


Article

“Confession Is Good for the Soul?” Charismatics and Confession in Conversation

Andrew P. Rogers 

Centre for Research in Society, Culture, and Social Change, School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Roehampton, London SW15 5PU, UK; andrew.rogers@roehampton.ac.uk

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



Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daugherty

Received: 20 January 2025

Revised: 27 March 2025

Accepted: 28 March 2025

Published: 3 April 2025

Citation: Rogers, Andrew P. 2025.

“Confession Is Good for the Soul?”

Charismatics and Confession in

Conversation. *Religions* 16: 461.

[https://doi.org/10.3390/](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040461)

[rel16040461](https://doi.org/10.3390/rel16040461)

Copyright: © 2025 by the author.

Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland.

This article is an open access article

distributed under the terms and

conditions of the Creative Commons

Attribution (CC BY) license

([https://creativecommons.org/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

[licenses/by/4.0/](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)).

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 exemplified.

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 ‘efficacy 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.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Ethics Committee of the University of Roehampton (HSS 24-021, approved 9 May 2024).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Participants agreed to waive their pseudonymity.

Data Availability Statement: The interview data for this article was not obtained on the basis that it would be shared independently of this or any other publication. Therefore it is not available for separate publication.

Acknowledgments: I would like to thank the five charismatic network leaders who gave time and thought to the interviewees on which this article is based. Many colleagues offered very helpful feedback on papers from which this article has been developed. All Bible quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible, Anglicized Edition, copyright © 1989, 1995 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of Churches of Christ in the United States of America, and are used by permission. All rights reserved.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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).

References

- Atherstone, Andrew, and David C. Jones. 2019. Evangelicals and Evangelicalisms: Contested Identities. In *The Routledge Research Companion to The History of Evangelicalism*. Edited by Andrew Atherstone and David C. Jones. London: Routledge, pp. 1–21.
- Bartholomew, Craig G., and Michael Goheen. 2004. *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Bebbington, David W. 1989. *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: A History from the 1730s to the 1980s*. London: Unwin Hyman.
- Brierley, Peter, ed. 2020. *UK Church Statistics 4: 2015 to 2025*. Tonbridge: ADBC.
- Bruner, Jason. 2012. Public Confession and the Moral Universe of the East African Revival. *Studies in World Christianity* 18: 254–68. [CrossRef]
- Bryman, Alan. 2016. *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Butler, Perry. 1990. Introduction: Confession Today. In *Confession and Absolution*. Edited by M. Dudley and G. Rowell. London: SPCK, pp. 1–12.
- Cameron, Helen, Deborah Bhatti, Catherine Duce, James Sweeney, and Clare Watkins. 2010. *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology*. London: SCM.
- Cartledge, Mark J. 2006. *Encountering the Spirit: The Charismatic Tradition*. London: Darton, Longman and Todd.
- Cartledge, Mark J. 2010. *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

- Chan, Simon. 2011a. *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*. Eugene: Wipf and Stock.
- Chan, Simon. 2011b. Spiritual Practices. In *The Oxford Handbook of Evangelical Theology*. Edited by Gerald R. McDermott. Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 247–61.
- Christerson, Brad, and Richard Flory. 2017. *The Rise of Network Christianity: How Independent Leaders Are Changing the Religious Landscape*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Church of England. 2023. Submission on Government Consultation on Mandatory Reporting. Available online: <https://www.churchofengland.org/safeguarding/safeguarding-news-releases/submission-government-consultation-mandatory-reporting> (accessed on 13 December 2024).
- Clifford, James. 1986. Introduction: Partial Truths. In *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. Edited by James Clifford and George E. Marcus. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 1–26.
- Cocksworth, Christopher. 2007. Holding Together: Catholic Evangelical Worship in the Spirit. In *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*. Edited by Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, pp. 131–49.
- Collins, Helen. 2023. *Charismatic Christianity: Introducing Its Theology Through the Gifts of the Spirit*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Comer, John M. 2024. *Practicing the Way*. London: SPCK.
- Dahl, Espen. 2014. Preserving the Double Mystery: Augustine’s Confessions on Self and God. *Literature and Theology* 30: 99–111. [CrossRef]
- Eng, Daniel K. 2023. Healing from Sin: The Effective Prayer in Jas 5:16. *Trinity Journal* 44: 37–50.
- Foster, Richard. 1978. *Celebration of Discipline: The Path to Spiritual Growth*. New York: Harper and Row.
- Graff-Kallevåg, Kristin, and Tone S. Kaufman. 2023. When confessing sin feels good: The practice of confession explored through the lens of Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance. *Dialog* 62: 259–69. [CrossRef]
- Guest, Mathew. 2007. *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Harvey, William S. 2011. Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research* 11: 431–41. [CrossRef]
- Hatcher, Andrea. 2017. *Political and Religious Identities of British Evangelicals*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Ideström, Jonas, and Tone S. Kaufman. 2018. The Researcher as Gamemaker—Response. In *What Really Matters: Scandinavian Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*. Edited by Jonas Ideström and Tone S. Kaufman. Eugene: Wipf and Stock, pp. 173–80.
- John, Jeffrey. 1990. ‘Authority given to men’: The Doctrinal Basis of Ministerial Absolution in the New Testament. In *Confession and Absolution*. Edited by Martin Dudley and Geoffrey Rowell. London: SPCK, pp. 15–39.
- Kay, William K. 2007. *Apostolic Networks in Britain: New Ways of Being Church*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Kay, William K. 2016. Apostolic Networks in Britain Revisited. *Pneuma* 38: 5–22. [CrossRef]
- Kay, William K. 2019. Marks of British Pentecostal and Charismatic Churches. In *Pentecostals and Charismatics in Britain: An Anthology*. Edited by Joe Aldred. London: SCM, pp. 53–70.
- Lim, Swee Hong, and Lester Ruth. 2017. *Lovin’ on Jesus: A Concise History of Contemporary Worship*. Nashville: Abingdon Press.
- Luhrmann, Tanya M. 2012. *When God Talks Back: Understanding the American Evangelical Relationship with God*. New York: Vintage.
- McKinley, Braden J. 2023. The Neglect of Confession in Contemporary Worship Music. *Artistic Theologian* 10: 43–64. Available online: <https://equiptheworld.com/at-journal-article/the-neglect-of-confession-in-contemporary-worship-music/> (accessed on 29 June 2024).
- Miles, Matthew B., A. Michael Huberman, and Johnny Saldaña. 2020. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A Methods Sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks: SAGE Publications.
- Moberly, Walter. 2024. *Guidelines: Bible Study for Today’s Ministry and Mission (January–April 2025)*. Abingdon: Bible Reading Fellowship.
- Morden, Peter J. 2019. Evangelical Spirituality. In *The Routledge Research Companion to The History of Evangelicalism*. Edited by Andrew Atherstone and David C. Jones. London: Routledge, pp. 57–72.
- Osborne, Grant R. 2010. Moving Forward on our Knees: Corporate Prayer in the New Testament. *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 53: 243–67. Available online: https://etsjets.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/10/files_JETS-PDFs_53_53-2_JETS_53-2_243-267_Osborne.pdf (accessed on 14 December 2024).
- Packiam, Glenn. 2020. *Worship and the World to Come: Exploring Christian Hope in Contemporary Worship*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic.
- Pattison, Stephen. 1989. Some Straw for the Bricks: A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection. *Contact* 99: 2–9. [CrossRef]
- Pattison, Stephen. 2020. Conversations in Practical Theology. *Practical Theology* 13: 87–94. [CrossRef]
- Pioneer. 2024. Pioneer’s Response to the Independent Review. Available online: <https://pioneer.org.uk/independent-review/> (accessed on 11 January 2025).
- Richards, Noel. 1993. *The Worshipping Church*. Milton Keynes: Word Books.
- Robbins, Mandy, and William K. Kay. 2015. Evangelicals and the Charismatic Movement. In *21st Century Evangelicals: Reflections on Research by the Evangelical Alliance*. Edited by Greg Smith. Watford: Instant Apostle, pp. 137–53.
- Rogers, Andrew P. 2016. *Congregational Hermeneutics: How Do We Read?* London: Routledge.
- Rogers, Andrew P. 2022. Evangelicals learning practical theology: Autobiographical reflections. In *Evangelicals Engaging with Practical Theology: Theology That Impacts Church and World*. Edited by Helen Morris and Helen Cameron. London: Routledge, pp. 100–15.

- Rogers, Andrew P. 2023. Looking into the mirror: The Bible, normativity and reflexivity. *Practical Theology* 16: 462–88. [CrossRef]
- Roitto, Rikard. 2012. Practices of Confession, Intercession, and Forgiveness in 1 John 1:9; 5:16. *New Testament Studies* 58: 235–53. [CrossRef]
- Schwanda, Tom. 2017. Evangelical Spiritual Disciplines: Practices for Knowing God. *Journal of Spiritual Formation and Soul Care* 10: 220–36. [CrossRef]
- Scotland, Nigel. 2011. From the 'not yet' to the 'now and not yet': Charismatic Kingdom Theology 1960–2010. *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 20: 272–90. [CrossRef]
- Smail, Tom. 1995. In Spirit and in Truth: Reflections on Charismatic Worship. In *Charismatic Renewal*. Edited by Tom Smail, Andrew Walker and Nigel Wright. London: SPCK, pp. 109–16.
- Smith, James K. A. 2009. *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Smith, James K. A. 2013. *Imagining the Kingdom: How Worship Works*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic.
- Smith, James K. A. 2016. *You Are What You Love: The Spiritual Power of Habit*. Grand Rapids: Brazos Press.
- Steven, James H. S. 2002. *Worship in the Spirit: Charismatic Worship in the Church of England*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Stott, John. 1964. *Confess Your Sins: The Way of Reconciliation*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Taylor, Charles. 2007. *A Secular Age*. Cambridge: Belknap Press.
- Turner, Mark J. 2019. *A Biblical Theology of Confession of Sin: An Exploration of Text, Theology, and Practice*. Ann Arbor: ProQuest LLC. Available online: <https://www.proquest.com/openview/42f28cce4f6ce82ee43df2b72f260ba3> (accessed on 29 June 2024).
- Turner, Mark J. 2020. A Short History of Confession of Sin: From the Early Church to Modern Evangelicalism. *The Reformed Theological Review* 79: 38–63. Available online: <https://rtjournal.org/index.php/RTR/article/view/230> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Tyler, Peter. 2017. *Confession: The Healing of the Soul*. London: Bloomsbury Continuum.
- Walker, Andrew. 1988. *Restoring the Kingdom: The Radical Christianity of the House Church Movement*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.
- Walker, Andrew. 2007a. Deep Church as *Paradosis*: On Relating Scripture and Tradition. In *Remembering our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*. Edited by Luke Bretherton and Andrew Walker. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, pp. 59–80.
- Walker, Andrew. 2007b. Recovering Deep Church: Theological and Spiritual Renewal. In *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*. Edited by Andrew Walker and Luke Bretherton. Milton Keynes: Paternoster, pp. 1–29.
- Walker, Andrew, and Luke Bretherton, eds. 2007. *Remembering Our Future: Explorations in Deep Church*. Milton Keynes: Paternoster.
- Wells, Samuel. 2004. *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*. London: SPCK.
- Wesley, John. 1738. Rules of the Band Societies. Available online: <https://archive.org/details/rulesofbandsocie468wesl/mode/2up> (accessed on 13 December 2024).
- Willard, Dallas. 1991. *The Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco.
- Williams, Daniel H. 1999. *Retrieving the Tradition & Renewing Evangelicalism: A Primer for Suspicious Protestants*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Williams, Don. 2005. Theological Perspective and Reflection on the Vineyard Christian Fellowship. In *Church, Identity and Change: Theology and Denominational Structures in Unsettled Times*. Edited by David A. Roozen and James R. Nieman. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, pp. 163–87.
- Wilson, Andrew. 2018. *Spirit and Sacrament: An Invitation to Eucharismatic Worship*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan.
- Wimber, John, and Carol Wimber. 1995. Worship: Intimacy with God. *Renewal* 2: 13–18. Available online: <https://renewaljournal.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/RJ-06-Worship-131.pdf> (accessed on 17 January 2025).
- Winner, Lauren F. 2018. *The Dangers of Christian Practice: On Wayward Gifts, Characteristic Damage, and Sin*. Yale: Yale University Press.
- Wright, N. T. 1991. How Can The Bible Be Authoritative? *Vox Evangelica* 21: 7–32. Available online: https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/vox/vol21/bible_wright.pdf (accessed on 20 January 2025).

Disclaimer/Publisher's Note: The statements, opinions and data contained in all publications are solely those of the individual author(s) and contributor(s) and not of MDPI and/or the editor(s). MDPI and/or the editor(s) disclaim responsibility for any injury to people or property resulting from any ideas, methods, instructions or products referred to in the content.