we swapped liturgy for liberty a long time ago and have no plans to go back' (Wilson 2018, pp. 68, 75). Wilson then proceeds to offer a sacramental critique of these attitudes that chime with the questions of loss above, which I will draw on later. Of confession, MarkGL similarly recognised 'our hesitancy to use any sense of liturgy' as 'it's not part of our heritage, it's not part of our routine', yet also mused 'maybe that's at our loss', adding:

> ...what loss that leads to, it's the old "We're free to do what we want to do", but actually, we don't then do the things that are good. And I think there's... a lot of power and truth and benefits in some of the liturgical statements and sort of shared prayer... through the... Lord's Prayer and things like that. Whereas we will tend to sort of pull back from that, because we're a New Church.

The inertia of current charismatic tradition may then be a factor in the minimalism of public confession. TerryNF was more critical of confession-as-liturgy. On formal public confession, he said 'we've never had that kind of liturgy', so 'I don't come from that tradition'. He continued:

> So my fear is unreality... We will all confess, what am I confessing? I don't know... It becomes unreal... I'm nervous of liturgy, I suppose... I'm scared that liturgy robs me of genuineness, I'm just gonna say the things because this is what we say every week... It's not real enough.

A theological emphasis on God's grace is another 'why' (or 'why not') of charismatic confession. Thirty years ago, charismatic theologian Tom Smail wrote of

> ...the failure of the charismatic movement to find a central and regular place in their worship for the confession of sins and the deep repentance that God's free forgiveness evokes from us and creates in us.

This analysis still has some truth to it today, but, based on this research, I suggest that charismatic confession is more multifaceted than solely public formal liturgical acts. Matching the pendulum swing language, Smail characterises charismatic renewal as a 'healthy reaction against a sin-centred piety' that failed to emphasise God's grace in the blessings of 'his Spirit, his gifts, his fruits and his power'. While this was a needed correction, it is itself 'in need of radical correction' to overcome any 'absorbing preoccupations with our experiences of the Spirit' that 'lets us forget that we are sinners'. A *theologia gloriae* needs to wrestle with a *theologia crucis* (Smail 1995, pp. 111–12). Interviewees recognised this earlier reaction to a 'wretched-man-that-I-am' mentality (RichardP),[10] as well as the 'pendulum

swing' where over the 'last couple of decades there has been a swing towards grace', and 'then you end up with hyper grace and too far over' (MarkGL). TomV captured both swings of the sin/grace pendulum. The Anglican confession liturgy he had experienced previously was 'a little short' of the 'kingdom of God has come', because 'I have sinned, and I've continued to sin', but 'my fundamental identity now is one as a saint of the living God', rather than 'as a sinner who needs to receive continued atonement'. He was nevertheless concerned by some voices within his network and beyond that tend towards 'God is quite a lovely man' and therefore 'he wouldn't really get upset about this stuff', so TomV wanted to 'not lose a strong doctrine and understanding of sin'.[11] MarkGL said they emphasised the 'positivity' of John 10: 10—'life in all its fulness'—noting:

> We often have this sort of conversation, are we… sinners? Or are we saints? And… this, where are we now? And what do we focus in on? … So… there's that element of wanting people to know the freedom and the life they have in Christ.

TerryNF took the strongest view on grace, for which he is well known (e.g., Kay 2016, p. 12). I asked him why he does not like Christians identifying themselves as sinners, and he responded:

> Because we're called saints?… In the New Testament epistles, apostolic teaching is that you used to be a slave of sin; now, you've become a slave of righteousness. You have died to sin, you're alive to God. So the gospel sets us free.

TerryNF offered an example of asking someone, 'What sin have you committed today?', prompting the response 'I don't know. But we're all sinners. I guess I must have sinned.' TerryNF thought 'that teaching… is not biblical'. This raises the important question for confession practice of whether sin is general or specific, where an 'as and when' approach favours the latter.

For the next 'why' of confession, I will dig a little deeper into the confession-adjacent practice of sung worship. I did not observe any services, so used the Top 20 UK CCLI (June 2024) worship songs as a proxy to see if confession-related themes of confession, sin, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation were present. Out of 5207 distinct words,[12] the most common was 'name' (95), with the first confession-related word being 'sin' (and variants) (13), followed by 'cross' (11), 'broken' (5), 'forgiven' (3), 'redeem(ed)' (2), and 'reconcile' (1). 'Confess(ion)' did not appear in any of these songs, and 'sin' was not present in 12 of the 20 songs. Such an analysis is a very approximate measure (see Packiam 2020, p. 110f) but chimes with other analyses of charismatic sung worship. Swee Hong Lim and Lester Ruth identify 'very little confession of sin, failure, or fault' in aspects of top songs going back over decades (Lim and Ruth 2017, p. 95), and Braden McKinley argues that confession of sin is 'notably reduced from a comprehensive model of biblical confession', where the focus tends to be on '*past* sin that has been covered and is no longer an ongoing reality' (author's emphasis) (McKinley 2023, pp. 53–54). The 'why not' of confession may then be that the primary liturgy of charismatics—sung worship—offers little language to do so.

TerryNF was troubled by *some* contemporary worship songs used in charismatic networks. While praising the work of some songwriters, of the churches, he also commented:

> …they sing rubbish… we're singing silly stuff in our churches, because it's the latest one that's been picked up somewhere. And there's hardly any theology in it.
>
> I'm frequently in leaders' meetings… and I will… say this, "Why have you handed your meeting over to a guy who can play a guitar? You are the shepherd of this flock"

In terms of the form of charismatic worship, McKinley also makes the charge that the need for 'flow' and the 'motive of cultivating intimacy' displaces traditional notions of confession practice (McKinley 2023, p. 57). This point interacts with the writings of John and Carol Wimber, who laid out five phases of worship, with the third phase of expression possibly including confession:

> Often this intimacy causes us to meditate, even as we are singing, on our relationship with the Lord. Sometimes we recall vows we have made before our God. God might call to mind disharmony or failure in our life, thus confession of sin is involved. Tears may flow as we see our disharmony but his harmony; our limitations but his unlimited possibilities. (Wimber and Wimber 1995, p. 16)

The form (and language) of confession here appears to be similar to the DIY confession described earlier. I put McKinley's displacement claim to TomV, who unsurprisingly was not convinced, since

> . . .we'd feel like worship raises the water level of consciousness of the kingdom, which must carry with it a sense of conviction of sin, like it must do, if it doesn't, then what are we experiencing?

Intimacy for Wimber, noted TomV, 'came out of Isaiah 6', so 'inherent in that intimacy is. . . a holy God'. TomV also went on to reflect that 'it would be really hard to have confession as a distinct, separate activity, within charismatic contexts'.

Any practice may have its deformations, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, that may contribute to why it is or is not practiced. My interviewees spoke of the dangers of confession. Safeguarding was a key concern for mutual forms of confession, as already mentioned, with RichardP having found the confessant experience as a young Christian helpful, but, with roles reversed, 'I probably wouldn't do the same with a young person now'.[13] MarkGL spoke of potential 'oversharing', which may be 'for attention rather than out of need', as well as how public confession of specific sins might 'unnerve' members of the congregation 'because, you know, am I going to have to do this too?' TerryNF's concerns about the 'unreality' of formal liturgical public confession have already been heard, as well as his doubts about whether accountability structures work. RichSLA spoke in deformation terms of 'the flip side' of 'routine and discipline' where 'routine becomes dry, becomes empty. . . words lose their meaning', but he recognised also that 'charismatic spontaneity. . . sometimes. . . can lead to shallowness'. TomV wanted to stress that the benefits 'massively outweigh. . . the negatives' but knew of confessants who had heard their sins preached the next Sunday; or had their confession used against them by those in spiritual authority; or in small groups had people saying "Oh, don't worry about it, everyone does something wrong"; or someone in leadership confesses, thinking there would be no consequences. More broadly, TomV added, 'if confession brings you to Jesus, then that's good', but 'I've been in many, many contexts where confession doesn't feel like it brings you to Jesus'. This emic list of deformations appear to be intrinsic to the practice itself, but it was unclear how much of a barrier they were to confession practices, with perhaps the exception of safeguarding.

A final 'why' of confession, with its own deformations, is the oft-critiqued individualism of charismatic churches (and wider evangelicalism) (e.g., Steven 2002, p. 197f). This only came up explicitly with RichardP in the context of talking about DIY confession, where he agreed that 'evangelicalism has. . . individualized the gospel to a large extent', yet 'we definitely fight against individualism all the time', while recognising 'we're probably influenced by it, as well as trying to resist it'. The Vineyard theologian, Don Williams, similarly saw individualism as a challenge to 'go beyond' (D. Williams 2005, p. 185). The danger of individualism is in how it may truncate and reduce the Gospel to 'personal piety'

alone (Cartledge 2010, pp. 45–46; see also Smith 2013, p. 182). While charismatic worship is actually both significantly corporate *and* individual, there is certainly the danger of individualistic deformation of confession practices inherited from the roots of the charismatic tradition and the wider culture of expressive individualism (Taylor 2007, p. 473–95; cf. Morden 2019, p. 69; Turner 2020, pp. 60–61).

6. Whither Charismatic Confession?

Is confession good for the soul? Based on these conversations, an honest charismatic answer is 'yes' and 'no'—thus the question mark in the article title. I have chosen 'whither' for this section to reflect the fragile nature of the normativity emerging from these conversations, as Pattison himself noted of his model (Pattison 1989, p. 8). A related reason for choosing 'whither' is that I want to conclude by posing three questions as to where charismatic confession might go. As an insider, these questions are for me as well.

Firstly, *how will charismatic networks engage with the Bible on confession?* It is hard to avoid the conclusion that confession is mostly corporate and/or public in the Bible. Apart from Jas 5:16 (Eng 2023; Osborne 2010, p. 262), this was something I had not properly noticed until undertaking this project. TerryNF agreed: 'I'm like you, I have never thought of that before'. Perhaps the most popular verse for evangelicals related to confession is 1 John 1:9, 'If *we* confess *our* sins, he who is faithful and just will forgive *us our* sins and cleanse *us* from all unrighteousness' (my emphasis) (Osborne 2010, p. 264; Roitto 2012). Similarly, the Lord's Prayer petitions: 'And forgive *us our* debts, as *we* also have forgiven *our* debtors' (Mt 6:12, my emphasis). There are also some lengthy corporate confessions in the Old Testament (e.g., Ezra 10; Neh 1, 9; Dan 9). Of the New Testament, Mark Turner concludes that confession is 'primarily a communal activity' (Turner 2020, p. 38, see also Turner 2019). For churches in the (charismatic) evangelical tradition, I suggest that the biblical witness on confession requires renewed attention—a 'provocation' that RichSLA said he would welcome. This will of course require some hermeneutical work for seeing what shape confession might take today, drawing on the range of biblical testimony.

This leads into my second question: *How will charismatic networks engage with Christian tradition(s) on confession*? An overarching hermeneutic of faithful improvisation may be useful here, which understands the authority of scripture to reside in the church's improvisation of the biblical 'script', often using the analogy of a drama. Such a hermeneutic has evangelical credentials (and beyond), despite some variations in how it is construed (e.g., Wright 1991; Bartholomew and Goheen 2004; Wells 2004, pp. 45–57). Turner recognises how the 'long history of confession' has contributed to 'the theology and customs of confession of sin in modern evangelicalism'. A hermeneutic of faithful improvisation does not ignore the 'healthy theological developments of the following millennia' with regard to confession (Turner 2020, p. 61). The role of the Spirit in tradition and so also in faithful improvisation is complementary to this second question, which 'requires us to attend to the originating and continuing work of the Spirit across the centuries and the continents' (Cocksworth 2007, p. 132; cf. Walker 2007b, p. 12). Such a hermeneutic also holds in now-and-not-yet narrative tension themes that have been seen to frame charismatic confession, such as sin/grace, death/resurrection, *theologia crucis* and *theologia gloriae*, and freedom/routine (cf. Scotland 2011, pp. 288–90).

For some decades now, there have been calls for a 'retrieval' of tradition for evangelicals, including charismatics (e.g., Smail 1995; D. H. Williams 1999; Walker 2007a). One aspect of this is a reported renewed interest in spiritual disciplines (Chan 2011b; Morden 2019, pp. 69–70), including mutual confession as noted in §2, although there was not much evidence of this in the interviews. However, some interviewees did communicate a sense of something that had been lost. Retrieval is needed to 'dig deep into our own

resources' to avoid 'gospel amnesia', where, in Andrew Walker's sharp critique, charismatics are 'liable to become fey, subject to fantasy and delusion' if they do not access 'the "grand narrative" of the Christian tradition' (Walker 2007a, p. 12). The grand narrative of faithful improvisation is also needed to avoid retrieval turning into a bricolage that ends up being more about spiritual consumerism than enriching charismatic tradition. To aid such retrieval further, the wider Pentecostal tradition needs 'traditioning' according to Simon Chan, arguing that those communities that have an explicit tradition are, counter-intuitively, those 'most likely to be open to change'. You can be more self-critical when a tradition is explicit (Chan 2011a, p. 17). Following on from Chan, Helen Collins has argued for the importance of traditioning charismatics—i.e., teaching the tradition and passing it on to others, appropriately understood as 'affective, embodied, cognitive, and relational' (Collins 2023, pp. 2–3, 192–93). Adopting this language, traditioning must include charismatics not just knowing why we do what we do but also the inverse—and what omissions there may be.[14] In the case of confession, it was not clear from the interviews whether the call for retrieval had been heard and/or welcomed,[15] but there was certainly a critical engagement with their tradition in relation to confession.

Thirdly, *how will charismatic networks engage with the formative power of practices?* Repeated practices are habit forming. Charismatic communities have many practices, including confession, carried out by individuals, small groups, and in public worship. It is hoped that these practices are directed towards transformation into the likeness of Christ through the power of the Spirit (e.g., 2 Cor 3:17–4:6), but they may undergo deformation. The formative power of liturgy and worship has received a lot of attention from academics in recent decades (e.g., Smith 2009, 2013; Wilson 2018; Packiam 2020), with James K. A. Smith prominent among them. For my questioning purposes here, Glenn Packiam's pithy summary statement of Smith's argument is sufficient: 'we are what we love; we may not love what we think; and our loves have to be shaped by intentionally God-centred, counterformative practices in Christian worship' (Packiam 2020, p. 33). Rather than being formed cognitively, Smith argues that people are primarily formed by what they love, which is a product of their habits. Christian liturgy therefore forms people in what to love and counters the alternative secular liturgies on offer. It calls Christians to be a people of memory and of expectation, to 'remember our future' (Smith 2009, p. 159; Walker and Bretherton 2007). Smith often writes of confession and includes a case study of Alex, who routinely enacted confession at his church over many years. A crisis provoked the need for him to forgive his son. Smith writes:

> The regularity and repetition of the practice of confession and absolution had already taught [Alex] on a gut level, that he too was a prodigal son. . . Through his regular and repeated immersion in the practices of Christian worship, Alex had absorbed the temperament of our gracious heavenly Father. . . such an imaginative construal happened "automatically", as it were, because the repetition of the practice has effectively recruited Alex as a character in the same drama. (Smith 2013, pp. 184–85)

Wilson of New Frontiers follows Smith's argument with some caveats but on confession makes a similar point:

> Yet when we consider the means of Christian formation we have at our disposal corporately. . . then nothing has more power than our liturgy; the things we say, hear, and do when we meet for worship. . . If we want to be trained to turn from sin, nothing is more effective than corporate confession. . .. (Wilson 2018, p. 79)

While agreeing with Wilson and Smith about the formative power of liturgy, I am less convinced about the extensive list of liturgical practices they both offer (Wilson 2018, pp.

81–84; Smith 2013, pp. 170–71). A retrieval of liturgical practices for charismatic tradition needs to be faithfully improvised according to its theological commitments and the work of the Spirit in its history. I note that neither list, for example, includes testimony.[16] I paraphrased Wilson's argument for RichSLA, asking, 'How will people. . . know how to confess if they don't see it in public?' He pushed back by asking, 'what does one mean by public confession?' RichSLA went on to argue that people can know how to confess 'if you have robust, genuine, deep life-giving one on one relationships with other people'.

How is God's action disclosed in these practices of confession? While this can be only partially discerned, through interviewee testimony in the case of this research, it is nevertheless a properly theological question. Throughout the accounts of confession above, there is witness to God's action that is implicit to varying degrees. The confession-adjacent relationality of the networks stands out. Interviewees also spoke more explicitly of God at work through confession, although I did not ask them about this directly. TerryNF said, 'I think the Gospel sets us free', which chimed with MarkGL's desire for 'people to know the freedom and the life that they have in Christ'. RichSLA stressed that confession 'is to do with the kindness of God'. TomV saw worship as leading to 'a place of face to face encounter with a holy God', where 'he will release healing and kindness upon you', but 'it's unto holiness, it's unto a formation into his likeness'. He spoke of seeing people get to 'the moment of genuine surrender'; then, 'it's really transformative, their life and walk with Jesus'.

More tentatively, I suggest that God's action is also disclosed in the interviewees' critique of their own tradition alongside an openness to reviewing practices of confession by some. Drawing on this research, and particularly the three questions above, I suggest that, to avoid potential deformations, a reimagining of charismatic confession is needed. This reimagining should quarry from their own treasures as well as those of other traditions (Cartledge 2010, p. 46). In my view, 'as and when' confession is not sufficiently robust to withstand the human propensity to avoid acknowledging the truth about ourselves and our sin before God. Therefore, a reimagined confession needs to be regular. It also needs to be corporate in some way, as a faithful improvisation from scripture. 'As and when' confession can be quite ad hoc and DIY, with the danger of being 'hit and miss'. Therefore, the practice needs more substance, including assurance of forgiveness and a prompt towards reconciliation if needed. Communion is the obvious starting point for incorporating confession, if it is not practiced already. Sung worship, being confession-adjacent, also needs greater theological balance. The double sense of confession, of confessing praise to God and of our sin, may also offer a clue to reimagined charismatic confession that resonates with the discourse of relationality, honesty, 'being real' and the practice of testimony. Confession is an epistemological and relational act that acknowledges the truth about God and so also the (sometimes painful) truth about ourselves.[17] As the confessing Psalmist says, 'you desire truth in the inward being' (Ps 51:6)—reality therapy indeed.

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Notes

1 Other prompts included: the Tyndale Fellowship study group in 2024 being themed on 'A Practical Theology of Sin' and the invite from Religions journal to guest edit this special issue on evangelical practices.
2 This resonates with the INC (independent network charismatic) Christianity terminology of Brad Christerson and Richard Flory in the US, albeit the dynamics and history are somewhat different to the UK (Christerson and Flory 2017, p. 7f).
3 N = 282.
4 Rogers (2023) considers this theological epistemology and its relation to reflexivity.
5 Some passages are not specific enough to know which type they may refer to: e.g., Mk 1:5 is less specific than Acts 19: 18 about what was confessed.
6 'Sacramental confession. . . is not very widely spread in the Church of England, however, for those who practice it, it is held very strongly' (Church of England 2023).
7 Brierley notes that most of the networks experienced difficulties with leadership succession in recent decades and also that some networks have reorganized into networks of networks (e.g., New Frontiers), making knowing what to count more complicated (Brierley 2020, §7.3).
8 The networks have a range of views on the role of women in leadership which was a factor in my male only sample. I did request interviews with female leaders but they were not available.
9 Insider and outsider perspectives respectively.
10 Smith has a similar term—'worm theology' (Smith 2016, p. 97).
11 Tanya Luhrmann's interpretation of a US Vineyard congregation resonates with TomV's concerns (Luhrmann 2012, p. 104).
12 Using the ATLAS.ti Wordlist function which has a standard 'Stop List' that excludes (in)definite articles, pronouns, prepositions, and verb modifiers.
13 Pioneer have recently held a safeguarding enquiry into their late founder and subsequently made an apology for his conduct which was confession adjacent (Pioneer 2024).
14 Noel Richards offers an 'historical' example of this tradition awareness and self-critique regarding charismatic liturgy from within the Pioneer network (Richards 1993, Ch. 7).
15 However, Andrew Wilson of New Frontiers has argued for a 'eucharismatic' form of retrieval (Wilson 2018).
16 Packiam also more broadly critiques Smith's lack of attention to how Pentecostal-charismatic worship operates, particularly if worship is understood as primarily about encounter with God (Packiam 2020, p. 36f).
17 Walter Moberly draws out briefly the 'painful self-knowledge' of Nehemiah's prayer of confession in Neh 9 (Moberly 2024, p. 9).

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Article

Intensive Prayers: Prayer as a Weapon and Relationship Among the Emerging Generations of African Diaspora Churches in the UK

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Abstract

The proliferation of African diaspora churches, especially over the last four decades in Europe and the West, has not gone unnoticed. Over this period, there has been a planting and transporting of independent churches as well as branches of Pentecostal and charismatic churches from sub-Saharan Africa to the West. First-generation members of these churches have often been the pioneers, leaders, and custodians of the church culture and practices from their motherland. These first-generation members continue to hold on to liturgy and practices from 'home' (Africa) and seek to replicate them as authentic spirituality and spiritual formation practices. A significant part of the rise of these churches are the second-generation members who have a fluid identity and are finding newer ways to assimilate their parents' socio-cultural and religious practices with that of their present 'home' European/Western nations. For these emerging-generation members, their parents' culture, which is largely based on an African worldview, continues to shape church liturgy and practices. An integral component of the church's liturgy and practical ministry is prayer. Prayer in its various forms plays a significant part in both personal and collective worship. This paper examines the impact of emerging generations on the dynamics and praxis of prayer in the Church of Pentecost UK. Prayer holds a significant place in the lives of these emerging generation members and forms part of their socio-religious identity. Against this backdrop of prayer from a generational and liturgical viewpoint, we explore the nature, dynamics, and context of the prayers of the emerging generation members of the Church of Pentecost, UK. We examine areas of continuity and discontinuity and explore how Western influences and modernisation have influenced the prayer language and style of the younger generation. Through participant observations and lived experiences, we argue that though prayer is central to the worship of the younger generation, there are significant variations between the generations within the broader framework of style, language, and content.

Keywords: prayer; second generation; first generation; intensive prayer

1. Introduction

The African diaspora churches in the UK are known for their commitment to planting and nurturing churches, negotiating cultural and generational gaps, and engaging in cross-missional partnerships with British churches and societies (Smith and Kwiyani 2021). These African diaspora churches have experienced significant growth since the late 1980s, focusing predominantly on black sub-Saharan African migrants (Ayokunle 2025). First-generation migrants started these churches with the aim of evangelising Britain and Europe,

yet over time, their churches have become predominantly a homogenous hub and haven, especially for first-generation members in the diaspora. Consequently, some of these churches find it challenging to engage with the British and multicultural communities in Britain (Olofinjana 2017). Nevertheless, the African churches in the diaspora have established various ties, including ecumenical affiliations with organisations such as Evangelical Alliance and Churches Together. Some of the diaspora churches also engage in pastoral or ministry exchanges, and international ministries, demonstrating a complex peregrination that reflects the religious transnationalisation of African churches in the diaspora (Trost 2007). One significant aspect of their networking is through prayer and interdenominational prayer events. This intentional networking is often the first step in positioning themselves within the British evangelical alliances.

First-generation African Pentecostals in the diaspora are known for their passion for prayer. Often, their prayer meetings are intense and lively practices, including clapping of hands, running around, shouting intensely, praying in loud voices, and praying all night. They believe in the efficacy of prayer, engage in regular and intense fasting, and view prayer as lived theology (Tira and Yamamori 2020). Indeed, this type of prayer is Pentecostal and finds it roots in both the Bible and the African socio-cultural worldview. As with typical Pentecostal prayers, there are shouts of acclamation, declaration, and exuberance. From an African prayer perspective, there are strategic and intentional efforts to direct prayers towards the enemy and evil forces. In so doing, prayer is understood to become a weapon through which the enemy's plans are destroyed, bombarded, and, in some cases, 'returned to sender' (Nyanni 2021). This article discusses how the emerging generations of the African diaspora church see prayer as both a weapon and an extension of their conversion and relationship with God. We focus primarily on the second-generation members of African Pentecostal churches in the UK, using the Church of Pentecost (CoP) and the Redeemed Church of God (RCCG) as references. In this article, the first-generation members are the pioneers of the African diaspora churches that were planted or started in the 1980s. These are generally seen as Gen X, born 1965–1980. Second-generation members are Millennials, born 1981–1996. We also use the abbreviations FG to refer to first-generation members and SG for second-generation members. Both authors are located within the SG and are ministers of Pentecostal churches—one from Elim Church and the other from the CoP.

2. Methodology

This article is part of ongoing research into the activities of the second-generation members of the African diaspora church in UK and Europe. We have employed a mixed-methods approach to gain a deeper understanding of the complex phenomena surrounding the second generation's attitude and practices towards prayer, the Holy Spirit, worship, and biblical interpretation. Additionally, this approach aims to generate new insights regarding the adaptation of these practices by the second generation.

Mixed-methods research design provides an approach that incorporates both objective and subjective knowledge (Cresswell and Plano Clark 2018). As insiders, we both approached the research with existing knowledge of the African diaspora church. However, through a critical reflective approach coupled with ethical reviews and carefully selected methods, we were able to minimise our biases in our research approach.

Our research methods allowed us to observe and interpret attitudes and opinions from the subjects' perspective, improving our understanding of denominational patterns and how religious practices are ritualised and passed down to generations.

Methodologically, the research was qualitative, making use of interviews, surveys, and participant observation in selected church and worship settings. Ethnographic data

were collected during this research. In addition to conducting interviews, which served as the primary tool for gathering field data, surveys and observations were also carried out at the Church of Pentecost and Redeemed Christian Church of God.

The ethnography component of the research involved short-term field visits (Knoblauch 2005). Unlike traditional ethnography, focused ethnography is primarily employed to gather information on a specific, well-defined topic that is usually identified before the commencement of the research. As such, focused ethnography assumes an in-depth understanding of the research context and is frequently conducted within the researcher's own society. The usual criticism regarding the short duration of this type of ethnography is its perceived lack of depth, rendering it superficial. However, the brief nature of participant observation is counterbalanced by the authors' deep insight and knowledge of the churches used in the research (Knoblauch 2005, p. 20).

In 2022, a survey of 100 FG and 100 SG members in two parishes of the Church of Pentecost UK was conducted alongside interviews with key participants. Participants were informed about the research purpose, procedures, and benefits before agreeing to participate, ensuring their participation was voluntary and based on a clear understanding of the study. Participants gave verbal consent for extracts of transcripts to be included in this article under pseudonyms.

3. Pentecostals and Prayers

Pentecostal prayers are characterised by a strong emphasis on experiential faith, direct contact with the Holy Spirit, and the transformative power of personal encounters with God. Pentecostals prioritise the immediate experience of the Holy Spirit over doctrines and emphasise affectivity and the power of the Spirit in their lives. This emphasis on experience is rooted in the belief that knowing God is about experiencing Him rather than just intellectualising Him (Warrington 2008, p. 25). Indeed, central to evangelicalism is the conversion experience and personal faith in Jesus. For Pentecostals, the conversion experience is rooted in the Holy Spirit's presence in this transformative conversion. For most Pentecostals, prayer is the vehicle through which this relationship with Jesus is enabled and lived. Prayer becomes an active part of worship. Daniel Albrecht describes this as a ritual (Albrecht 1999, pp. 166–69). In other words, prayer is a moment when humans make space for interaction with the divine. In its ritual sense, prayer is waiting, tarrying, and communicating with the divine both for intervention and for sacred fellowship. Pentecostals often combine prayer with fasting and meditation during seasons of prayer and waiting. They see this as a ritual of consecration, waiting on God, and a sign of spiritual growth and empowerment (Vondey 2017, p. 78). Pentecostals believe in the transformative power of prayer, which is, in a way, their hope and expectation of a God who hears and answers prayer.

The emphasis on personal encounters with the Holy Spirit and the transformative power of prayer is central to Pentecostal theology, which is rooted in the story of Pentecost and the continuity of God's redemptive mission throughout history (Vondey 2020). Most Pentecostals, therefore, understand that prayer transforms, makes a difference, and effects miracles. Often quoting Jesus' miracles and other passages such as James 5:17, Pentecostals have the firm belief that prayers bring transformation. Within this context, some African diaspora Pentecostals including the CoP have initiated what they term 'intensive prayers'. These are specific prayers directed at casting out demons, breaking Satanic strongholds and petitioning God for divine interventions. They are often long sessions of prayer, accompanied by fasting and characterised by clapping, speaking in tongues, jumping, and a continuous repetition of words, phrases, or jargons. These prayers are central to the

liturgy of some of these Pentecostal diaspora churches and serve as a means of experiencing the living God and engaging in God's mission through the leading of the Holy Spirit.

4. Intensive Prayers: An African Influence on Pentecostal Prayers

The rise of the SG, especially since 2015 in the UK and the West, has not only contributed to the growth of the African diaspora church, but it has also highlighted a new and growing trend in Pentecostal liturgy and practices. Second-generation African migrants who were either born in the UK or migrated with their parents at a young age have adopted a hybrid and fluid form of Pentecostal liturgy that is an amalgamation of their parents' practices and influences from their UK multicultural and religious practices (Nyanni 2021, p. 131). For example, the Church of Pentecost and the Redeemed Christian Church of God, arguably two of the largest migrant Pentecostal churches in the UK (Akomiah-Conteh 2021), have their roots and headquarters in Ghana and Nigeria, respectively. These two Pentecostal churches have a significant number of second-generation members who play active roles in the church leadership and practices. These SG members have adopted some of their parents' worldviews and church liturgy whilst navigating newer and varied ways of doing church in the West. Their FG parents have come from a background where prayer is culturally and religiously significant. The FG parents came from a worldview where everything had a spiritual causation. This worldview, as Anderson puts it, is simply a spirit-filled world (Anderson 2018). In this spirit-filled worldview, although God is transcendent and involved in the daily affairs of his people, he does not abide within the heart or spirit of humans; neither does he physically reside in the human body. Yet, he is recognised as being present in their daily lives. Due to his supreme nature, God cannot be approached lightly and directly. Hence, there is a need for prayers to petition God for their desires and wants.

The FG also holds a strong belief in Satan and his cohorts. The belief and understanding that Satan and his cohorts are behind all evil actions prompts fear and ignites the need to intensify prayers to avoid their engagement in human affairs. This emphasis on the presence of malevolent spirits stems from African socio-cultural and religious practices, where every physical manifestation has spiritual causation (Asamoah-Gyadu 2025, pp. 93–117). Therefore, people seek power for protection and vengeance and generally live a fruitful life. Although these FG African Pentecostals believe in the supremacy of God and his omnipotence, there is a genuine fear that Satan can cause havoc in human affairs. Hence, there is a need to intensify prayers to ensure that all Satan's efforts and plans are thwarted. Thus, against this spirit-filled and cosmic battle worldview and background, most of the FG members of the African diaspora church believe that these spiritual forces and struggles continue to impact their lives even in Britain and the West. As one FG pastor said, 'Witches don't need visas. They can fly anywhere without charge' (Pastor Kyere, London, 21 August 2023).

The CoP and RCCG churches, therefore, provide several prayer meetings in the local parishes from early mornings throughout the day and all-night services, usually on Friday nights, for their parishioners. The intensity of these prayers in dealing with specific threats from evil, malevolent forces and misfortune in life is what they describe as 'intensive prayers'. Hanciles suggests that the numerous services in migrant churches are a sign of their quest to cater to the spiritual needs of migrants in the diaspora (Hanciles 2008, p. 361). These additional programmes are often prayer and deliverance services, and they are mainly patronised by the FG members because most of them continue to fear and worry about the influence of witchcraft and malevolent spirits. As one pastor said, 'We preach less and pray more during deliverance services because that is why our people come. They

come to pray and seek deliverance and the manifestation of the power of God' (Pastor Marvin, London, 8 June 2015).

Furthermore, churches organise specific 'Healing Camps', deliverance services, prayer warfare nights, and many such themed nights to help their members deal with their spiritual problems (Asamoah-Gyadu 2015, pp. 133–34). People go to these prayer meetings with all types of problems for healing and deliverance. For over a decade now, the Church of Pentecost in the UK has traditionally set apart Monday mornings in their central parish in London as a 'prayer clinic'. Prayer clinics are essentially prayer meetings or services. One of the former National Leaders gave them the special name prayer clinics in 2013. The name describes the rationale behind the prayer meetings. They are to be like a clinic where people go for healing and well-being. In August 2024, the New Season Prophetic Prayers and Declarations (NSPPD) organised a mega prayer day that was attended by over 80,000 at Twickenham Stadium (Valencia 2024). Leading the event was Pastor Jerry Eze, a Nigerian-based pastor who launched the NSPPD YouTube channel in 2021. Such prayer meetings and gatherings are significant; FG and SG Pentecostals and charismatics attend them. With over one million views from the UK on his YouTube channel, Pastor Eze is providing a prayer service for the needs of not only his congregation in Nigeria but for Christians and people globally (Valencia 2024). During such prayer meetings, healing is on top of the agenda and many go there to seek healing and miracles. Frank D. Macchia said, 'By making healing an important aspect of the church's mission, the Pentecostal movement became a haven for those dissatisfied with the decline of emphasis on healing in the mainstream evangelical churches' (Macchia 2006). The FG look to the supernatural for every natural occurrence. Hence, African diaspora churches provide their members a platform to seek supernatural intervention through prayer as they incessantly appeal to the power of the Holy Spirit. Ultimately, what Pastor Eze and most Pentecostals do is not to dismiss evil and malevolent spirits. On the contrary, they acknowledge their existence and operations, whilst they present the power of the Holy Spirit as more potent than any other spirit to deal with all problems (Anderson 2018, p. 133).

5. Second Generation and Adaptation of Intensive Prayers

From the African diaspora perspective, Adogame has argued that indigenous forms of worship in African Christianity have adopted a global form while remaining faithful to their local identities. For example, churches use various technology and media productions for their songs, sermons, and other liturgy while continuing to sing and preach in their local dialects.

Arguably, unlike some of their parents and grandparents, the SG do not believe that their world is full of malevolent spirits. Their understanding of the spirit world, coupled with the socio-cultural influences in Britain, has produced, in some SG members, a form of spirituality transcending the dread of the demonic powers and attitudes towards the spirits. Although they believe in the spirit world, they do not subject all physical occurrences to spiritual forces. These SG members are essentially British and locate their social consciousness within the British culture and social space. Subsequently, they do not link every misfortune and life struggle to evil spirits' presence, power, or influence. Consequently, their focus in prayer meetings is not predominantly directed at evil spirits or forces. From both participant observations and the survey of SG congregations of African diaspora churches, it is evident that the second-generation members still engage in intensive prayers. In practice, they continue to engage in practices such as loud, vibrant, and lengthy prayers like their parents. In 2023, some second-generation members of the Church of Pentecost, attending university in the Midlands region of England, organised a prayer conference. One of the lead pastors, an SG minister who was organising the

conference, wanted to use a church building rather than one of the halls on any of the university campuses. His key reason was that they wanted space and time. Most university campuses gave them only two hours, but the pastor and his youthful students wanted half-night prayers. Again, he mentioned that they are loud, exuberant, and vibrant once they get going. Hence, they did not want any complaints or interruptions from the university (Pastor Q., November 2023).

An example of a prayer by a second-generation below demonstrates this phenomenon:

> Father in Heaven, we bless you! Jesus, we give you the glory, honour and praise for your faithfulness and goodness. We thank you for hearing our prayers today. You have spoken your living and powerful words to us. Your word is a double-edged sword and has cut through our hearts this day. We pray for spiritual understanding and favour. We pray that you open the heavens and give us the grace to understand your unadulterated word. Please help us to be doers of your word. Help us to cultivate excellent spirits just like Daniel. Help us to live lives that will glorify your name. Holy Spirit please help us! We need wisdom, we need understanding. Please forgive us for going our own way and help us to walk in your ways as Daniel did who had the excellent Spirit. Make us strong in your word and may we become victorious, successful and fruitful like Daniel. We ask this in the mighty name of Jesus. Amen. (Nyanni 2021, p. 107).

The contrast with one of the first-generation leader's prayers is seen below:

> Our omnipotent creator and everlasting God! We bless you! We honour you! We lift you high and exalt you! Your name is the great I am, and you alone are God. We thank you for this wonderful opportunity to come before your presence and to hear your word. Your word brings power! Your word brings life! As we stand in your presence, boldly approaching your throne we pray against any oppressive and destructive in the mighty name of Jesus! Elijah did not bow to any god. We will not bow to any god. Therefore, we take authority and demolish principalities, evil forces, and demonic spirits rising against us in the name of Jesus! Like Elijah may we be overcomers, and may we walk through the lion's den without any trouble. If there are any persons here walking in the lion's den, we break them free in the name of Jesus. We destroy any demonic dens that your people may find themselves in this evening in the name of Jesus! The den of oppression. The den of depression, the den of immigration, the den of unemployment, the den of sickness, we break free in the name of Jesus! You died so that we will be free. You are God! You are king! You are great! We trust you and we receive it in Jesus mighty name. Amen! (Nyanni 2021, p. 107).

Though these two prayers are by no means representative of an entire generation or congregation, they demonstrate the emphasis on the worldview and context of prayers offered by various generations in the church. Both prayers begin with acknowledging God's goodness and incorporating biblical language. However, this biblical terminology is not unique to the Church of Pentecost but is commonly found in other Pentecostal and Christian prayers. The phrasing reflects the structure of well-known biblical prayers, such as the Lord's Prayer, 'Our Father in heaven, hallowed be thy name' (Matthew 6:9), and the Psalmist's invocation: 'Let God arise, and his enemies be scattered' (Psalm 68:1). Notably, the SG prayers did not have the African socio-cultural emphasis on spirits, particularly regarding awareness of deities and evil spirits, and the destruction of strongholds. This marks a significant discontinuity in beliefs and practices among SG members. SG members focused their prayers on practical requests such as wisdom, excellence, and productivity rather than demonstrating power over evil spirits. As evidenced above, there was no

mention of evil spirits in SG prayers, whereas the FG elder repeatedly emphasised breaking and demolishing demonic strongholds. This focus on malevolent spiritual forces within FG prayers aligns with African socio-cultural and religious traditions, attributing spiritual causation to physical manifestations.

6. Theological Implications of Intensive Prayers

The key theological concepts and principles associated with Pentecostal prayers are rooted in Pentecostal perspectives on prayer and the experience of the Holy Spirit, including Holy Spirit baptism, praying in tongues, the Spirit's role in prayer, and the missiological understanding of prayer's effectiveness.

6.1. The Holy Spirit's Role in Prayer

The Pentecostal perspective on prayer emphasises the role of the Holy Spirit in assisting believers in their weaknesses, opening their discernment to comprehend the Spirit's mindset, and aligning their will to God's purposes. This highlights the belief that the same Spirit who empowered the first church will empower the current generation to accomplish their Spirit-inspired mission (Laurito 2023). Pentecostalism does not only provide emotional experiences and assurance of salvation and life after this life, but, significantly to most Africans, it provides security against witchcraft and vindictive spirits, which the people notoriously fear. In contrast to some mainline Western churches, Pentecostals believe in the existence of witchcraft and evil spirits; however, through the power of the Holy Spirit, they can confront these malevolent spirits. For the FG, the Holy Spirit is a powerful Spirit who fights their battles and empowers them to overcome their struggles with the demonic forces, whilst the SG mainly sees the Holy Spirit as a friend, guide, and help in their daily walk. Incidentally, though the SG also sees the Holy Spirit as a power, they do not expect his power within the context of a cosmic battle but rather power to become effective in their lives.

6.2. Baptism in the Holy Spirit

Primary to the Pentecostal perspective on prayer is the conviction that being baptised with the Holy Spirit is an indispensable aid in prayer. This baptism is seen as an experience in which the believer yields control to the Holy Spirit, leading to a more intimate knowledge of Christ and receiving power to witness and grow spiritually (Stewart 2015). This view of baptism in the Holy Spirit leading to character formation is more prevalent among the SG, where prayer is seen more as a relationship than warfare. The understanding of FG members is that Holy Spirit baptism is power. For the FG, Holy Spirit baptism is a baptism that brings power to believers to engage with spiritual warfare. It is within this understanding of power that they engage in intensive prayers. They believe they have been endowed with power; hence, they can approach and defeat the enemy. In a 2022 survey of 100 FG members in two parishes of the Church of Pentecost UK, 80% of them described the Holy Spirit baptism as 'power'. The rest described the Holy Spirit baptism as a supernatural encounter. In the same survey but with 100 SG members in the same churches, 60% of the SG described the Holy Spirit baptism as the 'presence of God', whilst 20% described the Holy Spirit baptism as an 'enabler and influencer'. The word influencer was particularly significant. This is the language of social media 'influencers', depicting people who influence and inspire others to act or behave in certain ways. Thus, the younger category of SG members in the survey saw the Holy Spirit baptising people to influence them in a godly way. As one SG from RCCG explained, 'Once I was baptised with the Holy Spirit, we became influenced by him to do good works.' He continues, 'the Bible says we should not be drunk with wine but be filled with Spirit, so once we are filled with the

Spirit, he positively influences us (Interview with Kelvin, 2 February 2024).' It is within this context where there is a rupture from the first generation. Thus, although the SG continues in the practice of intensive prayers, they do so not with the same understanding of demolishing strongholds but instead seeking an engagement with the Holy Spirit to influence them. Thus, one of the key differences between the FG and SG when it comes to Spirit baptism is seen in purpose. For the FG, the Spirit gives power to overcome evil, whilst the SG see Spirit baptism as an influence to live.

Alongside baptism are prophetic utterances during intensive prayers. Thus, people filled with the Holy Spirit are heard and encouraged to prophesy during worship and prayers. Again, the emphasis on prophecy during services is key to the Pentecostal understanding of intensive prayers. Though the Pentecost event in Acts 2 is explained within the context of Joel's prophecy, the rise of charismatic churches has dramatically influenced the expectation of the prophetic in Pentecostal prayers. In observations of several RCCG churches in the Midlands in the UK, there were frequent prophetic utterances during prayers. These prophetic words often came in the form of prayers. So, during prayers, people could be heard prophesying hope, miracles, and deliverance. They would usually declare, 'I prophesy that. . .' followed by their words of encouragement. Furthermore, the CoP believes and teaches that prophecy under the influence of the Holy Spirit speaks to address contemporary situations (Onyinah 2011). Through prophecy, they can hear wisdom, guidance, and direction from God. Significantly, during CoP services, prophecy comes not only from the pastors or leaders but also from any member who feels inspired by the Holy Spirit to give a prophetic word from the Lord. The prayers, speaking in tongues, and prophecies are evidence of the Holy Spirit's presence and power in their midst.

6.3. Praying in Tongues and Spirit-Inspired Prayer

Pentecostals emphasise the effectiveness of praying in tongues as a spiritual weapon in spiritual battles (Eph 6:18, Jude 1:20) and as a form of Spirit-inspired speech that facilitates radical openness and intense devotion to prayer. This practice is seen as a distinctive feature of Pentecostalism, representing a nonrational expression of worship in words from the human spirit rather than the mind (1 Cor 14:14) (Cettolin 2016). Second-generation Pentecostals in the diaspora continue this tradition and Pentecostal praxis actively. Praying in tongues (glossolalia) is seen as a language of the Holy Spirit inspired by the Spirit and effective for spiritual battles. The SG African diaspora Pentecostals continue engaging in intensive prayers by speaking in tongues. Indeed, most of their prayer and worship services are loud, vibrant, and full of tongue speakers.

6.4. Healing and Deliverance

Healing and deliverance are closely aligned with the Holy Spirit's power in intensive prayers. Healing is a prominent theme in African Pentecostal prayers, often viewed as a direct manifestation of the Holy Spirit's power. Warrington argues that it is a foundational belief of many Pentecostals that healing is guaranteed for believers (Warrington 2008, p. 283). For many African Pentecostals, intensive prayer is the time when they pray intently for the healing of the sick and deliverance for those who need it. As African Pentecostals migrate to Europe, they often battle with their beliefs and practices as they assimilate into Western socio-cultural practices. For example, FG African migrants continue to blame evil spirits for sicknesses and misfortunes in life. Some of them refuse to seek medical help and instead choose to pray for divine healing. Some engage in online streams with prophets and pastors back in Africa to participate in online healing and miracle services. Regardless of time differences, many of these FG members either stay up late or wake up in the early hours to join these prayers. Thus, these Pentecostals see intensive prayers as the time for real

warfare prayers to break strongholds of sicknesses and diseases. There is a fundamental tension between the physical and spiritual realms during such prayers. The dynamics of such 'aggressive prayers', as described by some of the FG, becomes uncomfortable for some of the SG and other nationals, including a few indigenous members. Some diaspora churches in the UK and Germany have modified their approach to these public prayer meetings and have organised some private prayer sessions. This shift illustrates the need for generational sensitivity while maintaining core beliefs about healing and deliverance.

The Church of Pentecost in the UK, have found a way to assimilate their cultural and liturgical practices into Western culture. The format of their prayer clinic has been replicated in other branches of the church across the UK. The purpose of these prayers is in the name. As one senior minister of the church explained: 'We come to Doctor Jesus to receive healing and miracles' (Interview with Pastor C, August 2024). Many individuals are drawn to Pentecostal churches seeking healing for physical ailments or emotional distress, and testimonies of miraculous healings are common in such services. This focus on healing reflects a broader understanding of salvation that encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being (Resane 2020). Significantly, the SG members of the church also patronise these meetings frequently, depending on their school and work schedules. Incidentally, even on bank holiday Mondays, when people either rest or discourage such programmes, the church continues to run the prayer clinics. The senior pastor explained that these were opportunities for the younger ones to get involved and pray.

Our observations over a two-year period, 2022–2024, show a significant number of SG members during school holidays, including the summer holidays, attending the prayer clinics. Though the prayers of the SG are not usually directed towards breaking strongholds and demons, nevertheless, their attendance and participation show their engagement and continuation of intensive prayers. Arguably, Western education and assimilation have a part to play in the SG members who do not solely attribute sickness to evil spirits and demons. Indeed, the majority do not attribute misfortune to evil spirits either. They navigate such challenges through scientific and social theories. For some SG members, issues such as race, equality, social justice, climate change, and human responsibility or lack thereof contribute to ills in society. Adapting these socio-cultural practices also reflects the broader dynamics of globalisation, where Pentecostalism interacts with various cultural expressions, leading to a rich tapestry of worship that resonates with diverse audiences. For some of these SG, healing, deliverance, and well-being are not merely issues of physical sickness caused by spiritual forces. They see a holistic approach towards healing that includes mental health, well-being, environmental, social action, and engagement. For example, a group of university students organised a prayer meeting in Coventry to pray for the healing of broken families and social action on homelessness and the increase in mental health issues among their friends and colleagues. Another group of students organised a prayer in Glasgow, where their focus was on the increase in pollution and its effects on their generation. Their prayers were not directed at evil spirits but at the politicians and councils. In this context, Pentecostalism's theological underpinnings of healing and deliverance often intersect with social issues. For many adherents, healing is not merely a physical restoration but a holistic experience that addresses emotional and spiritual well-being.

6.5. Missiological Implications of Intensive Prayers

Pentecostals believe that the charismatic experience of the Holy Spirit or the reception of the baptism in the Holy Spirit empowers believers for mission, similar to how it empowered the apostles and early disciples in the narrative of Luke–Acts (Nkwocha 2024). In summary, Pentecostal prayers are characterised by the emphasis on praying in

tongues, the Spirit's role in prayer, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, and the missiological implications of prayers. These concepts and principles are foundational to the Pentecostal perspective on prayer and reflect the unique theological framework of Pentecostalism. One of the key differences within the missiological implications of intensive prayers is the SG's approach to social justice as part of their missionary call. The SG engage in intensive prayers; however, they are not directed at demolishing strongholds. Rather, they focus on practical, personal, and social justice issues. This is arguably the impact and influence of British evangelicalism where emphasis on social justice is advocated (Rutz 2011). In addition to praying, the SG engage in social justice interventions such as feeding the poor, helping the homeless, and going into community centres to help those in need, which contrasts with the FG. This activism is founded on their belief that part of the evidence of their conversion should be seen in the outworking of their love of Jesus towards others (Bebbington 2003).

6.6. Situating God in the Prayers: Second Generation

Most of the SG participants' spiritual needs involve seeking God through prayer and fasting and getting closer to him. Gerloff observed that one of the key elements of the African diaspora church is that it continues to provide for its members' spiritual needs (Gerloff 1999, p. 116). Concerning this adaptation of African Christianity to the needs of Africans in the diaspora, Adogame aptly notes, 'It is the rapprochement with indigenous cosmology and ritual praxis that distinguishes it within global Pentecostalism . . .and accounts for its success' (Adogame 2013, p. 93). Hanciles adds that 'the declaration of spiritual needs implies that members experience spiritual growth and adequate spiritual support in times of crises' (Hanciles 2008, p. 361). Though Gerloff, Adogame, and Hanciles were referring to the FG migrant church, their observations on the church providing spiritual support are true among the SG members in CoP-UK.

At the core of African Pentecostal theology is an emphasis on transformative encounter with God, who is perceived as holy and spirit. This encounter is often articulated through personal prayer and relationships. For some SG members, prayer is not simply an act of speaking in tongues or a religious rite or performance. Their engagement with Western culture and openness to a fluid society means that their prayers are not only ventured into the demonic and breaking strongholds. Instead, they see prayer as part of their transformative encounter with a holy God. Such transformations are marked by a radical rupture from past sinful behaviours, leading to a new identity and purpose in life (Stinton 2011). Furthermore, the experience of being 'born again' is not merely a spiritual break from the powers of darkness, as is the case for most of their parents, but is also seen as an empowerment that enables believers to confront and overcome various life challenges, including financial, career, social action, and witnessing challenges. Prayer, therefore, becomes an outworking of their conversion and desire to continually walk with God in their daily lives.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the emerging generations of African diaspora churches in the UK are navigating cultural and generational differences in their liturgy and mission. The second-generation members of these African Pentecostal migrant churches are amalgamating their first-generation parents' socio-cultural and religious practices whilst maintaining and carving newer ways of engaging in liturgy such as intensive prayer. This article has shown that the second-generation members are still passionate about worship. However, their understanding of the world they live in, coupled with influences from other Western initiatives, has toned down their aggressive attacks towards demons. Second-generation African Pentecostal prayers are deeply rooted in the belief in the Holy Spirit's transfor-

mative power, shaped by cultural practices, and focused on empowerment, healing, and social justice. The integration of cultural, social, and spiritual dimensions of prayer and a commitment to the experiences of social action highlights the dynamic and contextually relevant nature of African Pentecostal spirituality.

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Article

If I Confess with My Mouth: Boundary Markers, Conversion Narratives and Autistic Belief Practices

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Abstract: This article considers evangelical conversion and the practices that are associated with it. Evangelicals use the giving of oral testimony as a method of illustrating the change that occurs at conversion. This becomes, the authors argue, a boundary marker that cannot be bridged by autistic people who do not communicate using speech. Making use of Acts 15 as a hermeneutical tool to address the lived experience of people who have otherwise not been included, we argue that the example of the woman who touched the hem of Jesus' cloak is a model for proxemics as a declaration of faith. The evangelical belief in conversionism is maintained, but a non-speaking autistic person is able to demonstrate this in other ways, following the haemorrhaging woman's example.

Keywords: evangelical; conversion; autism; testimony; haemorrhaging woman; Acts 15; proxemics

1. Introduction

At the beginning of Acts 15, the nascent church gathers to consider a new issue that has arisen amongst them. The people are perplexed and of no agreement concerning the ways in which new members of The Way are to join in and become participants. Gentiles, unfamiliar with the customs of Judea, are hearing about Jesus and converting but doing so without the boundary marker of circumcision. Much confusion reigns, and the new leaders gather to discern amongst themselves and with the Spirit the next course of action—to circumcise to indicate conversion or not (v6). Peter stands amidst the council and says,

> *My brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that I should be the one through whom the gentiles would hear the message of the good news and become believers. And God, who knows the human heart, testified to them by giving them the Holy Spirit, just as he did to us, and in cleansing their hearts by faith he has made no distinction between them and us. Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing on the neck of the disciples a yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear? On the contrary, we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will.* (vv. 7–11 NRSV)

Peter highlights practices of belonging that exclude the Gentiles from The Way. Thus, he suggests that this practice of circumcision creates an obstacle for new believers, implying their salvation is not only by grace but also by associated practices.

A call to describe contemporary evangelical means of demonstrating understanding of God is replete with description, language and words. The boundary markers of word-based epistemologies signal belonging and participation via speech and correct articulation (Macchia 2022; Wenk 2022). These individualised, public practices confer identity and formation within this tradition. In my recent publication 'Peculiar Discipleship', I, Claire Williams, write of the normative voice in churches that excludes and fails to account for autistic people (Williams 2023, p. 5). Other sociological and theological publications suggest that autistic people are excluded from churches for a variety of reasons, and this can include the emphasis that churches place on word-based practices, expecting

people to (for example) take part in liturgy, demonstrate glossolalia, perform speech acts such as confession or testimony-giving or speak publicly in the form of extempore prayer (Waldock and Forrester-Jones 2020; Van Ommen and Endress 2022). Autism has a cluster of characteristics that relate to communication and social behaviour (Macaskill 2021, p. 18). One feature of this is an intermittent relationship with speech; indeed, some individuals will not audibly speak at all. This paper will argue that word-based practices of testimony giving can function as exclusionary boundary markers, whereas a renewed attention to Biblical texts allows for a broader definition of what it means to testify to the presence of the Holy Spirit within (as per Acts 15:8, above). In this paper, we will argue firstly that speech-based practices of testimony giving can function as boundary markers. We will then demonstrate how this can serve to exclude some autistic people, who use spoken language differently or not at all. We will then reconsider the conversion narrative, not as a simple act of speaking, but more significantly as an act of hermeneutical agency, one that can be communicated through both regular and irregular practices of speech. We deepen this argument by considering Biblical texts that point to a broader understanding of what it means to testify to the presence of the Holy Spirit within; in particular, we reflect on the testimony giving of the haemorrhaging woman whom Jesus encounters. We conclude by reflecting on the role of the community in interpreting acts of testimony giving, including those acts that employ forms of communication other than speech.

Overall, whilst we determine to keep the conversionism emphasis in evangelical lived religion as a core tenet of the transformed life, we argue that the church needs to critically appraise its relationship to word-based practices, in the same way that the early church critically appraised its understanding of the role of circumcision, including the interrogation of scripture to determine what was required to demonstrate participation in the converted life. This includes paying attention to the role of the community in interpreting communicative acts and allowing individual believers to communicate in appropriate styles. We determine that maintaining the conversionism emphasis in evangelical lived religion is a necessary core tenet of the transformed life. But, we also argue that the church should critically appraise its relationship to words-based practices, in a way that resonates with how the early church critically appraised its understanding of the role of circumcision, interrogating scripture to determine what was required.

Acts 15 not only illustrates the question of membership in Christian communities for the purposes of this paper; it also provides a methodological framework which helps the exploration. This paper will follow the suggested process of John Christopher Thomas (J. Thomas 1994) who writes, from a Pentecostal perspective, of a practice and pneumatological process that offers a hermeneutical method for reading scripture in light of lived experience. Following such listening to the new or the different in the lived experience, there proceeds a 'theological redescription' (Swinton 2017, p. 17) where the new perspective is brought into conversation with the previously held convictions. All this is undertaken with the belief and faith commitment that the interpretation of scripture occurs in correspondence with the work of the Holy Spirit. Andrew Thomas notes that the role scripture has in evangelical communities, that of it being authoritative, is beholden to the interpreters of the text. He notes the possibility of damaging practices that follow from such interpretation. Thus, he argues, comes the abuse of power from holding authoritative interpretation privileges (A. Thomas 2022, p. 30). Incorporating lived experience into an interpretative process for reading scripture is part of a process that continually adds to the voices in the interpreting community. John Christopher Thomas argues that, in the example of Acts 15.1–29, a new understanding of the lived faith community was brought to bear upon previous interpretations. Paul and Barnabas strike out into the Gentile communities and discover that there is a requirement for a new interpretation that includes the Gentile community. Scriptural instruction is reread in light of a new story that is being told and in light of previously unheard voices. In Acts 15, these are the voices of the new Gentile believers, and, for this paper, it is the voices of non-speaking autistics that allow for this fresh understanding (J. Thomas 1994, p. 45). Thus, a process of hearing

voices—in this case, drawn from research concerning autistic lives—and continuing the process of interpretation with these voices are necessary for orthopraxis. This is, therefore, an appropriate method for allowing the autistic voice of experience to be incorporated when it is often marginalised and excluded from interpretative discussions. This paper takes these two methodological ideas about interpretation and the authoritative power of the current interpretative understanding and suggests this as a process by which we can theologise. The interpretative community of evangelicalism can attend to new experiences, those of autistic people, and allow their experiences to re-interpret the text. This does not necessarily reduce previous interpretations but facilitates a 'hermeneutical paradigm' that understands the text as always being interpreted in light of the faith community and their experiences in the Spirit of God (J. Thomas 1994, p. 49).

Autism theology is a small but growing field, and, at present, is a distinctly British phenomenon. Almost all the major publications currently available in this area are authored by British writers or by writers working in British universities. In addition, the vast majority of the content of these published works takes its impetus from the experience of autistic Christians attending British churches, encompassing a range of denominations and styles.

It should be noted that research into (and theological reflection on) the faith lives of non-speaking autistic Christians is extremely sparse, largely due to the complexity involved in gathering and interpreting data (Van Ommen and Cundill 2024). But, of the small amount of scholarship available, the majority stems from those conducting research at the University of Aberdeen, UK, which is home to both the Centre for Autism and Theology and the Centre for Spirituality, Health and Disability. I, Helena Cundill, am a post-doctoral researcher in the Centre and have undertaken research on autism and prayer. I, Claire Williams, am a researcher associated with the Centre, and I am autistic.

2. Evangelicals and Words as Boundaries

Acts 15 describes the early Christians deciding the requirements for identifying new members of the Christian community. The community discover members that they were not anticipating, namely, Gentiles who do not know the socio-religious behaviours of the Jewish Christians that formed the original core of believers. The question becomes, for the Jerusalem council, what is necessary and how do we discern it?

The fundamental element for evangelicals that denotes membership into faith communities is conversion. Timothy George and Alister McGrath note that evangelicals are particularly known for their emphasis upon conversion and that David Bebbington's famous definition identifies the requirement for an individual to 'make a decision for Christ' (George 2003, p. 3). Bruce Hindmarsh, describing one Sampson Staniforth's experience of conversion in the eighteenth century, notes 'everything that preceded his conversion was prologue; everything that followed was epilogue' (Hindmarsh 2008, p. 1). This story, told with a 'before' and an 'after', captures something of the fundamental personhood definition and the transformational nature of evangelical conversion, both then and now. Bebbington's description of conversion includes the call to hear the Gospel, turn from sins, repent and accept Christ by faith (Bebbington 2005, p. 5). Accounts of such conversion often include a process of 'agony, guilt and immense relief' (Bebbington 2005, p. 5). Conversion, for the evangelical, is theologically necessary because of soteriological commitments. No action of the human can be sufficient to win favour with God; the person is only justified by faith in God (Bebbington 2005, p. 6). For the evangelical, conversion is the way into the community; it allows for all who wish to come to enter without reference to any other requirements. It is the answer to the question that is posed in the Jerusalem council, a life-changing belief in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and a commitment for one's life to be transformed from this moment (or series of moments) onwards. The associated practices that surround conversion and illustrate it for the benefit of others are the subject of this paper and its analysis. The resonance between the decision of the Jerusalem council and the practice of communicating conversion narratives is that they are

both non-essential for the process of salvation but considered signifiers of membership in the faith community.

Evangelical conversionism is associated with the practice of accounting for the 'before' and 'after' of 'the great change' (Bebbington 2021, p. 167). Typically, this has been achieved by audibly narrating the series of experiences that surround the conversion. During the period of c.1740–c.1850, it was common to read obituaries of evangelical Christians that testified to the process of a change. It was also common to understand the change as happening at a fixed point in time, to the extent that one William Stranger, written about in 1822, could not identify a fixed point in time for his conversion and thus deferred baptism believing himself unqualified (Bebbington 2021, p. 173). To be able to identify the fixed point in time when conversion was said to occur illustrates not only the belief that the before and after times are clearly delineated by a crisis moment but also that such a crisis moment should be accounted for as part of the authentication process. David Kling similarly emphasises the identity constructive elements of conversion narratives:

> *Autobiographical narratives such as Augustine's are acts of reconstruction and interpretation (a type of "fiction" or self-representation), reflections on an experience of divine encounter that reorients one's life. Throughout Christian history, thousands of conversion narratives have been written, though nearly all date from the modern period.* (Kling 2014, p. 605)

Kling finds that such narrations are products of the modern era, dependent upon a literate and introspective society, and that their place as common is in contrast to their rarity in Christian history (Kling 2014, p. 605). The necessity of a fixed point in time, before which a person is not 'saved' and after which they are considered redeemed, has developed since Stranger's anxieties of the 1800s. It is complexified by the emergence of 'second-generation' evangelical children who did not experience a crisis moment or a discernible 'before' period (Anizor et al. 2021, p. 116). However, despite this development—also in the prescriptive practices of evangelical theologians (see Smith 2010; Abraham 1989)—there persists an secondary practice of giving narrative descriptions or testifying as a way of verifying the existence of conversion. Alongside this are the word-based practices that lead towards the possibility of conversion, for example, praying the sinner's prayer or verbally accepting Christ (Anizor et al. 2021, p. 113). In T. M. Luhrmann's book, *When God Talks Back*, she dedicates her first chapter to the responses that individuals make to 'the invitation' to faith (Luhrmann 2012, pp. 3–39). Lurhmann notes the predominance of conversion narratives: 'for a while I attended an evangelical church in southern California in which everyone told conversion stories of self-destructive addiction'. (Luhrmann 2012, p. 7). Despite the research taking place in America, this form of spiritual autobiography emerged in part in the eighteenth-century evangelical revival in England (Hindmarsh 2008, p. 321). This occurred to the extent that conversion narratives could be described as 'routine' by the 1740s and constituted a 'tradition' thereafter. Indeed, Hindmarsh describes how 'Over time it became more possible to appeal to a tradition of conversion or to offer a rational account of conversion...' which then developed into a way, not to describe one moment in time, but to establish a narrative of meaning 'of one's life from beginning to end' (Hindmarsh 2008, pp. 321–22).

The conversion narrative has a universalising scope. Hindmarsh notes that it allowed women to speak and speak with authority in ways that had previously been prevented in the eighteenth century (Hindmarsh 2008, p. 324). This corresponds to the Charismatic/Pentecostal practice of giving testimony in the present day which also removes many barriers to participation, so that even (according to Pentecostal theologian Cheryl Bridge Johns) a child can teach (Johns 2010, p. 89). Charismatic theologian Helen Collins similarly notes that testifying in the Charismatic tradition is 'their primary way of expressing their experiential knowledge and wisdom of God in Christ' (Collins 2023, p. 99). This universality reflects the purposes of the Jerusalem council who, following Peter, agreed that 'we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will' (Acts 15.11). Conversion, and the accounts that accompany it, are evangelical acts that

demonstrate that all who are willing—just like the Gentiles—are allowed to be converted, by God's grace.

What, then, do conversion narratives achieve? Kling writes of 'an inherited tradition' and a 'pre-set script from the evangelical subculture' that is employed within conversion accounts. These scripts and discourses are used in constructive social ways:

> *This coded vocabulary and impetus to spread the gospel defined authentic conversion for evangelicals and ipso facto raised questions about the kind of church to which the converted should belong. Because this common vocabulary was not shared within the Orthodox and Catholic traditions (or, if used, was not invested with the same meaning), evangelicals often judged these traditions deficient in their understanding of authentic conversion.* (Kling 2014, p. 606)

The necessity for a correct form of conversion accounts, as Kling illustrates, serves to create boundaries of participation around an evangelical community and align such participation with a personal sense of identity. Conversion narratives achieve both a narrative for the self in this situation but also for others to recognise 'proper' membership. The conversion narratives also offer a way to describe the self, where the self has hermeneutical authority to illustrate their proper relationship with God and to map their lives onto the soteriological story provided in scripture and in the community (Hindmarsh 2008, pp. 6–7). Thus, conversion narratives are applied in particular contexts and have values associated with their contextual deployment. Older evangelical histories account for written conversion narratives, individual accounts or second-person narratives found in obituaries (Bebbington 2021, pp. 167–91). Bebbington writes that, at the beginning of the twentieth century, candidates for ministry were asked to account for their conversion and that this was a development from the narratives he presented from the 1740s–1850s (Bebbington 2021, p. 191). Although George and McGrath note that salvation by faith requires action on the part of the divine, not simply a cognitive decision on the part of the individual, the emphasis remains, for them, upon the communication of such a decision (George 2003, p. 4). In McGrath's opening chapter of his book, he proceeds to critique the 'arid evangelical rationalism' that prioritises theological certitude over a link to the 'heart'. However, throughout this critique, the right knowledge is still foundational to evangelical spirituality: 'theology is thus understood to concern knowledge, reflection, and speculation' (McGrath 2003, p. 15). Therefore, we can argue that evangelical spirituality is always subsequent to evangelical right belief. Evangelical conversionism appears to have a set of beliefs associated with it that are necessary for conversion to be fully realised. The purpose and context of evangelical conversion narratives coalesce in the necessity for membership boundaries that are governed by theological convictions. The evangelical does not believe in baptismal regeneration (Holmes 2015, p. 28) because baptism is one of the 'ordinances that have no saving value' (Kling 2014, p. 604). The impact of this belief about the ordinances in evangelical theology (and illustrated in Kling's account of his father's conversion) is that markers such as baptism are insufficient to illustrate conversion (baptism might have occurred as a child or at a time before or a long time after conversion), yet the soteriological requirement of conversionism in evangelicalism still requires an accompanying marker. Believer's baptism is used to accommodate the requirement for conversion, but this is typically accompanied with testimony given either prior to or during the course of the baptismal experience. If baptism cannot fill this role because it is not tied tightly enough to the experience of conversion, then it is dependent upon accounts of conversion to indicate that it has indeed occurred. Luhrmann's experiences of attending a US Vineyard church illustrates this tendency, despite being across the sea from our main point of focus. In this account, she tells of the stories recalled by individuals in the churches about coming to God:

> *Like many evangelicals, Arnold [a member of the congregation] tells the story of a crisis, a sharp confrontation with humiliation or despair, and a turning point at which he consciously chose Christ. These stories are told again and again in evangelical churches, and often they acquire a local sameness, so that any church seems dense with the same kinds of personal struggles.* (Luhrmann 2012, p. 7)

What Luhrmann recognises in these testimonies is the rhythm and connection with the community that occurs when these accounts of conversion are given. The process is validated by those who hear the words and the same-ness that comprises the stories; it connects the convert with those around them. Evangelical faith is entered by conversion, one of the four key points in Bebbington's quadrilateral and the way in which lived theological conviction is expressed in this part of the Christian faith. Conversion, however, as a way to enter a community that is founded on an interior and individual experience, requires (or at the very least is accompanied by) a public and visible account of the change in a person. Much remains from the earliest days of evangelical history of written testimonials of conversions, and this has continued into the present as public spoken accounts of the change in people's lives that illustrate their entry into the faith. These accounts tell those who hear them that they have changed their lives, accepted the offer of salvation made by God through Christ and in the power of the Spirit, and aligned themselves with the faith community. Conversion narratives are practices of the soteriological emphasis in the evangelical community that create boundaries around the said community. This boundary is porous, all are welcome and offered the opportunity to convert, and, subsequently, they tell others about it.

3. Autism and Non-Speaking Communication

As discussed above, communication differences are a key diagnostic feature of autism. It is estimated that between 25 and 30% of autistic people can be described as 'non-speaking' or 'minimally speaking' (Rose et al. 2016). The term 'nonverbal' is often also used to describe these autistic people. However, many of these individuals do fully understand other people's spoken language, albeit they are unable to produce intentional directed speech in return. Therefore, it is argued that the term 'non-speaking' (rather than nonverbal) better captures their experience of words and language, and this term is generally preferred by autistic people (Zisk and Konyn).

In place of speech, non-speaking autistic people develop various ways to communicate needs and wishes, as well as to build relationships and even to tell stories. For example, Amy Sequenzia uses an augmentative communication device and writes of the frustration she feels when neurotypical people assume that, because she is non-speaking, she is of restricted intellectual ability, or does not have ideas and opinions (Sequenzia 2012b). The misconception that people who do not *speak* also do not *think* is a common and frustrating one. As Sequenzia writes,

> *There is still a misconception that if you don't speak you can't understand, think or even hear. People talk about you, not to you; they ask questions not to you, but direct the conversation towards a third person, even when you can communicate through signs or other augmentative communication devices.* (Sequenzia 2012a, p. 349)

Not all non-speakers can use the kind of device that assists Sequenzia, yet all non-speakers find ways to communicate. One way to conceptualise this is to describe it as each autistic person having their own 'language' which non-autistic people can learn to understand.

Practitioner Phoebe Caldwell shows how we can learn the 'language' of non-speakers, including amongst those with significant intellectual and other disabilities, using a process that she calls Intensive Interaction (Caldwell 2006). She begins by identifying how the non-speaking disabled person 'talks' to themselves, for example, by repeatedly tapping or touching surfaces to communicate with themselves and gain information about the environment around them. (This kind of practice is often described as 'stimming' or 'self-

stimulatory' behaviour). After observing how an individual 'stims', Caldwell then copies the sound or sensation that they habitually produce—in other words, she imitates their 'language'. This is in much the same way that a caregiver will imitate the early sounds made by a very young infant, establishing the back-and-forth turn-taking pattern that is the first building block of learning to speak. Caldwell's imitation usually succeeds in getting the attention of the non-speaking person, and a back-and-forth dialogue ensues:

> *A child comes into a sensory centre. Normally she either wanders around looking at the lights or lies on a waterbed next to the entrance with a pillow over her head. She does not engage with support staff. When I come she is on the mattress with her head at the far end under the cushion. I stand outside the door and watch. She kicks the mattress and I tap the same rhythm on the wall. She then sweeps her feet across the mattress which makes a different sound. I make a similar sound by rubbing the wall. She alternates one sound with another which builds into a fast interactive game. Gradually she lifts her pillow and her head comes round to see what I am doing. We can see that she is smiling.* (Caldwell 2006, p. 105)

A key feature of Caldwell's approach is that she does not seek to impose societal norms of communication onto the non-speaking person, but she also does not limit the communication to what the non-speaker is already doing in terms of self-stimulatory behaviour. Instead, by gently introducing novelty into the dialogue, Caldwell creates a "between" place, where the non-speaking person is drawn out of extreme introversion and given the opportunity to realise themselves as someone who exists in the view of another.

> *[A child who is blind, deaf and autistic.] He holds a piece of sheet foam in his hands with circular holes cut into it and runs his fingers round the holes. This is how he talks to himself, giving himself tactile feedback, the pattern of which is a circle. Each time he makes a sound, I make a circular movement on his arm. He starts to laugh, especially when I reverse the direction, feeding in the circle pattern he recognises but containing the element of surprise, anticlockwise to his clockwise.* (Caldwell 2006, p. 109)

Caldwell's work demonstrates how communicating is intrinsically linked to self-consciousness. Even self-stimulatory behaviours are communicative; they are the non-speaking person communicating with themselves about the environment around them and their agency within it. This self-talk can then be developed into dialogue when it is effectively captured and used for the purpose of communicating that there are other agents in the environment. The non-speaking disabled person, even if both deaf and blind, can then come to understand these agents as separate beings, ones who can observe them, communicate with them, and (as is testified to by the laughter in the examples above) even bring them joy.

One further point should be noted in relation to autistic communication, which is that even autistic people who can and do learn to speak may not find speech to be their most natural and authentic means of communication. Many autistic people report feeling that their relationship to spoken language is idiosyncratic, compared to non-autistic norms. Paul Deary, for example, describes how, for him (and he presumes for many other autistic people), words are very material things in and of themselves, things which resist pointing to meanings that lie beyond the simple materiality of sound (Dearey 2009, pp. 44–45). Ruth Dunster describes this autistic trait in a positive light, as an ability for 'cherishing the thisness of things' (Dunster 2022, p. 140). This is a different, rather than inferior, experience of what spoken language is, but it is one which may mean that expressing spiritual experiences and encounters through the medium of words has a disconcerting feel to it. We might liken it to the notion of "watching" a ballet by closing your eyes and having it described to you—there is a significant sense of a gulf between what is experienced and what can be described. Whilst this may be true to a certain extent for any attempt to describe spiritual encounters in words (by an autistic or non-autistic person), the sense that a spoken testimony is distant from, or poorly descriptive of, the spiritual encounter that actually occurred may be more significantly distressing for an autistic person. Autistic

theologian Stewart Rapley describes how both autistic and non-autistic Christians often have the same struggles, but, for an autistic person, it can be harder not to worry about those struggles and any sense of inauthenticity that they create (Rapley 2021, p. 41).

Drawing together this examination of autistic communication, there are certain points which should be emphasised and considered in relation to the evangelical tradition of conversionism and the giving of testimony. Firstly, it is incorrect to assume that non-speaking people cannot understand language and therefore cannot understand the Christian message. Additional disabilities such as dyspraxia will mean that some non-speakers will not be able to use an assistive device such as the one used by Sequenzia, and some non-speakers will not be able to direct their eye gaze, bodily movements or facial expressions to show understanding. However, it should never be assumed that this means these individuals are either not listening or not understanding words spoken to or around them.

Secondly, it is incorrect to assume that even those with multiple disabilities (such as the example above of the child who is autistic, blind and deaf) are not or cannot be conscious of themselves (Haslam 2012).[1] Repetitive movements or actions, including sounds (echolalia), whether produced voluntarily or involuntarily, all provide the individual with information about themselves in the environment around them and can be used to provide information about other 'selves' who are present, providing attention and loving care. The ability to conceive of oneself as separate from other people and things in this way is significant, as it creates the possibility of intending to respond to and to communicate with them (even if that intention cannot be actualised due to disability). Molly Haslam describes this intentional state as "yearning" or "expressive longing" for relationship, and she explores the possibility that this yearning can be directed towards encounters with God just as much as towards people and things (Haslam 2012, p. 104).

Lastly, even where testimony can be given by means of words, either spoken or written with an assistive device, this may not be the most authentic way for an autistic person to express interior and individual experience. This pushes us to consider whose convenience is primary in the communicative act of giving testimony. Whilst a spoken or written testimony is likely to be the readily understood form of communication for a predominantly neurotypical congregation, it may feel inauthentic to the autistic person who must perform this communicative act to testify to their conversion. When it comes to the means of determining who is within the boundary of the community, should the community's norms be put ahead of what is meaningful to the individual? It is noticeable that, in Acts 15, whilst circumcision was the accepted practice, it came to be re-evaluated following an interrogation of scripture. This led to pragmatic choices being made (e.g., Acts 15:20) as to which customs of the community could be observed by all members (including those with female bodies, although this point is not stated in the text) to demonstrate the shared identity of the community. As such, whilst the demonstration of a shared identity was deemed necessary, the new community needed to theologise the requirements and boundaries at the heart of the matter, and it was the fact of that demonstration, rather than the means of it, that proved to be the question at stake.

4. Autistic Hermeneutical Agency

The conversion narrative is an act of hermeneutics. It tells the story of a life with autobiographical interpretation (Hindmarsh 2008, p. 6). Theologian and occupational therapist Sarah Jean Barton highlights the significance of normalcy in disability studies and the manner that a 'normal' person is a socially constructed individual to whom people wish to conform behaviourally (Barton 2022, p. 6). Her work seeks to understand the practices of the church, such as baptism, and their relationships with disabled people (Barton 2022, p. 24). We address similar concerns by interrogating the conversion narrative practice used frequently in evangelical communities. The question that Barton asks is 'what constitutive practices sit at the heart of Christian discipleship?' (Barton 2022, p. 24). In relationship to conversion, we suggest that it is the story that one gives and the account one provides as evidence of the converted life that indicates a desire for membership in the faith

community. This has two facets: the first is oral and literary, that of a spoken or written autobiographical account, and the second is hermeneutical, the ability to interpret one's own life and find a converted centre that is orientated towards the evangelical emphasis on Christ. We argue that the first facet is necessarily subsumed beneath the second—the core practice is the hermeneutical agency. The manner and power of telling the story of conversion needs to be suitable to the individual and their preferred communication style. Evangelical practices associated with conversion require a core of reflection, of self-understanding and of movement from before to after. Whether that is narrated in a particular style or manner is less important than the conversion experience. Thus, following Miranda Fricker (Fricker 2011), hermeneutical agency is compromised in autistic believers if their manner of communication is restricted by practices that are not actually constitutive of Christian discipleship. For Fricker, hermeneutical injustice is the 'unfair advantage in structuring collective social understanding' (Fricker 2011, p. 147). This relates to social meanings, she argues, and is significant for this paper. Conversion experience, and testimony about it, are ridden with social meanings; it is the way in which membership is understood and determines whether the 'good news' (as articulated in the opening verses from Acts) is understood to have been received. By requiring the conversion experience to be narratable in words either written or spoken, there may be an obstacle that prohibits the free expression of a spiritual conversion for the autistic person, leading them to believe 'I don't have a testimony' (see above). Furthermore, it is similar to Fricker's other category of epistemological injustice, testimonial injustice (Fricker 2011, pp. 9–29). Fundamentally, the autistic testimony that is neither speaking nor writing about conversion is not received as authentic, and, thus, the autistic person is subjected to injustice and their experience not received as valid. Yet, the ability to speak and give an account is not the primary issue at hand for evangelicals. Rather, testimony-giving is a practice that has developed around the focus on conversionism, and it has become related to a need to authenticate the experience of conversion. As we have observed above, in evangelicalism, baptism itself is not an ordinance that constitutes the authentication of conversion, as baptism may have taken place in infancy, before conversion, or may, for a variety of reasons, not take place until some time after a conversion experience. In light of this, narrating the experience of conversion has slipped into the role of boundary-marking one's entry into the community of faith. This could have the unfortunate consequence of leaving those who cannot narrate their conversion experience on the outside of the faith community's boundary, with no way to 'speak' their way in.

5. God Disclosed in Irregular Speech: Practices of Conversion

The evangelical conversion narrative, according to Hindmarsh, constructs a self-understanding by drawing an individual into a larger narrative. It achieves this by a narrative act of location. Evangelical conversion narratives answer the question 'who?' by way of this locative association. This 'who?' refers to the individual self-identity of the narrator in the conversion narratives. For many evangelicals, the answer to the question 'who?' is not, however, 'me' but actually 'Jesus Christ'. The narrative self-understanding of an evangelical conversion narrative is to locate the individual as no longer only telling their own story but aligning their story, superseding their story, with the story of another. This places the practice of giving an account of the transformation of a life as a practice that is concerned with locating that person in the story of Jesus Christ. Indeed, Kling claims they are 'attempts to explain the experience [of conversion] by answering the fundamental questions of identity: Who am I? To whom do I belong? What does life mean?' (Kling 2014, p. 605). In the Gospels, one does not have to look far before finding examples of testimony that occur without the use of spoken words. Even in the opening sequence of the Gospel of Luke, the unborn infant John the Baptist is depicted as leaping in the womb of Elizabeth, testifying that child carried by Mary was the coming saviour (Luke 1:39–45). This event is taken up by Martin Luther, who uses it to argue that infants are able to have faith and should therefore be eligible for baptism (Luther 1958, p. 242). Luther's discussion

is then taken further by Kevin O'Farrell, who uses it as part of his proposal that baptism should neither be withheld from non-speaking people who cannot make a declaration of faith. O'Farrell observes Luther's conviction that it was not the baptismal act itself, but the ongoing behaviour of the church towards the baptised, treating them as members of the community, that daily confirmed their status as baptised people (O'Farrell 2019).

John Swinton argues that non-speaking people are not so much limited in their ability to communicate their own story, so much as '. . .they are limited by the communicational contexts within which they are embedded' (Swinton et al. 2011, p. 6). By this, he means either that the stories of such individuals are often the (sometimes untrue) stories told about them by other people, or that they need the assistance of other people to tell their own stories. Sometimes these stories can be powerful counternarratives, ones which transform the way that disabled people are perceived and valued by those with whom they have encounters. Swinton gives the example of a disabled person, Brian, who does not use any known system of communication. Despite his significantly limiting disabilities, Brian's mother describes him as 'a good person'. Swinton comments on the way this challenges what people perceive about Brian:

> *Cultural narratives may commonly position Brian as disabled, unable to communicate; a tragic figure; his mother linguistically positions him as "a good person" and in so doing offers a simple but powerful counternarrative that gives Brian a quite different story.* (Swinton et al. 2011, p. 8)

One of the ways in which we become able to tell these different stories is to observe an 'embodied counterstory' which is embedded in the life of the non-speaking person (Swinton et al. 2011, p. 11). As an example, Swinton recounts the behaviour of Mary, who has continual muscle spasms and cannot speak but makes sounds—noisy shouts and long wails. However, since her infancy, Mary has been taken to Quaker meetings by her caregivers, and, when the community moves into periods of silence, Mary too becomes silent. It is not known, nor can it ever be known, whether Mary understands why the community observes silence, whether Mary 'prays' in any conventional sense or not. But, as Swinton points out, in Matthew 25, Jesus describes how he has been ministered to without the ministers even realising it—as Matthew 25:37 states, '. . .Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink?' 'That being so', concludes Swinton, '. . .it would appear that knowing Jesus is a *relational* concept and not merely an intellectual one'. The significant point is that Mary's silence is recognised and held by the community with whom she worships as a communicative act of spirituality. In this way, not only does the community confirm and sustain Mary's spirituality by treating her as a member, but Mary's spirituality also confirms that of the community in return (Swinton et al. 2011, p. 16).

6. Non-Speaking Testimony

We argue not on the premise that non-speaking people cannot make a spoken declaration of faith but, rather, that all non-speakers communicate somehow. This may be only in the experience of yearning and expressive longing, which is met by the receptiveness of (rather than the evaluative judgement of) a community of faith—one that is willing to make the disabled individual's story of faith part of their own. If the question of conversion is 'To whom do I belong?' then, where a community is prepared to pay careful attention to how a non-speaking person communicates their yearning to be part of that community, the answer can be shown to be 'I belong to Christ and His church'—with or without the adornment of spoken testimony.

Léon van Ommen, a theologian whose work has a focus on understanding the faith lives of non-speaking autistic people, recounts an encounter which took place at a church where he was undertaking some fieldwork. A non-speaking autistic person, See Huan, came up to van Ommen after the church service and stood near to him. See Huan did not speak or return van Ommen's greeting:

> *. . .he just stood next to me—showing his attentiveness. [. . .] . . .and after a while he went somewhere else. To many, this may seem like a brief and insignificant exchange, but afterwards the pastor, who had also been present at the interview, commented that this was a remarkable and a very significant act on See Huan's part, as he would not usually approach someone like that."* (Van Ommen and Cundill 2024)

See Huan used proxemics, the choice of where to place his body within the room, to communicate his interest in, or perhaps his sense of relationship to van Ommen. It may seem like a small act to those who can freely converse with new friends or people with whom they wish to become better acquainted, but, according to the Pastor's interpretation, this was a highly communicative and meaningful act on the part of See Huan. Our suggestion is that there are many such communicative acts which take place, but which run the risk of being overlooked by those who focus too readily on normative styles of communication.

Turning to scripture, this type of behaviour (i.e., communicating through the choice of where to place one's body) can also be seen in the actions of the haemorrhaging woman who presses through the crowd to touch the garment of Jesus. The events of this encounter are recorded in Matthew 9:20, Mark 5:25–34 and Luke 8:43–48. In each case, the action of the woman is one that leads to *sózó*—which is often interpreted as indicating the woman's physical healing (which it likely includes) but also the word used throughout the New Testament to indicate salvation in terms of deliverance from the power of sin (e.g., John 3:16).

In the Matthew account, the woman is described as thinking (literally, *elegen gar en heautē*—'for she was saying to herself') that touching the garment of Jesus would save her (*sōthēsomai*—'I will be saved'). She is not recorded as saying anything else, and, as such, she does not publicly communicate the intended meaning of her act, either before or after, yet it is presented in Matthew's Gospel as sufficiently communicative in and of itself.

In Mark, she is recorded as saying these words, but it is not clear who the audience is or if anybody hears her (*elegen gar hoti*—'for she was saying'). It is notable that, after the woman comes forward to identify herself as the one who had touched Jesus' cloak, she is described as telling Jesus the truth. Jesus then makes a two-fold response. Firstly, he says that her act of faith has saved her (*sesōken*—'saved'; the perfect tense indicating a completed action) and, secondly, she is then given the imperative to go and be healed of the disease from which she suffers. This appears to indicate that, although the physical healing has not yet come about, her salvation has been made complete by her act of faith. Notably, it is not the gathered crowd who judge her telling of the truth, but Christ himself, and he accounts her act of faith as sufficient for the salvific moment, prior to her subsequent confession.

In his version of events, Luke recounts that the haemorrhaging does stop in the instant that the woman touches the cloak of Jesus (Luke 8:44). Luke also records the woman subsequently declaring (*apēngeilen*) to everyone present that she has been 'healed'—using the verb *iaomai* (to heal) rather than *sózó* (to be saved). When Jesus responds to her testimony, however, he appears to correct her understanding by reverting back to *sózó*, saying, *hē pistis sou sesōken*—'your faith has *saved* you.'

In the Acts 15 passage with which we began this article, we proposed a method to assess hermeneutical processes in light of previously unheard experiences. It is notable that Peter accepts the Gentiles placing themselves within the community of faith as making him aware that the Holy Spirit had been gifted to them and that a new understanding and interpretation might be necessary. Their behaviour seemed to show the yearning and expressive longing of faith, a communicative act in response to the question 'To whom do I belong?' This is observable in the woman who touches Jesus' garment, whose communicative act is not even seen but only felt by Jesus, even before (or regardless of whether) a word has been spoken. Indeed, even in Luke's Gospel, where the woman is subsequently recorded as giving a verbal account, she does not seem to succeed in authentically putting into words the magnitude of the spiritual experience that she has had.

Knowing her intimately, Jesus corrects her understanding and speaks her testimony for her, telling a different story.

Returning to See Huan—he was not able to explain to van Ommen the meaning of his act, but the Pastor who knows See Huan more intimately was able to explain the communicative significance of what had occurred. See Huan is embedded in a Christian community that pays careful attention to the ways that he communicates and, as such, is able to assist him in narrating the story that is embedded in his life. This becomes possible when the 'collective social understanding' (as described in Fricker's account of hermeneutical injustice) is not carelessly structured towards able-bodied norms but is deliberately reorientated towards being attentive to the communicative style of each individual.

Jesus's behaviour to the woman, seen in light of the research conducted by Caldwell, Swinton, van Ommen and others, indicates that there are ways of authenticating a turn to faith that do not require narration. Where narration does occur, for example, in the Lukan account discussed above, it is for the purpose of the bystanders' understanding and is not essential to the act of being saved in and of itself. This serves to affirm the role of testimony as something which is good and beneficial to the faith of others, but, at the same time, Jesus' declaration—'your faith has saved you'—also clearly demonstrates that it was the act of approaching Jesus (and not the subsequent testimony about it) that was sufficient to demonstrate the woman's faith.

There are many possible means by which a non-speaking autistic person might wish to demonstrate their faith. For some, communicative media such as artwork, photography or dance may be possible. For others, communication may come in the form of proximal acts (such as with See Huan), an observance of the community's ritual of silence (Mary), or the sense of 'To whom do I belong?' may be communicated only through regular attendance. What matters is not so much the means of communication, but the community's willingness to pay attention to it and to understand that the story being told is not just that of the non-speaking person but is also part of their own.

There is scope too, for believers who do speak, to also think about the story being told by what they do not say. It is not only non-speakers who communicate their feelings and intentions through where they place themselves in a room or in a group, or by who they do or do not approach and pay attention to. Van Ommen et al. record how one of their research participants, Philip, a non-speaking autistic man who communicated his thoughts via a spelling board, felt frustrated that members of his church never tried to converse with him, even though this was possible by means of his assistive communication device. Communicating this way was a little more effortful and time-consuming, and, as a result, people did not try. As Philip commented, 'We abandon people when they have trouble with conversation.' It is striking that the church members had (albeit perhaps unwittingly) communicated their 'abandonment' of Philip, even when he continued to choose week by week to place himself within the community where he wished to belong. This abandonment not only impoverished Philip, limiting his sense of belonging in the faith community, but it also impoverished those who chose to ignore him, because they missed out on hearing and growing through what Philip could testify, in terms of how God was at work in his life (Van Ommen and Cundill 2024).

7. Conclusions

Conversion is a core tenet of evangelical lived religion. It is the primary way in which the new life that is offered by the Gospel is experienced. The focus in Acts 15 is on the ways in which those who are new to the community can demonstrate their allegiance to the community and to the transformative power of a new life in Jesus Christ by the power of the Spirit. The agency and narrative control that has been afforded to all types of people, those in power and those on the fringes, via the act of giving an account of their conversion is not disputed. However, we have argued in this article that the understanding of agency should be further expanded to include non-speaking members of congregations and to receive their accounts as authentic and validating. The narrative agency that requires

people to account for their own conversion experience has hermeneutical force. Their own experience is interpreted via their own understanding. This is a powerful equaliser for all who seek to show the power of God in their lives. It functions as a soteriological marker and, as such other methods of boundary marking should be incorporated, any that can illustrate the belief and personal decision making necessary to be in line with evangelical conversionism. We have suggested in this article that embodied behaviours speak volumes—that, both in scripture and in current experiences, the use of proxemics and other forms of physical communication are both valid and suitable when they are the primary forms of communication and self-narration for an individual. This embodied signification should be received, as all conversion narratives are, contextually within the faith community and with the power of the Spirit to aid in the hermeneutical reception for those who witness it. The pragmatic consideration in Acts 15.20 demonstrates the necessity of both removing unnecessary acts of conformity and of finding suitable and appropriate ways for conversion to be illustrated in new or evolving contexts. Thus, evangelicals today can refuse a 'yoke that neither our ancestors nor we have been able to bear' (Act 15 v 10).

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Notes

[1] As discussed by some disability theologians, it is a common misconception that people with severe intellectual disability and limited ability to communicate through traditional means of speech or gesture lack self-consciousness. Thus, self-consciousness is taken to be a component of intelligence, separating humans from animals, implying that humans with intellectual disability are akin to animals. There are obvious theological difficulties arising from ths latent assumption, particularly with regard to humans being created *imago dei*. See (Haslam 2012).

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The Influence of Popular Culture's Interpretation of Noah's Ark upon Evangelical Reading and Interpretation

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Abstract: Whilst there is much published research looking at the use and/or interpretation of the Bible in popular culture, there has been little research investigating the impact of such cultural biblical engagement upon contemporary Christian Bible readers. Drawing upon focus group data, this paper thus explores the influence that the cultural history of Noah's ark, particularly in popular culture, has upon the way evangelicals interpret. This paper shows that evangelical readers were influenced by the interpretations of the Noah story in the spheres of science, new atheism, children's books and films, and this affected the conclusions they came to about the issue of historicity, morality and applicability. The paper closes with a reflection on why this phenomenon occurs and what hermeneutical benefits it might offer the reader by considering how God might be at work in the cultural depictions of Scripture and what they might offer interpretative practice.

Keywords: Noah; evangelical; popular culture; film; science; atheism; children's books; interpretation

1. Introduction

The story of Noah was one of three biblical texts that I had focus groups of participants read and discuss as part of my PhD research. In their reading of all three texts, the participants evidenced numerous influences upon their interpretation, including various facets of their individual and personal context (Hutchinson 2024). This is to be expected as hermeneutical research has long established that readers are influenced by their context.[1] Yet it became apparent that the story of Noah, when contrasted with the other two texts that my participants explored, offered a unique type of context that affected a participant's interpretation—the interpretations of the story in popular culture. The story of Noah's ark is famous and has been discussed, interpreted and depicted in various public spheres. This cultural conversation around Noah provided a context for the participants' engagement with the story that the other texts did not, simply because they have not made their way into the cultural conversation in any meaningful way.

Though much scholarship has explored the use or interpretation of the Bible in popular culture, there has been little research investigating the impact that this might have on Christian readers of Scripture (Culbertson and Wainwright 2010; Clanton and Clark 2012; Clanton and Clark 2020). So it was that this paper was born, exploring the influence that the cultural history of a text, particular "popular culture" has upon the way evangelicals engage with Scripture. The notion of cultural history as an expansion of the field of reception history is described by Timothy Beal: "cultural history encompasses reception history even as it opens toward horizons of research that are beyond reception history's theoretical and methodological reach. The rise of cultural history over the past several decades has marked a shift in the focus of historical research from cause . . . to meaning . . . In relation to the reception history of the Bible, the turn to cultural history of scriptures would signal a parallel shift in focus from the impacts or influences of biblical texts and Bibles to the cultural meanings of them (Beal 2011)". This encapsulates the focus of this paper, which explores popular cultural depictions of the story of Noah and their influence upon evangelical interpretation.

Accordingly, this paper offers another piece of evidence into the growing body of empirical research into evangelical Bible reading practices that has been illuminating what happens when evangelicals read the Bible.[2] In this paper, I demonstrate how evangelicals approach Scripture under the influence of its depictions in popular culture. The first part of the paper explores popular cultural depictions of Noah's ark, pertinent to my data and then evidences the way in which my participants called upon these cultural depictions in their discussion of the text and the way in which they were influenced by them. The second part of the paper offers a reflection on this phenomenon from an evangelical perspective, claiming that cultural history can be a helpful lens through which to engage the text and reveals something about the way that God is at work in cultural depictions of Scripture so as to inform interpretation. Before coming to this, I will outline some key definitions and the methodology of my research.

2. Materials and Methods

Though focus groups pose some methodological challenges, they provide an excellent insight into Bible reading as a natural forum in which readers can discuss and share their ideas. This is particularly adept given that group Bible study is a common Christian phenomenon (Bunton 2014).

The 19 participants involved in this research were aged between 23 and 83, 10 of whom were female and 9 male. They all volunteered and belonged to three evangelical Anglican churches based in the south of the England. Importantly, to classify as "ordinary" readers, none of the participants had to have undertaken any formal theological training or education. The research on ordinary readers has grown in recent decades stemming from liberationist methodologies and contextualised reading (West 2014). The importance of studying the theology and Bible reading of such individuals has been recognised (Astley 2002).

The participants were invited to read Genesis 7, the middle of the Noah narrative, which was provided on a handout including three broad questions to provoke discussion.[3] The conversation was predominantly participant-led, with minimal input from the moderator and lasted around 45 min.[4] My analysis through thematic coding enabled me to identify themes, conclusions and tendencies that could be seen in at least two of the three groups.

Researcher Self-Reflection

This paper reflects on themes that have emerged organically from the data, beyond what I set out to research. As such, I initially approached the exploration of cultural history without a bias or agenda to prove anything in particular. Of course, this does not make me an objective reporter. I research evangelicals as someone invested in the tradition, having been shaped myself in the evangelical Anglican tradition. The habits and practices I captured from my participants are very familiar to me, and I am trying to explore them here in the hopes of firstly, offering an account of what evangelicals are doing (the descriptive-empirical task) and then reflecting on why this might be the case (the interpretative task) (Osmer 2008, p. 4). Whilst this paper does not extend to all four of Richard Osmer's practical theological questions, it does take some steps towards the third, considering what ought to be the level of influence that popular culture depictions of texts have upon evangelical readings, and whether this practice actually reveals anything about the way that God might be at work in cultural depictions of Scripture to inform how one understands the story. This final point of reflection has been prompted by a focus on the theme of the journal of which it is a part. This is worth mentioning simply to note that my reflection has not taken an unchartered course but been focused to consider how God might be at work in this practice.

3. Results: Popular Cultural Depictions

In this section of the paper, I give a brief overview of the cultural history of Noah's ark in the spheres of popular culture that my participants referenced: science, new atheism, children's books and film. I turn first, however, to outlining some key definitions.

3.1. Cultural Depictions

Although the term "depiction" is often associated with visual mediums, I am using it within this article to describe the way in which particular communities interpret the narrative of Noah and so reframes and casts the story in a particular light. In other words, by engaging with the Scriptural narrative from a specific perspective, different interpretative spheres depict the narrative of Noah as a certain kind of story. Erickson and Santana refer to this as "rescripting" (Erickson and Santana 2016), whilst Culbertson and Wainwright frame this as the text's "afterlife" (Culbertson and Wainwright 2010). Both these terms are indicating the way in which the text has been received and interpreted beyond the religious community to which it belongs.

The cultural depictions that emerged from my participants' discussion of Genesis 7 centered around the issues of historicity, morality and application. In discussing whether or not the events of Noah actually happened, the participants drew upon insights from science and considered how atheists might respond to the text. This consideration of an atheist perspective also featured in the participants' discussion of the morality of God in the story, where the participants also made reference to the Noah films and the impact that these had upon their impression of God in the story, as well as the events of the narrative itself. Finally, the influence of children's stories could also be detected in the participants' discussion of morality and in how they might apply the story to themselves. Section 4 of this paper will elaborate on these instances in more detail, but this part of the paper explores these cultural references and their depiction of the Noah narrative.

The following thus explains how science has depicted the story of Noah as fiction/myth, and how new atheists paint the story as an exposé of the immorality of God and the delusion of his followers, whilst children's story books offer Noah as a moral tale. Finally, the most visual medium I discuss, that of film, depicts the story as a fantastical epic.

These spheres of cultural history are chosen for exploration specifically because they relate to the data that emerged from my participants' discussion of the text. Offering an overview of the relevant cultural depictions prior to the data might suggest that these categories have been imposed upon the data, rather than emerging from them, but this is not the case. Rather, by exploring the cultural depictions first, this offers the reader the necessary background to reflect on the participants' contributions elaborated in Section 4. Therefore, as a result of these cultural depictions arising from the data, the following overview is not intended to be a comprehensive account of the numerous and diverse depictions of the story of Noah that can be found in culture.

3.2. Popular Culture

It is also important to establish that I am using a rather broad and particular definition of "popular culture" when it comes to these categories and that certain interpretative communities explored in what follows may seem more at home in this category than others. I am using the term to mean the spheres of interpretation that are firstly, from outside the church and academic theology, and secondly, well known (by virtue of the fact that my participants knew about them), i.e., not elitist or high culture. I am not claiming that my participants will have necessarily read or engaged directly with specific cultural history material, but rather that certain spheres of interpretation have offered responses to the text that have become well known in such a way that they infiltrate contemporary thought. However, as will be seen, drawing lines between what counts as "Christian" and "non-Christian" is not clear cut, so there is a looseness to the overarching category of "popular culture" that I am working with. I now turn to the first of these categories: science.

3.3. Science: Fiction/Myth

The interpretation of the Noah story within the field of science fits my definition of "popular culture" because the field of science is firstly, not theological, and secondly, because under the 1989 Education Reform Act in the UK, science became a compulsory

core subject alongside English and Maths as part of the national curriculum in the UK (House of Commons Science and Technology Committee 2024). This means that a basic level of scientific knowledge is commonplace amongst the average Briton who has been schooled since this act, including various topics that have typically been seen as contentious in relation to the Bible, such as the big bang and evolution (Ofqual 2024). This means that one does not have to be an academic Scientist to have an understanding of how the field of science would interpret the story of Noah's ark.

Both Norman Cohn (1999) and Janet Browne (2003) have documented how the growth of the sciences over the last few centuries has challenged the validity of a world-wide flood taking place. In their work, they cover that modern science has posited on numerous grounds that the Noah flood, as it is accounted for in Genesis, is a scientific impossibility. Whether it be the amount of water required to flood the Earth, building a vessel big enough to contain the world's species, the ability to gather the world's species, or fossil records and geological evidence—science's interpretation of the Noah narrative is that it did not happen as the text describes. The story is thus depicted as either a fiction, a made-up account of something that did not happen or a myth in the form of an exaggerated account of an ordinary flood that occurred. This naturally poses a difficulty to a reading of Noah that takes the story to be a factual account of an event that happened in history. Either the findings of science have to be discarded, or the nature of the biblical text and the way it is to be read needs to be readjusted.

3.4. New Atheism: Exposé

Particularly since the rise in scientific knowledge and archaeological investigation, atheists have typically used the Noah narrative to deconstruct religion whilst also highlighting the immorality of "God". Richard Dawkins provides the most famous example of this in his *The God Delusion* writing "the moral of the story of Noah is appalling. God took a dim view of humans, so he (with the exception of one family) drowned the lot of them including children, and also, for good measure, the rest of the (presumably blameless) animals as well" (Dawkins 2016, p. 269).[5]

It is important to note that this atheistic response which questions the morality of God in the story, can also occur amongst people of faith. Yet, what differs between Jewish and Christian interpretations is their appreciation of the themes of salvation and redemption that the story offers (themes that emerge more clearly in the context of the overarching narrative of the Bible), for example, Atkinson (1990, p. 136), which are seldom dwelt upon by atheists, who simply conclude that the story shows that God is not good. The destruction of the entire human race is seen as an unredeemable action, and the story is depicted as an exposé of the character of God who is revealed to be unforgiving and cruel.

Moreover, atheists use the narrative as evidence that the Christian faith is delusional—believing that the entire world could be flooded is considered unscientific (as above) and appeals to miracles, and the action of God is not a valid defence. This view is taken by all four of the central figures associated with new atheism, namely Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, succinctly summarised by Benjamin DeVan (2012). Though not dismissing that the story could have its origins in some sort of natural disaster, these thinkers contend that believing that the events of Noah's ark occurred as they are told in Genesis, is a mistake. In the words of Hitchens, "Every year, Christian fundamentalists renew their expeditions to Mount Ararat in modern Armenia, convinced that one day they will discover the wreckage of Noah's Ark. This effort is futile and would prove nothing if it were successful" (Hitchens 2011, pp. 88–89). For new atheists then, the story of Noah's ark is depicted as an exposé on two fronts: it reveals the true character of an immoral god, as well as the delusion of said god's followers who believe in the story of Noah's ark.

3.5. Children's Books: Moral Tale

The story of Noah has long been a popular children's story taught in "Sunday school", featuring heavily in children's bibles and often appearing on the front cover. Strictly speaking, children's Christian literature does not quite fit my own definition of popular culture as being outside the church, given that these are produced by Christian authors. However, I am including it as a sphere of popular culture because it is an area of Christian resourcing that many non-Christians may have engaged with as children. This means it has a role in shaping popular understandings of Noah outside the church, in a way that other Christian literature does not.[6]

Research has been conducted into children's account of Noah's ark (England 2012, pp. 213–40; Landy 2007), and Russell Dalton's analysis of the story of Noah in children's bibles throughout American history highlights that often embellishments, abridgements and illustrations are used in these retellings (Dalton 2016).[7] Dalton's analysis notes that one such embellishment is that Noah was made fun of by his contemporaries for building the ark. In connection with the idea that Noah interacts with his peers, which does not occur in the Genesis narrative, is the notion that Noah had the opportunity to warn or save his contemporaries from the impending flood. Neither the mockery nor the warning occurs in the biblical account, but they do exist in many children's accounts. This strand of embellishment did not originate with children's books, however. Nadav Sharon and Moshe Tishel have established several occurrences of the embellishment in second temple Jewish literature, showing that it has been a persistent idea early in the history of interpretation (Sharon and Tishel 2010). It is also worth noting that some have corroborated the idea that Noah interacts with his peers from New Testament references to Noah as a "preacher of righteousness" (2Peter 2:5) and his "condemning the world" (Hebrews 11:7). Additionally, 2 Peter 3:3–6 references the notion of "scoffers" in relation to Jesus and references the flood, offering a further potential source of the notion that Noah was laughed at, especially in relation to 2:5. However, these are extrapolations and not explicit affirmations that such an event occurred. Indeed, Jesus's own references to the Noah flood indicate that no warning was given (Matthew 24:37–39/Luke 17:26). One further source of this tradition should be acknowledged, which is the Qur'an (Q.11:38) where Noah is scoffed at as he builds the ark.

Contemporary children's books are therefore certainly not the inventors of this addition to the Genesis account. Dalton goes on to identify four main ways that children's stories frame the Noah narrative: retellings which focus on the character of God, retellings that relate Noah to the salvation offered by Jesus, retellings that tell the story of Noah as history and entertainment and retellings that emphasise Noah as a model of virtues and vices. Of this latter group, Dalton writes:

> These authors not only add the embellishment of Noah's mocking neighbors, but use the extra-biblical episode as the source of the lesson they feel children should primarily glean from the story. Furthermore, they tweak the embellishment of Noah's mocking neighbors to have them call him crazy in order to encourage children to remain true to their faith even if their views lead others to question their sanity. The truly faithful, this version of the story seems to imply, will be mocked and even be called crazy. (Dalton 2016, p. 177)

Dalton establishes that this trend dominated in the last decades of the twentieth century, appearing in Jenny Robinson's *The Encyclopaedia of Bibles* in 1974, Sandy Silver Thorne's *The Great Bible Adventure* in 1990, Dottie and Josh McDowell's *The Right Choices Bible* in 1998, Focus on the Family's *Bedtime Bible* in 2002 and Zondervan's *Veggie Tales Bible* in 2009 (Dalton 2016, pp. 174–77).

In adapting and embellishing the story of Noah to communicate it to children, the story is depicted by some children's books as a moral tale with a lesson to learn about how to live as a faithful Christian.

3.6. Film: Fantastical Epic

The category of film sits most comfortably within the designation of popular culture. Two notable films have been made about Noah. The first was the 2007 film *Evan Almighty* starring Steve Carrell, a sequel to the popular film *Bruce Almighty*. The film provides a comedic contemporary reiteration of the Noah story where the modern Noah, called Evan, is ridiculed as he carries out his instruction from God to build an ark. In the modern setting of the film, Evan's exploits make global news and TV talk show hosts are shown calling him "crazy" and a "jackass". The film both mirrors children's stories in the imaginative additions that it makes to the story, but also captures something of the interpretation of the text by atheist readers who claim that religion is delusional. Evan Almighty depicts a culture that is extremely sceptical about God and their response to Evan encapsulates something of the broader secular response to the story of Noah's ark in general.

That being said, the film concludes in a dramatic flood caused by the breaking of a local damn which ultimately proves the modern day Noah as correct. It further offers a moral vision for changing the world with one "Act of Random Kindness" (ARK) at a time, which reflects the depiction of Noah by children's books as a moral tale. Cast ultimately as a comedy and entertainment, the film offers an amusing and fantastical take on the Noah story.

The most recent film depiction of the Noah story was the 2014 *Noah* film starring Russell Crowe. This film is very different to *Evan Almighty* and offers an adaption of the story that is more in line with the original story (rather than a modern reiteration) but with incorporated material, particularly from the book of Enoch. It is a dramatic film that has been said to offer an interpretation of the story that highlights modern issues including the environmental crisis (Moore and Shapiro 2018). Like *Evan Almighty*, there is an undertone of a moral lesson, but both films primarily depict the Noah event as a fantastical epic, drawing the viewer into the drama and spectacle of such a sensational story (Johnston 2014). By virtue of being depicted "on the big screen", Noah's flood is depicted as an epic tale of adventure.

4. Results: Popular Cultural Depictions in the Participants' Reading

Having outlined the depictions of the Noah story from various fields, this section of the paper highlights three areas where they appeared in the participants' discussion of the text: historicity, morality and applicability. These three discussions correspond to the hermeneutical "three worlds" of the text (Ricoeur 2008). In exploring historicity, the participants were looking at the world behind the text; the discussion about morality involved the world within the text, whereas the topic of applicability concerned the world in front of the text. I will demonstrate how each of these discussions was influenced by the depictions of the text in cultural history.

4.1. Historicity (The World Behind the Text)

Whether or not the flood actually happened was a prominent point of discussion amongst the participants.[8] As evangelicals, my participants had a high view of Scripture which meant that they wanted to assert the "truth" of the text. In general, however, there was an understanding prevalent amongst the participants that the text could be both true but not factually accurate. For some, this was a result of their understanding of the genre of the text. Yet, both science and new atheism appeared to also influence the way in which the issue of historicity was explored.

4.1.1. Science

The participants demonstrated a tension between their belief in miracles and the omnipotence of God, their belief in the truth of the Bible and their education and scientific understanding that a worldwide flood is implausible.

In the application of science to the text, the participants demonstrated an awareness that science raised significant issues in relation to the plausibility of the narrative. For

example, one participant commented: "About the historical accuracy, there's obviously things that aren't accurate because it couldn't have been the whole of the earth that was flooded because the amount of water required would have been impossible". This might suggest that science and the story are incompatible or at least mutually exclusive, but the participants attempted to navigate this tension, mirroring research that suggests many evangelicals are in the habit of integrating the insights of science with their reading of the Bible (Chan and Ecklund 2016). The results of this integration was that all three focus groups concluded that the flood did occur, but was local, rather than global. The flood would have appeared to be the whole Earth to those who experienced it, but was in fact, limited to a particular area. In this interpretation, the participants attempted to respect the insights of modern science that depict the story as fiction, whilst upholding the truth of the Bible; the flood is not impossible as science prescribes because it was not universal, and the Bible is truthful in its limited perspective.

Although this was the conclusion reached, there remained a tension in this, as is evidenced in the following participant comment: "But how would the water be contained? In that one area? If it's as high as the mountains? It would cover the whole face of the earth". Whilst being open to the interpretation of a local flood, this participant simultaneously demonstrates wanting to read the text literally by taking seriously the text's claim that the water covered the mountains. How could a contained amount of water have risen so high? This is a demonstration of the strain between taking the text at face value and having respect for scientific plausibility.

When discussing the narrative from a scientific perspective, a variety of factors were considered including tectonic plates, continents shifting, the spread of civilisation, the amount of water on the Earth and the atmosphere at altitude. This shows that the participants read the narrative as educated individuals, with a basic level of scientific education. A generational difference could be discerned between two groups which consisted of participants who were in their twenties and thirties, and the third group who were all in their forties or older. The younger groups attempted to incorporate scientific knowledge much more than the older group, likely a product of receiving their education in the twenty-first century.

In summary, if science interprets the Noah narrative as fiction or at least, myth, modern readers were influenced by this in their interpretation that the flood could be local, rather than global. In their respect for science, the participants could be seen to merge their scientific knowledge with the events of the narrative, showing a lucidity towards the text in conjunction with a commitment to the events having taken place. They therefore did not succumb to an entirely scientific interpretation that the flood did not happen, because the flood in question was taken to be local.

4.1.2. New Atheism

The influence of new atheist responses to the text also proved to be an influential factor in how the participants handled the question of historicity. In one group, despite agreeing that God is omnipotent and can do anything, the participants were not content with this as an explanation of the story, instead wanting to understand pragmatically how the events could occur, prompting much of the science discussion (above). This concern for a rational explanation stemmed from an anticipated backlash from atheists, as one participant stated, "cynically, sceptically, this is what atheists will come to you and say, 'how is that possible?' And frankly, I don't have the answer". This statement suggests that the participant was imagining either an antagonistic or evangelistic exchange whereby he would be required to offer a rational or convincing explanation for how a worldwide flood could occur to someone who claimed that believing in the story was delusional.

Additionally, another participant in a different group mirrored this consideration of how "non-Christians" would receive the text:

P1: What do you do when non-Christians ask you "do you believe in x,y and z?"

> P2: I never had somebody question me about a passage like this actually. I mean, I'm sure other people have, but I've never had someone actually ask me that.
>
> P1: It's probably because I grew up when a lot of people went to Sunday school and heard all these stories and as they got older, they thought "that was a load of rubbish" and started to challenge the Christians about it, you see. Maybe people don't do that so much these days, I don't know.

Participant P1 was considerably older than the other members of his group, who were in their twenties and thirties, hence his reference to growing up in a context where Sunday School attendance was much more common. His reading of the text was affected by his experience of his peers losing their faith and coming to question the narratives that they had been taught, including Noah, concluding that the whole thing was made up. Though he postulates that "maybe people don't do that so much these days", his concern reflects that of the participant above, who was much younger, suggesting that the atheist influence transcends age categories.

Considerations of the text's historicity thus incorporated an "atheist" mindset, revealing the influence of secular responses to the text that depict it as evidence that believers are delusional. The participants seemed to be aware that the Noah narrative might be a target for attack by atheists who would claim that religion is delusional, and so the participants chose to address how such thinkers would respond to the text in their consideration of historicity.

4.2. Morality (The World in the Text)

Readings of Scripture that consider the "world in the text" frequently have a literary focus, exploring within narratives features of the plot, characters and other literary devices. One such topic that emerged from this perspective amongst the participants was the portrayal of the "character" of "God" in the story—in particular, the morality of this character, God, who chooses to destroy all the Earth bar those on the ark. The participants struggled to understand why a God they believed to be loving and forgiving would be characterised this way. This concern was prompted by the events of the text itself, but appeared to be compounded by the popular cultural depictions of the story by the new atheists and film.

4.2.1. New Atheism

The influence of atheist depictions of the text could be seen in how participants handled the question of morality as with historicity. Aware that the character of God in the story was vulnerable to attack, one participant commented, "I think many atheists draw on stories like this when they say the God of the Old Testament is completely different from the God of the New Testament". Completely unprompted, this participant chose to see the text through the lens of how atheists respond to it and thus raise concerns about God's behaviour. This response suggests that whilst the participant, as a Christian, could understand and make sense of the actions of God in the story, he was aware of the conclusions that non-Christians came to and was concerned by this. Depictions of the story like that of Dawkins who casts it as an exposé of God's immorality seem to be casting a shadow over this participant's reading.

4.2.2. Film

The story's depiction in film as a fantastical epic could also be seen to influence the participants' take on the morality of God in the story, as demonstrated by the following comment from a participant about the impact of the 2014 *Noah* film, worth quoting at length:

> You do just kind of get used to it and you're like, 'oh this is just the story and this happened and it's fine' but I now find it really hard to read without seeing the images from the questionable film in my mind and actually, as many things that were really bad about that film it did help me to visualise the fact that it

> took 40 days of rain for the ark to get lifted. I don't know if anyone's seen it but there's just a horrific bit where you've got people banging on the outside of the ark and you just think, however awful people are, if you can hear them begging for help. . . I mean it was horrific, it's really stayed with me and it's really uncomfortable and so as much as I absolutely trust in God's goodness and his character and really trust his sovereignty in this, it still is uncomfortable when you don't just see it as words and you think gosh, whether it was just one area or the world, it's still God saying 'these people will not change and therefore they're all going to die' and that's really tough.

For this participant, the impact of the film was primarily emotive. Her familiarity with the narrative had led her to an acceptance of the story, but the film's depiction of the flood and the deaths of those not on the ark had impressed upon her a sense of the horror of the events, leading her to question God's actions. This participant read the text through the lens of the film, and this was causing her to rethink the morality of God.

Additionally, the influence of film proved to be influential for some participants' consideration of morality in the expanded narratives that films foster, specifically Noah's interactions with his peers. In one focus group, a participant (P2) questioned the morality of the story by wondering why there is no warning given about the flood to anyone but Noah, in contrast to the public warnings of the prophets later in the Bible. In response, another participant (P3) suggested that the building of the ark would have been akin to a prophetic act and that it would have taken some time to build, implying others would have seen it and would have been able to question Noah about what was going on. When another participant (P4) asked if others could have joined Noah in building the ark, P2 began to recall that God instructed Noah to say something, "But didn't God say to him 'tell them to. . .'", before stating she could not remember. As P3 went to check in her Bible what the preceding chapter included, the following exchange occurred:

> P4: I think he did . . . I think he had to . . . I feel like that's in the story . . .
>
> P5: Yeah, I think so
>
> P2: It's definitely in the film
>
> P6: Yeah, definitely it's in the story . . . they all made fun of him

Multiple participants demonstrated a belief that in the biblical story, Noah interacts with his peers, either being "made fun of", or providing some form of warning. P2 noted that this is depicted "in the film". When P3 established that this was not part of the biblical text after having consulted her Bible, she too agreed that she thought that this was part of the story:

> P3: So there isn't . . . and actually yeah, in my mental image . . . which must be how it's . . .
>
> P4: . . . portrayed
>
> P6: It's Bruce Almighty[9] isn't it?
>
> P2: Well yeah, or Sunday school, they must answer that question going beyond the text.

It was only once the participants were made aware of what was in the biblical text that they reflected on the origins of where their mistaken memories came from, with both film and Sunday school being cited. What this demonstrates is that the embellished narrative had become so infused with their recollection of the Noah story that they could not confidently source where it had come from, eventually hypothesising that their childhood encounters with the text and the more recent films could be sources. Though no participant referenced either the New Testament, the Qur'an or Jewish interpretations, it is interesting to consider their possible unacknowledged influence, which would highlight the complexity of cultural history particularly in a multicultural context, such as the UK,

and its bearing upon Christian interpretation. Though the data do not allow for any further specific conclusions, this could be an area for further research.

This exchange was a rare moment where the participants seemed to be self-aware of the influence of the text's cultural history on a popular level. In considering the morality of God's actions, the participants wanted to posit that there was an option or possibility for salvation that those who were not on the ark rejected. As such, they drew upon embellished narratives that attest to the influence of cultural depictions in children's stories and in film.

4.3. Applicability (The World in Front of the Text)

Though it is well documented that evangelicals read the Bible with a goal for application or relevance to life,[10] this goal can be seen in connection with the discussion regarding historicity and morality. In the challenge that popular cultural depictions posed to discussions of the world behind and in the text, the participants chose instead to focus on the world in front of the text. For example, one participant commented, "I don't mind that much if it is real or not. . . but how can I apply it to my life and live now?" The question of historicity was ultimately silenced for the sake of applying the text to life, which could be accomplished regardless of the conclusions from the historical conversation. This was reflected by the other participants including the one who made the following comment: "whether we individually believe bits of it and not other bits is irrelevant if we're taking on board the reflection of God". In this statement, the text was understood as a vehicle for theological truths which did not depend on the factual accuracy of the story to be conveyed.

Therefore, the turn to application, though expected from evangelicals, can also be seen as a response to the challenge of the question about historicity and/or morality from popular cultural depictions. Additionally, the influence of children's books and films could be identified in some of the specific applications that were made.

Children's Books/Film

Unlike the example above, where the participants recognised that they had unknowingly embellished the Noah story, another focus group did not realise that they were working with an expanded narrative. In this focus group, the idea that Noah was mocked was not explicitly discussed or identified as an embellishment.[11] Instead, it was confidently dropped into conversation and remained unchallenged by the other group members. One participant stated, "That's what's so wonderful about the previous chapter, how they . . . cos they scorn him don't they? 'What on earth are you doing building that great big boat?'" This participant's question had a rhetorical force—she appeared confident that Noah being scorned was part of the narrative and was not actually asking for confirmation from others that this was the case. This point was later repeated and elaborated on by another participant who made a contemporary personal application about obedience and faithfulness despite adversity on the back of the false narrative that Noah was mocked:

> I usually take from this that God asked Noah to do something that seemed ridiculous and everybody else was sortof making fun of him, 'why is he building this boat?' and I take it from this that sometimes God might want me to do something and . . . other, friends, perhaps non-Christian friends, might say 'well that's ridiculous' and I then have to struggle and think 'well is it ridiculous or is this really the path that God wants me to follow?' So, it is hard I think, today, as it was for Noah. Sometimes there are things we need to do or not do that other people would think as acceptable, but we as God's children really think that this is who we've got to obey and although it might look ridiculous and we might be made a figure of fun or something, if we really believe it's what God wants us to do then we've got to knuckle down and do it and trust God to see us through it.

This participant encapsulated and reflected perfectly the lesson that many children's authors tried to communicate through their retellings of the Bible story. Her comment was met with murmurs of agreement from the group, demonstrating that they too believed this to be a valid reading of the text, and another participant provided an example, citing

Christians called into monastic life, which would appear "crazy" to outsiders. As none of the participants recognised that they were working with an embellished narrative, they did not reflect on where these embellishments came from. However, given that this is a common feature of children's stories, it can be confidently conjectured that this might be the origin of the interpretation, and if this is the case, the depiction of the story of Noah as a moral tale to learn from and emulate influenced the application that these participants drew from the story.

5. Discussion: Reflection on Evangelical Engagement with Popular Cultural Depictions

The following section explores what this paper has offered so far using the first three of Richard Osmer's practical theological questions (Osmer 2008, p. 4). The first two questions, "what is happening and why?", function as a summary of the findings so far, with the third, "what ought to be happening", offering space to reflect on this phenomenon.

5.1. What Is Happening?

It is clear from the overview above that my evangelical readers had absorbed popular cultural depictions of the story of Noah and the way it has been interpreted in different spheres (both consciously and subconsciously) and this formed part of their response to the text. Cultural history was not the only influence upon the participants' interpretation, but certainly had a role (Hutchinson 2024).

Cultural history was drawn upon to explore the various aspects of the narrative including whether the flood actually happened (the world behind the text), the morality of God and Noah's interactions with his peers (the world in the text) as well as what the text means today in lessons of application (the world in front of the text).

When popular culture was drawn upon in the discussion of historicity and morality, the participants appeared to be asking the question "how do we make sense of this text in light of the way the text has been received and depicted in popular culture?" This presupposes that there is a tension between the text and its popular cultural depiction, and there was something to reconcile in the popular cultural depiction and the Christian understanding of the text.

When popular culture was drawn upon in application, this tension was not felt, and the influence of popular cultural depictions went under the radar. The participants were making sense of the text in light of its depiction in popular culture leading to the embellished narratives, though they did not seem to be aware of it.

5.2. Why Is This Happening?

Firstly, the fact that poplar cultural depictions had a role in the participants' interpretation is quite simply the result of the fact that there are popular cultural depictions in the first place. Because Noah has been a story retold and responded to in public discourse, this discourse has come to shape the way in which readers engage with the text. This is most notable when contrasted with my participants' discussion of another biblical text, Psalm 44. Although this comparison crosses two different genres, what was clear was that there is no popular cultural history of Psalm 44; the participants did not consider the Psalm from any other perspective than their own, in contrast to Genesis 7 where they saw the text through the lens of the cultural depictions of science, atheism, film and children's stories. Though Psalm 44 most likely would not elicit a response from these same spheres of popular culture should it become as well known as Noah, no popular cultural depictions of any kind could be discerned in the participants' discussion.

Secondly, a result of Noah's public discourse and the challenge it raises to the text caused the above noted tension that the participants sought to resolve. The story of Noah was considered somewhat problematic by the participants when it came to the issue of historicity and morality, and this no doubt was compounded by the story's depiction in the spheres of science and new atheism. This created a particular hermeneutical agenda of "solving" the problems of the text, which fostered an apologetic or defensive tone. The

comparison to Psalm 44 proves instructive in illustrating this as well. Psalm 44 posed its own theological challenge to the participants in claiming that God had unwarrantedly abandoned his people. Although the "problems" of these texts cannot be equated as a result of their genre (Judd 2024), it is interesting that only Genesis 7 prompted the "apologetic, defensive tone" to the problem solving of the passage and not Psalm 44. Both texts contained interpretative issues, but these were seemingly compounded in Genesis by a perceived recognition that the problem was external (from non-Christian sources) and not just internal. So, whereas the story of Noah prompted the participants to question how they could explain or defend the story to a non-Christian, no one considered the Psalm from a "non-Christian" perspective. This suggests that the cultural history of the text offered an external challenge which was significant in setting the tone of the hermeneutical agenda of reconciling the depictions of the story as fictional and/or delusional, with their understanding that the story was truthful and/or instructive for Christian life.

5.3. What Ought to Be Happening?

This paper closes with some reflections on whether this influence of popular cultural history ought to be going on and whether this practice might say something about how God is at work in the cultural depictions of Scripture and their influence upon interpretation. What level of attention to popular cultural depictions of a text should an evangelical hermeneutic endorse? To what extent should popular cultural history set the agenda or influence the way one approaches the text?

Increasingly within evangelical scholarship and thinking there has been a movement towards engaging culture. Some of this engagement is missionally focused, leading evangelicals to "appropriate, especially, popular culture and the latest technology to assure the relevance and efficacy of their mission" (Dyrness 2007, p. 157). Some of this engagement, prompted by Mark Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Noll 1994), focuses on interpreting culture or "reading" culture theologically, asking what we make of the world that we live in when viewed through the lens of the Bible (Anderson et al. 2007; Ward 2011). Little of this scholarship is directed at allowing culture to affect our engagement with the Bible. In fact, the opposite is usually argued, with a refocus on Scripture itself such as Beavis and Kimm-Cragg who see "transformation and distortions of the biblical stories in the wider culture" (Beavis and Kim-Cragg 2017, p. 25). Yet, my fieldwork demonstrates that rather than asking "what do we make of the world we live in through the lens of the Noah story?", popular cultural history prompted my participants to ask "what do we make of the Noah story through the lens of the world we live in?" As has been noted, this resulted in an apologetic reading of the text that attempted to defend the text's historicity and the morality of God, as well as its usefulness for today. An apologetic interpretation of the text that addresses the challenges of culture certainly might be deemed an important exercise within an overarching goal of evangelism. However, might there be some reasons for an evangelical hermeneutic to incorporate popular cultural history in their reading and not just in order to respond to it in the form of counterarguments? I believe that there are.

First, Anthony Thiselton highlights the importance of the questions and context of the reader, asking whether engagement with a text can be authentic and can speak to a contemporary reader if the text does not address the questions of today? He writes: "Our initial questions may well differ from the questions which the text itself first addressed to the ancient world. Yet our initial questions must be asked. For they trigger off the preliminary round of dialogue with the text. Then, however, the text itself will speak back to our preliminary questions, and may well suggest that these questions now be revised and reformulated" (Thiselton 1977, p. 105). Thiselton is clear to highlight that the reader's questions are not the final point of engagement with the text, but that they are an important place to start. If readers live in a culturally secular context, captured by popular cultural history, then there is an argument to be made for readers to approach the text with comments, questions and insights that reflect such a context.

Second, if the answer to the question "what ought to happen?" is that readers disengage from the cultural history of the text, this might suggest that culture is something external to us that we can simply disengage from and "cut out", rendering its influence non-existent in our approach to Scripture. This simply is not true. As humans, we are affected by culture and participate in culture, and this will be true whether popular cultural history is denied or included in Scriptural engagement. Amongst the participants, the fact that popular cultural history was drawn upon unintentionally and uncritically in instances where the story of Noah was misremembered evidences the enmeshing of culture and faith. We are not always aware where culture is active and approach the Bible with its influence unacknowledged. Therefore, a hermeneutic that proposes to ignore popular cultural history is somewhat naïve. Whereas the much-debated realm of the relationship between Christian faith and culture has typically characterised them as two distinct forces or remits and posited ways in which they might engage one another, by acknowledging the influence of culture, readers are led towards a more nuanced understanding of both the spiritual dimension of culture and the cultural dimension of spirituality (Anderson et al. 2007, pp. 33–34). It is not simply the case that we bring something secular and cultural to something Christian and theological. But rather, culture itself is not theology-free and theology is not culture-free. As Smith argues, "There is nothing inherently sacred or profane. These are not substantive categories, but rather situational or relational categories" (Smith 1988, p. 55). Indeed, the Bible itself is not culture-free. As Sparks claims, "all interpreters of Scripture—including even the biblical authors—read the Bible through the lens of our respective cultural traditions" (Sparks 2008, p. 212).

Thirdly, and in light of the focus in this journal upon the disclosing of God in practice, I wonder whether God might be at work in the popular cultural history of the text and its influence upon interpretation? One might be initially hesitant to make such a claim, particularly given that many spheres of cultural history draw conclusions from the text that are not in line with traditional Christian readings.[12] In all the experience, tradition and cultural history that readers draw upon when they read Scripture, who is to say which is inspired and of the Holy Spirit and where God is at work?

And yet, as I have reflected upon this phenomenon, it has occurred to me that the cultural history of the text attests to the compelling and provocative nature of this Scriptural story. Might the very fact that Noah's ark has captured the imagination of so many, for good or ill, speak of a God whose Word inspires? The story of Noah clearly captures the imagination; it is an extreme tale. It is both playful and childlike in its fantasticality and adventure, and yet dark and intense in its brutality. A worldwide flood and the saving of a small few is exciting, scary and sensational. The interpretation of this story in the spheres of science, atheism, film and books all attest to the fact that the story of Noah is powerful and compelling, such that it would be reflected upon and engaged with in these spheres, whether it be creatively and/or critically. Might this reveal part of the way in which God is at work through culture to inform the interpretation of the story of Noah's ark? Could it be that part of what it means to engage this story well is to allow it to capture the imagination?

Of course, the fact that God's Word inspires, that it captures the imagination, does not necessarily guarantee fruitful interpretative avenues. The parable of the sower offers a helpful analogy and framework to reflect on this.[13] What we have seen in popular cultural history is that like the parable of the sower, the seed of the story falls on a variety of grounds, leading to a variety of interpretative conclusions. The condition of the ground, however, does not detract from the capacity of the seed. Though the story is not always handled in ways consistent with Christian thinking, this does not take away from the fact that the Noah story is an inspired seed; it will germinate and spark the imagination, capture attention and warrant reflection. Staying with this parabolic framing, what my participants were doing when they engaged with cultural history was exploring the variety of grounds where the seed of the story had fallen and reflecting on how the story had fared in those conditions. We cannot make a claim that God is at work in every place that the seed has fallen, but we can make a claim that God is at work in sowing Scriptural seeds of impact.

By engaging with cultural history, with the places where the seed had fallen and the results of the imagination in those contexts, my participants were inspired themselves to imaginatively explore the story, and as a result cultivate their own good soil, in considering how the imaginative seed of the story should be best received and understood as contemporary followers of Jesus. God is at work in this inspired story, and witnessing where the story has died, choked, withered or flourished in cultural history offers wisdom and guidance for the faithful interpreter of Scripture as they seek God in the story.

6. Conclusions

This paper has offered evidence of the way in which the popular cultural depictions of a biblical story, in this instance Noah's ark, can influence the way in which the biblical text is interpretated and understood on three levels—the world behind the text, in the text and in front of the text. I have explored the spheres of popular culture that my participants referenced and the way in which they depict the text, and shown the role they played in the discussion of the text. I then reflected on this dynamic and argued that there is a hermeneutical benefit to exploring a text in relation to its popular cultural depictions, and not simply as a means to counter alternative interpretations in the form of an apologetic response. Considering the cultural depictions of a Bible story in popular culture recognises the imaginative power of such texts and can lead to fruitful avenues for cultivating good soil for the reader themselves to be transformed and inspired by a powerful Scriptural story.

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Notes

1 The context has been acknowledged and discussed in various ways, for example Gadamer's 'horizon of understanding', Fish's 'interpretative communities' and Powell's 'social location'. See Gadamer (1975), Fish (1980) and Powell (2004).

2 Notable examples in the UK include: Village (2007), Rogers (2015) and Perrin (2016).

3 (1) What do you think is interesting/of note in this text? (2) Do you have any questions/concerns about the text? (3) Do you think that this text is historically accurate?

4 There is one footnote reference in this article to a control focus group. This group had exactly the same format but was made up of participants who considered themselves to be agnostic/atheist.

5 It is worth noting that more recently, Richard Dawkins has claimed to be a "cultural Christian" and "at home in the Christian ethos", though it is unclear if this changes his depiction of the Noah narrative: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=COHgEFUFWyg (accessed on 8 October 2024).

6 This was corroborated by a control focus group of non-Christian participants who referenced familiarity with the Noah story as children: *"everybody knows about Noah and the ark don't they? And like, for children, with Noah's ark [toys] that they're given?"*

7 It should be noted that although Dalton's analysis was restricted to the American context, it is still relevant for British readers who share many Christian cultural resources with America.

8 This was largely due to the third question on their handout which pointed participants towards historicity as an issue to discuss.

9 As has been noted, *Evan Almighty* focuses on the story of Noah and is the sequel to *Bruce Almighty.* This reference to *Bruce Almighty* was most likely a mistake.

10 All empirical studies on evangelical Bible reading corroborate this, for example, Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009).

11 The participants in this group were at least twice the age of those in the group previously discussed which establishes the pervasiveness of the embellishment that Noah was mocked, as it is not confined to a particular age group.

[12] David Atkinson sums up just such a traditional Christian reading when he writes: "The story of the Flood is the story of God's sovereign judgement on a world that has lost its moorings. The story of Noah is at the same time the story of God's intimate, compassionate and faithful love" (Atkinson 1990, p. 138).

[13] Matthew 13:1–23.

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Article

Bible Noise—Sonic Explorations in Biblical Engagement Through the Use of Voice

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Abstract: This paper examines the practice of 'Bible Noise', a group which I led at a Church of England evangelical church that explored creative ways of reading aloud the Bible through sound art practice. Biblical engagement is central to evangelicals and I wanted to expand biblical engagement by using sonic performances through the use of our voices, thereby facilitating a more bodily encounter with scripture. 'Noise' in the group name alludes to the disruption that sound can generate and also alludes to the 'noise' of multivocality, since the Bible has many voices in it from authors, narrative characters, editors, compilers, translators, interpreters and so on. The 'noise' is also a disruption of the visual primacy of our current culture. Bible Noise explores ways in which different voices can be brought in to enrich our aural engagement with scripture by exploring five different 'pieces' or readings of scripture. In doing so it establishes a communal idea of scripture where the different voices within scripture can be heard, paying attention to their particularities. Listening to these voices and our own embodied enactment of them can enrich and deepen our perception and engagement of scripture by appreciating the chorus of voices that is the Bible, the collection of texts that forms a core of British evangelical practice and belief.

Keywords: bible; engagement; sonic; sound; voice; embodiment

1. Introduction

A group of people are around a table. They have sheets of paper in front of them, and then reading from them, some of the people start uttering repeated nonsensical sounds.

The same group are now standing in a circle with small pieces of paper and they are whispering, with one person in the middle of the circle listening intently.

A similar group of people now seem to be playing a game of tag while repeating particular words.

These seemingly strange occurrences are the practice of Bible Noise, a group that I formed as part of my PhD research. Bible Noise is an experimental approach to engaging with scripture through sound and voice, rather than relying solely on traditional reading or interpretation. It explores how embodiment, disruption, and multivocality can shape biblical engagement. Instead of treating the text as a fixed, silent document, Bible Noise invites participants to voice, listen, and interact with scripture in layered and overlapping ways—through spoken word, breath, whispers, and movement. These sonic practices expose the tensions, harmonies, and hidden voices within the text, often revealing new resonances that might be missed in conventional readings. By incorporating multiple translations, languages, and vocal performances, the project not only highlights the Bible's polyphonic nature but also challenges assumptions about whose voices are heard and whose remain marginalized. Bible Noise is thus both an artistic and theological practice,

encouraging fresh ways of encountering scripture in community, particularly for those seeking to engage beyond the printed page.

This expanded engagement with the Bible through sound used sound art and vocal performances, which enabled bodily and communal encounters with scripture that then allowed for an engagement with the multivocality and potential hidden voices within the Bible. The ideas of multivocality arise from a critique of the way scripture is engaged with, where a single voice reads the texts aloud in communal settings. The group nature of these performances was an affirmation of the multivocal nature of scripture itself through its plurality of authors, editors, compilers and genres.

The Bible is a key text for Christians across the denominations and is central to British evangelical faith practices, as shown through the Bebbington quadrilateral and its subsequent engagements (Bebbington 2003, 2021). The delineation of the uniqueness of British evangelical engagement with the Bible is beyond the remit of this paper. Rather, this paper explores a particular creative engagement with the Bible in a British evangelical context. We were a group of British evangelicals expressing our devotion to and joy in scripture in creative ways.

Bible Noise had its origins in the chance discovery of a book, *Whispering the Word: Hearing Women's Voices in the Old Testament* by Jacqueline Lapsley (Lapsley 2005), where she paid particular attention to the characters of women; their voices, their sounds and their silences. She used Russian theorist Mikhail Bakhtin's notions of polyphony (Bakhtin 1982) as a way of hearing these voices. This was in the realm of text, and I wondered what it would be like to enact some of these ideas in sound. I was also interested in the concept and practice of polyphony and the way many voices could be heard simultaneously. In contrast to the single voice that normally reads aloud scripture, I aimed to enact the multiple voices that emanate from the Bible. In doing so, I hoped to hear voices that have been marginalised, hidden or silenced.

My own position comes from different experiences and also my background. Having been a musician, I entered the sound art and sound studies worlds with the curiosity and intrigue of exploring how sound and faith interacted experientially and conceptually. I am also a bi-cultural British Indian neurodiverse man living in a mixed-race family. Born in the UK, my familial origins are from the Syrian Christian community (so called for having a Syrian Orthodox liturgy), who have been in Kerala, India, before European missionary contact. My father's family were Anglican (what became the Church of South India) and my mother's was from a reformed Syrian church (Marthoma). Both churches had strong evangelical influences and my own journey continued through Methodist and Vineyard churches in India. These mixes of experiences and backgrounds guided my research and practice, and I leaned into this multiplicity by drawing on notions and practices of polyphony. I had to draw on many voices for my practice, and this paper continues my sense of multiple belonging by sitting across disciplines of sound art and theology.

In this paper, I begin by introducing the *Bible Noise* group and its practice. I then explore the significant ways in which sound resonates with the Bible, offering insights into how engaging with the text through sound can deepen our understanding. Following this, I examine the concept of noise and its role within the group's practice. I critique the tendency to prioritize abstract and cognitive approaches over those that are rooted in sound and embodied experience, suggesting that such a focus may cause us to overlook vital aspects of our faith experience. Finally, I discuss various 'pieces' or readings performed by the group, each with distinct emphases and resonances, all contributing to a rich tapestry of voices that together shape the communal practice. I conclude by reflecting on possible implications for British evangelical biblical engagement.

2. British Evangelical Practices of Biblical Engagement

The Bible is central to evangelical identity even though there might be differences in the form of this centrality. John Dyer, exploring the contemporary digital engagement of scripture, quotes Bishop J. C. Ryle as defining evangelicalism in terms of 'the absolute supremacy it assigns to Holy Scripture' (Dyer 2023, p. 37). Dyer further quotes John Stott as saying, 'evangelical people are first and foremost Bible people, affirming the great truths of revelation, inspiration and authority. We have a higher view of Scripture than anyone else in the church' (Dyer 2023, p. 37).

However, what shape or form does this centrality take? My own experience of how evangelicals engage with the Bible is that it is treated as a repository of knowledge, something to be understood and applied rather than something to be *experienced*. Strhan speaks of the Protestant prioritisation of belief over experience: 'Belief—-in terms of an internal assent to propositions, mediated through hearing, accepting, and then knowing Jesus as Saviour—-became separated from and privileged over experiences of the sacred gained through 'carnal knowing" (Strhan 2013, p. 227).

Bible Noise attempts to amplify the experience of hearing scripture in creative ways that aims to disrupt the semantic and cognitive prioritisation in biblical engagement. This is not to discount the importance of the semantic and the cognitive, but rather to point towards extra dimensions of biblical engagement. This will be further addressed below.

3. The Practice

Bible Noise started at Holy Trinity, Beckenham, an Anglican evangelical church in South-East London. It was constituted for my practice-based research. At its heart it was based on the practice of reading aloud scripture in worship. As this was experimental and creative, it happened outside worship times. The practice of reading aloud scripture has great variance across churches. Some have spoken liturgies before and after the reading. In most cases, the biblical reference is said aloud. For some, a special place like a lectern for the Bible is at the front of the church, from which it is read. At others, readers might bring their own printed Bible or read out from an app. The reading aloud of scripture is often followed by the sermon, either immediately or soon after.

Bible Noise reconstituted the ritual by bringing in multiple voices for every reading. Additionally, the text was sometimes discussed *before* the reading. The readings sometimes brought together disparate passages next to each other and sometimes different texts were read simultaneously.

It was open to anyone who had an interest in engaging with the Bible in different ways through voice and sound. The members of the group were from the church. We were of different ethnicities and genders, with an age range of 7 to 82. We met eight times across a period of 18 months, until COVID-19 restrictions came about in 2020. The group size varied between four and eight across the meetings. We met after the main church service and shared a meal before the sessions. Then, we got on to engaging with the Bible through sound.

Though this was a creative and at time playful set of sessions, there was a serious and rigorous approach to the texts which chimed with evangelical approaches to scripture. We used only the texts of the Bible and did not interpolate with other texts or interjections. While we were of different ethnicities and backgrounds, this practice was framed by our British evangelical context. It was from this 'ground' that the practice of sounding the Bible arose.

4. Sound and the Bible

The Bible is intimately connected to sound. Creation comes into being through God's sounding words. Speech and listening features strongly in God's interactions with creation. In a religious world where images of God are banned, speech and listening become primary ways through which God is interacted with. Music is also significantly present in the books of Psalms, Song of Songs, and Lamentations. Other passages like 1 Chronicles 15 and 25 show the infrastructure of music within Israelite life and worship. Beyond music, the cries of the people and the listening ears of God and God's pleas to and for his people to listen to him form a symphony. The New Testament, while not as populated with music, focuses on the Word who was '. . .in the beginning' (John 1). 'Word', from the Greek *logos*, is both utterance and concept in this context (Beardslee 1993, p. 463). Early church fathers spoke about the voice of God from this idea with the animating Spirit who brings the voice to us. The New Testament has songs that are quoted (e.g., Mary's Magnificat based on Hannah's prayer), and fresh songs (e.g., Philippians 2:5–11) are brought forth. A further important relation between the Bible and sound comes through the oral nature of cultures, especially before printing. The voice as an interaction of flesh and breath was the primary way in which to access scripture. Our current media cultures have changed, and it is worth revisiting the voice through these changes.

The NRSV was mostly used for the practice as it had a closer representation of rhythm and meaning without extensive paraphrasing. Other versions were used only if there were particular sonic reasons. Other language versions were also used to explore the rhythms and resonances they produce.

5. Noise

Bible Noise explored a polyphony of spoken word where multiple voices spoke simultaneously, and the question arose, 'won't that just be noise?' There is an acceptance that multiple singing voices work together but spoken voices are noise. I will briefly talk about noise as it is part of the practice in performance and name, drawing on work from sound studies scholars. Greg Hainge, professor in cultural studies, researching noise, posits that 'Noise is relational' (Hainge 2013, p. 273). Paul Hegarty, a sound studies scholar, expands this notion: 'it exists only in relation to what it is not' (Hegarty 2007, p. 5). The relationality of noise is to do with its subjectivity according to context. It is contextual positioning that makes a sound noise. 'Pollution' is another way that noise is understood, according to science writer Mike Goldsmith (Goldsmith 2012, p. 2). This has religious connotations, as anthropologist Mary Anne Douglas has researched (Douglas 1966). Since Bible Noise might become noise with many voices speaking simultaneously, there is question as to whether this is 'polluting' to the ritual of reading aloud the Bible. Unknown and unfamiliar sounds can be considered noise and the practice of Bible Noise might be considered as such.

Noise can also evolve in the perception of hearers, as Hegarty states in a discussion about avant-garde music: 'where music becomes an avant-garde, and in so doing is always, initially, at least, identified as noise. Only later does the old noise come to be seen as legitimate music' (Hegarty 2007, p. 10). Eric Wilson, who researched the sounds of 16th century London, agrees with this developmental notion: 'Noise, then, can be heard not merely as a symptom of symbolic vulnerability or theoretical disorder, but as the evidence and the occasional catalyst of dynamic cultural change operative across the urban topos' (Wilson 1995, p. xxiii). Media theorist David Hendy also highlights the unexpected nature of noise calling it 'full of surprises' (Hendy 2013, p. 8). The practice of Bible Noise approached its own noise in this vein looking towards the possibilities of surprise that

might engender fresh ways of engaging with the Bible. Bible Noise also attempted to engage with certain issues that are currently present in biblical engagement.

6. Issues in Biblical Engagement

6.1. Abstraction and Semantic Priority

The reading aloud of scripture has become less corporate and less corporeal. Mark Earey, tutor and researcher in Anglican worship, says 'the bible no longer belongs primarily to a corporate context in which it is spoken out loud and heard by a number of people simultaneously', as congregants are more 'likely to be following it in print'. This 'privatizes the bible' and separates it from its 'corporate context' (Earey 2002, p. 90). Today, this can be seen in our digital engagement as well. Prior cultures depended upon the voice and a communal presence with each other for scripture to be accessed, while today scripture can be immediately and privately accessed. Walter Ong has explored this contrast in his work, examining the impact of printing, where he states that '[m]ore than any other invention writing has transformed human consciousness' (Ong 2002, p. 77). Ong proposes that oral cultures are 'more communal and externalized' while literate ones promote '[w]riting and reading [which] are solitary activities that throw the psyche back on itself' (Ong 2002, p. 67). There have been critiques of his views from a sound studies perspective (Sterne 2011), which opens up the question of the distinctions arising from seeing rather than hearing the text. Birgit Meyer further speaks of the early Protestant 'emphasis on [silent] reading and text' which according to her was 'deliberate discrediting' of other more material forms of the ritual of reading aloud scripture (Meyer 2013, p. 8).

Prior to this, however, texts were engaged in more corporeal ways. *Lectio Divina* was one such practice. Professor of Spirituality Raymond Studzinski talks of monastic communities who 'lived a life centred on such reading' which 'had a social and physical dimension'; socially, due to the communal nature of the reading, and physically, as the 'reader responded to how words felt to the mouth, to the ears, to the eyes' (Studzinski 2009, p. 14). Studzinski further recounts the metaphors of 'chewing' and 'digesting' applied to the act of reading, which are strongly corporeal metaphors. Reading here is shown as an embodied and social practice which has today been abstracted away to become privatised and individualised. This abstraction is aided through the downplaying of the sonic features of text. Reading can be a corporeal event but can the composition of the text, the writing of it, have corporeal elements?

6.2. Corporeality of Writing

Philosopher Karmen MacKendrick also highlights that writing can be corporeal as well. She considers the written voice as 'distinctly auditory and bodily', while accepting that it is different from the spoken voice (MacKendrick 2016, pp. 9, 21). The difference seems to be in how the written voice is imagined, and this imagination is sonic. Drawing on writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Virginia Woolf, Mackendrick shows how the written voice is based on the sonic which arises out of the body. LeGuin says 'Body is story, voice tells it' which MacKendrick reformulates as: 'Voice tells body' (MacKendrick 2016, p. 15). Woolf uses the metaphor of a wave to describe her writing: 'A sight, an emotion, creates this wave in the mind. . ., then as it breaks and tumbles in the mind, it makes words to fit it' (Woolf 1980, p. 247 in MacKendrick 2016, p. 16). The corporeal nature of the text is enacted through the practices of Bible Noise both through sound and the texts they originate from. There are different corporeal aspects to the practice. Biblical texts are printed on pieces of paper that Bible Noise participants are holding. In some pieces we are sitting, while in others we stand and in others we move, every time holding on to pieces of paper with printed text. What often happens, however, is that the voice is silenced in a bodily sense;

what is given importance is the semantic content, and the bodily is discarded. This is a silencing of the body and thereby a silencing of the voice that comes from body.

6.3. Voice and Body

The voice has often been held in suspicion due to its bodily nature. Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE), regarding, the singing voice says: 'When it happens to me that the song moves me more than the thing which is sung, I confess that I have sinned blamefully and then prefer not to hear the singer' (*Confessions* Book 10 Chapter 33 para 50 in Epstein 2004, p. 16). Augustine's concern is with the bodily aspect of song, which will separate him from the 'thing', the meaning. Lactantius in his Divine Institutions is more direct: 'For all those things unconnected with words, that is, pleasant sounds of the air and of strings, may be easily disregarded, because they do not adhere to us, and cannot be written' (Book 6, Chapter 21 in Epstein 2004, p. 16). Augustine Erasmus of Rotterdam (1466–1536) also centres meaning over sound when he protests against music that 'produces a tremendous tonal clamour, so that not a single word is understood', quoted in (Epstein 2004, p. 16). Erasmus would be happy to silence singing itself: 'Let us sing vocally, but let us sing as Christians; let us sing sparingly, but let us sing more in our hearts' (Epstein 2004, p. 16). Feminist theologian Heidi Epstein calls this prioritisation, a 'musical chastity belt' where 'Text bridles music's "body," sublimating its erotic pull to higher intellectual ends' (Epstein 2004, p. 15). The prioritization of the semantic has often led to the subordination of the body, particularly bodies that differ from the norm. In this framework, rationality is highly valued, and as Cavarero notes, it is the male who is considered rational and ideal: 'through the bodily difference that marks her, a woman is a deficient human person, a man who is less-than-man' (Cavarero 1995, p. 53).

Sound artist Mikhail Karikis highlights the problem of viewing the voice as separate from the body: 'such thinking undervalues the particular embodied 'who' from where the voice emanates, and keeps only the semantic aspect of the voice, i.e., 'what' is voiced. It is a logocentric way of thinking: it confirms the hegemony of speech and by extension undermines all those vocal sounds we produce which are not destined to language' (Karikis n.d., p. 2). Karikis calls for a focus on the sonics of the voice rather than its semantic content alone. Attending to the sonics allows us to recognize the 'who' behind the voice, whereas, too often, the tone used in Bible readings minimizes the importance of the speaker. As MacKendrick describes, this voice suggests: 'Nothing to hear here, an undercurrent murmurs, only ideas to understand, all spoken in the same and therefore irrelevant voice' (MacKendrick 2016, p. 118). This 'irrelevant' voice is frequently heard across denominations worldwide. Inviting listeners to engage with the corporeal aspects of the voice within their own bodily experience can transform this irrelevant voice into something resonant and impactful. This is particularly pertinent to evangelical practices, where there is much more of an emphasis on the semantic and the abstract, as shown above.

In my *Bible Noise* practice, I engage with the Bible by reading it aloud with others, in the presence of others. The use of voice in community opens up spaces for distinct, unique vocal contributions, creating polyphony. Polyphony emerges when multiple distinct voices sound together simultaneously. Since, as Cavarero notes, the body imparts a unique quality to each voice, the bodily voice, in the presence of other bodies, provides fertile ground for exploring polyphony and plurality. Engaging the Bible in this fleshly manner activates the voice, the ear, and the other senses through embodied presence.

In emphasizing this corporeal approach, I am not dismissing the importance of the semantic. My practice integrates both the aural and the semantic. As MacKendrick argues, 'The notion that we must reduce or turn away from language in order to take the body

seriously, or that we can disregard corporeality in understanding words, misreads both. The two of them must make each other' (MacKendrick 2016, p. 21).

The downplaying of the corporeal voice happens when text is given a certain status and the voice is then merely a vehicle for the semantic.

7. The Pieces

Four 'pieces' are now presented to illustrate the practice of *Bible Noise*. The term 'piece' is used in a musical and performative sense, referring to the time span from the beginning of the sounding to its conclusion. These pieces were often revisited in different sessions and adjusted based on insights gained from previous iterations. Each piece involves a reading from a biblical text. This is compiled into a score that includes instructions for the performance. The pieces discussed here were selected for their distinct emphases within the research process.

Prologue Remix focuses on sonic elements, exploring the rhythms and sonic potentials within the text, as diverse voices bring it to life. *Contrapunt of Naomi and Job* places greater emphasis on critical hermeneutics, combining feminist re-readings to enable a hidden voice to be heard alongside a dominant one. *Thus Whispereth the Lord* centres on listening to marginalized voices, amplifying the role of the female prophet through the sonic qualities of the text and sounds derived from their names. This piece unites several voices that were previously 'whispering', allowing them to sound their actions with and through their 'noise'. *Babble Kabaddi* explores the interplay of listening and sounding by reimagining the traditional Indian game of Kabaddi.

7.1. Prologue Remix

'*Prologue Remix*'[1] was the first piece created during the Bible Noise sessions. It centred on a passage from the Gospel of John (1:1–5), beginning with the phrase, 'In the beginning was the Word'. The repetition of words and phrases in this text served as the foundation for the sonic performance, shaping the structure of the piece. The choice of this passage was not only influenced by the textual repetitions but also by the resonance of the terms 'beginning' and 'Word', which aligned with the start of the *Bible Noise* process and the engagement with Word/word.[2] The recurrence of phrases like 'In the beginning', 'light', 'Word', and 'God' revealed potential for sonic exploration.

The concept involved layering participants' voices by recording and looping their spoken phrases, which were then played back for listening. Phrases such as 'the Word was with God' and 'the Word was God' were particularly explored, with sound enacting the duality of 'with' and 'was' through the layering of loops at varying intervals. At times, 'Word' and 'God' would resonate simultaneously, while at other moments they would align sequentially. Similarly, terms like 'light' and 'in the beginning' would interact with the other words in this layered soundscape.

Each reader would speak into a mic and be recorded. After recording the voices, participants had the opportunity to mix the sounds themselves, allowing them to explore the interplay of different voices and to experience how the sounds clashed or blended. This practice illustrated how our interpretative approaches can 'decrease' or 'increase' the 'volume' of certain voices—amplifying softer ones or quieting louder ones to ensure every voice could be heard.

During an early recording session, one participant, a child, began to cough. Reflecting on this moment, the cough exemplified the intention behind the research: it was a 'noise', an unexpected disruption that challenged my preconceived vision of the piece's sound. This unplanned element aligned with the broader aim of integrating sounds that challenge established meanings and ways of understanding.

In the discussion that followed, participants noted that they initially focused on listening for their own voice, which made it difficult to hear the other voices collectively. This highlighted a tendency for listeners to isolate a single voice, particularly when speech is involved. The performance element of the piece likely prompted this self-focused listening. However, with repeated listening, participants began to perceive the composition as a whole, rather than concentrating on individual voices. Additionally, the performance context initially made participants hesitant to engage in mixing; the awareness of being observed by others while mixing led some to rush through their 'turn'. It took time for participants to embrace the concept of collaborative participation, moving beyond a traditional performer-audience dichotomy.

'*Prologue Remix*' is rooted in sound—from the selection of the text to its enactment through sound and the subsequent reflection through discussion. Sound serves both as the process and the subject of analysis.

7.2. Contrapunt of Naomi and Job

'*Contrapunt of Naomi and Job*'[3] engages with hermeneutics, guided by feminist theologian Jacqueline Lapsley's interpretation of the Book of Ruth, which centres on Naomi, Ruth's widowed mother-in-law (Lapsley 2005, p. 90). Lapsley draws a parallel between Naomi and the more widely known figure of Job, whose story is traditionally seen as a meditation on suffering. By focusing on Naomi, Lapsley uncovers a voice that has often been marginalized. Although the biblical book is titled 'Ruth'—likely due to Ruth's connection as an ancestor of King David (Ruth 4:18–22) or as a narrative defending inter-racial marriage (Bush 1996, p. 19)—this title shifts focus away from Naomi. Naomi's obscured presence is compounded by her status as a widow who has lost both sons, a situation that renders her position socially and materially precarious. Lapsley's reading amplifies this hidden voice.

This piece began with the question, 'What would happen if Lapsley's reading could be enacted in sound?' I developed a piece that highlighted the shared language and phrases between the narratives of Naomi and Job, drawing on Lapsley's insights. Words like 'bitter' and phrases such as 'the hand of the Lord' and 'seven sons' served as common sonic motifs. Both Job and Naomi lament how God gives and takes away, and both narratives include loud expressions of grief—Naomi and her daughters-in-law, and Job and his friends. These overlapping themes formed the basis for a sonic piece that aimed to bring these two voices into dialogue.

The score was formatted as text in two columns, a deliberate departure from musical notation, designed to reflect the format of many Bibles. Participants were divided into two groups: one read from the 'Naomi' texts, and the other from the 'Job' texts. As the performance unfolded, the voices from each group began to mix and merge towards the end. This blending of reading and subsequent conversation was integral to the research processes.

Job, a wealthy, powerful figure, is juxtaposed with Naomi, a destitute widow. While Job is eventually restored to wealth and given seven sons, Naomi is gifted with Ruth, who the text describes as 'better than seven sons'.

This piece presents various challenges in listening. Participants needed to listen to others in their group to ensure synchronicity, while also listening for cues from the other group to stay aligned with the score. This dual attentiveness is similar to the listening required in a choir, where a singer must hear their own part while remaining in time and pitch with others. However, this piece differs because it involves spoken voices. Our inclination to focus on a single voice conveying a clear message makes it more difficult to engage with a chorus of spoken words. Unlike in choral singing, where pitch alone can guide synchronization, this piece requires active listening to the words. The score aids this

process by providing a structure, but it also adds complexity—participants must monitor both their own column and that of the other group, balancing their individual reading with the collective performance.

The layered listening and text engagement in this piece mirror the complexities of interpreting biblical texts. Readers approach texts with preconceived ideas shaped by the many 'voices' that have influenced them, even if they are not consciously aware of these influences. This is the aim of *Bible Noise*: to physically enact, through sound art practices, the intricate processes that accompany textual engagement. Hearing multiple spoken voices at once makes us aware of the other voices present and forces us to decide whether to attend to those voices or ignore them.

7.3. Thus Whispereth the Lord[4]

The ritual of reading scripture aloud often concludes with the statement 'This is the word of the Lord', to which the congregation responds 'Thanks be to God'. This phrase appears in certain Bible translations (Ex: NRSV 2 Kings 9:36), while similar phrasing in the King James Version is 'Thus saith the Lord'. The latter is used throughout the Old Testament, especially in prophetic books like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel.

While biblical prophets are predominantly male, I sought to amplify the voices of female prophets, whose contributions are often overlooked. The phrase 'Thus saith the Lord' became '*Thus whispereth the Lord*', reflecting how these women's voices have been minimized in the biblical narrative, rendering them a whisper. Bible Noise aims to hear and give voice to these whispers, focusing on the often-muted presence of female prophets. This shift from the ritual phrase initiates a process of textual research, identifying and exploring women prophets within the Bible. The piece centres on seven instances of female prophets, a number that signifies completeness in biblical symbolism. The goal was to engage with these figures through a sonic performance that brought their texts and contexts to life.

The piece is structured for three groups of participants: two groups produce sounds representing the prophet, while the third reads the biblical text associated with her. Here, polyphony emerges not through multiple textual voices but through the simultaneous interplay of sound and narrative. The sounds are derived from the text itself, such as 'tambo' and 'bereen' from Miriam's tambourine, or a buzzing 'bzzzzz' for Deborah, whose name means 'bee'. These sonic elements simultaneously obscure and amplify the prophets' narratives. While they can drown out the spoken words, they also highlight the voices of these women, creating space for attention and celebration amidst potential derision.

The piece follows a chronological progression through the Bible, beginning with Miriam in the book of Exodus and concluding with the unnamed daughters of Philip from the book of Acts. It ends with a passage from Ezekiel that speaks of God's breath reviving the dead, prompting reflection on whether the readers' breaths have truly given voice to these silenced figures.

7.4. Babble Kabaddi

This piece employs a game-based approach to generate its soundscape, drawing inspiration from the use of games in composition. While Iannis Xenakis famously utilized game theory to compose works like *Duel* and *Stratégie* (Xenakis and Kanach 1992, p. vii), my approach is simpler and less rooted in mathematical structures. For Xenakis, game theory provided a formal framework for composition. In contrast, my use of the term 'game' emphasizes following straightforward rules rather than engaging with game theory in a technical sense.

The idea of a game serves two primary purposes in this piece. First, it acts as a compositional strategy. This is influenced by composer David Behrman's concept of composition

as a game among performers. In Behrman's approach, the sound is 'dependent on interactions among [the performers]. . . , and far less upon the previous choices of the composer' (Conrad 2012, p. 163). Second, the concept of the game provides a framework for engaging with language. This resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's notion of 'language games' (Giles 2021) and Hans Georg Gadamer's idea that hermeneutics, or the interpretation of texts, involves a form of 'play' (Gadamer 2004, p. 102).

'Kabaddi' is a sport indigenous to South Asia (Tomlinson 2010), involving two teams positioned in separate zones. One player, called the 'raider', enters the opposing team's zone to tag a member, attempting to eliminate them from the game, and the raider must continuously chant the word 'kabaddi' throughout their raid without pausing to breathe. This continuous vocalization is an essential feature of the game.

Drawing from this concept of continuous sounding, *Babble Kabaddi* adapts this vocal element in a new context. Here, there are no teams and no tagging. Instead, all participants except one stand in a semi-circle, while the remaining participant, designated as the 'Babel-er', stands at a distance facing the semi-circle. Each participant in the semi-circle receives a fragment of a biblical passage, with none aware of the portions given to others. Individually, the fragments make no coherent sense. The Babel-er then begins to chant the word 'Babel' without taking a breath, moving into the semi-circle as they continue to sound. Simultaneously, the group members repeat their respective fragments out loud. The Babel-er, while maintaining their chant, attempts to piece together the passage from the collective utterances. As soon as the Babel-er runs out of breath, they return to their starting position, and the group stops speaking. The Babel-er then shares their interpretation of what they heard, after which the group members can clarify the parts they were given. Together, they decide whether to settle on a single version of the passage or preserve multiple interpretations. The process then repeats with a different passage and a new Babel-er.

This piece draws on the story of Babel, known for its association with the confusion of languages. Craig Bartholomew suggests that Babel carries two potential meanings: 'confusion' or 'God's door' (Bartholomew 1998, p. 314). The Babel-er embodies both these meanings as they move into the semi-circle, their repeated utterance of 'Babel' creating potential confusion while also acting as a gateway to understanding the fragmented text. The Babel-er must sound and listen simultaneously, initiating the reconstruction of the passage. However, this task is inherently communal, relying on the cooperation of the group. Although group members are not explicitly instructed to listen, they too engage in this dual act of sounding and listening.

In this setting, polyphony emphasizes the simultaneous acts of listening and sounding. The multiplicity of voices is present, but it hinges on the Babel-er's production of 'nonsense' while trying to decipher 'sense' from the group's utterances, as well as on the group's ability to assist. Skills of memory and recall are crucial, as the interplay of listening, vocalizing, and short-term memory sustains the game's dynamic. The improvisational nature of the piece lies in its unpredictability. For example, in one iteration, the Babel-er was unable to recall any of the fragments. Here, the hidden voice represents what the Babel-er could not retrieve, the parts they could not hear or grasp before running out of breath. Ultimately, it is only when the group reconvenes that this voice can be heard.

The development of *Babble Kabaddi* began with an exploration of a traditional sport that integrates vocal sound. By reimagining the kabaddi game for Bible Noise, the structure shifts from a competitive format to a collaborative one, merging the two teams into a single group. Instead of team members crossing into opposing zones, the solo Babel-er enters the space of the group, simultaneously belonging to the group while taking on a unique role as both noise-maker and interpreter. This continuous vocalization without breathing creates physical tension, altering the state of the body. The Babel-er, in this process,

becomes different—transformed into a listener who seeks to interpret the differences within the group.

The Babel-er's role bears a resemblance to that of a researcher, who approaches a group with a sense of difference, bringing noise into the interaction, and subsequently reflecting back their understanding. The Babel-er's interpretation is provisional, open to the corrections of the group, mirroring the iterative and communal nature of research. In this way, the piece becomes a reflexive exploration of the research process itself, embodying the dynamics of inquiry, interpretation, and collaboration.

8. Implications

There are various implications and possibilities that arise from creative engagements through sound with scripture. Generally, it shows that a deeper engagement *with* and *through* sound can reveal different experiences. When this is applied to the Bible we have new and fresh appreciations of the text. Sound has a malleability and permeability that allows the bringing together of different voices without overpowering each other. Sound also alerts us to the embodied and corporeal nature of our selves and importantly also of the texts. Rather than being accessed through the 'cloud', hearing the text through the voice indicates the presence of the bodies. The voice is sound that comes from breath upon flesh and as we share breath we share sound without having to compromise body. This has theological resonances with the Trinitarian God and several church fathers have used the analogy of word and breath to talk of the Son and the Spirit.

The practice of Bible Noise then allows an embodied practice of these ideas. It allows us to encounter God through sound which is not music. The ordinary speaking voice also reveals God to us and if we listen we might hear God's voice afresh. When a small child reads the Bible it embodies a different voice of God. In doing so it could expand our understanding and experience of God

8.1. Body

Embodiment is a further implication from this practice. In a world where most of our lives are lived in the 'cloud' or online, a practice like this brings us closer to the world of the Bible and the traditions of its practice across the centuries by using our voices and bodies to engage with the Bible. The Bible can take on a more fleshly experience in an analogical way enacting the idea of 'the Word made flesh'. Halvorson and Hovland in their research into evangelical Bible reading highlight this embodiment by speaking of materiality: 'Reading in Christian communities fundamentally involves materiality, not only of the text as a material object but also through the bodily act of reading' (Halvorson and Hovland 2021, p. 504). The use of the voice in the practice is a way of making the body present to each other. The voice is a production of bodily processes where breath hits vocal cords which is then shaped by our tongues and mouths. We receive these voices as our ears receive the movements in the air which in turn move eardrums and inner ear hairs. By speaking scripture to each other we can acknowledge the body that speaks and acknowledge our own in hearing it. Having the voice that is formed of body gives it a particularity, a uniqueness which is also important to evangelicalism with its emphasis on personal faith. Voices often contextualise what kind of location we might be in and when you listen to the recordings of Bible Noise they can reveal further information in terms of class, education, which part of England and so on. This uniqueness then makes the participation in the scripture more important.

8.2. Participation

The participatory nature of Bible Noise shows how scripture can be engaged with communally. Quite often in worship, the Bible is read by a single voice. Bible Noise attempts to disrupt the single voice to acknowledge the multiple voices in the Bible from its authors, character, editors and compilers. In contrast to worship settings, informal Bible studies do sometimes have a sharing of voices where people will share the reading of passage. Bible Noise attempts to take that sharing further. The piece 'Babble Kabaddi' for example shows the importance of participation for understanding and interpretation. It is by a community sharing scripture that meanings remain alive. Participation in the experience of scripture and the multilayered interpretative possibilities from this participation mean that the Bible is dynamic, active and the 'living word of God'.

8.3. Diversity

The different participant voices can also reflect the diversity of the faithful. Evangelicalism itself is hugely diverse within Britain and if different spoken voices from our various locations, geographically and socially, come together it can sonically give us a more realistic representation of the body of Christ. This sonic diversity is evident from the beginning of the church when at Pentecost many tongues of the world were animated by the Spirit. Too often single voices dominate in the name of unity but true unity requires diversity to become meaningful. Unity is distinct from uniformity and the church is always called to love across its diverse differences. While Bible Noise does not explicitly show such idealised hopes it enacts ways in which diverse voices can come together.

9. Critiques and Problems

There are different issues that come with a practice like this. Several of them coalesce around the audio reception of sound. For those who are deaf or hard of hearing such a practice can be confusing and disorienting. One participant commented on this when we did a piece where scripture was whispered. She had difficulties of hearing as a child and the whispers took her back to a difficult time. For those who lip-read, having several sources of speech will make it harder to comprehend or appreciate what is going on. Engaging with issues deaf people face is part of broader issues of communal practices. Deaf artist Christine Sun Kim speaks of her relationship to sound: 'As a Deaf person living in a world of sound, it's as if I was living in a foreign country, blindly following its rules, customs, behaviors and norms without ever questioning them' (Kim 2015). Kim's work with sound is important as it contextualises how deaf people may engage with some of what Bible Noise has to offer.

A further audio reception issue has to do with sensory processing where some find too many voices or sounds overwhelming especially some with neurodiverse conditions. A practice like Bible Noise could make it overwhelming thought equally a practice like Bible Noise with the right contextualisation could stoke an interest that allows greater engagement. Our group had two members with autism and two with ADHD and their interest in the topic and the practice allowed them to fully engage with the practice. The variation within neurodiversity means that not everyone will find this a helpful experience. Therefore, such a practice needs to come with sufficient contextualisation and warnings, so as to not distress those with auditory processing difficulties.

There is also an important issue about how comfortable evangelicals will find such a practice. On one level the discomfort is intentional as a way to foster different ways to engage with the Bible. However, an important balance needs to be struck in making this a welcoming practice. One of the difficulties that evangelicals might find is that scripture here is not propositional but experiential. For my sessions I always gave clear explanations as to

what was going to happen and also gave my reasons as to why we were doing what we did. Those who were not comfortable with the ideas we were trying did not join in, while others understood what we were doing but did not feel comfortable to put themselves in that experience.

Participants broadly saw this as a distinctive way of engaging with the Bible. Unlike traditional Bible studies, which seek answers to specific questions, or sermons, which offer clear takeaways, this approach was more open-ended, emphasising a *being with* scripture—experiencing it without a predefined conclusion. Here, the Bible was encountered not as a structured pathway of meaning but as an immersive experience. Some participants noted that the process drew their attention to biblical figures they had not previously considered, such as Naomi and the women prophets. While further research into the impact of these practices would have been valuable, plans were curtailed by the COVID-19 pandemic. The intention had been to present these *pieces* to the wider congregation with opportunities for participation, but this was not possible. Performing these works in broader communal settings would have provided greater insight into their practical applications.

10. Conclusions

Bible Noise provides creative avenues for the engagement of scripture through voice, embodiment and communal participation. Coming from a background characterised by an evangelical love for the Bible it also challenges evangelical emphases on propositional approaches to scripture. Bible Noise attempts to emphasise the body by the use of the voice and movement along with a strong participatory approach to the reading aloud of scripture. In some senses this reflects scripture itself as a material collection of multiple voices that requires to be sounded out through fresh voices and locations. The use of multiple voices is a way to reflect the diversity of scripture and the diversity of the body of Christ. It also reflects the origins of the church at Pentecost where the Spirit gave utterance to people in multiple languages.

It is worth noting that Bible Noise is a work in progress that needs further experimentation, feedback and reflection. The ideas that come from Bible Noise could be envisaged as engaging different age groups and different kinds of people for whom a less abstract approach to scripture would be more engaging. The practices also can be further expanded into various forms of spoken liturgy and also used within musical contexts of worship as a different approach to song. The expansion of these ideas will be a further set of works beyond the initial research project.

Further, the practice of Bible Noise reveals facets of God's action. The Bible for evangelicals is God's word and yet it is arguably through his *spoken* word that he acts. This can be seen poignantly in Genesis through creation but also through many interactions God has with his people. From God's first spoken words of creation through his call to Moses, his stillness with Elijah to the words of Jesus, his Son and to the final welcome that the bride and the Spirit offer in Revelation, God's voice choruses above, below and around in a symphony of truth and grace.

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Notes

1 https://on.soundcloud.com/xDHsCHLNJwWJqmqSA (accessed on 30 December 2022).
2 Both the theological notion of 'the Word' and descriptive term of the unit of language, 'the word'.
3 https://on.soundcloud.com/RSfLJSKZs9fCw9GZA (accessed on 30 December 2022).
4 https://on.soundcloud.com/XVyHqqq1wTKqEgjV8 (accessed on 30 December 2022).

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Article

Roots, Threads, and Possibilities: How Learning from Some Origin Stories of Evangelical Youth Ministry Can Help Navigate a Challenging Future

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Abstract: Working with young people is a key part of the story of British evangelicalism, both being formed by and forming evangelical Christian life. Exploring evangelical youth ministry through the lens of the origins of the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes (now Urban Saints) in the UK and demonstrating the shared threads and themes in regard to the Australian and US contexts, through studies of the InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF) and Young Life, respectively, key themes are revealed that embody an evangelical approach to working with young people. These themes, encapsulated within the overall practice of relationship building, focus on influential young people, charismatic lay leadership, and have an emphasis on fun. We further demonstrate the wider influence on evangelical church life encapsulated by this evangelical sensibility towards working with young people that endures, which is often unacknowledged. In addition, these themes suggest an operant theology that raises questions for the practice of evangelical youth ministry. The consideration of these themes can help us respond to some of the challenges faced by youth ministry in the UK and young people in contemporary culture. Moreover, the historical threads contain possibilities that might help evangelicals navigate a future in regard to working with young people.

Keywords: youth ministry; practical theology; evangelical; history; relationships; practice

1. Introduction

The world has changed dramatically in recent years and continues to do so at an almost alarming rate. Whether it is the ongoing influence of the digital revolution and recent breakthroughs in AI technology, the interruptions and impact caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the global climate crisis, increasing military conflict, or the epidemic of poor mental health among younger people, this is a volatile and complex time to grow up in. As a distinct ministry of the church, youth ministry is still a relatively new phenomenon, with Nick Shepherd's claim from over a decade ago that "the task of understanding being a Christian Youth Worker has really only just begun" (Shepherd 2014, p. 10) still ringing true.

This article interrogates primary relational practices of evangelical youth ministry, through a reflection on aspects of its origin story, through the lens of three early youth ministry organisations in the UK, Australia, and the USA. In doing this, we will trace shared roots and threads that shaped the representative organisations and, through them, evangelical youth ministry practice more widely. Together these aspects give prominence to the central practice of relationship building, specifically through a focus on influential

young people, charismatic lay leadership, and an emphasis on fun. By offering reflections on these common roots and threads, this article acknowledges ways in which God was understood to be active in the practice of these early youth ministry organisations, highlighting how this understanding of God's action through relationships is still present in the evangelical practice of youth ministry. From these reflections, suggestions will be made that turn from the past, through the present, and toward the future; how might evangelical youth ministry develop from within its own history, without being bound by it? We will offer a hopeful way forward that critically engages with the past, acknowledging the giants on whose shoulders we stand,[1] whilst recognising the context in which we now "live, move and have our being" (Acts 17:28).

2. Methodological Overview

This article is a work of practical theology, seeking to make a contribution based on the practices of Christians, desiring to faithfully follow God in the context they find themselves (Ward 2017, p. 55). The origins of the practices in question are historical, relating to the formational years of key early evangelical youth ministry movements, but the methods underpinning this article are a combination of research into organisational archival records and conducting group-based theological reflection. As such the methodology underpinning this article is akin to the notion of "writing the Body of Christ", a corporate act of "creating a narrative that tells the story of [the Church's] ongoing life" (Graham et al. 2019, chap. 4), although here it is employed in a parachurch rather than a congregational manner. In keeping with the acknowledged activism of evangelicalism (Bebbington 2003), the pioneers of youth ministry on whose work we draw did not take time to formulate complex ideas that underpinned their practice, rather their ideas and theology can be seen as embodied first in practice, then established as accepted practice by future generations. In this way, a study of historical practice can be understood as the study of the operant theological voice of these early and, therefore, formative, youth ministry organisations (Cameron et al. 2010, pp. 54–55).

In addition, this article is undergirded by aspects of auto/theobiography (Ward 2008, p. 4), with each of the three authors' interest in the topic emerging from their personal involvement in the practices of youth ministry, influenced to differing degrees by the work of the organisations that provide the threads of practice discussed in this article. Author one's focus on the history and influence of Crusaders/Urban Saints originated from a period of working for them in 1999–2002, as an Area Development Worker. This period, when author one was a member of staff, coincided with a turbulent period in the organisation's history, as a new CEO was brought in with a new vision and, ultimately, a new name for the organisation, which stirred strong feelings among those people that had been steeped in the work of the organisation for many years. Author two was a student leader of an InterVarsity Fellowship group in Australia and subsequently became a staff worker in 1992–1993. Her experience of a theologically rich, evangelical tradition strengthened her faith and her desire to be part of the global evangelical student movement. The third author's research interest in Young Life stems from her participation as a student (1990–1994), then as a volunteer leader, and finally as a student staff leader (1996–1999). She received her call to ministry on a Young Life camp, when her leader gave her the verses Matthew 28: 18–20 as they hiked in the mountains of Colorado.

Each author has continued to be actively involved in various forms of evangelical youth ministry practice, from leading local church-based groups in both an employed and volunteer capacity, through to teaching and training Christian youth workers in higher education, and regular involvement in key conferences and networks. It would not be

possible to dislocate ourselves as authors from our research, as we are formed by and involved in forming evangelical youth ministry practice.

The primary historical research underpinning this article was undertaken independently. Each author had conducted extensive archival research focused on a youth organisation for independent projects. On hearing and reading each other's findings, a sense of overlapping and shared themes developed. The authors then undertook a period of group-based theological reflection through conversation. This process involved each author detailing the story of their respective organisation and the themes that the story encapsulated, with the other authors reflecting on the themes that resonated with them. This process was repeated by each author for each organisation and, gradually, the themes that are detailed and discussed in this article developed, as did the analysis of contemporary youth ministry practice in light of the key historical threads.

3. Organisational Origins

This opening section outlines the origins of the three organisations from which we identify the roots and threads of youth ministry practice. We do not claim they cover every aspect and nuance of the origin stories for youth ministry or account for every aspect of contemporary practice, but we think that these organisations are particularly influential, highlighted by their transnational nature. Our contention is that these themes are archetypal of dynamics that continue to shape the practices of evangelical youth ministry and create a certain common sensibility as to how God is active in and through these practices.

3.1. Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, UK

In March 1900, Rev Albert Kestin, a Church Mission Society missionary, was in London on furlough and lodging in Crouch End with a wealthy couple, Mr and Mrs Saffrey. One day a conversation arose between Kestin and the Saffreys about some boys they observed in the park opposite the house on Sunday afternoons. Given Kestin's missionary experience and training, Mrs Saffrey suggested on one such Sunday that he might go into the park to meet and speak to these boys, inviting them back to the house for a Bible study. Kestin, perhaps with a sense of obligation, did just that:

> In her drawing room on Sunday afternoon, 1 April 1900, four boys met me in the first 'Crusaders' class. Next Sunday there were only two boys and for the first few weeks little progress was registered so that I began to ask myself if we really were working out any plan of God. (Kestin 1919)

From these inauspicious beginnings, however, the work grew and, by autumn 1901, the group numbered 60 boys. Based on the inspiration provided by this group and Herbert Bevington, another early leader, further classes began, and the formal Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes[2] came into being. Spreading slowly at first, twelve groups formalised the union in 1906. The spread then became quicker, such that by the start of the Second World War, there were 256 groups, with over 16,000 members (Crusaders 1956).

The influence of the Crusaders on Christian work with young people in the UK and beyond tends to be underplayed, often in favour of an emphasis on the much later influence of the Youth for Christ (YFC) movement. By the time of this transatlantic arrival, however, the impact of the Crusaders on shaping youth ministry practice and the wider evangelical church is hard to ignore.

3.2. InterVarsity Fellowship (IVF), Australia

The IVF in Australia was part of an international evangelical movement.[3] The background of this movement was the formation of breakaway Christian groups at Cambridge and London University. Some of the Christian students believed that the SCM (Student

Christian Movement) groups had become too liberal, especially in regard to their views on the atoning death of Christ and the authority of the Bible. In 1928, this break was formalised by a committee of students who called themselves the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF, later IVF). Together they vowed to establish a "truly Evangelical witness" throughout the world (Guinness 1978, p. 42) and vowed to plant IVCF evangelical unions both in Britain and other countries. The heart of these unions were small Bible study groups, similar to the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes in the UK.

The IVF in Australia was formed by the Vice-President of the IVF, Howard Guinness. He was given the role of missioner and, as part of his world tours, he visited Australian universities and schools in 1930 and 1934/35. Guinness began his Australian tour at Sydney University, where there was a small group of students that had broken away from the SCM in 1919 and now called themselves the Bible League (Prince 1987). Guinness encouraged the group to have a more visible presence in the university and, through public meetings and house parties (camps), to proclaim the message that Jesus Christ was the Saviour and the Lord. The group was named the Evangelical Union (EU) and was affiliated with the IVF. After establishing the EU, Guinness travelled to the other capital cities in the country and encouraged students to form EUs. These groups slowly grew in popularity. At Sydney University, the EU began with 20–30 men and women; by 1955, there were 450 members.

Through the influence of Guinness, the IVF in Australia was part of an international parachurch ministry for students. It understood its work, at least in part, as to win theological battles with student organisations that they considered to be theologically liberal. They did this through public meetings, but also through small group-based Bible studies run by students. In the 1930s, this model influenced youth ministry in Australia, as other organisations, such as the Australian Crusaders' Union, the ISCF (Inter Schools Christian Fellowship), and church fellowship groups in local churches, embraced it.

3.3. Young Life, USA

From Jim Rayburn III's account of the first days of Young Life,[4] the first meetings in the summer of 1940 were evangelistic crusades, complete with music and preaching. During that summer, Rayburn spoke to more than 13,000 people at his canvas church. He used a particular conversational style; he was a great joke teller, a master at getting people's attention, creatively adapting a Bible story to make it live. "Do you stop having fun when you start talking about Jesus? If you do, God help you", he would say. Along with his seminary friends, Addison Sewell and Walden Howard, he sought ways to build a bridge to teenagers in the area around Dallas. Across from the fair park, some businessmen helped put up a tent with a "God Bless America" banner. The Christian faith is what made America strong, they reasoned. From this summer experience and through his contact with fellow pastors at the seminary, Rayburn managed to recruit 65 volunteers to begin working with high school students as part of his Young Life campaign. That autumn, they began working in Dallas, Gainesville, and Houston, Texas, laying the foundations for Young Life. Relational, incarnational ministry became the pragmatic tool utilised by Young Life to present the gospel to young people in the United States. This style of ministry set the frame of reference for evangelical youth ministry globally.

4. Practices, Roots, and Threads

David Bailey details the way that relationships are considered the "key conduits of mediation and transmission within youth ministry" and contends that this idea has crossed "distances and continents [to] shape contemporary youth ministry" (Bailey 2019, p. 73). He goes on to describe such relationships as central "communicative acts" (p. 74) of evangelical work with young people. Such a focus on the practice of relationship building with young

people can be traced from the very earliest days of youth ministry (Ward 1996, pp. 37–39) to the present day, where it remains front and centre. This is evidenced by relationship building being named Young Life's second method, after prayer at a Young Life celebration event local to one of the authors, and the core theme within numerous contemporary youth ministry books (e.g., Ward 1998; Root 2007). Consequently, in this context, a historical focus is particularly illuminative in regard to understanding the dynamics of contemporary youth ministry practice.

The practice of building relationships takes a particular form when viewed through the lens of the roots and threads of youth ministry history. It can be seen, for example, in each of the following three threads: (1) a focus on influential young people, (2) charismatic lay leadership, and (3) fun. These threads carry expressions of the relational practice of evangelical youth ministry, demonstrable in the origin stories shared and, also, full of potential in regard to holding God's action in and for the lives of young people into the future. It is, therefore, to these threads that we turn.

4.1. Thread One: A Focus on Influential Young People

The first thread drawn from youth ministry's story out of which relational practice develops is a focus on certain influential young people, colloquially termed "key kids" by Rayburn. Each organisation, in its own way, is focused on the potential of young people themselves to influence, reach others, and grow the ministry. The form of this focus shaped each organisation in a particular way, but with a common underpinning practice of targeted relationship building as the means by which God was understood to be at work.

From its earliest days, the Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes had a focus that might seem strange to contemporary ears. During the formation of the Union in 1906, it was stated "as a guiding principle that the Crusaders' classes were aimed at the upper middle-class boys attending public and private schools".[5] There were two reasons for this clause:

> Sunday Schools [attracted] children of the working classes by offering an education that, due to work commitments, they would otherwise have been unable to have. . . [They] tended to meet on both a Sunday morning and afternoon. It follows then. . . those from the middle and upper classes who, significantly, would have been attending public or private school during the week were less likely to be attached to a Sunday school. . . It was precisely one of these unattached groups of boys with free time on a Sunday afternoon that came to the attention of Albert Kestin. (Scanlan 2017, p. 33)

The more strategic rationale for this focus relates to influential young people in a specific way. This is an example of what has been coined the "grand strategy" of UK evangelicals, which relates to approaching influential young people at the right time to reach the next generation and, thereby, gain "control of the future" (Ward 1996, pp. 45–62). This meant they sought to reach boys who, as adults, could be influential in society, perhaps through politics, business, and church leadership, and to do so as committed evangelical Christians. Given the way in which, especially in the early twentieth century, such influential positions in society were dominated by men from the upper and upper-middle classes, it was to such boys that the focus turned. Furthermore, the grand strategy suggests a second-stage desire to not only see young people become followers of Jesus, but that an evangelical flavour to Christianity might be perpetuated and, resultantly, wider culture shaped. It is unclear from the historical records available whether such a second-stage aim was made explicit to the boys joining early Crusaders' classes. It is of interest to note that such second-stage intentions have often, explicitly or implicitly, formed part of the narrative of Christian work with young people, whether that be to preserve the church, change society, or influence their peers, flowing from a relational basis.[6]

The Australian context was directly influenced by this approach in the UK. Howard Guinness, when he arrived in Australia, was committed to the same grand strategy, focusing on connecting relationally with influential young people from key schools. Guinness had encountered this strategy in England through his experiences with Crusaders and, again, this grand strategy presumed that elite school and university students would become the movers and shakers, the leaders of the church, state, and business (Lukabyo 2020, p. 79). Guinness saw himself as beginning a movement and, using relationships, deliberately mentored gifted young men to follow his example of living a life of service. In his second tour of 1933/1934, he invited three students to accompany him as missioners. He trained them and many others and said that he was "handing on the torch" (Guinness 1978, p. 67). Guinness came to Australia with a vision for university ministry, but he soon realised that he needed to reach students from elite independent schools. As early as 1930, he decided the first target would be schools (ibid). These school students would become his "key boys". His plan was that young people would be converted at school and then trained and mentored at university. They would then graduate to become evangelical leaders. Therefore, along with the university ministry, he began to speak at independent schools and urged school students to start Crusader groups and evangelise their friends.

Subsequent leaders of the IVF continued to employ this strategy and train key boys. Paul White became the IVF General Secretary in 1943 and was involved with the Crusaders' Union. He coined the term "Blokes Worth Watching", or BWW for short. A BWW was a younger man, who had potential as a minister or missionary. White would write the names of BWW in his prayer diary and would spend time investing in them as leaders (White 1986). The relational strategy used by Guinness was effective in training a small group of leaders. However, this also meant that there were naturally those, often students from state-run schools, who felt excluded. There was an "in group" and these students were not in it.[7] There was, therefore, as with the Crusaders' Union, a focus on the relationships built.

Although not directly linked to the origins of the Crusaders' Union as an IVF, a similar relational strategy, albeit with a particular US flavour, is evident in the origins of Young Life. This highlights the shared instincts in regard to evangelical youth ministry practice across transnational boundaries. Young Life's philosophy of "winning the right to be heard" meant leaders gained the respect of students before expecting them to listen to the claims of Christ. From the beginning, Young Life believed this had to be done on the young person's turf, at football games and practice, high schoolers' hangouts, such as soda fountains, school events and, when permitted by the school authorities, the high school cafeteria. This whole process, which came to be understood as "incarnational", led up to a point at which the Christian gospel was presented. As the ministry of Young Life emerged and evolved, this method of proclaiming the gospel to young people framed their style of evangelism. It was also discovered that kids would go where their friends were, so to reach them, school leaders were the initial target. Relational, incarnational ministry became the pragmatic tool utilised by Young Life to present the gospel to young people in the United States.

Young Life's relational approach, the focus on winning the right to be heard while meeting young people on their turf, are maintained as central practices and tenets of Young Life's local work to this day. This was witnessed by one of the authors, when attending a tenth anniversary thanksgiving event for a local Young Life centre. Building relationships with young people was described as the most important practice, reinforced by the use of 1 Thessalonians 2:8: "Because we loved you so much, we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well" (NIV).

A relational focus on young people, with a view to influencing them, and for them to become influential, has maintained its primary status among youth ministry practice and a central way in which God is understood to work through youth ministers in the lives of young people. This has been demonstrated in recent research among Christian youth workers in the UK, who said that their expression "through relationships" was connected to "being like Jesus" in terms of their theology of practice (Bailey 2019). Similarly, Root articulates the relationship of a leader with a young person as being the concrete location of God's action in youth ministry (Root 2007, p. 15). In youth ministry, the terminology of "incarnational" is commonplace, being used to describe the significance of relationship building with young people. Another common expression is to "enter their world". Pete Ward exemplifies this by conflating the terms in a chapter entitled "The Incarnational Approach", describing how "relationships are the fuel on which youthwork travels" (Ward 1998, p. 43). The wide use of these terms has been criticised for being theologically shallow (Griffiths 2013; Gough 2019). Despite this, these terms still influence writers and youth ministry practice today and have their roots in the very origins of evangelical youth ministry practice.

4.2. Thread Two: Charismatic Lay Leadership

The second thread that is common across our contexts and the formation of relational practice is charismatic lay leadership.[8] As with each thread, however, the way it plays out is distinct, recognising cultural and contextual differences. The significance of this, as a theme within evangelical youth ministry, is seen in the way that such foundational leadership being lay, rather than ordained, along with the classic activism of evangelical Christianity (Bebbington 2003), created flexibility and ambiguity regarding the place of the church within the work. Consequently, the place where relationships might be formed between leaders and young people, be it at Bible studies in houses, camps, sports grounds, or any other viable location, becomes the locus of God's action. The structures of formal church are secondary at best. As will be detailed later, this created an approach to evangelical youth ministry practice in which it is understood that God is active outside, and perhaps despite, institutional forms of church life. Suffice to say, for now, that relationships in youth ministry take the place of ecclesial identity in many ways.

While Albert Kestin was the founder of the Crusaders' Union, Herbert Bevington carried more influence establishing more Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, beyond the ones Kestin launched. Bevington was recruited as a co-leader as the first classes grew in size, being described by Kestin as his "old boy", having been discipled through his involvement in a previous group by Kestin himself. In 1904, when Bevington's business took him from London to Brighton, he launched a class there. By 1906, when twelve classes were formalised as Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes, Bevington had already personally launched three classes and more had been launched by boys involved in the original class he had co-led with Kestin (Scanlan 2017, p. 30). None of these classes sat within the boundaries of a local congregation or under the auspices of denominational church.

The leadership of these early classes created a multiplying effect. New classes were led by those who had grown up within the Crusaders' Union, resulting in the existence of over 250 classes within thirty years. The leadership culture led to new leaders developing and launching new classes. Within this culture, the identity of the Crusaders' Union became something of an unacknowledged faith tradition, akin to a local church and denominational affiliation, and was surprisingly strong (ibid, p. 38). Replacing a denominational affiliation was a relational connection, through leaders of a local group or class, to the organisation. The strength of this extra-ecclesial faith tradition forged among members and leaders within the Crusaders' Union is evidenced by the near identical phrases used over eighty years.

On becoming the first paid General Secretary, A. J. Vereker was described as a "Crusader to his fingertips"; eighty-two years later in 2002, when re-naming of the organisation was first mooted, the then-Chair of the Crusaders' Council pushed back stating that he "feel[s] 'Crusaders' down through [his] roots" (ibid, p. 39). Few would name Kestin or Bevington as influential youth ministry pioneers, yet their fingerprints are all over the shape and approach of much evangelical youth work in the UK, with the crucial emphasis on relational connections through Bible study groups and activities, rather than ecclesial affiliation.

As highlighted above, the approach of IVF in Australia was directly influenced by the Crusaders' Union in the UK and, similarly, was reliant on lay leadership, this time by Howard Guinness. Guinness was converted and nurtured within English parachurch organisations, rather than his local church. At the age of fourteen, he became a Christian, following a conversation with the leader of the local Crusaders' Union Bible class (Guinness 1975, p. 21) after a cricket game. Following his conversion, Guinness and his brother established a class at their school. In the holidays, they attended Christian camps, called Varsity and Public Schools Camps (VPSCs), run by the Children's Special Service Mission (CSSM). All of these early experiences in parachurch youth ministries would shape him, and his focus on relationships and gatherings outside of the institutional church followed suit.

On arrival in Sydney, Guinness was quickly accepted and admired by the children of key evangelical families. He was 26 years old, young, energetic, tall, and an extrovert. He took an interest in the students and what they cared about (White 1986). He loved sports and reflected a kind of "muscular Christianity" that was evident in English public schools in the early 20th century (Weir et al. 2005, p. 2; Bezzant 2021, pp. 1–16). In his dress, he was debonair in an upper-class way that Australian students respected, no doubt this was due to their colonial cringe and high regard for all things British. The students looked up to him, while the men even imitated the way he dressed, by wearing conservative grey slacks and Harris Tweed sports coats![9] The form of Christianity to which Guinness inspired students was in a context where many churchgoers were nominal, thus the extra-ecclesial nature of the relationships and fellowship formed was deemed essential to the work. This is reinforced by claims that "habitual churchgoers resented the religious enthusiasm which carried Sunday observance into weekday living" (Prince and Prince 1979, p. 103).

Although not directly traced back to the Crusaders' Union in the UK in the manner of IVFs, it is fascinating to highlight a similar thread in terms of lay leadership, operating and seeking the work of God, outside the normal structures of church life, within the origins of Young Life. Andrew Root states that as the parachurch movement expanded within the United States from 1940 to 1960, the model of relational youth ministry was unleashed. Root argues that Rayburn and the Young Life organisation invented this form of youth ministry (Root 2007, p. 53).

Young Life was so popular in many towns that the only space large enough to hold events was the local mortuary. More than three hundred young people would gather to listen to Rayburn speak to them about Jesus Christ. There are many photographs documenting gatherings of this kind. Wally Howard summed up Rayburn's style by stating, "His faith had a daredevil quality about it. There were times when I could not decide if he was a man of God or just presumptuous, whether he was driven by ambition to serve Christ or to build his own empire" (Schoon Tanis 2016). As more and more stories were discovered about the early years of Young Life, the same theme resonated: Rayburn was such a dynamic speaker that he often packed-out rooms with young people, who clamoured to hear him tell stories about this person, Jesus Christ. Whether it was in mortuaries, hotel ballrooms, or living rooms in large houses, Rayburn had a way of attracting teenagers to hear the good news of the gospel, albeit deliberately outside of the usual structures of church life.

Embedded, then, in the origin stories of evangelical youth ministry is the influential role of lay leadership, whose lay identity and active desire to reach young people with the gospel led them outside the boundaries of institutional church life, believing that God was as much, if not more, suited to being at work among young people in those spaces. This extra-ecclesial practice is still seen as both an opportunity and a form of tension within evangelical youth ministry. Schoon Tanis highlights this ongoing tension in her contemporary exploration of Young Life's uneasy relationship with the life of the church and, in particular, the deliberate decision to avoid the questions of the sacraments (Schoon Tanis 2016). The action of God being located in relational connections suggests an implicit sacramentality in regard to these relationships, thus replacing the more formal ecclesial sacraments (ibid).

4.3. Thread Three: Fun

As a contemporary Urban Saints' leader said when interviewed, "if you're not thinking fun, then you're not going to have any youth work!" (Scanlan 2021, p. 152). Evangelical youth ministry developing, as it did, alongside the social changes in the twentieth century, found itself competing for the time and attention of young people with other activities and possibilities. Consequently, the thread of fun, of making youth ministry enjoyable, runs through our origin stories, becoming a core practice within evangelical youth ministry. Creating fun is not periphery to the work, but is seen as a way that God can shape the lives of young people, seen especially through the idea that the Christian life is the best life that a young person can lead. Or in the words of John 10:10, Jesus offers life in all its fullness. It can be argued that fun fuelled the relational heart of youth ministry practice at its origin and still does today.

The idea of fun activities for teenagers emerges almost immediately in the story of the Crusaders' Union, beginning with a proposal in 1907 to run a summer camp to bring together boys from across different classes that were already part of the Union. One of the benefits of being part of a larger movement was the ability to gather for activities and events on a scale that a local church could not manage (Watford 1995, p. 25). The development of fun activities by the Crusaders' Union was justified in the early days as needing to cater for the body, mind, and spirit.

This early move into organising camping activities developed into a programme of camps across multiple locations and weeks of the summer. Alongside this, regular sports competitions, annual trips, and events were developed to bring young people together from different regions of the UK, as well as nationally. These events were high profile enough that in 1993, Ian Botham, perhaps England's most well-known cricketer, presented a Crusader, Tim Pamphlett, with prizes at the Oval cricket ground in London for beating the Crusaders' Union cricket ball-throwing record, beating the record set by Botham himself, in 1969 (ibid, pp. 75–76). These events were clearly well-loved by the young people involved, with some games invented specifically within the Crusaders' Union and for Crusaders.

The significance of fun was not simply for young people to enjoy themselves, but also to reinforce the relational connection to the Crusaders' Union, so that the Crusaders' Union was not simply something you went to, but became something you were. It is of course not surprising that the leaders wanted to make being a Crusader fun and attractive, and whilst they never went as far as Jim Rayburn and Young Life, avoiding boredom was crucial. The evidence of an early Crusaders' Union camp song displays an aspect of this: "Come to Cru Camp, Come to Cru Camp, that is the best place to be" (ibid, p. 34).

This focus on fun and enjoyable activities, making the Crusaders' Union the "best place to be", betrays a tension in these origin stories that is perhaps still felt in attempts to develop faithful youth ministry in the ever-shifting cultural dynamics of the 21st century,

the question of cultural relevance and Christian distinctiveness. The desire of these early Christian youth leaders to create fun places that might be seen as the "best" place for young people laid the foundation for much of the youth ministry work that seeks to provide activities that young people might enjoy, to create a space to build rapport and relationships, with the hope that gospel sharing becomes easier as a result. This relational strategy is exemplified in more recent literature, such as that of Doug Fields, describing how to move young people from the "crowd" to the "core" (Fields 1998, p. 211) or Ward's vision for "incarnational" outreach that begins with "contact", followed by "extended contact" to building relationships, before moving to talk about the gospel (Ward 1998, pp. 52–79). This demonstrates how the practice inherent to these early organisations has become embedded within youth ministry theory, thus shaping contemporary practice to this day.

The IVF had a similar approach to fun as the Crusaders' Union. The Bible and evangelism were the priority, but fun was essential to facilitating these through building relationships. With a similar approach to the Crusaders' Union, it was assumed that fun would attract non-believers to come to the camps, join Christian groups, and be converted. The goal was to show young people that the Christian life was joyful and relational. Guinness embraced this approach, especially in organising camps and house parties. The house parties (holidays at a house) were a lot of fun for university students. They included a programme of Christian talks, but also games, sport, swimming, and other fun activities. Christians would invite their non-Christian friends, who might be attracted to the faith by the fun they experienced. Guinness believed that a scenario involving fun and community was the best context for deep personal conversations about faith. He recounted a conversation at a house party near the sea in Tasmania: "I can still see a striking girl in scarlet shorts who told us all that she had come down to have a good time. To her astonishment, she discovered that to be a Christian was the very essence of having a good time" (Guinness 1978, p. 87). The Crusaders' Union groups also organised house parties and they were often led by university students who had attended their schools. During the Great Depression, when there was not a lot of money for holidays and other fun activities, Crusaders' Union camps advertised themselves as a "real holiday" and used fellowship and fun to "explode the idea that Christianity is something to be avoided" (Crusaders' Union Camp Brochure 1979).

There is a never-ending list of the ways Young Life emphasises fun in their ministry. Early stories tell of Jim Rayburn taking Young Life kids on hikes to mountain tops, so that they could slide back down on snow patches that remained on the side of the mountain. With both camping and club ministry evolving simultaneously for Young Life, camping ministry allowed Young Life to develop a praxis of ministry that would influence their club work. This parallel evolution led Rayburn and Young Life to share their ministry around weekly clubs and summer camps, full of rides, adventures, entertainment, and the gospel. In 2007, Young Life touted this idea of fun as a brand strength, with the concept of "making Christianity attractive" a central tenet from the early days, with the role of volunteer lay leaders as crucial to this concept's success (Schoon Tanis 2016, chap. 4).

The practice of creating fun and youth ministry go together, hand in glove. In youth ministry, this connection is not frivolous, but is essential to the kind of life that the leaders believe young people can have if they respond to the gospel for themselves. The fun and activities are both meant to attract and keep young people involved and to build relationships. Both aspects present to young people a vision of God's work in their lives, that a life lived for and with Jesus Christ will be the most fulfilling life possible.

5. Further Reflections on Relational Practice and the Action of God

Whilst much of this article has been focused on historical reflection, such enquiry can bring light to the shape of contemporary practice and help to equip future-focused thinking. It is clear from the historical analysis that implicitly, and to some extent explicitly, God is seen to be at work in evangelical youth ministry through the primary means of relationships, expressed specifically in the themes of influential young people, charismatic lay leadership, and fun. Whilst this is not intended to be a comprehensive analysis of such practice, this final section offers some further reflections on the wider impact of these practices on youth ministry.

While the reflections threaded through the sections above highlight how historic practices of youth ministry have shaped and continue to shape contemporary youth ministry practice, there is a sense in which these practices have also shaped the wider life of the church, despite the extra-ecclesial, lay-led nature of youth ministry detailed above. It is clear that the practices of these parachurch youth organisations have shaped church-based work with young people throughout the twentieth century to the present day. Indeed, it could be argued that church-based youth ministry took on a parachurch ethos (Scanlan 2017, pp. 62–63).

In the British context in particular, the methods of the Crusaders' Union had a direct influence on church-based youth ministry. Essentially, the Crusaders' Union model of relationally gathering young people for Bible-based activities and fun, away from the usual streams of congregational life, proved so successful that the model was taken up within both the established Church of England and Free Churches through two distinct organisations: Covenanters across free churches and Pathfinders within the C of E. These movements within denominational and congregational networks were launched in the era between the world wars. Businessman John Laing, who was a local Crusaders' Union leader and part of the Crusaders' Council, piloted a class based on the Crusaders' Union model in his local church. This proved so successful in engaging young people that he left his Crusaders' Union roles to multiply this work, eventually launching Covenanters in order to hold groups together.[10] While there was not the same personal relationship with the launch of Pathfinders, there was a similar influence through the mirroring of the style, as well as a recorded visit from the first secretary of Pathfinders to the Crusaders' Union Head Office in order to learn how the work was run (Scanlan 2017, p. 48). These moves are examples of the phenomenon identified by Mark Senter in which imitators follow an innovative youth ministry leader and replicate the form of successful innovative work (Senter 1992, pp. 68–69). In the UK, the Bible class model of Christian ministry moved into local churches and set the course for the "fellowship" model of youth ministry to become the mainstay of evangelical youth ministry practice (Ward 1996, p. 24).

It is interesting to note that the increase in thinking and action towards new forms of church, exemplified by the Fresh Expressions movement in the Church of England in the early years of the twenty-first century, can be seen to occupy the same dialogical space and emerge from the same heritage practice (Collins-Mayo et al. 2010, p. 100). A key characteristic of this work is what has elsewhere been argued to be a previously "unprecedented move" of creating parachurch youth ministry organisations that carried within them the hallmarks of an evangelical ecclesial imagination (Scanlan 2017, pp. 35–37). Such an imagination sees personal piety, building on what Bebbington described as "conversionism" (Bebbington 2003, chap. 1), and small groups within an "interconfessional fellowship", as being more significant than a traditional local, parish, or denominational church affiliation (Scanlan 2017, p. 37). The expectation in this regard is that God is active outside the usual boundaries of the church and, perhaps further, that reaching young people with the gospel requires movement outside the church, almost suggesting that in regard to these threads

of early youth ministry, God was able to be more active in young people's lives in those extra-ecclesial spaces that were not identifiable as church. Moreover, it has been argued that the moves to work with young people outside the boundaries of church life, exemplified by the charismatic lay leadership of Bevington, Guinness, and Rayburn, serve to provide a context through which the church itself might be transformed. This transformation is happening as the church is stretched by the Holy Spirit into new spaces that are being opened up by relationship-focused work with young people. As a result, the activity of God through relational spaces created outside, or in parallel to the church, is understood to be transformative of the church, enabling the church to learn further how to be the church (Scanlan 2021, p. 246).

A second further reflection builds on the theme of creating fun within youth ministry. The emphasis on creating an atmosphere of enjoyment, adventure, and entertainment has played a central role in youth ministry practice from the early days. Looking at this through the lens of contemporary life for young people, there is great potential for God's action to be evident afresh through this practice. As we have reflected, we believe fun remains an essential part of ministry to and with young people, not so much in regard to the emphasis on excitement, but because it might undergird God's command to remember the sabbath day and keep it holy. Providing and creating spaces for fun allows young people a sabbath space of rest that might alleviate the strains of growing up in a time when the number of young people suffering from anxiety has risen dramatically (Haidt 2024). In this context, relational practice is vital as leaders and young people enjoy activities involving play with one another, aware that this might in itself create a fresh space for God's work in young's people lives to be evident. Building on the historical thread of fun, therefore, might create a sabbath space of fun within youth ministry in the 21st century, establishing restive and restorative spaces for young people to live in the coming years.

These further reflections on practice have addressed the ongoing impact of lay leadership and creating fun within the relational practice of evangelical youth ministry. Alongside these, it is of interest to note that there seems to be no contemporary equivalent within the literature or practice of the 'grand strategy' of early evangelical youth work. Despite this, questions remain in regard to the connection to contemporary expressions of relational influence within evangelical youth ministry. UK-based research, for example, has found that over 75% of young people from churched backgrounds, and 85% of Christian young people from non-churched families, cite the influence of their peers as having a positive impact on their faith (Youthscape Centre for Research 2022). Such research findings should encourage those working within a classic 'nucleus' model of Christian youth groups (Ward 1998, pp. 8–9), still much favoured within evangelical church life, that young people themselves can be effective in relationally influencing their friends positively towards the Chrisitan faith.

6. Conclusions

This article has explored a historical perspective to illuminate contemporary practice within evangelical youth ministry, through a transnational lens. A tradition of evangelical youth ministry practices that centres on God's action through relationships can be traced from the earliest days of key lay leaders, with a focus on young people stepping outside of the usual boundaries of church life to meet young people, provide places to meet, and share the gospel with them. This is clear in the UK context, through the work and influence of the Crusaders' Union/Urban Saints, with transnational dynamics reinforcing this central practice, seen in the work of exemplars, namely the IVF in Australia and Young Life in the USA. Through a historical focus, this article has highlighted how relational practice has remained central to evangelical work with young people and has the potential to continue

to shape the church in new ways and support young people through the challenges of growing up, albeit in an ever-changing context, as the world of young people continues to change and develop.

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Notes

1 As per the phrase attributed to Sir Issac Newton and inscribed on the UK £2 coin.

2 Crusaders' Union of Bible Classes is the full original name for the organisation that more commonly became known simply as 'Crusaders'. In 2006, as part of the Crusaders' centenary, the name was changed to 'Urban Saints'.

3 Sometimes named the InterVarsity Christian Fellowship (IVCF).

4 This section draws on chapter 1 of Gretchen Schoon Tanis' previously published work (Schoon Tanis 2016).

5 Quoted from handwritten minutes in the 1906 Crusaders' Union minute book. Note that in the UK, somewhat confusingly, public and private schools are both fee paying, rather than freely available statutory schooling, which is known as a state school education.

6 See for example the current strategy of the CofE to grow younger, in large part to ensure the survival of the denomination.

7 For example, Jean Porter interviewed by Richard Ford on 23 June 2000. Held in their personal collection.

8 We acknowledge as we write this section the very real abuses of power and position that have come to light within evangelical youth ministry. The documented abuses perpetuated by, for example, both John Smyth and Mike Pilavachi within the Church of England, are horrendous and evidence of the potential for the theology and practice we are detailing here to turn toxic, being used for sinful and evil purpose by leaders who should have young people's wellbeing at the very centre of their practice. An analysis and discussion of these abuses is beyond the scope of this article, but we signpost readers to the detailed reports that have been published in relation to John Smyth (https://www.churchofengland.org/sites/default/files/2024-11/independent-learning-lessons-review-john-smyth-qc-november-2024.pdf (accessed 13 December 2024) and Mike Pilavachi/Soul Survivor (https://static1.squarespace.com/static/547c7dfde4b028a1612a4736/t/66f5374e329e35524f9c0f7c/1727346512153/Soul+Survivor+Review+-+Final+Report+260924.pdf, accessed 13 December 2024), as well as to the reporting process within the CofE (https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/reporting-abuse, accessed 13 December 2024) and an independent safeguarding body, ThirtyOneEight (https://thirtyoneeight.org/help-and-resources/safeguarding-helpline/, accessed 13 December 2024), should any support be required. We are also fully supportive of research recently launched by Prof. Mike Higton and others at Durham University to centre the voices of victims, specifically in relation to the abuse by Mike Pilavachi at Soul Survivor Church in the UK.

9 Allan Bryson interviewed by Richard Ford on 28 June 2000, held in Ruth Lukabyo's personal collection.

10 Covenanters ran until 2000, when it merged with YFC in the UK.

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Article

Disclosing the Spirit in Evangelical Leadership Discourse

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Abstract: This article offers a theological reflection on the leadership discourse of four senior evangelical leaders in the Church of England. The justification for a discourse-led approach within the discipline of practical theology is that discourse is itself a socially informed practice. Discourse is constructive for meaning-making and has ongoing constituting effect for practice. Thus, any theological bias found in evangelical discourse is of interest since that discourse has a practice-shaping effect. Using the method of content analysis, I undertake an audit of four leadership texts to find out how often God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are referenced. The content analysis reveals a quantitative disparity. The Person of the Spirit is referenced far less, and any references to Spirit are qualitatively limited. These quantitative results offer evidence to suggest that a full account of the Divine Move that is Spirit, and the leading activity of the Spirit, fails to be disclosed in these texts. I suggest that these findings indicate an imbalance in the discourse which I hope prompts evangelicals to further reflect on, and explore, the place of the Spirit in their theology and practice.

Keywords: evangelical; leadership; discourse; spirit; practice

1. Introduction

For this Special Issue on 'Disclosing God in Action', I would like to offer a theological reflection on how God in Trinity is disclosed in the field of practice that is evangelical leadership discourse within the Church of England.

If I take as a theological starting point that God is a revealing God who wants to be known and made known in his activity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, then I would like to propose that how the Third Person of that Trinity—the One who will guide into every truth (John 16.13)—is revealed theologically in the constituting action that is the discourse of evangelical leadership matters. It also has import for the ongoing practice of leadership by evangelicals, which, because of the significant presence of senior evangelical leaders in the Church of England, will have an impact on the established church too.

In this article, to summarize, I analyze the books of four evangelical Anglican leaders, and using the method of content analysis I investigate how these texts on leadership reveal God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. I find that there is a quantitative difference in how often the Spirit is referenced compared to the Father and Son, and a qualitative difference in how the Person of the Spirit is delineated; I find limited articulation and expression in these texts of the Spirit's action in leading leaders. Accordingly, it would seem that there is an imbalance in the way the Spirit is being disclosed by these authors. The reason why I think this is worth highlighting is because, by reason of the linguistic turn in the social sciences, it is now understood that there is a dialectical determining relation between discourse and practice. And so, any imbalance found in the disclosure of the Spirit's move and activity in discourse invites further reflection and investigation into how the Spirit is engaged in evangelical leadership practice.

I propose, therefore, that my exploration of these texts can contribute to the discourse of evangelical leadership by prompting constructive conversation around how senior evangelical leaders might better reveal the leading of the Spirit in their own discourse and then encourage engagement with pneumatology in public ecclesial leadership practice. It also raises a broader discussion about how evangelical leaders talk about being led by the Spirit, about the experiential aspects of a practice of discernment, and how a strengthened practical pneumatology might be developed for leaders.

2. Context

The timing of this article is serendipitous as the subject of ecclesial leadership is once more in the public spotlight, and senior Anglican evangelical leaders are the focus of much attention. It is a critical cultural moment. And therefore, what evangelical leaders say about their leading and leadership, and how they make decisions on our behalf, is significant for evangelicals like me embedded in parishes throughout England.

In addition, focusing on the subject of leadership is timely because the postmodernist cultural remit is requiring something quite different from the church. Ecclesial leadership therefore needs to find a way to lead in this new cultural complexity where experience, embodiment, and the networked self are the currency of connection. In order to speak this new 'language', leaders, I suggest, will need to be comfortable with a language of spiritual intelligence, and of spiritual practicing that is meaningful and shared, and that avoids abstraction. That is, 'spiritual' leadership is not me performing my own 'spiritual exercise', and you performing yours (depending on your personal preference or style), and then us operating functionally, organizationally, and mechanistically as before, such that what we understand to be 'spiritual' is abstracted and left out of our conversation and personal interactions.

Rather, spiritual leadership is about shaping and influencing how we come together in spirit to listen and discern the move of the Holy Spirit in practice in a shared, and what Zahl calls a 'practically recognizable', way. Zahl's use of the term 'practical recognizability' is to 'draw attention to experience of the work of the Spirit in the world, in bodies and in time. . .Thus, if we wish to correct a tendency towards abstraction in theological discussions of the Holy Spirit, an excellent way forward is to begin by focusing on the more concrete, experiential dimensions of the Spirit's work' (Zahl 2020, p. 75). And I am suggesting, in relation to evangelical leadership, that we must begin by paying attention to what we say, write, and teach.

However, how evangelicals relate to the Third Person of the Trinity, doctrinally and in practice, has been the subject of difference and disagreement. 'The bane and bog of most evangelical theology for the last century has been the doctrine of the Holy Spirit. Within the evangelical movement it has either bogged down in the sinking quagmire of debate or hovered emptily in the state of banality' (Cross 2007, p. 93). That said, certain trends and patterns have been clear. As Derek Tidball notes, older understandings of the Holy Spirit centered around his role and work in conversion and sanctification, but there was 'not really any interest in his role outside the church' (Tidball 1994, p. 229).

Looking back at older evangelical texts, Tidball notes that in 1890 in the book *Evangelical Theology*, there were four chapters on Christ and two on scripture, but not even one chapter on the Holy Spirit. In other works the activity of the Spirit was subsumed into commentaries on grace. According to Tidball, the Spirit does not become much mentioned until the late 1960s. He makes the point that 'the place of the Holy Spirit in evangelicalism was secure in theory. In practice it was a different matter' (Tidball 1994, p. 229). In the intervening years, there have been various 'waves' of interest, as in 1994 when there was a renewal of interest in, and experience of, the activity of the Spirit. This seems primarily

to have focused on the Spirit's role in empowering believers, the charismata, and the miraculous worked out on a personal level. Now, thirty years on, how is that interest in pneumatology being worked out in the leadership discourse?

This question is a personal one, because I am evangelical, I am ordained as a priest, and I have been a long attendee of the Church of England, but it arises in the context of my research into the wider discourse of leadership in the Church of England for my DPhil at the University of Oxford. The public discourse of leadership in the Church of England has thus been the subject of my attention for a few years.

As an ordained priest in the Church of England, my evangelical priorities have been subservient to, and have operated within, the pre-set discursive boundaries and ideational formations of the leadership discourse of the national church for both good and ill. Now, as a researcher, however, I have been afforded the time and perspective to take a more critical view. It is from this position that I now want to interrogate the evangelical leadership discourse.

Being ordained is an important element to admit in this analysis, but equally important is that I am a woman. And in this, I cannot claim to be neutral but confess a hermeneutic of suspicion around the inbuilt masculinity of leadership discourse. I recognize a personal leaning towards further undoing the hegemonic influences at play around the nature and work of leadership as male, as priestly, and as hierarchical, seeking renewed biblical allegiance to the priesthood of all believers. I am not unaware that this is also problematic theologically for some evangelical leaders.

There is no perfect selection of material that can exhaust a research question, so, aware of this and given the restrictions of space and word count, I have chosen texts by senior evangelicals who have current influence in contemporary leadership discourse. Further, these evangelical leaders represent different voices within the leadership discourse: the academy, the episcopacy, and both formal and more popular leadership training. The texts are by Andrew Watson, Bishop of Guildford; Justyn Terry, Vice Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford; James Lawrence, who pioneered the Growing Leaders course through CPAS; and then Ian Paul, who is of the academy and is a well-known writer of an evangelical blog. These different voices within the leadership discourse are grounded within Anglican evangelicalism and offer a snapshot of that evangelical discourse. And I would like to suggest that, given how many evangelicals now occupy senior leadership positions exerting influence within the church and beyond, this is a matter worth exploring.

Thus, concluding this section, it is from my position as student, leader, ordained, woman, evangelical, and Anglican that I want to try and fuse my evangelical 'horizon' (Gadamer 2013, p. 406) of priorities, assumptions, culture, and evangelical traditions to the theological horizon of these four texts on leadership to discover how God as Trinity is disclosed.

3. The Significance of Discourse

I acknowledge there is a presumption within practical theology to address 'what we do' rather more than 'what we say', but in adopting a discursive approach, I am not alone. So, for example, I found that Andrew Todd uses a discourse-analytic approach as a means of shedding light on how a group comes to share a particular hermeneutic of scripture (Todd 2013, pp. 69–85). By examining the flow of conversation of a Bible study group, he has found that a particular interpretative stance is adopted not because of a set reading strategy or a held theological position, but because of the turns in the conversation that allow for a negotiated and shared response. This work is of interest to me because it shows that the discourse, the shared conversation, operates as a carrier of meaning-making for the group as a whole.

Another example is the work of Marcus Moberg, who also offers an example of a discourse-led approach to a practical theological 'problem'. He has undertaken a large study of the formal leadership discourse of the established Western Protestant church to see how new market- and media-driven ideations within the leadership discourse have led to institutional and organizational change. His argument is that institutional change tends to be discourse-driven (Moberg 2017).

Moberg's work is helpful to me as he is also working at the boundary of theology and the social sciences and is intentionally seeking to offer an interdisciplinary contribution to the discussion around institutional change. He writes that, 'it is important to recognize . . .that actual, practical changes in the organizational structure, communication practices, and modus operandi of social institutions tend to be preceded by changes in discursive practices and changing institutional and organizational imaginaries' (Moberg 2017, p. 153).

As far as I can tell, he is the only other academic to undertake a content analysis of the formal leadership documents of the General Synod of the Church of England. His analysis shows that 'marketization' is already well underway in the English and European institutional church as he finds new ideational formations and discursive frameworks in place within the discourse.

A social theory of discourse and the field of critical discourse analysis was developed by Norman Fairclough (Fairclough 2013). It is 'critical' discourse analysis because it looks for absences, hidden values, and presumptions. I trace my approach to Fairclough in the first instance, though he stands in line with others who pioneered what has come to be called the 'linguistic turn'.

The 'linguistic turn' within the social sciences is the realization that language does not merely reflect reality as much as create and construct it. This realization that 'knowledge comes in linguistic form and cannot be considered apart from language' (Stiver 2001, p. 50) shifts language away from being merely a descriptive vehicle or a neutral information carrier to having wider significance in the construction and maintenance of meaning.

So, Gadamer writes, 'language is something other than a mere sign system denoting the totality of objects. A word is not just a sign' (Gadamer 2013, p. 434). Thus, it is not that knowledge or understanding or ideas are 'subsequently put into words' for transmission, but rather 'the way' that understanding and knowledge of a subject 'comes to' is *within* the process of expression itself. So again, Gadamer writes, 'the way understanding occurs—whether in the case of a text or a dialogue with another person who raises an issue with us—is the coming-into-language of the thing itself' (Gadamer 2013, p. 386). This is important if I am concerned with the disclosing of who God is—his nature and being—within leadership discourse.

Another influential voice is that of Wittgenstein, who argued that the specific, situated, and ongoing meaning of a word for a community is found in its usage; 'the meaning of a word is its use in the language' (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 25). So, meaning both comes 'to' in language (Gadamer 2013, p. 403) and forms or crystallizes in 'this' context, 'this' way, at 'this' particular time (Wittgenstein 2009). Language is thus the vehicle for 'meaning-making' in the widest sense for a social group.

Accordingly, and this is the point, it matters what leaders say, because the saying makes it matter—literally. It is *in the saying* that meaning and subjectivity come and are materialized into practice. Again, Wittgenstein pointed to this when he wrote, '[e]very sign *by itself* seems dead. *What* gives it life?—In use it *lives*.' (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 135). And it is such use that forms part of the 'language-game' of a community (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 8). Thus the presence of, and naming of, a subject (or object) in discourse becomes constitutive for the subjectivity of that subject (or object) as the ongoing use of its name instantiates and further establishes that one's subjectivity.

So, therefore, given that language use is understood to have meaning-making and practice-shaping effects, I want to lay out, very briefly, four propositions below that offer the theoretical groundwork and rationale for a discourse-focused approach.

The first proposition is that discourse is itself a mode of historically situated social action (Fairclough 2001, pp. 18, 19), a form of social practice. Fairclough viewed discourse as a form of social practice since it is not external to society; it is a process, and it is socially conditioned. Thus, although practical theologians usually associate actions with practice, in this instance, following Fairclough, I am arguing that discourse is a form of action and thus social practice.

Discourse in social theory is about the structuring of knowledge and ideas, and the structured ways those ideas are socialized and embedded linguistically. It can also refer to the more particular written or spoken expressions of knowledge within a field of knowledge, such as the practice of law. A discursive event within a discourse has a three-dimensional frame: the text itself, whether written or spoken, the production of that text, and its social context (Fairclough 2020, p. 3).

Further, if I accept that discourse is practice, by adopting the approach of T.R. Schatzki, discourse can be conceptualized as chains of texts and language events that interact so as to create a broader 'net' or 'field' of interactivity (Schatzki et al. 2001, p. 11). This approach foregrounds processes and the inter-relations between actors. According to this view, discourse is the wider 'field' of practice created by interacting leaders, texts, and discursive events. Evangelical leaders engage in both evangelical leadership discourse and the leadership discourse of the Church of England. These chains of discourse will interact at different points and times to create the broader field of practice. The four books being considered here will operate as 'links' in those respective chains of discourse.

Secondly, the reason why discourse is so significant is that discourse constructs meaning and then has ongoing organizing regulatory control such that 'discourse is seen as constituting reality for human beings' (Wetherell et al. 2001, p. 392). 'Discourse is a practice not just of representing the world, but of signifying the world, constituting, and constructing the world in meaning' (Fairclough 2020, p. 64). Language use then is 'constitutive in both conventional, socially reproductive ways, and creative, socially transformative ways' (Fairclough 2013, p. 92).

Thirdly, it is acknowledged that there is a dialectical relationship between discourse and sociality (identities, relations, structures, and systems) such that the determining effect is mutual. In developing discourse analysis, Fairclough was seeking a systematic means to explore this dialectical relationship and the causality and determination between discursive practices, events, and texts, and the wider social and cultural structures and processes (Fairclough 2013, p. 93). Fairclough took a structuralist view which contends that a discourse is intransitive enough to be studied as causal; that is, though it is accepted now that all sociality is in flux, discourse does not change so quickly as to be without effect.

If I am relying on there being a dialectical relation, then I am also relying on there being an ontological difference between discursive (linguistic and semiotic) events and the social events or structures (non-discursive) in which they take place. This acceptance requires a critical realist epistemology (Fairclough 2013, p. 93). It is when one finds ontological separation between different kinds of social practices (discursive and non-discursive) that it becomes possible to question the determination of the one by the other (Wetherell et al. 2001, p. 392).

The fourth proposition is that within the expression of language there seems to be an intrinsic ability to generate change—a change capability. As we have seen, discursive practices contribute to reproducing social identities, relationships, and beliefs, regulating meaning within that sociality, and contributing to the transformation of a societal group or

even wider society (Wetherell et al. 2001, p. 65), all of which depend on a mechanism or potential within the discourse itself that enacts change.

Thus, it is not only that discourse or discursive practices can be manipulated and changed, for example, by rewording or by changing a sign, but that there seems to be *within the expression* of the words or sign itself *an inherent* creative ability. If I use theological language, one might say that there is a 'prophetic' quality to speech that is inbuilt into its expression. So, in the Christian scriptures, speech is portrayed as an act of creation, as for example in Genesis 1.3 and the refrain throughout the creation narrative, 'then God said, "Let . . ."'.

So then, based on these four theoretical propositions, I propose that examining how the one we call God 'comes to' as the subject in evangelical leadership discourse is important and worth examining because the texts and language have a materializing effect, structuring the practices and practice of leading, and determining whether leadership practice sits within the priorities of evangelicalism. Further, it is through and by discourse that evangelicalism itself interacts with the wider field of leadership discourse of the national church, thus itself having an ongoing determining effect.

However, if I am to consider how leadership texts reveal God, I cannot rely on structuralism in its positive register only. I need also to rely on structuralism in its negative register. What I mean is that if 'the meanings of words are derived not from fixed relationships between abstract signs, but from the accumulated dynamic social use of particular forms of language in different contexts' (Maybin 2001, p. 65) then, where there is no accumulated dynamic social use, meaning cannot derive.

Consequently, and importantly, if it is agreed that it is from the *usage* of a word or semiotic vehicle in discourse that meaning is constituted, and carried, and subjectivity is conferred, then logically, the reverse must also be true. Where a word, name, or sign is *not* present in the discourse, then meaning or signification cannot attach to that ideation. There will be a lack of identification and perception, and any potential for that subject or meaning to be structured into practice will drain away. Another way of stating this is that there will be no 'coming to' of subjectivity, no materializing of presence into practice. Within the discourse, that idea, or theme, name, or noun, will not derive meaning, and—if I refer again to Wittgenstein—it cannot live (Wittgenstein 2009, p. 135; Prior 2014, p. 377).

Thus, to conclude this section, discourse is active in creating, constituting, and determining practice. This action of discourse is often overlooked in practical theology, which is problematic. The discourse itself needs to be addressed if reforms to practice are not to be undermined or subverted by the ongoing reiterative effects of pre-existing ideations and in-built suppositions within the discourse.

4. The Content Analysis

I have chosen content analysis as the means by which I begin to explore the texts. In enacting this, I am following Lindsay Prior, who advocates content analysis as a method of textual analysis, as opposed to being only a means of data collection or a form of research design (Prior 2014, p. 375). She is arguing that this method is often too narrowly construed and that it is a useful research tool that can be integrated in and alongside other research strategies.

One of the benefits of this approach is that it allows for an integration of quantitative and qualitative modes of analysis in a systematic rather than an ad hoc fashion (Prior 2014, p. 377), and Prior goes on to offer examples of the ways in which qualitative analysis can be combined with systematic modes of counting (Prior 2014, p. 361). It is this ability to be used alongside other forms of analysis that means it is particularly useful within a practical theological endeavor. Prior writes, 'it is easily merged with various forms of discourse analysis and can be used as an exploration method or as a means of verification. Above

all, perhaps, it crosses the divide between 'quantitative' and 'qualitative' modes of inquiry in social research and offers a new dimension to the meaning of mixed-methods research' (Prior 2014, p. 377). It was for this reason that I first chose this route into the textual analysis of the wider discourse as part of my DPhil project, from which this article derives.

Prior writes that it is of course important to focus on the use and circulation of documents in practice, but this can be 'overly anthropocentric and subsequently overemphasize the potency of human action in relation to written text' (Prior 2014, p. 376). Thus, 'it is interesting to consider ways in which we might reverse that emphasis and instead study the potency of the text and the manner in which documents can influence organizational activities as well as reflect them' (Prior 2014, p. 376).

My rationale for choosing content analysis as the means to interrogate the texts is therefore that it offers a way to obtain an empirical starting point for answering my research question into how God is named in discourse. Additionally, it secures the originality of the project, as any future development of ideas or re-visioning of leadership discourse that I propose can be checked and held up against the results obtained. (In my DPhil, the content analysis was then incorporated into a wider interdisciplinary co-constructing conversation of 'search–encounter–transformation' drawn from the work of Mark Cartledge, who also advocates the integration of empirical methods (Cartledge 2003).

In content analysis, one assesses the presence or not of a certain word, theme, or concept, the unit of analysis in a qualitative data set. It allows a text to be mapped to discover the frequency of use of that 'unit of analysis'. The value of this method is that obtaining a set of quantitative figures means that any conclusion I make can be measured back against these figures, thus strengthening that conclusion.

The number of references to the unit of analysis reflects the importance, value, or priority being accorded to that subject. If there is a high frequency of that unit within a text, that is evidence of priority, importance, and subjectivity being assigned to it. Conversely, lower frequency will indicate a lack of subjectivity and less priority and importance, and suggests that that unit is less relevant within the document. Accordingly, by counting these references, the documents can be mapped for the relative priority of subject matter.

The unit of analysis is 'what' I am looking for in each of the texts; it is my theological focus. One of the marks of a successful content analysis is to make the unit of analysis easily identifiable enough, while remaining meaningful, such that another person who mines the same document will achieve the same result. This requires a unit of analysis that is clear-cut and unambiguous to achieve a consistent result.

Since I am asking how the discourse makes God the 'subject', that is, whether it gives a full account of who God is, the unit of analysis chosen is the simplest unit possible that denotes God—his name. The name of a person is understood to be the most direct way to refer to a person, and it is an irreducible and compressed way of indicating a relation with that One. The name indicates the presence of that person in the text, whether subject or object; it speaks of 'being'; it implicates identity, knowledge, and relationship and, with respect to God, his nature.

Accordingly, when a Person of the Godhead is named, it operates as an irreducible indicator of the coming into subjectivity of that Person in the text, and as a signifier of the relative subjectivity, that Person is afforded within the leadership discourse. The coming-to of subjectivity of that One named invites potential for relation with that One. There is a creative potential and a prophetic quality inherently contained in calling upon God as Father, or in addressing the Son, or in seeking the Spirit.

The frequency of references in the text was totaled, giving a numerical total for the frequency of references to that person in any one text. In this way, the material was converted into a specific quantitative account, revealing how many times the different

Persons of the Trinity appear in each text. The quantitative results I obtain in this analysis then allow me to make an assessment as to the relative priority given to, and the subjectivity of, the Persons of the Trinity within the texts. I can make a deduction as to how God is disclosed in these leadership texts, and I can begin to assess what this reveals theologically.

I acknowledge that in the scripture reference Matthew 28.19, Jesus tells his followers to baptize 'in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit'. This is the composite Name for the Three-in-One God. However, in the practice of our faith, we routinely refer to one or other of the relations in God, and it is this relative referencing that I am seeking to discover. Accordingly, choosing to identify the persons individually is not a derogation from the One-ness of God but rather a discursive tool allowing for a discrete analysis as to how the Three-ness of God is portrayed.

Analysis was undertaken in several readings. The first reading of the text assessed the subject matter and the overall thrust of the document. Then, the next few readings involved counting the names of the persons of the Trinity. Then, a more detailed lexical analysis was performed on word choices, links, and patterns. The lexical field signifies different priorities and values as the writers 'foreground' some ideas and 'background' others, so the use of verbs, rhetorical tropes, and metaphors, and any other linguistic devices that play a semiotic role, was noted.

I set myself guidelines. I was tempted to include personal pronouns, but in the end, this would have complicated the task, which might have undermined the strength of the results. I decided, therefore, that the reference by name was more conclusive, offering a neat and definable unit to count. In addition, it was decided that though 'Lord' most often referred to Jesus, it could be a reference to the Triune God. It was therefore not counted unless it was obvious from the context that this referred to Jesus.

On the other hand, the word God, although theoretically referring to God as Trinity or to a divine (rather than human) being, is often used to refer to the First Person, in contrast to the Son. So, references to God were placed under the Father column unless it was clear the term was Trinitarian, which it very rarely was. I justify this guideline on the basis that where God as Spirit is in view, the authors would particularize the notion of God to make that clear. Where there were multiple names in any one reference, it was counted as only one reference.

5. My Findings

In reaction to the inculcation of leadership strategies from the marketplace, Andrew Watson, Bishop of Guildford, has written *The Fourfold Leadership of Jesus* (Watson 2008). This book focuses on the 'Jesus model' of leadership. The premise is that Jesus never mentions his own leadership, teaches leadership, or creates formal leadership structures because leadership is based on discipleship. Watson then argues that discipleship is about obedience to four commands: come, follow, wait, and go (Watson 2008, pp. 17–19). Watson argues that it is these commands that likewise determine and shape ecclesial leadership.

Basing a book around a model of discipleship brings to the fore the importance of praxis, and so it raises the question 'how' can we lead like Jesus? The imperative for a practical integrating pneumatological perspective is thus arguably raised from the outset. However, Watson frames his work instead around the qualities of charisma, competence, and character, moving quickly to the statement that 'the greatest of these is character' (Watson 2008, p. 17). The chapters therefore focus on the characteristics that are 'like Christ'. It is notable that in this unpicking of the Jesus model, the Son is spoken of alone.

This is borne out by the figures. Overall, the Spirit is mentioned only 38 times in the ten chapters I considered, compared to 157 references to the Father, and 350 references to Jesus (see Table 1). In the four chapters of Part 3 entitled 'Wait for Me', referencing the

promise of Pentecost in Acts 1.4, the Spirit is mentioned just six times. This compares to 74 times to the Father, and 127 times to the Son or Jesus. Even in this section, the activity of Spirit or the leading of the Spirit in the Church is avoided almost completely.

Table 1. Andrew Watson: *The Fourfold Leadership of Jesus*, 2008.

	Father/God/Almighty	**Son/Jesus/Christ**	**Holy Spirit**
Part 2: 'Follow Me'; Chapter 5: 'Inspirational leadership'	8	37	0
Chapter 6: 'Character of the pioneer'	16	61	0
Chapter 7: 'Jesus' obedience'	21	35	14
Chapter 8 Walking the way of costly grace	18	26	11
Part 3: 'Wait for Me'; Chapter 9: 'Longterm leadership'	12	51	0
Chapter 10: 'The character of the farmer'	17	33	4
Chapter 11: 'Jesus' trust in the Father'	24	30	0
Chapter 12: 'Embracing the call'	21	13	2
Part 4: 'Go for Me'; Chapter 13: 'Multiplying leadership'	10	29	0
Chapter 14: 'The character of our Lord'	10	35	7
Total from 10 chapters	**157**	**350**	**38**

I also noticed the placement of the word S/spirit within the text. For example, often the two ideations of 'word' and 'spirit' are brought together, with 'spirit' coming second. In pages 81 and 94, this lexical pair is used eight times. By bringing them together in conjunction as a pair, there is an expression of equivalence within the sentence, but lexical priority is given to the 'word', even when the notation specifically capitalizes the S for Spirit, emphasizing the Third Person, for example, 'word and Spirit', or the phrase 'the word and the Spirit of God' (Watson 2008, p. 89). In this section, therefore, the Spirit of God is placed on par with the written scriptures, and is named second. Such linguistic construction is found in common parlance, but its repetition here is arguably indicative of underlying subordinationism at work.

Other references to Spirit in the text tend to be in terms of being Jesus' spirit, in terms of providing sanctifying grace to the Body of Christ, leadership being a gift of the Spirit, or are usually part of a scripture quote. Most often, the Spirit is referenced in connection with the 'gifts' or being a gift. The Spirit is only referenced about a tenth as much as the Son.

The *Growing Leaders* book and course is developed out of the Arrow Leadership Programme, which James Lawrence, an Anglican evangelical minister, introduced into the United Kingdom in 1998 (Lawrence 2004). This course, presented by the Church Pastoral Aid Society (CPAS), has reached many people across this country, and can be accessed internationally. CPAS is an evangelical charity that was set up to care for Anglican clergy, and in Synod paper GS 1982, CPAS is described as having 'significant experience of delivering leadership development within the Church'.

Like Watson, Lawrence also shapes his model for leadership around the person of Jesus of Nazareth. By way of introduction, Lawrence lays out the theological truths that underpin his conception of Christian leadership. The first is his sense of calling and rootedness in baptism; the second is the atoning work of the cross; the third is the 'resurrection and the coming of the Spirit'; and the fourth is the return of Jesus (Lawrence 2004, p. 16). Lawrence writes, 'Jesus is present with me through his Spirit, bringing about his transformation of my life' (Lawrence 2004, p. 16). Thus, the first reference to the Spirit in this book comes within the third 'theological truth', and within a Christological frame as Jesus' spirit, who is 'transforming me'.

In chapter 1, Lawrence writes about the 'gift' of leadership, and in this context mentions the gifts of the Spirit twice. These gifts are described as a 'tangible expression of the active leadership of the Lord Jesus in a congregation' (Lawrence 2004, p. 27). This kind of sentence expresses a familiar sentiment, but I suggest it exposes underlying theological suppositions that from a systematic theological position are problematic. For example, it is this kind of sentence that means that appropriate differentiation between the Persons begins to be eroded and that there is a subsuming of the role and gifts of Spirit into the ongoing activity of Jesus, or denying the Spirit a leading/guiding/steering role as a perfecting cause alongside that of Father and Son.

Lawrence frames leadership around function, position, talent, and call (Lawrence 2004, pp. 23–28), and the language he uses reflects the received forms and traditions of leadership within the Anglican church. Leadership is also understood to be a gift of God.

The analysis of ten chapters shows that the Spirit is named 41 times, whereas God is referenced 401 times, and Jesus 276 times (see Table 2 below). There are two places where the references are bunched: pages 95–96, where there are eight references to the role and work of Spirit in the early stages of Jesus' ministry, and page 127, with three references to the work of Spirit in character transformation. It is also noted that the discussion on prayer omits naming the Spirit. There is mention of the transforming work of the Spirit on page 127, and a mention of the convicting work of the Spirit on page 140.

Table 2. James Lawrence: *Growing Leaders*, 2004.

	Father/God/Almighty	**Son/Jesus/Christ**	**Holy Spirit**
Introduction	22	18	2
Chapter 1: 'What is Christian Leadership'	44	38	11
Chapter 2: 'Leadership Challenge'	6	10	1
Chapter 3: 'First Love'	89	95	7
Chapter 4: 'Living in the Red Zone'	Omitted as about stress		
Chapter 5: 'Finding God's Purpose'	140	49	10
Chapter 6: 'Character Dynamics'	26	36	6
Chapter 7: 'Godly Change'	55	25	2
Chapter 10: 'Discernment'	44	5	1
Chapter 12: 'Team Talk'	16	13	1
Total from 10 Chapters	**401**	**276**	**41**

In a similar fashion to Watson above, Lawrence uses the phrase 'the Bible and the Spirit'. It is noticeable that Lawrence repeats this lexical pair three times in one section (Lawrence 2004, pp. 31–32), but unlike Watson, Lawrence capitalizes the word Bible. This use of the proper noun is significant as I think it denotes more than specificity to the Christian scriptures but places them on par with the specific person who is Spirit. The repetition and the consequent reinforcement in the reader's mind of the phrase 'and the Spirit' instantiate the Spirit within discourse as second or as additional to scripture.

Lawrence then writes that 'faithfulness to the Bible and openness to the Spirit of God are like the two spotlights at a theatre' that bring illumination (Lawrence 2004, p. 31). I think this metaphor of 'two spotlights' is worth noting. It reveals an equivalence in the 'giving of light' that begins to be problematic theologically. This might just be a superficial semantic point, but it is this kind of textual example that reveals, literally, the kind of thinking that can settle around the Person of the Spirit and his activity.

In chapter 1, Lawrence sets out what he sees to be the Christian distinctives in leadership. The first is that leadership is 'founded on a relationship with God as Trinity': 'on the grace of Jesus, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Spirit'. In this reference, which is probably derived from the liturgical form known as the Grace, there is a subtle re-structuring from the usual rendering of the Trinity as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. The Son is placed first. There is also interesting use of the term 'God' in place of the more usual 'Father' (Lawrence 2004, p. 30).

Later, Lawrence makes the point that Christian leadership is directed by and dependent on the Holy Spirit 'empowering and equipping'; the Spirit 'takes our strengths and weaknesses and transforms them' (Lawrence 2004, p. 30). This gives activity to the Spirit in the person, but not a wider leading role within the church. There are only two references that connect the Spirit to leading or leadership: on page 31, the Spirit of Jesus within guides and leads, and on page 96, the Spirit leads Jesus. Even chapter 10, which deals with the discernment of vision and leading people into God's purposes, has only one reference to the Spirit, on page 213.

Lawrence does offer a section on spiritual disciplines on page 73, and there are three references to Spirit. Lawrence writes on page 76, 'Change is possible, but only if we abide in Jesus. Spiritual disciplines help us do that'. At the end of the book, there is 'Resource 2', which does offer some practical help in discerning spiritual gifts. But what is noticeable here is that of only three references to the Spirit, two are a quote from another writer, and the third comes in a Bible text. There is no discussion about how one relates to the Spirit, or receives from Him, or is led by him in these areas.

The last sentence in the book, which also repeats the last line of the Introduction, serves to sum up the emphasis that is apparent throughout: 'May we be those who are led more by Jesus, lead more like Jesus, and lead more *to* Jesus' (Lawrence 2004, pp. 18, 249). This sounds grammatically pleasing. It communicates a sense of grounded truth being Christologically focused and because the construction of the sentence as a triple subconsciously resonates with the pattern of Trinity. However, I would want to suggest that the sentence reveals a deep theological weakness around the question left unanswered throughout: *how* might one be led by, or like, or to, Jesus if one does not emphasize the person, presence, and purposes of the Spirit? This is a similar critique to that raised in connection to Andrew Watson above.

From the counting, therefore, it is fair to say that the Spirit is apparent on the face of the text in 41 places, as a gift, in the life of Jesus, and for personal transformation, but otherwise the Holy Spirit is represented in a limited way. The Spirit is only referenced 10% as much as Father and Son—but the issue is more than numerical disparity. The placement of references, the way they are bunched in the text into one topic, or the way the Spirit is placed on a par with the written scriptures, or subsumed into the activity of Christ, raises deeper questions as to how the Spirit is understood theologically.

Justyn Terry, the Vice Principal and Academic Dean of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford, wrote *The Five Phases of Leadership: An Overview for Christian Leaders*, in 2021. Working as Terry does, embedded within a college training ordinands, means that he is particularly influential within the discourse of the Church of England, and in shaping future leaders for the church. The leadership ideas assimilated while training at Wycliffe Hall will stay with those to be ordained and be a springboard for their approach to work. This therefore is a significant text representing input at formation for Anglican leaders.

Notably, in this content analysis, this is the first time I have found a chapter where the numbers of references to the Spirit exceed references to Jesus (Terry 2021, pp. 7–27). In this first section, there are 52 references to Father and God, 17 to Jesus Christ and 32 to the Spirit. However, what is noticeable here is that this section is about building trust and

character formation, and the necessity to grow the fruit of the Spirit. Thus, although the figures indicate a fuller pneumatological perspective, the context for these references is in fact limited and individualized rather than being about a shared or collective practical pneumatological leadership view.

Thereafter, the numbers fall back into the pattern we have seen emerging throughout this content analysis: in phase 2, the numbers are 15, 11, and then 7. In phase 3, the numbers are 32, 12, and 2. In the conclusion, the numbers are 11 to God and Father, 1 to Jesus Christ, and 3 to the Holy Spirit (see Table 3).

Table 3. Justyn Terry: *The Five Phases of Leadership*, 2021.

	Father/God/Almighty	**Son/Jesus/Christ**	**Holy Spirit**
'Phase 1: Establish Trust'	52	17	32
'Phase 2: Cultivate Leaders'	15	11	7
'Phase 3: Discern Vision'	32	12	2
'Conclusion'	11	1	3
Total	**110**	**41**	**44**

Phase 3 is about discerning vision. In this chapter of 16 pages, it is particularly noticeable, given that discernment is a gift of the Spirit, that the Spirit is only mentioned twice.

This means that though there is encouragement to discern prayerfully one's vision and core values, there are no practical pneumatological guidelines offered or practical tips as to how the gift of discernment is made apparent or is materialized within the life of the church.

The rest of the book stays within the pattern of the other books considered here. The five phases of leadership are to 'establish trust', 'cultivate leaders', 'discern vision', 'implement plans', and 'transition out', all of which can be applied to both ecclesial and secular contexts.

The last book I consider is from the Grove Leadership Series. Obviously, the Grove books are much smaller texts, but nonetheless, they are widely perceived as offering sound evangelical opinion and they are respected within wider ecclesial discourse. In *Evangelical Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2016, Ian Paul makes the point that '[a] nagging criticism of evangelicals is that they do not take spirituality seriously' (Paul 2016, p. 13). Paul therefore makes sure he does, and in this book, it is noticeable how many references there are to 'spirituality', even with a section on 'Evangelical Spirituality', which is unique in these texts. Yet despite this, direct reference to the Spirit is low. So, for example, in chapter 1, there are eight references to spirit or spirituality but no references to the Person of the Spirit from whom Christian spirituality or a life of Christian virtue derives. This is a similar critique to that leveled at Lawrence. It is a theological sleight of hand to argue for deepening spirituality when the person of Spirit is occluded. The Spirit is referred to four times in total. See Table 4 below.

Paul points out that different descriptions of 'evangelicalism' often relate to preferences in worship, but that these ought not to become 'theologies of identity': 'the danger is that these different descriptions become tribal loyalties, and the preferences within them derive from a tradition, or personality, or a temperament, rather than being rooted in respectful reflection together on Scripture' (Paul 2016, p. 12). This is a helpful point to make, and it seems to allude to the notion that a focus on Spirit and pneumatology has very often been viewed as being equivalent to having a 'worship' preference.

There is reference to 'listening to what the bible says'. Yet as with the other books considered here, the practical pneumatological guidelines needed for listening, or for

handling the Bible, are left vague. I am left wondering what an evangelical understanding of inspiration is.

Table 4. Ian Paul: *Evangelical Leadership: Challenges and Opportunities*, 2016.

	Father/God/Almighty Son/Jesus/Christ		Holy Spirit
Chapter 1: 'Being a Leader'	9	7	0
Chapter 2: 'Being Evangelical'	8	3	2
Chapter 3: 'Being Missional'	10	3	1
Chapter 4: 'Being Biblical'	4	0	0
Chapter 5: 'Being Engaged'	1	1	1
Total	**32**	**14**	**4**

6. Analysis

In content analysis, where high frequency of references to a subject correlates with high priority of that subject within a text, these figures suggest that a much higher priority is given to the Father and the Son by these writers. For whatever reason, the Person of the Holy Spirit fails to be disclosed in these texts to the same degree as the Father and the Son, and thus these texts reveal a disparity in the subjectivity that is afforded the Spirit. This is of course not to suggest that the Spirit is not active, but that these leaders, by not disclosing the activity of Spirit in full in their texts, fail to make His presence 'live' as subject for the readers—as per Wittgenstein.

It may be true that each individual writer had reasons for writing as he did, and of course the lack of referencing is not evidence of pneumatological minimalism in the writer's own life. Indeed, I am sure all four leaders would personally espouse a fully Trinitarian understanding of God, but overall, it is fair to conclude that these texts, which operate within the evangelical and broader ecclesial leadership discourse, offer only a partial or weak account of the Spirit in leadership.

Some may counter that such 'hiddenness' of Spirit is acceptable given the hiddenness or apophatic quality afforded the Spirit by the gospel writers (Stackhouse 2002, pp. 168–69) and, some might even argue, by Jesus himself. But I am not so sure the Spirit was 'hidden'. Rather, within an ecclesiology where Logos Christology is dominant, we interpret the gospel accounts in a particular way. Sight is lost of the incarnational presence of the Spirit in the life of Jesus who was conceived, baptized, empowered, strengthened, worked miracles, and was raised from the dead by the Spirit. There is no Jesus of Nazareth as Messiah except by the Spirit: Jesus was the Anointed One.

So then, the limited and low frequency of referencing to the Spirit found in these texts invites further reflection as to whether it can be theologically meaningful, or even practically meaningful, to write about following a Jesus model of leadership without foregrounding the Spirit as well. And because of the dialectical link between discourse and practice, by finding there to be an imbalance in the referencing and naming of God by way of content analysis, further questions and lines of inquiry are now raised as to how evangelical leadership practices disclose God.

My main qualitative observation from my reading of the texts is that practical engagement with the Holy Spirit—practical spiritual know-how—is left out of the treatment of leadership. I find an absence of practical advice about spiritual intelligence. There is a lack of spiritual 'handiness' realized in the leadership models being offered. So a chapter on prayer, for example, omits how to listen and intuit God, and the relation with Spirit is left abstracted. The question 'what does the Spirit leading look like or feel like or sound like?'

is left unanswered. Sensitivity to how one is led by Him, or how one practices spiritual leadership, or how the gift of discerning, for example, actually operates within a group in practice fail to be articulated, leaving such concepts abstracted within the discourse.

So for example, I think it is worth noting that, in the four books examined, I found no reference to the 'word' of God being discussed as the 'sword of the Spirit' (Ephesians 6.17, Hebrews 4.12), which ought to be of significance for evangelicals. This scripture text would seem to place the use of the words of scripture within the hands of the Spirit—suggesting pneumatological priority and an implied practice to the way the scriptures are to be interpreted and used. Instead, there is a common theme of equivalence between the Spirit and the scriptures. So, for example, Watson writes, '[p]ure dependence on the scriptures is not enough. Pure dependence on the Spirit of God is not enough. For we are fallible creatures and even a wholehearted commitment to be blown by the wind of the Spirit can all too easily drift into a growing acceptance of the spirit of the age' (Watson 2008, p. 84).

Watson is making a salient and wise point. But I think it reveals a nervousness about fully depending on the Person of Spirit who is God—in practice. It also implies that full dependence on the Spirit and depending on the scriptures are differentiable or separable activities, as though there was a legitimate either–or. Yet when rightly placed, dependence on the Spirit will incorporate dependence on scripture, which is itself both 'God-breathed' and the 'sword of the Spirit'.

This nervousness is also apparent when, later, Watson talks about his personal experience as leader of an evangelical charismatic church. In connection to being led by the prompting of the Spirit, he uses the words 'danger' and 'dangerously subjective' (Watson 2008, p. 95). Watson is therefore reticent in linking the Spirit's leadership into the actual practices of public leadership. Watson, however, is not alone, because it is difficult to find any references to how the leading of the Spirit might be grounded or materialized or recognized in the practicing of public ecclesial leadership in the other books too. There is no reference to public or corporate pneumatological practice that I can see.

Instead, I submit that these writers tend to fold the leading action of the Third Person of the Trinity into the operation of the Son, which, although is on one level theologically true, does not say all that is needed doctrinally about the Spirit. So, for example, the leading eschatological activity of the Spirit as a perfecting cause is subtly subverted because of this Christological priority. Active verbs fail to be assigned to the Person of Spirit and to the activity of Spirit, which suggests that a full account of the Spirit as Leader is therefore not made. The Spirit does not come to the fore as subject. The folding-in of the Spirit into the Son means that the Spirit is undefined.

In contrast, there is more willingness to engage with the topic of spirituality and spiritual practices, as with Lawrence and Paul, or in connection to the Spirit being a gift or in relation to the fruit of the Spirit, as with Terry. Lawrence does engage with spiritual disciplines and gifts, but his statement in relation to spiritual disciplines (quoted above) completely misses the point that it is the infilling and indwelling Spirit who enables us to transform, stick with new habits, etc. Just trying to follow Jesus harder will not work, and it might have been here, for example, that explanation as to how to engage with the Spirit in practice would have helped. Likewise, in relation to the discussion about gifts—there is no meaningful articulation as to how one relates to or feels or follows the Spirit in the exercise of such gifts.

As already mentioned, it is because of the known constructive and constituting link between discourse and practice that leads me to suggest that this leaning away from, and backgrounding of, Spirit in discourse is problematic for evangelical leadership. Discourse and practice are so closely and dialectically intertwined, having a meaning-making effect, that any theological bias away from the activity of the Spirit in evangelical leadership

discourse raises questions as to how leadership practices incorporate the presence and leading of the Spirit in practice. Practices will be determined and shaped, and ongoingly constituted, by a leadership discourse that is Christologically strong yet pneumatologically ambivalent.

Thus, the question this sample content analysis raises for the purposes of this Special Issue is whether the trend that I have found in these four texts actually points towards a wider reality within evangelical leadership discourse. And, then, does this point to there being a weakly realized pneumatology in evangelical leadership practices in the Church of England more generally? If the Spirit is being backgrounded in discourse, then this suggests that there is a need for evangelicals to explore the practically recognizable dimensions of the Spirit's leading so that evangelical leaders can give 'a plausible account of the affective and experiential dimensions of the work of the Spirit' (Zahl 2020, p. 234) who is leading them and their churches. These figures therefore invite further analysis and a fuller working out as to what a theology of leadership would look like were emphasis to be given to both Son and Spirit—in practice.

7. Conclusions

To conclude, I have found a numerical disparity in the way the Spirit is named as compared to the Father and the Son in the four texts considered, which leads, arguably, to an incomplete representation of the activity and leading action of the Spirit of God. This suggests to me that there may be a disjunct between the Christological model on which leadership is being based and an expression of the concomitant pneumatology needed to practice it. Pneumatology is mainly framed as personal and private.

I would also like to propose that the constructing significance of discourse for ecclesial practice and practices has been overlooked in practical theology, and so I am asking the question, and wanting to raise for others to consider with me, whether a weak portrayal of the Holy Spirit in public evangelical leadership discourse might be unhelpfully affecting and shaping leadership practice. If there is a pneumatological deficit lying hidden in plain sight within leadership discourse, then can we begin to have the co-constructing conversation that starts to address this in order that future leadership decision making can be practically, and recognizably, Spirit-led?

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Article

Prospects for an Evangelical Rule of Life: A Case-Study in Living as a Dispersed Community of Missional Discipleship

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Abstract: From 2020 to 2023, I spent 3 years as the Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert based at St Nics Church in central Durham. St Nics is a classic UK evangelical city-centre church with a beloved history of Bible teaching, market-square engagement, and mission. In 2019 the church leadership discerned an opportunity to refresh the church's (and wider) practice of discipleship by launching the Community of St Cuthbert, and I was recruited as its Prior. This article gives an account of some of the strengths and weaknesses of this endeavour, focused particularly on four issues: the importance of a clear, positive and upbuilding 'rule of life' statement; the core issue of how a Rule of Life can facilitate widespread missional discipleship in a dispersed community model; the importance of a clear marker of membership in the Community (and the difficulties around developing one); and the potential (albeit largely unrealised) to use the Community of St Cuthbert model as a way of establishing new worshipping communities. My own retrospective reflection as Prior concludes with two convictions that may be of relevance to those considering such a 'Community': the nature and challenge of keeping the focus on God rather than on policing practices; and the ways in which such a re-energising of discipleship can offer an evangelical contribution to the life of the whole church, rather than being limited to self-described evangelical churches.

Keywords: discipleship; community; evangelical; rule of life; missional; justice; service

1. Introduction

This article explores a case-study of an attempt to deepen the practice of discipleship in one evangelical church, and in particular an attempt to match an evangelical rule of life to the process of discerning God at work, in God's way and in God's time. I begin by describing the case study and looking at discipleship in principle and in evangelical practice. I then examine four strengths discovered in the case study. The heart of the experience was setting up a rule of life, as part of a dispersed but intentional community of discipleship, based in one local church but with the hope of sharing it more widely in our local area. The four strengths explored relate to having a 'rule of life'; missional discipleship; membership; and new worshipping communities, I also note some practical difficulties that occurred in some of these areas. How to do all this in a way that remained focused on God—rather than on our human activity—remained a constant question and challenge, but some encouraging progress was made, at least in part. In conclusion, I will reflect more widely on the gift of intentional discipleship for the whole church.

I offer here a brief note on method. The approach followed, in this case study, offers a loose implementation of a critical and progressive pastoral cycle, where a thick description of an issue is offered (namely the challenges involved in establishing the Community of St Cuthbert), and then the biblical and theological reflection is brought to bear on laying out more precisely the nature of the strengths and weaknesses. The final progressive and transformative element is muted because the particular case study being described has been concluded, but elements of a way forward for comparable other projects are articulated. I draw my understanding of a progressive pastoral cycle from the work of Thompson et al. on theological reflection (see Thompson et al. 2008). I have written elsewhere at length on

the nature and limitations of prescribing method in theological reflection, but do not wish to rehearse those issues here (see Briggs 2015).

2. The Community of St Cuthbert: A Case-Study in Deepening Discipleship

From 2020 to 2023, I spent 3 years as the Prior of the Community of St Cuthbert, based at St Nics Church in central Durham. The whole purpose of this Community was to deepen the shared life of discipleship in the church and beyond.

2.1. Context

Durham is a small city in the North of England, dominated by its world-class university. The Church of England in the North East of England is not especially well-served for evangelical Anglican churches, and St Nics has been by far the largest such church in its Diocese.[1] By 2020, even though not as big as it had once been, St Nics could still have regular Sunday attendance of 200–300 in total across its several services. A considerable factor in the make-up of the congregation has long been the presence of students, lecturers, and other staff from Durham University. While County Durham is marked by its working-class (often mining) background, the City of Durham is by comparison wealthy, middle-class and highly educated.

St Nics is a classic evangelical city-centre church with a much loved and valued history of Bible teaching, market-square engagement, and mission. A strikingly fruitful period in the church's life was captured in a book by St Nics' vicar from 1975–1982, George Carey: *The Church in the Market Place* (Carey 1984). The church's self-understanding, characteristic of evangelical churches more generally, would assume that discipleship was not an optional extra for the few, but a characterisation of the Christian life to be lived by all. For a range of reasons, including the rise of several other lively evangelical Durham churches outside the Church of England, there was some decline in numbers at St Nics in the decades following George Carey's time.[2] In 2019, the church's leadership discerned an opportunity to refresh the church's (and wider) practice of discipleship through launching the Community of St Cuthbert, and I was recruited as its Prior. The Community began in a low-key way for a year or so before I took up the post.

I joined in 2020, was licensed in September 2020, and led the Community for 3 years, stepping down in October 2023. This does not represent three years' full-time commitment to the project: factors including health, initial part-time commitment while I completed a previous job, a wider ministerial remit, and overseeing the church during a year-long vacancy, all meant that I was rarely able to focus full-time on the Community of St Cuthbert. The role of Prior was discontinued after I finished and the Community no longer exists in the same intentional way, although many of its emphases have been woven into the regular practices of St Nics Church, as indeed they partly derived from it in the first place.

2.2. Characteristics and Practices

During the three years in which I oversaw the Community of St Cuthbert, we evolved a core statement along these lines: The Community of Saint Cuthbert is focused on 'loving God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength' and 'living our lives in step with the rhythms of God's grace'.[3] The phrasing about 'rhythms of grace' was drawn from Eugene Peterson's *Message* translation of Matt 11:29, where Jesus says to infants/the weary/the burdened: 'Walk with me and work with me—watch how I do it. Learn the unforced rhythms of grace.'

This statement foregrounded the theological conviction that the work of discipleship is God's work first, in which we—the disciples—are caught up in response. Evangelical commitment is typically activism-orientated, as observed in David Bebbington's classic discussion of the defining marks of British evangelicalism.[4] St Nics is itself a lively and active church. We wanted a way of characterising the life of faith that did not rest on such activism and would not overly contribute to it.

The Community was named after St Cuthbert, the 7th century Bishop of Lindisfarne. Our records of Cuthbert are somewhat limited and tend towards the hagiographical, but insofar as they permit conclusions, we noted that the life of Cuthbert was deeply rooted in God, both personally and with others[5]. We focused on how Cuthbert sought a life of service that embodied 'God's life-giving justice for all'. This phrase was adopted to capture something of St Nics' then-prominent conviction that justice was at the heart of Christian discipleship, in ways that I will discuss below.

The core commitment at the heart of the Community consisted of being part of one of its 'Spiritual Growth Groups' (SGGs), in which members were encouraged to keep in step with '7 key rhythms of God's grace', namely:

- (1 & 2) *prayer* and *Bible study*—focusing inwards
- (3 & 4) *worship* and *hospitality*—focusing on our life in community
- service through (5 & 6) *justice* and *witness*—focusing outwards
- celebrating God's regular gift of (7) *rest*

Initially, this had been a 5-fold vision, but it was adapted several times. 'Evangelism' became 'witness', and we foregrounded the more general word 'service'; 'worship' was added to the list partly to deal with the unexpected experience of some people seeking membership on the grounds that they did not like church but wished to be part of a Christian group, which we did not wish to encourage; and 'rest' was added partly to counter the activist tendency noted above, and in an attempt to incorporate social dimensions of group life as a healthy part of discipleship rather than as an 'off-duty' optional extra. I hoped that three pairs might be memorable enough to become ingrained, and it appealed to have a capstone seventh rhythm that chimed with the seventh day's traditional emphasis on rest.

The core statement of the Community was a 'rule of life' agreement (actually called a 'rhythm of life' for reasons discussed below). In principle, all groups would affirm this annually in an SGG small-group meeting given over to reviewing it. It was kept short, to fit on one sheet of paper in large print. At its heart was the above statement about living in step with the rhythms of God's grace, and a rehearsal of the role of SGGs and their seven commitments. There were some framing comments on being part of God's wider church and journeying for 'this time' (i.e., the given year) together. There was also a commitment to bless anyone who decided to leave the Community. The idea of renewing the commitment each year was to make sure it did not simply become a lapsed agreement honoured in the breach. Better to be intentional for one year (or several successive years), and then stop intentionally, as I argued it.[6]

It was envisaged that the Community would provide regular small group study notes for SGGs (often by myself), have occasional study days for wider gatherings (led by me), and be part of the missional life of the church by resourcing church activities through getting SGGs to take turns in various forms of missional service. All these things happened, to varying degrees, across the three years of the Community. It had also been envisaged that the Community would be offered to other churches in the diocese. Some initial progress was made in discussing this with local churches, but in practice, this did not happen.

One of the recurrent challenges in establishing the Community of St Cuthbert was how to keep our focus on God. In my view, this difficulty was partly traceable to a general evangelical preference for the language of discipleship to be about human activity. One of the first things I did as Prior was to explore the roots of discipleship language. Interestingly, some thought this was an unnecessary step. I wondered if the assumption was that everyone knew what discipleship was, and did not wish to be troubled by asking whether it matched up to scriptural language. It is to this question that I now turn, seeking to let scripture's voice speak into the practice(s) of evangelical discipleship.

3. Evangelical Discipleship: What Is It?

Discipleship is part of the core value system and practice of evangelical Christian faith. In the UK evangelical church, it has generally been assumed to be a self-evident

life-giving good, and obviously biblical through and through. A cherished marker of its key convictions and practices was the 1981 account offered by noted Anglican vicar and evangelist, David Watson (1933–1984) in a book simply titled, *Discipleship*.[7] I have my own memories of this book being widely recommended and disseminated during my time as a student Christian in the 1980's, which is when I first read it. Watson's energetic ministry, in part mediating charismatic renewal to the Church of England through his time at St Michael-le-Belfrey, York, found expression in emphasising community, prayer, simple lifestyle, spiritual warfare, and many other practices, all of which are the topics of chapters in his book. In York, for example, he pioneered practical experiments in simple community living through extended households, freeing people up to serve in Christian ministry in contexts where others in the house earned the income.[8]

Evangelicals have perhaps then been rather taken aback to recognise that discipleship is not so self-evidently a helpful biblical expectation to many in other Christian traditions, including fellow Anglicans.[9] It is true that the abstract noun 'discipleship' does not correspond to any particular biblical term, though whether this justifies the sometimes-made claim that 'discipleship' is 'not biblical' begs many questions about what it means to 'be biblical' that we cannot go into here.[10] Evangelicals tend to conflate the biblical language about 'disciples' with a general description of Christian living, but one may note that the New Testament does not straightforwardly sustain such usage.

The word 'disciple' (*mathētēs*) is used a little over 260 times in the NT, and over 230 of these uses are in the Gospels. Another 28 occur in the book of Acts, beginning at Acts 6:1 ('when the disciples were increasing in number'), and last used in Acts 21:16, twice: 'Some of the disciples from Caesarea also came along and brought us to the house of Mnason of Cyprus, an early disciple'. By this point it certainly looks like the word 'disciple' is serving as a general term for 'follower' (of Jesus). Strange to observe, then, that the word never occurs again in the NT. It fades from view in Acts, is never used by Paul, and makes no appearance in any other NT epistles or the book of Revelation. There is probably no straightforward OT equivalent term either. Most translations (from the KJV on down) only use 'disciples' in Isaiah 8:16 where it translates *bᵉlimudāy*—'my taught ones'/'my disciples', probably referring to the group being addressed by Isaiah in 8:11–15 (So Williamson 2018, pp. 302–4).

Watson rehearses some of this data, in a rather unfocused way, but makes no comment on the usage being restricted to the gospels and Acts, turning instead to the nature of Jesus' 'radical and unique pattern of discipleship', which is found particularly in the call to practices of obedience, service, simplicity and suffering (Watson 1981, pp. 19–34, quote from 20). But where Watson actually starts is with the celebrated quote from Dietrich Bonhoeffer: 'When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die', which was the then-current English translation of a particularly striking Bonhoeffer aphorism.[11] It is perhaps to Bonhoeffer, rather than the reflective study of the New Testament, that the rise of 'discipleship' language in English evangelical church life is due (Snow 2021, p. 4).

What would Bonhoeffer have made of Watson's book, with its immediate and consistent focus on human activity, and its general lack of engagement with the absence of 'discipleship' language in Paul and elsewhere? The title of Bonhoeffer's *Nachfolge*, originally translated in 1948 as *The Cost of Discipleship* but now refreshed and retranslated as *Discipleship*, probably comes in turn from Bonhoeffer's reading of Thomas a Kempis' 15th century *Imitation of Christ* (*Nachfolge Christi*) (Kuske and Tödt 1996, p. 303). Part of Bonhoeffer's agenda is indeed to show that 'discipleship' remains key in Paul and beyond, albeit in other terms: such as 'believer', 'saint' and 'brother'. Most basically, for Bonhoeffer, 'What the Synoptics describe as hearing and following the call to discipleship, Paul expresses with the concept of *baptism*.' (Bonhoeffer 1996, p. 207). This is the over-arching context for thinking about discipleship as the call to death: baptism as new identity in Christ, an absolute 'break with the world', and the reception of the Spirit as the gift received in baptism. Bonhoeffer sums up: while baptism is not mechanical, it 'requires a passive role on our human part'.[12] I suspect this emphasis would not have been overly congenial to

David Watson, whose book contained no reflection on this or on rest, for example, and rather offered practical tips for things like rising early to pray even when exhausted.[13] It is perhaps worth noting, though, that it is more encouraging to find recent evangelical writers on discipleship explicitly acknowledging the significance of enacting our union with Christ in baptism, as does Kevin Vanhoozer, in a book that also begins with none other than Bonhoeffer.[14] Theologically I tried to help the Community of St Cuthbert take its lead much more from Bonhoeffer's emphases (and Vanhoozer's) than Watson's—and the introduction of a rhythm of 'rest' was just one move in this direction.

How to retain this overarching theological focus on God's work in and through our life in the Community of St Cuthbert was the most interesting but demanding challenge of my time as Prior. I am sure I was only intermittently successful. I turn now to some specific aspects of the challenge, and how far we were able to catch sight of God in action in and through our practices.

4. An Evangelical Rule of Life: Possibilities, Practical Constraints, and Prospects

This section is intended neither as a triumphal report on success, nor a grim critique of failure. Based on an account of the case study described above, I seek out worthwhile aspects of setting up an evangelical rule of life, with a view to offering wisdom to others interested in such a pursuit and noting some ways in which my clarity on what best to do was partly informed by our failure to do it. The first focus is the 'Rule of Life' statement; then the immense possibilities for missional discipleship in a dispersed community model; then the value of having clear 'membership' boundaries, partly clarified by our own failure to square this with a context governed by openness to as many people as possible; and finally I note the potential (largely unrealised in our own case) for using a rule of life-shaped community approach in establishing new worshipping communities. I should also clarify that all the views and estimations of the life and work and witness of St Nics (and the Community of St Cuthbert itself) are my own, and I do not speak for other church or ministry leaders past or present.

4.1. How to Articulate a 'Rule (Rhythm) of Life' Statement

The notion of a 'rule of life' does not most naturally find its home ground in the evangelical tradition. The various monastic traditions of the church have given us the most famous statements of a 'rule of life', notably of course the *Rule of St Benedict*. Certainly some 'rules' were aimed beyond the monastic community, perhaps most obviously Gregory the Great's 'Pastoral Rule' for Christian leaders and pastors.[15] Evangelical traditions have not generally used this language, and indeed a degree of nervousness on this matter at St Nics led to us adopting a 'rhythm of life' statement instead, as noted above.

Perhaps the evangelical nervousness is changing. There is clearly a move toward embracing forms of intentional Christian living indebted to monasticism as an appropriate way forward, and while that does not necessitate a 'rule of life' statement, it will probably amount to something comparable, once thought through. Part of the shift is again due to Bonhoeffer, who in a much-quoted 1935 letter wrote to his brother about the church's need for a 'new monasticism':

> The restoration of the church will surely come from a new kind of monasticism, which will have nothing in common but a life of uncompromising adherence to the Sermon on the Mount in imitation of Christ. I believe the time has come to rally people together for this.[16]

From this passing comment has come a fresh desire to export some of the disciplined ('ruled') living of the monastic tradition to the daily life of the church in general.[17] As one example, John Skinner's discovery of Bonhoeffer's quote led fairly directly to the founding of the Northumbia Community in the North of England.[18]

One resource I found helpful for encouraging more of an evangelical embrace of this approach was Greg Peters' book on *The Monkhood of All Believers*.[19] Peters' rich and enriching account traces several aspects of the history of monasticism, averring that the

cloistered life of ruled orders was but one (high profile) way of living out the core of the monastic vocation. That core was about being 'single-minded'—a *monachos* was one who was focused on God, involving (therefore) asceticism as the stripping away of anything that distracted from single-mindedness, and where the central ideas of being a 'monk' involved an interior focus on God as a way of living out one's baptismal vows.[20] Bonhoeffer would surely have agreed.

Peters' argument then proceeds by way of analogy with the priesthood of all believers: it is a matter of the baptismal identity of all Christians to partake of the priesthood that is made up of all God's people, and likewise, all Christians partake of the single-minded interior focus on God that is the calling of all God's people. Just as some are called to a public and named vocation as 'priests' in a way that is complemented by all believers' priestly calling, so some are called to a public and named vocation as 'monks' in a way that is representative in some way of 'the monkhood of all believers' (Peters 2018, pp. 135–55). From here it is a much shorter step to suggesting to one's evangelical church that we are rightly called to embrace a ruled discipline of daily spiritual life, in the tradition of the great 'rule of life' statements of the past. The challenge becomes how to do this in a way that meets the particular contingencies and contexts in which one finds oneself.

In the Community of St Cuthbert, an early move, as noted already, was to shift the language to being a 'rhythm of life' statement, in which keeping in step with the rhythms of God's grace was couched as a human response to divine initiative.[21]

The first two of our seven rhythms—prayer and Bible study—were focused on hearing from God. How far we successfully enabled our groups to move from long traditions of prayer-as-intercession to an equal if not greater focus on prayer-as-hearing-from-God I do not know. Resources for groups encouraged this shift in emphasis, and there was certainly at least some movement in this direction.

Similarly, our second pair of rhythms—worship and hospitality—encouraged a receptivity to God in shared practice as a group. This represented a broadened vision of small-group life for the church, which had previously thought of small groups more as Bible study groups—a long and much-valued part of St Nics' church life. In principle this move to worship and hospitality might have allowed greater engagement with the possibilities of developing new worshipping communities, which I return to in 4.4 below. Likewise, I pick up the third pair of rhythms—service and justice—in 4.2 below. These too were envisaged as representing our response to the God who had spoken first to us.

Given the caution and lack of initial understanding of the purpose and substance of a 'rule of life', I concluded that it was essential that any such statement be characterised through and through by an evangelical confidence in God's good news, rather than a focus on our activity. This is indeed partly a matter of reconceiving 'activity' as 'response'. More pointedly, it is a matter of returning always to the life-creating call of God on our lives without which none of our Christian activity makes a difference. Once groups could examine the specific steps or details of a 'rule of life', in terms of particular 'rhythms of grace', much of the nervousness dropped away, even if people did at times struggle with really embracing the language or seeing the significance of what it was trying to articulate. To some extent, a common response was that 'these are things all Christians should be doing anyway'—which was not intended as an affirmation of Peters' idea of 'the monkhood of all believers', I am sure, but in fact did affirm precisely his core convictions. The intentionality was then partly embodied in having groups commit to making space to reflect together on how these rhythms of grace were being experienced.

One practical result of this was the need to mark different small-group meetings as being for different purposes. We developed a monthly pattern in which weeks 1 and 3 would be focused on Bible study and prayer, week 2 would be worship-focused, and week 4 would be committed to enabling the outward-facing activities of the group (worship and service), whether by actually doing them or using the time to support and facilitate them if they happened at another time. I will discuss examples of this later. If there was a week 5, then groups were invited to arrange a restful social activity of some kind.

One of the challenges was how to feed this observation about participating in God's work back into the life of the Community in a way that encouraged everyone else. Again, there was some progress, without there being a particular sense of radical transformation. However, my conviction was that this slow-but-steady progress was in theory more sustainable than an initial burst of enthusiasm followed by lapsing back to pre-Community of St Cuthbert practices.

To return to the core point: all of this activity was a good sign of the work of God among us, but it remained essential to insist often and clearly that it was all response, and that what mattered at the heart of it was discerning God's ways. That this would take time, and often be inconclusive, required us to learn patience and perseverance. In my experience, some find this harder than others.

4.2. Missional Discipleship in a Dispersed Community Model: Enabling Participation

A project such as the Community of St Cuthbert offers immense potential for cultivating and sustaining the practices of missional discipleship. Here I return to the pattern noted above of rotating group meetings (SGG meetings) through Bible study, worship, and 'mission'. We struggled to find the right framing of this last emphasis, for interesting reasons, but when it worked well it was certainly illuminating for helping people to reflect on God being at work in their own missional living. This was true even if, for the average church person including those in our Community, this is not the language they would have used to describe their experience.

The first attempt to articulate the core value at issue here, before my own time as Prior, circled around the importance of 'evangelism', before settling on 'witness'. This was on the basis that while not all are evangelists, all are called to be witnesses. We also started with a core commitment to justice. 'Witness' and 'Justice' were two of the initial five 'rhythms of grace' when I began as Prior.

What I discovered early on was a mixture of reluctance and misunderstanding regarding 'justice'. I had not anticipated that some people would hear the language of 'justice' as forbidding: referring perhaps to a God bringing judgment to bear. It is true that justice and judgment are two sides of the same coin—a point given resonance by the Old Testament vocabulary involved in talking about them. Both are captured by the Hebrew term *mishpat*, variously translated 'justice' or 'judgment' depending on the issues at hand—classic illustrative examples include 'all Israel heard of the judgment (*mishpat*) that the king had rendered, and . . . they perceived that the wisdom of God was in him to execute justice (*mishpat*)' (1 Kings 3:28) and 'a spirit of justice (*mishpat*) to the one who sits in judgment (*mishpat*)' (Isa 28:6). There are usually good reasons to prefer one or the other translation, but the point is that—in Old Testament thinking—judgment is what permits justice; an insight usually clearer to the powerless in need of the king's judgment than to the well-off seeking to escape justice, it might be said.

I would have anticipated that talk of 'judgment' would be relatively unpopular, and indeed it is in response to that cultural unease with the language of judgment that I have often rehearsed with congregations and classes the above points about the sense(s) of *mishpat* in scriptural texts. But I had not anticipated that in the evangelical context of St Nics 'justice' would likewise be seen as a harsh term, creating a sense of distance from God rather than a desire to respond in lives of faithfulness or praise. (Obviously, this is a generalisation, but the issue was a real one.)

It was in response to this issue that I moved to the language of 'God's life-giving justice for all', and resituated the importance of a rhythm of justice to be subservient, alongside 'witness', to the broader term 'service'. This seemed to result in the sought-after sense of response: people in the Community rallied to the call to embody life-giving justice through service.

Thus suitably defined, it soon became apparent that the Community's rule of life was facilitating a wonderful expansion of very practical ways of living out a missional calling in the midst of typically busy urban, professional and family lives. The decision to make every

group look outward, as the focus of, at least, one of its weekly meetings per month, led to a rapid translation of good intentions into practice. For example, a group might commit to taking a turn on the rota for our cafe project, which was opening in the city centre with a view to being a 'justice hub' for service of all kinds to the community. The small-group meeting (in 'week 4') could then either be cancelled to be replaced by the cafe time, or used as a chance to organise and pray for it. In feedback to group leaders at quarterly gatherings, I reported one time on around 12–15 groups having indicated some such recent activity with their 'outward facing' week. Add this up, multiplying by larger numbers of groups over repeated quarterly meetings, and a considerable number of people were being facilitated to serve in practical ways throughout the month. Other such group activities noted in our regular encouragements to SGGs included: to join with any of our St Nics justice initiatives (significantly, the church had appointed a Social Justice Enabler at the same time as a Prior, with plans to facilitate small loans, debt counselling, cv development, and so forth); join with a local project beyond the church—e.g., a foodbank, a homeless ministry; use group time to offer hospitality to those in need, or international arrivals in Durham (which included students, newcomers, and refugees); arrange a schedule of visiting those who lived alone and offer practical help; support an established charity through active involvement; engage in letter writing or similar advocacy work; set up zoom links with a mission partner and use the time to learn about and encourage their ministry; and others. The degree to which these activities are rightly understood as missional might vary from case to case. The ethos of our study notes in the Community of St Cuthbert was much indebted to Sam Wells' work on mission as rooted in *being alongside* those with whom one lives.[22] In this sense, mission was being brought in to the heart of our rule of life. Underpinning this, for myself, was the celebrated claim of John Stott, himself a much-respected evangelical voice at St Nics: 'Mission . . . describes everything the church is sent into the world to do'.[23] In the end, what mattered was not being able to define the extent to which any of these activities were missional, but the focus on getting groups to look outward in service to (many different kinds of) others.

In short: in a dispersed way the people of God, in the Community of St Cuthbert, were being facilitated into missional engagement. On good occasions, groups also used their 4th meeting in the month to reflect on lessons learned and encouragements experienced. The low-key nature of this small-group 'mobilisation' seemed to encourage a sense of joining in with the work of God that was already taking place. It was clear that few, if any, of our groups were themselves creating mission work that had not existed before they came along. The entire focus was on playing a faithful part in one of the many initiatives the church was already engaged in, but in the process, many people were brought into direct contact with God at work—e.g., in cafe work; city centre hospitality; or in acts of service such as facilitating church events; door to door visitations; or giving out free tea and coffee, invitations, and literature, on city-centre occasions such as during Durham's major annual Miners' Gala.

This was a vision and practice of missional discipleship that was being clearly translated into smaller and manageable practices for small groups in the church. It was a way to connect with God being at work in and through daily discipleship, rather than deferring mission to some elusive moment when one would have more time or energy, better understanding, or a full programme of welcome in place. Crucially, it created a sense of 'dispersed community'—people would be in one small group, but part of a wider network of missional initiatives. The clarity and intentionality of the Community of St Cuthbert was key to seeing this happen.

4.3. Commitment, Boundaries and Openness to All

In our own case, the benefits of that clarity and intentionality did not extend to getting it right with regard to matters of membership of—and commitment to— the Community of St Cuthbert. For practical rather than conceptual reasons, we did not arrive at a satisfactory way of marking Community membership, and this had a negative impact on our ability

to make the best use of our rule of life or commitment to specific rhythms of grace. I will describe the issues by way of a comparison.

At St Martin in the Fields, located in Trafalgar Square in central London, Richard Carter has developed and led 'The Nazareth Community'. Carter came to his ministry in London from a time spent in an Anglican religious order in the Solomon Islands and found that he wanted to retain the value of that ordered life in his new city-centre context. The result was the Nazareth Community—a dispersed monastic community in the city. As one would then expect, it offers a 'rule of life' statement, in this case couched in terms of seven 'guiding principles': Silence, Service, Scripture, Sacrament, Sharing, Sabbath Time and Staying (see Carter 2019). Early in my time as Prior I read through Carter's inspiring account, recognising aspects of overlap between the two communities while noting his specific context of finding ordered Christian living in the centre of London (so that, for example, gathering for periods of silence was a valuable discipline for his community). I was particularly struck by Carter's description of an annual public service of commitment where members would affirm the vows of their Community. The Nazareth Community is thus, in effect, a self-defined subset of those who gather to worship at St Martin in the Fields, and those who join it are freely taking this additional step of committing to a rule of life. There is no suggestion that all should do this (though I imagine that many may be encouraged to consider it). Rather, it is a particular form of ruled Christian living for all who choose to undertake it.

On reflection, I am sure that this is an important facet of setting up a Community governed by a rule of life. It is also one that, in principle, can work well within an evangelical understanding of being summoned to serve the gospel in all one does.

As a matter of observation, in our case, we did not achieve clarity on this issue, and this left us a tension that we did not successfully resolve. The Community of St Cuthbert was joined by being part of one of its small groups—called Spiritual Growth Groups (SGGs), a name that was in place before I started, and which reflected a traditional evangelical commitment to active pursuit of spiritual growth. In principle, each SGG would annually reaffirm its commitment to our Rhythm of Life statement, and SGG leaders met with me as Prior through a regular pattern of group leaders' meetings. My own view is that this could in principle work as a way of leading a community, but it ran into tension with the existing small-group structures and self-understandings of St Nics. These involved its evangelical passion for being open to all, as well as the pre-understanding, mentioned above, of small groups being effectively Bible study groups.

For reasons to do with the specific circumstances of the beginning of the Community of St Cuthbert, including my own taking up of the role of Prior being significantly delayed for health reasons, the Community was launched by importing into it all the previously existing small groups of St Nics who were willing to make the transition. (Approximately 8 of 30 or so groups chose to remain outside the Community initially.) Clearly, there was some intentionality about these decisions, but the inevitable result was that the boundaries of the Community of St Cuthbert were not entirely clear. Some members of some groups had a hazy sense of what it meant to be in the Community. Further, no shared public act of commitment (annual or otherwise) was introduced.

It is not particularly important to examine what was or was not well thought through in this one particular case, in which doubtless some things could have been done more helpfully. What is relevant is to draw out reflections on the nature of intentional discipleship within an evangelical church setting, with its desire to see new people become part of the church, and to emphasise discipleship for all including newcomers. Ironically, Bonhoeffer's emphasis on 'discipleship' as the living out of baptism could have been a useful support here, but various factors mitigated against this. One was what I take as an evangelical tendency not to refer to baptism much in general above and beyond particular baptismal services—in our own case partly no doubt because we were situated in a gathered city centre church that attracted people from all different church backgrounds. In my experience, this does tend to result in a low-key and perhaps pragmatic approach to baptism in the

midst of such varying personal histories and practices. It is worth observing by way of example that baptism plays no functional role (if any role at all) in Watson's account of discipleship either—even in the account of starting out as a disciple or bringing someone to faith.[24] But all this said, are there general lessons to learn?

I would draw two conclusions here. One is that intentional discipleship, based around a rule of life, requires a public moment (whether singular or repeated, e.g., annually) in which a commitment is made, or renewed. Of course, this is a logic entirely related to the logic of baptism too—a public enacting of new life in Christ. Whatever baptismal practices are in place, one cannot in general be unsure whether one has been baptised. The reason for this importance is not just sociological—in terms of a rite of passage for example. The reason why a public commitment is important is that God is at work in such a public confession. A second, and related, point is that it is useful to distinguish between participation in the life of a local church, and membership of a ruled community—even if one has a rare case of an entire church undertaking such a rule of life.[25] A church with a strong emphasis on welcoming new people, and encouraging newcomers to experience the claims and practices of the gospel, will tend to want to encourage having a relaxed sense of boundaries about being in that church or not: all are welcome and encouraged to feel welcome. (Whether this evangelistic enthusiasm works in practice, as against, for example, some more traditional churches that have loose boundaries precisely because of a lack of evangelistic zeal, is not the point at issue here.)

The Community of St Cuthbert suffered an unresolved tension on this issue, and in my own view, we never successfully clarified whether it was a project fundamentally about intentional discipleship, or about the renewal of the church's small groups. We learned the hard way that real clarity upfront is key and that in the context of a Church of England church, and probably more widely, this will have to allow for the provision of space for those not wishing to be part of an intentional community—and not thereby made to feel second class as a result. Obviously, there is no real category of membership in a Church of England church. What I am suggesting here is that the benefit goes both ways in separating out the two categories: belonging to the church, and being in the Community. Each gathering can benefit from the other, but there is no gain in blurring their distinctiveness and trying to imagine that they can be approximately the same. The particular strengths of an intentional community are thereby lost, and the appropriate openness of church life is not enhanced either.

4.4. A Rule of Life and New Worshipping Communities

A final issue to be considered briefly here was one we did not inhabit in practice, but which was helpful in principle: the role of a rule of life in understanding the nature and possibilities of new worshipping communities. Durham Diocese has made expansive commitments to seeing multiple new worshipping communities established, not least in response to clear evidence of the decline of traditional church gatherings in many areas of the Diocese. St Nics participated in the resultant discussions, sometimes under the older rubric of church planting. This is not the place to discuss the strengths and weaknesses of such ideas in general.[26]

One particular long-term question besetting such reflection both at St Nics specifically and in the Church of England more widely has been the matter of understanding the link between the sending/planting church, and the sent/planted church. This is not so much a matter of appropriate ecclesial oversight, important as that is, but rather a question of ethos or style. How does church A understand its relationship to church B, which has been sent out to a new existence? The idea of a shared rule of life offered a fresh way forward in thinking this question through. Regardless of the precise scope or nature of a new worshipping community, it could still be invited—or more precisely people within it could still be invited—to be (or remain) members of the Community of St Cuthbert. The same rhythms of grace could still be valued, and the same commitment to intentional discipleship upheld. The practicalities of such projects are always subject to the vagaries of

particular leaders, resources and various other contingent factors. The 'new worshipping communities' conversation will continue to navigate through such troubled waters, and the Community of St Cuthbert did not in practice do more than assist the conversation. But in so doing, in the time period under review, this brought focus and energy, as St Nics considered potential options.

5. Retrospective: Seeing God in Action in an Evangelical Community

I offer in conclusion two broader reflections on the challenges of seeing God in action in and through the adoption of an evangelical rule of life.

The first follows from the above-discussed need for a positive articulation of the rule itself. It remained a challenge throughout to keep the focus on God rather than on policing practices. However, it was energising to try and meet this challenge. The difficulty—and the vast potential—comes from recognising that divine action and human action do not constitute two options in a zero-sum game. God is not at work in precisely those areas where humans are not, as if we only invoke God when we are unable to explain things in any other way. The life-giving work of God is found (also) in, with and under human activity—and human faithfulness is itself divine gift.[27] The daily acts that make up faithful discipleship are the work of God too, in that they are called forth in response to the word of God, and by the power and the Spirit of God. This cannot be said too often, and the 'rule of life' statement needs to make this centrally clear, otherwise, the whole vision for deepened discipleship drifts down towards an activist work ethic. One must seek where possible to keep the focus explicitly and responsively on God's leading. The experience of seeing how it energised and facilitated missional discipleship in the Community of St Cuthbert seems an encouragement to believe that such an approach is on the right track.

A second reflection is on how this case study might permit an insight into what it means to be evangelical—another wide-ranging and contested issue that I do not propose to explore here. At the risk of simplification: some older models of evangelical church life understood themselves as offering a sectarian alternative to the culture (and indeed the wider non-evangelical church) around them: 'evangelical' as an alternative to other approaches. The Community of St Cuthbert did not take this approach, and my sense is that evangelical enthusiasm for 'new monasticism' in general does not do so. This is a style and spirit of 'evangelical' that sees itself as one embedded aspect of the wider church, inextricably situated in its wider cultural contexts. What I have been discussing is an evangelical passion for 'catholic' discipleship in the sense of 'for all/general'. The goal is not—again to simplify—to make evangelical disciples, but evangelically to make disciples. In principle, we imagined the Community of St Cuthbert as available to resource any church, of any tradition, by way of its articulation of a generous rule of life focused on our seven rhythms of grace, which could then be worked out in detail in a range of theological ways.

I would not want the claims for an evangelical rule of life to be overstated. It is not the silver bullet that will resolve the conundrums of a church, evangelical or not, and lead ineluctably to deepened discipleship. However, in the case study explored, I have attempted to draw out lessons from one extended attempt to put such a rule of life into practice, which enabled us to discern the benefits in the area of missional discipleship in particular. The approach helpfully gave us language to talk clearly about many and varied actual practices of discipleship and their place in the life of Christian faith. If the insights of the three-year experience of the Community of St Cuthbert may serve to encourage and refine the attempts of others to go further and deeper, then in one small way its commitment to serving the wider church beyond Durham may yet be fulfilled.

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Data Availability Statement: No new data were created or analyzed in this study. Data sharing is not applicable to this article.

Conflicts of Interest: The author was a participant-observer in the case study discussed, but believes and hereby declares that there is no conflict of interest.

Notes

1 Resource Church initiatives, funded as was the Community of St Cuthbert by Strategic Development Fund money, have recently contributed to developing other sizable evangelical churches in the diocese.

2 For a lively account of the changing church context in Durham, and St Nics' role in it, see (Byassee 2020), especially 36–58 on Durham city—written after the author's 7-month study and research trip to the North East of England in 2019. St Nics is described on pp. 38–43 and elsewhere.

3 The Community of St Cuthbert had a website as part of the St Nics website, and all our materials were hosted there from 2020–2023. The website no longer exists, but I quote from the uploaded documents.

4 (Bebbington 1993, p. 3). The four marks are conversionism, Biblicism, activism and crucicentrism.

5 See the writings, including by Bede, gathered in (Various 1998).

6 In this regard and many others I would like to acknowledge the significant wisdom of Revd Tom Brazier, whose own and more deeply rooted parish-wide version of a comparable project in Durham Diocese is available at https://www.greensideparish.org.uk/ourruleoflife.htm (accessed on 16 May 2024), though at the time of writing it has not been kept updated.

7 (Watson 1981). The American title of the book was *Called and Committed*.

8 A helpful brief account of Watson's life and work is (Porter 2003).

9 For a useful review of this issue see (Snow 2021, pp. 3–6).

10 The pursuit of what it means to be 'be biblical' is an over-riding concern of the American evangelical theologian Kevin Vanhoozer, whose books include works written specifically for churches seeking to encourage faithful Christian living (i.e., discipleship!). See for example (Vanhoozer 2019), the 'Introduction' to which begins 'What does it mean to be biblical? This has become my life question . . .' (p. xvii).

11 'Jeder Ruf Christi führt in den Tod' (literally 'Every call of Christ leads into death'); now translated as 'Whenever Christ calls us, his call leads us to death': (Bonhoeffer 1996, p. 87). Bonhoeffer's book was first published in 1937 in Germany, a context pregnant with significance regarding faithfulness unto death.

12 (Bonhoeffer 1996, p. 209). I am summarising here pp. 205–12.

13 (Watson 1981, pp. 129–30), using language like 'I have taken active and practical steps to "pommel my body and subdue it"!' (p. 130). Rather strikingly, in the section on daily early morning prayer, Watson says 'In any war, communications are vital'. (p. 129) For critique of Watson's activism see (Porter 2003, pp. 27–28).

14 (Vanhoozer 2019, pp. 149–51). Note his opening reflection, where Vanhoozer quotes Bonhoeffer on cheap grace being like 'baptism without church discipline' (p. xii).

15 A helpful reflection here is (Wakefield 2014).

16 (Bonhoeffer 2007, pp. 272–73), in a letter to Karl-Friedrich Bonhoeffer, 14 January 1935.

17 See for example (Wilson-Hartgrove 2008).

18 As recounted in (Grimley 2021, p. 53).

19 (Peters 2018). See now also (Guiver 2024).

20 (Peters 2018), throughout, but see pp. 23–42 and 142 especially.

21 I was particularly influenced here by (Luigi Gioia 2017), which emphasises letting God's work in us be the foundation of anything we then do in service.

22 See among other titles (Wells 2017, 2018).

23 See (Stott 1975, p. 30): Mission 'is not a word for everything the church does. . . . [It] describes rather everything the church is sent into the world to do.'

24 The single clear reference in Watson's whole book to baptism, oddly, is in Appendix C, a 'Further Discipleship' course, in which there is a solitary (unanswered) question in a study on Mark 16:9–20: 'What place should baptism have in "preaching the gospel"?' (p. 275). It is unclear to me how even a studious reader of Watson's book has been equipped to answer this question.

25 The church mentioned in n.6 above has achieved this, at least at times.

26 A helpful discussion about growth and decline in the Durham context is in (Byassee 2020, pp. 36–58); a chapter entitled 'Durham city: Growing churches where churches can't grow'.

27 From among many theological resources on this issue I have been helped by (Barclay 2020).

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Article

The Lived Experience of Divorcing Evangelicals and How Integrated, Empathetic, and Restorative Practice Can Disclose God to Them

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Abstract: Approximately seven in twenty marriages end in divorce in the UK, causing anxiety, depression, and a lasting impact on children. British evangelicals may fare better than average but are not immune from divorce. Despite a rich body of theological literature offering perspectives on divorce contributed by British evangelical scholars, there have been no related empirical studies to examine the lived experience of divorced evangelicals or the pastoral practitioners who support them. My study captures this missing empirical data, finding that evangelical divorce is a life-changing trauma that church practices sometimes compound. In contrast, those who reported integrated, empathetic, and restorative practices in their church or on the Restored Lives course say they were better able to cope, heal, and find hope. Irrespective of the pastoral environment, God was reported to act with compassion. The study employed mixed qualitative methods to capture the empirical data, which were analyzed and brought into dialog with relevant evangelical academic theology and documented practice. I concluded that in the context of complex connections and disconnections between the evangelical domains of theory and practice, integrated, empathetic, and restorative approaches toward the divorced are possible, effective, and disclose a God of grace.

Keywords: evangelical divorce; lived experience; pastoral practice; ecclesial discipline; restored lives

1. Introduction

Evangelicalism is a form of Christianity characterized by a focus on the Bible, personal conversion, the importance of the crucifixion of Jesus, and activism (Bebbington 1989, pp. 2–17). The movement in Britain consists of a loose coalition of para-church organizations like the Evangelical Alliance and Spring Harvest (Warner 2007, chap. 1–2), a wide variety of churches within and outside the historic denominations (Brierley 2006), and various academics within mainstream universities or specialized evangelical colleges. British evangelicalism is influenced by global institutions, churches and scholars but is distinctive from the prominent and well-documented US movement by emphasizing social justice rather than social issues (culture wars), holding diverse political affiliations rather than leaning right, and an absence of Christian nationalism (Hatcher 2017, pp. 1–43, 71–111, 147–86). For the purposes of this article, evangelicalism is broadly defined to include any person or institution that self-identifies as evangelical, regardless of their heritage or expression.

Approximately seven in twenty marriages end in divorce in the UK, causing anxiety, depression, and a lasting impact on children (Benson 2023). Despite a rich body of theological literature offering perspectives on divorce contributed by British evangelical scholars, there have been no related empirical studies that examine the lived experience of divorced British evangelicals. Some of the theological literature speculates that Christians have assimilated with a broader culture that has undermined marriage sociologically, politically, spiritually, and legally (Cornes 1993, chap. 1). However, there have been no academically rigorous data available to confirm or challenge this assumption. In the US, quantitative

data about evangelical divorce do suggest the movement mirrors American society (Pew Research Center 2014), which can be attributed to the social composition of the movement rather than any spiritual factors (Glass and Levchak 2014). No equivalent data exist for British evangelical divorce.

In this article, I will preview new empirical data from my study based on interviews with divorced British evangelicals and a focus group with pastoral volunteers from an organization called Restored Lives which specializes in divorce ministry (see below). Once collected, I placed this lived experience in dialog with relevant academic theology and documented practice to better understand the complex dynamics of evangelical divorce in Britain. I will argue that relevant academic theology, pastoral practice, ecclesial practice, and lived experience are connected and disconnected in both intended and unintended ways that cause harmful dissonance for divorcing evangelicals and the pastoral practitioners who support them. However, in situations where these domains are brought together toward empathetic and restorative practice, the effect can be transformational, and God's grace is disclosed.

Restored Lives is a charity based in Britain that helps people recover from relationship breakdown and provides courses for separating adults and children of divorced parents under thirty. It hosts online courses three times a year but also resources other organizations, mainly churches, to run them independently. The courses are provided for people of all faiths and none by design, and the material, although explicitly based on Christian principles, de-emphasizes religious language (Castenskiold 2013). Many leaders of Restored Lives are evangelical Christians, but this is not a requirement. Three optional evenings are provided on the adult course focused on men, abuse, and faith. The faith evening is Christian in content and discusses the additional dimensions of divorce experienced by people of faith.

From a reflexive perspective, I approach this article as an insider in more than one way. I have been an evangelical for almost forty years in multiple strands of the movement, most recently the Church of England as a Licensed Lay Minister (Reader). I am also divorced and remarried, with my own story of evangelical practices that took me to the brink of leaving the movement. I am, too, an insider to the Restored Lives organization cited in this study. My role as a volunteer on the adult course, and especially the optional faith evening, has given me firsthand insight into this specialized form of evangelical practice toward the divorced over many years.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted mixed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a dialogical model adapted from a proposal by Cartledge (2010, chap. 2).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve divorced evangelicals. These sixty-minute conversations explored the context of each interviewee's marriage breakdown, their related lived experiences within their faith community, the practical influence of the Bible, and any perceived divine encounters. The interview cohort was recruited partly through records of previous guests of Restored Lives and from my own contacts. Efforts were made to achieve gender balance (eventually five men and seven women), and a variety of post-divorce relationship statuses. Ages ranged from 42 to 76. Ethnic diversity was also sought, but the small identifiable population made this challenging, with two interviewees registering as non-white.

To mitigate the risk of triggering emotional distress, I stipulated that interviewees must have been divorced for at least two years and made clear at the outset of each interview that the process could be paused or stopped at any point. All interviews were conducted online using either Microsoft Teams or Zoom, which avoided the complexities of balancing in-person safeguarding with privacy arrangements for such a sensitive discussion.

The focus group was conducted with six leaders from the Restored Lives program, all with evangelical backgrounds. During a one-hour session hosted on Zoom, the group explored themes and patterns of lived experience observed among course participants.

In his book *Testimony in the Spirit*, Cartledge proposes a reflective method employing a dialogical relationship between three levels of discourse (2010, chap. 2). The first is the ordinary discourse of people sharing testimonies of lived experience in non-technical terms (Astley 2002); the second is an institutional level of ecclesial discourse; and the third is academic theological discourse and social and human science discourse (see Figure 1).

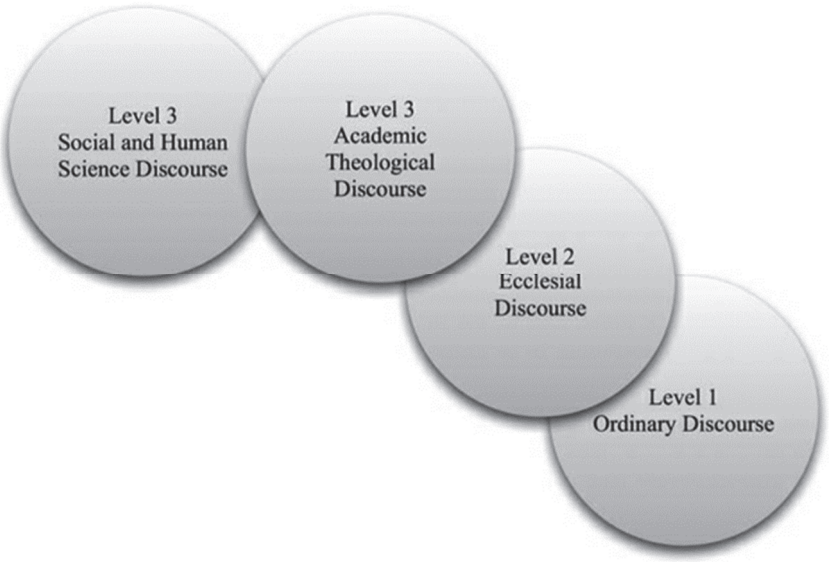

Figure 1. Cartledge's Dialogical Model.

I adapted this model to the context of my chosen domain of divorce and to clarify some features already implicit in Cartledge's approach (Figure 2). My first change was to remove the idea of *levels* of discourse, which could imply a hierarchy and suggest a lack of direct interaction between levels one and three. As such, I reconceived the levels of discourse as overlapping domains to emphasize their equal status and mutuality. In so doing, I always assume the primary source of ethical normativity is scripture, but that biblical insight can be embedded in lived experience and evangelical practice as much as in academic theology. I have also renamed the domain of ordinary discourse as *lifeworld* discourse to avoid any connotations of inferiority while retaining Cartledge's helpful definition. This domain is formed from an analysis of the semi-structured interviews.

The next two domains retain the concept of Cartledge's single ecclesial level but focus specifically on pastoral and ecclesial practice toward the divorced. The former incorporates the empirical data captured from Restored Lives leaders, augmented by assorted studies on Christian divorce recovery and other relevant pastoral literature. The latter uses works on ecclesial discipline and institutional church policy toward the divorced. The final domain of discourse retains Cartledge's academic theological theme applied to divorce theology and other relevant subjects identified in the analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. I did not require a separate discourse covering social and human science.

The dialogical process envisaged by Cartledge is not mechanistic but rather identifies resonance and dissonance between the domains of discourse. Specifically for this research, the reflection involved developing two thematic mind maps by analyzing the interviewee and pastoral practitioner transcripts. These themes were then explored through interactions with relevant works on academic theology and divorce practice, some of which had been identified in a prior literature survey. The process was highly iterative and evolved over a period of three months. Occasional informal discussions with relevant scholars supplemented my deliberations. Repeated drafts of this paper served as a vehicle to refine the results and sharpen the related discussions.

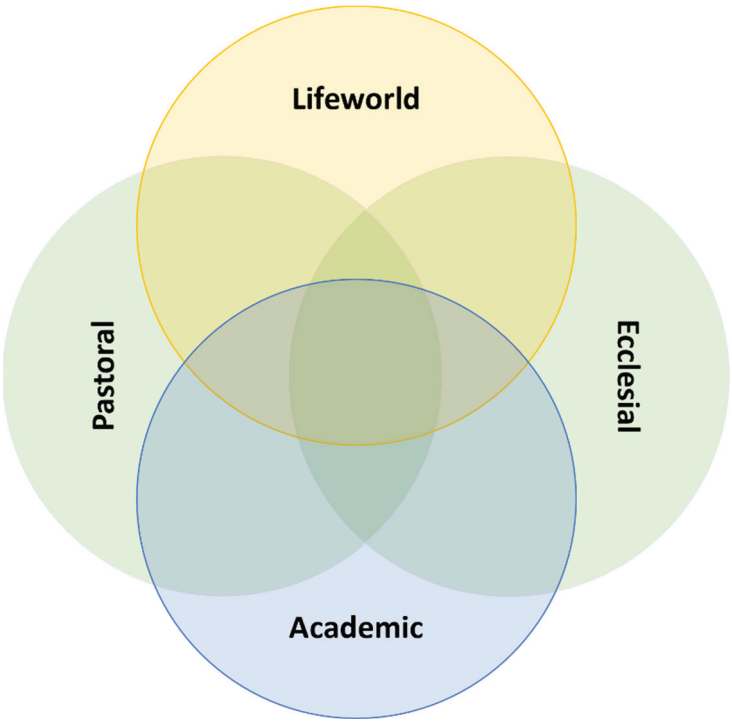

Figure 2. Adapted Model.

3. Results

On naming conventions, the divorced British evangelicals in my interview cohort will normally be referred to as "interviewees," and the pastoral volunteers from Restored Lives are described interchangeably as "focus group participants," "pastoral volunteers," or "pastoral practitioners." Material from the separate interview with the leader of Restored Lives is specifically identified as such.

3.1. The Lived Experience of Divorced British Evangelicals

The detailed experiences of each interviewee were unique, but various common themes emerged. The first is that, in all cases, the interviewees reported significant efforts to save their marriages, even if this was not always reciprocated by their former spouses. The marriage breakdown for most interviewees was protracted, and the leader of Restored Lives observed that Christians tend to delay divorce because of their high view of marriage. The range of relationship challenges faced included growing apart, verbal conflict, financial pressures, work problems, mental health issues, verbal and physical abuse, affairs, and addictions—often in combination. These issues are not unique to British evangelicals, but the data clearly show they are not immune from them either. It is possible that similar efforts by other couples have brought restoration of the marriage, but this is a self-selecting group of those who did not reconcile.

In every case, something brought the situation to a head. For many, the other partner left, or indicated an intention to divorce, with new relationships a common catalyst. In other circumstances, the interviewee initiated the crisis in response to abuse, addiction, or the discovery of an affair. Occasionally, the trigger was the realization that the marriage was "dead" and their spouse had already left the relationship emotionally. Irrespective of who brought the situation to a climax, everyone in the interview cohort experienced significant trauma. This manifested itself variously as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, shame, hopelessness, and guilt. Financial pressures, custody battles, complex temporary arrangements, and the loss of support networks only compounded these problems. Adverse experiences were sometimes counterbalanced by supportive relationships and direct

experiences of God (see below), but not sufficiently to avoid significant and protracted emotional distress.

All the interviewees went on to recount the eventual formalization and stabilization of their situations. Divorce proceedings followed, more permanent practical arrangements were established, the severe emotional distress diminished, and contemplation of the past and future began. Contact with exes varied from no discretionary communication to regular co-parenting and even friendship. Several interviewees made the point that pragmatism was required in deciding what contact was possible and appropriate after divorce. None of the interviewees were in another relationship at this point, although several of their former spouses were. The impact of divorce on children ranged from shared trauma in the initial stages to long-term self-destructive behavior that interviewees attributed to divorce. Children were sometimes pawns in bitter conflicts between parents, especially in the immediate period after the 'crisis,' and were sometimes poisoned toward the other parent or used in hurtful ways.

Much of what has been reported so far could apply to any divorce, but the empirical data also reflect the faith of the interviewees. Many reported that in the longer term, they observed significant improvements in their character, particularly empathy. They also cited better life skills such as boundary setting, communication, and discernment of other people's intentions. Several considered their faith to have deepened and their conception of God to have expanded. Some went as far as to say they would go through the whole experience again to achieve the transformational outcomes they had experienced by God's grace. Nonetheless, some interviewees reported ongoing sadness, a sense of loss of a future they had once envisaged, long-term scars and vulnerability, plus the stigma of a divorced identity within the Christian community. This was often combined with the complexity of navigating blended families for couples with children.

Only four of the interviewees had subsequently remarried. In all cases, they reported a positive contrast to their first union and gratefulness to God for their subsequent marriage partner. None of the interviewees expressed any moral dilemmas about remarriage from a faith perspective, but some were cautious in light of their divorce experience. One noted that male divorcees sometimes try and accelerate remarriage to legitimize physical intimacy.

3.2. Some Evangelical Divorce Practices Compound the Problems of Divorcing Evangelicals

One of the pastoral focus group participants estimated that three-quarters of churches manage divorce badly, at least from the point of view of divorced Christians attending Restored Lives. Although my interview cohort is not statistically significant from a quantitative perspective, it reflects a similar split. I will cover the more positive experiences below, but first, the key themes emerging from adverse experiences.

All the British evangelical churches creating adverse outcomes from the perspective of the interviewees were described as passive in the build-up to the divorce crisis. Their involvement began once the marriage breakdown became visible, almost always prior to an actual divorce. Church engagement then had a disciplinary tone and, in one case, entailed a quasi-judicial process to establish if a "biblical divorce" was envisaged. When both spouses remained in the church, the congregation, and sometimes the leaders, tended to "pick sides." A strong complementarian culture in one church afforded priority to the man, and the woman felt marginalized, even after his abusive behavior had become known to the leaders. In several cases, the spouse whose actions had initiated the crisis had already left and was, therefore, beyond the reach of church discipline. This tended to result in censure for the remaining partner based on the prospect of divorce alone, rather than an accurate apportionment of accountability for the situation.

To that end, several interviewees reported their removal from ministry roles. In all these cases, the individual was not provided with a rationale, beyond what they felt were euphemisms, such as "You need a break." No process, criteria, or timeline for reinstatement was provided to any of the interviewees. None of the cohort were reinstated to ministry

roles in the church where their divorce crisis arose, in part because they all subsequently left their church.

Strong encouragement to reconcile was a theme for some interviewees, even in the face of reported long-term abuse. In retrospect, one interviewee raised concerns about safeguarding in this respect. A culture of keeping the situation hidden, in one case even from family and close friends, was sometimes encouraged. This had the effect of isolating the person from their primary support networks. Another interviewee said they believed the church was more concerned about their image than the divorce situation itself because it undermined their notions of "victorious living."

Isolation was a commonly cited result of the divorce itself, removal from ministry roles, and informal rejection by others in the congregation. Several women reported that couples who had previously been friends withdrew because the interviewee's newly single status was perceived as a threat to their own marriages. Another common issue was that people did not know what to say and so chose to say nothing. This was enacted through avoidance or awkward conversations that skirted around the divorce situation. Even single friends sometimes withdrew because they considered divorce to be sinful and did not want to be "contaminated" by association. This situation encompasses both the *social* and *emotional* loneliness identified by Dykstra and Fokkema (2007) in their analysis of divorce in the Netherlands.

Pastoral care was reported to be limited or non-existent in these churches, compounded for some interviewees by the pretext of prayer being used to spread gossip. Eventually, the social isolation, sense of injustice, and lack of support led all the interviewees affected adversely to leave their original church. Afterward, some found other evangelical churches, but others left evangelicalism altogether. Two went to liberal churches, which they described as positive experiences of acceptance, healing, and, in one case, "fresh air." Others left the institutional church altogether whilst retaining their individual faith. In contrast, non-Christian friends were consistently described as less judgmental, more supportive, and "didn't say stupid things." One interviewee noted, "Lesbian rugby friends brought more healing than the church."

An additional subject raised without prompting by several interviewees was the impact of evangelical purity culture on young people. This was cited as a factor in their own situation by some. Concerns were raised that an emphasis on waiting until marriage for sexual intimacy resulted in pressure to marry before those in the relationship properly knew either themselves or one another. One interviewee recounted being sent letters from each of their parents asking them to reconsider an early marriage in these circumstances. That same person described the church environment as "coercive" in this regard. There was also some irony noted by more than one interviewee that evangelical church culture is a catalyst for misguided marriages that eventually fail only for the subsequent divorces to be met with uncompromising judgment and a lack of care by the very same movement. However, no easy answers were provided about what should be taught or encouraged instead. Interviewees who raised this point suggested they were more permissive with their children on sexual matters within committed relationships whilst remaining opposed to promiscuity.

3.3. Divorcing Evangelicals Do Not Prioritize Questions of Biblical Interpretation During Divorce

Although all interviewees held a high view of both marriage and scripture, once the period of crisis began, considerations of the various biblical interpretations of divorce were not prioritized. In part, this was because they were in survival mode, lacking the time or mental resources to engage in a complex technical debate. Several interviewees reported returning to the subject after some normalization of their circumstances had taken place. Views resulting from this retrospective reflection tended to be critical, accusing scholars of lacking context, nuance, grace, objectivity, and taking positions with unintended consequences, such as on abuse.

However, when discussing forgiveness rather than the Bible directly, interviewees often expressed a real sense of moral failure, even if, in technical terms, they may have met the criteria for a "biblical divorce" in the minds of their church, friends, or even themselves. The possibility of moral justification arising from biblical grounds did not provide relief because these matters were considered secondary to the breaking of the marriage covenant. This response was also reported even when the interviewee might be considered predominantly a victim in the divorce situation.

Rather than a focus on divorce theology, interviewees reported drawing on broader biblical themes such as assurances of God's unconditional love, forgiveness, grace, and restoration. Some also cited scriptural promises, especially "All things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). Many believed God was guiding them during the crisis period through both inner convictions, "I just knew it was right," and circumstances, "God was working all the time." Several interviewees expressed more trust in these direct experiences of God than in the contested interpretations of bible passages on divorce.

3.4. Pastoral Practitioners Make Limited Direct Use of Evangelical Divorce Theology

The focus group participants were all evangelicals with a high view of scripture, except one who had left evangelicalism because of unspecified "judgmental attitudes." Even so, their collective view on the use of scripture with divorced evangelicals was cautious. Focus group participants cited a need to recognize complexity and context in applying scripture amidst what they perceived was an evangelical cultural preference for "black and white" beliefs and a clear separation of "good from bad." A failure to do this could cause "confusion" for people whose "lives are falling apart." One said that simplistic interpretations are "lazy thinking" that lacks nuance. Another suggested that "big themes," such as God's love and grace, should be used to interpret individual texts on divorce.

Even so, in the interview with the leader of Restored Lives, he explained that it felt incomplete for the organization not to have a position on what the Bible says about divorce. He worked through a lengthy consultation process before authoring a paper and using that material to produce two videos of different lengths. This has now been moved to the optional 'faith' evening since the course is open to people of all faiths and none. He also added that for most people, the big themes of love and forgiveness are more important, but for some, these specific interpretive issues remain pressing.

3.5. Empathetic and Restorative Practices Are Transformational

For those interviewees with positive church experiences, these were themed around sustained support, empathetic engagement, careful listening, and the mediation of God's love. Some interviewees mentioned being allowed to continue serving whilst also being afforded appropriate space to deal with their situation. Another noted that the church did not take sides but found a way to listen to both parties. Pastoral support was also a feature of these more positive church experiences. Some was formal and specialist, but most was informal. One commented, "They gave me so much listening time."

Similar themes emerged for those interviewees who had attended Restored Lives. The course's impact was cited as significant and represented a turning point for some. Several who had participated as guests on the course returned as helpers, which brought the additional benefits of supporting others alongside exposure to the material at a different stage of their own divorce journey.

The Restored Lives pastoral volunteers observed a similar pattern of meaningful change in many participants. This was true of evangelicals, other Christians, and people of other faiths or none. Evangelical participants were considered to carry additional burdens of guilt, shame, and a sense of letting God down. It was also noted that evangelicals often reported additional damage from their church situations, but that Restored Lives helped to model a different Christian response.

The success of the course was put down to a mixture of "structured content, group therapy, and love." When asked about the motivation for volunteering to help on the course,

one leader said the "positive impact was infectious and addictive." It was also seen as a way to use their own painful experiences for good, and several leaders had volunteered consistently for over a decade as a result. As a ministry, some leaders suggested it was analogous to the good Samaritan or a way of continuing the work of Jesus. The very fact they were prepared to spend time with those who had experienced marriage breakdown was considered noteworthy by some guests on the course.

3.6. God Is Described as a Positive Actor in Divorce Situations

Interviewees were asked about any perceived direct experiences of God throughout the divorce period. Some wrestled with God in light of their suffering and raised typical questions about God's goodness, power, and presence. Only one interviewee reported being angry with God, while another explicitly did not blame God for their situation. One drew a sharp distinction between their positive experience of God and negative experience of the church.

Most experiences described were of God's active presence, providing peace, assurance, and support. One interviewee said, "He [my husband] moved out and God moved in." God was considered active in several of the interviewees' divorce situations, including answering prayers in very explicit ways, reducing anxiety and depression, and speaking both directly and through others. One interviewee described God as "the ultimate chameleon" who presented in whatever way was needed at the time. On this topic, several interviewees reported that their conception of God had enlarged through the divorce experience, and a deepening of personal faith often accompanied this. Theological perspectives were also described as broadening and set in a renewed and overriding context of grace.

4. Discussion

For the purposes of this discussion, I am bundling systematic, historical, and biblical theology under one heading of "academic theology." Theological works on divorce usually blend all three, so this approach has a valid basis in the structure of the dominant literature. I will also use the term "evangelical academy" to represent the wide variety of evangelical scholars distributed within the global movement. In so doing, I do not mean to imply any sense of organization, cohesion, or collaboration between them beyond the normal processes of academic peer interaction and review. I have separated the domains of pastoral and ecclesial practice partly because most interviewees did, and since they are typically distinct in the literature. The former is enhanced by data from the focus group with pastoral volunteers. The "lifeworld" relates to the lived experience of divorcing British evangelicals summarized above.

The discussion draws on the dialogical model outlined above that places these domains in "oscillation," with one another (Cartledge 2010, p. 14). After considerable reflection on this basis, my overriding observation is that the experience of divorcing evangelicals is shaped by both deliberate and unintended connections and separations between these domains. The discussion below works through each one in turn to examine its dominant themes.

Whenever possible, I have used British scholarship, but evangelicalism is a global movement, and some distinctive material comes from elsewhere, particularly the US. Evangelical pastoral theology is sparse in the literature, so I have used whatever sources are available. Similarly, studies on divorce recovery in a faith context are few and cannot be restricted to either British or evangelical sources. I have used the ecclesial practices of the Church of England for illustrative purposes, but those reported by interviewees were denominationally diverse and usually outside any formal policy.

4.1. The Self-Isolation of the Academy Has Not Yielded a Consensus on Divorce

The evangelical academy often treats pastoral and personal perspectives on moral theology with suspicion. This is grounded in a fear that reflexive locations outside the 'objective' academy may distort the real meaning of scripture and undermine its norma-

tive primacy. Equally, scholarly works often state that the pastoral implications of their conclusions need consideration by others, ending their contribution with only exegesis or some brief comments on the application. On this basis, pastoral and lived perspectives are neither an input to nor an output of academic theology. Cornes expresses this situation explicitly in the opening chapter of his substantial work on divorce, writing:

> Some address in careful detail the biblical, or later theological, material. They examine and comment on the relevant texts. They come to carefully judged conclusions. Yet hardly any of these more scholarly works make any attempt to flesh out what their conclusions will mean in pastoral practice today [...]. The other group of books is clearly written out of intimate encounter with other people's, and often their own, divorce (and remarriage). Many are very sensitive and compassionate; most are full of pastoral wisdom. Almost all seek to come to terms with the biblical material but, for the most part, do so in a woefully inadequate way, with their previously held convictions often clearly manipulating the biblical texts. (Cornes 1993, pp. 44–45)

However, even after avoiding the risk of hermeneutical "manipulation" by pastoral and personal perspectives, evangelical scholars have failed to reach an interpretive consensus on what the Bible says about divorce. Attempts to do so have now tapered into occasional contributions, often by those wishing to revise their previous positions (Heth 2006; Grudem 2019; Wenham 2019). The enduring differences include such fundamentals as whether divorce is ever permitted, if so on what grounds (usually a combination of adultery, abandonment, and other issues such as abuse), and whether remarriage is permissible afterward. Notable evangelical scholars represent every permutation of these possibilities (Gushee and Stassen 2016, pp. 278–79). In contrast, Cornes asserts that an "overwhelming majority" agree on the main points, except for remarriage, and shifts the focus to divorcing evangelicals, suggesting some willfully use differing interpretations to justify whatever "appeals" (Cornes 1993, p. 39). I consider him simultaneously too generous to the scholarly community and too critical of divorced evangelicals on this point.

To find an evangelical "consensus" on divorce requires a return to the roots of Reformed theology. Calvin and Luther both accepted divorce on grounds of adultery, abandonment, and potentially other situations such as cruelty (Calvin) or sexual incapacity (Luther), and both accepted remarriage for the "innocent" party (Luther 1956, vol. 21; Calvin 1950, 4.19.34). Wenham cites a similar "twentieth-century Protestant" consensus restricted to the grounds of adultery and abandonment, but also with the right to remarriage (2019, ix). However, Cornes and Wenham each argue against the respective consensus they have cited, and it is, therefore, problematic for Cornes to expect divorced evangelicals to accept a consensus that he rejects.

The second part of Cornes' claim, that evangelicals use interpretive differences to justify their preferred actions, is not evident in my empirical data. There is no doubt that interviewees were confused by the diversity of views and considered the normative force of any particular interpretation to be diminished as a result, but no exploitation of this situation was discernible. Instead, in the absence of interpretive clarity, interviewees felt compelled to find their own way forward based on broader scriptural principles and direct guidance from God. This is not the hermeneutical opportunism Cornes describes.

Regrettably, there is little reflection on why no evangelical consensus has existed for decades. Smith (2012, chap. 1) uses the term "pervasive interpretive pluralism" for such a situation and suggests that methodological problems are to blame. However, most evangelical scholars have responded instead by doubling down on a particular view rather than reflecting on whether there is something wrong with the approach. Even this entrenchment would be tolerable if academic theology were truly disconnected, and its effects contained within academic discourse. However, as Gushee notes:

> The difficulty of interpreting the [divorce] passages [in the gospels], together with the varied perceptual lenses brought to the texts by interpreters, has led to a stun-

> ning range of positions which have had real pastoral and human consequences. (Gushee and Stassen 2016, p. 378)

Gushee rightly observes that methodological isolationism has not prevented interpretive issues from creating a wider contagion of pastoral practice and lived experience. This situation is exacerbated by an asymmetry between finely balanced interpretive decisions in the academy and their life-changing implications for the divorced. For example, some differences in view hinge on highly contested semantic nuances in terms typically translated as "sexual immorality" (porneia) in Matt. 5:32, and 19:9, and "is not bound" (dedoulotai) in 1 Cor. 7:15, which are used to decide whether adultery is legitimate grounds for divorce, and abandonment allows for the possibility of remarriage, respectively (Heth 2006, pp. 43–46). Similarly, the lack of an explicit scriptural reference to abuse as grounds for divorce leads some to suggest it should be "accepted and forgiven" at least for a period (Cornes 1993, p. 304). Gushee again:

> [Some scholars] demonstrate little sensitivity to the human context in which all Christian ethics is done and the chaos that is out there. What results is moral teaching torn asunder from contact with human experience [. . .], sometimes culminating in irrelevance or even cruelty, as when women and children are sent back into abusive families. (Gushee and Stassen 2016, p. 272)

The empirical data clearly capture this "human context" and "chaos," diverging sharply from the controllable linearity of decision-making assumed in most academic theology covering divorce. Real divorces begin with at least one spouse exhausting options to reconcile, as most theologians assume, but the marriage is then plunged into a crisis in which survival rather than exegesis is the priority. Only when the situation has normalized is there the possibility of reflection on academic theology.

However, a small number of scholars have challenged the norm and placed their academic work firmly in the context of pastoral and lived perspectives. Shelly (2007), in an American setting, seeds pastoral vignettes from his own ministry experience into the discussion of key divorce passages, which serve to complexify them and expose simplistic and formulaic practices. He also provides a useful set of practical questions and answers, ending with pastoral letters to those going through divorce and their church leaders. He writes:

> Sometimes our penchant to be right and certain in our doctrine has led us to boil down the complex matrix of Scripture to a series of bullet points, propositions for debate, and systems of thought that grind up people. While trying to be correct, we have sometimes been unmerciful. In our sincere efforts to follow the words of God, we may have abandoned the heart of God for his people. (Shelly 2007, p. 20)

Instone-Brewer has provided a detailed academic treatment of the subject (Instone-Brewer 2002) but also a more accessible and practical version of the same content for pastoral practitioners and church leaders (Instone-Brewer 2003). This latter perspective is derived from a considerable body of correspondence he has received from people experiencing divorce over many years and, like Shelly, is structured around frequent questions. Restored Lives has adopted Instone-Brewer's work as the basis for its theological teaching on the subject.

Cornes, already cited above, follows his exegesis through to its practical and pastoral outworking and provides an excellent contribution on "caring" with the best treatment of church discipline in divorce cases that I have found in my literature survey (Cornes 1993, chap. 10). However, his views on abuse at the time of writing are concerning, with Roberts (2008) an important female voice that should be heard urgently as a counterbalance.

Finally, Keener (1991) has contributed a substantial academic work on remarriage explicitly written from a pastoral perspective. He is a rare self-declared divorced and remarried scholar who has written about his lived experiences in a separate biographical work (Keener and Keener 2016). The density of his contribution makes it difficult to level a

charge of "inadequacy" in dealing with the biblical material, whether his conclusions are accepted or not.

In summary, despite (or perhaps even because of) the rejection of pastoral and lived perspectives, the evangelical academy has failed to produce a normative consensus on what the Bible says about divorce. This interpretive pluralism has undermined pastoral and ecclesial practice and confused divorcing evangelicals. Scholars have shown little self-awareness of this problem, but a few have sought to reconnect their work to pastoral and lived perspectives, which have enriched their contributions. Sadly, Gushee's assertion of irrelevance and Shelly's of unmerciful reductionism are both validated by this study.

4.2. Pastoral Practitioners Retain a Christian Anthropology but Minimize the Academy and the Language of Sin

Notwithstanding the rejection of pastoral perspectives by the evangelical academy, the move toward the separation of the two has not all been one way. Oden (1984, chap. 1) documents a fundamental shift in pastoral practice away from classical Christianity and toward secular psychology as early as the 1980s. By way of illustration, he conducted a literature survey of seven then-contemporary Christian writers on pastoral practice and noted no mention in their work of the classical theologians of the first millennium of Christianity in the tradition of the "care of souls," but instead 330 references to modern psychotherapists. He concluded, with some justification, that Christian pastoral practice had moved away from classical theological anthropology.

In this context, McMinn notes a corresponding loss of the language of sin and grace:

> There was once a time when the language of sin and grace was understood, both in private and public discourse, but that era has largely been supplanted by a therapeutic culture that emphasizes symptoms more than sin and unconditional acceptance more than grace. (McMinn 2008, p. 18)

The Christian divorce recovery literature also illustrates this adoption of therapeutic concepts and the associated shift in language away from theological language. Hille (2017) provides an excellent analysis of the interpretive issues in academic divorce theology as context to his empirical thesis and returns thoughtfully to this topic at the end. However, the divorce recovery course at the heart of his study is founded overtly on therapeutic ideas. Similarly, other studies that show faith improves outcomes for those experiencing divorce, assume this is grounded in the psychological idea of "religious coping" rather than Christian anthropology (Simonič and Klobučar 2017; Webb et al. 2010).

However, whilst the focus group with Restored Lives pastoral volunteers also confirms some reliance on therapeutic assumptions and the avoidance of the language of sin, the participants talked clearly about moral accountability using alternative terms such as "damaging behavior" and broader scriptural themes of forgiveness, hope, and restoration, sometimes with biblical references. Also, while making limited direct use of academic divorce theology with individuals, the optional faith evening provides an extended treatment of the subject with follow ups in discussion groups.

There was also a repeated sense that helping on the course was an incarnational act, showing the love of Jesus to people and continuing his ministry. It is notable that recent attempts to reconnect academic theology and pastoral practice have adopted a similar incarnational model (Anderson 2001; Root 2014; Akin and Pace 2017). Another related theme from the focus group is that of empathy. As noted above, the pastoral volunteers, themselves mostly divorced, have sought to use their experiences to come alongside others.

These dynamics are reminiscent of the pastoral model outlined in Gal. 6:1–3:

> [1] Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. [2] Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. [3] If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

Galatians stresses mutuality and gentleness in restoring those who have sinned, based on the pervasiveness of temptation and the risk of a sense of superiority. McMinn makes a similar point, suggesting that true empathy is rooted in our mutual sinfulness and dependence on God's grace:

> This [empathetic attitude] is not merely empathy for an offender, it is empathy with the human condition. All of us are born in a sinful state, all are sinners by choice and habit, and all have been wounded by the sinfulness and sins of others. (McMinn 2008, pp. 33–48)

As such, whilst the theoretical disciplines of academic and pastoral theology may have drifted apart in settings like ministerial training as Oden suggests, the Restored Lives volunteers demonstrated a deep embrace of Christian anthropology and biblical models of care during their focus group. This is not always expressed in traditional terms, not because of a rejection of the underlying concepts, but rather that the language of sin and grace is not understood in modern culture. A deep sense of empathy and incarnational ministry pervades their approach.

4.3. Ecclesial Discipline Has an Ambiguous Relationship to the Atonement

As noted above, the most common example of an ecclesial practice toward the divorced arising from the interviews was removal from ministry roles, which all the interviewees considered unjustified. As such, it is relevant to explore the basis of ecclesial discipline and its limits.

Although the theological divorce literature generally avoids application, it sometimes recommends ecclesial practices. Wenham represents one end of the spectrum when he suggests:

> The issue of remarried church officers may come up, and in the course of time it may be thought improper to appoint them to positions of leadership in the church. First Timothy 3:2, 12 insist that overseers and deacons in the church must be married only once. At some stage in the process, it may seem right to exclude from fellowship those whom the Anglican Book of Common Prayer calls "open and notorious evil livers." (Wenham 2006, p. 41)

It is not clear from the final sub-quote whether Wenham advocates the removal of the divorced and remarried from the church entirely, but his call for their progressive and permanent removal from leadership is plain. He is also the only scholar identified in my literature survey who advocates this interpretation of 1 Tim. 3 with respect to the divorced. Wenham's position does not appear to be altered by repentance, whereas Cornes, in many ways holding a similar interpretive position, writes, "So, the severity of discipline must be determined primarily by the extent of willful disobedience to Christ's command, and discipline must be lifted where there is repentance" (Cornes 1993, p. 415). In contrast and arguing that 1 Tim. 3 is about faithfulness in a present marriage, Keener asserts that divorce does not debar anyone from Christian service *per se*, unless there was ungodly conduct during the process (Keener 1991, chap. 7). However, he does not cover the effect of repentance if there was. Many theological works on divorce do not even discuss the role and effect of repentance at all.

This question of forgiveness brings the discussion to the very heart of the gospel. In Bebbington's widely adopted definition of evangelicalism cited above, "crucicentrism" is one of its defining features (Bebbington 1989, p. 2). It is no surprise, therefore, to find a rich body of literature on the atonement by evangelical scholars (Greggs 2020; Lane 2020; Pugh 2020). However, these studies tend to focus on initial conversion, often describing a singular event for each believer, with the treatment of subsequent sin something of an afterword. There is collective agreement that the atonement was "once and for all" and covers future sin (Heb. 7:27), but there is little clarity on how this forgiveness is accessed. My literature survey on the topic identified no dedicated work by an evangelical on post-conversion repentance after Spurgeon in 1855 (2024). It is, therefore, necessary to consult commentaries

to find a scholarly exposition of passages such as 1 John 1–2, which anticipates ongoing forgiveness for sins.

In contrast, Catholic theology is noticeably clearer on the matter. The sacrament of baptism covers all past sins, while the ongoing sacrament of confession enables the forgiveness of sins committed afterward (Hahn 2003). Evangelicals may have reservations about a sacramental approach to confession, but their alternatives are typically highly truncated and lack clarity. For example, forgiveness after repentance is usually presented as an absolute of the atonement in theory but with an array of potential prerequisites to forgiveness in practice, such as confession (1 John 19), the forgiveness of others (Matt. 6:14–15), and reconciliation (Matt. 5:24–24). It is usually left unclear whether these criteria must be met in full, although Piper (2015) considers only a "settled position" against performing these things "destroys us". Also, no practices are offered to enact repentance outside the denominational liturgy.

Therefore, assuming true repentance, a willingness to meet the biblical requisites and a mechanism to enact the process, most scholars would agree that the atonement should be considered just as effective in dealing with sin after conversation as before. In this context, it is notable from the empirical data how many interviewees had taken responsibility for their failings in marriage, sought and offered forgiveness, and achieved reconciliation when possible. These actions lie at the heart of the Restored Lives course, which, for many, provided a practical vehicle to work out their repentance and forgiveness of others.

However, how does this position reconcile with "unbiblical" divorces? Setting aside the fact that there is no agreement on what these are, for situations where the failure is historical, such as causing a divorce by committing adultery, the principles of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration apply precisely as described above, as they do for all other serious sins. The challenge comes from divorce situations in which there is considered to be an ongoing sinful state. This is restricted to those who believe in the indissolubility of marriage and assert the original marriage remains in force after remarriage, such that any new relationship is forever adulterous. Since no scholar in my literature survey advocates the breakup of these second marriages, the parties are condemned to a life of continuous adultery. Piper (1986) suggests the adulterous status of the second marriage can be removed by repentance but offers no explanation of how this is achieved theologically. Whatever the merits of this stance, it does at least provide a coherent reason to keep divorced evangelicals out of ministry positions indefinitely, as Wenham proposes above.

For the majority of evangelicals who do not believe in indissolubility, the only justifications for long-term exclusion from Christian leadership for the divorced could be unrepentance or posing an ongoing safeguarding risk. A lack of repentance would constitute a valid reason for church discipline and is the basis of the approach advocated in Matthew 18 (Leeman 2012). However, even these measures are designed to be temporal and restorative. On the question of ongoing risk, divorce itself poses no such threat unless an aspect of past or current behavior does, which is not specific to the divorced. As such, outside indissolubility, it is difficult to justify any unique sanctions for the divorced. As Shelly summarizes:

> Is divorce somehow different than other sins? Is the adultery or covenant-breaking element somehow unpardonable? No sin is beyond the reach of God's grace! Any sin repented of and offered to God for pardon will be forgiven by the limitless efficacy of Christ's blood. (Shelly 2007, p. 149)

This same logic is seen clearly in the approach of the Church of England to leadership roles, particularly ordination. Divorce itself is not seen as an impairment to ordination, but for those who are remarried, there is a special measure required usually referred to as "Canon C4" (National Assembly of the Church of England 1964). Since 1990, the previous total ban on ordination for those who have either remarried themselves with a former spouse still living or who had married someone in that position was amended to allow an archbishop to grant a "faculty" on a case-by-case basis (General Synod of the Church of England 1990). This was linked to the official position of the Church of England that

marriage was indissoluble, which was revised in 1999 (Holmes 2017, pp. 185–86). Since then, and given that in 2024, approximately one in six ordinations require the Canon C4 procedure, a proposal to devolve it to Bishops or abandon it entirely has followed (Nye 2024). No equivalent requirement applies to lay ministries, even those requiring a formal license, although it should be noted that no remarried person could even partake in holy communion in the Church of England without special permission from the bishop before 1981.

In summary, except for those who believe in indissolubility, the breadth and depth of the atonement removes any basis for ongoing sanctions against the remarried after appropriate repentance. Similarly, no long-term exclusions from ministry can be justified for those who are divorced and remain unmarried irrespective of indissolubility, again assuming appropriate repentance has taken place. As such, most of the punitive ecclesial practices in British evangelical churches reported by the interviewees cannot be reconciled with the evangelical gospel.

4.4. Restored Lives Is a Working Model of Integrated, Empathetic, and Restorative Practice

As noted above, Restored Lives is not a direct model of evangelical practice toward divorced members in a church context. However, it is a working example of a practice that is derived from evangelical principles and attempts to provide an integrated experience to its participants of all faiths and none. It can be examined fruitfully in terms of academic theology, pastoral practice, ecclesial discipline, and lived experience even in this alternative setting. Indeed, the context in which it operates brings a new insight into evangelical divorce practice.

The first point to note is that Restored Lives has developed and integrated an academic position on divorce theology. This is offered with an acknowledgment of disagreements amongst scholars but reaches a specific interpretive conclusion based on the work of Instone-Brewer (2002, 2003). The content is encoded in long- and short-form videos for use in the faith evening curriculum. Participants often pose specific theological questions in real-time during this event, and other resources are offered in response. These are selected to match the individual's faith tradition as far as possible.

None of the volunteers on Restored Lives are assumed to be trained pastoral practitioners. However, the course has been designed by professionals to use a facilitation model of structured content and group therapy. If serious issues arise, participants are referred to more specialist advisors or encouraged to see a doctor. One part of the adult course is focused on access to this kind of professional help, and while most specialists connected with the course are Christians, Restored Lives does not seek to mandate their methods or assumptions. As such, Restored Lives is built around a highly effective pastoral-therapeutic model explicitly based on Christian principles, but without the use of religious language.

Since Restored Lives is a charity and the courses are attended voluntarily by a wide variety of people, there is little scope for ecclesial discipline. However, the core material encourages participants to take moral responsibility for what has happened to them, forgive themselves and others, learn to communicate respectfully with ex-partners while observing appropriate boundaries, and make positive decisions about the future. Participants are encouraged to work all this out for themselves, and the course is not advisory beyond its core content. Even so, it is common to find a degree of peer accountability emerging on the course as participants encourage and sometimes challenge one another. Nonetheless, the formal role of the course leaders with respect to discipline is restricted to managing the discussions and safeguarding matters.

The lived experiences of participants are a primary component of the course. Videos are used to offer the testimonies of others, and a personal story concludes every evening, sometimes offered live by a volunteer. Regular opportunities are provided for participants to share their own experiences, reflect on them, and learn from one another. The leaders never challenge the validity of these narratives but instead, provide an opportunity for participants to be heard through active and empathetic listening.

In addition to the four dimensions of evangelical theology and practice examined in the dialogical analysis, it is evident that Restored Lives also provides a missional component. This is not explicitly evangelistic in nature but rather incarnational; what one Restored Lives volunteer described as "soft evangelism." The course provides a channel for God's general grace to believers and non-believers alike as an extension of the ministry of Jesus, which is often recognized in some way by participants on the course.

Finally, it is entirely feasible to adapt Restored Lives into a specific church setting, as some have already achieved (including one of the focus group participants). The material can then be more overtly Christian, pastoral practice can articulate a clear Christian anthropology, and elements of restorative ecclesial discipline can be added to the process. The missional focus could also be more overtly evangelistic if desired. This model would be a more comprehensive and integrated response to divorce than any outlined in the empirical interviews.

5. Conclusions

The divorced British evangelicals in my study have a high view of marriage and scripture but cannot always save their relationships. In these cases, a period of crisis ensues in which they are in most need of the evangelical community to provide an integrated, empathetic, and restorative experience. Even afterward, the effects of divorce leave emotional scars, practical complexity, and spiritual questions, requiring ongoing support. Unfortunately, many interviewees in my study were subjected to practices that were disconnected, judgmental, and condemnatory. In these situations, evangelicals took responsibility for their own welfare and often left their original church, instead relying on friends, family, sometimes a new church, and God. However, for those with a more positive experience in their churches or on the Restored Lives course, the support they received was often life-changing, and they remained rooted in the Christian community.

Evangelical academic theology on divorce has self-consciously separated itself from pastoral perspectives and lived experience to avoid the risk of their undue influence on exegesis. Nonetheless, its moral conclusions have an impact on real lives and are not limited to academic discourse. Methodological isolation has not prevented a plurality of interpretations that left interviewees confused and often angry. In the empirical data, it was found that divorcing evangelicals temporarily ignore academic perspectives on divorce until they can reflect at a later stage. The academy is thus deemed irrelevant at the critical moment. Some scholars have attempted to integrate pastoral perspectives and lived experience within their examination of the biblical texts in ways that support and illuminate rather than undermine the primacy of scripture.

Pastoral practice may have disconnected from academic theology and drifted away from a Christian anthropology in theory, but the Restored Lives pastoral volunteers maintained a clear Christian worldview and sense of incarnational mission in their work, even if they were reluctant to adopt the language of sin or use academic theology on divorce directly with individuals. Their frequent references to broad salvific themes in the Bible were mixed with concepts from group therapy without any sense of contradiction. The empathetic and restorative approach outlined in the focus group is similar to the pastoral model encouraged in Gal. 6:1–3.

Ecclesial practice was most often experienced as a removal from ministry roles by interviewees. This was considered inappropriate, poorly communicated, and conducted without clarity on future restoration. All those who experienced this sanction left their church, and some never sought a new one. However, a brief examination of post-conversion sin and grace through the atonement confirms that divorce can be fully forgiven and does not uniquely warrant lifelong sanctions. However, the minority theory of marital indissolubility is an exception that creates a pastorally incongruous situation of perpetual adultery for the remarried. Outside this view, I conclude there is no biblical basis for the adverse actions taken by the churches in the empirical interviews.

Restored Lives provides a working model of integrated, empathetic, and restorative practice. It has a clear but respectful theological position on divorce, integrates a facilitated therapeutic model based on Christian values, and includes content encouraging moral accountability, and forgiveness of others. The interviewees who had been participants in the course, and in some cases also volunteered to lead it afterward, described it consistently as life-changing. Adaptions to this model for an evangelical church setting already exist and would be a good starting point for other churches seeking to improve their provision for divorcing members.

Finally, can an integrated, empathetic, and restorative practice toward divorcing evangelicals amount to a disclosure of God in action? Firstly, such practice is aligned with the subjective divine experiences reported by the interviewees, in which God was revealed as a compassionate and salvific actor in their situations. Secondly, the Restored Lives pastoral volunteers self-consciously saw themselves in an incarnational role continuing the ministry of Jesus. Lastly, several of the interviewees who experienced positive practice described it as a disclosure of God, one explaining, "People alongside me were like God to me." As such, rather than consider divorce only as a human failure that discredits Christians, British evangelicals should also see it as an opportunity for God's grace to be demonstrated at a time of acute need so that "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20b).

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Camping with Jesus: Theologically Reflecting on Evangelical Christian Festivals

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Abstract: Attending a Christian summer camp or festival is a regular feature of many evangelical church calendars within the UK. This article uses a practical theology approach to explore definitions and distinctives of evangelical camping, both within the literature on evangelical camping and through examining the websites and publicity materials of three specific camps—New Wine, Big Church Festival and Newday Generation. The analysis highlights the significance placed upon the location, size, rhythms and purposes of gathering in the festivals' self-understandings. This leads into a theological reflection upon the biblical festival of Sukkot to examine the ways in which God's work might be disclosed through the practice of evangelical camping. Three pairs of themes emerge from the comparison: located and temporal, secular and religious, and rejoicing and re-examining. These themes are drawn upon to propose ways in which God might be at work in the social world disrupting a sense of permanence, blurring the boundaries between faith and the world, and calling people into radical solidarity with creation and with the marginalized. Finally, suggested actions are proposed as to how evangelical festivals may better respond to God's disclosure.

Keywords: New Wine; camping; divine action; Sukkot; Big Church Festival; evangelical; practices

1. Introduction

Attending a residential Christian camp is a regular feature of many evangelical church calendars in the UK. From youth summer camps to family conferences, weekend festivals to package holidays, evangelicals have made big business out of Christian-themed holidays. I have been associated with evangelicalism[1] in the UK since my early teens, and I have participated in many camp-based holidays and residentials, both as a participant and as a volunteer leader. I continue to engage in these ministries now as a parent, and I first took my eldest daughter to one of these camps when she was eight weeks old. They have had a significant impact upon my own faith development, and I observe the same effect on my three children. This article will examine the practice of evangelical camping to better understand why people participate. I will also use a practical theology method to consider how God might be disclosed through the practice.

The topic of evangelical camping is related to several distinct strands within the literature, including (1) the innovative camp meetings of early Methodism from the eighteenth century into the Great Awakening and their various subsequent developments (Weiss 1987; Brown 1992; Eslinger 1999; Ruth 2001; Avery-Quinn 2019); (2) African American camp meetings, from secret meetings in the woods during slavery to the establishment of settled camp grounds with distinctive worshipping traditions (Duitsman Cornelius 1999; Vondey 2012; Floyd 2018); (3) the emergence of programmatic summer camps from the early twentieth century, which were aimed at the Christian education of children and young people (Stock 1926; Thurber et al. 2007; Ribbe 2010; Murphy and Singletary 2015; Clements 2018; Sorenson 2019, 2021); and (4) contemporary evangelical conferences focused on sharing resources, building networks and disseminating products (Guest 2007; Christerson and Flory 2017).

This literature base shows that evangelicals have long practiced camping in association with revival ministries, sharing the gospel and educating the faithful. However, evangelicals are not the only group to engage in religious camping. For example, there is literature examining summer youth camps for Jews (Shabi and El Ansari 1999) and Quakers (Pearmain 2005); camping festivals for Tibetan Buddhists (Melton 2011, p. 524) and Catholic pilgrims (Melton 2011, p. 696); and summer festival camps for liberal Christians in the UK (Nita 2018) and the USA (DeConto 2011). Moreover, evangelicals in the UK do not only camp; they also have increasingly varied ways to host their gatherings, including making use of commercial holiday parks (Spring Harvest),[2] local hotel facilities (Keswick Convention),[3] and business conference centers (Hillsong).[4]

Although evangelicals are not the only ones camping, nor are they only using tents as accommodation at their residential gatherings, I argue that there is a distinctive evangelical practice of festival camping. However, unlike a social science approach which seeks primarily to describe and analyse a religious practice, I will use a practical theology approach, following Root (2014), Watkins (2020) and Collins (2020), to examine questions of divine action through the social practice, in order to analyse 'how is God disclosed in and through the practice?' Within this article, I will first examine the literature on Christian camping and then explore three case study examples of specific camps currently taking place in the UK—New Wine, Big Church Festival and Newday Generation. I will then engage in theological reflection drawing on God's command to the Israelites to build temporary shelters in their celebration of the harvest festival of Sukkot. The emerging themes of located and temporal, secular and religious, and rejoicing and re-examining will be examined to locate how God might be disclosed through the practice of evangelical camping.

2. What Is Evangelical Camping?

Most of the literature explicitly engaging with the virtues of Christian camping, and concerning itself with definitions of Christian camping, relate to children's and youth summer camp ministries in the USA. The American Camp Association (ACA) define 'the essential trinity of organized camp: (1) community living; (2) away from home; (3) in an outdoor, recreational setting' (Thurber et al. 2007, p. 242). The Christian Camp and Conference Association (CCCA) locates itself within the ACA and extends the definition to include an explicitly religious element: Christian camping is 'an experience within a temporary community using the outdoor setting and trained leaders to meet spiritual objectives' (Ribbe 2010, p. 145). Therefore, staying in tents is not seen as essential to Christian camps, and there can often be rivalry among some camps about how 'authentic' (rustic) should be the experience that they provide (Sorenson 2021).

Sorenson offers the following definition of Christian camping to bring unity to the varied expressions: 'camp is a set-apart space that facilitates relational encounter between the self, the other and God' (Sorenson 2021, Ch.1). This rather broad definition maintains the focus on a place away from home, the presence of other people and a religious emphasis. For Sorenson, the definition assumes that whatever the camp setting, be it rural or urban, it involves interaction with the natural world in some way, and crucially, it is this interaction with God's creation which is distinctively able to facilitate the three-way relational encounters.

The outdoor setting is seen to uniquely provide opportunities for learning and formation for the young people who attend. As a space which is away from home and the familiarity of routines, comforts and technologies, it enables people to 'be exposed to new or novel experiences in the Christian life' (Clements 2018, p. 28). Research into camp ministries in Uganda found that participants appreciated that the outdoor environment brought with it a new set of norms and expectations, which required 'an open mindset' (Murphy and Singletary 2015, p. 7) and facilitated relational openness among the attendees. The outdoors creates risks and opportunities for problem solving and teamwork, which each enable powerful learning experiences for personal growth. It also foregrounds

participants' dependence on nature's rhythms and their lack of control in the face of them (Ribbe 2010). Research into the impact of camp upon young people demonstrates how the outdoor environment enables sustained growth in 'social skills, independence, and the willingness to try new things' (Thurber et al. 2007, p. 254). Therefore, it seems to be that 'camping' refers to significant exposure to the outdoors, rather than staying under canvas per se, and it is this prolonged interaction with nature which enables unique opportunities for relationship formation and personal growth which can lead to lasting change.

What makes these experiences 'evangelical' camping is the focus upon the religious input which takes place and the type of input offered. Evangelicals organize summer camps for the purpose of teaching the Christian faith; they '"take the child out of the routine of daily living" and use that as an opportunity to preach the gospel' (Balmer 2003, p. 57). Camp intentionally enables people to be exposed to Christianity in immersive ways by creating new opportunities to practice corporate prayer and worship, to receive Christian teaching, and to participate in community (Clements 2018). Evangelicals see camps as a 'crucial place to train the next generation of Christian leaders—a gospel-infused, community-centered environment away from screens and school pressures' (Fowler 2020, p. 49). The programs often contain structured Bible teaching, corporate worship and space to experience conversion. The organizers are concerned with seeing lasting spiritual growth among their attendees, and that it does take place is evidenced by the research (Thurber et al. 2007). Camp is seen as an 'integral part of Christian education' (Sorenson 2019, p. 53) and 'a school for the Lord's service' (Miller 2014), such that camp activities are often intentionally planned to connect with gospel themes to create a holistic, integrative experience of faith formation. There is also often intentional time for discussion and reflection on each day's activities and events, usually with a camp counsellor, which further enables integrative learning and faith formation (Ribbe 2010).

Guest highlights the importance of identity formation which takes place through attending evangelical Christian conferences. Although he does not focus explicitly on camping, he argues that the 'evangelical movement is more radically shaped by trans-local networks than any other faction within contemporary Christianity' (Guest 2007, p. 200), and the evangelical camps are a significant means of sustaining these trans-local networks. Therefore, for evangelicals, it matters that they camp with (mostly) other like-minded believers such that the culture and values can be imbedded and shared. This is not to say that other people are not welcome—the presence of non-evangelicals creates unique opportunities for presenting the gospel and facilitating conversions. However, the 'experience of being in fellowship with other evangelicals' (Guest 2007, p. 205) across different denominations is central to identity formation and a key reason why evangelical camping persists. Therefore, I am defining evangelical camping as the practice of staying in temporary dwellings, close to nature, more intentionally to engage with Christian practices alongside other evangelicals, to learn and grow in faith formation, and to encounter God in new ways.

In addition to the benefits and opportunities of evangelical camping that I have so far outlined, other writers note the challenges and complexities. Evangelical camps can often be white spaces in which people of colour are often under-represented. Karianjahi (2023) examines ways in which American summer camps have sometimes appropriated aspects of native American culture in ways that marginalize and exclude people from those communities. Moreover, she notes how the outdoors has often been a place of violence and exposure for marginalized people, and many campgrounds are located on land which was historically ceased from indigenous communities. These factors can make camps 'places of desolation rather than consolation in the collective memory of People of Color' (Karianjahi 2023, p. 52). She offers various suggestions as to how camps can become more inclusive.

Others highlight the ways in which camps can manipulate emotional highs, which can lead to dissatisfaction when people rejoin their 'ordinary' church (Stock 1926). Idealizing the natural world is another potential danger as it centres the experience of people who live in the city and overlooks those who are already located in rural communities (Yust 2006). Yust also questions how 'set apart' the evangelical camp experience is, noting

the similarities between Christian camps and the programming of non-religious equivalents. Furthermore, network church camps and conferences can overly focus on commodifying the Christian experience through selling merchandise and resources, which function to perpetuate a brand and grow the influence and income of the leaders (Christerson and Flory 2017).

3. Materials and Methods

There are various camping festivals in the UK and Ireland which are affiliated with the Evangelical Alliance. These include family camps with a national reach, such as New Wine,[5] the Keswick Convention,[6] David's Tent,[7] and Big Church Festival.[8] There are also more local or denomination-specific camps including the Cedarwood Festival,[9] Creation Fest[10] and HTB's Focus.[11] There are festival camps aimed at young people, including Newday Generation,[12] Luminosity,[13] Limitless,[14] and Summer Madness,[15] and there are activity camps for children and young people, including CPAS Venture and Falcon camps,[16] Scripture Union Camps,[17] and Nefyn camps.[18]

To examine the purpose of evangelical camping in more detail, I used a case study approach to build up descriptions of the camps and engage in 'case comparison' (Tracy 2020, p. 63). Three camps were chosen as case studies—New Wine, Big Church Festival, and Newday—because (1) these are among the larger national camp events which take place in the UK; (2) they have a proven longevity of over fifteen years of operating; (3) they each are exclusively camping events (aside from the day ticketing options); and (4) they represent a range of denominational affiliations, geographic locations and envisaged participants in their self-descriptions. My interests are in how the camps speak about themselves to understand what they consider to be the purpose of their gatherings and to ascertain how they sell their camp to potential participants in such a crowded marketplace. Therefore, I focused my analysis on their websites, past publications, blog posts (where available), and social media posts. I used a form of qualitative content analysis (Silverman 2011) to identify key words and themes. I examined points of convergence and divergence between the self-descriptions in order to identify resonate themes between them. Finally, I sought to corroborate and triangulate these public-facing descriptions with descriptions within the annual financial reports submitted to the Charity Commission.

4. Three Evangelical Camp Festivals

New Wine (NW) was set up in the late 1980s by Anglican vicar David Pytches, along with his wife Mary, following their experience of renewal during their ministry in Chile in the 1950s and their desire to bring this to UK Anglican churches. The organization now describes itself as a 'Spirit-empowered movement'[19] which seeks the renewal of the local church, through leadership networks, prayer, regional events and a national gathering. The website is explicit about NW's affiliation to the Evangelical Alliance, and it contains information about the biblical basis for its work and its evangelical values. Of its 2024 six-day summer festival, the website's main introductory paragraph states the following:

> In 1989, New Wine gathered for the first time in Shepton Mallet. The aim was to refresh, inspire and minister to individuals in the power of the Spirit so that they could then go out and share what had been experienced and learned. This summer, after 35 years, over 14,000 people will gather at The Bath and West Showground to pursue that same vision. [20]

This description foregrounds the importance of repetition and rhythms of gathering over time, and it highlights the significance of place. The Bath and West Showground was the home of NW until 2019 when it moved to the East of England Arena.[21] After a break during the pandemic, NW met in a few different places until returning to the Bath and West showground in 2024. This sense of 'returning home' comes through in the description. The purpose of the gathering is ostensibly to equip attendees, through encountering the Spirit, such that they will make a difference to their home communities. The attendees are identified as 'individuals', even though the camp strongly emphasizes

families, children and young people in its programming. The size of the gathering seems significant in conveying the sense of individuals participating in a larger movement. The name for the NW camp event has gone through various iterations, with the language of 'Summer Conference' being used in the past (Melluish 2013, p. 15), which evolved into 'National Gathering' (Dwyer 2015, p. 9), and 'United', (Charlwood 2017, p. 6); now, the title of 'festival' has been consciously adopted, along with the language of 'yearly rhythms'.[22]

Big Church Festival (BCF) started as a charity in 2009 and was known as Big Church Day Out until 2022. The camp is held in Sussex over the August bank holiday weekend and has over 30,000 people in attendance. Unlike the NW website, there is no narrative of BCF's history on its website, nor details of the key organizers nor a statement of faith. BCF is not explicit about an evangelical affiliation and avoids this term on its website. However, the various musical performers and partner organizations which are listed on the website evidence strong connections with evangelical networks. Moreover, the BCF 2023 financial report states that 'The Big Church Festival is about people of faith, evangelism, music and worship, activities, families and just being together' (Hills 2023, p. 2). This focus on evangelism suggests that the attendees are not necessarily assumed to be evangelical Christians but that the festival is set up to further evangelical aims. The website's primary summary of the festival states:

> Join with over 30,000 people from across the UK and beyond to worship together in the jaw-dropping surroundings of the Wiston Estate, in the company of some of the best Christian artists in the world. Each year, rippling flags and worship anthems ring out from the mainstage as families flock to the field of fun, and cream teas are served within earshot of choirs surrounded by the beautiful gardens of Wiston House. This is the church; all tribes and all ages, campsites becoming communities, memories in the making, the happiest festival-goers on the planet. [23]

The camp meet 'each year', again stressing the importance of the repetition of the event. Again, we see that the numerical size of the gathering matters, but, unlike NW, BCF explicitly envisages its participants as international as well as UK-based and celebrates the ides of 'all tribes and all ages'. The outdoor location is given prominence in the description, with reference to campsites alongside the effusive and repeated descriptions of Wiston House, which is a family-run estate and winery. A rare blog post on the BCF website describes the connection with Wiston Estate as 'a long and incredible "God" story' which includes (unspecified) 'prophetic words over the land [and] the generational prayers of a family'.[24] Thus, it seems clear that the location of the gathering is very significant for the identity of the festival. The description mentions 'worship', 'Christian' and 'church', foregrounding its religious orientation, but it does not make explicit reference to God, Jesus or the Spirit, unlike NW and Newday. This perhaps reinforces the fact that the description of the gathering is more in line with other secular festivals, with a focus on music—hearing 'the best Christian music that the world has to offer',[25] enjoyment—having 'three days of sun-kissed festival fun',[26] and community—making memories together as participants 'hang out, build friendships and deepen relationships'.[27] However, despite these strong festival associations, the charity 'seeks to affect the lives of individuals, and to influence the spiritual atmosphere of the region, and those regions to which visitors return afterwards' (Hills 2023, p. 2), and thus it envisages connections between the festival and the communities people come from.

Newday Generation was set up by Newfrontiers churches in 2004 and is a five-day summer youth camp event for 12–18-year-olds hosted at the Norfolk Showground. Its vision is 'equipping local churches to reach and disciple the young people in their church and community',[28] and the summer festival is seen as one part of achieving that aim. Like NW, the Newday website is explicit about its membership of the Evangelical Alliance, but, like BCF (unlike NW), it does not contain further information about its beliefs or values. The website notes Newday's continued service of the Newfrontiers network but

also expects its attendees to come from other church denominations. The Newfrontiers website offers the clearest definition of the festival:

> Newday is one of the largest Christian events for young people that takes place in the UK every year. Thousands of young people aged 12–18 descend on Norfolk Showground, near Norwich to join hundreds of churches from all over the UK and Europe to learn about and worship God, camp out together and soak in the summer festival feeling, leaving Newday further along in their relationship with Jesus. [29]

The location of the gathering again seems to be part of the identity of the festival, as is the outdoor setting with reference to camping out.[30] The annual rhythm of gathering is again noted through 'every year'. As for NW and BCF, the size of the camp is again significant, describing itself as 'one of the largest' events in the UK with 8600 young people and 900 adult volunteers (Schofield 2023, p. 4). There are similarities with BCF in the expectation of participants from beyond the UK; the links made between the significance of camping in tents and the formation of community; and the language of fun and relaxation. The similarities with NW include the explicit references to worshipping God and having a relationship with Jesus and the positive impact of the festival on one's ongoing life.

There are a number of divergences between the promotional self-descriptions of these three camps: the extent to which they foreground their history; their use of the designation 'evangelical'; their local vs. global reach; their use of explicit references to God/Jesus/the Holy Spirit; and their willingness to state their beliefs and values. There are also differences in denominational affiliation, location, duration, size, attendee type and particular emphases. However, despite these divergences, there are also striking convergences to note between these descriptions of evangelical camps which indicate cross-case patterns. Each highlights the annual rhythms of gathering, the large size of their gathering, the importance of the outdoor location for the identity of the gathering, and the benefits of the gathering for attendees and their communities. They have each moved towards using the language of 'festival' to describe their gathering, and they each see the purpose of gathering to be participation in Christian practices (especially worship) and receiving positive personal benefits (such as fun, equipping, memories, community, and learning) alongside other people.

5. Theologically Reflecting on Evangelical Camping

The self-descriptions I have examined above indicate what the festival organizers consider to be the purposes and aims of their festival camps. The combination of fun, relationship building and faith formation which can take place at these festivals is clear evidence as to why people might choose to participate in evangelical camping. However, as per the brief of this Special Issue journal, I am interested to reflect on whether we can discern any divine purpose within evangelical camping. My questions in this part of the article are what purposes might God have for these festival camps, and do they align with what the organizers think they are doing? Making claims for divine intentionality might seem at odds with the academic task—how are we possibly able to determine what God wants or desires? However, there are growing trends within practical theology that consider questions of divine action to be legitimate for academic inquiry. Root asserts that in Christians' lives, they have 'concrete and lived experience of divine action' (Root 2014, p. 35) and as such, they make frequent claims about God's will and intention. For Christians, these experiences are God disclosing Godself to humans in the event of encounter, and this means that personal testimonies of meeting with God can and must provide data for theological reflection on divine agency (Watkins 2020). The methods of these authors seek to go beyond stating merely what Christians believe about God's action to say something more concrete and constructive about God's action in the world. Therefore, one approach I could have taken is to engage in empirical research among evangelical campers to ascertain and evaluate people's testimonies as indicative of God's action. However, the convergent

themes which have emerged from the case study analysis have strong biblical resonances which invite a different line of inquiry.

The evangelical camping language of 'festival' and 'annual rhythms', along with the corporate practice of staying in temporary dwellings and the intentionality around enjoyment and worship, have strong resonances with the Festival of Sukkot described in the Old Testament. The biblical passages which describe the Festival of Sukkot assert God's intentionality in relation to them: God commands the Israelites to participate in the festival in particular ways and for particular reasons, as I will examine below. This biblical account provides a basis from which to examine why and how God might be at work through camping festivals. In pursuing this line of inquiry, I am following a method I have published elsewhere, which foregrounds the witness of scripture in discerning God's action in the world (Collins 2020). The method involves exegeting a biblical text and then drawing connections with contemporary practices in order to discern transformative encounters with God. In drawing a comparison between Sukkot and evangelical camping, I am not attempting to collapse these events into one another, nor to ignore the significant differences in culture, meaning and practices between the two. I am, however, seeking to employ an associative hermeneutic, which observes a 'rhyme' between a biblical text and a contemporary event (Sechrest 2022). If the Bible asserts God's purpose in a historic situation which rhymes with a contemporary event, the translation of that purpose between contexts can be examined. This method seeks to analyze the proposed 'rhyme' by exploring the convergences and divergences between the text and a contemporary situation, creating space for fresh thinking. To Sechrest's method, I add the theological justification that it is the Holy Spirit, joining communities across time and space, and this is the basis upon which a rhyme can be asserted (Collins 2023). In the following section, I will examine the biblical texts which disclose God's intention and action through the Festival of Sukkot. I will then compare this emerging picture with the evangelical camping cross-case patterns to establish the 'rhyme' between them.

The Festival of Sukkot is one of the three great Israelite festivals in the Hebrew Bible. The three festivals are (1) Passover—commemorating Israel's redemption from Egypt; (2) first fruits—commemorating the barley harvest (also known as Pentecost); and (3) ingathering—celebrating the end of the harvest season (Ex. 23:14–17). In Deuteronomy 16:13–17, this latter festival is called the Festival of Booths or Tabernacles (which are both translations of the Hebrew word 'Sukkot'), and it is a seven-day festival of rejoicing for all people in response to the blessings which God provides through the produce of the land:

> Rejoice during your festival, you and your sons and daughters, your male and female slaves, as well as the Levites, the strangers, the orphans, and the widows resident in your towns. For seven days celebrate the festival to the Lord your God at the place the Lord will choose. For the Lord your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete. (Deut. 16:14–15).

Leviticus 23:33–43 also reinforces the themes of harvest, rest and rejoicing associated with the Sukkot Festival and gives more detailed instructions on the celebrations and offerings required (cf. Num. 29:12–40). The people are commanded as follows:

> You shall live in booths for seven days; all that are citizens in Israel shall live in booths, so that your generation may know that I made the people of Israel live in booths when I brought them out of the land of Egypt. (Lev. 23:42–43).

The festival is therefore directly connected to the Israelite sojourn in the wilderness before entering the promised land. Moreover, the harvest festival is when the temple was dedicated under Solomon (1 Kgs 8:2; 2 Chron. 5:3), and the rededication of the temple under Ezra promoted the Israelites to reinstate the celebration of Sukkot (Neh. 8:13–18). There is also reference to Sukkot in Zechariah, whose prophecy looks toward the messianic age when all the nations will gather at Jerusalem to celebrate the festival of booths (Zech. 14:16–19). In John 7, we see Jesus participating in Sukkot, and he connects his identity and

mission to the festival's symbols of water and light (Burge 2012). Therefore, it is a festival with rich and extensive symbolism, incorporating creation, the land, the Exodus journey, the temple, and the messianic age.

There is much debate about the meaning of 'Sukkot', because Leviticus does not elaborate on the nature of a 'sukkah' (singular) or booth. The confusion arises because the Israelite dwellings in the wilderness are called 'tents', whereas the word 'sukkah' is sometimes used to mean clouds (Ps. 18:11–12; Job 36:29), and thus rabbinical associations arose between the sukkah of the festival and the wilderness pillar of cloud (Rubenstein 1994). According to this interpretation, Sukkot is a time to celebrate that the Israelites dwelt in God's glory when they were in the wilderness; the pillar of cloud symbolizes God's presence and loving protection within which they dwelt. According to the Mishnah, the primary purpose of the temporary booths was to provide shade so that the people could experience sitting under God's protection, just as they were shaded by the pillar of cloud in the desert (Rubenstein 1994). The ceiling of the booth therefore had to be constructed of vegetation to provide leafy shade which could evoke experiences of dwelling within and rejoicing under God's intimate protective presence.

However, there is another interpretation of booths which draws out themes of insecurity. Rather than the booths being primarily about comforting shade, they also symbolize temporality and vulnerability (Rubenstein 1996). Temporary shelters are associated with hardship and discomfort; they reinforce the temporal nature of human lives and the risks posed by the natural world. To live in a sukkah is 'a type of voluntary exile' (Rubenstein 1996, p. 393) which may link to the Yom Kippur festival, which takes place five days before Sukkot. Yom Kippur was a time to seek forgiveness and atonement for sins, and so the dwelling in tents may extend that sense of one's need for God grace and mercy. Therefore, the symbolism of Sukkot is polyvariant. It 'unites materiality and spirituality, wilderness and domestication, transience and permanence, friend and stranger, reality and dream' (Belinger 2017, Conclusion). I will build on these paradoxes to highlight three contrasting 'rhymes' or convergences between the Sukkot Festival and evangelical camping in order to propose ways in which God's action might be disclosed.

5.1. Located and Temporal

As discussed, the literature on evangelical camping celebrates the importance of being located within the outdoors and forming temporary communities which can enable social and personal transformation. The evangelical camps I have examined show a strong sense of identity in a particular meeting location (Bath and West Showground, Wiston Estate, Norfolk Showground), and they also celebrate the temporality of staying in tents. Likewise, the Festival of Sukkot has a dual focus on located-ness and temporality. It celebrates God's harvest provision, made possible through the Israelites settled status in the promised land. They are no longer a nomadic people and have a home and a place of their own. However, the festival also commands that the celebration takes place in a temporary dwelling so that the people continue to remember their previously nomadic status. It is precisely at the point of the year when the Israelites would have felt most comfortable, settled and self-satisfied, due to the harvest which their labours had produced, that God commands them to re-enact the wilderness wanderings when they had to depend for their sustenance on God alone (Rubenstein 1996).

A testimonial on the BCF website observes that 'Big Church Festival brings to life the gospel and the wonder of the kingdom of God. It's a slice of heaven, full of people who love Jesus'.[31] Significantly, this 'slice' of the Christian's permanent, eschatological home in heaven is most clearly recognized in the context of staying in temporary shelters, when one is exposed to the elements. Thus, the connections between permanence and temporality which are symbolized in Sukkot can also be seen in evangelical camping. Evangelicals frequently characterize themselves as people who are 'in the world but not of the world' (John 17:16) (Bird 2020; McFarlane 2020), and thus they already intuitively affirm this dual sense of their located-ness (in bodies, places and communities) and their temporality

(awaiting their home in the new creation). That the evangelical festivals take place in the summer is partly of practical necessity due to the British climate, but it may also be significant that summer can also symbolize the time to relax and enjoy the fruits of another year of one's labour. Therefore, at the time of self-satisfaction in one's efforts, the annual practice of engaging in the discomforts of camping may be one way to explicitly perform this dual identity of being always located and temporal within the Christian life.

5.2. Secular and Religious

The 'in the world but not of it' conviction is an expression of contested and negotiable boundaries between the sacred and the secular. This ongoing boundary negotiation informs evangelical discussions about all manner of behaviours, including appropriate dress, music and leisure activities (Gaddini 2022). While some express anxiety about the Christian distinctiveness of evangelical camps when compared with secular versions (Yust 2006), the evangelical camps discussed all seem to embrace the symbols of a secular music festival alongside their religious programming, thus showing some sense of porousness between the secular/religious boundaries. In studying Greenbelt—a liberal Christian festival described as 'indistinguishable' from secular festivals—Nita explicitly references NW as 'not connected with the modern festival culture, in fact, they are positioned against modern culture' (Nita 2018, p. 46) due to their format of talks, Bible teaching and focus on leadership. Therefore, there is a perception that evangelical camps are intentionally set up in contrast to secular festivals. However, NW's explicit change of name from 'conference/gathering' to 'festival' might signal a greater embrace of 'secular' festival culture, something that BCF and Newday also actively promote.

Sacks observes the two rhythms of time which intersect in the Sukkot festival, and he describes the tensions between common humanity and religious specificity which this represents (Sacks 2017). He notes that the celebration of the harvest is an affirmation of God as Creator of the whole world who is provider and sustainer of all people. However, the connection of the booths with the desert wanderings also affirms the specificity of the Jewish story at the heart of the Sukkot festival. Therefore, Sacks argues that Jewish people 'believe in the universality of God, together with the particularity of Jewish history and identity' (Sacks 2017, pp. 109–10). The festival commemorates these two aspects side by side, without seeing tension between them. Yee asserts that Sukkot preserves two separate but overlapping stories—the God of the harvest and the God of the Jews—which gives the festival its multi-identity and purpose (Yee 2007).

Evangelical camping festivals similarly seem to evidence this multi-identity and purpose in creatively fusing aspects of secular music festival culture with Christian practices of worship. The festivals do not seem to see a tension in this, as one attendee is quoted as saying: 'Our daughter loved the music and the buzz, and we loved worshipping God and dancing with her. . .Being around so many families with young children enjoying God and the music was encouraging'.[32] Participants celebrate the sacred and the secular, joyfully embracing both (Bartkowski 2014). Of course, the music is usually Christian-themed music, which facilitates the practice of worship, but it is worship which joyfully embraces the paraphernalia of festivals to mediate the encounter with God: multiple stages, varied performers, lighting, flags, food outlets, cheering crowds, merchandise and even poor sanitation facilities! Similarly to Sukkot, the evangelical camping festivals are inhabiting a universal story and a particular story at the same time—the 'secular' desire for fun and 'social release' (Flinn and Frew 2014, p. 419) and the religious vocation to joyfully celebrate God.

5.3. Rejoicing and Re-Examining

As has been shown through the self-descriptions, an important part of evangelical festivals is celebration and having fun with others, and this resonates with the Sukkot emphasis on rejoicing together over God's bountiful provision. Although the evangelical rejoicing is not over crop harvests, there is significant evidence of participants rejoicing in God's provision, through the many testimonials on the different websites and within

the publicity materials. Here is one example: 'we have come back buzzing! At the end of a seminar, five of us prayed for a lady with a painful left arm. . .by the end, both had significant healing, physical and emotional. Isn't our God great!' (Melluish 2013, p. 15). Sukkot 'was a time to thank God for his many blessings' (Sacks 2017, p. 98) but ultimately, the rejoicing was not in the produce received but in Godself (Rosen and Rosen 2006). Therefore, the extensive and exuberant dancing and singing which would have lasted the many days of the Sukkot festival was as much a celebration of God's ongoing protective presence as God's bountiful provision. This is perhaps where the closest 'rhyme' between the ancient and contemporary festival practices can be identified: both engage in exuberant celebration of God for its own sake.

However, there are noticeable divergences between God's intention for the Sukkot festival and contemporary festival practices. First, Zechariah 14 envisages all nations joining together in celebrating Sukkot in the messianic age. The basis for this international vision may arise from the connection between the sacrifice of seventy bulls to be offered at Sukkot (Num. 29:12–34) and the seventy nations listed in Genesis 10 (Sacks 2017). Sukkot is the only festival which envisages the participation of the whole world. There is some evidence from the descriptions that the evangelical festivals envisage international participants; however, there is scope to significantly develop and deepen this connection, particularly due to camps being very white spaces (Karianjahi 2023). One important way this could be achieved is through engaging with themes of migration. Berlinger examines contemporary practices of Sukkot in Israel and makes clear links between the temporary dwellings constructed for the festival and the tents concurrently used by homeless and refugee people in Tel Aviv (Belinger 2017). There is scope for evangelical campers to re-examine their practices to deepen this sense of solidarity with other tent dwellers around the world, even as they rejoice.

A second divergence can be noted through Deuteronomy 16, which expects all spheres of society to participate in the Sukkot festival—sons and daughters, slaves, strangers, orphans and widows. That all social spheres are commanded to camp in booths is a sign of God's intentionality for the Israelites to embrace radical equality: there is no hierarchy among the people of God when all alike live in temporary shelters. There is some evidence that the evangelical camps seek a diverse demographic at their festivals. For example, BCF offer different levels of ticket price,[33] so that some can receive financial support, and Newday offer a 50% discount to those outside the UK.[34] However, the costs of attendance still run into hundreds of pounds for a family ticket, and the costs of camping equipment have risen significantly, particularly with the trends towards 'glamping' (Grenby 2023). The evangelical festivals are clear about wanting to impact the communities of which participants are a part, and, as such, they may want to further explore how their camping practices can be inclusive of all. How can people from all social spheres be enabled to experience the radical equalizing opportunities that camping affords?

Third, in being connected to the harvest, the Sukkot festival is also a time to intercede for rain. Zechariah 14:17 makes this connection to rain explicit, as does the water symbolism in John 7:37–38 (Burge 2012). Sacks notes the tension between praying for rain for next year's harvest, while at the same time sleeping in temporary dwellings with a roof made of foliage, when rain would not be welcomed (Sacks 2017). The temporary dwelling accentuates the participants' vulnerability towards the rhythms of the natural world at the same time as reinforcing their dependence upon those rhythms. Various references in the evangelical festival descriptions celebrate summer and the sun, while all the publicity photos show the festivals in sunny weather, implying a strong connection between sun and celebration. However, in the context of a global climate crisis, a camping festival gives various opportunities to reimagine connections to nature and foreground the universal need for and privilege of rain. And yet, festival culture potentially makes this problematic. While in the 1960s and 70s, festivals were means of social protest against capitalistic forces (Nita 2018), contemporary festivals are 'a haven of rationalized consumption' (Flinn and Frew 2014, p. 428) with high carbon footprints (A Greener Future 2023). Evangelicals have

an opportunity to re-examine their festival practices in ways which depend on, rejoice in and protect the creation they enjoy.

6. Disclosing God in Evangelical Camping

My theological reflection has explored three pairs of themes which emerge from examining the rhyme between the practice of evangelical camping and the biblical descriptions of the Festival of Sukkot. In this final part of the article, I will suggest ways in which the insights from Sukkot might disclose something of God's purposes and actions towards evangelical camping. These suggestions are offered tentatively, as questions for further reflection rather than directive assertions, recognizing that discerning divine action is the work of the whole church, in the power of the Holy Spirit, and not the presumption of any solitary academic.

As discussed, camping particularly enacts the conviction that Christians are both located in the world and also temporary sojourners through the world. Staying in temporary dwellings within a consistent, familiar location aptly symbolizes this tension between being a resident and an alien, and festival camping can therefore function to remind participants of their temporary status in the world. Like at Sukkot, perhaps God is at work in the practice of camping foregrounding the temporality of human life, particularly when many of the campers are people of means who ordinarily have a sense of their safety and security in the world. Could God be using camping to disrupt a Western sense of permanence and settled-ness and to form believers who know what it feels like, however fleetingly, to be a temporary resident and to depend on God for provision? Miller offers a theological reflection on the purposes of Christian camping, drawing on the Rule of St Benedict. He advocates that 'Christian camping is a new monasticism that seeks to form persons within the temporary community for a lifetime of service in the kingdom of God' (Miller 2014, p. 310). Building on this insight, I wonder if, for God, perhaps the temporality of camping, as well as of the camping community, is also central to that formation, particularly for a Western church frequently tempted to feel too comfortable and settled in the world.

Camp festivals seem to blur the boundaries between the secular and the sacred by intentionally performing Christian practices in recognizably non-religious spaces. Could God be the agent of this boundary blurring work, encouraging the church to engage with worldly means in its Christian habitation? This is harder to discern; others could interpret evangelical 'accommodations to modernity as a sell-out' (Marsden 1991, p. 36) where embracing contemporary culture causes God to be aggrieved. However, the many testimonies of God changing lives through the festivals might suggest that God is present and active. Again, Miller argues that 'Christian camps are a training ground where youth and young adults can experience a rhythm and a rule of life counter to that of the prevailing culture' (Miller 2014, p. 312). However, if this rhythm and rule ultimately needs to be lived out in the context of the prevailing culture, campers might not be well served by drawing these lines too sharply. Could the Spirit's disruption of the boundaries be a manifestation of God's ministry of reconciliation and an encouragement to evangelicals to joyfully anticipate the day when the whole earth 'will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord' (Isa. 11:9) and God will be all in all (1 Cor. 15:28)?

Evangelical festivals are times of rejoicing in God's presence and provision, but they are also opportunities to re-examine corporate practices to ensure faithfulness to the gospel message. Through the practice of festival camping, might God be opening an opportunity for the evangelical church to engage in a deeper sense of solidarity with international Christians, with the marginalized and with creation? Miller states that one of the gifts of camp is 'the clarity of focus, the specificity of roles, and the simple way of life experienced in the camp context [which] offers a point of convergence in which we are able to practice being a whole, integrated self' (Miller 2014, p. 313). I would want to broaden this description to think about the ways in which campers become integrated selves in community with other selves. Could God be using the simplicity of camping and camp roles to make Christians more aware of their necessary interconnectedness and solidarity with the whole of creation?

Through this heightened awareness, evangelicals may be better equipped to positively impact their communities upon return.

7. Responding to God as Evangelical Campers

If God's purposes are being disclosed through evangelical camping in some of the ways I suggest, then how might the festival organizers need to respond? I offer some brief, potential implications in the hope of inspiring further reflection. First, through the close resonances with Sukkot, I have suggested that God's purposes might be manifest through evangelical festival camping; therefore, organizations such as Newday, NW and BCF can feel heartened to continue in these ministries. They fulfil an important function in the life of the church and potentially provide God with unique means through which to work in forming and shaping participants.

Second, God's command to the Israelites to engage in annual camping highlights the powerful theological symbolism of temporary accommodation and suggests that the festivals could further emphasize the significance of camping within their self-understandings. Rather than just being a pragmatic means of gathering large groups, how might the camping equipment, the camp layout and the provision of food, drink and sanitation be reimagined if celebrating temporality is a key part of God's intentionality for the festival? This has counter-implications for trends around glamping and other approaches to differentiating accommodation which would minimize the lived experience of temporality. Clearly, access issues need to be considered for different participants' needs, yet perhaps there is a unique opportunity through camping for settled Christians to embrace the theological significance of being a temporary resident.

Third, the suggestion that the Spirit might be at work transgressing the sacred/secular boundaries could be an invitation to continually reflect upon the ways that Christian practices and wider culture may co-exist. Disrupting boundaries does not mean obliterating them, and the art of holding together two different commitments requires constant care and attention. Festival organizers need to facilitate ongoing, corporate self-reflection to ensure each commitment is appropriately maintained. Moreover, attempts to integrate religious and secular commitments in the conception of the festival are also an invitation for evangelicals to consider how boundaries might be negotiated in other Christian practices—where else in Christian life might evangelicals be drawing the boundaries too tightly, or too loosely? How might festivals partner with theologians as well as ministry practitioners to amplify this ongoing and difficult work of boundary negotiation?

Fourth, the suggestion of God's invitation to engage in radical solidarity encourages festival organizers to continue to think about ways they can increase diversity, access and participation at their camps. Many are doing this, and the publicity materials show clear evidence of support given to various social justice organizations. Other actions might include increasing subsidized ticketing, setting ambitious targets to increase diverse participation, diversifying trustee bodies, recruiting diversity officers, learning from other organizations, increasing opportunities for political action at the festival, making more explicit connections with groups of displaced people, twinning with other festivals around the world, increasing the emphasis on intercession for migrants and refugees, and ensuring equity and diversity in music composition and production. In addition, there is work to be done around reducing the carbon footprint of these festivals and promoting green initiatives throughout, as well as encouraging ways in which the festival participants can feel more connected to and dependent upon the natural world before, during and after the gathering.

8. Conclusions

Within this article, I have examined the literature on evangelical camping, drawing out the significance of the outdoor setting, the new opportunities this creates for learning and growth, and the importance of camping for evangelical identity formation. I examined three case studies of evangelical festival camps in the UK based on their own self-descriptions within their publicity materials. I have highlighted the significance of the location and size

of the festival, as well as the rhythms of gathering, the integration of Christian practices with personal benefits, and the links between the festivals and the communities from which participants come. This led into a discussion of the festival of Sukkot, which I have suggested is an analogous celebratory camping festival. Three pairs of themes were identified—located and temporal, secular and religious, and rejoicing and re-examining—to draw out the theological significance of camping festivals. From these themes, I suggested three ways in which God's purposes might be disclosed through the practice of evangelical camping—disrupting a sense of permanence, blurring sacred/secular boundaries and inviting radical solidarity—and I identified some possible responses that might be made to ensure the practice of evangelical camping remains faithful to the work of God.

What I have offered are only some tentative ways in which evangelicals might want to re-imagine or adapt their practices in light of the discussion, and I am sure there could be many other faithful responses to the discussion. No doubt many of the festivals are already engaged in this work, and there is much I cannot see through the materials with which I have engaged. As a minimum, I hope that this reflection might encourage the festivals to continue to analyze the ways they speak about themselves and to evaluate the theological rationales and implications of their choices. In addition, I hope that this discussion might prompt further empirical work on Christian festivals, something that seems to be significantly lacking in academic literature. A welcome development would be an empirical work that could test and nuance my interpretations to see if participants are similarly discerning and encountering the divine actions I have proposed. The changes in name towards 'festival' language and the various changes in date, venue and format that have happened for each festival in recent years suggest that there is ongoing work to discern the best ways in which the festivals can be faithful to the call of God. My hope is that this article may aid that discernment so that a practice which has significantly shaped me might continue to bless the next generation.

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Notes

1 By 'evangelical' I follow (Noll et al. 2019) in seeing it as a Protestant movement which developed a distinct identity in Britain from the early eighteenth century and has grown into an international, trans-denominational movement or fellowship through which affiliates consciously affirm a shared set of beliefs, emphasises and practices.

2 https://www.springharvest.org/events/ (accessed on October 2024).

3 https://www.keswick.org/where-to-stay (accessed on 28 October 2024).

4 https://hillsong.com/conference/london/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

5 https://www.new-wine.org/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

6 https://keswickministries.org/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

7 https://www.davidstent.net/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

8 https://www.bigchurchfestival.com/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

9 https://cedarwoodfestival.com/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

10 https://creationfest.org.uk/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

11 https://focus.htb.org/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

12 https://www.newdaygeneration.org/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

13 https://www.weareluminosity.org/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

14 https://www.limitlessfestival.co.uk/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

15 https://www.summermadness.co.uk/ (accessed on 17 July 2024) Soul Survivor festivals were also a significant Christian camp for young people until they stopped their gatherings in 2019. Later, they were hit by a national scandal as the leader of the organisation faced serious safeguarding allegations https://www.churchofengland.org/media/press-releases/concerns-substantiated-mike-pilavachi-investigation (accessed on 28 October 2024).

16 https://www.ventures.org.uk/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

17 https://content.scriptureunion.org.uk/holidays-events (accessed on 28 October 2024).

18 https://www.nefyncamps.co.uk/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

19 https://www.new-wine.org/about/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

20 https://www.new-wine.org/ (accessed on 17 July 2024).

21 For a number of years, New Wine also held a gathering in Newark called New Wine North.

22 See note 19 above.

23 https://www.bigchurchfestival.com/about-us/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

24 https://www.bigchurchfestival.com/august-2025-blog/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

25 See note 24 above.

26 (See note 8 above).

27 https://www.bigchurchfestival.com/for-churches/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

28 https://www.newdaygeneration.org/about/who-we-are (accessed on 28 October 2024).

29 https://newfrontierstogether.org/words/ (accessed on 28 October 2024) post on 15 March 2024 entitled 'Children's work at Newday 2024'.

30 Another quotation from the Newday website refers to 'encountering God, worshipping Him and basking in the glory of His creation with some next-level sunsets'. https://www.newdaygeneration.org/about/join-us (accessed on 28 October 2024).

31 https://www.bigchurchfestival.com/news/family-friendly-festival/ (accessed on 28 October 2024).

32 See note 31 above.

33 https://tickets.bigchurchfestival.com/south/join-us/individual (accessed on 28 October 2024).

34 https://www.newdaygeneration.org/festival/when-where-and-how-much (accessed on 28 October 2024).

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Article

A Match Made in Heaven: Entrepreneurship Among Evangelical Immigrants in the UK

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Abstract: Evangelical immigrants from the Global South have a high degree of confidence in their own ability to start a business in the UK, and they report a significant amount of entrepreneurial engagement within their communities. This article explores how these Christians developed their skills and dispositions, how they are launching businesses in the UK, and—most importantly—how the action of God can be perceived through their experiences. The author constructs a metanarrative which begins in the Global South. Through their encounter with evangelical faith, women and men are developing the 'spiritual capital' that has historically been proven to foster entrepreneurship. In many instances, however, this potential for success lies latent in a societal context that hampers and threatens entrepreneurial enterprise. The story then shifts to the UK. When these evangelicals immigrate, many find success in business as they choose to put their spiritual capital to work. It is here argued that the actions of God can be discerned within this story. In the same way that God acted in Biblical times to raise the helpless and to bless exiles in a foreign land, so he seen by his people to be working today.

Keywords: entrepreneurship; evangelicalism; immigration; UK

1. Introduction

The notion that the Protestant/evangelical worldview fosters entrepreneurship among its adherents is now axiomatic among the social scientists and economists who have studied the subject.[1] Equally unsurprising—especially among those of us who live in the UK—is the economic research showing that there are very high levels of entrepreneurship among the immigrant populations of this country. And so it would seem that a research article on the business activities of evangelical migrants in the UK would struggle to uncover anything particularly new or exciting.

My aim in this project, however, is to introduce some new *twists* to our understanding of the topic. The first involves a move toward genuine theology. When social scientists talk about evangelicals, they often display a satisfactory level of theological literacy. Many can describe the beliefs of individuals and communities, and make reasonable connections between these beliefs and human behaviour. But God, as a person, can only be treated as an object of human belief. The social scientist cannot speak directly to the actions of God himself.

The overarching aim of this Special Issue of *Religions* is to explore how the activities and practices of evangelicals in the UK might disclose *God's own action*. In line with the current trends in British practical theology, practice is here considered a 'site' of theological discovery.[2] This is to say that human behaviour, particularly among Christians, does not just teach us about people. It has the potential to say something about God. And so in this

project my aim as a theologian is to better understand how God is being revealed through evangelical practice.

The second twist in this project is that I am not just exploring evangelical practice as it relates to Christian ministry, but rather evangelical practice as it relates to entrepreneurship.[3] This may ruffle some theological feathers. Among many British practical theologians, for-profit business activities will not seem like an obvious place to go looking for sites of divine revelation. Perhaps if the word *social* is tacked on—*social enterprise* or *social entrepreneurship*—the quest might be redeemed. But the general sentiment seems to be that God is only active in a business project where no personal enrichment is involved, and where the aims are purely for the benefit of the needy.

My research is not limited to social entrepreneurship. Rather, I am exploring how evangelical migrants are starting businesses, how they are making money, how they are integrating the pursuit of *filthy lucre* into their Christian calling, and how all of this discloses the work of God in British society.

I am interested in this topic for many reasons. I come from a line of entrepreneurs. My grandfather was a pioneer in the American trucking industry, who in the 1930s was probably the first person to build a 'double-decker' trailer for hauling automobiles. My father was also a pioneer in the American shipping industry, who managed to outprice industry giants like UPS and FedEx via the consolidation of small parcel shipments. My dad came to faith just as his career was taking off, and he has always been ready to explain why his Christian worldview and ethos were so essential to the success of his business.

I did not follow my father and grandfather into business. I chose a path that first led me into global missions and then into academia. But to be honest, I have never discerned an innate conflict between free-market capitalism and the Chrisitan faith. I have witnessed too many examples of righteous entrepreneurs (like my dad) who served the needs of their society, created jobs, generated wealth, enjoyed that wealth, and utilised it to bless others and to advance the kingdom of God.

Since coming to the UK (as I have hinted above) I have found that many of my Protestant/evangelical academic colleagues do not necessarily share my warm disposition toward 'American style' capitalism. It is a different story, however, when I talk about 'business' with my students. Most of them, like me, were born outside of the UK. And many, in addition to serving as Christian ministers, also run businesses. And so much of my interest in this subject stems from the relationships that I have with them.

The broad storyline that this article aims to elucidate is as follows: Over the past century, in the Global South, hundreds of millions of women and men have discovered an evangelical faith which is innately functional. Their religious conversion was not driven so much by the embrace of abstract, propositional truth, but rather by the desire to find a faith that works in their daily lives. As a result of their conversion, they began to accumulate what social scientific studies often refer to as 'spiritual capital'. Evangelicals have experienced a transformation of personal character, resulting in various 'fruits' such as self-control, love toward their neighbour, perseverance, and trustworthiness. They have experienced transformed relationships in their homes and communities. And they have an improved sense of self-esteem and security in who they are.

What many evangelicals in the Global South often do not appreciate, however, is that this same spiritual capital has given them the potential to be successful entrepreneurs. Given that many find themselves living in developing nations where entrepreneurship can be easily stifled, this potential is often unrealised. However, when these same Christians migrate to an economically developed, institutionally strong nation like the UK, the dynamic changes. Many immigrants perceive the UK as a good place for doing busi-

ness. There is support available from the government. And they see other immigrant businesses flourishing.

When evangelical immigrants bring their spiritual capital to the business-friendly context of the UK, there emerges a 'match made in heaven'. The right person with the right skills now finds herself in a place where she can flourish. And this, in very broad strokes, is the story of those individuals and communities who are the subject of this research.

This is the broad storyline that we will follow here. Admittedly, the metanarrative will emerge in something similar to a 'connect-the-dots' progression. As we move from theme to theme—from Christian testimony—to theology—to economic theories—to development indices—to demographic data—the inter-relatedness of these 'dots' may not be immediately apparent. It is my hope, however, that by the end of this essay a clearer image will emerge.

This story will be developed in three stages: first, we will look at two major regions of the Global South where evangelicalism has exploded: Africa and Latin America. Our purpose here will be to gain a better understanding of the context in which evangelical migrants started to accumulate their spiritual capital. Then, we will look at the landscape of entrepreneurial practice among evangelicals in the UK. This will involve analysis of demographic reports, collected data, and first-hand accounts.[4] And then, in the final section we will attempt to unpack the theological significance of our findings, namely, how does the story of these immigrants disclose the actions of God?

2. Evangelicalism in the Global South: Africa and Latin America

Since the beginning of the 20th century, Christianity has been exploding in the Global South.[5] In 1900, there were under 100 million Christians in the region. Today, the figure is estimated to be 1.8 billion (Johnson and Zurlo 2024). The fastest growth has occurred among evangelical/Pentecostal groups.[6] From 1970 to 2020, the number of evangelicals in Africa grew from 24.4 to 238 million. In Latin America, over the same period, evangelicals increased from 13.2 to 115.2 million (Johnson 2013, p. 17). In both regions, that is almost ten-fold growth in 50 years.

Despite the missionary origins of most churches in the Global South, evangelicals across the region have formed identities which are not mere replications of their counterparts in Europe and North America.[7] In many instances, this is the case because evangelicals came to faith in a context that was entirely different than that of the Northern missionaries who first came to their lands. As we will see below, different socio-cultural and economic settings will foster entrepreneurship for different reasons.

2.1. Latin America

In Latin America, poverty has been an endemic problem for many generations. In 1970, for example, to be poor in Latin America meant that despite a man's best efforts, he still did not earn enough to feed his family. He was most likely illiterate. His children had about a 20% chance of reaching age five. And he would be lucky himself to reach the age of sixty (Clark 2024, p. 1). In the latter half of the 20th century, it was among poor urban neighbourhoods and villages that the gospel spread most quickly. Offut (2015, pp. 5–6) notes that 'Evangelical conversions often occurred in moments of crisis. Frequently brought on by severe poverty, intense social conflict, or both. it was during this period that humble evangelical churches became fixtures in slums and poor villages across the developing world'.

Studies on the economic impact of conversion to evangelicalism in Latin America highlight two predominant themes. First, evangelical conversion often results in a personal, moral and psychological reform that has economic consequences. And second, evangelical

conversion leads to a worldview transformation that is congruent to the capitalistic, free-market system that has become predominant in the region.

With regard to power of inner reform, Martin (1990, p. 284) describes evangelical conversion as a 'new cell taking over from scarred and broken tissue'. Conversion

> renews the innermost cell of the family, and protects the woman from the ravages of male desertion and violence. A new faith is able to implant new disciplines, re-order priorities, counter corruption and destructive machismo, and reverse the indifferent and injurious hierarchies of the outside world. Within the enclosed haven of faith a fraternity can be instituted under firm leadership, which provides for release, for mutuality and warmth, and for the practice of new roles.

Empirical research among the poor in Latin America supports this analysis. For example, from 2011 to 2013, Bobby Lynch studied the impact of conversion to evangelical/Pentecostal faith among 285 Quichua residents in Quito's infamous San Roque barrio (Lynch et al. 2023, p. 186). He discovered that their evangelical faith enabled them to overcome destructive behaviours and ethnic self-stigma as they took steps toward the betterment of their personal and family lives. He observed, for instance, that the evangelical practice of reading Scripture played a particularly important role in life transformation:

> My research presented Scripture as a core element of personal identity transformation. Quichua Pentecostals consistently demonstrated that their perceived affective experiential relationship with divine Scripture functioned as a healing balm that enhanced the way that many converts viewed themselves. Furthermore, this perceived affective-experiential relationship with the Word of God associated with liberating acts, like better engagement with the formal economic sector and even self-professing that they were living and feeling 'blessed, prosperous and in victory'. (Lynch 2020, p. 312)

The picture that emerges from studies across the region is that when a poor person in Latin America comes to evangelical faith, the moral and psychological changes they experience have the potential to positively impact their personal economy (Offut 2015). Freedom from alcoholism, the empowerment of women, the repudiation of corruption, renewed self-esteem and the development of new social networks are all factors that can contribute to economic development (Harrison 2010). But as noted above, personal reform is not the only outcome of evangelical conversion that has economic consequences. There are also major shifts that occur in a person's worldview.

Since the beginning of the 20th century, the vast majority of converts to evangelicalism in Latin America are people who have left the Roman Catholic church (Pew Research Center 2014). Martin argues that beyond a change in religious affiliation, the movement away from the Catholic church represents a re-ordering of the way society is understood. Conversion 'represents a walkout from society as presently constituted. The evangelical believer is one who has symbolically repudiated what previously held him in place, vertically and horizontally. He cannot overturn the actual structures and is, in any case, committed to non-violence, but he can emigrate from the ecclesiastical symbol of its all-inclusive claims: Catholicism' (Martin 1990, p. 285). Evangelical identity leads to a fundamental change in the way a person views the social order. A man or a woman does not have to merely accept their 'place in life' as a cross to bear. The social order might not change, but individuals have the freedom to take charge of their own destiny.

All of these factors combined lead to an outlook that is rather congruent to free-market capitalism, as Martin (1991, p. 83) explains:

> Protestantism in Latin America is a fissile, highly adaptable phenomenon which is part of the breakup of organic wholes and of the antecedent religiopolitical system.

> It represents a mutation from religious monopoly to religious competition, from a territorial, automatic, and passive faith to the voluntary and mobile congregation. To that extent, it is at least congruent with competition and choice in the economic sphere. Add to that a discipline of person, of family, and of work, and there exists a psychology apt for capitalistic industry.

In Latin America, many evangelicals will be 'wired' for entrepreneurship. This does not mean that they will actually start a business. There are other factors at play, which we will consider further below. What we seek to emphasise at this point is that the worldview of many evangelicals in Latin America has become fertile soil for entrepreneurial engagement.

2.2. Africa

Across sub-Saharan Africa, the function of traditional religions was to help their adherents cope with their fears and navigate the insecurities of life. As the gospel has spread across the region, evangelicalism has not re-defined this functional understanding of religion. Rather, particularly in its Pentecostal expression, Christianity serves the same needs that religion has always served in African contexts. It meets people's needs. The difference is that in the eyes of believers, Christianity does it better.[8]

African Christianity differs from historical European Christianity in many key areas. In its European expression, the Christian worldview incorporates certain elements of neo-Platonism. The present material world is 'passing' in nature, and the hope of salvation is eternal life in heaven. Our relationship with the material world may or may not reflect the state of our soul. A righteous person might experience poverty, sickness and challenges in this world. Our task in life is to 'overcome the flesh', and to grow 'in the spirit' as we await deliverance to the eternal home that awaits us in the heavenly realm.

Despite the fact that this may have been what many missionaries to Africa once believed, this neo-Platonic theology has not become predominant in African Christianity. In traditional African culture, if a religion does not help its adherents in the 'here and now', then it is not worth following. The gospel did not take hold in Africa on the basis of what it promised for the future, but rather on the basis of its ability to help people in their current areas of need. Omenyo (2014, p. 140) notes that

> the popularity of the message was buttressed by its resonance with African indigenous concepts of salvation, abundant life, and the very practical African understanding of the goal of worship. In African traditional religion, salvation manifests itself in the transformation of material, physical, and psychic well-being. Every religious ritual seeks to preserve, enhance, and protect life. Abundant life to the African means peace with God, the gods, ancestors, fellow human beings, and the natural world. When a person is at peace with these agents, the natural forces cooperate by increasing their fruits.

The perception that converts to Christianity were experiencing immediate life improvements was essential to the growth of the church. Amidst his research among recent converts in Kenya and Nigeria, Okorocha (1992, p. 177) discovered that 'one of the initial factors that attracted them to the new faith was the evidence of a better quality of life—in terms of health, social, and material well-being—among the adherents of this new way of life'. This does not mean that African Christians are not interested in the rewards of the afterlife,[9] but in a very pragmatic sense, the question arises: Why would anyone entrust their eternal soul to a god who is unable to take care of them now? It thus comes as no surprise that many converts to Christianity in Africa expect that one of the outcomes of their faith will be material, economic betterment.

Research across numerous regions in Africa, including Nigeria, Ghana, Kenya, South Africa and others, reveals that evangelical churches are very interested in entrepreneurship

and development.[10] It is to be noted that in many instances, this interest may also be packaged with the preaching of a 'Prosperity Gospel', which promises material wealth to the faithful.[11] Whereas there may be a concern that this could lead to a reliance on 'supernatural blessing' which might preclude personal initiative, Heuser's research demonstrates that prosperity-oriented churches in Africa are fostering the skills and attitudes that lead to entrepreneurial success. He highlights the tendency of these churches to be self-funded, with an emphasis on individual transformation, personal empowerment, the re-working of social networks, social participation, and a strong sense of identity formation 'which has energising effects on a pr-capital or entrepreneurial ethos' (Heuser 2016, p. 8).

In the Nigerian context, Burgess (2021, p. 64) notes two emerging trends among Pentecostal churches: 'first, a shift from reliance on "miracles" to an emphasis on work and entrepreneurship; and second, a new understanding that the purpose of wealth is for it to be used for the common good rather than for personal enrichment'. Churches in this setting are offering their congregants the tools they need for entrepreneurship: microfinance programmes, business conferences and seminars, and courses on entrepreneurship. Burgess (2021, p. 65) further comments that 'Pentecostals also publish books and magazines articles, and present TV and radio programmes, on entrepreneurship and Christian engagement with the financial sector. Business enterprise has become a popular profession for Nigerian Pentecostals in response to increasing unemployment, especially among the youth'.

The picture that emerges from Africa is that of evangelical Christians who are 'wired' for entrepreneurship. There is strong continuity between the pragmatic element of traditional African religions and the practice of contemporary evangelical churches. Religion must be effective in the here-and-now, and one of the key measurements of this efficacy is material and economic betterment.

2.3. A Final Question

As we have looked in this section at the entrepreneurial proclivities of evangelicals in Latin America and Africa, we may be asking ourselves the following question: If the evangelical church has been growing so much in these regions, why has not there been more economic development? While there is no simple answer to this question, Shah and Shah (2010, p. 64) suggest that evangelicalism has simply 'proven too weak to thwart the negative consequences of wider cultural or social forces' which are hindering economic development.

There are ample data to support this conclusion. The World Bank Group (2024) argues that an essential factor in economic development is governance: 'Good governance helps countries improve economic growth, build human capital, and strengthen social cohesion'. The World Bank Group utilises six indicators to measure the quality of governance in individual nations: voice and accountability, political stability and the absence of violence, government effectiveness, regulatory quality, rule of law and control of corruption.

Unfortunately, many nations in the Global South that have significant concentrations of evangelicals still score very low across these indicators. We cite the following examples:[12]

- Nigeria, which is home to 58 million evangelical Christians, ranks globally in the bottom quintile for five out six indicators.
- Ghana, where approximately two-thirds of the population are Protestant/evangelical, ranks globally in the bottom half for five out six indicators.
- Kenya, which is 68% Protestant/evangelical, ranks in the bottom 40th percentile or lower for all six indicators.
- Brazil, which is home to 57 million evangelicals, ranks below the 50th percentile in five out of six indicators.

- Guatemala, where half of the nation's 18 million Christians are evangelical, has seen some evangelicals reach the pinnacles of political power. However, this has failed to result in good governance. This nation ranks as one of the world's least successful nations for the control of corruption (bottom 11%); the rule of law (bottom 13%); and government effectiveness (bottom 16%).

The explanation as to why evangelical churches have been so ineffective at improving governance in their respective nations will, of course, vary from country to country. The tragic story emerging from these data is that there are millions of evangelicals living in the Global South who are wired for entrepreneurship, but who may never know success in their business endeavours. They have the makings of successful entrepreneurs: the optimism, the vision, the personal confidence, and the networks. But too often they find themselves battling corruption, political instability, chaotic regulation and limited rule of law.[13]

Among the essential questions that we are exploring in this article are the following: What happens when these entrepreneurship-wired Christians re-locate to a more stable, business-friendly place like the UK? Do their business instincts and skills kick into gear? As we shall see in the section that follows, the answer is Yes.

3. Immigrant Evangelical Entrepreneurship in the UK

3.1. The Shifting Landscape

In order to set the stage for our exploration of entrepreneurship, we begin with a brief look at immigration and the changing face of the British church. It is here seen that immigration from the Global South is having a significant impact on British Christianity.

The global church is in the midst of a major shift. It is predicted that by the year 2050, 53% of Protestants will live in Africa, while less than 10% will be found in Europe (Johnson and Zurlo 2024). What we often do not appreciate when looking through these statistics is that this global shift is being significantly tempered by migration from the Global South to the Global North. In England and Wales, for example, there are nearly 2 million Christians who were born in the Global South.[14] Immigration is a major factor affecting church growth and attendance. And given that it is becoming the centre of gravity for the global church, the cultural influence from the Global South continues to shape and transform British Christian identity (Clark 2022).

Given that the Office for National Statistics (ONS) census of England and Wales only measures Christian affiliation in the broadest sense, there is no readily available information available on the number of Global South evangelicals who have migrated to these regions. This said, if we combine the census data with other sources, we are able to make some reasonable estimates (see Table 1).

Table 1. Top ten nations listed as 'country of birth' by Christian residents of England and Wales. The data in the centre column is taken from Office for National Statistics (n.d.), and the data in the right-hand column is taken from US Department of State (2023) and the Pew Research Center (2014).

Country of Birth	England/Wales Residents Self-Identifying as 'Christian'[15]	Country of Birth, Percentage of All Christians Who Identify as Protestant/Evangelical[16]
Nigeria	229,044	76%
India	175,506	60%
Philippines	141,962	10%
South Africa	125,699	84%
Ghana	118,576	81%
Jamaica	112,939	96%
Zimbabwe	100,921	92%
Brazil	80,054	38%
Kenya	33,815	76%
Sri Lanka	30,364	19%

Once again, the ONS census does not collect data on specific Christian affiliation. Thus, the data in the centre column only reflect the number of foreign-born residents who identify as 'Christian'. In order to extrapolate how many of these may be Protestant/evangelical, in the right-hand column I provide data on religious affiliation in their country of origin. With this information, we can reasonably conclude that (with the exceptions of the Philippines, Brazil, and Sri Lanka) the majority of the Christian immigrants from these nations are Protestant/evangelical.[17]

The case of African Majority Churches (AMCs) in England and Wales illuminates how these immigrants from the Global South are changing the character and makeup of the church. Between 2001 and 2011, the number of Christians with African heritage grew by 47.8%. From 2011 to 2021, the number grew by 10.9%.[18] Four out the ten largest churches in England are AMCs: Kingsway International Christian Centre (weekend attendance 5500); Winner's Chapel (3000); Glory House Plaistow (3000); and Jesus House Brent Cross (3000) (Cartledge 2019, p. 79). This all stands in contrast to the catastrophic numerical decline of white Christians.[19]

3.2. Attitudes and Entrepreneurial Activities of Evangelical Migrants in the UK

Immigrants are changing the landscape of the evangelical church in the UK, and they are also making an impact on the economy. If we look at the general immigrant population in the UK—across multiple religions and countries of origin—we find that immigrants have a particularly positive outlook on entrepreneurship. A report generated by the Global Entrepreneurship Monitor (Hart et al. 2017) found that 'Immigrants continue to be more entrepreneurial than the resident population'. The authors note that the rate of business start-ups for immigrants was 12.5%, while the rate for the life-long resident population was at 8.6%.[20]

Immigrants in general will tend to be more entrepreneurial than their UK-born neighbours. But what does this tell us about evangelical immigrants? Do they also follow this pattern? To answer this question, I put together an online questionnaire and invited participation from evangelicals who were born in the Global South.[21] The stated aim of this survey was to learn 'about attitudes and experiences related to starting a business in this country'. Twenty-seven people responded, and the key findings are as follows (see Table 2).

Table 2. Immigrant evangelical attitudes toward entrepreneurship.

Statement	Percentage in Agreement
'Here in the UK, there are good opportunities to start a business and make money'	100%
'I personally know someone who has started a business'.	85%
'I am confident in my own ability to start a business'.	74%
'I would be reluctant to start a business in the UK because I fear it would fail'	12%
Participant reports having started a business in the UK	37%

While the sample of participants is relatively small, the indication seems to be that the attitudes and activities of evangelical immigrants is very much in line with those of the general immigrant population. Participants in my survey had a very positive outlook on the economic opportunities in the UK, and many of them have taken the step of starting their own business.

Research conducted by Nwanko, Gbadamosi and Ojo among African Pentecostals in London corroborates these findings. They conclude that 'African Pentecostal churches have become a significant force in nurturing business start-ups and encouraging entrepreneurship among the population group' (Nwanko et al. 2012, p. 14). African churches in London coordinate training for aspiring entrepreneurs. Entrepreneurial networking is strongly encouraged among the congregants. And many pastors see business enterprise as being entirely consistent with the mission of the church: it brings personal prosperity, it creates jobs and it leads to the material support of the church itself.

Empirical research thus indicates that many evangelical migrants in the UK will have a positive outlook on entrepreneurship. In order to complete the picture, I wanted to hear personal accounts. In the following section I report on interviews conducted with two evangelicals who have started businesses in London.

3.3. Jackson from Brazil[22]

Jackson first came to the UK at the age of 24. Like many of his compatriots in London, he first found work in the construction industry. Working hard and living within his means for several years, he was gradually able to set aside GBP 20,000 in his savings account. When his bank reached out to him offering a loan to match this amount, Jackson saw this a chance to try something new: 'I want to work for me', he said to himself. 'I want to have my own business'.

With the funds he had borrowed from the bank loan, and his personal savings as a backup, Jackson opened his first business in North London. It was something of a 'one stop' locale for the Brazilian community: groceries, coffee, ethnic food and hairdressing. Within a short amount of time, Brazilians in the area were flocking to his locale. And then, as Jackson became more and more familiar with the needs of his community, he perceived opportunities to expand and diversify. In the years that have passed, he has gone on to start seven different projects, from grocery stores and butcher shops to restaurants and international currency exchanges. His current exchange business, known as Real Money Services,[23] has grown to become a leading operator for services between the UK and South America. Along the way, he got married and had children. He also started a church (which he continues to lead) and earned a Bachelor's degree in Theology at Roehampton University.

One of the key drivers in Jackson's business strategy has been the desire to serve his community. He recognised from the beginning that his Brazilian shop in North London would be more than just a place of commerce. It was a place for Brazilians to strengthen

their sense of community and to grow their relational networks. Jackson believes that his store played a key role in drawing Brazilian families to the neighbourhood, and thus revitalising the area. He fostered customer loyalty because the community felt that they had a stake in the business. Its success contributed to their well-being.

As the business grew, the Brazilian evangelical community became an important pool for recruiting employees. Beyond the language and cultural understanding that they shared, their common faith provided a foundation of trust. As Jackson described the relationship he had with his workers, it became clear to me that he viewed himself not just an employer, but as a pastor and a mentor. He gave opportunities to young people who would have otherwise struggled to find employment. For many of his employees, working for Jackson was a form of discipleship. They were challenged to look not only at their work performance, but at the development of their character and life skills.

Jackson's account of his entrepreneurial experiences was consistently coloured with biblical references. He explained, for example, that he had started his businesses among the Brazilian community, then expanded it to the broader society in the UK, and that now his projects are international in scope. With a seamless reference to Acts 1:8, he explained 'If you want to preach the gospel, start in Jerusalem, then go to Samaria, and then you can go to the other nations'. At another moment in our interview, he referred to the story of Joseph in Genesis, who advised Pharaoh to collect and store grain in preparation for the coming famine (Gen 41). 'Save money' was a principle Jackson had lived by, so that when the 'rough harvest' came, he would be ready. And a final biblical story to which he referred was the account of Abraham. In Gen 12: 1–2, God had spoken to Abraham, saying, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be blessing'. It was not difficult for Jackson to see the parallels between Abraham's life and his own experience in the UK: 'We trust in God. We practice faith. That's exactly what the Bible says. When God says 'Abraham I'm gonna bless you, you're gonna be a big nation. So I believe when you have the blessing from God in your life, things become, I'm not going to say easy, but it's like God opens doors in different ways'.

3.4. Solomon from Ghana[24]

It would seem that the Abrahamic metaphor of stepping into the unknown, walking by faith and trusting in the goodness of God is a common theme among Christians who have migrated to the UK and then taken the risk of starting a business. Solomon also compared his own experience to that of the Patriarch:

> It's just like Abraham, isn't it? You've been sent out of riches—everything that your family had. And you've been told 'Go, and I'll make you a father of many nations. I'll bless you'. You're going into the wilderness unknown. So I had to use that courage—that this is from God. This is directly from God.

Solomon migrated from Ghana 24 years ago. Over this period, he has played professional football, managed flagship stores for Boots and ScrewFix, earned a Bachelor's degree in Theology from Roehampton University, and started a church which he continues to lead.

One Sunday, about two years ago, Solomon was worshipping when he heard the Lord speak: 'I want you to start shipping'. He quickly sat down to process. 'Am I really hearing something?' Solomon then replied to God, 'So what is the name of the company?' And he heard 'One Stop Shipping'. He then determined in his mind that he would look for confirmation. If that name was not already registered in the UK, he would accept that the voice was from God. Later that afternoon he went online, found that the name was available, and registered his business.

The aim of One Stop Shipping is to forward freight from the UK to Ghana.[25] From his own experience, Solomon knew that Ghanaian residents in the UK frequently ship goods such as electronics, furniture and appliances to their families back in Ghana. When building his own home in Ghana, he had used various shipping services, and found that the service was not good. So there seemed to be an opportunity.

He had no experience whatsoever in this line of business, but he had a high degree of confidence. 'Having the background of being a branch manager in Boots and Screwfix, where it is very demanding in terms of customer service and making sure you're giving legendary service. I'm like, OK, if I'm able to translate that into my own business, I'll do that by the help of God'.

After launching the business, it was expected to actually take about one year before the operation started turning a profit. But through this time of trial Solomon and his wife would go back to the original word that they had received from God. A biblical passage that has been particularly meaningful for Solomon and his wife (who also runs her own business) is Habakkuk 2:2–3: 'Write the vision; make it plain on tablets, so he may run who reads it. For still the vision awaits its appointed time; it hastens to the end—it will not lie. If it seems slow, wait for it; it will surely come; it will not delay'.[26]

Solomon has interpreted these verses to mean that he could have confidence in the original word that God spoke to him. The business was not his idea. It was not something born from his own initiative. It came as word from God. And through the different trials that he has experienced, he knew that all he really needed was patience. In time, things would get on track, and God would demonstrate his goodness.

Both Solomon and Jackson have clearly developed many of the essential skills and attitudes that make for an effective entrepreneur. Their evangelical faith and experience of God have played a key role in the launching and development of their respective businesses. But the final questions that we need to consider are these: What are the theological elements of the evangelical worldview that make it such an effective driver of entrepreneurship? And how do the activities of evangelical immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK disclose God in action?

4. Immigrant Evangelical Entrepreneurship: Looking Behind the Narrative

In this final section, I will first consider those general elements of the Protestant/evangelical worldview that foster entrepreneurship. I will then present my own theological interpretation of what we have observed among immigrant entrepreneurs in the UK.

4.1. Entrepreneurship and the Protestant/Evangelical Worldview

Why is it that Protestant/evangelical faith is so good creating entrepreneurs? To answer this question, we begin with an essay by Lawrence Harrison (2010) entitled 'Do Some Religions do Better than others?' The basic premise of this piece is that not all religions, and not all branches of Christianity, are equal when it comes to stimulating modernisation and progress among their adherents. Utilising the UN's Human Development Index, he examined the developmental performance of 117 countries, each having a predominant association with one of the following: Buddhism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Protestantism, Confucianism or Judaism.[27] Based on my analysis of his findings, Protestantism emerges as the clear winner.[28] No other religion or branch of Christianity matches this group's ability to stimulate industrial advancement among so many societies across the globe. A strong argument can be made that Protestant Christian-

ity drives development because of the 'entrepreneurial spirit' embedded in its worldview and ethos.[29]

Harrison postulates that there are certain beliefs and values shared by nations and cultures that have experienced developmental progress. These include:

- The pursuit of 'this worldly' achievement and material advancement over against a purely spiritual or 'other world' orientation;
- Emphasis on personal agency rather than fatalism;
- The belief that wealth is the expandable product of human creativity;
- Placing value on education and self-improvement;
- Placing a premium on personal integrity, ethics and respect for the law
- Fostering investment, creativity and innovation;
- Treating competition as a factor that leads to excellence;
- Rewarding merit and achievement (Harrison 2010, pp. 26–28)[30].

Over the 120 years that have followed Weber's 'The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism', hundreds of books and research articles have made the case that these very same values and beliefs are predominantly embedded in the Protestant worldview and ethos (Becker and Woessmann 2009). And these characteristics are markedly evident among evangelicals. Evangelicals are not categorically resistant to the idea of material prosperity and the accumulation of personal wealth. They believe that if a person is ethical, pursues education, works hard and practices self-discipline, they can be successful in business. Evangelicals believe that God is able to expand personal and community prosperity, and that this does not necessarily have to come at the 'expense' of other individuals or nations. And evangelicals believe as 'image bearers' of God, that we reflect his creative capacities. Innovation and creativity flow from our identity.[31]

4.2. Theological Insights: God's Action Disclosed in Entrepreneurship

What we have seen above is the 'wide-angle' view on those elements of the evangelical ethos and worldview that have been historically conducive to entrepreneurship. These conclusions are somewhat commonplace among the economists and sociologists that have studied these issues. This is to say that they are not necessarily the product of deep theological analysis.

Our final aim in this paper is to engage in the *theological task*, properly speaking. As an evangelical theologian, I want to know how the entrepreneurial outlook and activities of evangelical immigrants in the UK reveal God at work. Toward this end, I present two biblical principles that characterise what I perceive to be happening. I am calling these principles *Get up and Walk* and *Blessing in Exile*.

4.2.1. Get up and Walk

In my engagement with evangelical congregations around the world, I have found that John 5:1–17 is often thematically interpreted as a passage about empowerment and agency. The pericope concerns an invalid man who—alongside a host of other disabled people—lay beside a pool called Bethesda in hopes of receiving a miracle. It seems these poor people believed that when the waters of the pool were stirred, the first one in would be healed. Tragically, this man reported, 'I have no one to put me into the pool when the water is stirred up, and while I am going another steps down before me' (Jn 5:7).

In evangelical proclamation, the predicament of this man is characterised emblematically as the helplessness and dependence from which we all must be delivered. In the passage, Jesus did not offer to help the man get into the pool when the waters supposedly stirred. Nor did he heal him straight away. When Jesus encountered this man, he asked him a question: 'Do you want to be healed?' (vs. 6). Identifying the desire to be healed is a

precursor to the faith that believes such a healing is possible. Before he could act on behalf of the invalid man, Jesus had to awaken him from his stupor. He found himself in such a state of helplessness and self-pity that he had forgotten why he came to the pool in the first place. Jesus then commanded the man' to 'Get up, take your bed, and walk'. He did not pick him up. He commanded him to get up of his own power and walk. The evangelical application here is that once we have articulated our desires, and affirmed our faith in the possibility of their attainment, God will show us what steps we need to take in order to make them a reality.

Evangelicals believe that God will give us the power to do things that would seem impossible. But we also believe that we must first articulate our desires, seek God's direction and then take initiative. It is this same mindset that characterises the evangelical approach to starting a business. The entrepreneurial spirit is the antithesis of the helplessness that characterises those who simply wait for others to solve their problems for them. Evangelical entrepreneurs are not sitting back waiting for someone to take action on their behalf. As Stevens (2015, p. 176) has noted, 'Evangelicals are taking major leadership in wealth creation, hands up instead of hands out'. They are perceiving the needs in their communities, they are seeking God's direction and support, and they are stepping out in faith.

This *Get up and Walk* mindset has been evident throughout our exploration of evangelicalism in the Global South, and the spirit of evangelical immigrants in the UK. The evangelicals of San Roque barrio are not drowning their sorrows in alcohol. With a renewed confidence in their own abilities, they are opening bank accounts, saving money and improving their lives. Nigerian evangelicals are not passively waiting to win the lottery. They are getting educated, starting businesses and pressing forward in life. My questionnaire revealed that evangelical immigrants in the UK overwhelmingly express confidence in their own ability to start a business, and they are taking action. Jackson from Brazil did not want to depend on others to get ahead. 'I wanted to work for me', was his attitude. So he took steps to make this happen. And in perhaps our most striking testimony, Solomon from Ghana received a 'Get up and walk' word directly from God: 'I want you to start shipping'.

Here in the UK, the action of God is on display in the same way that Jesus acted at the pool of Bethesda. God is moving on behalf of those who have the odds stacked against them. Immigrants from the Global South face numerous disadvantages in British society. They do not always speak English as their first language; there may be cultural differences; they may encounter racism and injustice; and in many instances they arrive with limited resources (Khan and Shaheen 2017). But rather than leaving them in a state of dependence, God is calling them to take action. He is opening their eyes to the opportunities for business. He is saying 'get up and walk'. They are responding in faith and accomplishing things they might never have dreamed to be possible.

4.2.2. Blessing in Exile

The Old Testament narrative is replete with stories of individuals and communities who found themselves sojourning in foreign lands. Abraham was told, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you' (Gen 12:1). Joseph was sold into slavery in Egypt (Gen 37). Ruth, the great-grandmother of David, was a refugee from Moab (Ruth 1). And the people of Judah were taken as captives into Babylon (2 Chron 36).

Evangelical immigrants will often use these narratives as metaphors for their own experience in the UK. Those of us who were born in other nations will always feel that in some ways we do not fit in. Whether it be a different accent, cultural traditions or an

ethnicity that puts a person in the 'minority' category, we are reminded daily that we do not quite belong here. As noted above, the social disadvantages faced by immigrants from the Global South can be particularly pronounced, resulting in an even stronger sense of living in the UK as a 'stranger' or an 'exile'.

A key passage which illuminates the evangelical understanding of 'living as an exile' today is Jeremiah 29:1–13. The text is a 6th century BCE letter written by the prophet Jeremiah to the Judeans who had been taken as captives into Babylon:

> Build houses and live in them; plant gardens and eat their produce. Take wives and have sons and daughters; take wives for your sons, and give your daughters in marriage, that they may bear sons and daughters; multiply there, and do not decrease. But seek the welfare of the city where I have sent you into exile, and pray to the Lord on its behalf, for in its welfare you will find your welfare. 'For I know the plans I have for you' declares the Lord, 'plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope'. (Jeremiah 29: 4–7, 11)

The counterintuitive message of this passage is that the Judeans can flourish in the land of their captivity. Jeremiah calls them to seek the welfare of their enemies, because as the Babylonians prosper, so will the Judeans. He calls them to trust that God is able to bless them and help them prosper in a land that is perceived as both foreign and hostile.

In his book *Flourishing in Exile*, British evangelical leader Joe Aldred explains what this means for minority ethnic Christians living in the UK today:

> 'Settle down' means not waiting to be invited into society but assumptively taking a seat around the table of life considering all conceivable levels and spaces of society approachable, accessible, and habitable. The assumption is that as a child of God made in the divine image with agency and self-determination, nowhere is off limits and nowhere inaccessible based on race, colour, or creed. Settling down assumes this right. It says 'here is the Promised Land and I am taking it, sharing it. I am not asking for acceptance or permission'. Until a people build and settle, physically and spiritually, they will not be in their best state to advance the cause of their own flourishing and to make their contributions to the greater society. (Aldred 2024, pp. 94–95)

When an immigrant starts a business in the UK, this their way of taking a place at the table in British society. It is a way of settling in, allowing this land to become a home-away-from home. And for the evangelical Christian, it is an act of faith in God. In my interviews, Jackson and Solomon both cited the Abrahamic narrative as a metaphor for their own experience in the UK: the idea of stepping out in faith into the unknown, leaving the homeland to come into a place which is both a foreign land, and yet also a place of promise. They see their success as a testimony to the faithfulness of God. Through their businesses, he is demonstrating that he is able to help his children prosper even as they live in a foreign land.

Once again, then, we perceive how God is acting. He is revealing to his people that he is able to help them prosper even in a land of exile. He is calling them to settle down, to build homes, to establish families and to start businesses. Their flourishing in this 'land of exile' bears witness to the fact that he seeks their welfare. He is giving them hope and a future here in the UK.

4.2.3. A Caveat

I will close this section with a brief critical reflection. We must bear in mind that God's manner of working on a community level may be different than the way he works with each individual. We have heard encouraging testimonies bearing witness to how God has blessed the business initiatives of two individuals. We have looked at the data showing

that many evangelicals in the UK are starting businesses. This is not to say, however, that every evangelical immigrant will be a good entrepreneur, or that every business started by an evangelical—'under the blessing of God'—will succeed. The Bible teaches that there is a diversity of gifts in the church, and a diversity of callings (Rom 12:6–8; 1 Cor 12). Entrepreneurship should be viewed as one type of calling and one type of gift that exists among many callings and many gifts in the church. The church is in danger when entrepreneurship is elevated as a 'superior gift', or when successful entrepreneurs are given special attention among the congregation (James 2:1–7). Thus, we can certainly celebrate how we have seen God at work in these cases. But of course we must remember that this is only one way—among many, many ways—that God is acting on behalf of his people in the UK.

5. Conclusions

'A match made in heaven' is the name that I have given to the metanarrative that we have outlined in this essay. It is the story of the right people, finding themselves in the right place at the right time. And behind it all is the action of God. Across the Global South, millions of people have experienced life transformation through the discovery of evangelical faith. In its best expression, evangelicalism offers freedom from debilitating and destructive life patterns; the development of leadership skills and self-discipline; enhanced self-esteem; and membership in a close-knit social network where people are committed to helping one another.

Through this process, women and men have developed the kind of spiritual capital that makes for a successful entrepreneur. Many may not even realise that this has occurred. Others may have started businesses in their native land only to find that the odds are stacked against them. Whereas their numbers have grown significantly across the region, in very few places have evangelicals been successful at transforming the government and societal institutions that are conducive to economic development. And so it is the case that for many evangelicals in their country of origin, the entrepreneurial potential remains latent.

Immigration to the UK has radically altered the dynamic. Evangelicals are coming to this land and discovering that this is a good place to do business. They see others in their communities who have been successful, they perceive opportunities, they have access to the tools needed for success and they live in an institutional context that protects and supports their endeavours.

The ultimate question we have tried to address is How can the actions of God be perceived in the experience of these evangelical entrepreneurs? We have here seen that these men and women have seen God moving in the same ways that he did in Biblical times. The God who commanded an invalid to 'get up and walk' is the same God who tells them to believe, to take initiative, to step out in faith and to start a business. And the God who blessed the sojourner Abraham, the God who prospered the exiles of Judea in Babylon, is the same God who continues to give his people a hope and a future in the UK today.

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Notes

1 See, for example, Shah and Shah (2010); Lynch (2020).

2 E.g., Watkins (2020, p. 243) argues for an approach 'which recognises that the theologian's attentiveness to divine revelation is given not only to scripture, Christian tradition, and academic disciplines, but also to practices of faith practices are a crucial, living way in which God speaks to us'.

3 For the purposes of this article, we will work with the classic understanding of entrepreneurship as developed by Joseph Schumpter in the early 20th century. The emphasis therein is on the idea of innovation. An entrepreneur is someone who sees economic opportunities, and who develops new methods, practices, products, production techniques and organisational strategies in order to advance a business project (Sledzik 2013).

4 I will here comment that my aim in this project was not to conduct comprehensive, in-depth empirical research on the behavioural patterns of this population group; rather, my aim was to provide 'accounts of practice' that might serve as a basis for the central task of this article, which is theological reflection.

5 Whereas this term is often critiqued, *Global South* is commonly used as a descriptor for regions in the Southern hemisphere that share certain socioeconomic and political characteristics. These include Africa, Latin America, the Caribbean, Asia (excluding Japan, Israel and South Korea) and Oceania (excluding Australia and New Zealand). See the UN Trade & Development (2024) for more information. Another reason for using this term is that it also used by Johnson and Zurlo 2024.

6 Whereas there are certainly doctrinal differences between those evangelical Christians who identify as Pentecostals and those who do not, Shah and Shah (2010, p. 63) note that these distinctives have little bearing on entrepreneurship: 'what is developmentally significant about Pentecostalism has little or nothing to do with its distinctive beliefs and practices concerning the Holy Spirit, but everything or almost everything to do with what it shares with other forms of Evangelical Protestant Christianity. Among the poor, at least, Pentecostal and non-Pentecostal Evangelicalism generate much the same spiritual capital'. For the purposes of this article, Pentecostals are treated as forming part of evangelicalism.

7 Offut (2015, p. 2) notes that evangelicalism is a movement that 'changes as it grows, just as the national and international contexts around it continue to evolve'. He goes on to mention competing theories which explain the driving forces behind evangelical growth and identity formation. Among the more persuasive (to me) is a paradigm which acknowledges 'the extent to which global flows of goods, people, services, and communication exist within Christianity' and sees how 'these flows connect Christians in different parts of the globe' (p. 3). This is to say that global evangelical Christianity is a 'free market of ideas and resources' wherein the historical hegemonies of America and Europe must now compete alongside other global players.

8 Okorocha (1992, p. 168) notes that 'African religiousness is pragmatist. Religion is useful as long as it serves a practical purpose. African peoples have no disinterested love of the gods. Consequently, they do not easily become enslaved by any particular religious system. When a religious system becomes overbearing, it is soon abandoned for a more humane alternative'.

9 Okorocha (1992, p. 177) explains that the 'existential immediacy' of salvation serves 'as a foretaste of the eternal security and refuge anticipated in Christ at the eschaton'.

10 Some recent examples include Freeman (2012); Gifford (2015); Heuser (2015); Röschenthaler and Schulz (2016); and Burgess (2021).

11 The 'Prosperity Gospel' has been defined by the Lausanne Theology Working Group (2010) as: 'The teaching that believers have a right to the blessings of health and wealth and that they can obtain these blessings through positive confessions of faith and the 'sowing of seeds' through the faithful payments of tithes and offerings'.

12 These conclusions are based on reports for the year 2022 taken from the World Bank Group (2024) and the US Department of State (2023).

13 Boettke (2010, p. 36) explains in further detail why stable governmental institutions are essential to development: 'Only those institutions of governance which minimise the threat of predation from both private and public actors are consistent with wealth creation. The poor countries of the world lack these institutions and thus their people live in fear of predation from either private or public actors, while the rich countries of the world can trust that predation will be limited'.

14 ONS dataset ID: RM014. Figures include Africa, America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and Asia. In order to query ONS data on the basis of a dataset ID, see https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/ (accessed 23 October 2024)

15 ONS, dataset ID: RM014

16 Data in this column are taken from the US Department of State(2023) *2020 Report on International Religious Freedom* and the Pew Research Center (2014).

17 It may also be worth noting that the for the African nations in particular, the vast majority of all migrants are Christians, e.g., Nigeria 85%; Ghana 89%; and Zimbabwe 81%.

18 ONS. See Census 2001 dataset ST104; Census 2011 dataset DC220EW; and Census 2021 dataset 2021. Thanks to Andrew Rogers for extracting these growth figures.

19 ONS data show that the number of White Christians in England and Wales decreased by 14.3% from 2001 to 11 and by 20.7% from 2011 to 21. See Census 2001 dataset ST104; Census 2011 dataset DC220EW; and Census 2021 dataset 2021.

[20] Business start-ups are denoted as TEA: Total early-stage Entrepreneurial Activity. Figures reflect the percentage of survey respondents who had started a business within the past 42 months.

[21] This questionnaire can be viewed at https://forms.gle/AoM5JcZipt1MX6Yu8 (accessed 24 October 2024).

[22] The interviewee has consented to the use of his real name. All quotations attributed to Jackson in this section are taken from Pereira (2024).

[23] www.realmoneytransfer.co.uk (accessed 24 October 2024).

[24] The interviewee has consented to the use of his real name and the name of his business. All quotations attributed to Solomon in this section are taken from (Adjei 2024).

[25] See www.Onestop-shipping.com (accessed 23 October 2024)

[26] All biblical quotations are taken from the ESV translation (The Holy Bible: English Standard Version 2016).

[27] Each of these countries have a million or more people among whom the majority identifies with one of these six religions, or one secular ethical code—Confucianism.

[28] Perhaps to avoid any semblance of favouritism in his conclusions, Harrison (2010, p. 25) actually names Protestantism, Judaism and Confucianism as the top three performers, noting that 'All three promote the ideas/values of control of destiny, achievement, education, diligence/work ethic, merit, saving, and social responsibility, although in different degrees'. Close analysis of his findings, however, make it clear that Protestantism is above the other two systems when we consider UN indicators and the global scope of influence. The data for Judaism is based on the tiny nation of Israel. The data for Confucianism is complicated by the inclusion and weighting of China, which generally scores low on the UN indicators. If we exclude China, the indicator scores for 'Confucian First World' societies including Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Singapore are higher, but still below the scores of Protestantism (Harrison 2010, p. 19).

[29] It is important to note that while they are not the same thing, entrepreneurship and development are closely linked. Entrepreneurship lies at the heart of developmental progress: 'entrepreneurship is widely recognised both by academics and practitioners as a fundamental factor of economic development throughout the world' (Sorin-George et al. 2014, p. 441). In more precise terms, entrepreneurship has the potential to stimulate competitiveness; increase pressure for infrastructure improvement; open new opportunities and markets; create jobs; and incentivise governmental and financial reform. Some economists note there are certain circumstances in the developmental stages of a nation where aspects of entrepreneurship can have adverse effects on economic growth. But the overall centrality of entrepreneurship in historical industrial development in the 20th and 21st centuries is well-established. See Leibenstein (1968), Sorin-George et al. (2014), Amorós et al. (2012).

[30] These are taken from a list of 25 cultural factors that promote progress.

[31] All of these statements find support in the Scriptures. See, for example, Gen 11:1–6; Ps 34:8–10; Ps 37:27–29; 2 Cor 9:6–12; 1Tim 6:17–18. For research on how evangelicals in diverse contexts have approached entrepreneurship, see Clary (2022); Hammond (2017); Dougherty (2013); Shumba (2015); and *Faith-Based Entrepreneurs: Stronger Together* (Globalethics.net 2018).

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Article

Towards a Better Denialism

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Abstract: This article uses two case studies to promote the idea that British evangelicalism is sometimes marked by the denial of inconvenient facts. First, it takes a critical look at the apologetic impulse to explain away the problems that Scripture sometimes presents and to deny their affective dimensions. Second, it considers some of the abuse scandals of recent years and the way in which the evangelical church has tended to respond by covering them up and silencing the voices of accusers. This response appears to be motivated by the fear of quenching what appear to be successful ministries or of tarnishing the reputation of the church. The common theme that these examples share is that they are motivated by the instinct to present the gospel in the best possible light, but this appears to stem from an unarticulated functional atheism that does not truly trust God's people to the Spirit. As a remedy, two linked practices are proposed, drawing on the work of Eugene Peterson and Cheryl Bridges-Johns. These are Sabbath-keeping as a means of rediscovering the primacy of God's presence and work; and the re-enchantment of Scripture by means of a Pentecost imaginary, which offers the possibility for the transrational.

Keywords: evangelicalism; apologetics; theodicy; ecclesial abuse; epistemology; denialism; re-enchantment; Sabbath observance

1. Introduction

This article will investigate the question: why do evangelical churches and organisations sometimes say, "there is no problem here", when there clearly is?

1.1. Positionality

I write from within British evangelicalism. My academic field of research is at the intersection of the Bible and violence, and this work falls into two categories. The first is the interpretation of biblical violence, which is a continuing and thorny issue for many Christians in the global north[1] in the twenty-first century, especially with regard to the violence that the text claims to be commanded by God. The second area is in the weaponisation of Scripture for the purposes of promoting or endorsing violence, which is a phenomenon no less frequent today than it ever has been. My work in this second area has led me into the study of the entailments of Scripture with contexts such as (domestic or ecclesial) abuse, right-wing extremism and Christian nationalism, and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In the course of my work in these twin fields, I have noticed in some evangelical churches and among some evangelical Christians and organisations a habitual attitude, which I here term "denialism". By this term, I mean something broader and more mainstream than the extreme (if no longer marginal) world of conspiracism and the like; I use it to refer to the deliberate choice to deny certain apparent realities which are perceived to be inconvenient or uncomfortable.

I have served as a minister in two Baptist churches in England and now work as a theological educator, taking a share of responsibility in my College's task of forming the next generation of Baptist ministers. For these reasons, although the question arises from my academic research, the concerns I raise in this article reflect my deep pastoral concern for the evangelical church in Britain.

1.2. Methodology

In this article, I will begin by offering two case studies that exemplify the sort of "denialism" I am seeking to investigate. These case studies relate to the twin areas of my own research outlined above: the interpretation of biblical violence and the church's response to abuse allegations. The first emerges from my own experience of speaking about biblical violence in a range of churches (some evangelical, some not) during a lecture tour. The ensuing conversations revealed an apologetic trend which both anecdotal evidence and theological logic would position principally within evangelicalism. The second case study draws on a published investigation of one of the recent church abuse scandals, this one sitting squarely within British evangelicalism.

Neither of the situations I describe is unique to the British context. The nature of the research I conduct, and the international compass of the study centre I direct, positions me well to see how the phenomena I identify are replicated beyond the British Isles. Alternatively, perhaps more accurately, they might be considered to be replicating observable trends elsewhere, particularly in the United States of America.

The influence of American evangelicalism on British evangelicalism can scarcely be overstated, even though differences remain. Many of us grew up with the voices of Don Carson and John Piper playing over our car stereos, and it is still true today that a great deal of the Christian literature consumed by British evangelicals comes from the USA. The Gospel Coalition, enormously influential in British evangelical circles, began life in the USA and continues to be led from there. I have lost count of how many of my students enthusiastically listen to or watch everything that The Bible Project (based in Portland, OR) puts out (which I warmly commend). For these reasons, both case studies will be linked with related phenomena in the USA. With regard to the apologetics of biblical violence, reference will be made to the work of an American apologist, whose work is very influential in the UK. With regard to the abuse report, links will be drawn with a similar report emerging from the Southern Baptist Convention.

What makes a reality inconvenient or uncomfortable? A key characteristic that most evangelicals share is the desire to present Christ to the world, in both word and deed. Taking seriously the words of Jesus, "let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven" (Matt. 5:16), many evangelicals will seek to present an attractive face to the world in order to present the gospel in the best possible light. A worship chorus written by Dave Bryant in 1978 contains the line "Make me like a precious stone. . . light of Jesus shining through", and although that particular song may no longer fall within the current repertoire of our worship bands, the idea it is communicating has shaped the imagination of many within our churches. Realities can therefore become inconvenient when they appear to present a challenge to this impulse.

In this article, I will use the two case studies to demonstrate how these faithful impulses sometimes combine with more problematic instincts to create a culture where it is hard for people to name their doubts, their struggles or their ongoing harms. I will seek to demonstrate that such denialism is predicated on an unarticulated weak theology of the presence and ongoing activity of the Spirit of God. I will then, more positively, explore how this "functional atheism" might be reversed by attending to practices that re-enchant our worldview and return to us the shock and awe of God's presence.

2. Two Case Studies

2.1. Denying the Complexity of Scripture

> "I wasn't getting an answer that I could build anything on". (Chastain and Whitmore 2024)

2.1.1. Description

In 2018, I was the nominated presenter of the "Whitley Lecture", an endowed lecture within the Baptist Union of Great Britain, where an emerging Baptist scholar gives a lecture tour to present their work to the Baptist Colleges and the churches. The (rather wordy) title I chose was "Dead and Buried? Attending to the voices of the victim in the Old Testament and today: towards an ethical reading of the Old Testament texts of violence". In the lecture I named, although I did not attempt to resolve, the problem that Old Testament violence poses to the Christian Church. "There are some serious outstanding theological questions about many of the Old Testament texts of violence, particularly those where God appears to command violent action" (Paynter 2018, p. 40). What I did attempt to address, at least by naming it, is the ethical danger that these texts might present to church congregations, if they are ignored or irresponsibly interpreted.

In every venue where I spoke, people from the congregations wanted to engage with me afterwards about this. Their responses and observations fell into three broad categories. There was a sizeable contingent (I will call group A) who were puzzled by my desire to tackle these texts. The solution, they told me in various ways, was to expunge them from Scripture altogether or to marginalise them as simply a construct of human power and ideology. This group, almost by definition, lies outside evangelicalism and will play no further part in the analysis offered below.

The other two types of response came from those in more conservative traditions, where such an approach would not be considered a faithful option. A tidily balanced counter-perspective to group A was offered by those who also told me that they did not understand the reason for my concern. For these (group C), the text was clear—God had commanded these actions, so no agonising was needed.

A third category (group B) was situated between these two perspectives. These were people whose church teaching viewed the texts of violence with the insouciance of group C, but who had themselves found this approach troubling. A typical comment from people in this group was along the lines of this question I was asked, reported from memory. "Am I allowed to say that I find these stories troublesome? Is it alright to think that? Don't I have to just accept them?"

I am not suggesting that these three groups encompass the full range of perspectives within the British Church; it reflects those who chose to attend my lecture and then to queue up to speak to me afterwards. However, I would suggest that people who fall into groups B and C are likely to be within churches, demonstrating the sort of denialism that I am referring to.

Group A	**Group B**	**Group C**
"Just take these texts out of Scripture"	"Am I allowed to say that I find these stories troublesome? Is it alright to think that? Don't I have to just accept them?"	"God said it, that makes it alright, end of story".

2.1.2. The Role of Apologetics

Denial of the challenges presented by Scripture seems to me, based on this and other empirical evidence, to be quite common within British evangelical churches. This is notwithstanding the subtle and nuanced responses offered by some British evangelical apologists, such as Gareth Black's video "Are there Two Different Gods in the Old and New Testament?" on the Scottish apologetics website *Solas* (Black 2021). Nonetheless, there are some highly influential apologists who are willing to portray the violence of the Bible as unproblematic.

In a video interview conducted by the (British) atheist YouTuber Alex O'Connor, the American apologist and moral philosopher William Lane Craig was asked about divine instructions to kill children, such as the instruction that in regard to certain cities Israel was not to spare anything that breathed (Deut. 10:16). Craig began his reply by making reference to Divine Command Theory, which is a logic-based argument that such a slaughter need not be incompatible with the goodness of God (see, for example, Copan and Flannagan 2014, pp. 141–70). However, rather than expressing any sense that this answer might be partial or unsatisfactory, or demonstrating any lingering discomfort with the idea that God might command the killing of small children, Craig evinced complete contentment with his answer and with the idea of divine infanticide. "It was actually a tremendous blessing to these children for them to be killed and go to Heaven and be with God" (O'Connor and Craig 2024).

Although Craig is an American scholar, it would be a mistake to imagine that such insouciance is a characteristic confined to evangelical churches on the western side of the Atlantic. Craig is a highly-respected apologist, and influential in the UK; so much so that the British apologetics website *Speak Life*[2] felt obliged to move rapidly to put out a video in response to, and partial rebuttal of, Craig's claim (Scrivener and Paynter 2024).

In my view, the impulse of apologists such as Craig to represent their answers as complete and wholly satisfactory combines with the instinct of some evangelical church leaders to offer clear and unambiguous teaching to their congregations. In a culture where Scripture is held in high regard, and where Jesus' Great Commandment is taken seriously, this can result in a tendency to deny the challenges which Scripture represents by providing "easy"—and often unsatisfactory—solutions. In an attempt to resolve a difficult problem (in this case, the goodness of a God who commands infanticide), thought leaders in evangelical churches may choose to deny certain inconvenient things—such as the clash that the text appears to have with the ethic seen in the person of Jesus Christ—rather than admit the problem.

2.1.3. Alienating the Wrestlers

In 1981, James Fowler published his well-known theory about the stages of human faith development. While it has been criticised for paying insufficient attention to God's role in the process (e.g., Hughes 1997), Fowler's theory remains influential on account of its perceptive analysis of the human side of the equation. By his account, individuals pass through a number of stages in their journey of faith development. Stage Five, which Fowler terms "Conjunctive Faith", tends to take place in middle age, though not all individuals will move from the previous stage to this. The characteristic of Conjunctive Faith is an acceptance or realisation that "truth is more multidimensional and organically interdependent than most theories or accounts of truth can grasp" (Fowler 1981, p. 186). This is akin to making the discovery that light can be understood as both a wave and a particle, or "discovering that the rational solution or 'explanation' of a problem that seemed so elegant is but a painted canvas covering an intricate, endlessly intriguing cavern of surprising depth" (Fowler 1981, p. 184).

Churches that deny the complex and sometimes paradoxical nature of Scripture and Christian belief, through a desire to offer self-contained and tidy answers, may be in danger of failing those who are moving into this stage of faith development. Dissatisfaction with what has formerly been accepted without question may be mistaken for a loss of confidence in, or commitment to, Jesus Christ, causing leaders to double down rather than engage openly with honest questions. This may result in disillusionment, contributing to the alarming rate of exodus from church (Fazzino 2014). For instance, the former evangelical and now agnostic Brandon Whitmore describes how his journey away from faith was partly precipitated by the easy answers that his church leaders attempted to provide when he struggled with the Old Testament destruction of the Amalekites, and with the contemporary problem of suffering (Chastain and Whitmore 2024).

2.1.4. Reflecting Divine Nuance and Grief

This denialism might be characterised as a refusal to acknowledge either nuance or discomfort. To return to the YouTube video of William Lane Craig's interview with Alex Connor, Lane's confidence and affect are the presenting issues. Divine Command Theory, while by no means satisfying everyone, is an internally coherent theodicy. But is it watertight? Does it not present a tension to those who have seen the character of God revealed in Jesus Christ? And surely it is emotionally dishonest to pretend that it makes the slaughter of children *feel good.*

The Old Testament itself contains resources to help us understand this better. A comparison might be drawn with Job's friends, who present a theology to Job that is perfectly consistent with the prosperity-piety tradition that the Old Testament contains (compare their argument with, for example, Genesis 12:1–3 or Deuteronomy 28). However, this is not the only theology of poverty and prosperity that the Old Testament describes. For Job's friends, however, there is room for neither doubt nor empathy. Job is crushed under the steamroller of their certainty.

Compare this with the Old Testament prophetic tradition, which is by no means afraid to offer bold denunciation and declaration of judgement. However, at least at times, this is offered not with glee, but with tears. Isaiah 15–16 is a case in point. The prophet, whose message is God's own, declares the imminent destruction of the prideful pagan nation of Moab, but with tears rather than delight.

> We have heard of the pride of Moab
> —how proud he is!—
> of his arrogance, his pride, and his insolence;
> his boasts are false. . .
> Therefore I weep with the weeping of Jazer
> for the vines of Sibmah;
> I drench you with my tears,
> O Heshbon and Elealeh;
> for the shout over your fruit harvest
> and your grain harvest has ceased. (Isa 16:6–9)

Like Hosea and Jeremiah, the prophet here embodies the grief that God himself experiences over the judgement he enacts. "The hand which metes out judgment is not separated from the spirit which grieves over the necessity and effects of such judgment. So the God who has stilled the shouts of joy is also the God who weeps for and with those who now cry" (Oswalt 1986, p. 346). If nuance and discomfort are divine characteristics, then it behoves us to reflect that in our own practice.

We will now turn to the second case study.

2.2. Denying Harms in Our Own Contexts

> "When an organisation is seen as successful, people do not look carefully enough about what the price may be for such success". (Scolding and Fullbrook 2024, p. 7)

2.2.1. Description

In 2023, following a series of allegations made against *Soul Survivor*'s leader, Revd Canon[3] Mike Pilavachi, the Church of England's National Safeguarding Team and the Diocese of St Albans conducted an internal investigation into the matter. On 6th September that year the Church of England issued a press release stating that the investigation had substantiated the concerns raised. The statement identified that some of Pilavachi's behaviour, over a period of four decades, had been spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically abusive (Church of England 2023).

A representative example of Pilavachi's behaviour can be found in the testimony of the now-successful Christian singer and songwriter Matt Redman. In a video he and his wife released in April 2024, he describes some of his interactions with Pilavachi, who was his youth worker when Redman was in his early teens.

> He started to counsel me about my sexual abuse, which looking back I don't feel awesome about, because he wasn't a trained counsellor—he'd actually been an accountant just a few years before. And, you know, I was telling him the deepest darkest things, and he was asking me for the details of what happened. The real problematic thing to me about that is he would often wrestle me afterwards. Wrestling was definitely his thing. I know a lot of people who were physically wrestled by Mike, and honestly it was quite often in a hidden room in the church, or it would be around his house away from everyone. And looking back I don't feel great about that. It didn't feel good at the time—I didn't really like physical touch that much because of what happened to me. . . sometimes it could go on for 20 min. It was like full-on wrestling, but obviously this is a youth leader, this is an adult, this is hidden away from everyone. Looking back, I really don't feel good about it, and especially as sometimes it happened straight after we've been talking about the details of the sexual abuse that I'd suffered. (Redman and Redman 2024)

The abuse was not considered to require criminal prosecution, but nonetheless was significant enough to trigger an external enquiry, which was led by the barrister Fiona Scolding and her colleague Ben Fullbrook.[4] They summarise the abuse and its long-term consequences as follows:

> [H]iding in plain sight, was someone who manipulated and controlled others, bullied and sought to abuse his power over those whom he worked alongside in the church and those who came to learn alongside him. That abuse of power has caused deep psychological harm to many with whom he worked closely over 30 years. (Scolding and Fullbrook 2024)

For our purposes, the key phrase here is "hiding in plain sight". Within Soul Survivor and the Church of England more widely, Pilavachi's behaviour appears to have been ignored or condoned for many years—in what might be termed a form of "denialism". In their video Beth and Matt Redman describe this as the "that's just Mike" phenomenon.

> *Beth*: We approached a senior leader from a church in London. It was a very emotional conversation. . . this person—you know, not dismissively or unkindly, just matter of factly—said "That's just Mike. Nothing will be done".

> *Matt*: You know, what would always come back if you spoke to someone in authority would be this phrase, "that's just Mike". (Redman and Redman 2024)

This is part of an observable pattern of churches and denominations disregarding abusive practices and silencing those who make allegations of abuse, which has become increasingly evident over the last couple of decades. Such silencing is a recurring theme in the testimonies of survivors of domestic abuse taking place within church contexts.

> There was a culture of silence, a culture of submission. There was no context to resist or complain.
>
> (Survivor testimony elicited in interview with the author, published in Paynter 2020, p. 139)

> After 14 years of abuse, I was told by my Priest "It's a storm in a teacup".
>
> (Survivor testimony, published in Aune and Barnes 2018, p. 51)

2.2.2. The Drive for Success

The stories provided above are just two examples of a tragic pattern that has been recurring with horrifying frequency in the last few years, both in the UK and beyond. Abuse scandals within churches, denominations, and para-church organisations are by no means confined to evangelical groups, but nor are evangelical churches exempt from the issue. A study performed in Cumbria identified a systemic disregard for the issue of domestic abuse. In response to the question of whether domestic abuse was ever mentioned in sermons, 57.1% of respondents could not ever recall it being discussed, with a further 28.3% saying it was mentioned only rarely (Aune and Barnes 2018, p. 26).[5]

When abuse scandals are investigated, structural issues such as incompetence, indifference, self-interest, or cultures of toxicity are commonly implicated (Paynter 2025). In their report on the Pilavachi affair, Scolding and Fullbrook identify a number of factors that contributed to the silencing of those whom he was harming.

> These include (but are not limited to) the notion of spiritual celebrity and the anointed leader, the blurring of boundaries within the Soul Survivor organisations, inadequate performance management and oversight from the trustees and the Church of England, and a failure to take action when matters became known. (Scolding and Fullbrook 2024, p. 7)

Tellingly, Scolding and Fullbrook conclude that the culture of the organisation, and of the Church of England within which it sits, was so dazzled by Soul Survivor's "success" that they became blind to its practices. This is borne out by the testimony of Matt Redman, in his further description of the "that's just Mike" phenomenon.

> I've heard this phrase from so many people down through the years… "That's just Mike". It was almost like saying, "yeah but you're going to get all this good stuff, he's going to lead these meetings—great—he's going to speak, he's going to be funny, he's so gifted and talented, he's got this charismatic personality, and what you have to put up with for that is there's going to be this mistreatment side". (Redman and Redman 2024)

A parallel example can be seen in the USA's Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) abuse scandal. The investigation report published in 2022 revealed that the previous decades had seen allegations made against 703 alleged abusers within the denomination, allegations which had often not been taken seriously.

> For almost two decades, survivors of abuse and other concerned Southern Baptists have been contacting the Southern Baptist Convention ("SBC") Executive

> Committee ("EC") to report child molesters and other abusers who were in the pulpit or employed as church staff. They made phone calls, mailed letters, sent emails, appeared at SBC and EC meetings, held rallies, and contacted the press. . .only to be met, time and time again, with resistance, stonewalling, and even outright hostility from some within the EC. (Guidepost Solutions 2022, p. 3)

This failure to act was found to be driven by a concern for the reputation of the Convention and its churches, and appears to have been related both to a fear of legal liability, and also a theological conviction that reputational damage would impair the gospel effectiveness of the SBC. For example, the SBC's Executive Committee's counsel and later interim president, August Boto said in two emails:

> We are collecting [the list of SBC ministers arrested for sexual abuse], and may even post them in some way, but we'd have to really examine the potential liabilities that would stem therefrom. (Quoted in Guidepost Solutions 2022, p. 6)

> This whole thing should be seen for what it is. It is a satanic scheme to completely distract us from evangelism. It is not the gospel. It is not even a part of the gospel. It is a misdirection play. (Quoted in Guidepost Solutions 2022, p. 6)

While there are many differences between the Pilavachi affair and the SBC scandal, they have at least two major factors in common: the institution was slow to act upon reports made, and at least one reason for that was a concern that the "success" of the institution should not be hampered.

3. What This Reveals About Our Operant Theology

> 'One can't believe impossible things', [said Alice].
>
> 'I daresay you haven't had much practice', said the Queen. 'When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast'.
>
> Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking Glass.
>
> "Make me like a precious stone. . . light of Jesus shining through"
>
> From the worship song, *Jesus, take me as I am*, © Dave Bryant 1978.

We have considered two very different pastoral practices found within British evangelicalism, although they are evidently replicated beyond the United Kingdom context. What they have in common is the instinct to conceal or deny inconvenient facts that might unsettle believers or impair the reputation or mission of the church.

3.1. Believing Impossible Things

Believing impossible things is integral to most expressions of the Christian faith. It is certainly integral to *evangelical* Christianity, whichever precise definition of that term is used. As an absolute minimum, evangelicals believe that a man whom the Roman Empire had subjected to its well-honed judicial process of scourging and crucifixion was, three days later, breaking bread with his friends. This requires the setting aside, or at least the limited suspension, of widely held beliefs about the permanency of death, of personal experiences of bereavement, and of scientific evidence about cell degradation and decomposition. In short, it requires a form of what might broadly be termed *denialism.* Faith, as the writer of Hebrews (11:1) tells us, is a conviction about things not seen; or, one might explicate, a conviction about things that cannot be proven.

Denying the evidence of our eyes, or the logic of our minds, is a double-edged sword. While the willingness to set aside this rationalist epistemology in (at least) one regard is essential for evangelicals, it may, under some circumstances, predispose us to a

wider and less helpful anti-rational perspective. There certainly seems to be evidence that fundamentalist evangelicals, at least in the USA, are susceptible to conspiracy theories; and one factor within the complex set of explanations for this is a willingness to deny what—to others—seems indubitable.

> The conspiracy theories' internal construction and scaffolding match Christianity's belief-based systems and theoretical structures. . .The degree to which faith plays a role in Christianity and conspiracy theories is unmistakably related. The denial of reality, reason, and science are no strangers to those who based their "truths" on biblical scriptures through unwavering blind faith. (Bloom and Rollings 2022, p. 4)

Nicholas Toseland has provided an ethnographic account of British conspiracism in the late 2010s. He notes that it is easier for those who are immersed within a "permeable" worldview to believe in things that might otherwise be considered implausible.

> In the Satanic ritual panics of the 1990s, the rumours of ritual abuse that appear implausible to the secular-minded observer are entirely reasonable to an involved observer on-the-ground who derive a cosmology and demonology from a Judaeo-Christian-inspired cultural tradition. (Toseland 2019, p. 163)

Not every Christian believer is a conspiracy theorist, happily, and conspiracisms are still exceptional in the British church scene. However, the case studies provided above suggest that under certain circumstances, evangelical Christians may be all too ready to deny the evidence of their eyes or the logic of their minds—to great detriment.

3.2. Success as a Proxy Goal

The second factor that the two case studies shared was the desire for "success"—variously referring to missional effectiveness, the continuity of the organisation, or confidence of faith among members of the congregation. I speculated that evangelical church leaders who suppress the challenge presented by certain biblical texts do so out of a desire to protect their congregations from destabilising doubt. Reports on the Pilavachi affair highlighted the priority given to his perceived missional effectiveness, and a similar phenomenon is seen in the SBC's over-riding concern not to allow its reputation to be tarnished.

The pursuit of "success", or excellence, is not antithetical to the Christian faith, of course. The apostle Paul speaks of becoming all things to all people, "so that I might by any means save some" (1 Cor. 9:22), of excelling in everything (2 Cor. 8:7), and "having all sufficiency in all things at all times" (2 Cor. 9:8).[6] But the measure of success the apostle has in mind stands in stark contrast to success as measured by the metrics of the world. Nowhere is this more clear than in the Corinthian correspondence, where he contrasts himself with the "super-apostles" of his day by listing his failures (2 Cor 11:21–30), and in his letter to the church at Philippi, where he describes all of his credentials as "rubbish" (Phil 3:4–11).

Young people who are apparently captivated by the Christian faith; lack of expressed doubt in a congregation; the longevity of a denomination—these may all be valuable goals. But they are not ultimate goals; they are proxies. An apparently lively national youth movement may indicate a deep and enduring move of the Spirit, but only time and the eschaton will prove that (provisionally and definitively, respectively). A congregation that expresses no doubts may reflect a group of disciples who are solid and mature in their faith, but may alternatively conceal a cognitive dissonance they are experiencing between their knowledge of the character of God as revealed in Jesus Christ and what they read in the text of Joshua.

I have elsewhere argued that we (by which I mean Christians in general) stand in constant danger of substituting our proxy goals for the true and good goals of the Kingdom of God (Paynter 2023, pp. 241–42). It seems impossible not to employ proxy goals in order to evaluate our effectiveness, and even—perhaps—our faithfulness. While the much-slated counting of "bums on seats" (or, as a Canadian student more elegantly put it, of "noses and nickels") is a poor measure of missional effectiveness, they are not wholly disconnected. We cannot see how our labours are evaluated in the heavenly realm, so we must perform a heuristic estimation from what we can see. But these proxies are only ever, at best, penultimate. And when they become their own goal, we have crossed a dangerous line into utilitarianism.

3.3. Functional Atheism

It would be ironic for a practice that perhaps has its roots in a refusal to surrender to mere rationalism to come full circle and embrace that rationalism, but this is what I will now argue may have happened in the case studies we have considered. The privileging of institutional reputation, of lack of expressed doubt, or of visible success may betray an unarticulated functional atheism that lies at the heart of our practices.

The term "functional atheism" was popularised by Parker Palmer, who writes,

> This is the belief that ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me. It is a belief held even among people whose theology affirms a higher power than the human self, people who do not understand themselves as atheists but whose behavior belies their belief!. . . Functional atheism is the unexamined conviction within us that if anything decent is going to happen here, I am the one who needs to make it happen. (Palmer 1998, p. 14)

As Parker suggests, functional atheism may manifest itself as an irresistible need to "fiddle", to take matters into our own hands. At the level of the individual leader, it may lead to workaholism and burn-out. There can be few pastoral leaders who have not experienced the temptation to work through a planned day off because of a belief that they are indispensable. It may lead to manipulative behaviour. Writing from within the Baptist tradition, I acknowledge the temptation to give the church member's meeting a little shove in the right direction, rather than allow the process of discerning the mind of Christ to run its course. And it may lead to pastoral harm by denying inconvenient realities in order to manipulate things on God's behalf.

If I am diagnosing this correctly, the issue may lie in a lack of conviction that the Spirit is truly at work. Using Helen Cameron's terminology, the *operant* theology of the group does not conform to its *espoused* theology (Cameron 2010, p. 54).

In our consideration of the first case study, we identified that the motivation appears to be the desire to present the gospel as reasonable and to build up the faith of others. This emerges from both missional and pastoral imperatives. However, might the over-emphasis upon these factors reflect an unarticulated lack of confidence in the work of the Spirit to convict, convert, and build up faith? As for the patriarch Jacob (Gen 25:29–34 and ch. 27, cf. 23:25), perhaps here too there is the temptation to give things a little shove to ensure that God's purposes are fulfilled. A similar dynamic may be at work in the second set of case studies in which the desire to present the church in the best possible light, or to permit the unfettered work of those perceived as missionally successful, seems to eclipse other concerns.

4. The Shock and Awe of God's Presence

Nothing in the above argument should be interpreted as an appeal to close the gap between the rational and the life of faith by making the scandalous claims of the Christian

faith more plausible. As discussed above, the Christian faith is predicated upon such a gap, and this is especially true for evangelicals who, axiomatically, do not seek to rationalise the supernatural claims of the resurrection (and other doctrines) by means of a Bultmannian demythologisation. My use of the language of denialism is not an appeal to embrace a more rationalist perspective (to be more "sensible") but to lean more fully into the enchanted world of the gospel (to become more truly "spiritual").

The calculus of the Kingdom of God is fundamentally irrational. It is about weakness rather than strength, patience rather than force, and appears like folly to the "wise". It leaves the ninety-nine in pursuit of the one. None of this makes sense unless we believe in a God who is at work in illogical ways and unexpected places. In closing, I will suggest two practices that may help us to recover from our functional atheism.

The first is promoted by Eugene Peterson[7] in his book *Living the Resurrection*. Here, as elsewhere, Peterson is mindful of the danger of internal and silent secularisation.

> [T]he feelings, convictions and ideas that clustered around our becoming Christians become background to the center stage drama of our work with its strenuous demands, energizing stimuli, and rich satisfactions. Along the way, the primacy of God and his work gives way ever so slightly to the primacy of our work in God's kingdom. We begin to think of ways to use God in what we're doing. The shift is barely perceptible, for we continue to use the vocabulary of our new identity. We continue to believe the identical truths. We continue pursuing good goals. It usually takes a long time for the significance of the shift to show up. But when it does, it turns out that we have not so much been worshipping God as enlisting him as a trusted and valuable assistant. (Peterson 2006, pp. 32–33)

What has been lost, Peterson argues, is resurrection wonder. "Without wonder, we approach spiritual formation as a self-help project. We employ techniques. We analyze gifts and potentialities. We set goals. We assess progress" (Peterson 2006, p. 30). In other words, we succumb to a functionally atheistic logic.

To counter this, Peterson commends the habit of Sabbath, to assist us in the task of spiritual formation and the recovery of resurrection wonder. Sabbath is a deeply counter-intuitive practice. For the subsistence farmers who were among the first to inhabit this way of being, it was a weekly act of faith. Every Friday, at dusk, tools were put down, no matter the condition of the crop, no matter the imminence of the harvest, and no matter what the activity of the pests. Sabbath was a weekly enacted reminder of the truth that all good things, ultimately, come from the hand of God himself. It was a formative practice that trained God's people in the pedagogy of wonder. So it still can today. As Peterson puts it, "disengagement from responsibility allows us to see the primacy of God's presence and work in all of life. In other words, we enter conditions in which we are capable of being surprised by what is other than us, other than what we do or don't do" (Peterson 2006, p. 115).

Related to this is a second practice that I commend in response to our functional atheism. This is the recovery of what Cheryl Bridges Johns[8] refers to as the enchantment of Scripture; its rediscovery as a "sacred, dangerous, mysterious, and presence-filled wonderland" (Johns 2023, p. 35)

> We all deserve a Bible that beckons us to enter a wonderland where we encounter a living God who knows and loves us. . . We deserve a Bible filled with the shock and awe of God's presence, to the degree that the glory offered by the empires of this world has no appeal. We deserve an enchanted text. (Johns 2023, p. 29)

Johns proposes a spiritual re-engagement with Scripture in a way that does not disregard the benefits of close and attentive study, but which does not collapse biblical

interpretation down to an academic exercise. She commends the recovery of what she terms a "Pentecost imaginary." Critically, this "does not suspend reason; rather, it offers the possibility for the transrational" (Johns 2023, p. 110). This transrational revelation will always challenge our utilitarian logic, which crushes people in the grand ideological project.

> In Pentecost, God is reaching out to lift humanity; in this space, knowledge is gift. As in the story of Babel, human reason alone has led to some tragic choices. The phrase "it makes sense" has been applied to all sorts of human atrocities. . . The reasoning of Pentecost has an eschatological flavour that brings the future to bear on the present. (Johns 2023, p. 110)

So, what might it look like if such "shock and awe" were to be a habitual stance within evangelical churches and individuals? We will return to the two case studies and postulate some changes that might result.

4.1. Beyond Rationalisation and Plausibility

With regard to the interpretation of biblical violence, a church that has cultivated a Pentecostal imaginary might be less concerned with explaining or rationalising all that they encounter as they read Scripture. Cheryl Bridges-Johns describes how, paradoxically, both the scientific moves of the Enlightenment, *and* the reactive fundamentalisation of Scriptural interpretation rely upon the same rationalist epistemology.

> Conservatives such as Charles Hodge and B.B. Warfield believed that the Bible could be studied and scientifically proven to be valid. Out of this ethos, they developed the doctrine of Scripture known as inerrancy. . . God left us an accurate, scientific record. Being a perfect historical document, the text was proof of divine inspiration. Based on this assumption, the Bible, as factual, could be demonstrated to be true. . . As with its liberal counterpart, fundamentalist biblical studies became a disenchanted science. Within the fundamentalist version of the Bible, there now was no room for the supernatural or the mysterious. (Johns 2023, p. 13)

Better, perhaps, to allow the Scripture to continue to puzzle, infuriate or bewitch us. A Scripture which has been stripped of all mystery is unlikely to surprise or challenge its readers. In the original lecture tour I described above, I commended the stance of *wrestling* with the text, and thereby with God himself.

> It is no coincidence that the nation which constitutes God's people in the Old Testament, in taking its name from its patriarch, uses not his childhood name Jacob but the name Israel. This, of course, is the name that he is given [by the Lord] at the ford of Jabbok after they have wrestled all night. . . It is not a coincidence, because this is what characterizes the people of God from then on—not meek submission to, but wrestling with God. (Paynter 2018, pp. 11–12)

Such a refusal to collapse the Scriptures down to a set of predicates to be believed—or worse, proved—invites believers into a more open, dynamic, way of reading them. It allows the rawness and roughness of Scripture to butt against our native *niceness*. For instance, rather than shying away from the imprecatory psalms, such an openness invites believers who live in comfort and safety to recover their scandalised outcry for the sake of the many who do not. Rather than reducing the texts of sexual violence to a single (often male) interpretation, it offers them up to serve the rage of survivors of such harm. Rather than rationalising away the divinely mandated wars, it invites dialogue around many themes, such as violence done in the name of God, the risks of theocracy, and the nature of the cosmic battle. Such generative—and generous—conversations will whet curiosity, opening up imaginative possibilities rather than apprehensively locking Scriptural interpretation

into the safe zone, and removing certain texts or perspectives from the conversation. Within the evangelical tradition, which places a high view upon the inspired nature of Scripture (and therefore places theoretical limits upon the multiplicity of meanings), such approaches are only possible if the belief that the Spirit of God is living and active today within both church and Scripture is both espoused *and* operant.

4.2. Beyond Concealment and Silencing

All the main denominations in Britain now have established safeguarding procedures and regional or national teams to train, advise, and respond. It is to be hoped that prolonged systematic abuse by powerful individuals can never again go unchallenged and be covered up. However, that hope has been entertained before, and stories continue to emerge, year upon year. So, what might the refusal of functional atheism add to the struggle?

A church or denomination that has been formed by the pedagogy of shock and awe will have a heightened awareness of the activity of the Spirit of God, not just by pursuing supernatural signs or seeking dramatic spiritual gifts, but by having a deep conviction that the work of church-forming and disciple-making is primarily the work of God. Church leaders who have been formed by the pedagogy of Sabbath wonder will be prepared to make the shift from employing the calculus of the market to trusting the invisible, irrational economics of the Kingdom of God, reducing the temptation to manipulate people or processes to optimise what can be seen or counted. An operant theology of the real presence of the same God who roared from Zion against abusers and oppressors (see Amos 1.2 and the whole of the book) will give churches and their leaders a sober appreciation of the risks they run by displeasing him by colluding with abusers.

4.3. In Conclusions

Cheryl Bridges Johns joins Eugene Peterson and other authors who call for a rediscovery of the transcendent in our spiritual practices and in our churches. Perhaps this has been most sublimely expressed by Annie Dillard.

> Does anyone have the foggiest idea what sort of power we so blithely invoke? Or, as I suspect, does no one believe a word of it? The churches are children playing on the floor with their chemistry sets, mixing up a batch of TNT to kill a Sunday morning. It is madness to wear ladies' straw hats and velvet hats to church; we should all be wearing crash helmets. Ushers should issue life preservers and signal flares; they should lash us to our pews. For the sleeping god may wake someday and take offense, or the waking god may draw us out to where we can never return. (Dillard 1982, pp. 58–59)

If we can recover this vision of a God who is living and dangerous, who does not submit to our agendas or follow our timelines, whose economics flies in the face of human accounting, perhaps then there is hope for our functional atheism. Perhaps we can learn to trust God in our doubts and perplexity, and not feel the need to smooth out all the roughness of Scripture. Perhaps we can learn to trust that God's mission is not dependent upon the success of charismatic individuals or our slick and shiny church facades, and so make space for all to be heard, including those with inconvenient narratives to tell.

Ultimately, we British evangelicals need to recover a better form of denialism. After all, if we can believe one impossible thing (whether before or after breakfast), perhaps we can believe a few more.

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Notes

1 The question is also relevant in the global south, of course, but from my conversations with evangelical Christians in a variety of majority world countries, it seems that other theological concerns are often more pressing.
2 Speak Life is fronted by Glen Scrivener, who is Australian, but lives and works in the British context.
3 Pilavachi has now been laicised.
4 It should be noted that this was not a statutory enquiry, and so did not have the power to compel witnesses or to open certain sealed documents.
5 As with most studies quoted in this article, statistics are broken down by denomination, but since evangelicalism is not located within a particular denomination, it is hard to identify the prevalence of the issue within evangelical churches in particular.
6 2 Cor. 9: taken from the English Standard Version. The translation of this verse is disputed.
7 Peterson was a Presbyterian pastor and professor at Regent College, Vancouver, which describes itself as "an innovative graduate school of theology where evangelical faith meets rigorous academics".
8 Johns is a Pentecostal pastor and theologian with affiliation to United Theological Seminary in Dayton, OH. UTS describes itself as committed to Historic Faith, Scriptural Holiness, and Church Renewal.

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Article

Too Gay for the Evangelicals, Too Evangelical for the Gays: A Narrative and Autoethnographic Study of a Celibate–Gay Testimony

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Abstract: The ecclesiastical discourse in Britian over homosexuality has included a significant focus on the narratives and experience of LGBTQ+ people. However, the relationship between and respective authority given to human experience and the Bible within church debates remains a matter of contention, especially among evangelicals committed to 'biblicism'. This study considers how even those unconvinced about experience as a 'source' of theology might still engage with queer narratives as an invitation for personal and cultural reflexivity and how the plausibility of theological claims might be tested whilst still prioritising Scripture. I examine testimony through a three-stage study. First, I conduct a narrative analysis of audiovisual recordings of my own prior practice of testimony as a celibate gay evangelical. Second, I offer up new, autoethnographic, thick descriptions of three pivotal crisis moments. Third, I theologically reflect upon these in relation to Romans 12.1–2 and the meta-theme of identity formation. I argue that LGBTQ+ testimonies have the potential to illuminate and thus transform heteronormative cultural patterns within the church; I argue that Christian identity formation must include the central integration of God's identification of a person in Christ; and I attempt to model how Christians might cautiously discern God's activity within a practice of testimony.

Keywords: testimony; queer theology; narrative analysis; autoethnography; gay celibacy; Christian asceticism; British evangelicalism

1. Introduction

A prominent aspect in the ongoing ecclesiastical crisis over homosexuality is the focus on the stories of LGBTQ+ individuals (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and other queer-identifying people, whose sexual or gender identities do not conform to traditional heterosexual norms). These stories highlight queer and queer Christian experiences and appear in various forms, including biographies, films, documentaries, podcasts, articles, seminars, and academic research (e.g., Beeching 2018; Bennett 2018; Stolakis 2021; Edgerton 2018; Peters and Aguirre n.d.; Grice 2024; Yarhouse et al. 2019; Yarhouse et al. 2017).

As an openly gay, celibate, evangelical Christian, I contribute to this growing corpus. Over the past twelve years, I have been open about my same-sex orientation in the church and received a persistent stream of requests to share my 'testimony'. In this article, I reflect on my practice of testimony and how it intertwines with my experience of gay celibacy. I conduct a three-part study: first, a narrative analysis of three personal testimony recordings to identify key themes and 'epiphanies'; second, new, autoethnographic, 'thick' descriptions of these epiphanies; and third, theological reflection on identity formation, in conversation with Romans 12: 1–2.

While some celebrate the increased focus on queer narratives in the church's discussions, others raise concerns that this prioritizes experience over Scripture. This is considered problematic for traditional evangelical 'biblicism' which holds to the supreme authority of Scripture (Bebbington 1989). An increasing number of 'affirming' evangelicals reconcile their reading of Scripture with the celebration of gay relationships and marriage (e.g., Inclusive Evangelicals Website n.d.; Fruitful 2024 Website n.d.; Taylor 2013). For these

groups, contemporary experience and queer narratives offer compelling evidence for the moral acceptability of gay relationships. 'Traditionalist' evangelicals, who understand Scripture as prohibiting gay unions despite cultural shifts and who are critical of prioritizing contemporary experience, have nonetheless not hesitated to strategically employ traditionalist-ethic queer narratives in promoting their stances (e.g., Living Out Website n.d.). As queer narratives are likely to remain central in ecclesial discussions, attention to the practice of queer Christian testimony benefits the whole spectrum.

In this article, I consider the reflexive invitation of testimony narratives in such a way that does not reject a traditionalist evangelical high view of Scripture. I argue that queer testimony has the potential to shift the conversation from a narrow ethical debate about a queer few to a universal call for transformation addressed to the whole church, inviting non-conformity to worldly patterns of sexuality. Before analyzing my practice, I will define testimony and outline my chosen methodology.

2. Testimony

Testimony highlights a specific type of narrative and experience. I adopt Collins' understanding of testimony as 'telling one's story of encountering God and God's ministry in Christ'. She argues that, in testimony, 'Christian faith and theology are oriented around the encounter and participation with God's own life and the witnessing to that through the telling of one's story. Faith is therefore performative, embodied, and affective, as well as cognitive and rational' (Collins 2020, p. 120). Testimony, by this definition, makes faith claims of equivalence between narrated experience, reality, and theological truth. Christians testify about what they believe that God has done. For those seeking to maintain the priority of Scriptural authority over experience, what is the value of such an experiential practice?

Zahl helpfully distinguishes between the 'implicit' and 'formal' roles of experience in theology (Zahl 2020, pp. 12–16). The implicit role refers to the unavoidable subjectivity that humans bring to theological reasoning. Attending to implicit experience is about critical self-reflection on how subjectivity influences reasoning, which impacts the employment of all other 'sources' of theology, including Scripture and tradition. Attention to experience can thus be a 'thick description of reasoning' (p. 46), desirable for those wanting to better prioritise Scripture on its own terms.

Acknowledging the implicit role of experience in theology, I adopt a position of theological critical realism, which recognises and interrogates the complex webs of social construction that cloud our interpretations of reality, while affirming the fundamental Christian conviction that God is the ground of reality, independent of human perception (Coakley 2013, p. 90; Wright 1992, p. 35). Critical realism affirms that reality exists but human subjectivity means that our perceptions and claims about reality are suspect and demand critical scrutiny and intellectual humility. A tenet of critical realism is thus the idea of judgmental rationality, the careful consideration of better or worse interpretations of the real (Bhaskar and Hartwig 2016, chp. 1).

As a narrative, the reality that testimony seeks to stand witness to is filtered through various subjective interpretive layers: the narrator's perspective and interpretation of events at the time; their later reinterpretations; the construction and delivery of the testimony; and the audience's interpretive reception. Given these multifaceted layers, a narrative approach views testimony as performative rather than directly representative (Ganzevoort 2014, p. 217). Interpretive claims about God's activity are made by the narrator, and the audience must judge their plausibility.

Such subjectivity, coupled with a Christian theology that acknowledges fallen human nature, fuels the methodological debate within theology about the role of experience as a 'source' of theological insight. Such debates are typified by the contrast between theological giants such as Schleiermacher (1928) and Barth (2003), who centralise and reject experience as a 'source', respectively. Such debates continue to abound in more recent theology (see Zahl 2020; Cartledge 2015; Webster 2003; Volf and Bass 2002; Morris and Cameron 2022).

Personal testimony, as defined above, invariably employs experience as a source. In analysing testimony, the focus here is thus not on whether experience *should* be employed, but *how it should be handled* and *what it contributes*. My focus will be primarily on its value in illuminating the implicit role of experience and inviting reflexivity; I will also briefly model how narrators and audiences might test and weigh the plausibility of claims while upholding traditional evangelical commitments to the supreme authority of Scripture. My method does not make experience the starting point or chief authority but weighs the potential veracity of testimony claims in light of 'biblical antecedents'.

'Biblical antecedence' refers to what Anderson identifies as the New Testament interpretive method. When the Spirit appears to lead the church into something new, it is always supported by mandates found in Scripture (Anderson 2001, p. 109; Collins 2020, p. 125). In this test, Scripture is considered the more trustworthy and authoritative source. Attending to spiritual experience is not pointless, however. Experience may verify, interpret, and even challenge inherited traditional understandings of texts, doctrines, and practices, helping to reveal subjectivity and the socially constructed assumptions contained within such inheritances (Collins 2020, p. 125). Even testimony's employment of experience as a source thus invites helpful attention to the implicit role of experience in normative theological understandings, regardless of whether experience is ultimately considered a legitimate theological source or testimony claims are judged true or not.

In short, I will demonstrate the value of testimony in inviting the listener to engage in a reflexive examination of their personal subjectivity and normative cultural assumptions. More tentatively, I will attempt to model a practical method of testing the plausibility of a testimony's claims that maintains scriptural priority. I pursue these aims through a study of my own practice of testimony.

3. Data Analysis Methods

My study contains three stages. First, I present a narrative analysis of three audiovisual recordings of occasions in which I shared my testimony publicly in 2012, 2018, and 2020, identifying key themes and 'epiphanies' (Section 4). Second, I compose new thick descriptions of the epiphanies as fresh autoethnographic data (Section 5). Third, I reflect upon the epiphanies and the theme of identity, in an attempt to discern God's action within the content and practice of my testimony (Section 6). While autoethnography is not usually proceeded by a full narrative analysis of prior storytelling, both aspects help to probe different dimensions of my practice of testimony and combine to offer a fuller and more reflexive analysis that draws attention to the implicit role of experience and the complexities of testimony's formal employment of experience as a source.

3.1. Narrative Analysis of Audiovisual Recordings of Prior Practice

To examine my practice and select epiphanies and themes for autoethnographic retelling and reflection, I used methods from narrative research (Ganzevoort 2014; Creswell 2013, pp. 70–76). I began by collecting audiovisual recordings, published articles, and interviews of me sharing my Christian story. I also consulted old journals, social media, and private reflections to provide supplementary contextual insights into the accuracy of narratives and my evolving interpretations of the re-narrated events at different times.

After carefully reviewing all collected data, I selected key sources that focused on 'encountering God and God's ministry in Christ'. Two videos and one audio recording provided the most comprehensive testimony narratives, delivered at several-year intervals: 2012, 2018, and 2020. The 2012 testimony was given to faculty and students at my evangelical theological college, marking my first public disclosure of my struggles with faith and sexuality (aged 20). The 2018 testimony was delivered on the main stage at a large national charismatic evangelical youth festival as part of a session on homosexuality (aged 26). The 2020 testimony was a professionally edited short film created for the Church of England's Living in Love and Faith (LLF) (Living in Love and Faith Website n.d.) course (aged 28).[1]

Creswell advocates for 'restorying' narrative data by 'reorganizing stories into some general type of framework' to identify central conflicts, 'sequences with implied causality', and themes for further discussion (Creswell 2013, pp. 74–75). I transcribed the testimonies in parallel against a chronological timeline to facilitate direct comparison. I coded claims of divine action and fact-checked details using the broader data set and memory. I then used Ganzevoort's six narrative dimensions to systematically analysis the transcripts. The first four dimensions—structure, perspective, tone, and role assignment—examine the narrative as a self-contained story (its content and form). The last two dimensions—relational positioning and justification for an audience—focus on the interaction between the narrator and the audience (the social context and practice) (Ganzevoort 2014). Considering these dimensions within the data led me to inductively identify three epiphanies (see Section 4.1) and eight themes (see Section 4.2).

3.2. Autoethnography

These epiphanies and themes become the focus of the autoethnography in Sections 5 and 6. Ellis et al. define autoethnography as 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno)'. This method combines elements of autobiography and ethnography to '. . .produce a "thick description" of a culture . . .to help facilitate understanding of a culture for insiders and outsiders, . . .by (inductively) discerning patterns of cultural experience—repeated feelings, stories, and happenings. . ..' (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 277). Autoethnographers focus on key epiphanies: 'times of existential crises that forced a person to attend to and analyze lived experience' (p. 275).

Walton notes differing epistemological approaches in autoethnography (Walton 2014, pp. xxxi–xxxii). For some, like Ellis et al., autoethnography involves telling evocative stories that focus on particularity and constructivist assumptions. Others seek to integrate it within a realist paradigm (e.g., Anderson 2006, p. 387). My critical realist employment sits between these. Like other forms of testimony, I contend that autoethnography *may* be potentially revelatory in regard to God's action and reality, but subjectivity and social construction mean that claims must be weighed and tested in light of Scripture and the subjective dimensions interrogated. As before, I am less interested in autoethnography's questionable ability to reveal truth and more in its potential to illuminate cultural patterns and the subjectivity that influences theological interpretation, opening both up to critical interrogation. I use it, as Walton describes, to 'unsettle, criticize and challenge taken-for-granted meanings and socially scripted performances' (Walton 2014, p. 9). In this way, autoethnography is a tool to aid the church in responding faithfully to Paul's exhortation in Romans 12.1–2:

> Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship. Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will (NIV).

I return to this verse in Section 6, but it also anchors the careful employment of autoethnography for theology in and to its proper context and end. With critical rigour, it can be a tool to systematically analyze personal experience to help reveal the 'patterns of the world' and interrogate how subjectivity may be shaping the discernment of God's action. Such visibility is crucial for the church to avoid blind conformity and, instead, pursue individual, social, and cultural transformation in Christ. By integrating the cultural insights of autoethnography with the critical faithfulness of theology, we can evaluate and reflect on the interpretive claims of God's action within testimonies, in order to better discern 'what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will'.

This study could be described as 'queer' autoethnography. Cornwall summarizes how queer perspectives exist 'in a state of opposition to regulatory normativities' (Cornwall 2011, p. 38). I seek here to deepen the understanding of a marginal perspective that

defies heteronormative cultural assumptions (Ellis et al. 2011, p. 278). In doing so, my analysis provides a disruptive theological critique—a queering effect—on often invisible heteronormative cultural patterns in British evangelicalism. As a queering work, it aims not only to illuminate patterns but drive spiritual and cultural transformation and a theological renewal of minds regarding sexuality, not only for queer people but for all Christians. My ultimate goal is that this analysis might, in a small way, help Christians to offer their whole selves to God, 'the total person, concretely, in time and space', as living sacrifices and acts of worship (Reumann 2003).

Having outlined my methods, I turn to my first stage: the narrative analysis of prior practice.

4. Narrative Analysis of Testimony Data

In this section, I present key insights from my narrative analysis of the 2012, 2018, and 2020 recordings of my testimony. I identify the overarching quest plot structure and Romance type and highlight eight thematic insights, which I distil into the meta-theme of the identity quest.

4.1. Narrative Structure and Type and Identification of Epiphanies

Analyzing the structure, perspective, tone, and role assignment of the testimonies revealed a consistent structure across all recordings: my initial rising agency in isolation; the introduction of God as a conflicting active agent; and a struggle to reconcile God's will with my own. The narratives pivot around three climactic crises—moments of escalating intensity where decisive confrontations are resolved by my submission to God. Each narrative concludes with some kind of moral teaching.

This intuitive structure reflects the archetypal story forms of the Romantic quest and 'hero's journey', familiar in literary theory. Romance, classically, focuses on the hero's success in overcoming conflict (Frye 1957, pp. 187, 192). Campbell's 'hero's journey' famously describes the archetypal structure of this form: a hero ventures from the ordinary world into a realm of 'supernatural wonder', encounters 'fabulous forces', achieves a 'decisive victory', and returns with the power to benefit others (Campbell 2004, p. 23). Vogler's titles for this structure help to demonstrate the 'archetypal' elements in my own testimonies (Vogler 2020).

1. 'Ordinary world': This stage reflects my life before grappling with faith and sexuality. Early on, my upbringing in a liberal Anglican context shapes my inherited faith. Doubts about God arise when my family stops attending church (around age 11), after which I discover and embrace my same-sex sexual orientation.
2. 'Call to adventure': The story begins properly with a friend's persistent invitation to her Baptist church (age 14).
3. 'Refusal of the call': Initially, I resist the invitation but eventually attend her baptism service.
4. 'Meeting with the mentor': At the service, I experience a sense of belonging. I re-engage with faith through the church's youth group, which becomes crucial in supporting my returning to church attendance and rediscovery of faith.
5. 'Crossing the first threshold': As I return to regular church attendance and faith and take discipleship seriously (age 15), I encounter Leviticus 18:22, leading to confusion and the realization that the church is divided on homosexuality. I am thrown into my challenging journey.
6. 'Tests, allies, and enemies': I navigate the church's conflicting views on homosexuality. My involvement in the evangelical youth group is juxtaposed with the exploration of secular LGBTQ+ spaces and the subculture.
7. 'Approach to the inmost cave': I conclude that a romantic gay relationship is acceptable and begin dating. I simultaneously explore a young leadership role in my traditionalist church (age 16).

8. 'The ordeal': The central crisis begins with an unexpected charismatic experience in which I discern God calling me to singleness. This brings deep anguish and confusion as I struggle with the demand but ultimately decide to end my romantic relationship. The ordeal stretches across six months and concludes with a second charismatic experience of God's profound love.
9. 'Reward': This second experience grants a transcendent perspective on the call and helps me to embrace it, transforming my view of the requested celibacy from a form of oppression to consecration, giving a greater degree of contentment.
10. 'The road back': With the fleeting charismatic experience finished, I apply and live out my newfound understanding of celibacy. I recount a brief, selective summary of events to the present time.
11. 'The resurrection': A clear climax is not emphasised, but a 'quiet climax' and evidence of the 'death and resurrection' experience might be the significant life shifts that flow from the call to singleness (Vogler 2020, p. 203). I move from a desire to pursue performing arts to studying theology and training for ministry.
12. 'Return with the elixir': My testimonies culminate in sharing the wisdom and insights gained through this journey, applying the lessons learned to broader contexts.

My Romance quest reflects both the universal Christian search to know God and my unique personal journey to reconcile faith and sexuality. The heroic undertones raise questions about potential ego-dynamics (Tyler 2013), and the romanticism, which Hopewell identifies as characteristic of charismatic Christian narratives (Hopewell 1987, pp. 59–60), suggests the downplaying of the realism and irony found in other forms, like tragedy and comedy (Frye 1957, p. 192). Both aspects will be explored further in due course.

Importantly, this structural analysis pinpoints three pivotal crises, which also featured the densest coding of claims about God's direct activity: (1) encountering Leviticus 18:22 (stage 5); (2) the initial call to singleness (beginning of stage 8); and (3) the second charismatic experience that helped me to embrace the calling (end of stage 8/stage 9). These events will be used as my epiphanies in the autoethnographic descriptions and analysis (Sections 5 and 6).

4.2. Emerging Themes

Analyzing the structure, perspective, tone, and role assignment also raised four inductive thematic insights. Considering my role as a narrator, the three different audiences, and the methods that I used to justify and legitimize my story in each interaction to those audiences highlighted a further four. After describing each, I suggest that they combine as aspects of an overarching meta-theme: a search for identity.

1. Love story plot (searching for relationship): Analyzing the tone and role assignment demonstrated how I framed my testimonies as love stories. I focus on the relationship between two main characters: myself and God. From our initial (re)meeting, through conflict and miscommunication, a happy union is eventually achieved. Supporting characters play significant roles but remain secondary to the central relationship. This framing emphasizes my quest as a search for divine love and relationship. The crises surrounding sexuality raise a 'will they, won't they?' tension, with the 'sacred marriage' or 'consummation' moment serving as the quest's reward (Vogler 2020, pp. 172–73, 183). This moment represents blissful intimacy and complete submission to God, the perfect lover.
2. Impact of key figures and communities (searching for belonging): Secondary characters and communities still significantly influenced my journey and theological and ethical formation. My heady feelings for my boyfriend and exploratory forays into LGBTQ+ community spaces and friendship groups clearly impacted my early theological and ethical conclusions in favour of gay relationships as a place where I could find belonging. Conversely, my youth pastor's approval and gentle explanation (only after I had accepted the call to singleness) that being in a gay relationship would bar me from leadership roles in my church potentially cemented my interpretation of the call

to singleness and influenced the later transition to a more traditionalist ethical position. Thus, my divine love story is accompanied by a search for belonging in human relationships and communities. The central conflict leads to bittersweet moments of feeling (rightly or wrongly) that I must choose between certain communities and relationships if I am to be accepted and find belonging in one or the other.

3. Bullying language and projection (searching for God's character): An uncomfortable insight emerged when coding the divine action claims in the 2012 testimony. Despite the triumphant Romantic form and love story plotline, a disturbing pattern of violent and bullying language choices for God's actions was evident. God's 'confronting', 'convicting', and 'challenging' were accompanied with more intense descriptions, such as God 'hitting me in the face', 'bringing me to my knees', 'pushing' me, and 'breaking my heart'. I describe 'grappling', 'wrestling', and questioning why God was 'doing this to me' and 'making me feel so miserable'. These painted a darker picture of the relationship: the portrayal of God as a bullying, oppressive partner, rather than a tender lover.

This language often (although not always) described previous interpretations, no longer held at the time of delivery. It revealed how prior views of God had evolved as I encountered and understood him more deeply.[2] Nonetheless, the violent terms led me to reflect on the formative impact of my first long-term romantic relationship with a peer through secondary school. This relationship was marked by intense physicality and I had often felt emotionally bullied. The projection of human paternal relationships onto God as Father is well considered (Leslie and Spaulding 2012; Bierman 2005). Casting God as my lover, could the violent themes in the 2012 testimony reflect a similar projection of my prior romantic wounds onto God? The 2018 and 2020 testimonies included conflict and confrontation but avoided such violent terms, perhaps due to greater distance from the defining human relationship and my years of theological study between the narrative interactions in which my understanding of God's character matured. Evolving interpretations of divine action appear intertwined with a quest to understand God's character as my lover, potentially viewed through the lenses of past relational wounds.

4. Social context, history, and interpretation (searching for meaning): Analysing the story configuration drew my attention to the scene setting of my third epiphany, the second charismatic experience. This was the key interpretive moment of my testimonies, in which a greater degree of contentment with celibacy was found. This event occurred during an intense ministry period at Soul Survivor, a prominent charismatic youth festival. I break cautiously but deliberately from anonymising contexts and characters to illustrate how social context and history complexify interpretive practice.

The recorded testimonies fail to make clear how instrumental Soul Survivor had been in shaping my understanding of sexual ethics, homosexuality, and singleness leading up to the narrative event. It was at Soul Survivor that I first heard singleness promoted as a potentially positive and fulfilling choice, legitimized alongside heterosexual marriage, through the teaching of the charismatic (in both senses) and celibate leader, Mike Pilavachi. Without social context, this epiphany event in my narrated testimonies appeared as a significant isolated 'leap' in interpretation, but this neglects the longer, undisclosed narrative of interpretive formation linked with this setting.

The connection between context, history, and interpretation is complexified further by Pilavachi's subsequent indictment in a high-profile safeguarding and spiritual abuse scandal (Church of England 2023; Burchell 2023). The substantiated concerns of spiritual abuse and inappropriate physical relationships with young men indicate a potentially more complex picture of the ministry context in which the experience took place and, potentially, of Pilivachi's contentment in celibacy (Scolding Kc and Fullbrook 2024, esp. pp. 83–85). The entanglement of my story with these stories complexifies the somewhat naïve, romanticised, and idealised view of celibacy envisioned by my teenage self. The probing of these social-contextual dynamics and their influence could warrant a separate

article. I simply note here how my search for meaning was shaped by social contexts—both the immediate context and atmosphere of the settings of the narrative events and more general and unfolding histories where the testimonies are connected to particular places, experiences, people, and communities.

5. Testimony as teaching (searching for ethics): Analysing the testimonies as narrative interactions demonstrated how each 'performance' used my testimony to justify teaching on pastoral, ethical, and theological issues. In 2012, I focused on the church's pastoral approach to LGBTQ+ people and costly discipleship. In 2018, I emphasized personal discipleship and the need to offer one's sexuality to God, regardless of orientation. In 2020, I explained my rationale for celibacy and theological vision for marriage. In each case, the 'moral of the story' influences my emphases as the same events are presented slightly differently. This use of testimony for the purpose of teaching highlights a search for ethics and practical direction (both personal and communicated) and the employment of testimony as formal source to justify theological arguments.
6. Factual errors and deliberate spin (searching for legitimacy): Some discrepancies in the narratives clearly arise from memory distortions, such as the exact timings of events or precisely what I believed at specific times. Others appear to deliberately stretch the truth. For example, the 2018 youth festival testimony exaggerates a period of waywardness by implying a greater degree of promiscuity before my call to singleness. In all testimonies, I minimize ongoing struggles and times of disillusionment after the second charismatic experience. Walton notes how 'heightening language' can increase the dramatic effect in performative narrative (Walton 2014, p. xxvi), and Hopewell notes 'the danger of distortion. . ., accentuating the achievements and minimizing the failures' (Hopewell 1987, p. 195). Exaggeration heightened the contrast between my old and new life, while minimizing the ongoing struggle crafted a more triumphalist narrative. Although these manipulations were likely stimulated by insecurities and a desire to convince, rather than malicious intent to deceive, they demonstrate the performative nature of testimony and highlight my search for legitimacy in the eyes of my audiences.
7. Growing platforms and the quiet climax (searching for affirmation): The three testimonies were delivered to progressively larger audiences, from a few dozen, to thousands, to a national online reach and inclusion in the CofE's flagship LLF course. This trend was reflected in the wider data gathered and raises ethical questions about platforming certain people and commodifying their stories. It led me to reflect upon my early 20s, when, by virtue of my story, I was offered many prominent public speaking opportunities and mentoring with high-profile leaders. This was flattering, but I increasingly felt pigeonholed—reduced to nothing more than a convenient celibate–gay story. Did my search for affirmation make me vulnerable to older leaders with their agenda? I have come to recognize in myself a tendency to perform to expectations. Increased audiences amplified this temptation. Might this have affected not only my storytelling but my life decisions? Earlier, I highlighted the 'quiet climax' of my stories as a shift from a potential career in performing arts to studying theology and Christian ministry. Did evangelical cultural values and specific community expectations influence my interpretation of charismatic experiences and career choices? Did I exchange one kind of performing for another?
8. Maintaining expectations (searching for integrity): Recalling the impact of Mike Pilivachi's celibate narrative on me as a teenager and the complexifying light of the recent allegations and revelations, we might note dangers in my own prior testimony practices. I have illustrated how my testimony narrative and practice may, in part, be a product of my search for belonging, validation, and affirmation before increasing audiences. Since I used it to make and teach claims about God, narrated interpretations of events as fact, and gave ethical and pastoral applications, any personal insecurity or deliberate dishonesty impacts and risks damage to others. Increasing public exposure

potentially intensifies the social pressure to maintain the established narrative as the stakes for reinterpretation or amendment grow ever larger. If, for example, I changed my theology or entered into a same-sex relationship now, after representing gay celibacy in the CofE's high-profile LLF process, it could have considerable political ramifications. Space could easily grow between a pedestalled storyteller's acclaimed performance and their hidden reality. The pressure to maintain a certain triumphalist narrative of celibacy could easily contribute to unhealthy repression or dishonesty, potentially leading to serious and harmful effects, all too familiar in the church.

4.3. Summary

My themes and Romantic quest framing can be distilled as a 'search for identity'. This search encompasses personal, social, and theological dimensions of how I, God, and others identify me. I will therefore focus my theological reflection on identity formation in Section 6. An ethical dimension has also emerged concerning when testimony might be deliberately or naïvely false. For testimony to contribute constructively, honesty, safe vulnerability and reflexivity will all be important. I have attempted to model this within my narrative analysis and now renew this commitment for my autoethnographic compositions.

5. Autoethnographic Descriptions of Three Epiphanies

I turn to the second stage of my method: fresh autoethnographic retellings of the epiphanies identified by my narrative analysis. These are newly written accounts, informed by the testimony recordings, narrative analysis, and wider data set. They are offered in an attempt to increase the reader's outsider knowledge of my experience of coming to gay celibacy in an evangelical setting and to provide restoried and transparent data for my subsequent theological reflection.

5.1. Epiphany 1: 'Hateful'

As a new, fifteen-year-old, born-again Christian, I made the dangerous decision to start reading my Bible.

I cannot recall exactly how I came upon Leviticus 18:22. The 'life lessons' inserted into the text in my Thomas Nelson Youth Bible addressed homosexuality here and alongside 1 Corinthians 6:9–11. I suspect I saw the word 'homosexuality' in the index and *immediately* turned there. Coming to terms with being gay had been the central preoccupation of the last five years.

'You must not have sexual relations with a man as you would a woman. That is a hateful sin'.

My blood froze.

Remarkably, I had never considered that God might have something to say about homosexuality.

'. . .a hateful sin.'

I had no idea it was contentious in the church.

'. . .hateful sin.'

My childhood church and liberal Anglican parents had never even mentioned it.

'. . .hateful. . ..'

'. . .hateful. . ..'

'. . .hateful. . ..'

Those 19 words threw my world upside down.

I read and re-read the 'life lesson'. It told me, 'homosexuality is wrong'; 'These laws ban every type of homosexual activity'; 'homosexuality is clearly stated here as something that does not please God'. The stark sentences were unyielding. The idea that something I desired and hoped for, that seemed so naturally *me*, might be a '*hateful* sin' could barely compute.

I turned to the calm, objective wisdom of the internet. I was met with a theological debate ablaze with vitriol, homophobia, and deep division.

In desperation, I went old-school, confiding in two Christian friends. The first leapt up, hugging me. 'God loves you! He just wants you to be happy. It doesn't matter that you are gay. Love is love'.

Bolstered, I told the second friend. As I confessed, 'I'm gay', she gaped in conflicted horror. My face burned red with shame as she told me her parents switched off the TV whenever a gay person came on. The Bible, she told me, taught being gay was wrong.

'I don't think my parents would want me to hang out with you anymore'.

She left.

5.2. Epiphany 2: 'Yes'

The sudden and palpable sense of unease caught me entirely off-guard.

I was alone in my room, doing nothing in particular, certainly nothing 'spiritual', but. . . something was not right.

The powerful press made no sense. Everything was good. Things were *the best* they had been in a long time. My life was back on track. At church, I was doing a young leader's course and the worship pastor was mentoring me into worship leading. That Sunday I would lead a youth band for the first time.

Something was wrong.

My love life was even better. I was in the heady rush of new, young infatuation. The romance with Alex had been bubbling up for months but the week before it had turned official. We had shared a magical first date: electricity sparking as I tentatively held hands with a boy in public for the first time; fits of laughter as we tried to share the same very tangled set of headphones and listen to his favourite band; the shared thrill of our first kiss in the icy winter air. My heart had not slowed since.

Something was wrong.

I'd been open with him about my faith. I'd even told him, to his bemusement, that I thought the Bible said sex was for marriage and I wasn't sure yet what I thought of gay marriage, so it might never be on the cards for us.

Something was wrong.

I'd thanked God for Alex repeatedly; thanked God that despite all the uncertainty and anxiety of the last six months, I had reached a place where I could have both a relationship and a faith. I'd thanked God for making me happier than at any other time in my life.

SOMETHING. WAS. WRONG.

What?

What was this?

I'd never felt such a strong, inexplicable sense that pressed against all the evidence. It seemed to come from outside of myself.

Suddenly, I knew.

This overwhelming, firm but gentle sense was God.

I stopped.

I prayed.

"What's wrong, Lord? What are you trying to say?"

God answered.

"Luke. This is not what I want for you."

Every atom of my being was charged with emotions too complex to feel or understand. I knew exactly what he meant.

"No. . . No. Everything is good."

"This is not what I want for you."

"Please, no! Things are going great. Why wouldn't you want this? It's so good. I. . . I don't want to be alone."

"I want you to be single."

My heart pounded, echoing against the implacable presence of God.

I cried. I prayed, worshipped, and grieved.

I agonised over the implications for my relationship with Alex.

God's desire for me was unrelenting.

"I want you to be single."

It was the first time I'd ever felt God speaking to me. There could only be one answer.

5.3. Epiphany 3: 'Worth It'

The six months after my call to singleness were utter misery. I could not understand why God would do this to me. It was so unfair, so unreasonable to make me this way and then tell me I couldn't be myself. No straight friends had to deal with this.

God clearly didn't want me to be happy.

I *hated* it. It felt like being physically torn in two. And *God* was the one doing it.

My prayer life was desperate questions and earnest pleading. I asked God, again and again, to take away my gayness, to make it easier, to no avail.

I pushed down the emotions.

That summer, our youth group attended Soul Survivor. I loved most of it but the intense ministry times freaked me out.

I waited in the hushed silence anxiously for the weird groans and shouts, the tongues and tears that I knew would soon fill the Big Top. I felt deeply uncomfortable, fearful even, about the more forceful utterances. It was not a familiar style or experience of worship. Apart from that one night, when God had called me to singleness, I had never had a strong sense of the Holy Spirit. I had certainly never felt out of control, as some in the tent appeared to be.

A distant scream made my skin crawl. I sat down, hugging my knees and waiting for the music to start again. Mistaking my posture, a fired-up peer came to enthusiastically pray for me. Too awkward to decline, I stammered a request.

"I just find this all a bit. . . I don't know. Maybe you could pray that I wouldn't discount what God is doing? You know?"

As they prayed, to my horror, the pent-up pressure cooker of confused emotions that I had been pushing down for months forced its way up, powerfully undeniable. My anger at God, pain at what he was demanding, self-hatred, guilt, frustration, longing, despair, and the deep, deep sadness I had been carrying.

I sobbed, uncontrollably.

After I don't know how long, something unexpected happened. For a fleeting moment, the inner tempest ceased and a picture came into my mind's eye. I looked upon thousands of faces, some looking up with longing, others with heads hung down. I experienced an utterly overwhelming sense of love, a love that outstripped even the deepest depths of my raw anguish. These people, I felt, were the LGBTQ+ community; a people shunned by the church, pushed to the outside, who struggled to know and understand just how much God loved them. They were people like me.

From drowning in the depths of self-pity and pain I was suddenly overwhelmed with God's love for me and for these people in my picture. God loved us. God loved me. God loved more deeply than I could ever understand. God loved so much that he gave his only Son.

I sensed two questions:

"Is there anything you can give up, that is bigger than what I have already given up for you? If even one person can come to know me as a result of you giving this up, is it worth it?"

There was nothing.

It would be worth it.

6. Identity

In Section 4, I identified a central theme of my testimonies as the search for identity. The epiphanies each recount pivotal turning points and crises within this quest. I now examine this theme by bringing the epiphanies into conversation with Paul's exhortation in Romans 12:1–2 and an effort to discern God's action. I do not seek to argue that my ethical

commitment to celibacy is necessarily the correct interpretation. Rather, I contend that my struggle with queer Christian identity (and other queer narratives) can draw attention to God's work of identifying Christians in Christ and calling them to resist worldly patterns and so be transformed by the renewal of their minds, whatever their sexual orientation.

6.1. Aggravated Identity Crisis: The Inability to Conform

The first epiphany triggered a period of acute disorientation and began my quest for reconciliation between faith and sexuality. 'Crossing the first threshold' included a shift from relative peace, simplicity, and assumed compatibility between sexuality and faith into fearfully navigating a world of heated cultural currents and vitriolic discourse. I felt pressured to choose a side, to align myself with a particular set of cultural values and morally acceptable roles. I stood at a crossroads in terms of what my life would look like.

This kind of identity and role confusion aligns with Erik Erikson's theories of psychosocial development (Erikson 1968; Stevens 2008). Erikson's theories remain foundational for much of developmental psychology, although modern scholarship has nuanced and expanded his ideas, primarily by critiquing the overfocus on adolescence and his overly masculine and western assumptions, which ignore the important complexifying impact of alternative cultural contexts and gender experiences (Cãotâe and Levine 2002; Schachter 2005; Syed and McLean 2018). Erikson nonetheless helpfully describes adolescent identity formation as arising 'from the selective repudiation and mutual assimilation of childhood identifications and their absorption in a new configuration, which, in turn, is dependent on the process by which a society (often through subsocieties) identifies the young individual, recognizing him [sic] as somebody who had to become the way he is and who, being the way he is, is taken for granted' (Erikson 1968, p. 157). 'Identity' refers here to one's internal sense of self but is directly connected to social roles and external 'identifications'. All 'formed' identities are shaped through the confusion of internal reconfigurations and experimentation with social roles. McAdams argues that the very form that these identity configurations take is story: 'people living in modern societies provide their lives with unity and purpose by constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self' (McAdams 2001, p. 100).

Erikson noted that the intensity or ease of resolution during identity confusion can vary. When the repudiation of prior identifications is costly or when a person repeatedly tries but fails to assimilate key identifications, the process becomes more complex. Where multiple attempts to reconfigure and form a new identity 'fail', a prolonged and 'aggravated' state of identity and role confusion can occur (p. 212). The first epiphany seems to mark the beginning of an identity crisis, as my previous holding together of gay and Christian identifications and expectations was questioned. Although starting to date a boy represented an attempt to forge a new identity—emerging from months of struggle and uncertainty not detailed here—this configuration was quickly disrupted by the perceived call to singleness. While this new role, of being gay and yet required by God to remain single, offered an identity role, the ongoing turmoil and angst leading up to the third epiphany indicates that my faith and sexual identity remained far from integrated and that the celibate role felt imposed and oppressive rather than internally assimilated into my sense of self.

During this aggravated identity crisis, my *inability* to conform to the normative sexual patterns of my world—whether secular libertinism or traditional evangelical heterosexuality—became painfully apparent. Conforming, on the one hand, would mean direct disobedience to what I felt that God was specifically instructing me to. Conforming, on the other, was simply impossible for me to imagine, with no attraction to women. Non-Christian gay friends and straight evangelical peers all, in their different ways, seemed able to navigate these cultural expectations with relative ease. I felt a sense of acute dysphoria and injustice that only I (it seemed) had such sacrificial demands placed upon my sexuality.

Romans 12:2's instruction to not conform to the patterns of the world highlights a surprising potential grace for this dysphoric experience. Feeling *unable* to conform *forced* me to grapple deeply with how to understand and express my sexuality in relation to

God. This focused, high-stakes struggle is something that I suspect that few straight evangelical peers face to the same degree. My anguished teenage cry was 'Why me?' Perhaps more pertinent critical–cultural questions are 'Why not them?' 'Why do so few straight evangelical teenagers seriously consider lifelong celibacy for God?' 'Do evangelicals unwittingly conform to invisible patterns and cultural expectations of romantic attachment and marriage that may not, in fact, align with the full extent of God's perfect and pleasing will?'

6.2. Creative Configurations: Queering Patterns

Psychologists recognise that aggravated identity confusion can still be constructive in shaping a person's identity, when repeated experimentation ultimately resolves into a new configuration (Erikson 1968, p. 163; Marcia 2002; Arnett 2000). Erikson felt that individuals whose experiments resulted in 'creative' configurations offered something important to society:

> We can study the identity crisis also in the lives of creative individuals who could resolve it for themselves only by offering to their contemporaries a new model of resolution such as that expressed in worlds of art or in original deeds, and who furthermore are eager to tell us all about it in diaries, letters, and self-representations. And even as the neuroses of a given period reflect the ever-present inner chaos of man's [sic] existence in a new way, the creative crises point to the period's unique solutions. (Erikson 1968, p. 134)

While these identity configurations may begin as internalized narratives (McAdams 2001), the narrating of such stories can challenge whole communities and cultures. Both the 'affirming queer Christian' and 'gay–celibate' configurations might be interpreted as 'creative' responses emerging from the queer Christian identity crisis. They both, in different ways, resist conformity to heteronormative cultural assumptions. Queering these norms can illuminate them for people who do conform unconsciously. The affirming configuration is counter-cultural within traditional Christianity by affirming gay romantic relationships and marriage. The celibate configuration challenges both secular sexual libertinism and traditional Christian (especially evangelical) heteronormativity by embracing consecrated celibacy. Public acts like 'Christians at Pride' or affirming 'Open Table' communion services offer one kind of powerful 'solution' and narrative in response to social concerns, while an openly same-sex-attracted person choosing consecrated celibacy for the love of God presents another.

The queering effect of celibate configurations may be less obvious or advertised than mainstream secular LGBTQ+ expressions. Rather than simply, as I have been accused, reinforcing heteronormative ideas though 'internalised homophobia', gay celibate asceticism can have a role in 'queering the queer', as Bennett pithily describes it (2022). Gay celibate expressions 'queer' heteronormative assumptions but with alternative identity configurations and expressions to mainstream and secular LGBTQ+ philosophy. The liminality of being too gay for the evangelicals and too evangelical for the gays demonstrates how gay–celibate configurations can be their own kind of resistance and non-conformity.

Within evangelicalism, celibacy has been largely neglected since the Reformation. Committed celibacy (distinct from circumstantial singleness), gay or otherwise, reintroduces an alternative expression to marriage of consecrated sexuality. Some recent movements accept and celebrate queer orientations while advocating for traditional Christian sexual ethics, a creative and queering configuration that separates one's fundamental and primary Christian identity from heteronormativity, without abandoning traditionalist sexual ethics (Life on Side B Website n.d.; Post 2021; Hill 2018). Conversely, those arguing for the complete rejection of sexual identity categories resist their increasing secular normativity (Allberry 2013; Childers 2024; Yuan 2018).

The ethical act of celibacy itself is not the only, or even the most important, part of the potentially creative witness offered by healthy gay–celibate configurations. Coakley (2015, chp. 5) and Bennett (2022, pp. 139–49) distinguish between celibacy that is repressive and

defined by extrinsic obedience to cultural or moral expectations or laws and one that is about free-self-giving and erotic sublimation for the love of God. The former remains a kind of works righteousness in which the virtue of an ethical action is prioritised but in which deeper questions of human personhood and flourishing are neglected. The latter emerges from what Coakley argues is a healthy Chrisian asceticism. This resists the false disjunction of 'libertinism', on the one hand, which holds the unfulfillment of desires as *harmful*, and repression, on the other, which advocates for the *denial* of desires altogether. Healthy Christian asceticism, for Coakley, is not about gratification or the denial of desires and erotic energies, per se, but about their sublimation: their chastening and channelling. In healthy asceticism, desires and energies are not repressed but purified and turned to the love of God (Coakley 2015, p. 133). She contends that 'the key issue in the ascetic "training of desire"... is a lifelong commitment to personal erotic transformation, and thereby of reflection on the final significance of all our desires before God' (Coakley 2015, p. 141). Celibacies of repression and erotic transformation may look superficially similar in their concrete ethical actions. Their underlying differences in how desire is understood, repressed, or expressed is seismic, however, and greatly determine their practical sustainability and impact on personal and social human flourishing. The latter kind of celibacy invites all Christians, homosexual or otherwise, to 'submit their desires to the test of divine longing' (Coakley 2015, p. 141) and consider the true end of sexual and other desires. Are these ends only immediate, personal gratification or even the love of other human beings, or is sexuality supposed to turn human beings to the love of God? The celibacy that emerges as a form of erotic sublimation for the love of God raises such questions to Christians in all sexual situations.

The mere existence of non-conforming configurations does not guarantee ecclesial cultural transformation. Gadini's ethnography of single women in evangelical churches, for instance, diagnoses and laments male-dominated culture's stubborn resistance to being critiqued and transformed despite repeated opportunities. It records the perpetuation of double standards and single female marginalisation for culturally unaccepted 'ways of being' (Gaddini 2022, p. 217). What is needed is the humility to embrace alternative configurations and narratives as invitations to critical self-reflection. How do testimonies reveal alternative subjective perspectives and how do these illuminate aspects of my own subjectivity? What cultural norms does a configuration resist and how much critical attention have I subjected those norms to? Where testimony is treated only as evidence in ethical discussions about gay sex and same-sex marriage, disagreements upon the authority of experience as a formal source are likely to perpetuate the impasse. Embracing testimony as an invitation to reflexivity transforms the ecclesiastical conversation from being about 'what to do with the gays' into a universal theological question. How might the attention to sexuality stimulate all Christians to give their whole and sexual selves, resist conforming the patterns of the world, and seek the renewal of their minds. The ethical debates may not be immediately resolved, but the church can only benefit from this widespread emphasis on a commitment to transformation in the Spirit by all Christians of all sexualities.

6.3. The 'Buffered' and 'Porous' Self: Patterns of Identity Formation

My epiphanies evidence an evolution in my guiding identity formation framework. Adopting Charles Taylor's seminal analysis of secularization, this can be understood as a counter-cultural movement away from an expressive-individualist framework toward a more traditional, integrated approach.

Taylor observes a paradigm shift between pre-modern and modern societies, characterized by the transition from a 'porous self' to a 'buffered self'. Pre-modern individuals, he contends, understood their identities as deeply interconnected with the world, influenced by external spiritual and communal forces, and embedded in a meaningful cosmic order. This 'porous self' was open to the supernatural and closely tied to community and tradition. In contrast, modern identity formation prizes autonomy, individualism, and a rational, secular worldview. The 'buffered self' is self-contained and defends against

external influences while navigating a fragmented and pluralistic landscape of beliefs and lifestyles (Taylor 2007, chps. 8, 12).

Taylor's contrast is a matter of posture and emphasis, rather than total separation between integration and autonomy, community and individual. Sociology and psychology, for example, widely recognise how things like culture and religious values still significantly impact modern identity development (Trommsdorff 2015, pp. 29–30). The 'buffered self' is not untouched by external influences but is more defended and judges them with greater autonomy, viewing the imposition of external judgements as tyrannical. External validation is still desired, but integrity is understood as fidelity to the self-determined sense of identity, rather than conforming to external expectations. In contrast, the porous self is willing to sacrifice and adjust its internally generated sense of self to align with the identifications of one's external community or deity.

The 'buffered self's' guarded posture inherently subordinates God's identification (as extrinsic) to self-determined identity. An *atheistic* 'porous self' certainly risks conforming to worldly patterns through social submission. For modern British Christians, conditioned in an expressive individualist society, Christian identity transformation would seem to require us to remove buffers from the self and permit God and God's community, the church, a more significant role in our identity formation. Crucially, rather than prioritising self-generated identity, the Christian must integrate God's identifications of them in Christ—as accepted, forgiven, and drawn into God's ongoing work within the community of the church.

The tension between what I perceived as God's authoritative presence and my modern conditioning is demonstrated in the epiphanies, especially the conflict of wills in moments like the initial call to singleness. The external influence is interpreted as a cruel and capricious imposition, rather than being welcomed as purposeful, liberating, and loving. Yet, in the third epiphany, I reframe God's demand not as a tyrannical imposition but as an invitation to participate in Christ's sacrificial love and ministry of reconciliation. The transition to a more porous self facilitated a move away from a more repressive form of celibacy, where I understood the fulfilment of desire as an autonomous endeavour and extrinsic limitation is an offence. It moved me towards a more integrated celibacy, in which the longing for erotic fulfilment directed me towards God's love and the extrinsic demands were thus freely assimilated as positive.

Whether celibacy was *actually* demanded by God or constituted a false interpretation, the willing integration of what I believed that God was asking was a pivotal moment in the shift towards a more 'porous self'. The sense of celibacy as oppressive has occurred periodically, but perhaps regular relapses into dissonance between our self-generated identity and our understanding of God's external identification, freely assimilated, are to be expected. I may seek non-conformity to modern western patterns, but I remain unavoidably embedded within them, assailed by expressive individualist philosophy and competing social expectations.

6.4. Identity Apotheosis: The Renewing of My Mind?

The third epiphany marks the dramatic transition from 'the great ordeal' into the resolution and 'reward'. This moment represents the defining test: will I do what needs to be done? Will I die to my old self to attain the reward of a true and integrated identity? (Campbell 2004, pp. 141–42). As Vogler elaborates,

> The Ordeal in myths signifies the death of the ego. The hero is now fully part of the cosmos, dead to the old, limited vision of things and reborn into a new consciousness of connections. The old boundaries of the Self have been transcended or annihilated. . . .The Greeks called this a moment of apotheosis. . ..
>
> (Vogler 2020, p. 177).

The transformation of buffered boundaries into a more porous posture allowed integration with what I interpreted as God's identification of me. This came not by a repeat calling to celibacy, per se, but through a profound encounter with God's overwhelming and

unconditional love, rooted in the sacrificial work of Christ. In the moment of apotheosis, my story is aligned with Christ's own story; my identity is united with Christ's glorious identity as the beloved of God. The intense conflict between sexuality and faith, the deep tensions of disintegrated identity, are overshadowed. The egotistical illusion that I am the 'hero' is vanquished. This transformation, this turn from hopelessness to purposeful resolve, comes not through my own 'heroic efforts', but through an encounter with the ultimate victorious action of Christ on my behalf. This 'divine boon' enables the 'completion' of my quest narrative. The essential identification that I must integrate is God's love for me, for LGBTQ+ people, indeed for *all* people, manifested in Christ's loving sacrifice. What once seemed tyrannical and oppressive is reinterpreted, through the renewing of my mind, into an invitation to participate in Christ's sacrificial love and ministry of reconciliation to those who do not yet know this love.

This apotheosis contains my testimony's most emphatic claims of divine action:

- God's love for me;
- God's love for all LGBTQ+ people;
- God's loving sacrifice of himself (in Christ);
- An implied reaffirmation of God calling me to singleness;
- God gifting purpose through the implication that celibacy may, in some unknown way, help others to come to faith.

Thus far, I have treated my testimony claims descriptively and emphasised the implicit role of experience. I remain less concerned with arguing for the validity of my actual testimony claims, rather focusing on demonstrating their potentially queering impact towards heteronormative cultural assumptions. Here, however, I briefly recall Anderson's test of 'biblical antecedence' to note how these key claims are uncontroversial, with clear scriptural mandates. The idea of God's universal love, demonstrated through Christ's sacrifice, is a fundamental gospel theme. God calling some people to singleness, for the sake of the gospel, while not a universal demand, is clearly possible, good, and even desirable (Mat. 19:12; 1 Cor. 7:32–34). My interpretation of events, narrative constructions, or ethical conclusions could certainly be wrong, perhaps influenced more by social and cultural dynamics than God's ultimate reality. Nonetheless, the essential claims about specific divine action are at least plausible in the light of Scripture.

7. Living Sacrifices, Holy and Pleasing to God: Implications for the Church

What implications might arise from this analysis? I have argued that the queer Christian identity crisis and creative configurations can illuminate the heteronormative 'worldly' patterns implicitly held by heterosexual Christians and encourage critical reflexivity. The most widespread contribution that queer Christian testimonies might offer is not necessarily a defence or validation of specific conflicting homosexual ethics on the basis of experience as a formal source. Rather, it is the voicing of uncomfortable, yet potentially transformative, questions about the nature and purpose of human sexuality, the cost of discipleship, and the tension between theological and cultural identities. These questions are vital for all Christians as they strive to offer 'their whole and very selves' as living sacrifices, discerning what holy sexual expression looks like in their own lives. The furore over homosexuality in the church will only be helped by heterosexual Christians humbly and critically examining the 'plank in the eye' of their own sexualities.

When testimonies are employed strategically to support specific theological positions or promote certain sexual ethics, it is crucial for narrators to employ humility and maintain integrity. The primary purpose of testimony is to honestly stand witness to God, rather than to win an argument. Humility requires recognizing that interpretation is the work of the entire church and that autonomous interpretations may be incomplete or incorrect. Dishonestly distorting testimonies for strategic purposes risks obscuring God's action and impeding the corporate discernment of God's good and perfect will.

Remaining conscious of the performative nature of testimony is important. It is perhaps especially important to resist 'fixing' testimonies into overly polished narrative

forms that ignore the complexities, unresolved issues, and ongoing struggles of Christian living. My triumphalist tone, especially in the 2012 and 2018 testimonies, downplayed the ongoing challenges and doubts of my celibate commitment. While well meaning, prematurely claiming *ultimate* resolution or suggesting an uncomplicated 'happy ever after' misrepresents the ongoing, messy nature of spiritual growth. Christians giving testimony should resist the temptation to neatly resolve every issue and instead embrace the continuous and evolving nature one's own story, allowing it, as Walton describes, 'to remain a disturbingly open-ended creation' (Walton 2014, p. xxiii). Christian narratives will only find their true fulfilment and ultimate climax in the physical resurrection and eschatological union of Christ and his Church.

Finally, queer Christian testimonies will be valuable when shaping pastoral practice. My focus has not been on the pastoral interactions within my story, but the most poignant aspect of this autoethnographic analysis for me has been reflecting on and feeling compassion for the deep anguish and vulnerability of my teenage self. The church's pastoral failings towards LGBTQ+ people have been highlighted repeatedly (e.g., Rivera 2021), and queer narratives serve as instructive examples of both effective and harmful pastoral care, guiding the church towards better ways of loving.

8. Conclusions

I have examined my own practice of testimony through a narrative and autoethnographic analysis, focusing on identity formation. I have argued that gay celibate narratives may queer both evangelical and mainstream LGBTQ+ culture and that queer Christian testimony, more broadly, invites personal and cultural transformation through illuminating heteronormativity and 'worldly' patterns ingrained in the church. I have tentatively discerned God's action in calling me to singleness, his sacrificial love, and his invitation to participate in Christ's ongoing ministry of reconciliation. I have offered implications for testimony practice going forward.

The theological interpretation of queer narratives will no doubt remain contentious. I hope, however, to have modelled how the critical consideration of subjectivity need not compromise evangelical concerns for the authority of Scripture over personal experience. Indeed, it may be vital in exposing the ingrained patterns of our world and invisible normativities that influence the church and aid Christians of all sexualities seeking transformation by the renewal of their minds.

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Notes

1 The 2020 video is accessable via the LLF learning suite (llf.churchofengland.org, 'Further Resources' > 'Story Films' > 'Luke'). For privacy and in line with ethical guidance (Walton 2014, p. xxix; Chang 2008, p. 68), the 2012 and 2018 testimonies are not made available. In Section 4, I provide new anonymized autoethnographic retellings of key events.

2 My masculine pronouns for God are consistent with my gendering of God in the testimony recordings. I recognise that this invites critiques over the potentially patriarchal assumptions in my formative communities and early theological training. The masculinising of God is particularly relevant here, however, because I frame my testimony as a love story and speak and write as a gay man.

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Article

How Evangelicals *Do* Theology

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Abstract: This article explores the question, 'What is distinctive about doing theology as an evangelical?' It takes an autoethnographic approach, recounting how this practical theologian has wrestled with how evangelical conviction should shape the stance for practicing theology. This article will work with the findings of the writer's own empirical studies to develop an argument for how two stances create a distinctively evangelical practice of interpretation. First, the stance of biblicism is explored in terms of how it functions for evangelicals carrying out theological reflection. Second, the article discusses how evangelicals practice theology as though divine revelation is on-going, as Andrew Root writes, 'Jesus still does stuff' (2014). This leads to a stance of expectancy that God is still at work in the world and 'talks back'. This article concludes that the implication of the stances means that practicing theology entails hermeneutics and research which decentralize the self.

Keywords: hermeneutics; biblicism; expectancy; evangelical; autoethnography; practical theology; theological reflection; research; sin

1. Introduction

"Well, I'm not trying to be evangelical about it". Her mildly defensive words reverberated around my brain. I was a newly arrived American postgraduate student, starting my studies for the MTh degree in Oxford, UK. Our conversation was not about theology, but pertained to her enthusiasm for joining the early morning training sessions with her college's rowing crew. She was British, and her words gave me a sensation of mild culture-shock, creating an 'I'm not in Kansas anymore' moment. I had never heard the term 'evangelical' used in this way. Although in the USA people sometimes used the word dismissively or derisively, in my context, it was often worn as a badge of honor. It was never used as a synonym for trying to convert someone. This was my first indication that 'evangelical' might have quite different meanings in my new context.

This article is an account of how I have come to make sense of the term 'evangelical' in my own life and work as a theological educator in the United Kingdom. It describes my experience of practicing theology over the years and coming to embrace 'evangelical' as a word to describe myself. As such, this is a form of Lived Theology, which is an emerging field of theology that focuses on individual people's constructions of their faith that develop through reflection upon experiences (see Tveitereid 2022). Müller (2024) writes, 'Lived Theology emerges in various locations, manifests digitally and analogously, and transcends denominations. It is a practical phenomenon, representing the personally constructed, integrated, ordinary Christian theologies of individualized people expressing meaning within their own lives'. This move toward practice for carrying out theological research is linked to the turn within religious studies to studying religion not solely in terms of institutions and traditions, but also considering how religious beliefs and practices may

feature in people's everyday lives (Ammerman 2007; Ammerman and Williams 2012). Along similar lines, Astley (2002) and Astley and Christie (2007) argued that 'ordinary theology' or articulations of theological beliefs by people with little formal theological training should be taken seriously within practical theology (Ward and Dunlop 2011). This means that this account includes the formal theology that I do in the academy, but also includes the informal, personal experiences of faith that emerge out of my everyday spiritual practices.

These shifts and the turn to studies of 'lived religion' (Hall 1997; McGuire 2008) have required new methods of research to emerge. Therefore, in this paper, I am using an autoethnographic approach which enables me to engage in critical self-reflection in light of a wider cultural context. Initially the term 'autoethnography' was used to describe a study of one's own group (Hayano 1979), but has come to mean a study of oneself as situated within a group (Reed-Danahay 1997). Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) describe autoethnography as 'an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural.' It is a method of investigation particularly suited to investigations of identity. Butz and Besio (2009) write that autoethnography involves carrying out 'identity work self-consciously, or deliberately, in order to understand or represent some worldly phenomenon that exceeds the self'. Walton (2014) has situated autoethnography as an important development needed for practical theology. In this article, I do not presume to write a full autoethnography, but instead engage in a form of what Walton would call 'life writing' (2014), similar to (Rogers 2022)'s approach.

British historian Bebbington (1989, 2005) proposed four features that were common characteristics of evangelical churches in the late 19th century. 'Biblicism' is used to describe devotion to the Bible as God's word. 'Crucicentrism' means that the Cross of Christ is a central focus in the teaching and preaching of these churches. 'Activism' refers to the commitment to cooperating with the mission of God through evangelism and social action. 'Conversionism' encompasses the belief that in order to be saved, a person must turn from their sins, believe in the saving work of Jesus, and commit themselves to a life of discipleship. This definition has been debated and explicated since. For example, Rob Warner (2007) complexified the quadrilateral by plotting them on axes, 'conversionist-activist' and 'biblicist-crucicentric' which he used to highlight polarizations within British evangelicalism. Indeed, even the meaning of the term 'evangelical' has been contested over the years, with Carl Trueman (2011) arguing that it can no longer be defined. In the USA, the term has been claimed by supporters of a conservative political movement with, at times, a tangential relationship to Christianity (Kidd 2019). Rather than abandoning the term, it is my aim to reclaim it via this explanation about how it functions in my work and practice.

In this article, I reflect on my own experience as an evangelical living and working in the United Kingdom. My evangelical convictions have caused me to take stances that shape how I practice theology. The first stance, biblicism, resonates with Bebbington's work and focuses on a commitment to the Bible. The second stance, I call 'expectancy' and it relates to how theology unfolds in sometimes messy ways because of the belief that divine revelation is ongoing. I will explore each one in turn below. I will then discuss some implications for taking these stances. Similar to Bebbington's four characteristics, my two stances are intended to be primarily descriptive, rather than prescriptive. My aim is to use my story to shed light on how evangelicals may navigate interpreting scripture and experience.

I referred to myself above as a 'theologian'. This is not solely based on my work teaching theology and writing books and articles. What I mean is far less grand. Anyone who thinks and wonders about God is in fact practicing theology and is, in a very basic

sense, a theologian. This democratization of theology means that for me, theology is less a book on a shelf and is more an activity of people as they go about their lives, considering God's place and action in all that they encounter every day. Thus, as a practical theologian, I write about theology as something people *do*. Terry Veling (2005) puts it succinctly: "practical theology is more 'verb-like' than 'noun-like'" (p. 4). Theology is an activity which is performed and lived out in rituals and other faith practices (Ward 2015). As we reflect on God's activity in the world, we are creating theologies.

This concept of theology intertwined with practice puts me firmly within the field of practical theology and is reflected in my current job title, 'Lecturer in Practical Theology'. However, my interest in learning about people's everyday theologies initially took shape when I was in the youth ministry in Amsterdam, The Netherlands, in the mid 1990s. I noticed similar theological questions around evil surfacing for Dutch youth as I had seen in the USA. This caused me to wonder whether the theology that is 'done' with youth is adequate—is it matching their concerns and questions? What do young people need to know to grow their faith? How do they make sense of suffering in light of faith? These questions formed the basis of my dissertation for the MTh in Applied theology. It was important to try to connect my theologies regarding the problem of evil to the practice of youth ministry. I worked with the writings of Douglas Coupland (*Generation X*, etc.) to give a voice to the younger generations' existential questions.

Studying theology at the University of Oxford caused me to reconsider my identification with the term 'evangelical'. In the US context, by simply being a female theologian, I was considered liberal, since many evangelical groups held complementarian views that often excluded women from leading and teaching theology. It was a shock to discover that in Oxford I was very much seen as a conservative theologian, where evangelicals were a tiny minority and believing that God was real and might interact with people was an anomaly. After completing my degree, I then joined the International Fellowship of Evangelical Students and served on an evangelism team, training leaders of Christian student movements across Europe, especially eastern and central Europe. We operated on a very low budget, and I spent many nights sleeping on the floors of student accommodation blocks. On the walls were often posters of Western pop stars—Jim Morrison, Kurt Cobain, etc. Through curious conversations with my kind hosts, I discovered that young people used the images as signifiers of a transcendent reality—an expression of spiritual longing. This and other experiences caused me to wonder whether modernity was experienced differently in the former Soviet states (Dunlop 2008; Willis 1990). I began to think that the ministry tools and resources imported from the UK and USA were ill-suited to that context.

Eventually these questions led me to undertake a PhD at Kings College London with Andrew Walker. He led the Center for the study of Theology, Religion and Culture, which was in the School of Social Sciences and Public Policy. Carrying out this study here rather than in the theology department meant that I received training in empirical research methods alongside social scientists. I was able to incorporate empirical work into the core of my research. I spent nine months completing fieldwork in Kyiv, Ukraine, interviewing students and participating in religious and cultural aspects of student life. My early publications and research community resided within the discipline of the sociology of religion, and I finished the PhD in 2005. At Kings, I also worked with Pete Ward, who was leading the way in adopting the language of practical theology and setting it out as a discipline within theology in the UK. The Journal *Contact*, started in 1960, came to be called *Practical Theology* in 2007. Pete and I published several articles together and I supported his work with the Ecclesiology and Ethnography network which has annual conferences in the UK and North America. The move from the sociology of religion to practical theology

helped me to reconcile my professional work with my vocation to do research that was responsive to the needs of the Christian ministry.

Eventually I took up the post as Lecturer in Practical Theology at Ridley Hall in Cambridge, a college for training people for lay and ordained ministry within the Church of England. It describes itself as 'open evangelical' and I like the generosity and hospitality implied in this phrase. In the last few years, our students have said that although their studies have prepared them for many aspects of their future ministry, they felt we had not helped them to make sense of their own evangelical identity. As a staff team, we realized that we had left much unsaid regarding this term. In response, we crafted a series of lectures in which each of the teaching staff explored what it means for her or him personally to be 'evangelical'. It was out of my own musings and reflections in preparation for this lecture that I developed the stances that I articulate below.

By 'stance', I mean my public expression of my interior conceptions which I believe mark me and my work as an evangelical. I like the visual picture that 'stance' conjures in the mind. The way a person is standing is visible to everyone but can also change as the circumstances and context dictate. But a stance is not necessarily articulated using words. It is a way of being in a situation and may at times be unconscious. In this spirit, I offer these stances as works in progress.

2. Stance of Biblicism

Knowledge and wisdom for practical theology is generated via what we call 'theological reflection'. This entails working with the sources of our Christian faith to make sense of our experiences and to imagine future possibilities. For the evangelical, the Bible is the primary source of knowledge and wisdom about faith. So, what does it mean for me to have a commitment to the Bible as an evangelical practical theologian? I am not alone in my practice of working with scripture as I practice theology in various contexts. In Pete Ward's 2017 book *Introducing Practical Theology* he argues that "in the everyday life of the church, most reflection on practice takes place through a deep engagement with the Scriptures" (Ward 2017). Helen Collins (2020) argues that theological reflection should begin with the Bible. Yet negotiating the relationship between the Bible and everyday theologies is not straightforward. Paul Ballard (2011) has a chapter in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology* in which he notes that "despite its importance, the use of scripture as a central concern in practical theology has proven elusive and problematic" (p. 163). The problem, as he sees it, is that each practical theologian has a different theological approach.

Indeed, Bennet et al. (2018) observe that in practical theology, there have been three main ways to bring practice and scripture together:

starting with the Bible or tradition and moving into practice.

working through a mutual dialogue between the Bible and practice.

starting with practice and moving into doing theology with the Bible.

In my own work, I have employed all of these approaches in my quest to interpret the world and the Bible. For me it has been important that all theology that I practice relates to scripture in some way. Initially, this was almost non-existent in my writing because my work was birthed out of the social scientific approach, which is suspicious of using what is conceived to be external sources to interpret empirical data. We wrestled with these tensions when working with our data from interviews performed as part of our Megachurches and Social Engagement project (Dunlop and Buckingham 2019). This three-year research project was funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), one of the public funding bodies in the UK. From 2014–2016 the project explored the nature of social engagement among large churches and sought to interpret the significance of such civic participation for public theology, a field concerned with theorizing and articulating

the role of religion in society. The research consisted of case studies, lasting several months each, of five London megachurches, which included participant observations at services and other activities; interviews with church leaders, church members, ministry leaders, ministry volunteers, and ministry recipients; and a review of the literature produced by the churches. All the churches could be described as evangelical, some were charismatic, and the others were Pentecostal.

We brought our findings about how relationships within the congregation were perceived by our participants into critical conversation with the social scientific theory of social capital. We observed that metaphors of 'family' were often used by congregation members to describe the networks of relational support. We argued that biblical concepts such as the family of God and the church body were a better fit for articulating what was being described rather than the more economy-driven concept of social capital. In essence, we were choosing the Bible as a source for theory-making over a sociological concept. The attempt was by no means flawless, but it does illustrate how our evangelical commitment to the Bible shaped our practice of researching religion. We interpreted the words of our participants as being drawn from a Biblical concept, which enabled us to draw out the interpretations in tension with theories of social capital.

Biblicism affects how I make sense of my faith in my everyday life. For example, at the end of a church service, I went to the front of church for the prayer ministry. A member of the congregation, whilst praying for me, said they sensed that God might be calling me to be a prophet. I was not entirely sure what this meant! I often equated prophecy with predicting the future. To make sense of this experience, I read all the books of prophesy in the Hebrew Bible and reflected in my journal about what their prophecies indicated about their vocation. I discovered that the work of a prophet most often entailed listening to God and then speaking this message into the contemporary context. This could be completed through speeches and writing, but also sometimes embodied demonstrations that illustrated the divine message. The ensuing soul-searching deepened my commitment that all my professional work should be grounded in a context and should aim to use a variety of forms and research methods to communicate and discern something of God's perspective into the situation. It should be, as Cameron et al. (2010) argue, 'theological all the way through'. Healy (2000) argued in favor of ethnography as a source of knowledge for ecclesiology, valuing how as an approach it uses thick description to analyze the meaning and the interpretation of a contextual investigation. For him, when the theologian uses an ethnographic approach, she opens up the possibility for speaking prophetically into the situation as she critically views the context through the lens of the Christian metanarrative, the 'theo-dramatic horizon' (Healy 2000, p. 180).

So, in this instance, evangelical biblicism entailed a personal quest for self-understanding, which had an impact upon my professional identity. For me, biblicism entails interpreting the Scriptural text, and my life and work in relation to it. However, there are of course many challenges in looking for Healy's theo-dramatic horizon. How do I know whether my interpretive lens is flawed or causing blind spots? How do I wrestle with an ancient text written for another people in another time and discern the implications for the contemporary contexts in which I find myself? A discipline for practical theologians involved in theological reflection is to pay attention to our standpoints and practice reflexivity regarding our preconceptions. Killen and de Beer (1994) suggest the need to be willing to move beyond certitude and self-assurance toward a standpoint of exploration. It seems to me that although evangelicals may find it difficult to know whether they are interpreting a situation or Bible passage correctly, a stance of biblicism needs to be combined with a standpoint of exploration. For example, this would entail avoiding adherence to prior interpretations and instead embracing an openness to discovering a new, fresh revelation

that could be emerging in the current context. I will explain more about what is required of the theologian for this standpoint in the final section.

3. Stance of Expectancy

Within my personal, evangelical spirituality, I expect that God will, at times, speak to me. Based on empirical research, Tanya Luhrmann (2012) described how charismatic Christians in the USA believe that God 'talks back' to them. Helen Collins (2023), in her recent book *Charismatic Christianity*, describes the prophetic nature of charismatic theology as 'expectancy'. For me, expectancy means that people are looking for, expecting, God to act. Of course, many Christian traditions believe that the Holy Spirit is active within faith practice and spirituality. However, I am arguing here that there is a particular way of practicing expectancy that is distinctive to evangelicals which is not limited to charismatics, a group whom I would describe as a subset of evangelicals (Kidd 2019). For example, a core evangelical practice is to have a daily 'quiet time', which entails reading the Bible and praying that God will speak through the text. This is a form of expectancy. Thus, expectancy encompasses the expectation that God will not only speak but will also act in certain situations.

Expectancy becomes an interpretive frame for evangelicals. In the megachurches study mentioned above, the findings revealed an expectancy that God would be active within and among the social engagement activities (Cartledge et al. 2019). Participants reported that God provided the impetus for people to become more engaged in the service. For example, a young woman who volunteered in a social action ministry said, 'As God changes us, we become the people we are made to become—more like God, who loves to give and is generous and selfless. I think that can be a huge gift to London or wherever'. Another person, reflecting on personal motivations, said, 'it's difficult to know how much of this is me and how much is of God'. Furthermore, in the minds of our participants, God is not limited to matters in church, but is seen to be acting in and encouraging people to become involved in the public sphere. But even more than telling Christians to help others, God gives them the power and authority that they need to do it. Time and time again, our participants recounted an experience of God that empowered them to join with God's work to transform society.

In both my own spirituality and professional practice, I operate as though God's revelation is on-going. As Andrew Root writes, 'Jesus still does stuff' (Root 2014). Through God's Spirit, God-self is revealed through my experiences of the world. God is active, speaking through personal words, senses, pictures, tongues, healings—all of which happen in the real world with real people in real contexts. Evangelical scholars like me want to spot God at work in our world, and not just anecdotally, but through rigorous paying attention, curiosity, and of course, empirical research. We listen and take seriously people's accounts of their experiences of a living God. For example, in a study of how church attenders integrate their faith into everyday life (Dunlop et al. 2021), we discovered that people from an evangelical tradition were more likely to relate to God as 'Thou', in Martin Buber's (1958) terms. We were curious about how theological reflection occurs in everyday life among people without a formal theological education. We interviewed people from a variety of Christian traditions about how they processed a significant life event, and what difference their faith made to the sense-making process. We sought to discover how people interpreted their everyday lives and their faith. The analysis of the language used when the participants spoke about their experience in relation to God revealed that there is evidence of a dialogical relationship among the interviewees from the evangelical tradition. For those from other theological traditions, the mechanism for relating to God tended to be far more instrumental, resulting in prioritizing practices born out of a Christian identity, such as

participation in church activities and rituals. This was a small-scale study of twenty people, so the findings are not generalizable. However, my experience of evangelical spirituality has been an openness to the possibility that God may speak and act in new ways.

Employing a hermeneutic of expectancy is also not straightforward. How do evangelicals know whether hoping for an event does in fact make it more likely? Are we merely listening to our own desires when we think we are hearing God's voice? Are we spotting what we want to see when we claim that we have seen God's actions in our context? All of this is possible and often quite likely. But, particularly in our study of the social engagement of London's megachurches, we saw that expectancy seemed to go hand-in-hand with profound benevolence. An organizer of the homeless ministry at one of the churches observed that non-Christian volunteers seemed to suffer from compassion fatigue more quickly than those with Christian faith. She wondered whether believing that God was there in the situation caused people to have a different kind of motivation for their service. Heidi Baker, a Pentecostal leader of a humanitarian organization, reported that she is inspired to serve others by two factors: unconditional love for others and the power of God. 'But the merciful love of God is that his love has teeth. . . God is a powerful and loving God, and he gives us both. So we have two wings and now we soar' (Lee et al. 2013, p. 185). It seems to me that although the stance of expectancy may not be without flaws or difficulty, it creates a space for encountering divine action.

4. Implications of the Stances

An implication of the stances of biblicism and expectancy is that I am invited to de-centralize myself and centralize Christ instead. In some ways this relates to Bebbington's 'Crucicentrism', but for me, the focus is on the person of Jesus Christ, rather than the action of Christ on the cross. Working to de-center the self does not come naturally to me. Like many others in my contemporary context, my worldview is firmly entrenched within what Smith (2014), in his analysis of Taylor's *A Secular Age*, refers to as the immanent frame. It is easy to imagine that I exist in a boundaried world that consists primarily in what can be naturally seen, instead of embracing a transcendent frame, in which God is active and the supernatural realm exists. Living and working in this way goes against the grain at times and requires regular spiritual practices to maintain this perspective. However, the advantage of embracing this call is that de-centralizing the self opens up a space for centralizing Christ.

I argued above that for me as an evangelical, the Bible is the primary source for wisdom and knowledge. Additionally, the Bible is authoritative, meaning that when it comes to weighing multiple sources of theology against each other, scripture always has the final say.[1] This means that I usually do not approach scripture with a hermeneutic of suspicion as practiced by some other Christian traditions. Instead, as Larsen and Treier (2007) write in *The Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, evangelical Christians believe that 'human beings are judged by the Bible and called to change in the light of it, rather than standing in judgement over the Bible and rejecting those parts that are not in line with their own sensibilities' (p. 8). This means that as I practice theology, I de-centralize myself, taking my thoughts, experiences, and intuitions and placing them in a critical conversation with scripture. As I submit my own intuitions to the Bible, I often find it reassuring that I do not need to try to be the ultimate authority on my topic. I humble myself before the Bible and in exchange I discover a foundational source of rich insights that deepens and complexifies my theology.

During my training as a social scientific researcher, we were advised that when we interact with the subjects of our research, we should assume the stance of a student. I remember feeling resistant to this approach because it felt like I was setting myself up to

be unnecessarily vulnerable. At the time I was planning my interviews among Ukrainian students in Kyiv, and moving to a faraway country with an unfamiliar language and customs already seemed rather risky. Perceptions of my status as a foreign PhD student were all the security I felt that I would have. However, I decided to give it a go. When setting up the interviews, meeting people and listening to them, I intentionally assumed the stance of a student of their culture, worldview, experiences, and spirituality. I actively listened to them and even tried to assume a lowly position, like sitting on the floor if there was only one chair in the student accommodation room and other ways of signaling an abdication of status or power. In this way, I de-centralized myself before my research participants, which then extended to centralizing their words and perspectives when it came time to interpret and analyze the research data. This then opened new and creative avenues for theology, particularly in relation to the values of the young people I interviewed (Dunlop 2008). In this way, de-centering the self has been quite generative.

I have found that de-centralizing the self before knowledge has also been hugely helpful for my professional work. Mike Higton (2012, p. 149) puts it this way: 'To know something—anything—truly is to know it as coming from and returning to God, to know it as a creature held by God's loving mercy on its way to the fulfilment that God has for it, and to know the forms of corruption and distortion that fight against that fulfilment.' Initially, as an undergraduate theology student, I was full of youthful arrogance, convinced I knew most of what there was to know about God and theology. However, as I deepened in my studies, I came to discover how very little I really did know and could ever know about God, life, and everything. Confronting the vast unknowable nature of the world was a shock. I began to pray that God would show me what I needed to know and what I could know. With Higton, I confess that anything I could know comes from in the loving mercy of God. Humbling myself before knowledge has developed into the attitude of a life-long learner. This has been life-giving as an educator. Even though, at this stage, I usually do have more experience of theological study than my students, I situate myself as a co-learner and we explore new knowledge together.

My experience is that these stances and their implications mean that life experiences are then understood in conversation with the transcendent reality. The idea is that rather than myself and my own intuitions taking center stage, my life and world are placed within the context of a loving and active God who cares about the mundane aspects of my life. As I read scripture and pray, I can then 'read' my experience of reality within this frame.

I believe that, amongst other things, this opens a space for taking sin and sanctification seriously. Lovelace (2020) recounts in his book, *Dynamics of Spiritual Life: An Evangelical Theology of Renewal*, that the Reformers combatted nominalism by insisting that people be convicted of sin before they can commit to Christ. This is a form of pre-sanctification, which demands a lot of a person before she can even start the Christian life. He argues that, over time, Christian thinking swung away from this and toward a simple gospel of grace. Although there is merit in this, he observes that the need for sanctification has been lost along the way. I would add that grappling with a sense of what sin really is has also fallen by the wayside. In an age of self-justification, it goes against the grain to seek to be justified by God and judged by scripture. However, this is a key component of de-centering the self before God.

When explaining my faith to people outside of my Christian tradition, I rarely start by talking about sin. However, it seems to me that if evangelicals are willing to humbly admit their own short-comings and support others as they face up to theirs, they will find a way forward for the church at this moment in history. Evangelicals see the world as imperfect and in need of salvation and transformation. In our context, we are seeing an awakening of people's interest in spiritual matters, and it seems to me that evangelicals

can continue to use the Bible to tell the story of God's ongoing work in the world. My hope is that evangelicals can lead people into experiences of the living God that will break them out of the immanent frame and open them up to the possibility of the life-transforming power of the transcendent God.

I conclude with a few initial thoughts about the implications of these two stances for other evangelicals practicing theology. Embracing the stance of expectancy is the invitation to step out from behind the protective walls of certitude and look afresh for divine revelation in the world and church. My advice is to not be surprised when you are surprised by the theological work you do. It turns out that it was never your work at all but is God's work and the work of and for the people of God. Maintaining a stance of biblicism will guide you and lead you to generative sources of inspiration for your deep listening to culture and experience. This creates a space for practicing theology that is not filled by you, but instead is open to others, including the Divine Other.

When I was a teenager, I remember my youth minister saying, 'The things that count in life are the things that have eternal value'. These words made a lasting impression on me and have guided my life choices. For my practice of theology, this has meant that I have always undertaken research that has a greater outcome than extending knowledge. It needs to have implications that matter for people from all walks of life. For me, theology should always operate in the service of the church and although this perspective is not solely an evangelical characteristic, it does relate strongly to Bebbington's characterization of evangelicals as people committed to activism and conversionism. The activities of the Christian faith are more than a weekend hobby or a special interest and have the potential to transform the world. In a very real sense, everything is at stake.

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Note

[1] Alison Le Cornu has written about different approaches to Theological Reflection, noting how the process is different for different people, depending on their tradition and perceptions of authority (Le Cornu 2005).

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