"Because it tells me so:" A qualitative investigation of the lived experience of engaging with the Bible in evangelical faith communities

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Declaration

I hereby certify that this material, which I now submit for assessment on the programme of study leading to the award of PhD is entirely my own work, and that I have exercised reasonable care to ensure that the work is original, and does not to the best of my knowledge breach any law of copyright, and has not been taken from the work of others save and to the extent that such work has been cited and acknowledged within the text of my work.

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Sola Deo gloria.

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In evangelical faith communities the Bible is afforded a privileged position and is read as a source of doctrinal content, moral teaching and devotional guidance. The Bible is expected to shape the corporate and individual lives of those who belong to these communities. While a significant body of literature exists addressing theological issues in regard to the Bible in these communities, very little research exists in Ireland on how people actually experience their engagement with the Bible.

The focus of this study is to investigate the ways in which people who belong to evangelical faith communities interpret their experiences of engaging with the Bible. The research has been designed deliberately to allow the lived experience of the participants to set the parameters for the research rather than being driven by the theoretical concepts of theological discourse.

The thesis begins by providing a 'theological frame' for the research, focusing on a limited selection of issues in order to locate the qualitative research within some of the wider concerns of theological discourse on the Bible. It then outlines and discusses the research methodology adopted for the qualitative research and provides the rationales for the interviewing, the analysis and the reporting processes.

The following chapters present the analysis of the interviews, allowing the participants to tell their own stories of how they have engaged with the Bible, how they have interpreted their Bible engagement, and how these experiences have shaped their lives. These chapters provide both a 'thick description' of the interview data and an accompanying analysis of the data in an attempt to understand some of the underlying frameworks and commitments that form part of the lived experience of the participants. The final chapter draws together the conclusions of the research and makes some suggestions for further research.

Introduction

The Bible is a foundational document for Christian theology and practice and is given a privileged place in Christian faith communities, particularly within evangelicalism (Maddix, 2018). The Bible functions in a wide range of ways in Christian faith communities, for example, as a source of historical information, as a foundation for doctrinal and theological formulation, as a basis for moral teaching, and a source of devotional guidance. However, the wide range of ways the Bible is used does not necessarily explain how it is experienced by people who read it.

The attribution of a special status or even a special authority to the Bible does not necessarily mean, as Marshall (2007) and Smith (2009) observe, this status or attributed authority is translated into practice. Where there is a desire on behalf of readers to translate what they regard as the authority of the Bible into life practice, there is no necessary guarantee of success, especially if they do not engage with some of the complex questions of how the Bible functions in a twenty-first century context. Ironically, Marshall (2007, p. 5) suggests a "direct correlation between how emphatically people insist on the inspiration and infallibility of the Bible, and how little they wrestle with its meaning and complexity." A commitment to authority on its own is not, in practice, sufficient

to guarantee any outcome from engaging with the Bible. This project explores some of these issues from a bottom-up perspective.

An explanation of this research project is best prefaced by elements of its "emergent design" (Patton, 2002, p. 45). The project began with the aim of examining the levels of transformation in people's lives as a result of engaging with the Bible. The initial proposal envisaged using templates from theological/biblical studies in combination with a template from the field of transformative learning to assess, using a qualitative research tool, whether transformation was taking place when people engaged with the Bible. As the project methodology was developed, it became increasingly clear that this approach was too dependent on a top-down, theory-driven model and would result in imposing a structure on the project that could well diminish the participants' reporting of their experiences of engaging with the Bible. As originally conceptualised the research would have been testing if theoretical insights were observed in practice, but might not have engaged with what was actually happening. There is value in this mode of research, but I wanted this project to give voice to people's actual experience.

The concern to let people's voices be heard became both a methodological and ethical consideration for the research. Therefore, both the construction of the qualitative methodology and the reporting of the data needed to allow the

participants to talk about their experiences of engaging with the Bible on their

own terms without being constrained by theoretically-driven concerns.

Inevitably, issues of theology and transformation arose in the interviews but

they were, as far as possible, on the participants' terms.[1] This means the

research design has, therefore, following Swinton and Mowat (2016), critically

combined elements of qualitative method with the concerns of practical

theology.

The result is an inter-disciplinary research project that combines elements of

both theological and sociological perspectives. These elements feature in both

the research design and in the data analysis. This was not a grounded theory

study as defined, for example by Creswell (2013), but the approach of the

research has been to construct an understanding of how people experience and

interpret their engagement with the Bible inductively from the data generated

rather than by testing a specific hypothesis. The themes addressed by the

research, therefore, have arisen inductively as the research has progressed and

the interview data analysed.

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[1] The involvement of the researcher in the creation of the interview data means that the data is never fully on the interviewees' terms; see further Sections 2.2 and 2.3 on research quality and researcher reflexivity.

As far as I am aware, this approach to how the Bible is experienced in the lives of Christian practitioners has not been undertaken in an Irish context.[2] There are some similar studies in other contexts and, as Ward (2012, 2017) recognises, this inter-disciplinary approach is a growing field of interest. This study will contribute to the understanding of the evangelical faith communities in the Irish context as the empirical research will help to shed light on aspects of the practice of Bible engagement in this tradition. The research will also be of relevance to the wider church and it is hoped that the outcomes will provide insights for Christian ministry practitioners.

Chapter 1 locates the study in the framework of selected theological issues that impinge on how people conceptualise and engage with the Bible in evangelical faith communities. The issues examined are not unique to evangelical faith communities, but the focus is on how they are understood in these communities. This chapter creates a theological frame for the research even though the theological concerns are not the constraints for the research.

Chapter 2 examines the construction of the research methodology for the project. The chapter begins with critical reflection on the issues of quality in qualitative research and researcher reflexivity and how these apply to this

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[2] Dunlop (2004) offers an overview of evangelicalism in Ireland, although now somewhat dated.

project. These sections outline the quality standards adopted by the project. The remaining sections of the chapter examine specific issues of the research methodology: methodological framing, sampling, participant concerns, data collection and analysis.

Chapters 3-7 present a rich description (Gibbs, 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2013) of the interview data with an accompanying analysis. The experience of the interviewees and their interaction and engagement with the Bible is presented in terms of overarching themes, main themes and a range of organising sub-themes. The overall aim of these chapters is to allow the voices of the participants to be heard, respecting "people's intentions and agencies" (Flick, 2007a, p. 74).

Chapters 3 and 4 examine the overarching theme of 'Encountering the Bible.' The focus of these chapters is more theoretical, though the theory is engaged through the experiences of the participants. Chapter 3 explores the 'Framing the Bible' main theme. It examines the reasons for and expectation of engaging with the Bible and then explores the participants' experience of the Bible as the word of God, a phrase used often by the interviewees.

Chapter 4 analyses the theme of 'Experiencing the theology of the Bible' through four sub-themes: 'Experiencing the Bible's authority,' 'Experiencing an

inspired text,' 'Experiencing genre' where the focus is on what Vanhoozer

(1998, p. 343) terms "genre competence" and 'Experiencing interpretation.'

These chapters will allow some of the underlying frameworks the participants

use in their engagement with the Bible to be explored. The implications of some

of these underlying commitments will become clear and will be explored in the

second overarching theme.

Chapter 5-7 examine the overarching theme of 'Experiencing the Bible in lived

practice.' The focus of these chapters is, as the overarching theme suggests, how

the Bible is engaged for life. Chapter 5 explores the theme of 'The search for

relevance.' This is a very important aspect of the participants' engagement with

the Bible as the high priority given to relevance influences the whole process of

Bible engagement in evangelical faith communities. The sub-theme of

'Negotiating relevance' will explore some of the reasons for the value placed on

relevance. The second half of the chapter will examine the sub-theme 'Strategies

for relevance.' This will involve exploring in detail how four of the participants

negotiate and create relevance.

Chapter 6 explores the theme of 'Experiencing transformation.' This is a

significant theme as it explores the ways in which the privileging of relevance

affects how the participants and by extension evangelical faith communities

perceive transformation. The sub-theme of 'Narratives of transformations' explores some of the differences the recognition of relevance makes to the participants' expectations of transformation and the subsequent construction of narratives of transformation. The sub-theme of 'Bible-shaping framework for life' explores how the Bible has been a widespread shaping influence on the participants, perhaps in ways they have failed to fully recognise.

Chapter 7 analyses the theme of 'Experiencing and resolving dissonance.' The participants' experience of dissonance with the Bible is explored in the sub-theme of *'I don't necessarily feel comfortable with it'*. The main focus of the chapter is on the sub-theme of 'Strategies for resolving dissonance.' These resolution strategies are helpful windows on how the participants conceptualise their engagement with the Bible. A sub-theme of experiencing and resolving dissonance in regard to preaching will also be explored, *'I would say probably least influential was pulpit preaching'*. At one level this may appear unrelated to dissonance about the Bible itself, but as will become clear in this chapter, a similar dynamic is at work in the experience of dissonance with preaching because of how the Bible and its functions are perceived.

Each chapter or section will draw some conclusions and aspects of these will be drawn together in Chapter 8 to summarise the findings of the research. As part of the conclusion, some implications of the research for evangelical faith

communities will be suggested. This is followed by a critical reflection on the

limitations of the research and some suggestions for further research.

Chapter 1: Critical issues in the contemporary study of the use of the Bible

Bebbington (1989) and Tidball (1994) have argued convincingly that the Bible is attributed a unique status in evangelical faith communities. However, as the empirical studies of Malley (2004, 2009) and Bielo (2009a, 2009b) have demonstrated this status is not simply a function of the theological factors outlined in Chapter 1, but also depend on a range of sociological and experiential factors. These are inherited and embraced as part of the belief structures and practices of such communities. As Malley (2004) observes, belonging to such evangelical faith communities means identifying with not just their theological beliefs about the Bible, but also their interpretive practices and experiences of the Bible.

Examining the role of scriptures[3] in religions generally, Watts (2006, p. 140) suggests it is the public ritualisation of the scriptures along "a semantic dimension, a performative dimension and an iconic dimension" which explains "their cultural functions and religious significance." This process exerts a strong formative influence on the communities concerned: "a claim to social authority [semantic]… a sense of inspiration [performative]… purposes of legitimation

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[3] Watts (2006) uses "scripture/scriptures" as generic terms for the texts of various major religious groups.

[iconic] (Watts, 2006, pp. 148–149)." This is one of the reasons, Watts argues, why faith communities have a shared experience of their scriptures being persuasive.

Even though the focus of this research is on laypeople's experience of engaging with the Bible, it is important to frame the enquiry within a wider consideration of some of the theological issues raised by the use and study of the Bible. This is important not just from the point of view of the theoretical framing of the research but also as a recognition of the influence of theological concepts, perhaps more frequently discussed in academic contexts, on people's commitment frameworks.[4]

This chapter will highlight selected aspects of the wider theological discussion about the Bible within which the experience of the participants needs to be located. Each of the issues selected in this chapter represent major areas of theological discussion. For that reason, the aim of the chapter is to highlight and reflect on the general framework within which the interview data will be generated and analysed.

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[4] There are other uses of the Bible that demand no element of personal or communal commitment, for example when the Bible is used for the purposes of cultural and literary studies, or for the purposes of the study of the history of religions.

However, it is important to note that highlighting these theoretical concerns is not intended to give the impression of a 'top down' approach that imposes on the participants a pre-existing theological structure. While the effects may not be as great as Malley (2009, p. 195) suggests, he is correct in the observation that theological accounts "underdetermine the ways in which people actually use and experience the Bible." This project is designed to focus on a 'bottom-up' approach of how members of evangelical faith communities in Ireland experience their engagement with the Bible, not how their experience might map to the contours of existing scholarship. For that reason, the theological issues highlighted in this chapter will, where appropriate, be supplemented with insights obtained from anthropological and ethnographic studies to ensure the lived experience of the participants is an integral part of the theological framing of the project.

1.1 The Bible: focal point for the church

The choice to focus on people who have a significant personal interest in and commitment to the Bible does not imply that this research can assume a homogeneous group of potential participants. One reason for this is, obviously, the multi-dimensional diversity of any group of people and the variety of ways in which the Bible functions in their lives. That is only part of the picture; there is the added complexity of the nature of the Bible itself.

In the space of the last century, there has been significant debate about and discussion of the Bible.[5] However, it is not just recent scholarship that has generated heated exchanges on the Bible and the cluster of important issues that are often related to it. The Bible has been the source of significant and extensive discussion and debate throughout the history of the church from the early debates about which documents should be included[6] to contemporary debates, as Work (2002, ch 1) notes, about the ways in which the Bible should be interpreted and lived.[7] In the history of western Europe, the Bible has had a significant impact on both culture and society (Dyas and Hughes, 2005). As a result of significant philosophical and cultural shifts that influence has seen a marked decline; this mirrors the general decline of Christianity in the west. Even though the locus of Christianity may have shifted to the global south (Jenkins, 2008), the Bible has left a mark in the cultures of the so-called western world.

In spite of the various debates and disputes, the church has generally regarded the Bible as a foundational document (Watson, 1997; McGrath, 1999; Fowl,

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[5] The titles of H Lindsell's work, *The battle for the Bible*, and J Barr's *Escaping from fundamentalism* are indicative of aspects of the debate that has gone on at a range of levels from popular works through to scholarly discussion.

[6] An example here could be Marcion's attempt in the 2nd century to suggest (for theological reasons) a truncated Old Testament and New Testament (Achtemeier, 2010, p.107).

[7] There is a significant and wide literature on this. This study will not seek to address these particular issues directly, but will refer to them as they arise as part of the research.

2008).[8] Wright (2011, p. 1) argues that, properly understood, the Bible is "central to the life of the Christian church." There is a theological necessity to this, even if, as Marshall (2007) observes, it not always reflected in the lifestyle commitments of those who think of themselves as part of the church. For a church to be in any way 'Christian' in its ethos, there needs to be some way in which it relates to the documents that contain the records, however those records are understood, of what it regards as the action of God and, in particular, the life of Jesus. As Achtemeier (2010, p. 2) observes, "without its Scriptures, the Christian faith would not be what it has historically understood itself to be, nor what it continues […] to claim that it is."

For those, therefore, who regard themselves as people of faith, the Bible functions in one way or another as the rule of faith. In the broadest of terms the Bible has functioned as documents of formation for the Christian community, which has included, among other things, the formation of lifestyle, ethics, character, worship, preaching and liturgy (Watson, 1997, p. 1). The Christian church has generally regarded engaging with the Bible and linking its doctrines and practices to it in some way an essential aspect of its self-understanding (Malley, 2004, chap. 3; Wright, 2011, chap. 5). This is primarily the result of the

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[8] As Watts (2006) notes, other religions have their scriptures, each ritualizing the dimensions in different ways. Watts (2006, p. 139) suggests aspects of this may draw attention to neglected or ignored perspectives; however, the focus of this study will be the Christian Scriptures.

Bible being understood as, in some sense, an address from God and at the same time a pointer to a response to God (Thiselton, 1992, 2012; Briggs, 2007; Wright, 2011, p. 3).

Even though Christian faith communities share something of a common commitment to the Bible, a range of other factors have influenced how they have engaged with the text. These factors include theological and doctrinal formulation, the particular interests and contexts of specific groups, and various cultural and social trends (Kelsey, 1975; Bebbington, 1989; Malley, 2004; Luhrmann, 2012). The broad spectrum of Christian faith communities have conceptualised and engaged with the Bible in a range of different ways.[9] This could be illustrated by selecting any number of examples from the history of the church from the debates of the early church fathers, through the Reformation, to the various debates of the last few centuries (Bray, 1996, 2014).

One of the key characteristics of evangelical faith communities is the privileged position they attribute to the Bible in shaping the theological perspectives, beliefs, faith practices and personal morality of their members. This reflects the view of the Bible expressed in the statements of faith of the main Protestant

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[9] Although dated, Kelsey's *The uses of Scripture in recent theology* (1975) provides examples that could be the basis of a contemporary typology of the ways in which the Bible is used both in theology and in practice. Johnston (1997) provides some reflections from an evangelical perspective.

denominations in Ireland. Sections of these statements that address the issue of the Bible are included in Appendix B. The Statement of Faith of Evangelical Alliance Ireland summarises the general tenor of these positions: "The divine inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and their consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour" (Evangelical Alliance Ireland, 2019). Evangelical faith communities, with their explicit commitment to biblicism, provide an example of how a community of faith relates to and engages with the Bible (Bebbington, 1989; Boone, 1990; Malley, 2004; Olson, 2005; Bielo, 2009b). The focus of this research will be how people who belong to such evangelical faith communities experience their engagement with the Bible.

1.2 The Bible in action: examples from evangelical faith communities

A complex interaction of theological, social, cultural and philosophical factors affect how people both conceptualise and engage with the Bible (Malley, 2004; Village, 2005a, 2005b, 2007, 2013; Village and Francis, 2005; Bielo, 2009a, 2009b; Luhrmann, 2012). The evangelical movement,[10] as it is commonly labelled,

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[10] This term is somewhat fluid, encompassing a range of mainly more conservative theological positions (Bebbington, 1989; Tidball, 1994). In many studies, the term is used interchangeably with what has become known as Protestant fundamentalism (Barr, 1988; Boone, 1990). Exact definitions are not vital at this stage.

provides an interesting example of this. This movement has self-consciously

and deliberately defined itself in relation to its attempt to give the Bible a

central and authoritative role in shaping faith and practice. Bebbington (1989, p.

3, italics original), in his historical definition of evangelicalism, suggests that

"*biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible," is part of a "quadrilateral of

priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism." In the course of his study,

Bebbington (1989, p. 272) explores a range of cultural and societal factors that

have influenced this movement, suggesting in the process that the "cultural

context [...] does most to explain the shape of Evangelical religion." There is a

sense, then, in which aspects of the movement's emphasis on the Bible are in

part a response to issues that were happening in the wider theological and

cultural milieu. In spite of its frequent insistence that its form of Christianity has

"possessed an essentially changeless content" (Bebbington, 1989, p. 271),

evangelicalism has undergone significant changes over the years. Bebbington

(1989, p. 271) argues that the four characteristics of evangelical faith expression,

"conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism," have been practiced in

many different ways. If this is true for a group that makes engagement with the

Bible a central pillar of its self-understanding, it serves to emphasise the fact

that any study of how people engage with the Bible needs to be aware of a

broader range of both theological and cultural trends. This highlights the

important observation that any attempt to understand and explain how people

have engaged with the Bible that is focused solely on theological concerns will

not be sufficiently nuanced to explain the multi-faceted nature of people's interactions with the Bible and its possible effects on their lives.

There has been some research conducted in the United States on some of the factors that influence the ways in which evangelical faith communities engage with the Bible (Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009a, 2009b; Luhrmann, 2012). Although this research is located in a different context, there are sufficient resonances with evangelical faith communities in Ireland to allow it to be drawn on to provide a functional perspective for this chapter and to form part of the theoretical underpinning for the qualitative research undertaken for this project.

Malley's study is focussed specifically on a church that defines itself as evangelical. His research attempts to "... outline the cognitive and social processes that cause evangelical Christians to feel that the Bible is 'living and active' in their lives today" (Malley, 2004, p. 1); he is investigating the notion of "how the Bible is related to other texts, talk and behavior (sic)" (Malley, 2004, p. 37). Malley understands that the Bible plays a central role in the lives of evangelicals and as a result his study is anthropological as opposed to theological; he is seeking to identify the sociological and cognitive factors which allow the Bible to function in this way. His understanding is that the commitments and understanding of evangelicals towards the Bible are as the

result of a complex interaction of cultural processes and personal choices. Rather than starting from a definition of the Bible, Malley (2004, p. 14) is concerned with Bible readers, "the people behind the texts who make the text special by their beliefs and practices."

This is an interesting perspective as it allows for a cluster of community and cultural factors to be examined, including aspects of personal, communal and institutional identity. One of the strengths of Malley's approach is that these factors could get displaced in a purely theological study. On the other hand, Malley's study does not always engage with some of the more subtle nuances of aspects of the theological issues involved. That does not take away from the value of his work, but simply suggests that some of the explanations could be nuanced further by a more thorough theological grounding, for example, with regard to the concept of revelation.

Bielo's (2009b) research with evangelical group Bible study adopts an insider-observer approach to analyse how a range of groups engage with the Bible. The groups he investigated belong mainly to the more conservative end of the theological spectrum. In the groups analysed the individuals engage with the Bible in such a way that "it is a site where individuals are able to critically and reflexively articulate the categories of meaning and action that are central to their spiritual and social life" (Bielo, 2009b, p. 12). Based on the work of Fish,

Bielo (2009b, p. 13) observes that "readers read the way they do because of their participation in defined communities of practice," and this is what Bible engagement in the group context provides. Bielo notes the whole ethos and communal commitments of the group impinge on how the individual members read the text. It is this group discourse (Malley, 2004, pp. 73–74; Bielo, 2009b, pp. 14–18) that contributes to the identity of a group and the individuals who make up that group and enables them to orient themselves towards the world of the rest of their lives. This is borne out in Bielo's (2009b, pp. 158–159) observations: "what happens in Bible study does not stay in Bible study. It travels well beyond the confines of the group into the participants' lives." This relation of the Bible to life will also form an important part of the qualitative dimension of this study.

Any consideration of the use of the Bible needs to give attention to some of the factors that impinge on how faith communities understand and engage with the Bible. The issues of inspiration, authority, interpretation and transformation will be considered as key elements in the theological backdrop for this research. While any of these themes could be a research topic in its own right, none of them is the primary focus of this research. As well as providing a theological mapping of the context of the research, these considerations will also provide theoretical insights which will inform the interview process. Given the focus of this research on actual lived experience, the more theoretical theological

considerations will be supplemented with perspectives from the anthropological and ethnographical studies noted above in the overall research design.

1.3 The Bible and inspiration

If, as suggested above, the Bible is to function in some way as a 'special' or privileged book within communities of faith, questions about its nature and character will inevitably surface. It is in this context that Olson (2005) suggests aspects of the doctrine of the inspiration of Bible need to be considered. The concept of the inspiration of the Bible is a complex issue that requires some account of the interaction between the divine and the human. The different ways this relationship has been conceptualised, Schneiders (2008) argues, has resulted in the range of models adopted by different communities of faith. At its most basic, the doctrine signifies the "belief on the part of the church that there is a unique linkage between God's communication with humankind and that specific collection of literature" (Achtemeier, 2010, p. 1). It is this broad understanding of the inspiration of Scripture that accounts for what is regarded as a theological necessity: the Christian faith needs to have its identity and practice rooted in some way in the documents of the Bible (Kelsey, 1975; Marshall, 1995; Watson, 1997).

The concept of the inspiration of Scripture has attracted significant examination and debate, particularly in the attempt to define exactly what is implied by the term. If the definition of inspiration could be left at the general statement of a special link between God's communication and the Bible, there may be a possibility of reasonable agreement within the Christian community on the matter. But it cannot be left at this point because, as Marshall (1995, pp. 9–18) points out, as the doctrine of inspiration raises many far-reaching questions. Examples include: how the Bible functions; what sort of book the Bible is and how readers engage with its contents; what readers might expect the Bible to 'do'; what the Bible says about its own origins and functions; and how inspiration is linked to issues of interpretation and understanding (Achtemeier, 2010, pp. 3–8).

Achtemeier's (2010) study of inspiration and its associated concept of authority is a helpful summary of many of the questions. He argues that the 'extremes' of conservative, perhaps in places this might be more accurately designated 'fundamentalist', and radical liberal thinking have not managed to grapple fully with the range of complexities that the Bible raises. As a result he is critical of both schools of thought. According to Achtemeier (2010), conservative scholars tend to work with *a priori* assumptions about the Bible and how it needs to conform to pre-defined and specific categories of truth, categories that he argues the Bible does not demand. The result of this is a tendency to distort

Scripture; it also raises significant questions about the concept of error, particularly as the understanding of inspiration can be expressed in terms of inerrancy. Liberal perspectives, on the other hand, tend to relinquish Scripture from any position of privilege, and as a result set it alongside any other literature and make it subject to the criteria of human experience; this too, according to Achtemeier (2010, ch 2), results in a distortion of Scripture. One of the reasons for these defective understandings of Scripture, highlighted by Achtemeier (2010, p. 12), is that both the conservative and liberal traditions have tended to frame their understanding of the inspiration of Scripture on the Aristotelian distinction of "principal efficient cause" and "instrumental efficient cause." This has resulted in the mode of authorship of the Bible being understood as something akin to the experience of an Old Testament prophet (Ricoeur, 1977, pp. 3–4). Conservative positions have tended to embrace and accept this prophetic-like underpinning for their conceptualisation of the Bible. Liberal positions, on the other hand, have tended to question and reject any notion of a prophetic understanding as it tends to suggest an alternative beyond normal human experience (Achtemeier, 2010, pp. 11–13, 85–90).

As a response to this analysis, and as a way forward through the 'impasse' which he observes, Achtemeier proposes that an understanding of the ways in which Scripture has been put together is a natural starting point to construct a doctrine of inspiration. This pushes him away from the prophetic model to a

more community-focussed model, which he suggests is based on what the Bible says about itself. He also argues that this sort of model is demonstrated in the formation of the canon. There are three key components to Achtemeier's proposal for understanding inspiration: traditions (related to the action of God), situation (in which the community has found and continues to find itself), and respondent (the people who interpreted traditions within their situation). It is at the confluence of these factors that inspiration is at work, a process whereby communities of faith remain faithful to the action of God in salvation (Achtemeier, 2010, pp. 109–121).

Marshall is critical of Achtemeier's proposals. He points out that although Achtemeier's proposals have significant insights to commend them, they have a tendency to locate "inspiration as an activity in the process of composition of the Bible" (Marshall, 1995, pp. 37–38) and do not deal with how the text of Bible itself might be termed inspired.[11] However, for the purpose of this study, the strength of Achtemeier's proposals is that the definition of inspiration can be viewed in more functional terms. It is based on a range of theological and philosophical insights and, perhaps most importantly, they have a practical dimension for the actual appropriation of Scripture. This remains the case even if there are aspects of the proposals that could be debated further, for example,

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[11] Marshall argues that the way in which 2 Tim 3:16 appears to be pointing is that "the Scriptures are inspired rather than the process of composition" (1995, p. 38).

the nature of the link between the inspiration and the truthfulness of the

Scriptures.

One of the interesting corollaries of Achtemeier's proposals is the insistence that

the Spirit must be involved in the appropriation of the texts for the

contemporary faith community. Achtemeier suggests that this should be similar

to the ways in which the Spirit was involved in the production of the texts

themselves. This could be problematic if it was taken to imply that the

inspiration of the Spirit functioned without some sort of connection to the Bible.

If the witness of the Spirit does not have an explicit link to the Bible, then,

Achtemeier (2010, p. 148) argues, the authority of the Bible is substituted with

"the authoritative voices in any given cultural situation […] The Christian

community that abandons the authority of the biblical witness becomes little

more than the mouthpiece of whatever current cultural norms catch its fancy."

However, the strength of the proposal is that the Spirit's work in the current

context is inextricably linked with the content of the Scriptures; in fact the Spirit

"is not heard apart from the content of the witness contained in the text"

(Achtemeier, 2010, p. 147). This means that "Scripture is tied to the life of the

community of faith" (Achtemeier, 2010, p. 130) and, consequently the

interpreter needs to take this community seriously. For the purposes of this

study, it is Achtemeier's (2010, p. 142) insistence on the effects that the Bible has

on the community of faith that are the most important when considering the

concept of inspiration.[12] Scripture has the power to "create and correct human

experience" by the power that "underlies the shaping of Scripture itself, namely

the Holy Spirit" (Achtemeier, 2010, p. 147). And if, as a consequence, the Spirit

is heard in a unique way in the content of the Bible (Achtemeier, 2010, p. 146), it

should follow that when it is engaged as pointing to the authority of God it will

be a source of potential transformation for the community of faith.[13]

It is clear from Achtemeier's (2010) work that the question of the truthfulness of

the Bible is one of the issues that is linked to the doctrine of inspiration. Part of

the problem with a discussion of truth and error in relation to the Bible, as both

Achtemeier (2010) and Marshall (1995) have highlighted, is exactly how to

frame the most important aspects of that discussion, namely how to define the

concepts of truth and error. Achtemeier seems to be suggesting that issues of

faith are the key focus of the Bible and, as a consequence, issues of history and

science are not at the same level of importance. Although this is not stated

explicitly, it appears to be the direction his argument is pointing, and, as a

result, may fall foul of his own critique of using some sort of external standard

or referent to judge the Bible and its contents. Whilst not the intention of the

argument, it may be the end result if this distinction is pressed too far. Marshall

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[12] This is not to suggest that other issues on this subject are not important, but that for the purpose of this study they do not need to be fully engaged.

[13] The concept of the Bible as an agent of transformation is explored in Section 1.6.

(1995, p. 69ff.), however, is slightly more nuanced in his arguments and

suggests that the Bible should be regarded as trustworthy in what it claims it is

doing. This suggestion avoids an *a priori* assumption of the ways in which

biblical texts are expected to function, a criticism often levelled at Christian

fundamentalism. It also creates an important link between any understanding

of authority and issues of textual interpretation; texts need to be interpreted in

order to understand what they might be claiming. As Brown (2008) recognises,

the further the genre of those texts are from contemporary literary genres

familiar to Bible readers, the more interpretive input is required. In some of his

work, Vanhoozer provides a theoretical basis for this link between the Bible's

authority and its interpretation using concepts from speech-act theory.

Although he is not addressing the inspiration of the Bible directly, Vanhoozer

(1986, p. 86, see also 1998, chs 5-6) argues that, utilising aspects of speech-act

theory,[14] it is possible to recognise and embrace the truth claims of the Bible

(which are linked to the doctrine of inspiration) and do "justice to the

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[14] Speech-act theory is based on the work of J.L. Austin and J.R. Searle. Meadowcroft (2011, pp. 25–26) explains the theory very briefly [the technical terms have been inserted into his quotation]: "this approach to understanding the act of communication distinguishes between the words spoken [locution], the intention behind their speaking [illocution] and the effect on the hearer of their having been uttered. […] it draws attention to the action intended by speaking [perlocution]." Vanhoozer (1986, 1998) provides a more detailed account, engaging directly with Austin and Searle and other language theorists.

In the context of reflecting on issues of biblical hermeneutics, Thiselton (1992, 2005a) and Briggs (2008) argue that speech-act theory provides valuable insights into how biblical texts function.

ordinariness of the biblical texts." The aspect of Vanhoozer's (1986, p. 91, italics

original) position that is important here is the argument that there is a

"*correlation between a text's genre or literary form, and a text's illocutionary point or*

force." For Vanhoozer (1986, p. 94), this means in practice that, "Scripture's

diverse illocutionary forces... achieve their respective purposes" and in the

context where the Bible is regarded as inspired the illocutionary force can be

trusted. What the Bible claims to be doing, it does so in a trustworthy fashion. If

inspiration is conceptualised in this way, it is, as Brown (2008) notes, the

illocutionary force of biblical texts and their genres that is important for a

practical understanding of the inspiration of the Bible. These proposals have the

attraction of combining elements of Achtemeier's and Marshall's work with a

philosophy of language that can be adapted for a contemporary context

(Vanhoozer, 1998).

One of the strengths of Vanhoozer's work is that the concept of inspiration it

implies remains linked to the text and not the process that may lie behind its

compilation, noted above as a weakness of Achtemeier's proposals. It is not

necessary to fully embrace Vanhoozer's conclusions to appreciate the value of

his arguments, namely, that questions about the inspiration of the Bible

necessitate careful consideration of issues of interpretation, especially if the

literary genre of a text affects its illocutionary force. Almost by definition, this

links any understanding of the inspiration of the Bible to questions of

interpretation of the text. In order to have any understanding of what the Scriptures 'do' (even if Vanhoozer's arguments for the reliability of this 'doing' are rejected), there needs to be a process whereby what any passage or book is 'doing' can be explained and embraced. This creates something of a dynamic between the doctrine of inspiration and the processes of interpretation and hermeneutics. It is only when a text is understood in its historical, literary and theological context that there can be an understanding of what inspiration might mean for that text, because only then will its illocutionary force be understood. It is also worth noting that it may not be possible to say with precision what the illocutionary force of a text might be; in such a case it will be more difficult to explain the nature of the inspiration of the text.

The more functional nature of this understanding appears to be appropriate for this study. If Vanhoozer's arguments are valid it is not always necessary for people to be able to articulate an understanding of inspiration for them to appreciate and experience the illocutionary force of the Bible. But, it would appear that there needs to be at least a basic orientation of the self towards the text in a way that takes the text seriously in what Vanhoozer (1998, p. 455) terms a "hermeneutics of humility and conviction."

Vanhoozer's proposals are not only useful for understanding the inspiration of the Bible, they can also function as something of a framework for engaging the

related issue of the authority of the Bible.[15] This is particularly true if the authority of the Bible is not considered simply as an abstract concept, but examined as part of the effect the Bible has on the community of faith, which Hays (2004, p. 7) describes as "the pragmatic task."

In Malley's (2004) ethnographic study of "Creekside Baptist Church"[16] one of the issues explored is how the members of this faith community conceptualised and experienced the inspiration of the Bible. Malley's (2004, p. 14) approach differs from the "theological, literary, phenomenological and historical studies" as it is focused on the "people who… make the texts special by their beliefs and practices." This offers a valuable, alternative perspective on the issue, and one that is important for this research. Based on the empirical research, Malley suggests that the doctrine of inspiration is in fact a corollary of a prior commitment to the authority of the Bible. This observation is based on his finding that although many of his interviewees knew about the doctrine of inspiration, very few were able to explain it. The implications of the doctrine, however, were deeply embedded in the belief and practice structures of the community and its members. On the other hand, many of the respondents were able to explain aspects of their understanding and experience of the authority of the Bible, something that is often regarded in academic theological discourse as

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[15] Thiselton (2012) offers a perspective on this.

[16] In keeping with the demands of Malley's methodology, this is a pseudonym.

a corollary of inspiration. This suggests something of a difference between the ways in which theologians and biblical scholars articulate the concept of inspiration as the principle underlying the authority of the Bible and the ways in which it is more popularly perceived and experienced. This highlights one of the key aspects of this study, namely to examine how the Bible is understood and engaged by non-technical readers, which requires a commitment to gathering empirical data and constructing theory from the 'bottom up' rather than assuming that it works in a 'top down' fashion. Theory may point in one direction; there is a possibility that practice may work in a different fashion. If, with regard to the Bible, there is the possibility that practice precedes theory, empirical data is important to consider alongside and raise questions about more theoretical considerations about how people engage with the Bible.

This section has highlighted aspects of the inspiration of the Bible and how that relates to the experience of the Bible within evangelical faith communities. As noted, the issue is extensive and complex, being considered in some way across the spectrum of Christian expression. Malley's (2004) study suggests that from the point of view of Bible readers the concept of inspiration, while acknowledged, and shrouded in elements of mystery, is, in practice, not as important for evangelical faith communities' engagement with the Bible as the concept of the authority of the Bible. The following section will consider, firstly,

the issue of the authority of the Bible and then examine some of Malley's
findings on its influence on practice.

1.4 The Bible and authority

A commitment to the authority to the Bible is an integral part of the self-
understanding of evangelical faith communities (Bebbington, 1989; Malley,
2004, 2009; Bielo, 2009b; Wright, 2011). [17] The focus of this study is not on issues
raised by attributing authority to the Bible per se. Rather it is how the authority
of the Bible functions for individuals in faith communities and how this is
experienced in practice as a result of engaging with the Bible. However, it is
important to locate these concerns in some of the theological discussions on the
Bible's authority. This section will examine aspects of this debate as it relates to
the focus of the research before examining and reflecting on some of Malley's
empirical findings on how an evangelical community of faith conceptualises
and experiences the authority of the Bible.

The question of the authority of the Bible has generated a wide and significant
debate. For example, it was one of the issues debated at the Reformation, with

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[17] As part of a different discourse, Davies (2004) argues that in what he defines as purely
academic contexts this authority needs to be denied and actively resisted. Watson (1996, 1997)
refutes this.

the emerging Protestant tradition resolving one of the issues under debate by setting the authority of the Bible over the traditions of the church (Horton, 2006). It is also one of the issues addressed by the Pontifical Biblical Commission (1993) in their statement on "The interpretation of the Bible in the Church." As noted by Vanhoozer (1986) and others (Marshall, 1995; Olson, 2005; Achtemeier, 2010), often the discussion of the authority of the Bible within evangelicalism has become entangled on issues of inerrancy and infallibility.

There has been significant debate about the ways in which people conceptualise the authority of the Bible. Barr's (1988) critique of what he termed "fundamentalism" raises some of these issues in sharp relief. In spite of some of the obvious polemic of, and consequent lack of precision in, some of Barr's argumentation noted by some respondents (Goldingay, 1977; Marshall, 1995, p. 11; Watson, 1997, pp. 18–26), the question of what sort of authority the Bible can be given within the Christian community is one question among many that needs to be addressed. How can the Bible be authoritative when often the sole source of authority for the assertion is the Bible itself? Biblicism, a circularity about a commitment to the Bible for matters of faith and practice, according to Barr (1988, p. 8), simply does not work. Barr presents the evidence for this in both theological and philosophical terms, but it is interesting, and significant, that recent research by Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b) suggests that the *habitus* he presents of those he terms fundamentalists may not be quite as accurate

when actual practice is researched. This highlights the need for the more 'bottom-up' approach of this research.

The issue of the authority of the Bible is important to consider in the context of examining the function of the Bible in the church community. It would seem that people who engage with the Bible in the context of a faith community need to have at least a working understanding of how the Bible exercises its authority, even if, as Malley (2004, p. ch 4) observes, they may not be able to express that understanding precisely.

In an attempt to frame the debate about the authority of the Bible in the context of wider theological concerns, Wright (2011) suggests that a better starting point for this discussion is the broad, widely-accepted theological lens of the authority of God (Wright, 1992, p. 24). This is similar in shape to some of the proposals of Achtemeier (2010, p. 146) who suggests that the locus of the Bible's authority is not the words of the text, but the one to whom Scripture points; it "is a derived authority." Goldingay (1994, p. 77) understands this as the "witnessing tradition" of Scripture. If this framework is adopted then the term 'authority of the Bible' can be understood in practice as a theological shorthand for referring to the "authority of God *exercised through* Scripture" (Wright, 2011, p. 23, italics original). The Bible, therefore, is conceptualised as the way in which God exercises his authority: "Scripture is there to be a means of God's

action in and through us – which will include, but go far beyond, the mere conveying of information" (Wright, 2011, p. 28). This fits very comfortably with Wright's assertion that the Bible should be understood in its overall narrative context. Although he does not state this explicitly, it would appear that Wright is attempting a more functional understanding of authority, an understanding that he argues is biblical in and of itself and can be regarded as part of God's action and purpose in the world.

This linking of the authority of the Bible to the authority of God in action provides a dynamic understanding of the concept. It also establishes a context for investigating the function of the Bible. Without this link to God's authority the concept of biblical authority can easily become something of an abstract and philosophical category. In Wright's (2011, pp. 33–35) work, the authority of God is linked to how he conceptualises and defines God's purpose, namely God's authority to provide an answer to the problem of evil and bring about a new creation. However, Wright's proposals about the Bible do not depend on a full acceptance of this wider scheme. While there may be a case for asking questions about Wright's overall theological framework, there is still a very helpful paradigm here for defining authority. Wright's work encompasses, like Hays (2004, p. 7) in another context, the element of consistent praxis, something Marshall (2007) recognises is important for any definition of authority that is going to make sense in twenty-first century culture. It also has the advantage of

being Trinitarian in its ethos with the Spirit being the one who 'effects' the

authority by bringing about the changes that the OT and NT announce (Work,

2002; Achtemeier, 2010).

Even if it were possible to arrive at a widely accepted definition of the authority

of the Bible, it is something quite different to try to explain how that authority

might function in practice. Assuming that the Bible can be ascribed some sort of

authority, some of the difficulties of attempting to describe how that authority

functions can be highlighted by posing questions about how different genres

work (Hirsch, 1967; Brown, 2008). For some genres of the Bible the link is

reasonably straightforward. If the genre happens to be the apodictic law of the

Old Testament, then, with an appropriate interpretive framework, it should be

possible to demonstrate how this might be authoritative for the community of

faith. If the genre is New Testament epistle, and the author is addressing a

context similar to a twenty-first century context,[18] the question for many readers

may not even arise (Fee and Stuart, 2014, chs 2 and 3). The question of how

genres like narrative, poetry, or wisdom, the majority of the Bible's genres, can

be authoritative needs to be addressed (Thiselton, 1992; Wright, 1992;

Goldingay, 1994, 1995; Vanhoozer, 1998; Thiselton, 2005a). It is interesting,

however, that this is often addressed in the context of using the Bible as a

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[18] 1 Corinthians 13 might be a reasonable example.

resource for ethical reflection (Wright, 1992, chap. 5, 2011; Hays, 2004),

highlighting that in the context of Christian living and discipleship, it is

important to understand the way in which authority works.

In an attempt to reflect on how the range of genres of the Bible exercise

authority in practice, Wright (1991) suggests that the Bible functions as forming

the major acts of the story within which communities of faith must act, living a

"unique, unscripted and yet obedient, improvisation," which, at the same time,

remains connected with the story. In a similar manner, Dyrness (1997, p. 171)

suggests that, in practice, the Bible functions "more like a musical score than a

blueprint" and as such is able to provide fresh interpretations that take account

of new contexts.[19] The ways in which the authority of the Bible is experienced

will be explored in the qualitative research.

Malley's (2004) empirical study provides some evidence of how the authority of

the Bible is understood and how it functions in the context of an evangelical

church.[20] The study is limited in scope, but Malley argues that despite its

limitations it is representative of the wider evangelical movement. The

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[19] Young (1990) also suggests the "art of performance" functions as a helpful paradigm to conceptualise how the Bible works in practice.

[20] Although Malley's (2004) study is focussed on an individual evangelical church in the United States he expects resonance (Swinton and Mowat, 2016) with similar church communities. Even though the Irish context is different to the United States there are areas of transferability (Braun and Clarke, 2013) between Malley's finding and evangelical faith communities in Ireland. See further Chapters 3-7, below.

interesting factor for this project is that it highlights some of the ways in which groups develop and pass on how they understand, and, as a consequence, interact with the Bible. In the context of Malley's research, the group's fundamental belief about the Bible was that it is an authoritative document. However, what is significant in practice is the relative priority given to the concept of authority as opposed to any theological explanation of why the Bible might be regarded as a privileged text, in this case any doctrine of inspiration. Malley (2004, p. 136, italics original) argues that "it is in fact biblical authority that is primary, and that the doctrine of divine inspiration functions psychologically as a *rationale* for *prior* belief in the Bible's authority." The reason for this, he suggests is, "the practice of biblical authority turns on psychological mechanisms that are quite different from those involved in speculative theology" (Malley, 2004, p. 137). This highlights the need for empirical data on this topic. In the light of this it makes sense to propose that corporate understandings of the authority of the Bible shape and condition responses to the Bible. It is not surprising that Malley observed this in an evangelical group who self-consciously define themselves in relation to their engagement with the Bible. However, it also highlights a potential gap between the theory and practice of biblical authority, something that will be taken into account in the analysis of the interview data.

Utilising and adapting the work of Durkheim and Rappaport, Malley (2004, pp. 137–144) develops the analysis of his observations and argues that the concept of biblical authority in Creekside Baptist Church can best be understood as a function of community formation. Biblical authority is, therefore, seen "in the discursive practice of framing one's speech in relation to the Bible" (Malley, 2004, p. 140). It could be added that it is not just speech that is involved, as there appears to be an attempt to make a deliberate connection between the Bible and lifestyle choices (Malley, 2004, pp. 106–107; Bielo, 2009b, pp. 58–63; Luhrmann, 2012). The dialogue about the Bible that is part of what it means to be a member of this community reinforces the concept of authority, and the belief in authority reinforces the need to discuss the Bible in this sort of way. This is an interesting observation and illustrates how both a shared understanding about the Bible and a shared commitment to practice it in life can shape people who engage with the Bible. Bielo's (2009b) research into the ways in which Bible study groups engage with the Bible would appear to support Malley's findings.

Bielo (2009b) discovered that for the Bible study groups he was investigating[21] the Bible was regarded as the ultimate source of authority. He suggests this is expressed in a "textual ideology" which is "a formative mechanism in social life" (Bielo, 2009b, p. 51). Such mechanisms are "negotiated among defined

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[21] A similar argument for resonance and transferability as noted above for Malley's (2004) work applies to Bielo's study.

communities of practice" (Bielo, 2009b, p. 51) and are the inherited traditions of a faith community. They strongly influence the shape and experience of Bible reading. Bielo (2009b, p. 52) suggests that in the Bible reading practices of a faith community members "can take ownership of those conceptions in ways that make sense for the readers' own social scenes." This implies that an evangelical faith community's understanding and commitment to the authority of the Bible is not necessarily driven solely by theological concerns. Rather it is also part of a social construction, informed by theological insights, inherited by the members of the faith community in such a way as they make them their own. This model of an inherited "textual ideology" may be paradigmatic for areas other than the authority of the Bible and will be explored in the analysis of the interview data.

Malley's (2004) observations on how people articulated their views of the Bible and its authority suggest that for evangelical communities of faith the assumption of authority is primary. The doctrine of inspiration seems to be a means of explaining this basic assumption. However, at the same time as serving as a rationale, it also shifts the discussion about authority to a non-negotiable, foundational level (Malley, 2004, p. 143). Interestingly, and probably significantly, very few people in Malley's study appeared to be able to explain inspiration, even though it was the reason for a commitment to the Bible's authority. This is evidence that the Bible can function as an authoritative

document even if the individuals engaging with it are unable to explain why it should be regarded in this way. The group that Malley (2004, pp. 143, 145–146, 158) was investigating appear to be committed to the authority of the Bible because that is the way in which it is perceived to 'work'. This may indicate that some of Wright's (2011) proposals, noted earlier, may actually be operative in the context Malley is investigating, even though it seems unlikely that anyone in Malley's study would have explained their understanding of authority in the way Wright proposes. This implies that, in practice, it may not be the semantic content of the doctrine of inspiration that is important, but the implications that arise from it. This suggested it was important for this study to ask participants about their experience of the Bible's authority in practice rather than asking about the understanding of the theological concepts underpinning the doctrine of inspiration.

The arguments advanced by both Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b) provide an explanatory framework for understanding some of the attitudes of people who engage with the Bible because they are convinced of its authority. However, there may be theological factors that are part of the explanation that have not been fully explored. There may well be important theological issues that either church members or Bible study group members may not be able to express, but provide an underpinning for the practices observed. One example may be an unspoken and unexplored link between a group or community's understanding

of the Bible and an underlying doctrine of God (Macquarrie, 1977, chap. 5; Vanhoozer, 2005, chaps 1, 4). For example, if God is postulated as a personal God, understood in the most general sense, then such a God is usually understood as a God who is able to communicate in some fashion, otherwise, as Williams (1994) argues, God would be less 'personal' than a human being. If so, then there must be some locus for that communication; people of faith include the Bible in some way in that communicative act (Vanhoozer, 2005). This general theological argument could be augmented by Wright's (2011) concept of the Bible's authority as the exercise of the authority of the God who communicates. Malley (2004) may argue that this is pushing the mystery further back, and in some ways it may be. However, in theological terms, the internal consistency of the Christian faith depends on a basic assumption of a God who communicates. This God, by definition, must be greater than human beings and, as Williams (1994) proposes, he should be able to communicate something of himself and his purposes at least as well as human beings are able to communicate. Even though Malley's (2004) studies provide some very suggestive paradigms for this research, it is worth noting that the 'bottom up' examination of the evidence may miss some of the 'higher level' theological processing. This does not render some of the insights any less valuable, and, in practice it would seem that people often do function in the way Malley has described.

This section has highlighted elements of some of the theological issues that form a backdrop to the concept of biblical authority for evangelical communities of faith. However, while these may form a generic background framework, it needs to be acknowledged that communities of faith might experience the authority of the Bible in a different way. The models suggested by the anthropological studies of Bielo (2009b) and Malley (2004) provide a framework for exploring this potential gap between theory and practice in the interview data.

As noted above, the issue of the authority of the Bible is linked to questions of interpretation. In practice, as with most communities that have a written Scripture, the Christian community encourages its members to "gain expertise" in the interpretation of the Bible "not only for personal devotion but also as a means for directing community behavior (sic) and for adjudicating conflicts" (Watts, 2006, p. 141). Issues of interpretation are key factors in how people experience their engagement with the Bible. The next section will consider some issues of Bible interpretation as they relate to this study.

1.5 The Bible: questions of interpretation and relevance

However, the issues of the inspiration and the authority of the Bible are resolved, and whether they are expressed in conservative, liberal or mediating terms, the question of how the Bible is to be interpreted remains a significant issue. It is almost a truism to say that the Bible needs interpretation for the modern context; there would be little dispute about that across a broad theological spectrum. Even those who suggest an approach to the Bible that assumes "it comes from God, as no other book does" and can be summed up on a bumper-sticker epithets such as "God said it, I believe it, that settles it" (Borg, 2001, p. 4) engage in processes of interpretation, even though these may not be consciously articulated. The question is not whether interpretation is needed, but what sorts of processes represent responsible interpretation and hermeneutical procedure.[22] Thiselton (2005a, p. 2005) is of the opinion that "issues of meaning and interpretation" with the linked question of "the nature and scope of hermeneutics" have become the primary focus for the contemporary debate about the Bible. This study will not be dealing directly with issues connected with the theories of interpretation and hermeneutics, but it is important to be aware of the ways in which people are actually interpreting

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[22] Any number of works on issues of Bible interpretation reflecting a breadth of theological perspective could be cited. The various Bible commentary series produced represent something of this spectrum of perspectives and approaches.

and engaging with the Bible. This section will highlight some of the issues that form the background to the analysis of the interview data.

It is not just the process of interpretation that is the subject of discussion and debate. Underlying the variety of approaches to interpretation there are a range of philosophical approaches and commitments that impact and influence the whole process of hermeneutics. Thiselton has examined a range of these in considerable depth (1980, 1992, 2009). The issue for this research is not so much the details of this body of research as the fact that in practice people who engage with the Bible tend to do so within faith communities. As a consequence they adopt, either by choice or by assimilation, the expectations of Bible engagement and the interpretive process that Village (2007, p. ch 7) and Rogers (2016) identify are a constituent part of such communities. Boone (1990), for example, is able to describe and examine the discourse and interpretive strategies of Protestant fundamentalism. In a similar vein Borg (2001) compares and contrasts the approach to the Bible adopted by conservative groups and by what he terms people of mainline churches.

One of the interpretation strategies often attributed to evangelical faith communities is that of literalism (Barr, 1988; Boone, 1990). Village's (2007, p. 68) quantitative study discovered a higher level of what he termed "principled" literalism in evangelical faith communities where, although there was an

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awareness of a diversity of literary genres in the Bible, the tendency was to

"assign a high probability of literalism to anything not specifically labelled as

story." Malley's (2004) qualitative study on his observation of textual practice

provides an interesting supplement to Village. Malley suggests the term

literalism when used about the Bible functions as a placeholder of

understanding about the Bible rather than specifying a particular hermeneutical

approach. Used in this way, Malley (2004, pp. 92–103) argues, the term

represents the epistemological understandings of the community and has its

roots in both the community's doctrinal assertions about the Bible and the

community's interpretative tradition. Ironically, in such cases "literal doesn't

always mean literal" (Malley, 2004, p. 101).

One of the recurring questions in Bible interpretation is the manner in which

the Bible is engaged. This is often expressed in the form of whether the Bible

should be read like any other book or like no other book. Moberly (2000, p. 3)

suggests that while this might have some "heuristic usefulness" it is a

"deceptive oversimplification of complex and intertwining issues," but it is

question that needs to be considered. It would not be difficult to trace and

document some of the shifts that have occurred in the field of Bible

interpretation, which, as Village (2007, pp. 19–28) proposes, can be mapped to

broader cultural and social influences. That would simply set a context for

contemporary practice, but one of the questions that would still need to be

asked is: in what ways do readers interpret the Bible? Malley (2004, chap. 3) suggests that the Bible is not read as any other book, not so much because there is a special "hermeneutic tradition",[23] but because the community he was examining gave relevance a unique and privileged place. This community had inherited an "interpretive tradition"[24] with a particular understanding of the inspiration and authority of the Bible that was committed to the relevance and contemporary application of the text. As Wright (1991) observes, Bible readers in the faith community being investigated have tended to follow the interpretive tradition rather than let the Bible question that tradition.[25] The Bible was, therefore, regarded unlike any other book because of its potential for relevance. Relevance was the 'given' in Bible interpretation, and, in the context of the faith community being examined, was the quality most prized.

Bielo also observed the premium placed on relevance among the readers he was investigating. One of the characteristics of the Bible study groups he observed was the assumption that the Bible would be, without question, relevant to contemporary living; Bielo (2009b, p. 59) labels this an "ideology of relevance."

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[23] By this Malley (2004, p. 73) means "a socially transmitted set of methods for reading the Bible." And for the reasons noted above, "evangelicals'… widespread avowal of literalism is not evidence of a hermeneutic tradition."

[24] Malley (2004, p. 73) defines this as a "species of belief-tradition in which a set of beliefs is transmitted along with the attribution of those beliefs to a text, the Bible."

[25] For further reflection on the relation of the Bible and church tradition, see for example from a Catholic perspective "The interpretation of the Bible in the Church" (Pontifical Biblical Commission, 1993) and from a Protestant tradition Vanhoozer (2005). See also Rogers (2016).

This gives Bible reading the potential to be transformative for those involved, something that Bielo (2009b, p. 60) suggests "has been integrated into virtually all trajectories of American Protestantism." This search for relevance is often built into broader social concerns as group members "place themselves in some form of ideological relationship with their sacred texts" (Bielo, 2009b, p. 60). As an example, Bielo (2009b, pp. 60–63) notes how the textual practice of the group he observed was able to use the Bible as "a means of gender articulation," highlighting how the assumed relevance of the Bible has been used much more broadly to construct what the "ideal Evangelical man" should be.

Malley (2004, pp. 105–111) develops his analysis of what his interviewees expect from their engagement with the Bible by utilising relevance theory as proposed by Sperber and Wilson. It is not only general relevance to the faith community that is expected. Malley (2004, p. 106) observes that the participants in his research expected "the Bible to be profoundly relevant to them in their individual circumstances;" as a result they devoted considerable energy to it. One of the strategies that Malley (2004, pp. 108–111) observed to facilitate the maintenance of relevance was the use of a "dual-context" hermeneutic where the Bible is read as part of a "communicative process, but a communicative process with a double structure" (Malley, 2004, p. 111). This creates two frames for the generation of meaning for Bible texts where "the human author's intent fixed the Bible's meaning" while at the same time "God, in the person of the

Holy Spirit, may speak to an individual, in the particular circumstances of that individual's life, through some passage of the Bible. […] Both contexts are available for interpreting a passage" (Malley, 2004, p. 111).[26] In a devotional frame the rules of interpretation can be relaxed, thus allowing a degree of interpretive freedom and imagination in order for relevance to be constructed. [27] The devotional context can also be related to the instance at which a person encounters a particular text (Malley, 2004, p. 111) and does not, by definition, need to engage with broader issues of interpretation. This devotional framing strategy opens a potential path for the ongoing relevance of the text, a path that raises its own questions. It allows the addition of "story line, motivations, inferences," "expansion of a term's semantic field, paraphrase, and elaboration" and "psychological profile" (Malley, 2004, pp. 112, 116–117). These techniques, which Malley (2004, pp. 116–117) terms the "working of the hermeneutic imagination," are used to "establish transivity between the ancient text and the modern reader's beliefs." Again, when analysing the interview data the priority and value of relevance and how it might work in practice will be examined.

Bielo (2009b, p. 72, ch 4) also observed that although the Bible was regarded as the book that was relevant in a way that no others were or could be, the reading

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[26] This is an aspect of what Bielo (2009b, pp. 70–72) might term "textual ideology-textual practice".

[27] Malley suggests this explains some of the repeated "complaint of scholars… that laypeople are always taking passages 'out of context.'" (2004, p. 111). The criticism, Malley argues, does not take account of the devotional context in which the normal rules of interpretation can be relaxed and can read texts in ways that are not constrained by the historical context.

strategy of searching for relevance carried over to other non-biblical texts, but no others were attributed the same authority.

It is not just the interpretation process that influences the way in which people engage with the Bible. As has already been noted, Malley (2004, p. 118) argues that an interpretive tradition "exerts a very powerful influence on how evangelicals understand the Bible."[28] Although it may not be quite as prominent in other groups, it is reasonable to suppose that this perspective could also be observed in other groups who live within a defined tradition of Bible interpretation. This interpretive tradition can be seen at work as it "gives rise to interpretations that stand in relation to the Bible in ways that would be unusual between other texts and their interpretation" (Malley, 2004, p. 119). In the case of evangelical groups both Malley (2004, pp. 118–126) and Bielo (2009b, pp. 70–72) suggest that this may, in practice, be just as important as the actual interpretation of the Bible text itself. When coupled with the "devotional framing" and the concern for relevance, it is possible that "selectivity and ad hoc hermeneutics" (Malley, 2004, p. 144) are likely to play a significant role in how the Bible is engaged.

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[28] Rogers (2016) also notes the ways in which both the assumptions and practices of faith communities shape the hermeneutical process they deploy to engage with the Bible.

It may not only be the reading practice that the interpretive tradition influences. If Watts' (2006) suggestion about the ritualization of the performative dimension of Scripture[29] can be expanded to include specific lifestyle choices as an aspect of the "performance,"[30] then it is possible to understand certain lifestyle choices as being part of the public ritualized dimension of the Bible. If this is the case, there is a strong possibility that the interpretative tradition will also have a controlling influence on this performance. In practice, this would mean that for specific communities there may well be an expectation of lifestyle choices and behaviours, public performance, that have their basis located as much in the received interpretive tradition as in the interpretation of Bible texts. This highlights the transformative potential of both the influence of the interpretive tradition and the result of engaging with the Bible text, which in evangelical faith communities may be closely intertwined.

There is also a possibility that how a group defines their doctrine of the Bible may not adequately represent what they do with it. For example, there may be a commitment to the relevance of the whole Bible, but in practice a preference for certain texts, for example, the New Testament. The principle of biblicism

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[29] Watts (2006, p.149) tends to limit this to the more artistic expressions of 'performance', but, interestingly, he briefly suggests an expansion of the concept to include preaching, and there may be a possibility it could be extended even beyond this.

[30] This suggestion is linked to the concept of performing the Bible as one of the means of faithful response to its message for faith communities (Young, 1990; Wright, 1991; Vanhoozer, 2005)

may be part of a group's self-definition, but that does not always mean, as both

Malley (2004, pp. 145–146) and Marshall (2007) observe, that it is translated into

interpretive practice or even actual practice. There may be a difference, as Bielo

(2009b, pp. 82–83) suggests, between what is said about Scripture and what is

done with it. This is one of the questions this study is seeking to address.

This section has highlighted a number of issues related to the ways in which the

Bible is interpreted in evangelical faith communities that will inform the

qualitative research. Of particular interest is the influence of the interpretive

tradition of these communities on the ways in which the Bible is engaged. The

interviews examined these issues from three perspectives. The first analysed the

participants' experience of genre; the second analysed the participants'

interpretive strategies; and the third examined how the negotiation of relevance

has influenced the participants' Bible engagement.

One of the reasons for the extensive interpretive activity in evangelical faith

communities is the desire for personal and community transformation. If, as

already noted, the Bible is an inspired text and is the means by which God

mediates his authority, its message transcends time and culture and, as such,

has what Bielo (2009b, p. 59) observed as the "unique capacity to be always

relevant and appropriate." This allows specific applications to readers'

"particular circumstances" to be found which are "amazingly exact in how it

aligns with readers' lives." Every time such applications are constructed "the

authority that produces relevance is testified to" (Bielo, 2009, p. 59). As a result

it has a unique potential to be an agent of transformation; this will be examined

in the next section.

1.6 The Bible: an agent of transformation

At a basic level of human experience, reading any text may, in theory, reshape

the horizon of a reader; in this sense, "reading may […] produce transforming

effects" (Thiselton, 1992, p. 1). From the perspective of Christian theology

Thiselton (2005b, p. 17) asserts that engaging with the Bible opens the

possibility of being "transformed by the formative impact of Scripture in

thought, life and identity."[31] Theologically, the function of Scripture is "to shape

persons' identities so decisively as to transform them" (Kelsey, 1975, p. 91).

Approaching the issue from the perspective of Christian spirituality, Schneiders

(2002, p. 136, italics original) suggests engaging with the Bible should be "*a*

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[31] Hardin (2012) proposes an actual hermeneutic for transformation. The components are: "an attitude of openness, serious historical investigation, the involvement of the Holy Spirit, and the contextualization of the text" and incorporate elements of the "historical grammatical approach" with the "desire for contemporary significance" (Hardin, 2012, pp. 147–148).

transformative process of personal and communal engagement with the biblical text."[32]

In his programmatic *The Bible in human transformation,* Wink (2010, pp. 1–2)

argues that the historical critical method is bankrupt and is unable to deliver

what he regards as the key purpose of engaging with the Bible: "so to interpret

the Scriptures that the past becomes alive and illumines our present with new

possibilities for personal and social transformation."[33] There is, therefore, a

widespread expectation, expressed by a range of theorists (Maddix and

Thompson, 2012; Maddix, 2018; O'Mahony, 2018; Castelo and Wall, 2019), that

engaging with the Bible will transform people, communities and social

structures.[34]

According to Thiselton (2012, p. 290, italics original), one of the key functions of

Scripture is formation: "Scripture above all exercises formative power… It

shapes readers by giving them a vision of what lies *beyond* the self. It delivers

readers from narcissistic bondage to the self, from self-centred horizons, from

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[32] In an earlier work Schneiders (1999) affirms what she regards as two closely linked objectives of New Testament interpretation, namely, information and transformation. Schneiders (1999, p. 14) observes that "while the person pursuing the first objective of biblical study (information) might be minimally interested in the existential aspect of biblical study (transformation), the person interested in the existential aspect of the text has no choice but to become seriously involved with its informational aspects."

[33] Briggs (2007) suggests that while Wink's diagnosis may be accurate his more psychologically focussed proposals for a new approach raise significant hermeneutical and theological questions.

[34] For a fuller treatment of how life transformation might be defined within evangelical faith communities, see Bloesch (2007), Chan (1998) Holmes (2005), Holmes and Williams (2007), Peterson (2005). For perspectives on Christian spirituality more generally see McGrath (1999), Schneiders (1999, 2002) and Sheldrake (2013).

self-affirmation and self-love." This de-centring of the self is, in Christian experience, "the heart of the message of the cross and resurrection, and one of the most fundamental functions which biblical texts can perform" (Thiselton, 1992, p. 6).

The re-orientation of the self that Thiselton describes has parallels to Snodgrass's (2011, p. 9) proposals for a "hermeneutics of identity" which are constructed to avoid the "bifurcation of head and heart, of thinking, doing, and being" so as to "put thinking and being back together." Snodgrass (2011, p. 18) suggests that such an approach to engaging the Bible will provide not just the tools but also the attitudes required for both individuals and communities to experience a "radical, lifelong conversion, reorientation, reshaping and empowering" of their identities.[35] While Snodgrass is working at the level of theoretical reflection and does not provide any empirical examples of how his proposals might work in practice, the concept of identity and how it is shaped by the Bible was one of the ways in which some of the participants in this study talked about their experience of transformation as a result of engaging with the Bible (see Chapter 6).

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[35] In the conclusion of his study of *The moral vision of the New Testament*, Hays (2004, p. 469, italics added) suggests one of the tasks of ethical reflection is "the recovery of the church's *identity* as the eschatological people of God." See further below.

In his proposals for how the New Testament is to be used in ethical discussion, Hays (2004, p. 3, italics original) suggests "four overlapping critical operations" which he labels as "the *descriptive*, the *synthetic*, the *hermeneutical* and the *pragmatic* tasks." He defines the pragmatic task as "embodying Scripture's imperatives in the life of the Christian community" producing "persons and communities whose character is commensurate with Jesus Christ" and regards this as "the test that finally proves the value of our theological labors (sic)" (Hays, 2004, p. 7).[36] This creates an implicit link between a commitment to the Bible's authority and the possibility of transformation; if the authority of the Bible is practiced, elements of life transformation should be expected. In practice, however, the unique position afforded to the Bible may not always translate from theological statements to the actual context of life. Reflecting on this tension Marshall (2007) suggests the authority a text possesses in practice is not dependent on what people say about it, but by the ways they allow the text to shape and influence their lives.

One of the ways in which the Bible is conceptualised and engaged to facilitate transformation is as a narrative or drama (Bartholomew and Goheen, 2014; Bauckham, 2003; Brueggemann, 2011; Wright, 1991, 1992). Brueggemann (2011, pp. 3–4) suggests that the Bible is "a text that redescribes" the world, setting

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[36] Jones (2003) provides an account of embodying Scripture in the community of faith.

itself against the "dominant script […] that has become an unquestioned, normative narrative that has permeated Western consciousness." [37] Jenson (2003) argues individual and corporate change is possible as a result of the imagination of an alternative reality. The experience of living as part of a faith community with an alternative text is something that was noted by some of the interviewees as a way in which they experienced the Bible as an agent of transformation (see Chapter 6).

Transformation was a major theme of the empirical data. As part of the interviews, participants were asked to recount their experiences of transformation which resulted from their engagement with the Bible. Chapter 6 documents their experiences of transformation and reflects on the structures of thought, expectation and practice that influence such experiences.

1.7 Chapter summary

This chapter has outlined the theological context for the research. These concepts, while not being topics of regular discussion in evangelical faith communities, shape the participants' underlying faith commitments and their experiences of engaging with the Bible. The issues examined in this chapter

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[37] For further theoretical reflection on "narrative-worlds", see Thiselton (1992, chap. 15).

form the theological backdrop to the qualitative research and the theological

dimensions of the practical theology considerations that have informed aspects

of the analysis (see Section 2.4.3). The theological concerns are not the driving

force of the research. There is no attempt to map the interview data to the

theological issues considered in Sections 1.3-1.6, but they will be included in the

analysis when they intersect the interview data.

Having outlined the general theological framing of the project, the qualitative

research methodology and its rationale will be explained and evaluated in

Chapter 2.

Chapter 2: Qualitative research methodology

This chapter focuses on the theoretical framework, the research methodology, the research instruments and the research processes used for this project. The chapter begins by reflecting on issues of quality in the context of qualitative research (Section 2.1). This is an issue that has created significant debate among qualitative researchers. Rather than being located at the end of this section or in the conclusion, it will be addressed at the outset to enable readers to understand and track the criteria for quality that have been used in this research.

For qualitative research the issue of quality is closely related to researcher reflexivity. In much of the literature the subject of researcher reflexivity is often addressed after theoretical and design issues have been examined (Patton, 2002; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Braun and Clarke, 2013). However, reflexivity is a critical part of the whole research process. Section 2.2, therefore, addresses the levels of reflexivity demanded by this project. The quality issues and procedures outlined in both Sections 2.1 and 2.2 will set the parameters for the whole project.

Section 2.3 focuses on issues of research design and reflects critically on the theoretical framing of the research. The first subsection (2.3.1) addresses why a

qualitative tool, interview, was selected as the best means of gathering the data.

Choosing a qualitative tool raises questions of ontology and epistemology;

these are considered in 2.3.2. This is followed by a consideration of the rationale

for including the concerns of practical theology in the methodological

framework (2.3.3). The section will conclude with some critical reflection on

how the tools of qualitative research, which are often located in a constructivist

framework, can be deployed in a practical theology informed methodology.

The next section (2.4) considers aspects of the interview process from the

perspective of the participants: sampling, participant recruitment, participant

consent, ethics considerations, and privacy and confidentiality. The final section

(2.5) critically examines the processes of data collection and analysis:

interviews, insider perspectives, transcription, storage, and analysis and

presentation.

2.1 Quality in qualitative research

It is perhaps somewhat unconventional to begin a chapter on qualitative

methodology with considerations of research quality. However, this approach

has been deliberately designed to achieve two goals. The first is to maximise

transparency (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Bazeley, 2013) and ensure that all

relevant details of the study and all decisions that have been taken are

adequately justified. Following the approach of Bazeley (2013, chap. 13), the second is to invite readers to evaluate the quality of the research using similar quality criteria to those that have been utilised by the research itself. Bazeley (2013; similarly Braun and Clarke, 2013) argues that this is important as the criteria used to assess quality and validity should fit the research design. This is not to suggest that every possible question has been addressed, but, Bazeley (2013) asserts, it does assume that if the researcher is able to display general research competence, they should be aware of the areas where justifications of quality are necessary and be able to demonstrate what Creswell (2013, p. 50) labels "methodological congruence."

The issue of quality in qualitative research has been widely discussed, the more so with the growing range of research instruments that are available in this field (Patton, 2002; Alastalo, 2008; Yardley, 2008; Bazeley, 2013). Earlier attempts to define quality criteria tended to use concepts from a more quantitative framework, for example, "reliability, validity and objectivity" (Flick, 2007b, p. 15; Hammersley, 2008; see also Bazeley, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Yardley, 2017). Hammersley (2008) recognises a potential mismatch between these criteria and the very different methodological frameworks employed in qualitative research. For example, markers of quality in quantitative methods tend to be constructed to minimise sources of error, control variables and reduce as far as possible the influence of research bias. In many modes of

qualitative research such steps are not only impractical, but in many cases would completely undermine the research process. Qualitative research, by design, allocates a primary role to the researcher; any steps to minimise this would, according to Braun and Clarke (2013), significantly reduce the value of the research instrument and could potentially render it unusable. Yardley (2008) acknowledges that the diversity of qualitative research methods make the development of universal assessment criteria very difficult. However, Bazeley (2013, p. 402) notes that although qualitative researchers have tended to reject the terminology that has its basis in quantitative research, qualitative research still needs to have a "sound basis" for its processes. This is not to suggest that criteria for quality do not exist. It does, however, highlight the fact that each qualitative research project needs to critically reflect on and then deploy criteria that match the research design and are able to convince other researchers of its rigour.

Bazeley (2013, pp. 403–404) suggests there are four areas in which qualitative researchers need to consider issues of quality: "quality of data, quality of process, quality of product, quality of outcome." These areas are broadly similar to the typology for quality suggested by Maxwell (2002) using the categories of descriptive, interpretive, theoretical, generalizability and evaluative validity, though he deliberately distances his criteria from the more quantitative associations of the concept of validity. While acknowledging that

certain procedures can be very valuable in demonstrating validity, Yardley

(2008, p. 243) argues that qualitative research may be better served with a "core

set of broad principles" that can be adapted to assess the quality of a wide

range of qualitative research designs: sensitivity to context, demonstration of

commitment and rigour, transparency and coherence, impact and importance.

It is important not only for a qualitative researcher to be clear about their

quality criteria, they must also demonstrate how the criteria have been met. A

set of quality assessment criteria have been developed for this research based

on the work of Braun and Clarke (2013), Bazeley (2013) and Yardley (2008).

Appendix A uses these to assess the quality of this research.

Quality research will be concerned to maintain high ethical standards (Flick,

2007b; Gibbs, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Aspects of research ethics will

be addressed in the various sections of this chapter as they arise: participant

recruitment, participant consent, anonymity, data storage, analysis of risk, data

handling and reporting. As part of the research design, ethics approval was

granted by the Research Ethics Committee of DCU. This approval was obtained

before any of the interviews commenced.

A key requirement to ensure quality in any research is researcher reflexivity. In

qualitative research where the main research instrument is the researcher

(Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Creswell, 2013), this issue becomes paramount

and is critical in any consideration of quality. This issue will be examined in the

next section.

2.2 Researcher reflexivity

Even though a range of qualitative research theorists and practitioners engage

with the topic of research reflexivity in their works (Patton, 2002; Flick, 2007b;

Gibbs, 2007; Yardley, 2008, 2017; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Cohen, Manion

and Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2013;

Swinton and Mowat, 2016), it is not normally the first aspect of qualitative

research discussed. All of the theorists insist that it is a critical quality attribute

and should be applied to all parts of the research design and implementation.

As a first step in researcher reflexivity, it is important to outline my

understanding of qualitative research, as this is foundational for the design of

the research. According to Flick (2007a, p. 2) qualitative research in general

"uses text as empirical material (instead of numbers), starts from the notion of

the social construction of realities under study, is interested in the perspectives

of participants, in everyday practices and everyday knowledge referring to the

issue under study." Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 3–4, italics original) agree that

qualitative research is, by definition, research involving "*words* as data" as

opposed to quantitative research which is concerned with "*numbers* as data."

This focus on words as data is important for this study, particularly as a

qualitative research methodology allows the experience of the participants to be

investigated and analysed with a high degree of credibility and quality (Patton,

2002; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009).

Bazeley (2013) defines qualitative research as a paradigm of understanding and

practice which encourages and embraces subjectivity, including the subjectivity

of the researcher in generating knowledge. Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 9–10)

reflect this when they suggest a key characteristic of qualitative researchers is

"qualitative sensibility." They (2013, pp. 9–10) suggest this is demonstrated in a

range of attitudes: "interest in process and meaning […] critical and questioning

approach to life and knowledge […] ability to reflect on, and step outside, your

cultural membership, to become a cultural commentator," which implies an

ability to bracket off one's own assumptions to ask questions about a

community; "development of a double consciousness," which means being able

to focus on content and analysis; "reflexivity," for example about the methods

being deployed and the role of the researcher in the generation of data; and a

"conceptual understanding of qualitative approaches." Flick (2007a, p. 5)

effectively combines these in his basic "guiding principle" for qualitative

research: "appropriateness." It is important, therefore, that these attitudes are

visible in the research design and implementation; care has been taken to ensure this was the case for this project.

Researcher reflexivity must encompass both the research processes, "functional reflexivity," and the "personal reflexivity" that brings "the researcher into the research" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 37). The functional reflexivity will be addressed as the various issues of research framework and methodology are addressed. In order to be explicit about the elements of my subjectivity and experience that I bring to the research, a personal statement about the "history, values, assumptions, perspectives" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 36) that I am aware I have adopted for this research is included in Appendix C. A researcher's subjectivity can and does influence the research functionality and, so, aspects of this will be noted, where appropriate, as the research methodology is considered and research tools selected and deployed.

Before examining some of the issues posed by adopting aspects of a qualitative research methodology and using qualitative research methods, it is important to identify and explain the basic methodological framework for this project.

2.3 Research design and methodological framing

Research methodology can be considered as "a package of assumptions about what counts as research and how it is conducted, and the sorts of claims you can make about your data" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 31). The methodological issues considered in this section are in practice a matrix of inter-related assumptions and practical commitments. The order in which they are addressed below is not intended to represent a hierarchy or logical order of processing; the reality of the situation is much more complex than this. In an endeavour to address the issues with the researcher reflexivity noted above, the order of the material is presented in a manner akin to the way I actually processed them for the overall research design.

2.3.1 The choice of qualitative methods and tools

Research design is influenced by a number of significant components. According to Creswell (2009, pp. 5, 18) the design of a project represents the "intersection of philosophy, strategies of inquiry and specific methods" along with factors linked to "the research problem, the personal experiences of the researcher, and the audience(s) for whom the report will be written." As the focus of this research is to explore, report and analyse the "lived world" (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, p. 29) experience of Bible reading practitioners, the research instrument needs to be able to provide appropriate data to do this

(Creswell, 2013). Patton (2002) argues that qualitative methods with their focus on subjectivity and experience are well placed to facilitate this. This does not mean that other research instruments could not provide valuable perspectives and insights (Patton, 2002; Creswell, 2009; Bryman, 2012); for example, the quantitative tools deployed by Village (2005a, 2005b, 2007; Village and Francis, 2005) have generated some very important data on faith communities and their practices of reading the Bible.

A broad range of qualitative methods are currently available (Alastalo, 2008; Gilbert, 2008; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014). The research method adopted for this research was semi-structured in-depth interviews. These are suitable for "experience-type research questions" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 81) in areas where people have a personal interest in the research topic. This allowed both a focus on the overall research questions and a flexibility where the interviewees were able to talk about issues that were important to them (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Silverman, 2011a; Bryman, 2012).

2.3.2 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

Ontological and epistemological assumptions underpin qualitative research projects (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, chap. 1) and impact on the nature of the data being generated. Patton (2002; see also Braun and Clarke, 2013) insists that for a coherent methodology these assumptions need to be aligned with the research goals and processes.

Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011, chap. 1) suggest there are two ways of conceptualising social reality which they classify as subjectivist and objectivist approaches. These positions represent very different ways of investigating and interpreting social contexts. Clough and Nutbrown (2005, pp. 18–19, italics original) nuance the subjectivist-objectivist debate by suggesting that rather than choose "*either* a normative *or* interpretive approach," their terminology for the subjectivist-objectivist distinction, researchers adopt a "persuasive" methodology "which requires them to justify their particular research decisions from the outset to the conclusion of their enquiry." This was the basic approach adopted in this project, and is one of the reasons why the issues of quality and researcher reflexivity were addressed first in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. This approach has allowed theory to be used as and when it was required without the whole of the project being tied to a pre-existing methodological perspective. Nevertheless, any aspects of theory used have been justified for their relevance, methodological coherence and contribution to quality.

For qualitative research, ontological assumptions shape the understanding of the "relationship between the world and our human interpretations and practices" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). One of the key questions in this area is whether reality is something different and distinct from human experience, and, if it is, to what extent and how. And, naturally, the answer to that question has implications for how any sort of research is to be understood (Patton, 2002; Braun and Clarke, 2013). In philosophical terms there is a spectrum of opinion on this question, from realism to relativism. The focus of this section is not to engage in debate with all the possible positions on this spectrum, but rather to provide a rationale for the approach of this research.

The ontological assumption of critical realism (Bazeley, 2013) will inform this project. This approach recognises with Miles, Huberman and Saldaña (2014, p. 7) that "social phenomena exist not only in the mind but also in the world." Braun and Clarke (2013) are able to frame an approach to qualitative research that adopts a critical realist ontology, avoiding what they regard as the extremes of realism or relativism. In fact, they suggest that a critical realist position is not uncommon in qualitative research, as research needs to claim "some 'authentic' reality exists to produce knowledge that might 'make a difference'" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27). A critical realist position accepts "a real and knowable world which sits 'behind' the subjective and socially-located knowledge a researcher can access" and can underpin a qualitative research

approach (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 27; see also Bazeley, 2013). For different

reasons, this is not universally accepted by qualitative research theorists

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2005; Swinton and Mowat, 2016). While the instruments of

qualitative research are often deployed in relativist and social constructivist

frameworks, this does not necessarily imply they require such a framework.

Braun and Clarke (2013, pp. 28–33) are insistent that interviews can be carried

out in any ontological framework. However, Swinton and Mowat (2016, chap.

3) are not fully convinced that this can work in practice; see the discussion in

Section 2.3.4.

Qualitative research methods also depend on the epistemological assumptions

that are part of the design. It is important to consider what counts as legitimate

knowledge and what it is possible to know. These questions are linked to the

ontological assumptions outlined above. For the purposes of qualitative

research it is important to know whether reality is discovered/uncovered,

within a positivist framework, or is created, as part of a constructivist

framework. The epistemological assumptions need to be aligned with the

ontological assumptions otherwise the resulting theory mismatch raises

questions about the quality of the research.

The epistemological position adopted for this project, based on the critical

realist ontological position noted above, was what Braun and Clarke (2013, p.

21) label as "contextualism" which "sees knowledge as emerging from contexts […] so that it is local, situated, and therefore always provisional." This was a deliberate choice of a mediating position between positivist and constructivist perspectives. This allowed for the possibility that the experiences recounted by participants may indicate something real that had been happening, but at the same time recognised that it was to a greater or lesser extent influenced by their own world of understanding and experience.

These ontological and epistemological assumptions have shaped the methodology and research framework that will be used for this research project (Silverman, 2011a). One other perspective has been factored into the methodological considerations, namely the concerns of practical theology. As noted in Chapter 1 the experiences of the participants are located in communities of faith whose belief and practices are underpinned by theological perspectives (Ward, 2017). Deliberately incorporating the perspective of practical theology into the research methodology allowed these to be highlighted and analysed as they arose in the data.

2.3.3 Embracing the concerns of practical theology

In order to do justice to the theological dimensions to this study, the methodological framework of the research was also shaped by the concerns of

practical theology outlined by Swinton and Mowat (2016, pp. 3–26) and Ward (2017). This section will not engage with the wider debate about the nature and methods of practical theology, rather it will follow Ward's (2017, p. 66) observation that "practical theology is first and primarily the discipline of paying critical attention to lived theology."

One of the reasons for adding a practical theology perspective is that, by definition, practical theology recognises the creative tension between theological commitments and the practical experience of faith communities (Rogers, 2016). Ward (2017, p. 13) terms this "a perspective that comes from being engaged in the life of the church." Rogers (2016) helpfully adapts Swinton and Mowat's (2016, p. 7; see also Ward, 2017) definition of practical theology as "[constructive] critical, theological reflection on the practices of the Church as they interact with the practices of the world, with a view to ensuring and enabling faithful [and innovative] participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world." Practical theology, therefore, according to Ward (2017, p. 25) "takes both theology and practice seriously." It is able to provide a framework where faith practices, what Ward (2017, pp. 62–67) terms "lived theology", can be examined while acknowledging and being able to interact with the underlying theological commitments that inform and shape such practices (Rogers, 2016).

Swinton and Mowat (2016, p. 19; see also Miles, Huberman and Saldaña, 2014; Rogers, 2016; Ward, 2017, p. 16) argue that practical theology acknowledges the "theory-laden" nature of practice. This is important for the design of this project as it recognises with Malley (2004), Bielo (2009b) and Rogers (2016) that what people do is linked in a range of complex ways to what they believe. Malley (2004) argues this is particularly true within a faith community that is accustomed to, and in many instances defined by, the process and experience of 'interpreting'. At the very least, Rogers (2016) argues, practices which are part of a tradition embed assumptions and shape understanding. Smith (2009, p. 18) argues that in certain contexts practices, whether religious or cultural, have much more powerful effects, shaping "desire […] what we love" and ultimately shaping life. One strength of this perspective is that it does not assume the priority of theological statements or constructs in people's experience, but allows people's experience to be an 'entry point' to facilitate explanation, investigation and reflection. Although referring primarily to grounded theory, Lather's (1986) comment, cited by Creswell (2009, p. 65), reflects the "reciprocal relationship between data and theory" adopted by this practical theology informed approach which "keeps a particular [theological] framework from becoming the container into which the data must be poured."

For members of evangelical faith communities the practice of Bible engagement takes place within the theological backdrop described in Chapter 1 and, as

Rogers (2016) argues, is shaped by a range of community factors. The focus of this project was to allow the participants to relate their experiences of engaging with the Bible without being concerned about the extent to which their practices cohered with their faith community's theological positions on the Bible.[38] Theological concepts were, therefore, not given priority, but were addressed as they arose in the data analysis. As far as is possible, the lived experience of the participants has been allowed to 'speak for itself'.

Swinton and Mowat (2016) in their *Practical theology and qualitative research* suggest that it is important to reflect on the question of how the framework of practical theology relates to the research instrument of qualitative research. This will be examined in the next section.

2.3.4 Competing paradigms of practical theology and qualitative research

Swinton and Mowat (2016, chap. 3) raise a cluster of questions in regard to how qualitative research can be justified and used in a practical theology context. As they correctly observe (2016, chap. 1), practical theology is, by definition, inextricably linked to theological concerns and requires some element of critical realism (2016, p. 87). If, as Swinton and Mowat suggest, qualitative research and

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[38] The focus of Rogers' (2016) study, while exploring similar issues of Bible engagement, is more concerned with the ways in which the hermeneutical practices of two selected church communities map on to more general hermeneutical theory. Nevertheless, Rogers' study provides interesting insights and points of comparison for this research.

the research tools it deploys embed a constructivist framework, a key question, therefore, is how the role of theology, which, they argue, is usually considered to have a certain given-ness and objectivity associated with it, can be investigated using these tools. Thus, the question for research design becomes how the two approaches can be brought together without "one collapsing into the other" (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, p. 68).

In order to use qualitative tools in a consistent and appropriate manner there needs to be a justification of how the questions raised by Swinton and Mowat were resolved as this informed the research process. Swinton and Mowat (2016) have attempted to resolve the tension they perceive using a "revised model of mutual critical correlation" which gives a "logical priority to theology." This is given practical expression using three factors which are themselves rooted in theological concerns (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, pp. 86–94): hospitality (an embracing of qualitative research, even if there are underlying conflicts); conversion (to ensure the methods of qualitative research recognise the theological concerns of the research); and critical faithfulness (which will take seriously the understanding of divine revelation).

Swinton and Mowat's (2016) approach has been given attention because they have sought to combine practical theology and qualitative research. Their solution will not be critiqued at this point, as part of my response to the

concerns they raise is to define qualitative research in a different fashion. In a

another (shorter) work Swinton (2012) uses the categories of sanctification and

hospitality, suggesting some alterations to his approach.[39] Given Swinton and

Mowat's definitions of qualitative research, their approach is understandable.

However, whether it is necessary depends on how qualitative research is

understood.

The concerns highlighted by Swinton and Mowat have been mitigated to a

considerable degree by developments within the world of qualitative research

itself. In the UK and Europe, as Flick (2007a) and Braun and Clarke (2013)

observe, there has been a growing openness to qualitative research being

located in a critical realist or even positivist perspective as opposed to the

largely constructivist framework that is engaged by Swinton and Mowat.

Although the second edition of Swinton and Mowat's book was published in

2016 the definitions of qualitative research remain unchanged since it was first

published in 2006. Braun and Clarke (2013) approach the issues of qualitative

research from the field of psychology where more positivist points of view are

more common. As a consequence, their definitions of qualitative research differ

significantly from the ones engaged by Swinton and Mowat (2016). This may be

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[39] It may appear confusing that a 2012 publication is suggested as a development of a 2016 work. The reason for making this comment is because, as far as I can tell, the relevant sections of Swinton and Mowat's 2016 edition of *Practical theology and qualitative research* are almost identical to the 2006 version.

due in part to the development of qualitative research methodologies across a number of academic disciplines (Braun and Clarke, 2013, chaps 1–2). Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 4, italics original) suggest the term qualitative research may itself be part of the problem as it "is used to refer both to *techniques* (of data collection or data analysis) and to a wider framework for conducting research." They differentiate between "Big Q qualitative research," which is research carried out within a fully committed "qualitative paradigm," often characterised by a constructivist approach, and "small q qualitative research," which is the "use of specific qualitative data collection and techniques" outside a "qualitative paradigm" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 4). The differentiation of "Big Q" and "small q" qualitative research is significant and results in considerable flexibility in research design, allowing many of the techniques of qualitative data collection to be carried out within a broad range of methodological frameworks. It would seem that many of Swinton and Mowat's (2016) concerns noted above are directed at "Big Q" qualitative research, and with justification. However, if a "small q" approach is adopted, then many of the methodological conflicts are removed, though Swinton and Mowat's concern for coherence and quality remain.

This project, therefore, adopted a "small q" approach and utilised the qualitative data gathering tool of semi-structured interviews within a critical realist ontology and contextualist epistemology (Braun and Clarke, 2013). This

design was methodologically coherent and appropriate for the purposes of the research and allowed the concerns of practical theology to be integrated with the qualitative research for the project.

2.4 Participants: sampling, privacy, risk assessment

2.4.1 Sampling

It is recognised that there are various approaches to sampling for a qualitative study (Patton, 2002; Flick, 2007a; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Bryman, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013). While Patton (2002, pp. 244–245) observes there appear to be "no rules for sample size in qualitative inquiry," he suggests one of the key factors in making a decision on sample size needs to be the "information richness of the cases selected and the observational/analytical capacities of the researcher."

Kvale and Brinkmann's (2009, p. 113) guide to sample size is straightforward: "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know." This is often reflected in the concept of saturation, "the point when additional data fails to generate new information" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 55). As Bryman (2012, p. 425) observes it is not always easy to determine how many interviews should take place before saturation is reached and is complicated by

the fact that the criteria for assessing when saturation has been reached are "rarely articulated in detail." Bryman (2012, p. 426) cites a study of qualitative research that suggests, in the context of in-depth interviews, saturation can be reached after twelve interviews. Braun and Clarke (2013) suggest that it may be possible to estimate a sample size based on the breadth and depth of the research topic and the subsequent data generated; for a large project based on interviews they suggest that at least 20 interviews need to be carried out. One of the factors that influenced the sample size of this study was what Patton (2002, p. 245) recognises as the "information richness of the cases selected."

This project was designed to be semi-flexible in its approach to sampling to allow the design to evolve as the project progressed (Creswell, 2009). In the initial design the possibility of further interview(s) with participants was left open (Seidman, 2013). There were no occasions where this was considered necessary; the initial interviews generated significant and relevant data. Additionally, the possibility of focus groups was considered to explore any issues that might have arisen in the interviews. Given the honesty I had encountered from the participants in the interviews, I was not convinced this would carry over to a focus group setting. I decided focus groups would not add significantly to this study. However, focus group discussions of the themes identified by this project could prove of value for future research.

Following Bryman's (2012, p. 425) suggestion an initial sample size of 20-30 was proposed for the project, and the option of adjusting the sample size was left open depending on both the richness of the data generated and the levels of saturation encountered in the data. As the interviews took place I was able to monitor the data both for richness and saturation using a combination of the digital recordings, the transcripts being produced and the notes I made during the interviews. Although data saturation is not easy to specify exactly, my estimation would be that it occurred somewhere between interviews 10 and 15. The interviews conducted after that point provided very little data that was new and afforded a confirmation that the initial candidate themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013) were appropriate. The final number of interviews was 20. This provided a wide range of rich data for the analysis.

According to Braun and Clarke, the "usual suspects" (2013, p. 58) for this type of project are those who belong to a more 'middle-class' perspective who, perhaps because of educational and social background, are presumed to be more able to articulate their experiences. In order to monitor the sample, participants were asked to complete a demographic information questionnaire. Even though participation was not contingent on completing this, none of the participants refused. In the sample the social class designations selected by the participants were 11 middle class, 8 working class and 1 no class. The form is included in Appendix D.

Owing to both the small sample size and the relatively small size of the evangelical faith community in Ireland I have not been able to include anything other than the most general aspects of this demographic information as anything more than this would substantially increase the risk of the participants being identified. The church denominations represented were Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Baptist, Pentecostal and independent evangelical churches.

Included in the sample were some participants who either have studied or were studying at the time of the project at the Irish Bible Institute. This was to allow the research to investigate what influence, if any, formal theological study might have on how Bible engagement is experienced and understood. In order to avoid any potential conflicts of interest participants who were current IBI students were not part of any class I was assessing at the time. It was made clear to the current students that their participation or non-participation would have no influence on their academic studies. With the students' permission the BA or MA Programme Committees were informed of the students being interviewed to ensure transparency; this was included in the Plain Language Statement for these participants (Appendix E; note additional paragraph). Recruiting past or current students from IBI raises the issue of the inevitable bias of insider research as I hold an academic position at the institution (Patton, 2002, pp. 566–570; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 204–208, 223–226;

Silverman, 2011a, p. 272; Bryman, 2012, pp. 389–398). The implications of this will be discussed in Section 2.5.2.

2.4.2 Participant recruitment and consent

Participants were recruited to the project in a number of ways: through existing faith community contacts, through IBI (former and current students), and through links with either participants or members of other evangelical faith communities.

It was important that potential participants were informed about what they were being asked to do before they agreed to be part of the research (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). However, the issue of consent can be awkward in qualitative research as "consent can only be granted to our broad interests/approach, not the final form of analysis" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 64). Following Weatherall, Gavey and Potts (2002, pp. 534–534), for this project it was assumed that when consent was given participants had agreed to an "abridged information package" as it was not possible "to give participants full information about a research project (its epistemological assumptions […] and so on)." This placed an ethical constraint on the researcher to ensure all aspects of the research remained within the initial consent given by the participants.

The project's aims and its expectations were explained to participants in the

Plain Language Statement (Appendix E). Every participant was given this and

had an opportunity to ask me any questions before they agreed to take part

(Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Participants were informed that although the

reporting of the research would be done anonymously complete anonymity

could not be guaranteed. The legal limits of confidentiality were also pointed

out. Everyone who agreed to participate completed and signed the Participant

Informed Consent Form (Appendix F).

2.4.3 Research ethics considerations

The ethical considerations for this type of research require that the potential

risks to the participants and the researcher be considered (Patton, 2002; Flick,

2007a; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011;

Bryman, 2012; Braun and Clarke, 2013), and, where necessary, procedures for

their mitigation be put in place. The only potential risk identified was that

participants may have considered the area of research and the research

instrument, an interview, to be intrusive. To mitigate this risk, every participant

was made aware of the subject-matter of the research and what was expected of

them before they consented to be involved. There were no obvious risks to the

researcher, either in terms of personal safety or in terms of the engagement with

the data, beyond what was normal in everyday life activities.

Given that the participants were chosen from Christian faith communities, the data sought was not particularly sensitive. Participants were being asked to talk about their personal experience, but, in the context of a faith community, this is neither unexpected nor abnormal. It was the insertion of the researcher that was likely to feel most abnormal. It was made clear to participants that if, at any point, the nature of the subject matter made them feel uncomfortable they would be able to withdraw from the project.

In the event of an adverse or unexpected outcome, the interview would have been stopped. Initially, I would have discussed the issue or incident with the participant and, although it was not required, I had ensured there was the option of recourse to further support mechanisms:

a. pastoral care structures of the participant's faith community; I ensured I was aware of potential pastoral care support in participants' church communities;

b. pastoral care structures within IBI (particularly for any student or former student);

c. professional counselling service (for example, Lucan Family Centre).

An addition ethical consideration, as noted above, is the way in which data is represented and reported by the researcher as the "product of our analysis" is somewhat "removed from the 'raw data' we receive" (Braun and Clarke, 2013,

p. 64). It is important that the voice of the participants is heard accurately and fairly, even when it has been constructed into 'another story' through the research process. In this regard, Flick (2007a, p. 75) emphasises "select your wording with respect […] avoid language that is biased against persons and be sensitive to the use of labels […] Be careful in generalizations." Care has been taken in the data reporting and analysis sections.

2.4.4 Privacy and confidentiality

The issues of privacy, anonymity and confidentiality in the context of a research project like this are not always straightforward (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, pp. 90–94)**.** There is always a risk that "'thick descriptions' of interpretive research require a level of detail that cannot be obtained if privacy, confidentiality and anonymity are required" and as a result can "lose the very richness that they are intended to demonstrate" (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p. 93). The relatively small sample size in this study made complete anonymity difficult to guarantee. However, this was mitigated by the fact that the data being gathered, while it may be understood as personal for some of the participants, would not be classed as highly sensitive. Participants were advised in the Participant Informed Consent Form (Appendix F) that although complete anonymity was the goal of the research, this could not always be guaranteed.

Braun and Clarke (2013) recommend that for the purposes of reporting and analysis each of the participants be allocated a pseudonym rather than a code. This was done and helped to maintain the focus on the personal experience of the participants.

2.5 Data collection and analysis

2.5.1 Data collection: interviews

Data was collected from participants by means of in-depth semi-structured interview. The interviews lasted on average between 45 and 60 minutes. Participants were asked to narrate their own experiences of engaging with the Bible and how the Bible had influenced their lives. Following Chase (2005, p. 661), the interviewees were encouraged to be specific as opposed to just providing "generalities about the interviewee's or others' experience." The interviews were framed as a "broad question about whatever story the narrator has to tell about the issue at hand" (Chase, 2005, p. 661).

Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 81) suggest an important aspect of qualitative research interviews is that "rapport and well-planned questions are important for generating rich and detailed accounts relevant to your research question." In order to facilitate this an initial interview guide was prepared to outline the

range of the subject areas I wanted to cover (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012). In each of the research areas some general guiding and probe questions were also prepared (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012). Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 84) suggest that not only is wording "vital for developing effective interview questions," it is also important that interviews be sequenced so that "early questions should be less probing." The guide was designed to begin with a straightforward question to encourage participants to relax and to talk as many participants had never experienced being recorded in an interview context (Rubin and Rubin, 2005).

The interview guide was checked by two experienced qualitative researchers and another academic. Their feedback was incorporated into the next iteration of the guide. Before being finalised, the guide was field tested using a pilot interview with a fellow academic (Fielding and Thomas, 2008; Silverman, 2011a). The purpose of the pilot was not to generate data for the research, but to assess the range of issues that were being addressed in the interview and the quality and accessibility of the questions. The final guide is included in Appendix G.

Before an interview began time was allowed for "rapport-building pre-interview chit-chat" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 88), particularly with

participants who were not already known to me (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). As part of these general introductions the Plain Language Statement was discussed. Participants were encouraged to ask any questions they may have had about the research. Only after it had been established that participants fully understood what was involved in the research, particularly that the interviews were recorded and that excerpts would be used in the final report, were they requested to sign the Participant Informed Consent Form. Participants were given a hard copy of this form.

During the actual interviews the guide was used to direct and focus the conversation. The interview questions were not designed to be asked in exactly the same order in each interview but were formulated to allow the interview process to be adapted for each participant depending on the flow of the interview and what the interviewee had already recounted (Rubin and Rubin, 2005). When unexpected issues arose that were relevant to the project, these avenues were explored further (Flick, 2007a; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009; Bryman, 2012).

It was also important to consider how an interview would finish and to ensure that it finished well. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 81) suggest planning closing or "clean-up" questions carefully. The final question was designed to ensure that participants had said everything they wanted to say and that this had been

included in the recording. Nothing was said after the end of any interview that was relevant for the research.

This section has outlined how the interviews were designed and conducted. The next section will reflect on the influence of the researcher on the generation of the interview data, particularly when the researcher is an 'insider'.

2.5.2 Data collection: insider perspectives

Not only does it need to be acknowledged that the practices of the interviewer "may have shaped the data produced" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 79), but being a qualified Third-level theology instructor might have created an issue of asymmetric "power" in the interview setting (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009, pp. 33–34; Braun and Clarke, 2013, pp. 88–89), where participants regarded me as the 'expert.' In order to mitigate this I reminded the participants that they "are the experts on *their* experiences, views and practices" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 96, italics original). There is also a possibility that because of the nature of the subject matter the responses of the interviewees could have been subject to elements of "social desirability" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 84). The Bible plays a major role in evangelical faith communities and the participants could have felt under pressure to answer in what they might have regarded as the correct manner. I reassured participants that I wanted to find out what they actually

thought. However, I did not over-emphasise this as it could have created for them a wrong impression of what I wanted them to say (Fielding and Thomas, 2008). The one thing I did stress is the participants should be honest in their responses and not to feel that I was looking for any particular right or wrong answers.

As I bring both an insider perspective on the research community and a personal experience of Bible engagement, the issue of "interest vs empathy" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, pp. 95–96) needs careful consideration, particularly in the interview context. If, as Braun and Clarke suggest, "for many qualitative researchers, the key to successful interviewing is to show *interest* in, and to appear non-judgemental about, what the participant is saying" (2013, p. 95, italics original), then a qualitative interview is not the place to attempt to engage or deal with a participant's questions about either the Bible or their experience of engaging with it (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Swinton and Mowat (2016, p. 62) regard as inappropriate in an interview context "for one or both of the participants to engage in implicit or explicit pastoral activities." During the interviews, I maintained my role as an interviewer and did not adopt the role of a theological teacher, my normal role in relation to the issues the interview were discussing. I did not present myself as, or give any encouragement to the participants, to view me as the 'expert' on Bible engagement who would be able to answer any questions they may have had. It

was crucial for this project that the experience of the participants was the focus of the interview data generation. I monitored this by reviewing the audio recordings and the transcripts (Fielding and Thomas, 2008).

Even with the levels of reflexivity deployed in this project a different researcher from outside the evangelical faith community would bring a different perspective to the research. Whether they would be able to generate the same levels of empathy with the participants and their experiences and, as a result, the same levels of honesty and disclosure, is an open question. It is, however, important to recognise that the data production and subsequent analysis have been influenced by my personal location and by being perceived by the participants as an 'insider.' A different study might have different results and conclusions, but as noted in Section 2.1, this study should be evaluated by its parameters, which include the location of the researcher as an insider.

2.5.3 Data collection: transcription

The process of transcription involved a change of medium from spoken words to written speech (Gibbs, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). Gibbs (2007, p. 10) recognises, "transcription is an interpretive process." In this project the transcription process demanded a range of interpretive decisions, for example, where sentence structure was located, how non-verbal utterances were noted,

anonymising data that could potentially identify the participant, and what to

preserve (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). The transcription process, therefore,

was not an exact procedure as "spoken (natural) language is 'messier' than

written language" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 162). Good quality transcripts

were produced that represented how the interviews actually occurred (Rubin

and Rubin, 2005; Gibbs, 2007; Braun and Clarke, 2013); this is an essential part

of ensuring quality in the research. The transcribed data was not considered

'raw data,' but a "selective arrangement of the object of transcription"

(Sandelowski, 1994, p. 311) produced by the transcriber for analysis.

A notation system for non-verbal utterances was constructed for the

transcription process so that all transcripts were consistent; words were also

transcribed as far as possible in 'natural speech', for example, where 'me' was

used instead of 'my' the former was preserved. Two transcribers were

employed for this process (Gibbs, 2007; Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009); both

affirmed their agreement with the Transcription Confidentiality Agreement

(Appendix H).

2.5.4 Data storage

All of the data generated during interviews was stored in a manner that

ensured the confidentiality of the material. Audio and transcript file labels were

anonymised. Except during use for the purposes of the research project, all electronic files were kept either in an encrypted format or in a locked facility. These precautions are particularly important for voice recordings as these are "more recognisable than printed text" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 64) and impossible to anonymise. Hard copy data was stored in a locked filing cabinet. Access to participant data was limited to the principal researcher and the transcribers who had access only to coded material (Bryman, 2012, pp. 482–486).

The participants have been informed that data will be securely destroyed five years after the project is completed unless further permission is requested. If any material needs to be kept beyond five years, this will only be done with the express written permission of the participant(s) concerned.

2.5.5 Data analysis and data presentation

It is important for quality purposes to be clear about the analysis and presentation of the interview data. The data analysis and accompanying conclusions need to be seen to represent valid inferences from the reported experience of the interviewees. The concerns of research quality demand not only that the perspectives of the participants have been represented in a way that is faithful to the data, but also that the analysis of the interview data and

accompanying inferences can be seen to have their basis in the data. For these reasons, a critical reflection on the analysis and reporting process is below.

The choices made for the process of data analysis were important. The mode of analysis needed to be aligned to the underlying research methodology to ensure the overall coherence and quality of the research. A range of options were available for data analysis (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Silverman, 2011b; Bazeley, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Saldaña, 2016), many of which can function in a variety of ontological and epistemological frameworks. The mode of analysis chosen for this project was thematic analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2013). This form of analysis has been chosen because it "does not prescribe methods of data collection, theoretical positions, epistemological or ontological frameworks […] One of the main strengths of TA [thematic analysis] is this flexibility" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 178). Thematic analysis, therefore, was suitable for a "small q" framework (see Section 2.3.4).

The coding process and accompanying analysis was an iterative process of engagement with the data. Bazeley (2013, p. 15; italics original) suggests a process of "*Read* and *Reflect*, *Explore* and *Play*, *Code* and *Connect*, *Review* and *Refine*" as a mechanism for analysing qualitative data. The process necessitates the researcher making choices about what is deemed to be relevant to the research (Bazeley, 2013). The process for this research was based on a deep

engagement that allowed the data to both open up and reduce to focus on the issues that were important for the research. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 205, italics original) suggest engaging "*actively*, *analytically* and *critically*, starting to think about *what the data mean*."

Data coding is influenced and determined by the "theoretical and knowledge frameworks you bring" and this allows the researcher "to 'see' particular things in the data, and interpret and code them in certain ways" (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 207). This is an important perspective as it is possible for a researcher to observe in the data what they wish to see. Even if the coding is done largely by means of what Gibbs (2007, pp. 44–46) terms "data-driven" codes, the process is heavily influenced by the researcher and their perspectives. Coding and themes generation necessarily involves selectivity and interpretation. Therefore, researcher reflexivity was critical throughout this process to ensure that the results of the analysis have their foundation in the data. This issue has been addressed as part of the quality assessment of the research in Appendix A.

The first stage in the interview analysis process was to listen to the interviews to check the transcripts for accuracy (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Gibbs, 2007; Saldaña, 2016). The transcribed interviews were then coded for every potentially relevant feature and an initial code list produced (Braun and Clarke, 2013). The initial coding was done by hand using printed transcripts (Braun and

Clarke, 2013; Saldaña, 2016). A range of coding labels was developed at this stage, many of them tentative (Seidman, 2013, pp. 127–130). In order to consolidate the coding and revisit the whole of the data set the transcripts were transferred to Nvivo and analysed further (Seidman, 2013, p. 128). Even though using CAQDAS software for coding is not without its problems (Rubin and Rubin, 2005; Gibbs, 2007; Bryman, 2012; Bazeley, 2013; Bazeley and Jackson, 2013; Braun and Clarke, 2013; Seidman, 2013), the transfer from manual coding to Nvivo allowed the initial coding to be re-checked for consistency and edited or amalgamated as required. The process, although time intensive, served as an additional immersion in the data prior to the report writing stage. Although not part of the original research design, this process afforded me the opportunity for further engagement with, reflection on and analysis of the data (Bazeley and Jackson, 2013). After initial coding was complete, the data was re-analysed and, in some places, re-coded to generate the overarching and main themes that are the basis of Chapters 3-7. The final list of codes developed in the analysis is included in Appendix I.

Themes were then developed from the coded data. Braun and Clarke (2013, p. 224) suggest a quality theme "has a central organising concept, which tells us something about the content of the data that's *meaningful*, something about how, and in what way, that concept appears in the data." Creating the themes was a recursive and iterative process which involved revisions of coded and

collated data, re-engaging with the whole of the dataset, revision of the importance and prominence of themes, and reviewing candidate themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013, ch 10). Again, the role of the researcher and their methodological framework is important in this process. I was identifying the themes from the codes I had designed; the themes were, therefore, a product of my interaction with the data. The themes that I suggest in the following chapters were the ones that I think best organise and pattern the data in relation to the experience of the participants, and, as such, they carry significant elements of interpretation. While there are no prescribed formulae for the number of themes for a given dataset, the thematic analysis was worked at until "the best 'fit' of analysis to answer the research question" was reached (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 230ff.).

Chapters 3-7 contain a rich description of the interview data. The inclusion of interview material as direct quotation is to enable "the reader to get closer to the data" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 97) and to demonstrate that the analysis is founded in the data. The length of quotations has attempted to balance the concerns of representing the views of the participants without reducing the analysis (Gibbs, 2007, p. 97f.). For ease of identification extracts from the interview data are formatted in italics and, as far as possible have been included in separate paragraphs. On each occasion a quotation from the data is included, the participant is identified using the allocated pseudonym. For the sake of ease of

reading, duplications, and features such as pauses with 'um' or 'ah' have been removed from the reported data unless they were regarded as important to what was being said. On occasion some words have been added for the sake of clarity; these are marked with square bracket. These processes involve elements of interpretation from the researcher, but this can be justified as being part of the wider interpretive activity involved in producing interview transcriptions and coding the data. In addition, where one portion of data did not follow directly from another, this has been noted using an ellipsis in square brackets. Where data selections were coded with more than one code, as far as possible the data excerpt concerned has been used only once in the analysis. The decision as to where the excerpt belonged was based on a consideration of which code appeared to be the best fit to the data and the theme to which it contributed. As far as possible I have avoided using the same data excerpt in more than one place.

An important issue raised by the data analysis is that of generalisability. The rich description contained in the following chapters will illustrate that the themes are well grounded in the interview data. The "temptation to over-generalize" (Gibbs, 2007, p. 100) has been noted in the analysis chapters and care has been taken to demonstrate the extent of the evidence available. For example, where issues were addressed by only a few of the interviewees, this has been noted. This does not make these insights unimportant, but care has

been exercised on how such insights relate to the wider evangelical community. Two important factors have been taken into account in considerations of generalisability. The first is the nature of evangelical faith communities which tend to be shaped by similar theological commitments and share a broadly common identity (Bebbington, 1989); these were outlined in Chapter 1. The second is the concept of "*identification* and *resonance*" (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, p. 45, italics original), which is based on the expectation that others in similar situations, in this case evangelical faith communities, are likely to be able to identify and feel a certain resonance with the findings of the research. Therefore, where appropriate, the following chapters will comment on issues that may be of concern to the wider evangelical faith community in Ireland. Whether the identification and resonance extend beyond either evangelical faith communities or Ireland will be for researchers and readers in other contexts to judge.

2.6 Chapter summary

The research process was committed to and followed the quality procedures outlined in Sections 2.1 and 2.2. A critical realist ontology and contextual epistemology were adopted as the foundation for the methodological framework for the data generation and analysis. This approach facilitated the coherent integration of the concerns of practical theology into the project. The

framework recognises the possibility of a level of reality in the participants'

experiences while also taking account of the range of influences which may

have contributed to and shaped those experiences. The inclusion of a practical

theology perspective in the methodological framework required issues of

theological theory and its relation to practice to be considered even though it

was not a driving factor in the research.

The following chapters are the analysis of the interview data. The structure will

follow the outline of the themes in Table 2.1 on the following page.

Table 2.1 Interview analysis

Lived experience of engaging with the Bible

Overarching themes

Encountering the Bible	Experiencing the Bible in lived practice	

Main themes

3. Framing the Bible	4. Experiencing the theology of the Bible	5. The search for relevance	6. Experiencing transformation	7. Experiencing and resolving dissonance

Sub-themes

3. Framing the Bible	4. Experiencing the theology of the Bible	5. The search for relevance	6. Experiencing transformation	7. Experiencing and resolving dissonance
3.1 Bible framing: Reasons for reading and expectations 3.2 Bible framing: the Bible as the word of God	4.1 Experiencing the Bible's authority 4.2 Experiencing an inspired text 4.3 Experiencing genre 4.4 Experiencing interpretation	5.1 Negotiating relevance 5.2 Strategies for relevance	6.1 Narratives of transformation: life-changing and general 6.2 Bible: shaping framework for life	7.1 'I don't necessarily feel fully comfortable with it' 7.2 Strategies for resolving dissonance 7.3 'I would say probably least influential was pulpit preaching'

Overarching theme 1: Encountering the Bible

Chapter 3: Framing the Bible

Chapters 3 and 4 explore the overarching theme of Encountering the Bible. Although the analysis of this theme is structured around some of the more theoretical and theological aspects of Bible engagement, its focus is on how the participants experience this in their faith practice. The main themes that comprise this overarching theme are Bible framing (Chapter 3) and Engaging the theology of the Bible (Chapter 4). Both chapters will provide insights into how the participants conceptualise their experiences of encountering the Bible as part of their faith practice.

This chapter will analyse the participants' framing of their concepts about and orientation towards the Bible. The first section (3.1) will explore some of the reasons given by the participants for why they engaged with the Bible and the expectation they had for their engagement. The next section (3.2) will focus on the participants' understanding and experience of the Bible as the word of God. Both sections will provide a window on some of the interviewees' underlying beliefs about the Bible and their resultant practice.

3.1 Bible framing: Reasons for reading and expectations

Sections 1.1 and 1.2 highlighted the ways in which evangelical faith communities prioritise their relationship to and dependence on the Bible, making it, as Bebbington (1989) suggests, a distinctive marker of self-understanding and practice. The participants in this research are located within such communities and, as Bielo (2009b) observes, they would be predisposed to adopting this perspective on the Bible as they identify with and embrace their community's commitments and practices for engaging the Bible. However, just because a faith community may adopt a certain position on the Bible does not necessarily mean that the members of that community follow those patterns. As Ward (2017, pp. 62–67) suggests, an examination of a "lived theology" must be willing to acknowledge that the "performative element" may be at odds with the theological perspectives of the community itself. The beliefs of evangelical faith communities about the Bible cannot be assumed to be automatically accepted by its members. It is important for the purposes of practical theology "to pay deep and close attention to the performance of theology in Christian communities" (Ward, 2017, p. 65) as it will be an indicator of the theological commitments imbedded in the community and in its members.

This section will examine the participants' experience and expectations of engaging with the Bible with the recognition that the commitments of their communities form an important backdrop.

3.1.1 *'I read the Bible because'* - reasons for reading

The question 'why do you read the Bible?' was the first thing that each interviewee was asked. This was designed as a straightforward conversation starter (Braun and Clarke, 2013, p. 84) to ease the participants into the interview. It was a question the interviewees would have been expecting and a question that they would be able to answer. At the same time, it provided an insight into some of the underlying frameworks that the participants adopted and inhabited in their engagement with the Bible. These frameworks were also explored in greater depth later in the interview.

There was a range of answers to the question of why the interviewees read the Bible. At a very basic level Bible reading was regarded as something of a duty that carried with it some degree of 'ought':

> *Cos I've always been told to read the Bible […] So I suppose I started reading cos I was told to and sometimes I still just read it cos I know I should […] I should read it, and so now it's part of my routine, it's like having a cup of coffee in the morning, and to be honest sometimes that's the primary reason: I do it because I do it. (Siobhan)*

Later in the interview, in a different context, Siobhan expressed the same sense of 'oughtness' in the shape of a discipline:

The longer I'm in this game the more I realise how something that you, how important something is, even if you don't want to do it, even if you are just going through the motions or doing it for the sake of doing it cos you'd feel guilty otherwise. (Siobhan)

There is a sense that Bible reading is part of an ongoing Christian discipline and is something that people of faith need. David talked about this necessity to read and engage; he calls it 'duty'. However, there is more than 'duty' involved; disciplined engagement for David is also very closely linked to an awareness that engaging with the Bible is something that he needs to do mainly because of what it does for him:

It's more almost duty sometimes. […] Now an awful lot of the time now I read it because I know I need to, I know I need to […] I need the food that it gives me […] Cos I need to, cos when I don't I'm lost; I get lost very quickly. (David)

Kevin's experience is similar and combines these elements of duty and enjoyment:

Just to be inspired, […] I approach it with a view that I'm hoping that I'm going to hear from God when I read it, on one side. On the other side there can be a duty element, so there can be that sense of it's good to do, so sometimes I do it because

it's good to do without actually receiving any, sorry, without receiving any

particular inspiration on it. But the general feeling why I do is because I wanna be

inspired and I want to hear from God, I think the Scripture is one of the key ways

that I'm gonna hear from God. (Kevin)

Kevin's 'apology', saying he is '*sorry*' about not '*receiving any particular*

inspiration' when reading the Bible indicates something of the tension he

experiences between Bible engagement as a '*duty*' (or discipline) and as

something to enjoy (experiencing God and '*receiving*' from him). It also suggests

an underlying expectation of what engagement with the Bible ought to deliver.

This is a pointer towards the sorts of frameworks of expectation that seem to

shape the ways in which the Bible is approached and experienced; this will be

explored further below.

Another common reason the participants talked about for reading the Bible was

what the Bible did in practice for those who read it. The interviewees were

encouraged to discuss, in whatever detail and depth they felt comfortable, how

their lives had been transformed by the Bible; the actual content of these

experiences will be discussed in Chapter 6, below. However, for this part of the

analysis it is sufficient to note and examine the potential of the Bible to shape

and change lives as a reason for engaging with it:

I treasure and value the life that is now mine because of the Bible, because of experiencing the Bible […] cos it has brought into a fullness my experience of God. (Colm)

The Bible keeps me very grounded, I think. It keeps me more grounded than I would be if I didn't read the Bible. […] The Bible gives me huge confidence and a hope, as well as being very real. Not, not confidence and hope that's kind of, you know, I win the lotto or something, I don't mean that. But confidence and hope in substance that's grounded in the best, and sometimes like the worst, of human experience. (Dermot)

It's very dear to me, it's what has shaped and transformed my whole life, because it's introduced me to and maintained and enriched my relationship with God. (George)

The predominant way in which interviewees explained why they read the Bible was in relational terms; engaging with the Bible enabled them in some way to not only engage with the text but to engage with and relate to God.

I read the Bible because I believe it to be God's word and I believe it to be the primary way through which God's speaks. (Brian)

Probably to know God better, to hear what he would say. (Anna)

This suggests an understanding of some sort of relationship between what the text of the Bible says and how God wants to be known:

In discovering more about God; who God is, and, and the people of God. I think, I think primarily, that's why I read it. (Colm)

The other reason that I read it is for, I would describe it as connection with God. (Patrick)

Because it's important to me as it gives me a look at who God is, and what he's about. (Aiden)

This is experienced across the interview data and suggests a link for the participants between what the Bible says about God and how the participants' experience is shaped. Conor links his engagement with the Bible to his experience of God in his life. In this experiential context, for Conor, getting to know the Bible would appear to be almost synonymous with growing in an understanding of God:

> *My primary purpose is to grow in my understanding of who God is… I'd had a*
>
> *very a real experience of God's grace and love in my life and I just wanted to get*
>
> *to know the Bible. (Conor)*

A very common expression of this theme was the belief and the expectation that the Bible should function in some way as a means of communication between the interviewee and God and that the contents of the Bible would provide a means for the participants to learn about God, themselves and how to live life:

> *I guess it's one of the places that I can experience God and I learn about him and I*
>
> *learn about myself and I learn about other people and the way I'm supposed to live*
>
> *my life. (Emma)*

This underlying concept of God communicating through the Bible is probably one of the reasons that gave rise to some of the interviewees explaining their reason for reading the Bible as wanting to hear God speak.[40] Dermot's comment about hearing God and pleasing him combines the expectations of God speaking through the Bible with the sense of necessity to do this as part of a relational duty:

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[40] How the interviewees actually experienced God speaking was explored explicitly as part of the interview discussions; this will be examined further below in Section 3.2.

I read the Bible to hear God, and to please him I think. (Dermot)

The question of what the participants meant by and experienced in this communication will be explored below, but it seems that this way of framing the reasons for reading the Bible might provide a pointer to some of the general frameworks of expectation, understanding and experience held by the participants.

George reads the Bible because it is enjoyable:

Because I enjoy it. (George)

However, it is noteworthy that the experience of enjoyment is not expected to be sustained and is linked in some way in George's experience to Bible reading being a discipline with an expectation that a discipline may at some time bring enjoyment:

So I think the immediate answer'd be because I enjoy it but then because it's an act of obedience too, so sometimes I don't really enjoy it but I know that it's for my, for my good, and that it is an act of obedience whether I feel like it or not and it's a norm through my life. (George)

All of the interviewees read the Bible because it was important to them in some way. The definitions of evangelical faith communities by Bebbington (1989) and Tidball (1994) suggest this is neither unexpected nor surprising. What is interesting, and perhaps also significant (and will be explored further below), was that the reason for the Bible being important was not expressed in the concepts and categories of theological/dogmatic discussion, but, as was noted above, was framed almost exclusively in experiential terms. Some of this framing is likely to be the result of the influence of the wider faith community informing and shaping the expectations of why the Bible should be engaged. Dermot expressed this as he described how the Bible was central to his community's faith and practice:

We'd have the Bible very much central to our understanding of Christianity. (Dermot)

An integral part of the interviewees' view of the Bible's importance was their expectations of what would be the result of their engagement. This is explored in 3.1.2.

3.1.2 *'We should come with expectation'* - expectations of engagement with the Bible

Many of the participants also talked about what they expected to experience as a result of reading and engaging with the Bible. This is not quite the same issue as why they read the Bible, but it is closely linked, and may, for some, constitute an experiential dimension of their rationale for reading. These conversations also provide an element of insight into some of the underlying conceptual frameworks the participants use to engage the Bible. Even if some of the expectations are talked about in aspirational terms, they are valid indicators of how the participants think about the Bible and how they conceptualise how it might work for them. These underlying expectations are strong shaping influences and have become part of the narrative of experiencing the Bible. Even when an initial response suggested that Emma did not have any expectations, as she tried to explain this in more detail, she actually changed her mind and was able to talk about specific expectations clearly and succinctly:

> *I don't know if I have an expectation. I don't go, you know, expecting to feel God or experience God every time, or like you know, or learn new information. I just, but yet that happens. What do I expect? I expect to discover more and that more can be academic information, in experience, something about myself, something about another person or something about God, so it's very broad. (Emma)*

This perhaps indicates something of the pervasive strength of some of the framework of expectations that shape Bible engagement in faith communities. There is a possibility that Emma is saying her expectations are not tied to defined experiences and that there is a range of possible outcomes from engaging with Bible. It might also be that Emma is reluctant to frame her expectations only in the more affective or emotional domains of learning. When Emma does clarify her expectations, she identifies examples of the sorts of broad learning about God, herself and others identified by other participants.

One of the most common expectations described was that of relating to and encountering God. Although there was some expectation of an emotional and experiential dimension to that encounter, there was a general realism that this was often not going to be the case. Alice is clear about her expectation and at the same time describes her engagements with the Bible in the most mundane terms: engaging the Bible can sometimes be like eating kale or porridge, namely, it is good for you so it needs to be done, even if it might not feel that way or be in any way enjoyable:

> *We should come with expectation just to encounter God […] even if we don't have an emotional response. […] It's still the word of God we're looking at, it's still something that down the line will come back to us, that will you know. You mightn't like eating kale but it's good for you. You know, it doesn't always have*

to be, you know, the tasty morsels. The tasty morsels are lovely but you know the

bottom line is you get up and I have porridge most mornings. I eat it nearly

without thinking about it anymore, you know and it is sometimes it's like that,

but is it feeding me? Yes, it is. (Alice)

David, too, is realistic about his expectations, but even in the realism there is a
very clear aspiration that there would be some sort of communication with
God:

Some days I have more expectations than others, some days I just literally do it

out of duty. I know I'm supposed to and I know I need to, but some days I sit

down and kinda go come on God, I need, I'm really hoping you say something to

me today. (David)

But, for David, that aspiration is not always realised:

Loads of times I might as well have been reading the Beano, do you know what I

mean? Well I think that way, but, and then I kind of convince myself do you know

what I mean, well me spirit's getting fed anyway, do you know that kind of stuff?

So, it's the classic evangelical answer isn't it. We pray about that, but it's like, I

know, you see I know all that stuff but the reality of the experience of it isn't

always the same. (David)

For David, even when he feels that reading the Bible is comparable to reading the *Beano*, he draws on an alternative narrative to inform and shape his reactions and responses to the Bible. David links this to a broader narrative which he labels the '*classic evangelical answer.'* It would appear that he is aware of a wider, shaping narrative of expectation that is able to inform his Bible reading, perhaps inherited from the reading practices of his faith community, so that, like Alice's kale, it is doing him good, 'feeding' him, even if he does not experience it that way. David was aware that he had '*no empirical evidence'* of the alternative narrative and *'no empirical way'* of proving what the Bible was doing for him. He did, however, have his own experience-based rationale for the alternative narrative, which is based on an experience of what was absent for him when he is not engaging with the Bible:

> *I have no way of proving that except I know, I know if I don't read me Bible for a while, I begin to notice something is missing. […] I begin to find my relationship [with God] I suppose goes even colder a lot of times than it already is. (David)*

Brendan talked about a similar expectation of wanting to hear God speak to him as a result of engaging with the Bible:

> *I'm always coming expecting, and hoping that God will just in a dramatic way, speak, but it's very rarely the case. There's always just an inner kind of witness*

that I just, yeah, I know he said something and I need to just meditate and just take this with me. […] I do expect God to speak, but he doesn't always speak the way I would like him to speak. (Brendan)

Reflecting on the source of these expectations, some participants were aware that the major shaping factors were the values and practices observed and communicated by the communities of faith they belonged to:

We never had a Bible. There was a Bible in our house when I was a kid a growing up, but it was never taken down off the shelf, a beautiful Bible, I'd love to have it now but it was a big gold leaf, and fancy thing, gorgeous pictures and all that. […] But it wasn't something that was taken down and taken out or anything like that, but it was there. […] I mean the first experience I had really of a Bible, we were working with these people who were Christians and we went out to their house and they had a Bible in the toilet, and I thought 'This is weird.' And they were always talking about the Bible and they were always talking about Scripture, and stuff like that so. So then I went to church […] and then it was like this person bought me a Bible and I started reading it. […] If it's really what we say it is then it's probably the most important document we have in the world. […] It's the word of God. […] The God who created everything that we're sitting in and sitting on and breathing, and I wouldn't be here only for so, in some ways I do believe that it's real and I believe that what he wrote in the Bible is real. (David)

I always pray that I'm open to receive anything the Lord has for me and wants me to know. I always want my heart and myself to be open to receive that. So I do, I go to church expecting and wanting to hear from the Lord. (Aoife)

From the experience of the participants, it would appear that their expectations about engaging with the Bible form part of the belief and experiential practice matrix of faith communities. It is a matrix which Ward (2017) suggests could be regarded as both inherited and inhabited by the participants as part of the wider traditions and experiences of the faith communities they belong to. As a result, Rogers (2016) suggests this matrix is probably communicated in both conscious and unconscious ways and embraced both as something to be learned and as an ethos or commitment framework to be assimilated and internalised to ensure that the experience is owned and personalised by the participants.[41] David's comments above suggest that there may have been a form of modelling that resulted in his expectations about the Bible being shaped by the lifestyle and 'life-talk' of others he met within the faith community. However, the main influence would appear to have been the belief matrix of the community itself, which was embraced and adopted by David as part of his faith journey. Whether or not David and the other participants are aware of the practical

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[41] Rogers (2016, 210-222), using paradigms from "community of practice thinking", examines how a person moves from the periphery of faith communities to become a member who has an influence on the hermeneutical practices of the community.

mechanisms for this moulding and shaping of expectations about the Bible, the end results allow the members of the faith community to successfully negotiate and engage with the Bible in ways that the participants in this study would say, with Malley (2004, p. 158), "work," that is, deliver on those expectations.

Exploring with the participants the reasons why they read and engage with the Bible and the expectations they have about what that engagement might achieve has served to bring to expression several basic elements of the frameworks they deploy to engage with the Bible and ensure that it works to meet their expectations and the accompanying expectations of their faith communities. As noted above, one of the most common reasons given for reading the Bible was that it enabled the participants to discern and engage with God's communication with them (Rogers, 2016). Connecting with God was one of the key talking points for participants. Using the lens of one of the repeated phrases in the interviews, the word of God, the next section will report and analyse how the interviewees talked about how that connection with God is given expression in their experience.

3.2. Bible framing: the Bible as the word of God

The expression the word of God is often used in evangelical faith communities as a placeholder for the theological issues examined in Sections 1.3 and 1.4, namely the Bible is a revelation inspired by God and as such carries authority. However, as Meadowcroft (2011) observes, in biblical usage the phrase also conveys the connotation of God speaking. This section will utilise the phrase word of God as a lens to explore and analyse some of the ways in which the participants frame their understanding of the Bible. The issue of the relationship between theological theory and Christian practice (subsection 2.3.3) will also form part of the background to the section.

The section will work from the more general to the specific and personal. Subsection 3.2.1 will explore how the title word of God was used as a pointer towards the relational and general communication framework within which the participants understand their faith journey. Subsection 3.2.2 explores some of the richness of the meaning the participants attribute to the Bible as the word of God, namely that it is for them God's way of communicating with them and their communities. The final subsection (3.2.3) will explore the very personal dimension of this communication where the participants discussed how they had experienced God speaking to them through the Bible and whether in their experience they had ever heard anything they would describe as the audible voice of God.

3.2.1 *'I believe the Bible is the word of God'* - the Bible as the word of God (and means of connection to God)

One of the common ways to describe the Bible was word of God. Brian articulated this very clearly:

I believe it [the Bible] to be God's word. (Brian)

Before examining what participants might have meant by this expression, it is important to note that for people who used this way of describing the Bible, it marks at least an understanding of the uniqueness of the Bible. Colm elaborated:

Other books might offer a source of encouragement, [the Bible] is the word of God so it is different to any other book which might give you help. (Colm)

For nearly all of the participants, the Bible was in some way unique and special, even though they experienced and explained this in different ways.

There's something life giving about the word of God. (Alice)

The word of God that can be trusted as the word of God, handed down through the centuries. (Colm)

The Bible asserts itself to be the word of God. (George)

It would appear that for many of the participants, the phrase word of God, functioned at both semantic and theological levels. Semantically, the phrase was used as a title that was more or less interchangeably with the word Bible as the name for a book or artefact. At the same time and often from the same people it also functioned as a theologically constructed title that implied a range of concepts and understandings, including, as Meadowcroft (2011) observes, being some sort of communication from God or by God. It is not that any of the participants actually talked about the word of God being the direct words of God, but many were clear that the Bible was a communication from God for them, personally and corporately as part of their faith communities. Interestingly, depending on the context of what was being said by an interviewee, the phrase could be used by the same people with both meanings:

I believe the Bible is the word of God, I believe that God authors the Bible, now in general. How he did that exactly is not really the point here, but I believe he did. […] I think faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God. (Dermot)

It became just all-consuming to know him and the only way to do it is through his word and what he reveals about himself. (Joseph)

But for, for that kind of critical decision, I'd want that confirmation from the word of God. (Colm)

It is not surprising that there is some coalescing of the two uses of the phrase word of God. It is possible, therefore, that when word of God is used as a title, there may well be underlying theological assumptions about the Bible being communicated. This explains why Brendan is able to talk about the word of God at a semantic level and link that by means of theological concepts about the Bible to expectations for actual experiences that might result from engaging the Bible. This represents a certain fluidity of categories that in practice allows Brendan to link theology and experience; this is a notable transition. Brendan talked about this coalescing of theological conviction and experience in action:

I believe, that this word is divinely inspired, and, it's really after coming alive to me, and, and it's really, I have that sense inside that this, if I don't do this I'll be left wondering what did I do? (Brendan)

Conor expressed himself in a similar fashion, but this time in the context of communicating the Bible and its experience to others. There is an underlying assumption that the Bible has been given by God for some sort of action, in this case on the part of others:

I believe the Bible is the word of God; it's the authoritative word of God; it's the inspired word of God. […] The word of God is so important; it's powerful and effective and so you're trying to use the word of God to try and speak into people's lives. (Conor)

One of the recurring themes that marked the Bible as special for the participants was the experience of the Bible being part of a broad matrix of communication between the participants and God, whether that interaction takes place individually, for example through individual study and reading, or within their faith communities and some of the more corporate aspects of Bible engagement, including group studies and preaching events.

One of the ways he [God] would communicate would be through the Bible, through the word of God, through the books that are in the Bible. (Dermot)

It's not about what can I get from it, it's what is God telling us. (Siobhan)

For Emma, this link between the experience of the Bible and the experience of a relationship with God was clear; this was one of the reasons she read the Bible:

I'm reading intentionally to experience God. […] Generally it's my own reading, or in a Bible study setting or a class, in the class and I'm hearing the words from

the Bible. And if it registers in me, as in if I have a reaction to it, I will definitely

become a rottweiler and interrogate it until I get what God is trying to tell me.

(Emma)

George's experience demonstrates something of how theological concepts can sometimes be deployed to negotiate and explain the link between someone's commitment to the Bible as the word of God understood in both the semantic and theological senses noted above, and his personal experience of God speaking. George adds an interesting dimension to the concept of God speaking when he talks about what he understands and experiences as an objectivity to engaging with the Bible. For George there is an objective element to hearing from God, which is tied up with his view of the Bible and how it works. For George, this objectivity of God speaking remains a given, even if it is not mirrored in his subjective experience:

When I read it myself, objectively I expect to hear from God, subjectively it may be

quite mundane. […] My conviction is that every time you open the Scripture and

you read it God is speaking, it's God's word, he's speaking by his Spirit through

the word, and every time it is read publicly God is speaking. So my experience of

it is of never having lost that conviction, my response to that conviction has

wavered but my conviction of it has never wavered. […] I think my conviction has

always maintained that the Scriptures are God's speaking. (George)

These observations, while perhaps appearing to be at slight variance to the more experiential framing of the other participants, actually serve to reinforce the general experiential expectations of Bible engagement. For George, even when a subjective experience is absent, the framework of orientation towards the Bible and how it works still expects some sort of communication to have taken place. The combination of perceived objectivity and experienced subjectivity might be George's way of negotiating and bringing together doctrinal beliefs about the Bible, perhaps shaped by the faith community he is part of, and his actual lived experience.

These reflections from George were one of the few places where any of the interviewees came closest to making a statement about the Bible that seemed to be more based on the language of theological discourse and theory rather than the language of personal experience. The significance is not so much that George said this, but that the majority of the others did not, and some of those had completed theological education. The next chapter will explore more fully the relationship between the participants' experiences of the Bible and the more usual discourse of theological study.

Across the sample, the experiences narrated by the participants would appear to suggest that although there is an awareness of doctrinal and theological statements about the Bible, these are acknowledged and embraced within a

wider narrative framework of what they understand as an ongoing and active relationship with God. The Bible, in this frame, is, for the participants, the means by which God has communicated and continues to communicate with both individuals and communities. The Bible is regarded not just as a record of God's actions and words in the past, but as his ongoing communication for the contemporary context. How the participants negotiate this and create the desired contemporary relevance from the Bible will be explored further below.

For the participants one of the consequences of this framing of Bible engagement within the context of relationship is a concern for the contemporaneity of what the Bible says. If the participants expect in some way to have God communicate with them through their engagement with the Bible, there is a logic about expecting the communication to address specific issues in their lives, their contexts and their faith communities. These basic assumptions about the Bible, what it is, and how it works in practice underpins and provides a theologically nuanced framework for the very high value placed on the relevance of the Bible and Bible engagement. From the point of view of the interviewees, there is a certain theological logic to this. If the Christian faith is framed within a narrative of relationship, there is an expectation communication will take place. The Christian understanding of God, McGrath (1997, 2012; see also Bray, 2014; Goldingay, 2016) argues, is of a personal God who is capable of relating to human beings. This creates an expectation that the

God who created human beings will be capable of at least the level of

communication expected between human beings (McGrath, 2012). There is,

therefore, a theologically informed expectation for the interviewees that God

will communicate with them, either individually or corporately, through a

range of means and in particular through the Bible. The purpose of this research

is not to comment on the veracity or otherwise of such experiences, but to note

that this is the way in which the Bible was experienced by the participants.

Recognising this underlying framework of understanding is important as it will

help to inform the frameworks and processes for how participants ensured this

communication was relevant to contemporary situations.

This also suggests that one of the main influences on Bible interpretation for the

participants is, as Malley (2004, 2009) observes, a contemporising hermeneutic

to ensure that God's communication and action in the past can be experienced

as relevant for the present. Such an approach to the Bible demands considerable

theological nuancing, whether consciously or unconsciously absorbed as part of

living in a faith community where these sorts of approaches are regularly

practiced.

Examining the ways in which the participants talked about the Bible as the

word of God has highlighted it is used, as Malley (2009) suggests, as both a title

for the Bible and as a theologically informed placeholder for the idea that the

Bible is a communication from God. This also highlighted one of the pervasive

narratives and recurring experiences of the Christian faith for the interviewees

is the concept of relationship between God and them and their communities

and this in turn shapes their experience of engaging with the Bible. This allows

the participants to talk about their experience of the Bible as being God's

communication to them and their communities. However, most of the

participants went beyond the generalities of communication to talk about their

experience of God speaking to them personally. This experience will be

examined in the next section.

3.2.2 *'I believe this is God speaking'* - the Bible as the word God speaks

The general understanding of communication implied by the title word of God

takes on what can be described as an intensely personal dimension when the

interviewees talked about how part of the experience of their relationship with

God was hearing God speak to them through the Bible:

> *And I believe it [the Bible] to be the primary way through which God's speaks to*
>
> *me. (Brian)*

> *If you've never heard the voice of God then read the Bible, and if you want to hear*
>
> *his voice out loud, then read out loud. (Conor)*

I think the Scripture is one of the key ways that I'm gonna hear from God. […] I believe this is God speaking to us, albeit through a number of different mediums and stories and history and poetry and so on and so forth. So I'm saying it's going to connect with me at a deep level, […] I believe his word therefore at times is going to speak at a level that, an inspiring story might not do, […] there's something just deeper that's going, deeper resonance when I'm reading Scripture, that's it's going to challenge me, encourage me, sometimes frustrate me. […] So because I view it differently I expect it to be doing something different in my life, and, it does some of the time and it doesn't other times but I still expect it to be speaking to me in a different way. (Kevin)

I feel more connected to God when I read the Bible and I believe that it's, certainly, one of, if not the primary way that he speaks to me: it's certainly, it is the primary way he speaks to me. So that's why I feel disconnected if I'm not reading it. (Patrick)

The experience was pervasive throughout the data, even when it was not addressed directly in the interview questions.

The Bible is a textual document whose literature is framed in the language and concepts of specific historical contexts in the past. The concept that God uses these ancient texts to communicate relevantly to individuals and communities

in the contemporary context is not easy to grasp and negotiate. This was something that Siobhan, an avid reader and someone who has engaged with a range of literature at a both a personal and professional level, noted:

> *God speaks through the Bible and that seems like a self-evident truth, but it actually is quite confusing when you're not from a Christian background and how does God speak through words because I read a lot of fiction, and, it's a different thing, no-one's trying to speak to you through it. (Siobhan)*

Siobhan is observing that, for her, there seems to be something different about the Bible and that as a consequence she approaches it as a different sort of book with expectations that are unique to it, one of the main ones being that God speaks to people through the Bible. This might also suggest there are possibly different frames of understanding, orientation, expectation and experience that are used to engage the Bible: a literary frame that is comparable to the way in which people read other material, and a theologically- and faith-community-informed devotional frame (Malley, 2004) in which people are looking for and expecting to encounter what they might describe as being in some sense the voice of God. The use of such frames will be discussed in more detail later; for the rest of this section I want to explore the participants' experience of God speaking.

The idea that the Bible is the means by which God speaks to individuals was, for Dermot, more than simply a matter of faith or of shared expectation. Dermot expressed himself in pragmatic terms, but underlying the pragmatics there is a theological understanding that the Bible and its function are somehow linked to the action of God in the first place. This linking together of the nature and function of the Bible to an understanding of God, his character and his purposes results in both an implicit theological understanding and a personal and corporate expectation that God will communicate. And so, Dermot's underlying understanding of God seems to be informing and shaping his understanding and experience of the Bible, and if he is convinced that God is a communicator, then God will speak to him through the Bible:

> *I expect that God wants me to hear him. That you know, he's gone to the trouble of putting together this Bible, and this story of his Son, particularly, and that he has given me this so that I can hear him and hear his voice. […] I do think he is speaking to me through it. (Dermot)*

This linking of the experience of God speaking through the Bible to an understanding of the character and purpose of God was common and informed the participants' rationale and expectation of Bible engagement. Daniel was clear that as part of his faith journey he engaged with the Bible because he wanted to hear God speak to him:

It's my own sort of beliefs about it probably when I come to it, as I do come with

expectation. Certainly, I believe, [I] have an expectation, that God'll speak and

that's based on past experience, and it's part of, it's how I treat it. (Daniel)

Daniel deliberately locates this experience of hearing God speak in the context

of a lived personal relationship which, according to Daniel, is more than

knowledge and facts:

I see it as part of my, a relationship with God, so it is about me and God, not just

as a sort of theology text book, which at times it has been because I'm of that bent

where I like reading. (Daniel)

Dermot was very clear in his assertion that there was more to his engagement

with the Bible than what he regarded as the purely academic, and, interestingly,

he expressed his experience very definitely as someone who did not regard

himself as engaging the Bible primarily in an academic frame:

I'm not a New Testament scholar. I'm sure there are people that could tie me up in

knots about the way they interpret the Bible because they know the Greek so much

better, or the Hebrew so much better, or even the Aramaic or whatever, you know,

and different things, but I, so far as I can see and so far as I've learned from the bit

of study I have done and my experience and so on, I'm convinced that God is

speaking through the Bible. (Dermot)

It is noticeable in Dermot's declaration about God speaking that there might be suggestions from his experience of a dichotomy between the scholarly approach and the more devotional approach, and he would definitely want to align himself with the more experiential or devotional approach if he was forced to choose. It is important to note that Dermot was not disparaging scholarly study at this point in the conversation, but expressing some of his personal underlying convictions about the Bible. Although he has not engaged in formal theological studies, he has, by his own account, used a range of academic resources as part of his own Bible engagement, especially if that engagement is in the context of a talk or a Bible study:

> *If I was reading it with that [talk or Bible study] in mind probably I'd read it but*
>
> *then I'd probably be looking at commentaries, and I'd probably be comparing*
>
> *maybe some of it with, with other parts of it. (Dermot)*

The pervasiveness of the experience of God speaking suggests that this is both a common mode of discourse about the Bible and a common expectation within

the faith communities represented in the sample.[42] It would appear to be a way

of expressing a particular type of experience that was common throughout the

participant sample. Allowing for the different ways individuals use language to

explain experiences, it is noteworthy, and perhaps fairly significant, that the

participants explained their experiences of God speaking through the Bible in

broadly comparable terms. This means that across a spectrum of theological

opinion represented by the participants,[43] the experience and expectations of

God speaking through the Bible was described in very similar terms. There

were slight differences in the ways the participants articulated their experience

of God speaking through the Bible, but this could be as much a result of

personal and personality factors as being dependent on those elements of

shaping linked to distinctive denominational theological features. There was no

discernible pattern in the data of a particular way of articulating this experience

being linked to the theological particularities of a specific faith community, for

example Pentecostal faith communities. This suggests that there may be very

similar processes of shaping going on in evangelical faith communities with

regard to how members of these communities experience the Bible; this shaping

would appear to transcend individual faith communities. It may well be that

what the participants are describing here is something of a potential defining

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[42] Rogers (2016, p. 88) suggests the "overriding goal" of engaging with the Bible is "hearing God speak through the Scripture."

[43] Section 2.5.1 notes the range of denominations represented in study.

characteristic of evangelical faith expression and experience, when the term

evangelical is understood in the widest sense suggested by Bebbington (1989)

and Tidball (1994). A fruitful avenue for future research could be to compare

this particular experience of the Bible with other faith expressions within the

wider Christian church, broadening the empirical data to investigate if this is an

experience that ranges beyond evangelicalism.

While there may be a general belief that God speaks through the Bible, the

participants also narrated how they had experienced what they were convinced

was the voice of God. The ways in which the participants talked about this

provides an additional window onto their experiences of engaging with the

Bible. This will be explored in the next section.

3.2.3 *'Several times I've heard God speak'* - the Bible as the voice of God

In spite of the fact that, almost without exception, participants talked in some

way about the Bible being the means by which God spoke to them, no one used

the term God speaking to refer to any sort of audible voice or even any sort of

auditory experience:

I personally haven't had experience of an audible voice of God. […] Sometimes people, in my experience anyway, value the idea of an audible thing more. That's why I begin with why I haven't experienced that personally. (George)

I've felt specifically for me that was a speaking of sort, it was something. So my understanding it, is, first of all hearing God's speak is that I, I've never heard an audible voice at all so what I mean is something that deeply connects with me where I have a sense of [God speaking]. (Kevin)

They use that phrase 'God is speaking to you', but it's a way of communicating and actually making it personal. (Siobhan)

It would appear that even though the participants talked about God speaking, they did not use the language with its normal denotative meaning within the context of a relationship of a person speaking audibly to another. Mary recognised this as something of an anomaly:

So it's not audible, so speaking's a funny word I suppose. (Mary)[44]

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[44] Mary's comment about God speaking is similar to Collins' (2019) observation that the Bible is not "a speaking agent."

The interviewees appeared to be using the phrase 'God speaking' as a placeholder for a real experience for them. However, when they were asked to enlarge on the language they used to describe the experience, they explained and gave it meaning by using a range of different terms, mostly linked in some ways to concepts of intuition or individual internal impressions. The actual experience of God speaking is described and explained in various ways, but its locus is engagement with the Scriptures:

> *I don't think I've ever heard an audible voice. The day-to-day way would, probably 90% of the ways God speaks to me, or higher than 90, is, through the Scriptures. (Daniel)*

The mechanisms for identifying this voice are interesting, and are located within the relationship matrix noted above. God speaking is part of the ongoing relationship the participants experienced with God. For Anna, the experience is brought to consciousness by particular words or concepts '*coming back to you*' or when '*something particular jumps out*':

> *It's not an audible voice, I think it's more like you've read something and the, like particular words in a verse just keep coming back to you or you've listened to someone preach and something particular jumps out and you think actually this is*

meant for me I think, and then maybe you hear it again, or it just doesn't go

away. So that's, that's probably more what I'd say it's like. (Anna)

Conor expresses what might be a similar experience in terms of a strong experience of the presence of God that accompanies the insight that God is speaking. Interestingly, he internalises the idea of the audible voice, making it an internal and interiorised experience:

It wasn't the audible voice of God but it was certainly the strongest presence and

audible voice inside that I heard. […] That was an audible Scripture and word of

God that really impacted my life at that moment. (Conor)

Dermot reminisced about an experience that was close to an audible voice, but there is a lack of certainty it was an actual voice:

But God is, is definitely speaking to me […]. I do think he is speaking to me

through it [the Bible]. […] I mean one thing I, what I didn't hear, I thought I

heard it maybe, maybe in kind of a whispered voice, was, something I was really

worried about, it was when I was actually moving house and it was difficult days

we had, and, I sensed him saying 'leave it to Father'. Just 'leave it to Father'. And

it worked out fine. […] It's more principle, it's more you know, 'be patient', 'love',

'reach out' 'you don't know the full story', you know 'there's more going on there

than you know'. Those kind of general principles kind of thing. (Dermot)

The things Dermot reports as having heard God say through the Bible may not actually be in the Bible. They may be an application or extension of certain texts, but most of the phrases noted by Dermot do not appear in the Bible. This is similar to a feature of evangelical Bible interpretation observed by Malley (2004, ch 3) which he terms "transivity." This is an ability to create links between the Bible and beliefs, links that do not necessarily need to be interpretations of any particular texts; this is what Dermot has done. While the phrases may not be in the Bible, Dermot experiences them as an extension of his understanding of the Bible as the locus of God's communication, so much so that he comes close to saying they are in the Bible. Dermot is able to do this because of the link he has created between the Bible and his beliefs. Significantly, the link he creates allows Dermot to authenticate what he believes God has said to him by linking it to his commitment to the authority of the Bible, even though there is no Bible interpretation involved as such. This process is described by Malley (2004, pp. 83–87) and allows Dermot to attribute considerable weight to what he believes the Bible says, even if, exegetically, the Bible does not say it. Dermot's experience is suggestive of significant cognitive and theological processing.

Alice stated clearly that she had heard God speak:

Several times I've heard God speak. (Alice)

However, when the meaning of this was explored with her, she was clear that even though she identified it as '*audible*', it was not a voice:

So it was audible, well not audible, it was audible in here, in my heart [pointing to her heart]. […] It wasn't a voice. (Alice)

Brendan's experience is an *'inner kind of witness'*:

So, yeah I'm always coming expecting, and hoping that God will just, in a dramatic way, speak but it's very rarely the case. There's always just an inner kind of witness that I just, yeah, I know he said something and I need to just meditate and just take this with me. (Brendan)

This is similar to Patrick:

Sometimes God plants things in us, that become inescapable to us and we realise that maybe it is God speaking to us, and so I think there's other ways of confirming that and so on. But in terms of just everyday life or whatever, you

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know, I read things and there's an ongoing conversation then, that I have with God about what I read and so I'll ask, is this for me? is this for them? is this for us? What are you trying to say to me here? And there's time like I mean I'm flabbergasted when I read things and they have huge effect on me you know. (Patrick)

For both Brendan and Patrick, there are times, this *'inner kind of witness'* and the things that become *'inescapable'* become much more emphatic:

[The text] just begins to pulsate, I can't explain it, it begins to just, it's almost like 3D, it comes off the page. And I'm a six-month-old Christian, I have no idea what's going on and so I highlight it. […] When those Scriptures were kinda pulsating and highlighting and I had that experience then the following day, I kinda thought, wow this book is alive, it's come alive to me already. (Brendan)

How do I experience God speaking to me? Well sometimes I mean I have to be honest with you I've read parts of the Bible that have jumped out at me at a particular moment in time and had a very direct relevance on my life and, you know, I'm a natural cynic I think in a way, so I immediately ask the question of myself, well is this just what you want to hear? (Patrick)

Other participants expressed similar types of experience, though not in quite such graphic terms. It would appear that for the participants, the phenomenon as they define it of God speaking is the product of a range of interpretive processes that allow them to engage with the Bible and to attribute to certain experiences the label of God speaking. The nature of these interpretative processes, and how the participants find authentication for them, will be explored further below. However, in the context of the broad framing of approaches to the Bible, this experience of God speaking needs to be understood as part of the overall relationship narrative adopted within the faith communities of the participants. This relationship narrative possibly explains the desire to hear an audible voice expressed by Aiden, Bernadette and Dermot, and may well also be the explanation of their desire for what they understood and talked about as their relationship with God to be enriched by a deeper and more intensely personal encounter:

It would be great if it was an audible voice, wouldn't it? (Aiden)

Like how God speaks to me? Well it's not audibly, ever. I want it to be but it's not. (Bernadette)

First of all I don't think I've ever experienced an audible voice, I don't think I ever have. I'd like to, but I don't think, and it isn't for want of wanting, you know, at

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times. […] Now what he doesn't do, I think, is give me direct orders on what to do

about something. (Dermot)

The methodological approach of this research provides no credible way to comment on the veracity of the experiences of God speaking described by the participants, except to acknowledge that for the participants this was an experience they considered to be real, and, for many, was what they described as life-transforming:

Like life, literally life changing, literally it changed the way my marriage was, it

changed the way my life was, it changed the way my parenting went, it changed

everything about me. (David)

For the participants, the language of God speaking to them would appear to be something of a placeholder concept that points to their experience of the communication from God that occurs in the context of the ongoing relationship narrative that they appear to have inherited from their faith communities and now inhabit for themselves.

This section has examined in some detail the multi-faceted framing concept of the Bible as the word of God. It has become clear that both the phrase and the underlying theological construction link together a wide range of beliefs and

commitments. Whether the participants are aware of this, their points of view and the ways in which they make sense of their experiences involves a considerable level of theological acumen and processing, perhaps more than they consider they could articulate.

3.3 Chapter summary

The analysis of this theme has highlighted important aspects of ways in which the participants' have constructed their conceptualisation of the Bible.

Section 3.1 underlines the analysis of Sections 1.1 and 1.2: the participants experience the Bible as an important document and as a result are committed to engaging with it on an ongoing basis (3.1.1). As Malley (2004) has suggested, engaging with the Bible is a key marker of evangelical self-identity and self-understanding. However, it is noteworthy that while the theological significance of the Bible was not ignored, it was the experiential aspects that were most striking and created the expectations expressed by the participants (3.1.2). For the interviewees, the experiential dimensions of their Bible engagement was much more prominent than theological formulations; this is an important perspective of their lived experience and their "operant theology" (Ward, 2017, p. 61). As noted in the introduction to this chapter, there is a corporate dimension to this experience as the data supports Bielo's (2009b) view

that much of this orientation to the Bible is inherited from the wider faith community.[45] It is also significant that many of the responses for why people engage with the Bible are framed in relational terms, thereby making the participants' experience of the Bible part of their ongoing faith journey and embedding a framework of relationship with God in both their experience and theological understanding.

This framework of relationship to God lies behind and shapes the conversations about the Bible as the word of God (3.2). It also creates the context for the participants' narratives of God speaking and provides some measure of authentication of the experience they were describing. This reflects Malley's (2004, p. 14; see subsection 1.2) position that it is the participants' handling of and response to the text that contributes to it being regarded as special. This experience is not driven by theological concerns, but by the participants' understanding and experience of this framework.

The participants' framework of relationship to God adds a layer of meaning to their experience of the word of God. Not only is it a theological placeholder, it also functions an experiential placeholder, indicating as Swinton and Mowat (2016, p. 15; see also Subsection 2.4.3 above) and Rogers (2016) observe that the

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[45] Rogers (2016) argues this is also the case for hermeneutical practice.

Bible engagement practices of the participants are not only "theory-laden", but may also be responsible for creating new and fresh "embodied" (Ward, 2017, p. 55) perspectives on theory. The Bible was experienced widely as an integral part of an 'I-thou' relationship (Buber, 1958; McGrath, 2012) with God. Engaging with the Bible was described as God communicating in some way with the participants.

If a framework of relationship to God is the matrix within which participants interpret their encounter with the Bible, this will influence how they conceptualise and experience the more theological issues noted in Sections 1.3 and 1.4 that are an integral part of engaging with the Bible. The next chapter will build on the analysis of this chapter to explore the theme of experiencing the theology of the Bible.

Chapter 4: Experiencing the theology of the Bible

Sections 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5 noted elements of the theological backdrop to this research. The participants are members of communities where even if these issues are not discussed or the participants may in practice be unaware of them, they form a key element of what Ward (2017, pp. 62–67) terms the "lived theology" of the participants. The purpose of this chapter is not to examine the correlation between theological statements and the participants' experience, but to analyse how participants recount their experiences of these issues as a result of their ongoing engagement with the Bible.

This chapter will examine the theme of experiencing the theology of the Bible. The focus will be on three sub-themes that are linked to the issues addressed in Chapter 1: the authority of the Bible (4.1; see Section 1.4), the Bible as an inspired text (4.2; see Section 1.3), and the interpretation of the Bible (4.3 and 4.4; see Section 1.5) with a special focus on the experience of engaging with biblical genres (4.3). Each of the sections of this chapter will have its own summary, with a brief summary at the end of the chapter.

4.1 Experiencing the Bible's authority

Malley (2004) identifies a commitment to the centrality of the Bible which informs and shapes theology, faith, devotion, life and communities practices as a characteristic of evangelicalism. However, he also suggests that although this is "widely acknowledged […] the actual evidence for it has never, to my knowledge, been marshaled (sic)" (Malley, 2004, p. 127). The focus of this section is to examine the empirical data of the participants' experience of the authority of the Bible in an Irish context. Some of the underlying theological issues related to this have been mapped out in Section 1.4, but the theoretical perspectives gave no indication of how the authority of the Bible might be lived and experienced in evangelical faith communities.

The interviews allowed the participants to talk about their experiences of the Bible's authority in whatever terms they chose and in the process they created narratives of how they and their faith communities negotiated these issues. The focus of this section will be on those narratives. This section will address, firstly, how the participants talked about their experiences of the Bible's authority (4.1.1). The second half of the section will focus on a particular mode of expression that was common, namely talking about the authority of the Bible in relation to the person of Jesus (4.1.2).

4.1.1 *'Scripture has authority'*

The ways in which participants talked about the experience of the Bible's authority seem to be linked in various ways to the sorts of commitments explored in the previous chapter in Section 3.2:

> *[The Bible] is my objective authority because it's God's word. (George)*

The research data does not suggest that either of these is primary in the experience of the participants. Rather, they are closely linked themes feeding off one another in various ways, their use depending on what the participants wanted to highlight from their experience.

All of the participants talked specifically about the authority of the Bible in some way. The issue was also a widespread undercurrent in other parts of the narratives the participants constructed about their engagement with the Bible. In some cases, these undercurrents were obvious; at other time they were much more subtle and linked to other aspects of the interviewees' experiences. Authority was one of the non-negotiables that participants believed they needed to state about their experience of the Bible:

> *So there definitely is authority. (Daniel)*

So in my mind Scripture has authority. (Kevin)

So there's an authority in it [the Bible] […] there's authority in it and there's power in it [the Bible]. (Alice)

No other book has authority over me, no other book can tell me how I ought to think and live and act with the same authority as the Bible. (George)

I see the authority as like pre-dating me, funnily enough. […] I think I'm under the authority of the Bible, you know. (Dermot)

They're God's words […] they're true, reliable or they have authority for all time. (Mary)

I suppose what the Bible says goes, is basically it. (Siobhan)

However, having made statements like this which, on the surface, resemble certain aspects of the formal theological discourse about the authority of the Bible, the participants always went further to talk about how they experienced this authority as part of their ongoing experience of a relationship with God. It is important to note, however, that in doing so significant theological issues

were underpinning their answers, even if they did not use theological nomenclature or articulate theological formulations.

Many of the participants experienced the authority of the Bible in a manner that was directly connected to the way in which they conceptualised the Bible. If, as many interviewees explained, the Bible for them has its origins in God then, by its very nature, it carries a unique authority. Alice expresses it straightforwardly using the language of 'obedience,' but the same idea is there with others:

> *So for me if God has said that, and it's true then if he says [it] I must obey. (Alice)*

> *God is the author of truth and he is gracious and merciful and has shared with many different areas in the world in science and medicine and whatever. But if that contradicts the word of God it's thrown out. (Emma)*

> *So I guess the ultimate authority is God's authority over me, but God's speaks to me through his word, so every word is authoritative. (Daniel)*

George expresses his experience in similar terms and for him this has the added significance of moving the question of the Bible's authority, at least in principle, away from any particular experience that he has as a reader:

It's divine, so in that respect it's obviously unique. […] Because the Bible asserts itself to be the word of God, and the authority thereof, that is something I'm submitting to. It does not become authoritative because of my preference to choose for it to be so; it is authoritative whether I like it or not, and it is authoritative whether my neighbour believes it is or not. And that doesn't change the nature of it. So its authority is not derived from the conviction of the reader. […] The authority is external to me. (George)

For George, at some level, the Bible's authority is not linked to the ways in which people respond to it; the Bible carries authority in and of itself whether people recognise it or not. The Bible, is, therefore, as far as George is concerned, some sort of independent authority apart from any sort of experience of it or response to it. This explanation by George is the closest any of the participants came to talking about the Bible's authority in the language and concepts of more traditional academic theological discourse.

Most of the participants conceptualised and experienced the Bible as somehow having its origins in some way in God. As a consequence, it needs to be engaged and embraced as carrying something of the authority the participants are prepared to attribute to God. Dermot expresses his experience of the authority of the Bible as an authentic self-disclosure from God (O'Mahony, 2018), and because it originates with God, it can be trusted. For Dermot, what

God reveals about himself may not be complete, but what has been communicated is accurate and, by virtue of the logic of this belief, is what God wants people to know:

> *I suppose I think of the authority of the Bible as that it authentically communicates to us about God, in the biggest sense now. It will not tell us everything there is to know about God, you know, you can see that. But I think I can be pretty sure that what it says about God […] is a very good basis for understanding God, from what God wants us to understand about himself, cos there's maybe all kinds of things he doesn't want us to understand about himself, it's up to him. (Dermot)*

For Alice, because she regards the Bible as having its origin with God, it must have something to say about how someone should live if they want live in the sort of relationship to God she sees the Bible pointing to. Alice explains her experience of that authority in the language of willing service:

> *I suppose that's the way I feel that I'm a person under authority. I'm a servant of God and so if the Lord is telling me to do something then I do, but not, not as a slave but as a willing servant, if you know what I mean, as someone who's willing. So I just, I experience the authority of God in that way. […] But because*

not only is the Lord my shepherd but he is also my Master, he's my Father, and

there is that sense of servanthood really, so I suppose that's the authority. (Alice)

This suggests Alice's conceptualisation of the authority of the Bible is, as Wright (2011) argues, closely connected to her experience of the authority of God. Alice is expressing in experiential terms Wright's (2011) suggestion that the authority of the Bible has its basis not in doctrinal formulations but in the authority of God (see Section 1.4). For Alice, this experience of authority includes a narrative of care and wellbeing (*'the Lord my shepherd'* and *'he's my Father'* suggest this) which encompasses for Alice a response of willing service (expressed as a *'willing servant'*). Alice approaches and embraces the authority of the Bible not as an abstract principle, but as an integral part of a wider narrative of relationship with God. Alice likens this to a father-daughter relationship, something that she feels she could not do without:

It's in a relational sense, […] it's a father/daughter relationship as well. But like

when your father tells you to do something, you do it because you know that your

father knows best, so there's an authority there, but it isn't in a slavish sense. […]

It does carry the weight and authority of God but something that's precious […] if

I was to lose my access to my Bible it would be like losing an oxygen tank. (Alice)

Alice experiences the Bible as carrying *'the weight and authority of God,'* but significantly for her, this is something she regards as *'precious,'* something that gives life and is as necessary as the air she breathes. This is not only an expression of lived theology, but is also, for Alice, a narrative of identity linked directly to the authority of God mediated through the Bible, supporting in her experience Wright's (2011) argument for how the Bible should be conceptualised. As far as Alice is concerned the authority of the Bible and the authority of God are not just concepts to which she assents, but are actually doing something in her lived experience.

This embedding of the theological concept of the Bible's authority in a wider narrative of relationship might be one of the reasons why many of the participants talked about the authority of the Bible in mainly experiential terms. It might be that the wider narrative of relationship allows the participants to frame the authority of the Bible as part of that relationship. The intensity of the personal relationship with God, as noted by Luhrmann (2012), may for the participants soften the concept of authority and shape it one characterised by restoration or liberation.

Kevin talks about God, kingdom life and freedom as well as service as part of his experience of the Bible's authority. Kevin links this with a shaping and benchmarking of his behaviour and lifestyle. It would appear that he

experiences the Bible as both the authoritative source and the means of the shaping that he is talking about. And although he has not used the language of relationship here, given the way in which he is expressing himself, it would appear to form part of the overall context:

> *So in my mind Scripture has authority. […] If you want to experience God and kingdom life, and freedom to be who you are, it's got to be something about service that's in there. That's pretty authoritative […] I want it to be part of my thinking, I wish it was more in my DNA, so as an authoritative view in my mind that's come from Scripture. I want it to shape me, so in that way it's authoritative, so ideas need to be benchmarked against it: my behaviour, my lifestyle. (Kevin)*

Dermot also locates his response to the Bible's authority within the narrative framework of relationship, but he explains his experience in terms of creaturely humility. Dermot expresses himself in relational terms and frames his understanding of his experience of the Bible's authority within a relational framework, a feature of the Bible noted by O'Mahony (2018). For Dermot the concept of relationship stretches beyond the personal to a much bigger and more comprehensive narrative of creation and creature:

> *I'm not the centre of the universe at the end of the day, you know. I see that the Bible is bigger than me, is bigger than my interpretation of it. […] You need to*

kind of humble up here a little bit and say, you know, he made me in his image,

and he wants me to engage with all my heart, and soul and mind and strength

and all of that, and I will, you know, and I must. But I also must recognize that,

you know, I see in a mirror dimly and all of that, and, you know, I have to leave

things to him at the end of the day. (Dermot)

The narrative of relationship to God, for Dermot, appears to be part of a much larger theological construct: it is the creator's role to disclose and the creation's role to respond and to recognise the limits that are inherent in the creation being less than the creator. Dermot's allusions to the Bible in his comments would suggest that, for him, this particular way of embracing the narrative of relationship to God is based on and shaped by the Bible itself.

David describes a similar experience of creator-created authority in relation to the Bible, but develops it using the language of the workplace:

God is ultimately responsible for our existence, my existence, so then I'm guessing

he has ultimate authority over my existence. He can snuff me out tomorrow if he

wants to. […] When I think authority I usually mean who's in charge? Do you

know what I mean, who's the boss? (David)

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The idea of God being in charge does not cause David any theoretical problems, even though it might be hard to practice. It is interesting that even this *'argument'* is framed in the relational terms noted above:

And then I don't have a problem with God as the boss. At the end of the day, he's the boss. I don't always do what he tells me, and I struggle with that and I usually do what he tells me but it might take a bit of time and I'm kinda going not right now God. But, he's going 'Yeah', and I'm going 'No' and we have that little argument or whatever, but, at the end of the day, he's the boss so like, the buck stops with him. (David)

It would appear that the participants are locating the authority of the Bible not so much in the Bible as a text, but in the Bible as the mediated authority of God. The experience of the participants was much closer to Wright's (2011) conceptualisation of the authority of the Bible. For the participants, the Bible mediates God's authority; it is how God exercises his authority - and so any authority that the Bible has originates ultimately with God. Mary articulated what was experienced by many of the participants:

What it [the Bible] says about itself, that is true and trustworthy and so it ultimately comes from him, the authority is in him, but I believe that that's in

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Scripture. And I think that that has come from him too, even though […] that

doesn't like make logical sense. (Mary)

4.1.2 *'I think about the authority of Jesus'*

The interview data points to the experience of the Bible's authority being

located primarily in a narrative relationship to God. However, that is not to

suggest the ways in which the participants framed their experience of the

authority of the Bible was devoid of theological content. In fact the reverse was

true; for this particular issue, there was significant, nuanced theological

reasoning underpinning their framework of experience, whether they were

aware of this or not. This was perhaps most obvious in the way that some

participants expressed their understanding and experience of the authority of

the Bible in terms of their understanding of and relationship to Jesus. This will

be explored in this present section.

Adam was keen to locate the authority of the Bible in how he engaged with the

character of God, but in explaining his own experience he expresses this in

terms of his experience of Jesus:

I think that the authority comes ultimately from, well, God through Jesus. […] So

if that's the case, if Jesus is that important, and if Jesus was in at the very

beginning of everything and Jesus is part of the Godhead then what he says has

ultimate authority over everything. (Adam)

Adam used this Christological reasoning to provide a rationale not just for the authority of Jesus, but to construct a framework that allowed him to embrace the authority of the Old Testament. Therefore, in Adam's experience, the person of Jesus is the lens through which he conceptualises and approaches all of the Bible:

And if Jesus refers back to the OT, as he does frequently, then we can accept that

his words relating to that are true. Then the Scriptures, the Bible, must have

authority over me personally, and I believe over life in general. (Adam)

For Bernadette, it is the authority of Jesus that gives the question of the authority of the Bible any practical meaning:

I think about the authority of Jesus, yeah, that's what I think about most because,

like, I've been involved in conversations and studies around the authority of the

Bible and actually practically day to day I don't really have time to do that much.

But what I do I always look to Jesus because like God sent Jesus to earth for a

reason and like he is the core person of the Christian faith and like I just feel we

cannot go wrong by looking at Jesus. (Bernadette)

Kevin's experience of authority is one of having his *'thinking and lifestyle'*

shaped. Again, authority is active and doing something in Kevin's life. It is

interesting that the shaping has a focal point in the person of Jesus and the

gospels. The prominence Kevin gives to the gospels in his experience of the

authority of Jesus creates something of a 'canon within the canon' for him.

Kevin's concept of the Bible's authority is almost personalised by his focus on

Jesus. This is an example of the rich theological nuancing that can lie behind

commitments to the Bible's authority:

Is it too simplistic to say authority to me would mean that I want my life to have a

certain shape? […] Because I keep coming back to Jesus and the gospels I

definitely align my thinking and lifestyle, sorry that's a very bold statement, but I

want to align my lifestyle, to that. That to me is a closer mirror and I wanna hold

that closer […] I dunno if they [the gospels] are any more authoritative but

definitely more used, and therefore probably they're more authoritative by the fact

I let them live in me a bit better than areas I probably don't understand, and

therefore maybe a bit more confusing or feel a little further or distant even from

the cultural perspective. (Kevin)

George explicitly linked the authority of the Bible with the authority of Jesus:

That's the thing you know, you're talking about the authority of the Bible you're talking about the authority of Jesus and the authority of his expression. (George)

The views expressed by Adam, Bernadette, Kevin and George demonstrate a considerable level of theological awareness and nuancing. They indicate that the experience of the authority of the Bible is significantly more than a simple attribution of a special position to the Bible just because that is the expected position of evangelical faith communities.

One of the issues this section has highlighted is the importance of locating the participants' experience within the wider conceptual and narrative frames within which they live. Aspects of these frameworks may have been 'inherited' from their faith communities, but they work for the participants because they are 'inhabited' by the interviewees and made their own.[46] This suggests that Malley's (2004, p. 137) observation that "... the practice of biblical authority turns on psychological mechanisms that are quite different from those involved

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[46] Rogers (2016, pp. 213–217) describes the process of moving from "peripheral participation" to becoming a member who has "full participation" in the community's development of hermeneutical virtue.

in speculative theology" is actually borne out by the data from this research. The narrative of personal relationship appears to allow the interviewees not just to acknowledge theological concepts implicitly, but also to embrace and inhabit them in ways that become part of their lived experience. This inhabiting is an experience that engages the whole person, what Dermot describes as *'all my heart, and soul and mind and strength.'* In practice this results in the participants conceptualising and articulating their experience of the authority of the Bible in functional terms. The inhabited framework is expected to work and to enable the participants to negotiate and construct meaning from their experiences of the authority of the Bible.

If, as suggested above, participants inherit aspects of this framework of meaning about the Bible's authority, then the practices of the communities of faith they belong to are very likely the places where this framework is learned. Malley (2004, pp. 137–144) suggests that this is actually learned as part of community formation as the Bible is used and talked about as shaping lifestyle choices.[47] Members of an evangelical faith community need to learn to experience and talk about the Bible in ways that can demonstrate that it is active in their lives (Luhrmann, 2012). This shared commitment to a narrative of how the Bible functions and a dedication to put it into practice appears to be a strong

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[47] See Rogers' (2016) contribution in the area of faith community hermeneutics.

shaper of individual experience and is one of the ways in which the participants created meaning for themselves regarding the authority of the Bible.

For the participants, the authority of the Bible is part of a wider complex of shaping influences that ensure that the participants are able to engage with the Bible in a way that will result in the desired outcomes from that interaction. There is a sense in which the participants' experience of the authority of the Bible is much more than a theoretical concept; it is a means for them to negotiate the pathway between the Bible and their lives individually and as faith communities. In this sense, the concept of the authority of the Bible is a facilitator of practical theology, enabling them to negotiate "faithful participation in God's redemptive practices in, to and for the world" (Swinton and Mowat, 2016, p. 6).

When asked about their understanding and experience of the authority of the Bible, the participants chose to explain themselves by means of a functional approach. This preference for a functional approach to the concept and experience of the authority of the Bible has resulted in a move away from a framework constructed using the usual discourse of academic theology to a more bottom-up construction of how the Bible exercises its authority and how it

functions.[48] For the most part, authority is addressed by the interviewees in functional and relational terms, not in philosophical or theological terms. That does not mean their expressions of the Bible's authority are not theological; they are intensely so, but do not use the common building blocks of theological argument the way they might be used in the discourse of academic theology. This functional approach, as noted above, is laden with theological concepts and ideas, but shaped in a way that allows the participants to make sense of their experiences and to allow the Bible to be a major factor in how they live their lives. The concern is not so much about authority per se, but about how that authority works in practice. There was very little doubt expressed about the authority of the Bible, and very little attempt to engage in any sort of discussion or reflection about authority in any sort of abstract way. It would appear that the more relational approach of the interviewees is closely connected to a much larger narrative framework of relationship within which the participants' Christian experience and life is located. It is this framework that allows the participants to negotiate the Bible and as a result allow it to shape their lives.

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[48] The conceptualisation of the Bible in relational terms bears some resemblance to Cantwell Smith's (1993, p. 18) observation that "people - a given community - make a text into scripture: by treating it in a certain way." As there is no scripture without a community that relates to it, scripture is, therefore a "bilateral term […] it inherently implies, in fact names, a relationship" (Smith, 1993, p. 17). Cantwell's Smith observation can be observed in the interview data. This works in practice because of the close connection between the participants' relationship to the Bible and their framework of relationship to God.

The next section will explore another aspect of this inhabited framework about the Bible, namely its inspiration.

4.2. Experiencing an inspired text

The issues of the authority of the Bible and the inspiration of the Bible are closely linked. In chapter 1 they were examined in the reverse order to this chapter, as very often in theological discourse, the concept of inspiration is the precursor to an understanding of authority.[49] In this chapter the order has been reversed as it would appear that in practice the concept of the authority of the Bible is much more prominent, so much so that Malley (2004, p. 136) regards it as "primary." This is an interesting dynamic, perhaps suggesting that while authority can be defined by encounter, inspiration is a much more remote concept, and certainly much more difficult to define in terms of experience; Malley (2004) suggests the whole doctrine of inspiration is shrouded in mystery for members of faith communities.

This section will present and analyse the participants' experience of the concept of inspiration. The ways in which the participants constructed their meaning of the concept was different from that found within the more usual discourse of

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[49] The order is exemplified in Migliore (1991) Erickson (1998) and Bird (2013). In Tidball's (1994) analysis of the doctrines of evangelicals, inspiration is prominent.

theological and biblical studies. This empirical data is important to note as it highlights the fact that for the participants, practice and experience may well precede theory.

This section will explore two aspects of the research data. The first subsection (4.2.1) explores and analyses the interviewees' general expressions about the inspiration of the Bible. The second subsection (4.2.2) explores the more technical question of how inspiration might have occurred.

4.2.1 *'It was inspired by God'*

There was widespread agreement among the participants that the Bible was a special text, doing things that other books were not able to do:

> *It's [the Bible] not a story that someone made up, it's not a whimsical idea, it's not supposed to make sense in the sense of it doesn't tie up nicely all the time. A lot of the stories are confusing, I've found particularly in the Old Testament you know a lot of it I don't necessarily, couldn't purport to understand. But it's true. […] It's a way of communicating and actually making it personal that you don't get from other books. (Siobhan)*

For Siobhan part of the 'specialness' of the Bible is a belief that what the Bible records is *'true.'* The sort of statement is more common in theological explanations of the Bible within evangelicalism, typified, for example, by Grudem (1994). However, she extends the explanation to include a comparison with other types of literature and to talk about a personal experience of *'communicating and actually making it personal.'* It is this latter experience that marks the Bible off from other books that Siobhan reads. Siobhan's explanation suggests that there is more to her concept of the specialness of the Bible than simply something she talks about as a matter of course; it has a personal, experiential component. This personal component will be explored further below, but it does suggest that for Siobhan her definition of the specialness of the Bible includes significant elements of a functional, experiential approach.

There were some comments that were linked to the processes of inspiration, but only in the broadest of terms:

> *Like it's a holy book, do you know. It's, you know, it's God-inspired, written from like from stories that Jesus told people, […] it's got power I suppose. […] Well I suppose that while God didn't sit down and write it himself, other people wrote what he said so I kind of feel that he inspired them to write it or gave them the words to write, or they saw it first hand and wrote it. (Anna)*

Anna struggled to find words to express what she wanted to say, but eventually stated that somehow God stood behind the text and was responsible for it in some way, especially the aspect:

… which is, I think, the power bit. (Anna)

Using language from the politics of Brexit (The Irish Times, 2019), Patrick explains that in his experience, the concept of the inspiration of the Bible functions as a *'backstop,'* which, even if he cannot explain the phenomenon of inspiration, provides him with a level of certainty and assurance in what he perceived as a confused and confusing context:

I would have a view that it is the inspired word of God, that kind of very traditional orthodox Christian view. Nothing has changed that for me, and so therefore in some ways its acts like a backstop for me. So that in the turmoil of the world in which we live, where everything seems very confused a lot of the time, to me there has to be a backstop, there has to be somewhere where it says this is it, this is the position. (Patrick)

Patrick is prepared to extend this view to include not just the process of the Bible being written, but also to the process of the construction of the canon. This is interesting as it extends God's action in connection with the Bible to include

its formation and transmission. The impulse to do this may well be linked to the understanding of God as a personal God who takes an interest in and is involved in the processes of life. This experience may not carry the same level of personal intensity noted by Luhrmann (2012), but it seems to have similar resonances:

> *What this means for me is that the writers were inspired by the Holy Spirit to write and, […] we have come around with, you know the canon of Scripture […] It [the Bible] was inspired by God and the people were even inspired by God to choose which books we read. And so I kind of think, I kind of have to believe that. (Patrick)*

Mary's experience is similar: the result of God's inspiration of the Bible are words that are true and can be trusted. Mary struggled a little to find other words to use other than *'true.'* For some reason she felt she had used the term too often and was starting to express herself in a circularity and yet she felt she had no other way to express her experience:

> *They're God's words, they are, oh I wish I had another word for true. But like that they're, that they're true, reliable or they have authority for all time then. They will function maybe differently at different times, but that they're, they can be trusted at all times. (Mary)*

It is the belief the Bible is inspired by God which results in it being engaged with in a different way to any other books:

> *I do believe it is the inspired word of God and so in that way I do believe it's alive, as the Scripture says it's active it's sharper than a double-edged sword.[50] And so I would treat it I would hold it much higher esteem than any other book […] but I would obviously read the Scriptures totally different than any of the other guys I would read. So, yeah, I would treat it differently and view it differently. (Conor)*

Again, the focus is on the results of inspiration and not on any mechanisms that might have been involved. Without prompting, Bernadette did reflect on what the inspiration of the Bible actually meant, but for her the most important part of regarding the Bible as special was considering Jesus. A focus on Jesus and what he did and said seems to resolve any issues that Bernadette may have had regarding the nature of the final *'inspired'* text:

> *I always, like have like this conversation with people about, yes, the Bible. Yes, it was inspired by God, of course it was, but like what does that actually mean? It doesn't mean that people can't like make mistakes or record something wrong or*

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[50] This is an allusion to Hebrews 4:12.

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you know misunderstand a situation that their making an account of, cos people who wrote the Bible were human as well. I think it's an interesting conversation but in terms of everyday life we need to look to Jesus. (Bernadette)

Surprisingly, Colm was the only participant to talk about the inspiration of the Bible in the language of inerrancy:

It's inerrant in terms of there being a lack of errors there. […] So yep that's what I understand about its accuracy, that it is the word of God as he wants us to have it. And, after all, if God is God, and he is almighty, even where people might set out to change it or make it different, I think maybe he has the ability to protect it and make sure that it is the message he wants to be passed on from generation to generation. (Colm)

When asked to explain, Colm expanded and provided what was for him a 'logical' argument about inerrancy:

I understand it as being a trustworthy and true, as being reliable, and that the authority of the Bible comes directly from God, through his prophets who spoke in ages past, and it's recorded in such a way that it's handed down orally at the beginning, and then written from generation to generation in a way and by a means that protected its accuracy. (Colm)

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Colm has framed his statement on the Bible's inerrancy as, in part, dependent on his understanding of the nature and character of God. For Colm, God has to be involved not just in the original process of the composition of Scripture, but also in the process of the handing on of the received texts. However, when asked about his own experience of the Bible and how inspiration worked for him, he added an additional frame of personal experience to his response:

> *And learning more about God, but that's only learning about God, that's not learning, or knowing God himself; you're only knowing about God because of the information in the Bible. […] There's a step after that of experience, where the Bible might say, or it does say God is faithful. Well, it's only in my experience that as I trust God I discover, oh, God is actually faithful. […] So the same with the word of God. On the one hand it is just information, it's words on a page, but it's when I apply it to my life, that God is love, or God promises various things, conditional promises of God, I have found in my life, in my experience they actually prove true. So that it is more than just words. (Colm)*

Colm recognised the circularity in his experience of knowing God and how that influencing his understanding of the Bible, as the Bible was for him the source of knowing and understanding the character of God in the first place:

Yeah you've come to know God now cos you started reading the Bible and understanding it and trusting it, and you find out more about God and then that became part of your experience and then proved what the Bible said in the first place. (Colm)

There appears to be a much bigger commitment framework lying behind this acknowledgement of the specialness of the Bible. At one level it is based on the Bible and what the participants believed about the Bible, but in a sense it transcends the Bible and is more about how the participants understood and had experienced God. This points back to the shaping narrative of personal relationship that was noted in the previous chapter as being the most important factor in shaping both theological understanding and personal response and experience. The theological understanding of the Bible is experienced as part of this relationship narrative and it is one of the ways in which the participants create meaning for themselves and for their communities from the more abstract theological expressions and constructs they know exist within the wider evangelical faith community. At one level it might appear that theological concepts are not important to the participants because they did not talk about them directly. However, a closer examination of how they have framed their experiences of the Bible suggests that they are utilising theological concepts within the much more personal and experiential frame of relationship with God. When explaining how he negotiates the meaning of inspiration,

Dermot explicitly links the concept of the inspiration of the authors of the Bible to his experience of God's overall purpose and plan to communicate with human beings. In this example the relationship framework appears to be stronger than any commitment to theological concepts. Dermot is, therefore, expressing here an outline of a framework of experience that the other participants have used:

> *God particularly ordained the writers, inspired the writers who wrote the Bible that God, in his authority, and in his wisdom, decided that one of the ways he would communicate, and it's not the only way he communicates, but that one of the ways he would communicate would be through, through the Bible, through the word of God, through the books that are in the Bible. (Dermot)*

Traditionally in theological discourse the inspiration of the Bible has been linked in some way to the work of the Holy Spirit (Erickson, 1998; Schneiders, 2008; McGrath, 2017). This also arose as part of the participants' conversation about inspiration and will be examined in the next section.

4.2.2 *'There was an overshadowing'*

As part of the conversation about the inspiration of the Bible, some of the participants talked about their understanding of the role of the Holy Spirit in this process. Brian's explanation would be fairly typical, both for the participants and for the broader evangelical community:

> *I supposes it would be the underlying conviction that it is God's word and so there is a uniqueness that comes with the Scriptures because of how I understand them to have originated by the activity of the Holy Spirit overseeing what the writers wrote. […] I suppose the way I heard it put one time most succinctly was God's words in man's words, with maybe some parallel with the incarnation[51] where we believe that in the one person of Jesus Christ there is one who is both God and man. So there's an element of mystery in the incarnation and I would say that there's an element of mystery in understanding how it could be that the Holy Spirit would so oversee what someone wrote that they were both choosing themselves in what they were saying, and true to what God wanted them to say at the same time. (Brian)*

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[51] Enns (2005) provides a well-known exposition of this theme.

The inspiration of the Bible by the Holy Spirit is shrouded in mystery and as a consequence defies explanation. In spite of this, it is still experienced as a reality .(Malley, 2004).

Kevin links the inspiration of the Bible with God speaking *'to us'* through it, again locating the more theological statement about the Bible within the experiential narrative of relationship:

> *I believe it's been inspired by the Holy Spirit. I believe this is God speaking to us,*
>
> *albeit through a number of different mediums and stories and history and poetry*
>
> *and so on and so forth. (Kevin)*

Several of the interviewees when talking about how they thought about the role of the Spirit in the inspiration of the Bible added layers of what might be described as personal meaning to the concept. In other words, they expanded the idea of the Spirit inspiring the Bible to overlap with the way in which they experienced the Spirit working in their own lives. This did not involve a total transfer of the concept, but was a subtle and nuanced shift that allowed them to explain and give significant meaning to aspects of their experience. Although not mentioning the Holy Spirit specifically at this point, Brendan explained that his experience of the inspiration of the Bible is that it is being *'kept alive.'*

Brendan's language here resembles other parts of the interview when he is talking about the Spirit.

> *So again people have asked, in the past, you know, it's a man, man-made book. It's written by man, written by Paul and all these people over the course of hundreds, and might be, whatever it is, 1,500 years. But the thread[52] I find from the beginning right through to the end remains the same and so there has to be, for me there has to be a divine inspiration. […] But yet the message right through, and the thread of it going right through remains the same, […] so I find that it has to be divinely inspired. The fact that I find it would be relevant for today tells me that it has to be. Because if God is still alive today, if he rose from the dead and he's still alive and it's divinely inspired, well then it's, how can I say it, it's been kept – he's alive, the book is being kept alive for a reason. (Brendan)*

It is noteworthy that for Brendan not only does the concept of inspiration set the Bible apart as special (*'alive'*), but it is also one of the ways in which for him its continued relevance is guaranteed. This is significantly more than Conor's statement noted above about the Bible being alive; Conor was using the language to talk about the Bible being special. Brendan is doing more than that here, suggesting that the Bible is *'kept alive'* by a God who is *'alive'* and active to

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[52] Brendan is referring to the 'grand narrative' of the Bible as outlined, for example, by Bartholomew and Goheen (2014).

ensure that it will have ongoing contemporary relevance. Framed in this way, the ongoing relevance of the Bible is intimately tied to the existence of God. In his study, Malley (2004, pp. 105–108) has noted the importance of the relevance of the Bible for people belonging to evangelical faith communities. The concept will be explored further in Chapter 5, but it is important to recognise that the concern for relevance is here given a theological rationale and is directly linked to the concept of the Holy Spirit's role in the inspiration of the Bible.

Brendan is able to make sense of his experience with the Bible by postulating that the Spirit who was involved in the process of inspiring the Bible is also involved with him as a reader:

> *If his word is divinely inspired, if this word is divinely inspired, and you've got the Holy Spirit, who was sent to lead us into truth, the book that's written is the book of truth. So he guides us and directs us in that interaction with that. (Brendan)*

The involvement of the Spirit in Brendan's experience of the Spirit-inspired Bible is probably influenced by a reading of Jesus' words about the coming of the Spirit in John 16:13. This expansion of the Spirit's role in inspiring the believer may have implications for how Bible interpretation is practiced and experienced.

Alice's experience takes Brendan's comment a step further. She began by talking about the Spirit's role in the production of the Bible, but quickly moved on to talk about her experience of how the same Spirit enabled her to be able to tell that the text that was being read at a funeral service she was attending was not the Bible:

> *It's almost like when Jesus was being born in the womb that he was overshadowed by the Holy Spirit and I believe that you know there was an overshadowing as the writers wrote that there was just an overshadowing there. That really was the hand of God that was guiding them to write what they were writing. […] They were reading [in a funeral service] and immediately I knew I sensed in my spirit, they're not actually from the Bible, and so it's that sense of being inspired. […] But immediately I knew and I suppose we take for granted the familiarity we have with the word of God. So, yeah, but I knew straight away, that's not the Bible, that's not the word of God. And I can't claim to have read every word in the Bible. […] So it is amazing that it [the Bible] becomes part of you and you don't realise that that inspiration is in there, that there's, there's something life giving about the word of God. […] In my spirit I recognised and that was on two occasions […] and immediately I thought, no there's something wrong here, I'm not recognising this; my spirit isn't kind of witnessing with it. (Alice)*

In spite of the fact that Alice recognised this *'was an unusual thing to happen'*, the fact that she would relate something like this indicates an underlying expectation that if the Spirit is involved with the reader to help them recognise what is and what is not the Bible, it is then very likely that the Spirit is involved in something like the way Brendan talked about to ensure some sort of responsible direction in the process of reading and interpretation. Alice did not doubt the authenticity of her experience. However, as we will see below in Section 4.4, she is prepared to ask critical questions of interpretations of the Bible claiming to originate with the Spirit. This might indicate that Alice was prepared to allow a self-authentication of her own experience which she might not permit for others.

The involvement of the Holy Spirit in the processes of inspiration did not remove some issues and problems for the participants. At the same time as they were describing their experiences of inspiration a number of them also talked about some of the problems that the special status of the Bible caused for them. Brendan was quick to acknowledge this:

> *You went to Leviticus and even Deuteronomy; it gives you the description of the*
>
> *tabernacle[53] and how it should be made and the way it measures and all that. And*

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[53] Tabernacle instructions are recorded in Exodus. This further proves Brendan's point about the confusion he has experienced.

it's kind of like, what's he on about?, what's going on here?, you know? And,

there are, there are some, there are some things I find difficult with it, but I've, for

what it's worth, I've just come to accept it. It's divinely inspired, it's God written.

(Brendan)

Conor, likewise, is very honest about his experience:

I believe the Bible is the word of God, it's the authoritative word of God, it's the

inspired word of God. And then there are parts of it I'm going, really God?

Really? Like why did you put that in there? […] The word of God is so important

it's powerful and effective and so you're trying to use the word of God to try and

speak into people's lives but then when people go, well, what about this bit and

what about that bit. (Conor)

Conor resolves some of the tension by adopting a final position on the authority
of the Bible, but, interestingly, it is an authority that needs to be interrogated
and examined:

I'd rather say no I don't know let me go study that, let me go look at that, that's a

really interesting question. […] And so I would view it as, yeah, as the word of

God so that would hold that much sway and importance in my life and so it'd be

very authoritative. (Conor)

The resolution strategy adopted by Brendan probably represents a broad consensus on how some of these conflicting feeling and emotions are resolved. It is not by any sort of theological argument, but by a return to one of the basic themes uncovered by this study, namely the framework of relationship to God, who, in hard cases like this, can be trusted:[54]

> *I have to just leave it in his [God's] good and perfect hands. (Brendan)*

The experience of the Bible as an inspired book was widespread. Interestingly, even for those participants who had completed some form of theological training, the way the participants explained their experiences was not in the usual language of theological discussion and debate. In fact, there was almost a complete absence of any discussion of the issue in the terms normally associated with formal theological dialogue. Many of the issues discussed in the academic context (outlined in Section 1.3) did not arise, even when the conversation questions would have allowed the participants to pursue these sorts of issues. In the lived experience of the participants, the issues more common in theological discussion did not seem to feature prominently, if at all. Some of the participants would have been aware of some of the more theological areas of this discussion, but it would appear that for them as well as

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[54] Strategies for resolving dissonance will be examined in Section 7.2.

for others without formal theological input, the commitment to the inspiration of the Bible arises, as Malley argues, in a different way than the one often conceptualised in more traditional theological discourse of a more linear trajectory of theory to practice. This suggests that the commitment to the Bible as an inspired text is not simply based on theological assumptions or expressions, but is part of a much larger narrative of relationship to God for the interviewees. These are linked, as the analysis in this section has demonstrated, but the much larger relationship narrative would appear to be the most important way the participants negotiated the concept of the Bible's authority. This relationship narrative has encounter with God as one of its significant components; this may an important theological perspective on Malley's (136) view that "authority […] is the premise, and inspiration […] the consequence". It is a result of a personal encounter with the text that many of the participants seem to be prepared to designate the Bible as an inspired text, the encounter in some way authenticating the Bible and allowing it to be designated as inspired.

The next sections will explore the experiences of Bible interpretation. Section 4.3 will examine the issue of "genre competence" (Vanhoozer, 1998, p. 343) as a window on interpretive activity. Section 4.4 will explore other issues related to the participants' experience of interpretation.

4.3 *'One big lump of literature'* - Experiencing genre

In developing an argument for the "rationality of literary acts," Vanhoozer (1998, p. 349) argues that "literary knowledge rests to a great degree on the centrality of literary genre." Without having to analyse the overall argument at this point, Vanhoozer's (1998, p. 343, italics original) observation about the importance of literary genre for Bible readers who wish to understand what the Bible says is important: "understanding texts […] is a matter of achieving *genre competence.* We will only understand a text correctly when we grasp *what it is* and *what it is about*, for the proper function of a text follows from its form and context."[55] As a way to encourage participants to talk about their experiences of both being on the receiving end of the results of Bible interpretation, for example in sermons and small groups, and interpreting the Bible themselves, the interviewees were asked about their understanding of literary genre in the Bible. The ensuing conversations generated some significant data on the ways in which the Bible is handled in evangelical faith communities.

All of the participants said that at the time of the interviews they were aware that the literature of the Bible is drawn from a range of literary genres, some of

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[55] Genre awareness (or, in Vanhoozer's words, "genre competence") is a major part of evangelical biblical interpretation. Examples can be seen in Fee and Stuart (2014), Osborne, (2006), Klein, Blomberg, and Hubbard, Jr (2017). However, such concerns are not limited to the evangelical community, for example, in Harrington (1979, 1981) and Collins (2019).

which would not be familiar to a twenty-first century readership and as a result could raise significant challenges for contemporary interpretation:

> *I certainly am aware there are different genres in the Scripture. There are different ways to, for example, I mean, the big one, is Genesis 1 and 2; where do I go with that? (Dermot)*

However, that level of knowledge and understanding was not always the case for the participants. When asked if they had ever had any sort of instruction in recognising and negotiating the genres found in the Bible, a significant number of the participants admitted they had had no help at all:

> *I was taught nothing; in terms of hermeneutics I was taught zip [nothing]. It was communicated as biblical perspicuity but actually it was just probably, this is the way we do it. So, no, I wasn't taught anything on how to handle the Bible, I wasn't taught anything about hermeneutics, I wasn't taught anything about how to handle the Scriptures in the traditional sense. (George)*

> *So I never really encountered the different genres. (Joseph)*

Very little [help]. Most of the teaching I experienced in the past was pretty awful.

[…] But in terms of genres and understanding different parts of the Bible and all

that, no. (Patrick)

I've never done any courses or anything like that on any of this, this stuff. […]

But no, no formal training. (Anna)

No, it wrecks me head. […] I don't know if I did, to be honest with you. (David)

Emma expressed her experience of engaging with the Bible, even in the context

of Bible studies, as one of flattening out genres. As far as she was concerned the

Bible was:

One big lump of literature. Yeah, I probably would have known that Revelation

was unique and that it had its own genre, but I definitely didn't grasp the genre.

[…] The Psalms […] I would have known that was poetry, but no I wouldn't have

paid too much attention to that even, even the smidgen I was aware of. […] It

never came up in discussion even in Bible studies, nothing, genre was never

mentioned. (Emma)

Emma was aware of some general genre issues, perhaps based on the general

intuition that accompanies reading. However, her experience looking back is of

reading every text in more or less the same way with little or no regard for how genre might influence reading and the construction of meaning.

George expanded on his experience of engaging with the Bible in the early days of his faith journey, describing the way he read as *"mining for the bits that were relevant,"* however they were made to be relevant:

> *I was mining for the bits that were relevant. […] You know you look at certain texts and you look for them right through and those are the bits that makes sense and so on. […] I still have one of the Bibles I got right at the start, and I scribbled like crazy on it. The whole of Malachi, nearly the whole book is underlined in green; I had a green pen at the time. So I didn't have a clue what kind of genre that was. […] I think at the initial stages you were just conscious of one book being different to another in a very basic understanding of well the OT is different to the NT. […] But it would have been a long time before I realised the big arc of the whole thing, and […] how it all came together. I would have been much slower to understand those things. (George)*

One of the results of the *"mining for the bits that were relevant"* was what George describes as a pick and mix approach that, at least for a while, took little or no notice of genre. What is significant about George's experience is that once he began to ask questions and take notice of genre and context, his understanding,

appreciation and experience of the Bible deepened. George's description of his experience with genre coheres with Vanhoozer's (1998, pp. 335–350) technical definition of genre and its function. It is also interesting to note how an understanding of genre has enabled George to connect the Bible to his own *"emotional experience and expressions"*:

So it would have been a very much kind of pick and mix kind thing, dipping in here, dipping in there. Things like Joshua might have been mentioned to me, 'Be strong, courageous', and so on. But I think being the kind of suspicious person I am, I had this kind of conviction […] that I'm not sure just how that jumps from there to here. So I had a kind of an early sense of there's probably better ways of thinking about this thing. So in time I began to realise […] its [the Bible's] own internal mechanisms that illuminate its purpose and understood the importance of context and fulfilment themes and those types of things. And I think that the application grew in the sense of just a deeper conviction for the ways in which each genre kinda knocks on the door of each of your emotional experience and expression. (George)

Malley (2004, p. 111) notes that the Bible dipping referred to by George, "the behavior (sic) of randomly opening the Bible" is one of the ways that is sometimes used to create relevance. However, George's experience raises questions as to why some instruction to help him engage with the Bible in what

he regards as a better way was not part of his instruction in an earlier part of his faith and discipleship journey. George is clear that this was something that was noticeably absent:

> I think I learned a lot of things the hard way. I wasn't well taught; I wasn't well discipled. I didn't have a particularly conducive way into getting my head around these things. […] You know all of those types of things would have come much, much later. (George)

Alice's experience is similar and no help was given to her. But she feels considerable regret about that:

> Nope. I can tell you no, I wasn't no. No, it was the word of God and you read it as such and you just read it straight the way through. So no I wasn't, and that's why I was desperate; I was desperate. I was sitting in the pews for years and years going I wish, I just wish someone would come and explain to me […] you couldn't read the Bible and just really figure all that out. (Alice)

These observations are both striking and surprising, especially given the prominence of the Bible and the way it is recognised as an important part of the participants' faith communities. Dermot noted this in a different part of the

interview when he was talking about the value his faith community placed on the Bible:

> *I suppose the Bible, […] or our treatment of the Bible is probably the key*
> *distinctive of our particular faith community. How central the Bible is, how we*
> *look to the Bible as final […] I think we really do believe that the Bible is the final*
> *authority on things. [...] We'd have the Bible very much central to our*
> *understanding of Christianity. (Dermot)*

It is clear that, as far as Dermot is concerned, his faith community gives the Bible a very important role in its community life; he describes it as central to their understanding of Christianity. This sort of position would resonate with the other participants, even if they did not express their experience in this fashion; according to Bebbington (1989) and Tidball (1994) this is typical of many evangelical communities. It is, therefore, surprising to find that such communities who define their very existence in relation to the way they read and understand the Bible do not, in many cases, provide any basic instruction on how the genres of the Bible work. It would seem to me that this experience of the participants highlights what is probably a major weakness of a Bible-focussed movement in that it provides little or no education about how the genres of the Bible actually work. This raises the possibility of readings of the Bible that do not respect or take adequate account of genre. There is a certain

irony in this observation as "readers who grossly mismatch text genres and reading genres should be deemed hermeneutically *incompetent*" (Vanhoozer, 1998, p. 338, italics original). Faith communities that approach the Bible as *'one big lump of literature'* lack what Vanhoozer terms "literary competence" (Vanhoozer, 1998, pp. 337–338) and what Rogers (2016, p. 91) labels as "theological reflection" to aid an honest assessment of where interpreters are coming from.

While Vanhoozer's judgement may be technically valid, it also needs to be acknowledged that even with little help in understanding genre, this was not in itself a barrier to the participants experiencing something of the Bible's influence in their lives. Some level of Bible interpretation is going on, both on an individual and corporate level, and, it would seem, the Bible is being experienced in some way; Rogers (2016) argues that the "fusion processes" in faith communities that allows the Bible to be embraced in the contemporary context are "largely implicit.". This would suggest that in spite of very little help being given on how to handle genre, the participants' faith communities are able to successfully communicate expectations about and mould the experience of how the Bible works. This is borne out by the experience of the majority of the participants, even those who said they were provided with no formal instruction. This is perhaps what Colm means when comments:

I suppose as well it, it's only common sense. […] It just seems to make sense that certain parts ore poetic, certain parts are […] prophetic, and other parts are very practical. I didn't need to go to Bible college to work that out. I mean it's quite obvious there was different types of literature in there. (Colm)

There is a truth to what Colm says: some aspects of genre are simply 'common sense'. However, the further a biblical genre is removed from contemporary genres, the less Colm's insights will result in genre competence.

By the time of the interviews, the participants felt that they had learned to handle genres, some as part of a formal learning structure (such as theological education) or as part of wider lay training programmes. Over time, as they engaged with the Bible, some of the participants recognised a growing familiarity with the concept of genre. Some of this was implicit, and some was the result of being exposed to a wider community where some of this was talked about and seen in practice, for example in sermons. Adam sums up a number of such experiences:

I think it [instruction on how the Bible works] has come in a fragmented way over the years. It's come from learning from the very beginning from when I was exposed to the Bible in Sunday school through Bible classes, Bible studies in secondary school, through university and further Bible study interaction with

other people from different denominations to the churches I have been involved

with and the constant involvement in small groups over the years and also in

churches that teach the Bible. So it has come in a kind of absorption of knowledge

over the years from different ways but I would still go back to the point and say

that I have never had any formal instruction and I think that that could be very

helpful for people to get a sense of well why do we have Scripture as it is and who

has decided that these are appropriate books to be involved. I mean I have a little

knowledge of that but not in-depth and how has this has been interpreted over the

years. So I think that that could be very helpful. (Adam)

Brendan relates his experience, firstly of being self-taught, even about biblical poetry:

So I just began to, I don't know, self-taught. There was little help along the way.

There was no seminars, there was no school where I learned how to read, I just

probably self-taught. Then it was just curiosity, asking the questions; What's the

Psalms all about? What do you mean by poetry - cos I always understood poetry

as Little Bo Peep that lost her sheep, you know what I mean? That to me is poetry;

it's a rhyme, you know so and then you had the Prophets and then it began to

make sense actually. (Brendan)

Even though Brendan started relating his experience as being one of self-teaching, as he talked about what he remembered he also included the impact of others who had helped him to negotiate some of his questions about genre and the Bible:

> *There was elements of being in the company of more mature Christians that would have been more familiar with it and I was in the right place at the right time in their company and asking them the questions. And they were explaining different things to me. (Brendan)*

Brendan's experience is reflected more broadly for the other participants who described their experience of being made aware of genre as one of assimilation, picked up as part of their ongoing commitment to and involvement in the Bible practices of their communities of faith:

> *I wouldn't have the formal tools to do it. [It was] assimilated. […] So I maybe more as a lay man reading I've done that. (Dermot)*

> *I was just so hungry for that that I was just assimilating all of that information in. Some of it has stuck, some of it has stood to me. (Joseph)*

This suggests there is a community of faith dimension to Bible engagement which cannot be reduced to or primarily based on preaching. This encompasses learning specific skills of reading and interpreting and shaping certain expectations to ensure that the Bible works as anticipated, for example the ability to hear God speak through the Scriptures (Luhrmann, 2012). This will be explored further in Section 4.4.

For those participants who had embarked on some sort of formal theological training, it was the learning in these contexts that provided the most significant help for engaging with and negotiating the genres of the Bible:

> *When I got saved and was sitting in [church] services and it was that idea of I don't understand what you're saying, do you know what I mean? And the preacher saying as such and such says or using phrases that I had no idea and so most of the message was going over my head. […] In Bible college I had really great teachers that helped me understanding that types of things like the different genres, the different ways of writing, the different letters, the different times of they were written in, the different peoples they were written to […] a great foundation in say basic hermeneutics. (Conor)*

Patrick's reason for theological study was because some of what he was hearing and experiencing in his faith circles was not making sense; he did not like the sort of Bible interpretation he was being *"sold"*:

I would have said that there was a growing awareness within me that things weren't just the way they were being sold to me all the time. Which I think in a way was probably what sent me down the road of theological study in the first place. (Patrick)

As a *"literary critic"*, Siobhan took some time to navigate the differences between her professional literary world and the Bible of her faith community:

Well so for a long time […] I had no idea that something like Genesis could be read in different ways. And the idea that something can be true but also [pause] can I use the word ambiguous, I'm not sure but, open to interpretation, is something that is, as a literary critic […] I'd no idea of truth and literary criticism but that was a hard thing for me to get my head around. (Siobhan)

Although Siobhan does not spell things out, the way she talks about her experience suggests something of an inner conflict between her professional literary studies and the ways in which she expected to handle the Bible. Siobhan's reticence in talking about truth and ambiguity suggests that she has

been subject to some (possibly strong) shaping influences on this issue. It is interesting that formal theological study helped Siobhan with these questions:

I did definitely discover particularly in my time in [theological college] the more you read around the stuff […] the more you [say] OK that makes sense now I understand why that is there or what that means. (Siobhan)

Several of the participants talked about how their understanding and appreciation of genre had deeply enhanced their engagement with the Bible:

It's [the Bible] just full of different kinds of literature and how all of those different kinds of literature work in different ways so they produce different effects on us as we read them, and would have when they were originally written. And that's why they were written in the form that they were written. So understanding that I think really helps to understand how it works in that sense. (Kevin)

Because when I'm reading it at the beginning I'm reading it, and I'm not too sure what I'm reading. Now when I'm reading it I know I need to read it with different eyes in a sense, with different glasses. (Brendan)

I also then grew to love [non Bible] literature so I guess never quite put it together. […] Learning about genre and context, things that must have been there

on some level but just not at a conscious level, so understanding more of what the Bible is, and then allowing that effect how I engage with it has been really helpful, and I've enjoyed it more. […] I think that has been a very important thing in allowing the Bible to work as it's meant to work as I understand it and engage with it. (Mary)

Mary's comment about *"allowing the Bible to work as it's meant to work"* is significant as it highlights that for her as she understood genre at a deeper level, she developed a fuller appreciation for the Bible, how it works and what it is aiming to do in her life:

It's just full of different kinds of literature and how all of those different kinds of literature work in different ways so they produce different effects on us as we read them, and would have when they were originally written. And that's why they were written in the form that they were written. So understanding that I think really helps to understand how it works in that sense. (Mary)

An appreciation of genre is only one part of Bible interpretation. In the interviews, conversation progressed from the specific issue of genre to the more general issue of interpretation. It is to the participants' wider practice and experience of interpretation that we now turn.

4.4 Experiencing interpretation

The Christian tradition has a long history of interpreting the Bible, stretching back to the early church and the New Testament. The history of the church has, as Bray (1996) observes, seen numerous controversies centred on how the Bible is interpreted and even who has the responsibility and perhaps also the ability to interpret it. One of the defining characteristics of the modern evangelical community, as Bebbington (1989) and others (Tidball, 1994; Meadowcroft, 2011; Ward, 2017) have noted, is its focus on the Bible and its general insistence that the Bible can be interpreted by almost any individual who can read or engage with it in some way. Given this background and context, it is not a surprise that all of the participants were aware of the need for Bible interpretation and had been negotiating it in some way themselves. The focus of the interviews was not on questions of interpretive methods and techniques, though they were mentioned in places, but rather on the participants' actual experience of interpretation and how it affected their lives. This focus allowed for analysis of some of the assumptions and commitment frameworks of the participants.

4.4.1 *'Sometimes interpreting the Bible can be difficult'*

In a sense Dermot speaks for all the participants when he observes:

> *Sometimes interpreting the Bible can be difficult. (Dermot)*

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In order to explore some of those difficulties, the first part of this section will focus on some specific experiences narrated by Alice of how a growing awareness of issues of interpreting the Bible had a major influence on her life. The narrative will make most sense when recounted as a unified whole and is presented here as snapshot of how one participant made sense of her experiences. While other participants may not have expressed themselves in the way Alice has done, it is important to note that Alice's experience would resonate with other participants. The narrative brings into sharp focus some of the key issues narrated by the other participants about Bible interpretation and provides some insight into the underlying experiences of participants. Alice began by reflecting on her own journey of discovery of Bible interpretation:

> *I'm a Christian 38 years and it's taken me that length for someone to sit me down and show me how to read the Bible for all its worth.[56] Yeah, how to read it all in context. (Alice)*

Part of that journey for Alice was experiencing what, with hindsight and regret, she now regards as poor interpretive practices:

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[56] Alice is referring to the title of Fee and Stuart (2014). It was a textbook she had used on a course.

I realised that a lot of the time those people weren't interpreting correctly and they weren't looking at the word of God in its entirety. They were looking at specific verses in isolation in the same way that I had looked at them. And I think because I had been looking at verses in isolation I was heavily influenced by people because I didn't know how to answer that back. And I just thought, well this must be the way it is. But I also knew, and I know we don't go by feelings, but there were times when I knew something just did not feel right and it didn't witness with what the heart of God was like. (Alice)

Alice is highlighting a mode of reading and engaging with the Bible that tends to focus on proof texts, very often read without any regard for the historical or literary context. In practice this makes it possible for the person using the Bible to claim biblical support for whatever they want to say (Tidball, 1994, p. 79). This is a fairly common way of using the Bible in some evangelical faith communities; the rationale is to ensure everything that is said and done within the community can be shown to find it basis in the Bible. The focus in this approach is not so much the responsible interpretation of texts, but to demonstrate, as Malley (2004) argues, that whatever is being talked about flows from the Bible. There are limits to what can be said. Bible texts can only be used to support those attitudes and actions that fall within the overall interpretative tradition of the faith community; anything beyond this is either regarded with suspicion or labelled as unorthodox. Alice regarded the use of the proof-texting

approach to the Bible she encountered as less than a responsible reading of the

biblical material being used. It is interesting that Alice seems to be saying that

she knew this intuitively, but did not have the knowledge and skills to question

it. There are a cluster of interconnected ideas finding expression here which are

worth exploring further as they are indicative of some of the wider issues of

interpretation that arose with the participants.

First, there is the assumption that when a person uses a biblical text to support

what they are saying it is often regarded as carrying some element of authority

even if the actual interpretation of the text may be open to question. Alice was

certainly questioning the interpretation process and the results in her

recollections. This is probably a specific example, in this case in the context of

preaching, of the more generic way in which evangelicals have been observed

as appealing to the authority of the Bible as part of their normal modes of

speech to support their points of view and to demonstrate the relevance of the

Bible (Malley, 2004). In the sort of context being described by Alice (preaching),

it is as though the authority usually attributed to the Bible is transferred in

some measure to the words of the communicator, especially if the speaker is

able to add a Bible passage or verse to justify what they are saying. As Alice

observes, without some skills of interpretation the plausibility of such

pronouncements are rarely questioned, as to do so might be perceived as

questioning the authority of the Bible itself, something that is not generally

acceptable within the conventions of the community being described by Alice. There is a sense in which appealing to the biblical text in this manner moves any matter beyond the realm of asking questions or discussing potential alternative views and interpretations. Whether this is due to the communicator themselves or to the sort of role-sending[57] that is possible in faith communities, where members of the community expect authoritative pronouncements from their speakers, is an open question. Whatever the causal factors, the end result for Alice and her community was that when Bible verses were added to an utterance it was assumed to carry significant authority without any need for a mechanism for ascertaining whether the use of the text(s) in question could stand up to the scrutiny of the tools of interpretation. This, in turn, might be one of the reasons why the tools of interpretation can be treated with some scepticism in some evangelical faith communities.

The second issue is the prominence Alice gives to personal intuition as a means to ascertain the meaning of a text: *"I knew something just did not feel right."* This is in spite of the observation immediately before, *"I know we don't go by feelings."* The intuition, however, is not just based on feeling and has, for Alice, a basis in her understanding and experience of God: *"and it didn't witness with what the*

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[57] Mebane and Ridley (1988) define role sending as "the process by which the expectations of one person or a group of people are transmitted to a focal person in order to elicit a particular set of behaviors (sic)." Their analysis is of the role-sending from pastor to congregation, but role-sending in the opposite direction is also possible.

heart of God was like." This experience was probably shaped by Alice's previous

engagement with the Bible and the framework of relationship with God within

which she approaches the Bible. It is noteworthy that Alice's response to a poor

use of the Bible was based largely on intuition on her part, as her reasoning

could be open to the same sort of problems she is critiquing, namely not being

demonstrably linked to a responsible interpretation of a Bible text. However,

the guarded reliance on intuition illustrates that Alice is using a "theory of the

mind" (Luhrmann, 2012, p. 60) that enables someone to experience God's voice

in a very direct fashion. In fact, Alice's words are very close to the second test

that Luhrmann (2012, p. 64) describes for assessing whether a person in the

Vineyard churches she investigated has heard the voice of God: "whether it was

the kind of thing God would say or imply."

The third factor that is part of Alice's narrative is a tendency to adopt a flat

reading of texts, taking them at face value without any regard to their wider

literary context. This might be a way of making texts both accessible and

relevant without the need for any tools of interpretation beyond basic reader

intuition, creating a contemporising hermeneutic that is not overly concerned

with the actual illocutionary force of a given passage or text and can be

subverted by the user of the text to support whatever they wish to say.

Meadowcroft (2011, p. 26) notes that in the sort of context Alice is referring to

"an appreciation of the fact that God speaks must focus both on the word of

God and on the response of the reader or hearer;" he suggests that for Bible

engagement it is important to pay attention to "the action intended by

speaking." The danger of the contemporising hermeneutic described by Alice is

that this can be substantially changed by a flat reading and the accompanying

search for relevance. [58] The experience of relevance will be explored further in

the next chapter. This flat reading of texts could be perceived as a strict

literalism where words are taken at face value independent of their context.[59]

Patrick talked about his experience of this when asked about approaching parts

of the Bible as symbol and metaphor:

What you read, what was on the page was immutable and unchangeable. […]

They were all literal. And you see, of course, there was great difficulties with that

especially when you realise Jesus used hyperbole when he was preaching. And

then you suddenly realise well maybe I shouldn't cut me hand off, you know. […]

The way I would be I'd have no eyes, no hands, no legs and probably no other

parts of me. […] I realised I think a long time ago, that a lot of that was

unsustainable in terms of taking very literal translations to everything. […] Of

course, the other thing I realised is that an awful lot of the time these literal

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[58] Vanhoozer (1998, pp. 367–452) offers a similar perspective.

[59] Malley's (2004) research raises some cautions about how the term literalism should be used in connection with Bible reading. According to Malley, when people talk about reading the Bible literally, they are referring to something like a 'normal' reading of texts. The situations described by Alice and Patrick are not what Malley encountered in his research.

translations supposedly that were repeated to me were either completely taken out

of context; in fact, a huge number of cases were completely taken out of context.

And also misquoted. (Patrick)

In Alice's experience, the combination of poor interpretation and the associated

lack of knowledge and skills to challenge this had some unforeseen and

unfortunate consequences:

I think everybody just made their own way […] So you made your own way and

you read books, but some of them were good and some of them were awful. […] I

knew people who would open the Bible and just pick a particular word and then

they'd say, this word is for you, you know random like. […] The Lord has given

me a word for you […] they'd turn up with this. […] There's a member of my

family got married on the back of one of those words, imagine the hard life she's

had! [said with deep feeling]. The Bible was misused by Christians. […] All

jumping on the band wagon [of the renewal movements of 60s and 70s], all

coming with their own agendas which was mainly for their own glory not for

God's glory so that they could say that they were part of this movement of God.

(Alice)

Alice's personal involvement in some of the tragic consequences of an abuse of

authority no doubt colours her perceptions, but they are real for her. Reflecting

on what went on, she observes that considerable damage has been done because the Bible had been used to serve other agendas:[60]

> *I think huge damage has been done. […] I do think part of that was that I hadn't been taught how to handle the Bible. […] That is why I so value what [theological college] does, because it's training people to look afresh at the Scriptures, to look at it in its entirety, and, and to learn to interpret. (Alice)*

For the purposes of this research, the issue is not so much whether Alice's views are accurate, but that she and in her view others experienced a disempowering as a result of not having the interpretation skills to be able to engage with what was being taught at the time. It has been Alice's experience of theological education that has empowered her with the tools and skills to ask the sorts of questions she now knows she was not able to ask:

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[60] This could be categorised as an example of religious/spiritual abuse. Cashwell and Swindle (2018, pp. 183–184) define religious abuse as "the act of an individual in a position of religious leadership/authority to gain power and control over individuals or collective groups," and as such is a form of "betrayal trauma." In the religious context, "common experiences of trauma, betrayal, stigma, and confusion have the potential to take on amplified meaning when attached to the sacred." Further perspectives are investigated by Childers (2012) and Ward (2011).

In a survey of over 500 church-goers in the UK "86 per cent of respondents felt scripture is used to guide behaviour with 45 per cent stating it is used to control behaviour. Results were comparable when reflecting on previous church experience with 85 per cent indicating scripture was used to guide behaviour, however, 69 per cent stated that scripture was used to control behaviour in their previous churches." (Oakley and Kinmond, 2014, p. 89)

And my heart is broken and it took me 35 years to find a place that would sit me

down and say, Alice, this is how you read the Scriptures. And not pushing me to

read them that way but guiding me so it's guiding and it's not enforcing. […]

Forcing me to ask questions, and knowing that it's alright to ask questions.

(Alice)

Alice's narrative highlights not just the importance of responsible skills of

interpretation, but the potentially serious consequences in people's lives when

they are absent. This absence was not unique to Alice and was experienced by

many of the participants. Given how central the Bible is considered to be within

evangelical faith communities, it is, therefore, very surprising that more

attention is not given to teaching tools of interpretation. This may signal that as

a result of theological commitments such as the perspicuity of Scripture, the

meaning of Bible texts is assumed to be clear to a reader without any additional

training in interpretation skills. Whatever the basis for the assumption, it was

not experienced in practice by the participants, and, as noted in Alice's'

experience, was the exact opposite.

Adam, who has been part of a faith community for most of his life, comments:

Nobody has ever given me an in-depth instruction in how to interpret or what

these certain groups of books are all about and where they are related to the whole,

the greater scheme of things. I think that is a lot easier with the New Testament

but […] I have never had formal instruction in that way. (Adam)

Emma expresses a similar experience:

I was never aware of context and the significance that had on what I was reading.

I didn't think of it. Nope, it wasn't on my radar - you know the different

techniques of interpreting the Bible. That's terrible. […] I would have not even

kind of understood, you know, that the text cannot mean what it was not

originally meant to mean.[61] So it's all of that awareness now that I bring to the

Scripture when I'm reading. (Emma)

Siobhan seems to be vaguely aware that training may have been on offer in some conferences she attended, but she did not realise she needed the training, and, in any case, she preferred the alternative:

I mean I imagine that probably at [organisation] conferences there would have

been things on how to interpret the Bible. But they would have been very general,

and optional. So, I probably didn't go to those ones; I probably went to the ones

about sex. (Siobhan)

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[61] This phrase is almost certainly derived from Fee and Stuart's (2014, pp. 34–35, italics original) observation, "a *text cannot mean what it never meant for its original readers/hearers.*"

When asked how she developed the skills of interpretation for the Bible, Siobhan described it as a process of '*assimilation*':

> *I suppose you assimilate and you perhaps maybe see models and things like that but it's all very ad hoc. […] It's mad when you think about it because if you say you're a Christian it's [the Bible is] such a key component of your life. (Siobhan)*

However, that process of assimilation is not entirely straightforward as it often requires people to observe the outcome of the process, the sermon or Bible study, and from that develop an understanding of how Bible interpretation is used, which is in practice a very high level of analytical skill. Siobhan realised this:

> *Yeah, I know it's mad isn't it? (Siobhan)*

Alice was also aware of the high level of expectation placed on listeners when there was little by way of training in the skills of interpretation, an expectation that Alice regarded as being misplaced:

> *No, we're not equipped, we're not equipped and anyway you know you have different levels of intellect. People have come sometimes from the most broken backgrounds like they're barely hanging on by their fingernails, and you're*

getting sometimes these high level sermons or on the other hand you're getting

trash like and the quail thrown at you.[62] *Like people were 'amening'*[63] *that sermon,*

and I'm like, are you for real? And some of them ['amening'] had been there for

years. But if you're not familiar with the Scriptures and if you don't know [and]

this people is standing there with authority, telling you that this is the way it is.

(Alice)

Brendan's experience of the assimilation process (he did not use that term) is

more positive, and perhaps represents more the way in which people learn to

handle the Bible:[64]

So I just began to, I don't know, self-taught. […] There was elements of being in

the company of more mature Christians that would have been more familiar with

it [the Bible] and I was in the right place at the right time in their company and

asking them the questions, and they were explaining different things to me.

(Brendan)

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[62] Alice had described an incident earlier in the interview where a preacher had used the incident of the quail in the desert as a sign of God's blessing on the Israelites and was encouraging the congregation to 'pray for quail' in order to experience a similar blessing. Not only was Alice sure that this is not what Numbers 11 is about, but she also discovered that the sermon had come almost verbatim from the internet.

[63] In certain church circles, this is a sign that the audience/congregation is affirming what is being said from the front, for example, during a sermon.

[64] His initial comment below was referred to in Section 4.3.

This community dimension is important in helping people develop their interpretation skills. Dermot's Bible engagement not only takes place within this community, but he talked about how he regarded his reading as taking place within the context of a wider community of academic scholarship:

> *One thing I have learned is to be very careful how you interpret the Bible. You know, and check out, I mean. […] What I do is I do try to look for advice from people who know better than myself. If I have a passage, if there's a difficulty or whatever I do check out commentaries. (Dermot)*

Patrick is also aware of his indebtedness to others:

> *I must be honest: I think that a lot of how I interpret the Bible is helped by what I read. So I think that the other books that I read along with the Bible are pretty much, I was going to say as important. Not as important but they do help shape a lot about what I believe. (Patrick)*

Patrick is aware of the priority that his faith community gives to the Bible, and corrects himself when he comes close to saying that the resources he uses to engage with the Bible are nearly as important as the Bible itself. Bielo (2009b) notes the textual ideology and its accompanying search for relevance used with the Bible is also deployed for other books. There is a possibility that Patrick's

uncorrected comment may be closer to the reality of the situation than the commitment to the formulations of his faith community will allow him to say. Together with the comments of both Alice and Dermot, this highlights that there are considerable portions of the Bible for which people need significant outside help to understand and that responsible Bible interpretation is a significant skill that may need to be developed in evangelical faith communities.

For the interviewees, there was more to the interpretation process than just the application of specific literary skills. All of them talked in some way about a spiritual dimension to the process. This has been encapsulated by the theme of the next section, namely the insistence that prayer needs to accompany Bible reading for it to be a complete process.

4.4.2 *'One of the things I do is I pray'*

Bible interpretation was not regarded by the participants as simply a matter of learning and then using a set of literary skills to engage with an ancient text. While these skills were recognised as important and, as noted above, their absence could have a significantly adverse impact on people, the interviewees were all of the opinion that the interpretation experience was considerably more than this. The additional dimension was talked about in slightly different

ways by the participants, but they were clear that they thought there was a spiritual dimension to the interpretation experience. This is probably a result of the experience of locating the act of Bible engagement in a setting that is concerned with spiritual wellbeing and relationship with God. It may also be linked to the belief that God speaks through the Bible and his speech is expected to carry a spiritual dimension. The issue of relevance,[65] especially relevance for spiritual life, may also play a part. In describing her experience of interpretation, Aoife notes not just the work that she does, but how the experience for her is definitely spiritual in its nature as she is convinced that in her Bible engagement practice the Holy Spirit *'will always direct'*:

> *I read a piece of the Bible and then if I want to know more about what that is I'll get out me study Bible and I'll get down and I'll do me writing. And I'll break everything down bit by bit, word by word. But I also have the Holy Spirit with me, so that's the main thing. The Holy Spirit will always direct me with what I'm doing. And I don't always get it right, no I don't always get it right, but I try to do personal studies about me life and about me children, so I'll definitely go straight to the Bible when it comes to me children. (Aoife)*

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[65] The theme of relevance will also be explored further in chapter 5.

The spiritual dimension of interpretation does not remove the potential for human error. It is clear that Aoife does not regard the involvement of the Holy Spirit in the interpretation process as a guarantee of interpretive accuracy. However, it would appear that for Aoife the main role of the Holy Spirit in the process of interpretation is to enable the Bible to be directly relevant to her own life and the life of her children. This link between the role of the Spirit and relevance is a very strong element in the overall framing of Bible engagement for the participants; this will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 5. Aoife does not explain fully how she experiences the Spirit in the process of her interpretation processes, but she does talk about how prayer is an integral part of her Bible engagement. This seems to facilitate making it relevant to situations in her life, in this case with regard to a situation a family member was facing:

Yes I do yes. I pray a lot [about guidance from the Bible]; I do a lot of praying. […] The first thing I'll do is pray. I'll pray and ask the Lord to show me [when reading the Bible] what am I meant to do here, what am I supposed to do. I do have a [family member] struggling and going through a lot of hard times at the moment. We pray together; I pray with her. I tell her what the Lord says about her. So that makes it little a bit easier. […] I prayed with her first and then I said to her we will ask the Lord what he thinks we should do about this because this is serious. (Aoife)

This concept of talking to God and having him respond in some way is part of the experiential framework of evangelical faith communities (Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009b; Luhrmann, 2012). In Aoife's case she expects to have God speak to her through her engagement with the Bible as she uses the skills she has learned. Other participants talked about prayer as part of their interpretation processes:

Well one of the things I do is I pray. I mean the Bible encourages us like, 'The Spirit will lead us into all truth.' Jesus said he'd send us another counsellor,[66] all that. So I believe the Holy Spirit is in the world and wants us to know God, and wants us to grow, to know Jesus and know the Trinity and all of that. So I pray; I pray when I don't understand something. I ask God to show me, well, first of all, does it concern me at all? […] But clearly if it's to do with something that I'm supposed to do myself, I do take that very seriously. […] To be honest I don't spend a lot of time personally, you know working on areas of Scripture that are obscure; that's not my field […] and if I really have to find out what it, you know, I'll be able to find it out, but I probably need to be doing the bit I do know about. (Dermot)

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[66] These phrases are resonances of Jesus' discourse in John 14-16.

Dermot's understanding of the results of the Spirit's guidance and prayer are carefully nuanced. Not only, like Aoife, does it not guarantee interpretive accuracy, it does not remove the careful hard work of interpretation and listening to the insights of the wider interpretive community:

Maybe I've learned this from others: […] to re-read it, see where is it elsewhere in Scripture, see is it part of a pattern of something that God is saying in the different kinds of literature, you know, in the narratives and in the poetry and in the New Testament as well and in the gospels. So, I suppose I do try to kind of understand it in that way, whatever it is. And I suppose one of the things, if you get to know Scripture, […] if you do read Scripture a lot, you do actually begin to pick up that kind of thing. Thanks be to God, that's just true so I think the more time you spend in it the more you'll kind of realise that there is a pattern there and all of that. […] But again, like that, I would refer then to commentaries, to people I trust who know the Bible better […] and see what they have to say about it. Yeah, I suppose a combination of all those things. (Dermot)

Dermot's initial comment about praying and expecting the Spirit to lead him into the truth, if taken at face value, might suggest that he did not value the more technical interpretation skills. Malley (2004) discovers similar instances in his study, highlighting the importance of a carefully nuanced understanding of the meaning of the experiences that are talked about within faith communities.

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However, when encouraged to explore the meaning of what he meant by the process of praying, Dermot describes a carefully nuanced and self-critical interpretation process that depended more or less completely on his interpretation skills. It is interesting, therefore, that he talked about the primary role of the Spirit and prayer in interpretation. This suggests that for Dermot he locates his practice of interpreting the Bible within the broader framework of his experience of a relationship with God. The interpretation skills are what Dermot requires to integrate his engagement with the Bible into the overall dynamics of that relationship:

I mean we talk about having a relationship with God you know. We all say that, but, I mean, how does that turn into something? So, a relationship is a two-way thing. I mean, I learn about God, I expect to learn about God's ways and God's will through the Bible. Now, I don't mean I learn you know, what I'm going to have for breakfast tomorrow; I don't mean that. But in a sense of what are the qualities that are important to God? (Dermot)

Dermot is not expecting the Bible to address issues *like 'what I'm going to have for breakfast tomorrow,'* but he does expect it to be addressing and shaping what he regards as more important areas of life, for example, the character qualities the Bible expects from people who want to live their lives as part of the Bible narrative.

Brendan describes his experience of interpretation in a similar framework of meaning, keeping together the spiritual and more skill-based dimensions:

> *I mean there's obviously prayer as well. […] When we pray, we talk to God, when we read the Bible God talks to us. […] So one way for me interpreting it is prayerfully reading it […] It's having a commentary maybe at hand, some different translations […] and from that point then I begin. […] So there are those kind of principles or elements that I would use and then there's just a prayerfully kind of slowly reading it and just meditate on it. (Brendan)*

The experiences of interpretation described by the interviewees highlight that this is more than a technical skill. There appears to be a coalescing in the participants' experience of an academic framing and a devotional or spiritual framing such that both frames of understanding and experience can be inhabited simultaneously and, in the majority of cases, can enrich the process of Bible engagement.[67] David was aware that for him inhabiting both frames can cause something of a clash, perhaps representing, as he suggests, something of his own struggles with questions of interpretation:

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[67] This will be explored further in Chapter 5.

I wouldn't limit God to anything. […] I do understand the whole idea of getting things in context and all of that. But I think there is a simple beauty in what God wrote, that we can lose if it becomes a study book instead of a letter to us, which I think is what it was originally wrote for. […] All of that studying and learning and all that just complicates it. And now we can't just read the Bible and hear what God says, we have to take it apart, and I think I lost something in that process. (David)

David appears to be saying that he prefers his Bible engagement to deal with only that part of the text that addresses the spiritual dimensions of life; the rest for him is superfluous and even potentially distracting. This highlights the choice of frames that can be inhabited within evangelical faith communities: an academic frame and a devotional frame. Malley (2004) suggests Bible readers are able to choose to operate in both frames or in either one or the other, depending on what the desired outcomes of the engagement are. This is explored in more depth in Chapter 5.

However, for Mary, the experience has been the reverse: the more she has understood using the tools of interpretation and how the Bible and its literature works, the more she has enjoyed engaging with it:

And then learning about genre and context, things that must have been there on some level but just not at a conscious level. So understanding more of what the Bible is, and then allowing that affect how I engage with it has been really helpful, and I've enjoyed it more and I've understood, yeah, understood it more. So I think that has been a very important thing in allowing the Bible to work as it's meant to work as I understand it and engage with it. […] That's something that I think's important because what the Bible says in its context I think is really linked to its form. […] It's like what we talked about before: it can become flat, like as if it's all the same, but it's not. It's like an exciting landscape that you can explore and find all different kinds of terrain and experience it in different ways and I think that's part of what I'm fascinated by. (Mary)

Mary's strategy for engaging with the Bible is to allow *'the Bible to work as it's meant to work'*. This has involved, among other things, recognising issues of context (literary and historical) and consciously engaging with how genre functions as a literary device (*'its content I think is really linked to its form'*). As a consequence, Mary's engagement with the Bible had been enhanced, allowing her to appreciate some of the richness of the Bible. Mary likens the experience to exploring *'an exciting landscape'* with *'different kinds of terrain'* which she is able to *'experience […] in different ways'*. This approach has allowed Mary to creatively combine elements of the academic and devotional frames in ways which have considerably enhanced her Bible engagement. This might be one of

the reasons why her experience is somewhat different to David's where his experience of the tools of interpretation seem to have resulted, for him, in something of a dichotomy between the academic and devotional framing.

4.5 Chapter summary

This chapter has examined the ways in which the participants experience various elements of the theological issues outlined in Chapter 1. The first section considered the issue of the authority of the Bible. One of the most striking elements of the data is not only the universal commitment to the authority of the Bible by the participants, but also the way in which the concept of the Bible's authority was almost always processed in relational terms. For the participants a commitment to the authority of the Bible was seen as a natural corollary of a commitment to the authority of God; this mirrors in experiential terms Wright's (2011) argument that the authority of God is, theologically, the foundation of the authority of the Bible. The participants' commitment to the authority of the Bible was not just negotiated through their framework of relationship to God, it had become an integral part of the wider experience of that framework. The authority of the Bible was not approached as a concept to be discussed, debated or justified, but as a concept to be embraced, valued and lived as part of the ongoing dynamic of the framework of relationship with God. This way of conceptualising the authority of the Bible is most likely part of

the values and experience framework of the communities to which the participants belong, something to both inherit and inhabit as their own. This is not to suggest that the authority of the Bible was accepted without thought and reflection; the ways in which many participants related to the authority of Bible through the person of Jesus suggest significant levels of sophistication about their commitment.

The participants' experience of the doctrine of inspiration is, as suggested by Malley (2004), and noted in Section 1.4, something that is constructed to provide a rationale for the participants' prior commitment to the Bible's authority. The structure of this way of conceptualising inspiration is the reverse of that normally encountered in the discourse of what Ward (2017, p. 61) terms "formal theology." This may explain one of the reasons why the participants were much more concerned to assert their commitment to the Bible's authority than to explain its inspiration.

The final two sections analysed issues of Bible interpretation. The concept of genre was used as a window on the participants' interpretive activity. One of the surprising elements of the data was the "minimal hermeneutical instruction" (Malley, 2004, p. 88) offered in evangelical faith communities on either genre or interpretation. This is also seen in Rogers' (2016) study. In spite of this many of the participants had developed some skills in these areas,

though the majority had acquired it by participating in some level of theological

education. Some further reflection on this will be offered in the conclusion.

Overarching theme 2: Experiencing the Bible in lived practice

Chapter 5: The search for relevance

The overarching theme of Experiencing the Bible in lived practice will be analysed in chapters 5-7. The focus of this theme is, as Ward (2017, p. 65) suggests, the more "performative element to a lived theology," namely how the participants have actually experienced the Bible in their lives. The manner in which the participants recount their experiences of the Bible is, as Malley (2004) observes, an empirical window on how their theological understanding is both constructed and maintained. This highlights what Ward (2017, p. 65) suggests is the complex "multilayered" interaction of "thought and action."

This chapter will examine the main theme of the search for relevance. In the interview data this theme was often linked with the main theme of Experiencing transformation. When the Bible was experienced as relevant to life there was potential for transformation, and where transformation had been experienced it was often as a result of the Bible being found to be relevant. A significant portion of the data coded for the theme of the search for relevance was also coded for the theme of experiencing transformation. As noted in Section 2.5.5, given the considerable quantity of rich data, material coded for both themes was allocated to one theme based on the main focus of the data. I

am aware that this assessment is a researcher decision and, as a result, influences the presentation of material. However, the extent of the data for both themes is so rich that even if a number of the coding decisions were reversed the analysis would be broadly similar.

5.1 Negotiating relevance

5.1.1 *'It has to be relevant'*

Malley's (2004, pp. 103–119) examination of the "hermeneutic activity" of an evangelical faith community highlighted the desire for the Bible to address contemporary concerns directly and specifically. This was a major concern for many of the participants and finds expression in the experience of relevance. Bielo's (2009b, p. 50) research on group Bible study among evangelicals in the United States highlights "an ongoing attempt to apply biblical texts to their everyday lives" as characteristic of their interpretive activity. In his engagement with the Bible, Patrick is looking for relevance for himself and for the congregation he works with:

> *[I will] take some time to figure out really what I believe that God is trying to say to the people at the time [original readers]. And to me or, the congregation or whatever, so that is a different exercise in a way. I always try to get to the, what's*

the one line here, what is the core of this, that God is trying to teach me and teach

the congregation. […] And then I asked myself then the question, well then, what

does that mean for us? (Patrick)

George is convinced that relevance is an inherent characteristic of the Bible and

should be assumed as part of any engagement strategy. This means that one of

the main issues for George is not whether the Bible is relevant for today, he

assumes it is, but how to negotiate relevance and contemporary application:

What I mean is that relevance can't be dictated by a personal experience of a said

thing. As I like to think of it, the question isn't ever, is this relevant? it's how is

this relevant? It's not does this apply? it's how does it apply? (George)

This is an assumption that is shared widely by the interviewees. George

comments that it is something that has shaped his engagement with the Bible,

particularly in the context of preaching:

You're just wanting to share something, a nugget, you know, and something of

use. (George)

Joseph is convinced about what he terms the universal relevance of the Bible,

echoing the sentiment of Bielo (2009b, p. 59) that "evangelicals understand the

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Bible's message to be eternal, just as true tomorrow as it is today, as it always

has been. […] A certainty that the Bible has the unique capacity to be always

relevant and appropriate:"

> *I do believe that all of God's word is applicable today. It has to be relevant for all*
>
> *time, to every culture and every person, so I'd look for personal application in*
>
> *that. I try to take it as literally as I can. Obviously you have to be aware of the*
>
> *different devices used, like figurative language and all of that, but I would try to*
>
> *take it as literally as possible, for myself. (Joseph)*

Joseph links his belief that the Bible is God's word to its relevance for today.

This is an expression of the framework of expectation that has shaped his

experiences of the Bible: if the Bible is a communication from God, then that

communication should be *'relevant for all time, to every culture and every person.'*

As a result, Joseph engages with the Bible in a search for *'personal application'*.

According to Joseph, the way to unlock relevance is to read the Bible as literally

as he can. While he allows for the possibility of *'different [literary] devices'*, in

order to maximise relevance Joseph prioritises a literal approach. For Joseph the

main focus of his relationship with the Bible text (Bielo, 2009b, p. 60) is

application and contemporary relevance, for something that can be put into

practice in some form of obedience to his reading of the text:

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Cos I'm […] looking for the application. How does this apply to me? If this is

God's word and it speaks to us for all time, how can I read this to know God and

to obey what it says? And it is through learning the doctrines and things that God

requires from us that I try to apply everything that I am reading in the word and I

look at it that simply. If God says 'Do this' I try to do that; if I know something

displeases God I try to avoid that or adjust my behaviour to come into alignment

with that. (Joseph)

This concern for action and obedience as the focus for relevance may be one reason for Joseph's preference for a literal approach. Joseph's strong insistence on God saying *'Do this'* could be mistaken for an understanding of the Bible as a life manual or a rule book. Obedience might be a focal point for relevance, but Joseph is clear that the Bible's relevance extends beyond his personal morality to include being a source for his identity as well as a matrix for knowing God:

To know him [God] and to know what he required from me. […] Well, that's

where I get my identity from, my morals, everything. I'm learning, I'm putting

into practice; that's building me up, who I am. (Joseph)

Joseph expects his engagement to be relevant to how he lives. He gives an example of what he means:

Looking at Proverbs, […] that talks a lot about crooked speech and the fear of the Lord and watching your tongue. And you have that in James too. […] It was a collection of Bible verses that […] really struck me and spoke to me, you know. That gave me a biblical understanding of foul speech and how our words honour and dishonour God. So it's something I tried to cut out as much as possible and I'm having a lot of success, I have to say. But I would still have instances where the flesh would rise up and you would have a mistake here or there, but on the whole it's going very well. (Joseph)

Joseph's reflection in his use of language highlights the sort of immediacy and relevance he expects from the Bible, addressing his personal circumstances and providing him with what Bielo (2009b, p. 59) describes as "application" that "is not vague, but specific; not general but amazingly exact in how it aligns with readers' lives." In a very similar vein, Aiden reflects on how, after he started to read the Bible for the first time, it directly challenged his personal issues of anger:

One of the things I was challenged on [was] the way I was a very angry man. I had a lot of stuff going on so […] the way I used to deal with it was I'd lash out, you know. I'd actually go and look for a fight, I'd go and start trouble, and that would be my release. So I was challenged on that. […] I mean Jesus says […] there's an indignation, a righteous anger, but then there's this other anger that's

not right. […] I was challenged on it and I knew that it wasn't right, it just

wasn't right. […] I would go off the handle and I knew that there had been a

change in me, a massive change in my life and I wanted to deal with it in the right

way, so I sat down and, and dealt with it, and felt good about it. (Aiden)

The particular issues mentioned by Joseph and Aiden represent for both of

them a way of reading the Bible that is searching for and expecting an

immediate relevance. This basic understanding and expectation of Bible

engagement was widespread in the data. The participants not only expected

relevance from their Bible engagement, in many instances they made it a

priority, even if it required, as Malley (2004) concludes, significant elements of

work on their part to make it a reality. Some of the reasons for this privileging

of relevance will be considered in the next section.

5.1.2 *'It's a living book'*

The concern for relevance exhibited by the participants is not simply a matter of

pragmatics; it goes considerably deeper than this. The interview data suggests it

forms part of the understanding of the nature of the Bible and how it works. As

such, relevance is a major factor in shaping both the expectations of faith

communities and individuals. The combination of a traditional Christian

understanding of the Bible as the word of God (McGrath, 2017, Ch 6) with the

experience of a God as one who, as several researchers (Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009b; Luhrmann, 2012) observe, communicates and speaks directly with communities and individuals creates a theological imperative and justification to both expect and to search for relevance. Within this framework, almost by definition, contemporary relevance becomes a characteristic of the Bible. This conceptual and experiential configuration results in a situation where in order to prove that the Bible is what the participants and their communities claim it to be, they need to continually demonstrate its contemporary relevance; Malley (2004, p. 125) terms this "indefinite interpretability." Brendan gives voice to these concepts, linking the current activity of God to the Bible being alive and relevant:

> *The divine author of this book is still alive, he's still living and active so I just kind of find, yeah, it's a living book and it speaks and it's relevant. (Brendan)*

The search for relevance is so strongly embedded in her experience that even when Siobhan cannot see or find an immediate relevance for a text, there is a strong assumption that if she used a different approach or perhaps encountered the text in a different life context there would probably be some way to make it relevant. And if there are no other mechanisms for relevance, Siobhan comments that she will use the devotional framework of relationship to God to create the sought-after result:

At the moment I'm reading Deuteronomy and I don't get it at all. I know that

God speaks through every bit of the Bible, but I honestly do read bits and go, I

cannot see at this stage in my life where this is relevant. I'm not saying it's not,

but it's hard to see. But it's different because first of all I know the person who it's

about, and I know that it's personal even when I'm reading things about you

know, the story of the Israelites, or things. (Siobhan)

Siobhan appears to be equating *'God speaks through every bit of the Bible'* with the

idea of direct personal relevance. And even when it is elusive (*'hard to see'*),

Siobhan feels that if she searches hard enough some element of relevance will

be present. In such cases Siobhan locates her rationale for relevance in the

overall personal relationship with God that, in her experience, the Bible fosters.

The framework of personal relationship with God is important as it allows

Siobhan to create some form of relevance even from texts that feel opaque to

her. This framing of Bible engagement as an integral part of a personal

relationship with God is one of the factors that informs and shapes the search

for relevance. For Siobhan, if God is going to communicate with individuals,

and, based on the research of Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b), that would

appear to be a given in evangelical faith communities, it is her expectation that

the communication will be relevant.

The pervasiveness of the search for relevance is highlighted by several of the participants who recounted that one of their reasons for engaging with the Bible was to find particular guidance or answers to questions they encountered:

> *Honestly I read the Bible normally, like for guidance and something or an answer or from a desire of wanting to understand God a little bit more or Jesus particularly a little bit more. So that would be my main motivation and of course, you know, like it really is a source of comfort as well in that I always find myself drawn to the Bible if I am going through a particularly difficult time. (Bernadette)*

> *So I'll sit down and I'll read, especially if I'm dealing with a situation or I have some stuff going on in my own life. […] And, you know, sometimes I hope to hear from God, and just pray and read. I expect to hear from God. (Aiden)*

These are specific instances of approaching the Bible with the expectation that what is read will have a direct bearing on the participants' contemporary experience. There seems to be little awareness or questioning of whether reading the Bible with this goal in view might have any effects on the meaning 'discovered' in passages. This contemporising hermeneutic may be able to persuade participants of the relevance of the Bible, but there is every possibility that it might discourage the use of some of the tools of interpretation more commonly associated with reading ancient texts. Anna is not trying to

disparage the tools of interpretation, but her reflection highlights the extent to which the contemporising hermeneutic might in practice control the Bible reading experience:

> *But yeah I would try to read them [Bible passages] with a sense of seeing what could this say today. Rather than you know whatever it was saying all those years ago. (Anna)*

Anna's focus on the present represents her concern for the Bible to be relevant. What she did not explain was how that might work without taking some account of what it was saying in its historical and literary context. The sort of contemporising hermeneutic that Anna seems to be implicitly embracing might in some instances have little or no regard for what the text might have meant in its historical context (contra Fee and Stuart's (2014, pp. 25–27) suggestions) and, rather, relates it directly to the current context without asking any critical questions about the process. The privileging of the present may well leave to one side any consideration of the original context of texts and, according to Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Jr (2017, Ch 1), could in some instances subvert them completely.

In order to illuminate and further analyse how the search for relevance shapes the participants' engagement with the Bible, four selected cases will be examined in the next section.

5.2 Strategies for relevance

All of the participants talked about how they found their engagement with Bible relevant, but some recounted in more detail the strategies they adopted to construct relevance. This section will focus on four such examples. Although each of the strategies presented is slightly different, they are also broadly representative of the experiences of the whole sample. In order to allow the richness of the narratives to be explored and the strategies for relevance to be analysed, this section will present the data from the four interviewees as separate cases.

5.2.1 Daniel: *'it jumps out […] the word becomes alive again'*

As part of his narrative, Daniel reflected on how his interaction with the Bible had changed over time. At an earlier point in his Christian faith journey the focus for his Bible reading was on theology and knowledge. Even though that was *'all new'* and *'exciting'* at the time, Daniel has now *'moved on'* and his current

focus for engaging the Bible is relevance, expressed as the need *'to feel God saying something to me'*:

> *I see it [the Bible] as part of my, a relationship with God. So it is about me and God, not just as a sort of theology text book, which at times it has been because I'm of that bent where I like reading. So there are times I can get into that. I think I probably have changed over time, in part because as a young Christian it was all new, the sort of theology side, the knowledge side was all new, so that was really exciting. Whereas now that's sort of moved on where there is that relevance to me, I feel God saying something to me. (Daniel)*

Daniel's focus on personal and community relevance for the Bible finds expression in the way in which he talked about his approach to both his own Bible reading and his preparation for sermons. His comments highlight some unstated assumptions about how he expects the Bible to 'work'. In describing his personal experience of the relevance of the Bible, he highlights elements that *'jump'* out at him or *'strike'* him as the things that have special relevance and, perhaps, are instances of God speaking directly to him or the faith community. This is very similar to the experience of a "goal-directed process" of engaging with the text that is described by Malley (2004, p. 107), and which he summarises in terms of "when you suddenly see the importance of a passage for your life, God has spoken to you." Daniel recounts the process:

I read prayerfully, you know sort of talking to God before I read and as I read.

And then it's really just my experience; so, is there something that jumps out at

me, is there something that strikes me, is there something new? Sometimes it can

be something new that I haven't noticed before. So you know in that way it's

maybe more of a knowledge thing but if it feels fresh again; it could be fresh

because of a knowledge way but sometimes it's actually that it's striking me

today. Cos that's speaking to where my heart is at, or something going on in my

life. But I'm sort of ok with that cos my sense is God speaks through his word so

the word becomes alive again. And therefore it can be a different angle, if I'd read

that passage a month ago or a year ago, so yeah, that. (Daniel)

The framework of relationship with God is particularly prominent here and

forms the basis for Daniel's search for relevance. Relevance is perceived when

Daniel experiences what he describes as God speaking to him through his

engagement with the Bible, something he regards as part of an ongoing

conversation with God (*'talking to God'*). In that conversation Daniel looks for

the unexpected, the arresting or the new angle as a means to identify God

speaking to him and as a result making the Bible personally relevant to him.

Relevance, therefore, is prompted by something that is tangibly experienced by

Daniel. Without that experience there may only be a limited recognition of

relevance, as when he read the passage a month ago. For Daniel, God speaking

and contemporary relevance are virtually synonymous. Even though Daniel

may never have heard God speak audibly he is convinced that it is through the relevance of the Bible that God communicates with him:

> *I don't think I've ever heard an audible voice. The day-to-day way would, probably 90% of the ways God speaks to me, or higher than 90%, is through the Scriptures.[68] […] It's when I've come prayerfully to the passage and I read it, and I find something jumps off the page in some way. I'm sure someone else who doesn't have faith could argue the same about a piece of poetry, or a piece of literature, but that's my view of it. Sometimes […] I've kept reading until I felt something, sometimes it has been a phrase but sometimes I feel quite rooted, sometimes I can be convicted of something God telling me something, so there's a range of things. […] Recently when I've been trying to fast and be silent and have God speak to me outside of Scripture, I find when he does that, he uses Scripture to do it. (Daniel)*

Daniel recognises that his mode of reading is not what would usually be described as 'normal' and requires some special elements to aid his search for relevance. He mentions prayer, faith, fasting and silence as tools that have helped him to negotiate relevance. As Daniel notes, it is these additional elements accompanying his reading of the Bible that have allowed him to

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[68] This segment of data has already been mentioned in Section 3.2.3.

attribute his experience of something that *'jumps off the page in some way'*[69] as

God communicating directly with him. Daniel, however, recognises that his

experience of something jumping off the page is not unique to him or even to a

religious context; it may be a general human experience. What makes it unique

for Daniel is his faith context, expressed here as his relationship with a God

who *'speaks to me'*. Being able to locate his Bible engagement in this wider

relationship context is one of the mechanisms Daniel uses to both attribute his

experience to God speaking to him directly and to negotiate relevance for a

given text.

Daniel's definition of relevance relies not just on significant elements of

subjectivity and intuition, but on an ability to conceptualise and experience the

new insights he encounters (*'striking me'*, *'jumps off the page in some way'*) as God

speaking. It is unlikely that such a complex construction of conception and

experience would be developed by Daniel on his own. As Malley (2004)

suggests, it is much more likely that such mechanisms are located in the

interpretive traditions of faith communities. For such communities, relevance is

expected and so mechanisms have to be constructed to make it possible. This

mode of conceptualising the insights from Bible engagement as God speaking is

very similar to what Luhrmann (2012) terms a reorientation of a theory of

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[69] This may be similar to the "(re)discovery" noted by Bielo (2009b, p. 59), where the Bible can be "new with each reading."

mind.[70] As part of her ethnographic study of Vineyard churches in the United States, Luhrmann suggests that in order for members to experience God speaking to them they needed to embrace a new theory of mind that allowed their cognitive responses to be interpreted as coming from outside themselves, in this case from God. A similar process, namely learning a theory of mind that enables the results of engaging with the Bible to be heard as God's specific communication, may be part of what is going on here. This mode of conceptualising and experiencing allows the relevance created by engaging the text of the Bible to be attributed to the direct communication of God, thus combining and delivering what Malley (2004; similar perspectives are presented by Bielo, 2009b; Luhrmann, 2012) regards as the vital pillars of evangelical Bible engagement. This may be the reason why such engagement techniques are adopted and assimilated much more quickly and effectively within contemporary faith communities than the general principles of Bible interpretation.[71]

Daniel's experience also needs to be located within Bielo's (2009b, chap. 3) observation of "cultivating intimacy". According to Luhrmann (2012, p. xv) this

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[70] The context of Luhrmann's study (Vineyard churches in the United States), while somewhat different, has enough areas of resonance to allow some of her insights to be regarded as relevant to this research. Luhrmann identifies some of the mechanisms that make this new theory of mind possible and how it works in practice. A similar process may be at work here.

[71] For example, Fee and Stuart (2014) outline some general principles of interpretation; the target audience is largely those who share the commitments of evangelicalism.

is a significant recent trend in evangelical faith communities which involves seeking "out an intensely personal God […] the God they [modern evangelicals] seek is more personally intimate, and more intimately experienced, than the God most Americans grew up with." This observation has strong resonances in Daniel's experience and more widely in the Irish context.

Daniel uses similar processes to negotiate relevance in his sermon preparation, but he differentiates how he prepares for sermons from how he reads personally or devotionally. The following section has been divided at the point where Daniel starts to talk about his personal reading. This is only for the sake of presentation and clarity here; in the interview all of the following material was a single response:

> *So personal and work are different. […] I might start off if I know I have a passage I'm speaking on in that way [as described above]; that would be closer to a personal reading. But then pretty soon I want to actually go and sort of study it just to make sure I have everything, you know. So on that first reading I might [have] two things that really jump out, and I sort of think about and pray about. But in my experience they just tend to jump out, and I find early on I know how I might say something relevant to us as a church community. And so I sort of know early on what I want to say, and then I find myself studying the passage more. So I'll read, I'll work through it, I might read a little of what comes next in the book,*

or I might think what do I know about John's gospel, or whatever, study it and that fleshes out a lot of stuff. But I might find at the end I still have the same two points from the first hour.

Whereas in personal reading it's not study, it's personal, it's devotional, so it's slower, it's more prayerful. I tend to sometimes use resources. (Daniel)

Daniel is combining two frames of reference proposed by Malley (2004): an academic frame where study is primary and a devotional frame where the intuitive dimensions of his interaction with the text, the things that *'tend to jump out'*, are to the fore. Malley (2004, p. 111) argues that this dual framed approach to the Bible is adopted deliberately in an effort to ensure that relevance can be created and because it allows insights from the text to be labelled as being a direct communication from God. The manner in which the participants locate their engagement with the Bible in the wider experiential and conceptual context of a relationship with God also informs and shapes the devotional frame, and as noted throughout this study, is one of the main driving forces behind all of the Bible engagement of the participants. This relational component to engaging the Bible supplements Malley's (2004) proposals for a devotional frame and provides the participants with a rich and varied theological framework for their experience of engaging the Bible.

In the experience described by Daniel, the devotional frame also appears to embrace something of the new theory of mind suggested by Luhrmann (2012). It is clear from what Daniel says that he is consciously aware of elements of both frames of reference and wants to embrace them both in order to create and negotiate relevance. Daniel appears to inhabit the devotional frame almost exclusively for his personal reading, a place he has moved to as the result of a deliberate choice in his part. In his sermon preparation, both frames can be deployed. However, unless the academic frame raises serious questions about the devotional frame, it is the latter that is given priority by Daniel as it is the place where he assumes God's contemporary communication is most likely to be experienced. It is the insights derived from the devotional frame that, as far as Daniel is concerned, appear to allow him to be able to say something relevant to the church community.

In response to Daniel's comments on how he created and experienced relevance, the interview explored with him the question of what would happen if his initial devotional insights clashed with his later study:

> *Creates a bit of panic depending on what time of the week you find that. […] The norm would be that I want to study cos I wanna make sure [of] the thing that jumped out, the tentative bit at the start. Cos I feel this is the angle to take, and it has something to say for us in church. And then I study [and ask] well was this*

really what was meant in the first place? Most times it just changes the angle of those points, so it doesn't negate them. […] But yeah, that has happened so I would […] study just to make sure I don't go off on something. […] I sort of go back and if it doesn't match up, you know I've sort of jumped ahead of myself then, yeah there's time where I've had to start again from scratch. (Daniel)

Daniel is aware of the frames of reference he is using and the possible strengths and limitations of each. However, whether he is able to effectively communicate that as part of his teaching role to his faith community is a question that was not addressed. Some of Alice's comments on interpretation in Section 4.4 suggest that not everyone is able to negotiate the frames of reference as coherently as Daniel. It would also appear from Section 4.4 that hearers are very unlikely to be able to tell the difference between the academic and devotional frames of reference and may well be inclined to choose the devotional frame as it is normally the one that brings contemporary relevance for them. This raises some questions for how faith communities instruct their members in the methods of Bible engagement; aspects of this will be addressed in the final concluding reflections.

The mechanisms Daniel talks about in theory to construct relevance are described in detail by Brendan as he relates a specific example of how he has experienced relevance in his engagement with the Bible.

5.2.2 Brendan: *'it comes alive'*

One of the distinguishing marks of the Bible for Brendan is that it *'comes alive'*, which is his way of expressing that it is relevant for him. Bielo (2009b, p. 59) notes a similar concept and suggests that as "scripture is 'alive' it can never be old, antiquated or exhausted."

> *I find it comes alive. I find it's relevant. […] I'm actually [reading] in Acts chapter 20, and there's a text right there, verse 20[72], and it just begins to pulsate. I can't explain it, it's almost like 3D, it comes off the page. And I'm a six month old Christian; I have no idea what's going on and so I highlight it. […] The next day, at the same time […] SixOne news is on and I had me Bible out and […] two Mormons knock on the door. And so I thought I'm a young Christian, I'm on fire, this is great, I'll invite them in and I'll convert them, and that wasn't the case. […] When they left I was reminded of the Scripture that I highlighted the day before and I went back and looked at it and it made sense. It made sense. Now I've never read any other book that has made sense, that has come alive in that way.*
> *(Brendan)*

It is the experience of the text 'pulsating' that highlights the potential for relevance for Brendan. However, that relevance is not seen immediately.

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[72] The verse Brendan is referring to is actually verse 28; he quoted it as part of the interview.

Brendan's experience of the pulsating text raised his consciousness of what the text said, but it is the incident the following evening that has created for him a situation in which the text is immediately relevant.

The pulsating 3D text is actually a rare occurrence for Brendan, even though he would prefer it to be much more frequent:

> *When I read that and that Scripture really kind of pulsated and came alive in 3D, that hasn't happened many times. It's happened a couple of times […] that would have been in 2002 and so what are we now, 15 years later, 16 years later, and it's probably happened about three times. Three, four, no more than five times so. Sometimes I nearly look for that all the time, but it doesn't always happen. For most of the time I find when I'm reading I just have this excitement inside me that I can't explain. It's an anticipation. […] Sometimes I get that feeling when I'm reading the Bible, I get that just really excited, anticipated feeling. And knowing that what I'm reading here is really coming to life, I'm getting a good grasp, a good handle, and a good understanding of it. (Brendan)*

As Brendan describes how he negotiates the relevance of a Bible passage, what is important for him is the experience that authenticates the sort of relevance he is seeking. The experience can be the more dramatic text that *'pulsates'* or the more regular and perhaps more mundane *'inner kind of witness'*. The more

dramatic experience is the preferred option, but, as it does not seem to happen very often (five times in sixteen years is not frequent), Brendan will settle for the more commonplace occurrence. Either way, what is important to note is that Brendan is locating his experiences in a framework of an ongoing and interactive relationship with God. It is that relational interaction that makes the Bible come *'to life'* and as a result creates the anticipation he talks about. The framework is also the context for the understanding and experience of relevance: if God communicates, and does so through the Bible, then what he says will be personally relevant to Brendan. When Brendan engages with the Bible he expects this activity to be part of this ongoing communicative relationship, and therefore something of what he reads will be directly relevant to him and to his life.

Brendan then narrated an experience where the relevance of the Bible and the fact that God was speaking directly to him was, for him, inescapable. Brendan is recounting a dilemma he was going through about which church he and his family should be attending. Brendan's experience exhibits elements of the dual framing approach to the Bible described in Section 1.5:

> *I knew God was speaking to me, so there was different things that was going on.*
>
> *So I remember this particular time I came home from church, and I was really, I*
>
> *felt just in bits. And I couldn't have a conversation, I couldn't even have me*

dinner. So I went upstairs and I began to read the Psalms. [...] I got to Psalm 107. [Reading from a Bible] 'Some wandered in desert wastelands'[73] and that's what I felt; I felt I was wandering. I felt I couldn't find and know a way to a city where they could settle. I felt unsettled, so all this was kind of like, yay, that's how I feel, I was saying to myself. 'They were hungry and thirsty'[74] and I felt I came to a place in my walk where what I was eating it wasn't satisfying me and I was hungry for more. I wanted me mind in a sense to be broadened. So I was in, and I don't mean to say it this way, but it was a small little group of ten to fifteen people that had their way of thinking and maybe they didn't open their minds to other ideas of other churches. I was hungry and thirsty and I felt like me life was ebbing away. If I don't do something I'm going to die here, and I did. I genuinely did cry out to the Lord in that trouble and I was on me bed and then it says 'And he delivered them from their distress'[75] and then it went on to say 'He led them by a straight way to a city where they could settle'[76], so I'm kinda thinking, Lord I need somewhere where I [can settle]. What do I do about this? We had Jamie [Brendan's child] at the time and I kind of thought, you know, we want to have other kids. And do I want them to be experiencing what I'm experiencing. (Brendan)

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[73] Psalm 107:4

[74] Psalm 107:5

[75] Psalm 107:7

[76] Psalm 107:8

In this incident, Brendan has turned to the Bible looking for specific guidance and help. Brendan's expectation is that as he reads the Psalms God will speak to him in some way that will help him resolve the turmoil that has been caused by the question of which church he should attend. The lack of specificity of many of the Psalms makes them more open to this kind of approach than other texts and genres. Brendan's action involves the presupposition that God will have something specific to say about this and will communicate this to him. The Psalms will not say anything directly about which church to attend, but as he reads Brendan is reading with a question of "how does this apply to my life?" and, Malley (2004, p. 105) argues, what he "make[s] of the text turns on considerations of relevance." Malley (2004, p. 107) suggests the Bible reading patterns of people who belong to evangelical faith communities are structured around discovering and creating relevance and they will keep reading until this goal is realised. Brendan did not say how many psalms he had to read before he encountered Psalm 107, but he recounted how he read until he encountered something from which he was able to create relevance. It is important to note the manner in which he creates the framework for relevance.

Given that the psalm in question pre-dates the formation of the church,[77] an

academic frame is unlikely to be able to offer any direct relevance for answering

Brendan's question about whether or not he should be attending this particular

church. It may yield some general principles that he could relate in the broadest

of terms to his context, but without further work on Brendan's behalf it will not

be directly relevant. To create relevance, Brendan has constructed what might

be termed a parallelism of experience between his situation and that of the

psalm. He then reads the psalm through the filter of that parallelism. This

allows Brendan to create a direct link between the psalm and the situation he is

experiencing. Where the psalm refers to "desert wastelands" (whether this is to

be read literally or metaphorically in the psalm[78]) Brendan takes this as God's

way of describing his situation and how he was feeling. Brendan then appears

to assume that if the text indicates God will act for those who are going through

a 'wasteland' experience like that described in the psalm (even if it is corporate

experience), then God will also act and speak to someone who is going through

an existential 'wasteland' experience in the contemporary context. Brendan is

also able to establish other experiential parallels in order to sustain the link:

[77] Even though he notes it is unlikely that the redactional history can be determined, Goldingay (2008, p. 248) suggests that the psalm "relates to reflection and worship in connection with the experience of exile and restoration, but we do not know how it was so used." This would date the psalm at some point after the exile, and definitely before the first century BCE.

[78] Goldingay (2008, p. 249) suggests this phrase along with the other phrases mentioned by Brendan may be "more states or types of experience, the kind that could belong in any geographical area." Goldingay links the promises in these verses to the promises given to the exilic community in Isaiah 40-55.

hunger, thirst, crying to God, deliverance, a place to settle. Having established these experiential parallels, Brendan is able to read other relevant parts of the psalm as God's communication to him about the situation:

So he [the psalmist] says [reading from a Bible] "he [God] turns the desert into pools of waters, they brought the hungry to live, and they found a city where they could settle. They sowed fields and planted vineyards."[79] And I was kind of thinking, yeah, I just want to be fruitful. […] Now I wasn't the holiest of cases. […] So he [God] increased their families and flocks, so I'm kinda thinking, Lord, [that's] what I want. I'm hungry. It's not just for me; I want it for me wife, I want it for the kids. […] I know for a fact God has spoken to me. […] So, I talked with Orla [Brendan's wife] and she's kind of are you sure you've heard from God? are you sure you've heard from God? And I said, Orla I'm certain I've heard from God. […] I believe that this word is divinely inspired and it's really after coming alive to me. And I have that sense inside that if I don't do this I'll be left wondering what did I do? Why didn't I do it? […] So yeah I knew I had to do it. So she says right I'll trust you, I don't think we should do it but I trust you, you've heard from God. (Brendan)

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[79] This is a loose paraphrase of Psalm 107:35-36.

And it was not only Orla that Brendan had to convince; there were people who were part of the church he was leaving he also needed to convince that he had heard from God:

> *I really feel I need to do this; if I don't do it I'm going to be left wondering what if? I said if I do do it, and I'm wrong, like I'll be back. I said I've no problem coming back and saying I got it wrong. […] But I just really feel I need to do this and so we made the decision to leave. […] I believe the Lord is leading me to this church and he will one day lead me back to [my own area]. […] I'm not saying we're any great people, we're any great standing in the community or anything like that, but I know, I know I wouldn't be the person that I am today if I had a stayed where I was back then. (Brendan)*

This is an example of one of the ways in which the devotional frame for reading the Bible works in practice. Through the whole of the incident it is the ability to read the psalm as a series of direct parallels to his experience that convinces Brendan this is God's particular instruction for him. He not only sees a description of his own experience in the text, but takes any promises or predictions that God makes in the psalm as being for him. The parallelism or typology of experience has enabled Brendan to contemporise the text for himself and answer the questions he was asking. Having used these steps to create relevance, he is convinced that God had spoken directly to him, a result

the devotional frame is expected to deliver. The nature of the experience allows

Brendan to describe it as a direct communication from God. Not only is it a

convincing experience for him, he is able to convince both his wife and others

that this is the case, even when they may not have wanted to hear it.[80] And even

if the other parties whom Brendan spoke to about his experience of hearing

God speak may not have wished to hear it, they appear to have accepted the

mechanism by which Brendan had explained and believed God had spoken to

him. This suggests a shared understanding and acceptance of how relevance is

created for individuals and communities by engaging with Bible texts using the

devotional frame.

Based on his research findings, Malley (2004, pp. 106, 107) comments,

"Evangelicals […] expect it [the Bible] to say especially important things about

their contemporary needs and concerns. […] To this end they are willing to

devote quite a lot of energy. […] Modern evangelicals just assume it is relevant,

and read the Bible in ways that deliver the expected relevance." The devotional

frame is the mechanism most often deployed to facilitate this. As noted in

Section 1.5 using this frame in the search for relevance permits some of the

more generally agreed constraints of interpretation to be relaxed and, in some

cases, ignored. Provided the relevance created does not obviously contradict the

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[80] Malley (2004, p. 106) observes that the "Bible need not say something evangelical readers necessarily like, but they believe it should be highly relevant to them."

more general teaching of the Bible, it will be accepted as God's direct message for the situation concerned. This would appear to be the case for Brendan's experience. It is also the case for the incident Colm recounts.

5.2.3 Colm: *'SMART reading'*

Colm is concerned that within the context where he works[81] people are given tools to engage with the Bible. Colm has developed what he has termed a SMART approach for engaging with the Bible:

> *They want help in understanding what that story means and we use the acronym of SMART. […] In business terms you always need SMART goals, so as we do life study with them, we're teaching them to ask: what does the Bible **S**ay? what does it **M**ean?; what do you want to **A**sk?; what's your **R**esponse?; and who are you going to **T**ell? So you're being SMART about studying the Bible. We call it Life Study instead of Bible study. (Colm)*

The title 'Life study' indicates that the goal of Bible engagement for the groups Colm is working with is life transformation. And the way in which that relevance is achieved is through a reading process that wants to try to take the meaning of the text seriously (*'what does it Mean?'*) and incorporates the

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[81] Colm noted that in the area where he works most people had finished school by the age of 16 and would not have had the opportunity to attend third level education.

recognition that reading the Bible for relevance may not always be straightforward (*'what do you want to Ask?'*). However, the focus is very clearly on the relevance of the process: *'what's your Response?; and who are you going to Tell?'* Questions of application and relevance are important for Bible engagement, but in this context it is not the first question to be asked. The final question (*'who are you going to Tell?'*) ensures that the whole of the process is geared to address the lives both of the readers themselves and the others they relate to in their lives.

The overall goal of the approach is to ensure the people look at their lives *'through the lens of the Bible'*:

> *We want to look at our lives through the lens of the Bible. […] We want people to understand that studying the Bible is about life transformation so we're looking at our lives through the lens of the Bible from the point of view of seeing what it is in my life that doesn't measure up to what the word of God says. And the stories that are there that are examples of other people's lives and what needed to change with them, and what mistakes they made and how that relates to us and what we can learn from that so that our life changes because of what the Bible teaches. So it's about transformation; it's about application. (Colm)*

When asked if this approach was effective, Colm was convinced it worked at least for some:

> *Yeah, it works. Well for some it works effectively, quite effectively. (Colm)*

Looking at life through the lens of the Bible may well be a shorthand way of describing the contemporising hermeneutic that seeks relevance. The way in which Colm describes the process above suggests that one of the most important outcomes of SMART reading is relevance, which he describes as transformation and application. As part of his strategy to sustain relevance, Colm gives a prominent role to the context of the reader, though perhaps without fully acknowledging the levels of influence of the reader on Bible interpretation and engagement noted by Fee and Stuart (2014) or Klein, Blomberg and Hunnard, Jr (2017). Colm recounted an actual example of this when he talked about how one woman he knew had engaged with the story of Noah. As Colm notes, Sarah's[82] way of reading the text was very different to his and her response to the story is definitely not what he had expected:

> *I'm all rainbows and covenant but Sarah was very practical, very down to earth.*
> *[…] We got to the part where Sarah explained her response and her response was*

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[82] Colm did not use the woman's name. I have used the name Sarah for her to enable Colm's narrative and the following comments to read more smoothly.

she was shocked. So I enquired why are you shocked? […]. So Sarah said well I'm

shocked because God actually did it. I said, what do you mean? She says, well,

God told the people the flood was coming, and they were going to get drowned cos

he was going to wipe them off the face of the earth. And he actually did it, and

that's shocking. Because I'm always telling my children if they don't stop doing

such and such, I'll murder them, […] but I don't actually do it. But God did it.

He actually did what he said, and that's shocking. But the most shocking is the

animals. What did the poor animals ever do to deserve getting wiped [out]; they

all got drowned as well. Like it was the people that done the bad stuff not the

animals. So why couldn't God have drowned the people, and not drowned the

animals or done it some other way so as the animals would survive? Then Sarah

says, now who am I going to tell? Well, I'm going to go home and tell himself

(meaning her husband). I'm going to tell himself that from now on, when we have

an argument or a row, we're not doing it in front of the children because they

don't deserve it. Because when him and me fight they get scared and annoyed and

start crying because we're roaring and shouting at each other having an

argument, and it's between him and me, and they get upset and they don't

deserve that, so we're not going to fight in front of the children anymore. And I

thought, never in a million years would I have understood the story of Noah […]

the way Sarah is applying it and changing her life. And, for Sarah, that was a

moment of transformation. (Colm)

In spite of the fact that Colm could not have envisaged this response, he is convinced it was a moment of significant transformation for Sarah. The account was Colm's way of illustrating how life can be examined through the lens of the Bible *'so that our life changes because of what the Bible teaches.'* In Sarah's case there is the potential of transformation on the issues she has highlighted as a result of having engaged with the Noah narrative, though that is not the point of the narrative in its original setting. However, Sarah's experience provides an insight into the contemporising hermeneutic that is used to produce direct relevance from Bible texts for people's lives. The process of how this is done with this particular text is enlightening. For Sarah, it was observing and reflecting on the action of one of the characters in the narrative, in this case God, and looking for some sort of parallel in her own life experience that caused her to ask the questions about her life. As a result, Sarah appears to have been able to transfer her insights about God's action in the Genesis narrative to what appeared to her to be parallel issues that were going on in her own life. The connection between the Genesis narrative and Sarah's life is another example of reading the text as a parallelism of experience, God carries through on his 'threats,' as opposed to following the approaches outlined for evangelical communities for example by Kuhatschek (1996), Doriani (2001) or Klein, Blomberg and Hubbard, Jr (2017), namely what the text meant in its historical context is the basis for contemporary significance. In a similar manner the collateral damage of the effects of God's action, the drowned animals, is likened

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to way in which the children suffer as a result of the arguments between Sarah and her husband. Again, by transferring chosen dimensions of the narrative to her own experiences, Sarah is able to negotiate relevance for the Noah narrative, relevance that Colm recognises he could never have foreseen.

The observations Sarah makes about the Genesis narrative are part of the text, but it is not easy to see how the actions Sarah is proposing could be viewed as part of the intention of the text. The relevance has been generated by using aspects of a devotional frame and may actually be closer to reading the Bible through the lens of life than vice-versa as intended by the SMART process. It would appear Colm is prepared to accept and endorse both Sarah's response and the resulting proposed change of behaviour, perhaps because he regards the proposals as being within what he regards as the general framework of a biblical lifestyle. However, in a devotional frame, as Malley (2004) suggests, Sarah's reading is both acceptable and maybe even encouraged as it is a means to generate relevance and potential transformation.

Bernadette's example provides insight into another approach to generating relevance using the devotional frame.

5.2.4 Bernadette: *'read the Bible a bit differently'*

Bernadette describes how adopting a new approach to the Bible has not only changed how she engages with the text, but has enabled her to see *'a deeper meaning'* to what she reads. The former mode of reading, described as having *'to read a passage or a verse every day'* created some struggles for Bernadette both in terms of the actual practice of reading and the benefit and relevance that she saw from the process. The new approach for Bernadette involves a process of deliberate meditation on selected Bible texts in order to create connections between the text and her daily life. This is a slightly different approach to that related by Colm and Sarah, though in terms of relevance the end result may be very similar. As an example of her new approach to engaging with the Bible, Bernadette recounted how she had chosen to meditate on the Beatitudes (Matt 5:3-12) and use the words of those verses to influence how she did her job:[83]

> *Well actually how I read has changed quite a lot in the last two years. I suppose I grew up in a tradition that kind of said, you know, you have to read a passage or a verse every day and I always struggled to do that to be honest. But in the last couple of years I have been attending sessions with a spiritual director and she has encouraged me to read the Bible a bit differently. So what I tend to do now is meditate on a certain Scripture and that might be the only Scripture I'll meditate*

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[83] Bernadette's practice has some points of contact with more contemplative traditions, including the approach of *lectio divina* (McGrath, 1999; Schneiders, 2002; Maddix, 2018).

on for maybe a month. But I find that there is just a deeper meaning to what I

read by taking that approach. […] At the minute I'm really meditating on the

Beatitudes. I kinda came across that passage as a result of someone saying to me

you should have a look at the Beatitudes and then even consider writing your own

beatitudes. So I read it in a few different versions and there is one version that I've

really liked the words of and that's been my focus for the last couple of weeks. And

it's been amazing to see how those words have applied to so many different

situations and I have been able to draw on those words in so many different

situations over that period of time. It doesn't necessarily mean that I am sitting

down with the Bible in my hand reading those words, but it is more that they're

constantly in my mind and on my heart if that's not a clichéd way of saying it.

You know, as I go about my everyday business. (Bernadette)

The important part of this mode of engaging the Bible for Bernadette is the way

it has allowed her to create relevance for her life and especially for her work

context. She has not explained this fully, but it would appear that deliberately

creating links between the words of the text and her work and life context has

been part of how this has been done. This utilises the devotional frame to create

parallels of experience that enable direct lines to be drawn from the text to life

contexts. Provided these do not contradict wider biblical principles, this is

assumed to be the relevance of the text for Bernadette. In addition, her

approach has also enabled her to shape her identity and understanding of her

work in a way that she regards as flowing directly from the Bible. Bernadette describes how this has functioned for her:

Those words [the Beatitudes] remind me that Jesus understands the life of an everyday person, a normal person, and that he accepts us just how we are. And by actually understanding that transforms how I approach my day. It gives me confidence in tasks perhaps that I'm not so confident in, and that helps me frame my identity in Christ. And not to be too defined by just what's going on in my life but to understand that my truth is that I am who God has created me. […] It's been very liberating. Before I always felt very guilty about not, you know, being the person who had a quiet time[84] every day. I have a really bad short term memory as well so I'm not great at just rhyming off references or verses, that's just not who I am. But this new way has taught me, I suppose confirmed for me, that I'm ok as I am and that God does not ignore me because I don't prescribe to a certain way of reading the Bible. […] With the Beatitudes passage I felt that was God speaking to me in a very direct way; that to me was God speaking. Those words were God's message to me when I needed to hear them. (Bernadette)

This move away from the feeling of having to read a certain amount of the Bible every day has been significant for Bernadette; she describes it as *'very liberating'*.

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[84] This is a term often used to describe time given to personal Bible reading (Grayston, 2002).

Bernadette is questioning the tradition of the *'quiet time'* and the explicit

assumption that a certain way of reading the Bible is prescribed. Bernadette's

new approach to the Bible, however, has allowed her to experience the Bible

both as part of her everyday work life and as a means of direct communication

from God. The result for Bernadette has not just transformed *'how I approach my*

day', but has helped her *'frame my identity'*. Even though Bernadette is drawing

on some elements of contemplative traditions, most of what she describes is

using the devotional frame to construct the relevance she seeks. As Malley

(2004, p. 158) suggests, Bernadette is able to generate relevance because she has

been willing to work at it.

5.3 Chapter summary

As Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b) have observed in their studies, relevance is a

critical factor in shaping the ways in which the participants engage with the

Bible. Malley (2004, p. 146) goes as far as to suggest "evangelicals' Bible reading

is driven by a search for relevance." On the basis of the data analysis, it is an

important factor for Irish evangelicals. However, lying behind the search for

and the appreciation of relevance is a complex interplay of the experiential and

theological.

The participants believe the Bible is a communication from God (Chapter 3) and as such it functions for them as an authoritative text (Section 4.1). When this is set within the framework of relationship with God, then as Malley (2004) observes, the expectation is that God will communicate through the Bible in a way that will be directly relevant to people's lives. The theological perspective of the Spirit as one of the means of God's communication opens the possibility of what Malley (2004, pp. 108–111) describes as a devotional frame as a means for creating and enhancing relevance. In such a frame the usual means of textual interpretation can be by-passed in the pursuit of relevance.

From a practical theology perspective there are forms of lived theology that Ward (2017) suggests raise questions and practices that, as Patton (2002) recognises, may have unintended consequences. That may the case for the use of the devotional frame. While the participants may view it as something to be embraced almost without question, it is important to reflect on how relevance generated in the devotional frame relates to the authority of the Bible, particularly when aspects of the authority attributed to the Bible is transferred to the readings generated in a devotional frame.

This section has examined some of the strategies used by the participants to create the relevance from their engagement with the Bible. Although the experience of transformation was not necessarily the primary focus of the

negotiating of relevance, it was often very closely linked. The main theme of

experiencing transformation will be examined in the next section.

Chapter 6: Experiencing transformation

Thiselton (2005b, p. 17) captures the transformational potential of the Bible when he describes it as a "formative" text. Chapters 3 and 4 provided an experiential matrix that explains aspects of this impact on the participants. If the interviewees regard the Bible as an authoritative text, then as Marshall (2007) suggests, the reality of that commitment should be seen in the ways in which they allow the Bible to shape their lives. As Smallbones (2007) notes one of the expected outcomes of the ways in which the participants conceptualise their engagement with the Bible is transformation. This is confirmed in the experience of the participants:

> *The Bible has transformed my understanding of authority; the Bible has transformed my understanding of family life. And still to this day is transforming it. […] And so the Bible does, how do I put it, what's the word, transform or inform how you live life. (Conor)*

> *It's what has shaped and transformed my whole life because it's introduced me to and maintained and enriched my relationship with God. (George)[85]*

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[85] This segment of data has already been mentioned in Section 3.1.1.

If the Bible is regarded by the participants as God speaking to them personally and relevantly, as noted by George, then putting into practice what they feel God has said to them creates an expectation of change. Conor explains the word of God in his experience as being *'very hard to ignore'* and provides some specific examples:

> *The Bible is so challenging you know what I mean it's so challenging. Like that love your enemy, no I want to get even with my enemy. […] Forgive those who've hurt you; I will but they need to know they've hurt me first, no that's not part of forgive them. So there's just parts of the Bible that's just so challenging and that affects your character and that affects how you respond to the word of God. Cause I can ignore it and go [dismissive wave of hand]. But because I believe it's the word of God it's very hard to ignore it, so it's hard to go [dismissive wave of hand]. No [pause] I can't just ignore it. (Conor)*

As part of the interviews, the participants were given an opportunity to reflect on the sorts of transformations they had experienced as a result of their encounters with the Bible. When people talked about specific examples, they often chose *'literally life-changing'*[86] incidents. These will be examined in Section 6.1.1. However, there were other *'generally not dramatic'* narratives of

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[86] The phrases used to describe the transformations are drawn from the interview data.

transformation that tended to arise almost incidentally as other topics were discussed and were rarely mentioned by the participants as specific examples of transformation. This was true even for those who discussed *'literally life-changing'* examples. These will be examined in Section 6.1.2. Some reflections on the differences in the forms of these narratives of transformation will be explored in Section 6.1.3.

The experience of the Bible as offering a life-shaping framework is another category of the participants' experience of transformation, which is linked to, but distinct from, the narratives of transformation explored in Section 6.1. The participants were not asked about this directly in the interviews, but examples were widespread in the interview data and arose when the interviewees were talking about a range of subject matters. As will be seen, this suggests a more subtle influence of the Bible on the participants, perhaps more akin to that suggested by Kelsey (1975) or Schneiders (2002), moulding emotions, attitudes and character in ways that would appear to be difficult to express in the conventional shape of a narrative of transformation. This sub-theme of experiencing the Bible as a life-shaping framework will be explored in Section 6.2. The chapter will conclude with some reflections on the participants' experience of transformation.

6.1 Narratives of transformation: life-changing and general

The previous chapter highlighted the close links in the interview data between the themes of relevance and transformation. In this section many of the narratives of transformation, particularly those in the category of *'literally life-changing'*, contain many elements that were also coded for the search for relevance theme. The selections below have been coded primarily for the transformation theme as they focus on elements of actual life change and not on more general concepts of relevance.[87] However, understanding some of the links between relevance and transformation in the experience of the participants may help explain some of the characteristics of the data presented in this section.

6.1.1 *'Literally life-changing'*

All of the participants were able to narrate experiences of the Bible being, in some way, an agent of transformation. In the majority of cases, when the participants were encouraged to reflect on how they had experienced these transformations they recounted what were major life incidents. Some of these narratives will be explored in this section.

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[87] See the comments on coding for relevance and transformation at the beginning of Chapter 5.

Aoife recounted a *'literally life-changing'* narrative of transformation which she attributed to her encounters with the Bible. Interestingly, however, she only mentions the Bible in general terms:

> *I was a drug addict. I was on drugs. […] I lost me leg from taking drugs. I lost three brothers from taking drugs […] and then I lost me sister to suicide and I just couldn't handle it. Instead of dealing with that grief in a different way I turned to what killed me brothers; I turned to drugs. […] The Lord saved me life and I think that's basically what everything comes down to, because of the life I lived and where he took me from. If you would've known me or seen me then, I am a totally different person today, a totally different person. All because of the Bible and because of the Lord - definitely. (Aoife)*

Aoife's experience is the most outwardly dramatic of the transformations encountered in the research. She experienced the Bible as a life-saver and regards herself and her life circumstances as having been completely reshaped *'because of the Bible and because of the Lord'*, even though no specific examples of how this happened were offered. When an encounter with the Bible has been so remarkable and *'literally life-changing'*, it is understandable that it becomes lodged in Aoife's memory as a major example of transformation. Aoife has shaped her narrative of transformation to attribute the changes she has experienced both to the Bible and the Lord in the most general of terms,

perhaps in Aoife's case this experience is also embedded in her narrative of conversion to the Christian faith.[88] This might be one of the reasons Aoife's narrative of transformation did not follow the more general pattern of these narratives. From the point of view of this research, it is interesting that her conversion experience was to the sort of framework of relationship with God present in the interview data which includes relating to God through the Bible.

David's encounter with the Bible was, in his own words, *'literally pivotal and life-changing'*. As he recounted the experiences, the depth at which it touched his life means that he still gets *'emotional thinking about it'* and his emotion was evident as he talked (this is difficult to fully appreciate in print):

> *It [the Bible] changed me life, literally. I grew up thinking I was a mistake, that I [pause] shouldn't be on the planet. Just nothing on purpose but stuff that was said. I was the last of eight kids; me ma and da were very old. So there was a lot of stuff said when I was a kid that left me with a belief system that I didn't belong here and that I was taking up space, that I shouldn't be here. And then I got saved. A while into that, probably a couple of years after that, I read two Scriptures. One was Psalm 139, where it said that I was knitted together in my*

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[88] Conversion narratives are common in evangelical circles. Bebbington (1989, p. 271) argues what he terms "conversionism" is one of the defining characteristics of the evangelical movement. Luhrmann (2012) also notes the role of conversion stories in evangelical communities.

mother's womb, and the second one was Ephesians 2:10, which is that I'm God's

masterpiece created to do good works that he planned in advance. And the two of

those Scriptures changed my belief system about me. (David)

This experience has had a major impact on David and his understanding of

himself and his life. It is as though the Bible addressed a major emotional deficit

in his life that had caused him to ask questions about his value and his very

existence. This may be one reason why David's description is more concrete

than Aoife's. For David, this experience and its outworking was *'massive'*, so

much so that he referred to it on various occasions throughout the interview:

God set me free. And he used the Bible to do it. […] It was like a light switch went

on but then I had to learn to walk me way around it, in a bright room instead of a

dark room. […] It was like lights going on, it was emotional, it was physical, it

was in every shape that I could think of it affected me, and still does. […] Like

literally life-changing; literally it changed the way my marriage was, it changed

the way my life was, it changed the way my parenting went, it changed

everything about me. (David)

An experience of this magnitude is very likely to influence David's perception

of the Bible. These experiences are, in David's own words, rare; he is happy this

is the case as he is sure *'he wouldn't be able for it'* as emotionally he would be *'a*

mess'. This has meant he has also had to find ways in which to relate the Bible to the more mundane experiences of life:

> *I wouldn't be able for it [life-changing encounters with the Bible; the two verses].*
>
> *I'm telling you now, I'd be a mess. […] Like I can tell you that that's the*
>
> *monumental stuff, other than that there have been milestones, but no monuments,*
>
> *not like mountainous stuff like they were. That was like God broke something that*
>
> *day. (David)*

David's *'mountainous'* experience is a one-off, yet it is still the experience that comes to his mind when he is asked about transformation. This is the case even though he is aware that there are other less intense *'milestones'* of transformation.

In a similar manner Adam does not experience regular interventions from God in his engagement with the Bible, but it has happened:

> *People talk about how God gives them a word from Scripture; that has rarely*
>
> *happened to me. But it has on one occasion and I can't explain how it happened.*
>
> *For me three sections of Scripture that were revealed to me almost simultaneously*
>
> *were extraordinarily helpful to me at a very difficult time in my career when I was*
>
> *kind of a broken man. [They] were very helpful to me in restoring my focus on*

God as being in control and therefore I needn't worry. It was a bit like in John

Bunyan's book[89] when Pilgrim comes to the cross and his burden rolls off his back;

it was a bit like that with me. The burden rolled off my back, but I had no specific

answer to my problem. All I knew was that I could trust God and that was

revealed to me specifically in three passages, well two, essentially two passages of

Scripture. [They] spoke to me about well you've got your focus wrong, you've

been waiting for all these phone calls from men, you know. Do not put your trust

in princes, trust only in me.[90] And then the other one was 'God will not allow you

to be tempted beyond what you can stand but with everything will provide a way

of escape.'[91] And so this was God saying to me, look remember who I am, and I

love you. […] [This was] highly significant to me at that time. (Adam)

The incident described by Adam happened towards the beginning of his career,

probably over 30 years ago; Adam is now retired. This incident is the only one

of major significance that Adam was able to remember, even though he was

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[89] Adam is referring to *Pilgrim's Progress.*

[90] The first part of this phrase is from Psalm 146:3; the second part of the phrase (*'trust only in me'*) may be derived in part from Psalm 146:5 (Blessed are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God). Alternatively it might be that Adam has extrapolated the text and coalesced the relevance that he experienced with the original text itself. If it is the latter, this is further evidence of how a devotional frame can work with Bible texts to make them relevant to life situations (Malley, 2004).

[91] This quotation is from 1 Corinthians 10:13. Adam's interpretation of the text includes elements of a devotional frame to create relevance. He has constructed a parallelism of experience to allow him to describe his experience in the words of 1 Corinthians 10 as it would be very difficult to describe his situation as one of temptation, unless he means it as a possible temptation to not trust God.

convinced that the Bible has shaped him in many more ways than just this one incident:

> *The Scriptures then influenced how Jane [Adam's wife] and I related to each other, whether or not we had intercourse before marriage, whether we lived together before marriage. So that had a huge influence. And then how we saw marriage and how we continue to see marriage. When it came to raising our children it had similar influence […] the principles of family living, principles of how we look upon our possessions, the principles of how we use our home in hospitality, in how we use our possessions or what our attitude to them should be. These are all things that have been influenced in our lives by the Scriptures and continue to be so. How we relate to each other interpersonally, the whole area of conflict, the sense of respecting others above yourself, these are all based on Scripture. And so you know right from the get go and with each challenge we have been very fortunate not to have much tragedy in our lives. We've had illness but very little tragedy, but when serious illness has been around and when we look to the future, with the possibility of serious illness, it's influenced by the fact that we believe God to be faithful and utterly trustworthy and we know that we don't live for ever and so death has no fear for us because the Scriptures tell us what our ultimate destiny is. The passage [though death] might not be particularly enjoyable but the ultimate destination is guaranteed and so we have nothing to fear. So everything in life really. (Adam)*

Adam can point to a fairly comprehensive range of areas of his life where the Bible has transformed and shaped how he lives, but none have the elements of the more dramatic experience earlier in his life. This is significant and may point to an underlying expectation that a narrative of more direct influence is to be preferred as a narrative of transformation. Adam's choice of response may be linked to the fact that he is able to construct the narrative in terms of the *'one occasion'* where *'God gives […] a word from Scripture'*. However, according to Adam's narrative of how the Bible has been an influence on his life, the more ordinary, at least as Adam seems to suggest, shaping of the Scripture would seem to be, in practice, more profound and far-reaching than a one-off reassurance about an interview process (even if the interview did influence his career pathway).

Some of the transformations experienced can be very immediate and direct. Aoife recounted how the influence of the Bible led her to her husband and, in this case, with a better result than the incident recounted by Alice in Section 4.4.1:

> *I didn't have the strong understanding, well good understanding, as I do now. […] But I got a word from the Lord. […] I was praying and asking the Lord are you after bringing this man into my life, am I meant to spend the rest of me life with this man? I would never ever let meself go there in me head of picturing*

meself being married or having a family or even having a house, cause I was

always convinced I was going to be dead. […] I wanted to know was this real. […]

I remember praying and I was reading the word [the Bible]. […] I remember the

Lord say, I got Matthew from the Scripture, Matthew 29:11 is it? [92] *What God*

joins together let no man separate. […] I was praying about me husband and were

we right for each other and that's what I got so strong. […] This is going to

probably sound crazy but I rang him from America and that morning while he

was in prayer the pastor was after coming over to him and interrupted in the

middle of prayer and said to him I really feel I have to give you this from the Lord

and he was given the same Scripture. So that's sort of really made us believe, yeah

I believed that was the very first time I heard from the Lord. (Aoife)

Jesus' pronouncement in Matthew 19:6 occurs in the context of a discussion

with the Pharisees on the issue of divorce in a first century context (Davies and

Allison, 1997). The statement in v.6 is presented in the pericope as Jesus'

starting point for the argument and comment that will follow. In the context of

Matthew's Gospel, France (2007; see also Hagner, 2008) argues it is a statement

of general principle. The important thing to note from Aoife's narrative is that

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[92] This phrase is from Matthew 19:6; the Gospel of Matthew has 28 chapters. The textual reference Aoife recalls (Matthew 29:11) is not in the Bible. Suggesting a specific textual reference is probably a way of noting that the words Aoife mentions are actually in the Bible. This may be evidence in a personal instance of what Malley (2004, pp. 80–81) argues is true of the "interpretive tradition" of evangelicals which is characterised by being "keen to establish some kind of connection between their beliefs and the Bible" where life choices are negotiated in a similar manner to beliefs.

she has appropriated the general principle as a *'word from the Lord'* for herself in her immediate situation. She was reading the Bible looking for guidance on the matter of a potential husband, an activity Malley (2004, pp. 106–107) describes as "spending time sifting through the text for the way in which it might be relevant." It is in the context of her ongoing relationship with God, expressed in this instance as *'praying and […] reading the word'*, that she finds a text that becomes relevant for her and will ultimately lead to a significant change in her life. The devotional frame has allowed Aoife to appropriate a general statement on marriage as a statement of God's specific direction for her. The timing of her encounter with the text is also significant as Aoife had the question of marriage in her mind. The combination of relevance and timing are key elements of a devotional frame (Malley, 2004) and, for Aoife, has led to the transformation she describes.

Emma is convinced that the Bible is transformative because for her *'it's alive'*:

> *[The Bible] It's living, it's life, it's alive, it's not words. It's transformative. You can't read it and not be changed, Well you can actually; you can read it and not be changed. But if you are reading it to find God you will find God, you will learn about yourself. It's the Bible for how we do life. (Emma)*

The transformational potential of the Bible is most obvious for Emma when it is located in the context of relationship with God. If the relationship dimension is not part of the engagement, Emma suggests that transformation will, at best, be limited. In Emma's experience, there is one defining experience that *'completely changed'* how she engages with the Bible. Emma found this difficult to talk about, but she is clear that in the midst of the emotional pain and trauma of bereavement and loss, the Bible was very important in enabling her to go through the experience and to process aspects of it:

I guess there's been one defining situation in my life which completely changed how I read the Bible and experience the Bible, and it was the loss of a close family member. It's hard to articulate this, but up until that point everything that I had learned in the Bible, it was at a different level. I didn't even grasp what faith was. […] When life gets tough I was presented with a choice. I either hold on to what I say I believe when I'm singing on a Sunday and the sun is shining through the window and everything's great, or I walk the opposite direction. And I remember it was as clear as that […] and that really was transformative in my relationship with God and how I read the Bible. […] The Bible was absolutely huge. Obviously going through the grief process of that loss, and, you know, knowing that from what I'd learned in the Bible that God is sovereign and that he's in control and that he's a good God. And even though this hurts, God is a good God and that I cannot look, you know, at this situation and let it change the God that I

discovered in the Bible. […] So passages that really, Matthew 14, you know

keeping your eyes on Jesus, Psalm 40, they were my anchors. Pulling me out of

that pit. I realised I was in a pit. A complete pit of blindness, and out of that

situation God pulled me out of it [using the Bible]. (Emma)

Emma's narrative is similar to many of the other narratives of transformation in that an important factor is some form of major life transition or trauma. Without any Bible engagement and reflection Emma's experience of the loss of her family member by itself could be a life-shaping influence. When such a painful incident is linked to an accompanying experience of transformation as a result of engaging with the Bible, it is understandable that for Emma these have become inseparable; the memory of the influence of the Bible has become part of the memory of her family member.

Emma is aware of the magnitude of the transformation she has experienced. She expresses elements of it with allusions to the Bible passages she refers to: *'keeping your eyes on Jesus'* and *'pulling me out of that pit'*. This may be an example of the "text-linking" notes by Rogers (2016, p. 104). Again, part of the reason implied for the transformation is the relevance Emma experienced from the biblical texts she encounters. By its very nature Psalm 40 is somewhat generic (Goldingay, 2006). Emma recounts how she appropriated the language of the psalm (being in a pit) for herself. It is not difficult to appreciate the parallels of

experience. However, Emma's use of Matthew 14 is an example of some of the

interpretive manoeuvres adopted by evangelical faith communities to enable

selected Bible texts to be appropriated as relevant, a mechanism that is possible

in a devotional frame. Rather than read the pericope of Matthew 14:22-34

simply as an incident in the life of Jesus,[93] it is being read as an example of how

to face hardships in life. The storm in the story is taken to represent any

hardship or hurdle in life. As part of the reading of the text Peter's failure to

keep walking on the water is attributed to his concern with being overcome by

the situation ("when he saw the wind, he was afraid and, beginning to sink,

cried out") and his inability to keep his eyes on Jesus, though the text does not

say this directly. This creative expansion of the text is an example of how

evangelical interpretation is willing to go "beyond the text as given" (Malley,

2004, p. 117) to create the relevance that in turn becomes the impetus for

transformation.

Another aspect of this narrative of transformation is the way in which the Bible

has enabled Emma to negotiate the questions of theodicy that this experience

raised for her: *'I either hold on to what I say I believe [...] or I walk the opposite*

direction'. Emma decided not to allow the death of her family member, *'even*

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[93] The pericope and the one preceding it in Matthew raise questions about the historicity of the accounts (Davies and Allison, 1991; Hagner, 2008). Davies and Allison (1991, p. 498) suggest the primary function of the narrative is as an "epiphany which brings rescue." France (2007) suggests there may be elements of lessons for discipleship in Matthew's representation of Peter.

though this hurts,' to *'change the God that I discovered in the Bible.'* This is an example of how the Bible shapes the framework of relationship with God that is at the heart of Emma's experience. When life incidents raise questions, Emma has chosen to allow how she experiences the character of God to shape her responses, including the dynamics of her ongoing relationship with God. This is evidence of the strength and resilience which the framework of relationship to God has been for Emma.

In Colm's case, the transforming power of the Bible reaches even to the point of cultural and political identity, which in the context of Ireland and its history represents very significant levels of change:[94]

> *My experience of just reading it [the Bible] and applying it to life, it has been life-changing. That devotional reading of the Bible isn't just a nice thought for the day, the way you might get from a Daily Bread devotional study.[95] It's that devotional study of the word of God in applying it to my life changes my life, changes my attitudes. It was life-changing for me. I'm from the North from a very Unionist area of the North, and for me my ancient enemy is […] the Irish. I always had a very stereotypical view […] and what they were and what they*

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[94] Some of these issues are addressed by the essays in Anderson and Kearney (2018).

[95] Colm is referring to a devotional publication published either by Daily Bread Ministries (USA) or Scripture Union (UK). Both organisations publish daily reading devotionals under the title *Daily Bread*.

weren't, what they were good for and what they weren't good for. Their people

killed my people, for generations. They're my mortal enemy: Irish Republicans.

And the word of God changed my life to the point where I was willing to cross

that border from the North to Republic and actually live in the capital of my

enemy, who is no longer my enemy, because the word of God changed my life.

That reading of the Bible brought about a 180 degree turn around in my life, a

transformation. (Colm)

When asked to expand on some of the dimensions of how the Bible had

changed some of his political and cultural outlook, Colm recounted his

experience of a range of significant changes:

I went from my MP[96] being […] from DUP to Fianna Fail in terms of political

representation. There has been a political change in coming out of the North […]

It was the Bible that brought about that change, maybe a gradual change. […] I

hadn't worked out all the changes before I moved, but in the transition I was

coming to terms with generations of animosity and hatred and bitterness and

suspicion. In moving through Dublin I started to get to know Republicans, who

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[96] Members of the Irish government, the Dail, are referred to as TDs (Teachta Dála) in the Republic of Ireland. This does not take away from Colm's comment that he is *'probably more Republican than Northern'*. Colm is using the language of Northern Ireland when he is talking about MPs, most likely because he is using his background in northern unionist culture as a base for the comparison he is making.

made it very clear that they were Republicans and they knew I was from Northern

Ireland […] and they made it very clear what they thought about that. But I

found that as I got to know them I got to understand them, which is something I

never would have done if it weren't for the Bible, if it weren't for the application

and the discipline that comes from becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ and an

understanding of what that means. So, yeah, a political change, cultural as well

because I'm now probably more republican than northern. […] It's brought about

maybe as well emotional change, emotional healing. I had family members blown

up by the IRA; I have been able to come to the point of forgiving whoever that was

because the perpetrator, the actual individuals were never caught or brought to

justice. […] The peace agreement and amnesty[97] means we probably never will

find out who committed that crime, and killed the family members. But I've come

to the point of saying that I forgive them, and being able to forgive them, even

though I have not met them personally […] But I feel within myself that sense of

injustice that I would have felt is not there anymore. […] I can't say I love my

neighbour if I hate republicans; I can't be true to Scripture if I have bitterness

against someone else for what they did. (Colm)

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[97] The Belfast/Good Friday Agreement of 1998 led to the early release of prisoners convicted of acts of violence during the Northern Ireland 'Troubles'. The Citizens Information website (2019) provides a basic summary of the agreement. The full text of the agreement can be accessing on the UK Government website (Northern Ireland Office, 1998).

Such major changes do not happen easily or quickly, and not without a considerable re-orientation of thinking and attitudes. Colm is convinced that the changes are attributable to the way he has engaged with the Bible:

So that's partly how I read the Bible in terms of devotional, in terms of discipleship. And that requires discipline; when the word of God is applied to your life, it takes discipline. […] (Colm)

These changes in Colm are major and did not happen in a short space of time. However, in describing the changes Colm recounted several minor incidents in the overall process where the Bible was directly relevant to him and to this process. It would appear that for Colm the narrative of transformation would be incomplete without these examples of how the overall transformation had been underpinned by the direct relevance of the Bible.

Brian's experience might not be quite as far-reaching as Colm's, but, interestingly, occurs at a similar point of transition in his life:

I haven't had the experience so very much of individual texts being formative, though I've had a wee bit of that. One example from earlier on in my life would have been when my family of origin were contemplating a move […] to Ireland when I was in my adolescence. And this, for me, was something of a personal crisis cos being a self-preoccupied teenager I did not think that my parents were

acting in my interests in contemplating this move. I read a passage from

1 Timothy 5:8 which speaks of the importance of looking after one's relatives and

that not to do so would be worse than an unbeliever. So that particular text spoke

to me in a very meaningful way at that point in my life and there have been maybe

one or two other instances of that sort of thing but that's been a relative rarity in

my experience. (Brian)

Brian acknowledges that the experience of *'individual texts being formative'* has

'been a relative rarity in my experience'. Yet, when asked about the ways in which

he has experienced transformation as a result of any sort of Bible influence, he

has chosen to recount this particular scenario where an individual text is

formative. This suggests that *'individual texts being formative'*, no matter how far

in the past the incident occurred, may represent for Brian some sort of ideal

pattern of expectation for how the Bible should function in the facilitation of

transformation.

Brian's comments also support Malley's observation (2004, p. 111) that one of

the factors which are significant for finding relevance in a devotional frame of

Bible engagement is the "timing of an individual's encounter with a particular

text."[98] The following incident recounted by Brian suggests that it is not just

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[98] See also the comments earlier in this section about Aoife's experience.

relevance that is linked to timing, but the potential for transformation is also linked to when a text is encountered or brought to the reader's attention. Malley (2004) suggests when these experiences occur together it is an indicator to the person using a devotional frame of reading that they have heard the direct communication of God. This is further evidence of the close link between experience of relevance and the construction of narratives of transformation:

> *There was a personal crisis that I went through […] some years ago which resulted in me stepping down from the eldership of the church that we belonged to at the time. After that traumatic week, my wife and myself went to another church, quite at random as far as we were concerned. And the speaker on that Sunday in that particular church […] spoke from Ephesians 4 on Christian unity. But he brought to it an understanding that felt like he had been with us all that previous week. It was the most extraordinary message. He put his finger on some of the issues that we'd been grappling with. […] I wouldn't be given to being demonstrative, my wife perhaps would be somewhat, but we both just bawled our eyes out because the message so evidently had our names on it and the preacher was completely unknown to us. […] [This was] God's reassurance to us at a very personal level that although we'd been through the very deepest of waters that he had not abandoned us. And that he was speaking to us through […] this passage from Ephesians 4. So that was momentous. (Brian)*

This narrative of transformation illustrates the close interconnection of some of the themes explored in this study. One of the characteristics of the devotional frame for reading is the expectation that God will speak to people through the Bible. The issue of timing can also be an important element in making God's communication relate directly to a person's life context. In this case it is encountering the comments of the preacher on a somewhat familiar Bible passage in the midst of personal struggle that creates the context to hear the passage as relevant and as being a word from God (Malley, 2004, ch 3). Ephesians 4 is a part of a general epistle that addresses some issues of church unity (Lincoln, 1990); Brian and his wife appear to have been generally familiar with the text before this incident. However, it is the point at which they encounter the text and the nature of the encounter that adds additional levels of relevance for them. Brian's comments are evidence of Malley's (2004, ch 3) observation that the ways in which a preacher appropriates and enlarges on a text in the sermon facilitates the creation of connection and relevance. It is unlikely that the text of Ephesians 4 could describe exactly what Brian and his wife had been experiencing. Brian and his wife regarded the incident as God speaking directly to them through Ephesians 4, providing for them an experience of reassurance, comfort and transformation. This was clearly something that was very important to Brian and his wife, as their uncharacteristic deep emotional response suggests.

Kevin's narrative of how the Bible shaped his future captures some of the same cluster of elements that have been identified as contributing to *'literally life-changing'* transformations: the timing of the encounter with the biblical text, the use of a devotional reading frame to create and negotiate relevance, and the expectation that God will speak directly from the Scriptures to a personal life situation (something that is often closely linked to the previous two elements being in place):

> *The other one would that comes to mind is [our relocation]. And it isn't that I read anything specific. It's just that when we began to think about our move, I just kept coming across the story of Abraham, pick up your tent and move on, pick up your tent and move on, without really knowing what that meant to us. So I began to write notes on that.[99] And eventually actually someone rang us [...] and they didn't know what I was going through. [He] was a bit of a hot headed guy, you know something like the prophetic, whatever that means. He said to my wife (I was in the bath), 'I just want to tell you I feel to say to Kevin you need to pick up your tent and move on.' And he had no idea I'd been reading about Abraham. There's a lot more than that, it wasn't just that, but again Scripture was used in a quite a pivotal way. (Kevin)*

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[99] Luhrmann (2012, p. 54ff) draws attention to a journaling activity in the context of prayer in Vineyard churches to help the members to process and make sense of what God might be saying to them in response to their prayers.

Other participants told similar narratives of how the Bible had been instrumental in various life transformations. It is significant that for nearly all of the participants these narratives of transformation are often located at a considerable distance in the past, often involving either a major life incident or some sort of personal crisis. In one or two cases the incident was part of the beginning of a faith journey. As already noted, the way in which the questions were asked may have been partly responsible for the ways in which the interviewees' narratives were constructed. However, as soon as I realised the interview questions may have been understood as only asking for major transformations I changed the focus of the questions to facilitate responses that were examples from the more recent past and could include examples of the *'generally not dramatic'* transformations that had cropped up in other part of the interview data. In spite of this change, the general direction of the responses remained the same. The number of answers that were located in the distant past was surprising, and this seemed to be the case no matter how the interview questions were framed.

The pattern of response suggests the preference for the *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation has its basis in how the participants think the Bible facilitates transformation and their understanding of how transformation should be described. *'Literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation had two notable characteristics: a very clear experience of a cause and effect

relationship between one or more Bible texts and the subsequent

transformation, and a very strong experience of relevance often created using a

contemporising hermeneutic or devotional frame. This does not mean the

participants were unaware of more low-key experiences of the Bible's shaping

in their lives. As will be observed below, the same people who chose to talk

about major incidents in the distant past were also very comfortable talking

about their current experience of the Bible in more mundane, framework

shaping and influencing terms when they were not talking specifically about

transformation. This suggests the participants may not consider these '*generally*

not dramatic' transformations to represent their understanding of transformation

in the same way as the *'literally life-changing'* incidents described above.

There is an element of paradox in this situation. The interviewees' construction

of *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation appear to have been

shaped by elements of expectation of an ideal model of such an experience.

However, none of the participants were able to articulate regular and ongoing

transformations from the Bible in this sort of pattern; consciously choosing

examples from the distant past to match the perceived ideal model is evidence

of that. It is significant that when the focus of the conversation was something

other than transformation, all of the interviewees were able to talk very

naturally about experiences of continual, contemporary, ongoing shaping

influences of the Bible on their lives; see below for some examples. This

suggests the participants' idealised model of how the Bible should work in the experience of transformation may, in practice, result in them not being able to fully appreciate the experiences that do not match the sought after paradigms. Kevin expresses aspects of this, especially in the recognition that for 95% of the time he has experienced no dramatic changes as a result of his engagement with the Bible:

[How the Bible has made a difference] in my life. [… The] thought that come to mind is probably not nearly enough. . […] I think when I come to Scripture there are moments, and I've have this experience where it has been life-changing, you know, it's kind of almost altered the DNA within me. Now that's not often enough; that's partly cos I don't read it well enough. […] I am expecting something, but I wouldn't say 95% of the time that I necessarily am inspired to make a dramatic change in my life. (Kevin)

As will be seen below, the *'generally not dramatic'* transformations may be equally as profound, and in some cases more so, and in many cases are more long lasting. In an effort to highlight the impact of the Bible on their lives it is possible that the participants and their faith communities may actually be inadvertently downplaying its more sustained and ongoing influence.

Bernadette's comment may inadvertently express what is happening in practice:

I think I underestimate the Bible constantly. (Bernadette)

These are issues those working with faith communities should be aware of and engage.

The *'literary life-changing'* narratives of transformation considered above are one part of a bigger picture. The other perspective that needs to be considered are the *'generally not dramatic'* transformations. These will be considered in Section 6.1.2.

6.1.2 *'Generally not dramatic'*

Alongside the narratives of *'literally life-changing'* transformations, the participants also experienced what might be termed *'generally not dramatic'* changes. They were expressed in more guarded and even understated terms than the *'literally life-changing'* incidents. This is in keeping with the suggestion noted above that an idealised model of how transformation should be expressed is shaping both participants' understanding of their experiences and the way in which the resulting narratives are constructed. The *'generally not*

dramatic' transformations provide an additional window on the participants'

experiences of Bible engagement and its influence on their lives.

In Section 6.1.1, Bernadette's tendency to *'underestimate the Bible'* was noted. At

the same time as acknowledging this shortcoming, she was able to recount how

she adapts her strategy of engaging with the Bible to ensure the process

produces some results. Again, even if Bernadette is still *'figuring out'* her

relationship to the Bible, the results of her engagement have been very

significant for her:

> *I'm still figuring that [relationship to the Bible] out. […] When I really do*
>
> *meditate on Scripture I really see its transformative effect on my life. I feel like I*
>
> *probably could do that more or whatever but I've never failed to meditate on*
>
> *Scripture and to learn something or to feel loved, or to feel comforted or to be*
>
> *surprised. So there's a lot of different emotions related to reading the Bible.*
>
> *(Bernadette)*

Even though Bernadette does not regard her engagement with the Bible as *'a big*

thing', she has experienced significant transformational change in her life:

> *I guess I like to be in control of things as well and like a transformation that I have*
>
> *gone through is back to identity and understanding that actually I'm God's*
>
> *creation. I am not the one doing the work, God is doing the work through me, you*

know, and that gives a totally different perspective. I'm not solely responsible for everything that happens in [my place of work] or in life generally and, you know, the responsibility does not sit solely on my shoulders. I am co-operating with Jesus and that's what it actually means to be a Christian. […] I know that doesn't seem like maybe like a big thing but that has been hugely transforming for me. […] Since I've done that like my personal life has changed immensely. I have a much better sense of balance in my life, my family has obviously been more positively impacted. […] I'm a more holistic person. I'm not just defined by my work; I'm defined by all the different things that make me. (Bernadette)

Perhaps because she is unable to construct her narrative in the stereotypical pattern of direct cause and effect noted in the preceding section, Bernadette feels she is still *'figuring out'* her relationship to the Bible. Even though Bernadette is not able to draw direct lines between her experience of Bible passages and particular incidents of change, she has experienced the Bible as an agent of transformation (*'hugely transforming for me*) particularly in the area of her identity.

Daniel talked about some examples of engaging with the Bible from his past which were *'transformative for me'* and where he knew *'for certain that God was speaking to me'*. Even though he was unable to cite any *'major examples now'* he

continues to adopt approaches to the Bible that he believes will be both influential and transformational:

> *I've gone through phases where I've kept journals and would have noticed things. The last number of years as part of how I read Scripture now I would use a note app. […] I sort of just try and have just one verse, or maybe one phrase of a verse, that I hold on to from that passage that I've read. And, you know, sometimes I might just repeat it to myself to try and sort of gently memorise it. […] Whatever the phase would be would just be there and I'd write that in and just as a little record of the things. So I know that is my own pattern of reading that I'm looking for that. […] That would be my experience, but not always dramatic, generally not dramatic. (Daniel)*

This strategy correlates with the ways in which Daniel looks for relevance, namely looking for things that strike him or jump out at him; these were examined in Section 5.2.1. If these are going to have an impact Daniel needs to have a way of recording them and processing them; journaling in the manner described here appears to work for him.[100] The end result of the process is, for Daniel, *'generally not dramatic'*.

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[100] See the footnote comment in 6.1.1 on journaling as a means of making sense of what God is saying.

Dermot expressed his experience of transformation by the Bible in terms of the principles that he has encountered:

> *Certainly if the Scripture says it, like, I believe it, and I want to do it. And I do do it as far as I can in many ways, you know. But, very humbly saying that […] realising that there's probably a hundred things I haven't done as well. […] It's principles that engage with me emotionally as well as intellectually. […] There are hundreds of examples, particularly Jesus. Ah, Paul too but Jesus I suppose centrally. […] How I bring up my children, in terms of their teaching them the way of the Lord, would be from the Bible. (Dermot)*

Dermot's explanations of how principles derived from the Bible function for him as a means for potential transformation were part of his reflection on how he has experienced the authority of the Bible in practice. He was not being asked directly about transformation at this point in the interview. It is notable that in this context the issue of transformation crops up. If the Bible is an authoritative source, then, as far as Dermot is concerned, if he puts it into practice his life will be transformed in some fashion.

Some of the participants who recounted dramatic narratives of transformation also talked about more mundane experiences. However, there was a marked contrast in the ways in which they did this. In addition to the *'literally life-*

changing' transformation recounted by Brian in the previous section (6.1.1), he also talked about what he termed a much more *'trivial example'*:

> *A trivial example would be some months ago I heard a message[101] that challenged us as to how we look after our bodies. And I have, since hearing that message, backed down from taking the strongest strength of coffee on the work's coffee machine to taking the middle of the road one. [Laughter]. (Brian)*

Brian was one of the participants who readily acknowledged the more mundane transformations as a result of engaging with the Bible, but mostly in contexts where transformation was not the focus of the conversation. Even though Brian labels the choice of coffee as *'trivial'*, it highlights the sort of life detail Brian is prepared to allow the Bible to address.[102]

Emma was able to specify a range of general issues where the Bible had shaped her life, even if she did not say how the transformations had taken place:

> *Where the Bible has helped me? Everyday life, like not worrying about money, and finances and bills. Not worrying about my children and their health and*

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[101] Brian is referring to a sermon.

[102] For further examples of Brian's experience of the Bible as shaping framework see Sections 6.2.1 and 6.2.2.

things that have happened to them. Just, you know, God's protection and his love,

and his provision. It's everything now, every situation now there's no road bump

that God's hand is not upon in our lives. And, you know, I get that now. (Emma)

In this case the more general influence of the Bible to shape Emma's *'not*

worrying about money, and finances and bills […] about my children and their health'

is part of the broader matrix of relationship with God that Emma talks about.

The Bible has enabled Emma to view important aspects of her life through the

lens of her understanding and experience of this relationship. In terms of

shaping and transformation, this may actually be very similar to the more major

incident of the loss of her family member she recounts in Section 6.1.1, though it

is not talked about in the same fashion. Emma's narrative of the *'literally life-*

changing' transformation was considerably longer and more detailed than the

answer given above. The contrast between the ways these incidents are

reported is marked and is further evidence suggesting there is a difference in

perception between the more dramatic and more ordinary experiences of

transformation.

Sections 6.1.1 and 6.1.2 have highlighted some of the contrasts of how the

participants explain their experiences of transformation that exist in the data.

The following section will reflect on some significant aspects of this.

6.1.3 Comparing the dramatic and the ordinary: a reflection

Some of the contrasts between the stories of *'literally life-changing'* transformation and the *'generally not dramatic'* influences provide an insight into some of the unspoken expectations of the participants and perhaps more widely into the ways in which both their expectation and experience may have been shaped by wider concerns in the faith communities to which they belong.

It has already been noted that the way in which the participants' *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation were constructed seems to presuppose some sort of idealised or stereotypical shape to narratives of transformation. Luhrmann (2012, p. 7) notes that stories of conversion are valued and "are told again and again in evangelical churches." These stories have a form that is recognised: "the story of a crisis, a sharp confrontation with humiliation or despair, and a turning point at which [the person] consciously chose Christ" (Luhrmann, 2012, p. 7). While not following exactly the same form as the stories of conversion, the narratives of transformation bear a strong resemblance in places and seem to have a similar sort of recognised and accepted shape. This suggests participants' expectations and understandings of transformation are being shaped by factors which have their origins in the faith communities to which they belong. If, as appears to be the case, the *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation are regarded in this way, the significance of the more ordinary (*'generally not dramatic'*) transformations may, in practice, be

diminished. And yet, as has been noted above, some of these more ordinary transformations have had significant long-term, life-changing effects. The fact that they were not talked about as examples of transformation highlights a potential weakness in the understanding and experience of transformation in evangelical communities. There may well be a much richer and more wide-ranging variety of things occurring in such communities that could be labelled as transformation. If the narratives of transformation can be extended to include and embrace the more ordinary, there is a possibility that a much more widespread experience of whole life transformation, resembling the models suggested by Peterson (2005) and Holmes and Williams (2007), might be possible as a result of Bible engagement. If the shaping influences of Section 6.2 could also be regarded as narratives of transformation there is potential for significant empowerment in this area for people who engage with the Bible as part of their faith expression.

One of the factors that might influence such narratives of transformation is the concept of relevance. As noted in Chapter 5 the direct, personal relevance of the Bible is highly valued in evangelical communities. As a result, the participants may feel one of the ways to display this relevance is to construct narratives of transformation which demonstrates God that speaks directly to people through the Bible and as a result their lives are changed. The interviewees are prepared to select narratives from as far back as necessary to meet this expectation. For

the *'generally not dramatic'* narratives of transformation noted in Section 6.1.2, a narrative of God speaking directly to people cannot be constructed as easily and the cause and effect links tend to be much more tenuous. As a consequence, they are unlikely to be construed as the apparently more valued *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation. As long as there is a significant pressure within the evangelical community to construe transformation as being in some way proportional both to the experience of God speaking directly to an individual and to the perception of personal relevance (Malley, 2004), there is every likelihood that narratives constructed with these elements are likely to be prized, no matter how long in the past they have occurred. If this analysis is accurate, one of the consequences could be an undervaluing of the Bible's potential to transform people's lives or the creation of an obstacle to those who feel they have not had this sort of experience, as the significant level of life and lifestyle shaping that was reported in the interviews may not be matching what is regarded as real transformation. If people do not regard the more ordinary transformations as significant, ultimately they will be disempowered in their engagement with the Bible.

None of the above comments take away from the very significant body of evidence in the interview data that the participants have actually experienced the Bible as a shaping influence, even if the participants seem to choose not to talk about it as an example of transformation. This shaping influence of the

Bible is so prominent and pervasive in the interview data that it needs to be treated as a separate category. The next section will explore and analyse aspects of the participants' experience of how the Bible shapes their lives.

6.2 Bible: shaping framework for life

Linked to and yet distinct from the narratives of transformation of Section 6.1 are the ways in which the participants recounted how they had experienced the Bible moulding and shaping their lives. This material is often talked about in a different way to the narratives of transformation and does not follow the patterns noted in Section 6.1. This awareness and experience that the Bible was a shaping influence surfaced more often in the data than the more stereotypical narratives of transformation, often without being asked for and most of the time as a very natural part of the conversation. This section will examine and analyse these experiences as they provide a slightly different window on the influence of the Bible in the participants' lives.

The participants, whether they are consciously aware of it, seem to have inherited a tradition of experiencing the Bible as a formative and life-shaping text as part of their faith communities (Ward, 2017). The evidence from the experiences recounted suggests they have not just accepted the tradition, but happily inhabit it and make it their own. The ways in which the interviewees

describe these experiences will provide some insights into aspects of the

underlying, often unspoken and unexamined, assumptions and understandings

about the Bible and the world and life views and practices that their

engagement with it creates.

Three aspects of the shaping influence of the Bible will be examined. The first

subsection (6.2.1) will examine the ways in which the participants described

their experience of the Bible as providing a narrative within which they were

able to locate themselves and live. Subsection 6.2.2 will focus on specific

instances of where the interviewees had experienced the shaping influence of

the Bible. The final subsection (6.2.3) will consider how the Bible is experienced

as a foundation or reference point for life. Compared to the narratives of

transformation, each of these elements represent subtle shaping influences

which, as will be seen, can result in long-term change in the participants' lives.

6.2.1 *'It is that grand narrative […] to inhabit'*

When asked about what it was that made the Bible different for him, Brian

expresses his experience of the Bible as a narrative to 'inhabit'; this is linked in

his experience of the nature of the Bible itself:

I understand them [the Scriptures] to have originated by the activity of the Holy Spirit overseeing what the writers wrote. And so I would see the Bible as being the grand narrative of God's work in this world, in creation at the outset, and then more especially in the unfolding story of redemption. And because it is that grand narrative it's one that I would seek to draw upon, to inhabit as it were. It informs my frame of reference on how I see the world and my own life within the world. So for all those sorts of reasons I would be keen to read the Bible and to make that a practice. (Brian)

Brian's primary concern here is not so much to look for direct relevance from his engagement with the Bible—though as noted in Section 6.1.1 he is able to utilise the devotional frame to find it—but to discover for himself a framework for life that he is able not just to inherit but actually inhabit. This idea of inhabiting is important for Brian as it enables him to experience the Bible as part of his normal life and not to have to repeatedly seek the sort of major encounters he described in Section 6.1.1. However, the concern for relevance is not completely absent as Brian's account is attempting to explain how the Bible has had a tangible influence on his life and how he translates the Bible story into his contemporary life experience. Having noted this, Brian thinks most of the shaping influence of the Bible has been indirect, though being indirect does not mean an absence of relevance:

I haven't had the experience so very much of individual texts being formative.[103]

[…] I think […] maybe with the years too there's an appreciation that exposure to

the Bible, maybe indirectly more so than directly, forms how one sees things in

this world, how one sees one's life in this world. And really it plays out then in

the attitudes that you perhaps portray and in how you seek to live your life.

(Brian)

Brian's experience of how the Bible *'indirectly more than directly'* shapes his life

corresponds to his understanding of inhabiting and finding his roots in the

unfolding narrative of the Bible. It is not just a case of always looking back to

the biblical records to find a narrative with which to identify and inhabit. Brian

was also keenly aware of the more recent narrative of the family heritage he has

inherited. When this was incorporated into his appreciation of the grand

narrative of the Bible it provided a paradigm of behaviour he wanted to

embrace and live within. The near history of the example of his grandfather

helped Brian to identify himself as part of a story that was bigger than him:

My maternal grandfather had as a life's motto the proverb, don't let the sun go

down on your wrath[104] which is something that he sought to live by. I guess the

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[103] This phrase was noted above in Section 6.1.1. Brian continues with some further reflections on this after talking about the incident of how a specific text had influenced him.

[104] The phrase is taken from Ephesians 4:26.

influence of family and that kind of anecdote crystallises for you that […] your

forebears too have experienced the value of those insights that come from the Bible.

So you're not, as it were, alone, an isolated individual bobbing around, but that

you're part of a sequence. And that of course, more widely, comes out of your

understanding of church history and how others have come before who've

grappled with the text and how you're now a recipient of what it is that they have

themselves experienced. So there's a sense in which your experience interlocks

with that of so many others down through the generations and it's your privilege

to feed off that too. So it's not as if you're re-inventing the wheel, but there's a

tremendous resource there to draw upon. And I think with the years too, maybe

it's a sign of approaching old age there's a greater appreciation of that heritage

that I would recognise. (Brian)

Brian is identifying himself as a participant in a narrative that transcends his

own personal experience, a narrative that has historical roots. This ongoing

narrative of faith experience which has its basis in the Bible and incorporates

subsequent people of faith allows Brian to appreciate that he is not an *'isolated*

individual bobbing around' and to *'interlock'* and *'feed off'* others *'down through the*

generations' who have inhabited this narrative. Brian explains how he

experiences his life as part of that narrative:

To go back to the idea of the Bible being a grand narrative, if you like a recording of redemptive history with a commentary thrown in for good measure. Its authoritative in the sense that for me […] is the story I think I can honestly say I primarily inhabit. So it has that shaping effect on points of reference, characters that you might recall in conversation. Then it would have a lot to say about the whole subject of what the good life is, how to live towards that life. So I guess there I'm talking about not just faith but how that faith is expressed ethically in what it is that you reach for as you see this being ideal, to aspire towards, what you would want for your marriage, for your family, for those you know, for your workplace, for wider society, all that would be rippling outwards from your understanding of the authority of Scripture. (Brian)

Brian explicitly links his experience of living within this *'grand narrative'* to how the authority of the Bible is expressed in his life. Brian conceptualises and experiences the authority of the Bible as the *'rippling outwards'* of his inhabiting the life framework that the *'grand narrative'* creates for him. This represents a nuanced understanding and experience of the Bible and how it works in practice, a view that is more concerned with the functional aspects of the question of the authority of the Bible. Brian has, in effect, constructed an explanation of the authority of the Bible which has significant levels of

correspondence to Wright's (2011) proposals to conceptualise the Bible as the means by which God exercises his authority in people's lives.[105]

Dermot, in similar fashion, describes his experience in terms of a *'huge panorama'*:

[The Bible is the] huge panorama really of the story of God if you like, definitely. And I mean I know that's [...] the drama of Scripture, isn't it?[106] That type of thing [...] you know the way of salvation, the way of God's great plan to solve the problem of sin and death. (Dermot)

This way of experiencing the Bible has had a significant *'formative effect'* on Dermot's life, even if there are other formative influences:

So I think the Bible has had a formative effect, a mentally formative effect on me. [...] I know as well, like, that there are other things have had a huge effect on me, my parents, my education, my professional development, you know. [...] I am self-aware enough to know like the Bible hasn't informed everything about me.

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[105] See Section 1.4.

[106] The phrase 'drama of Scripture' is derived from the title of a book by Bartholomew and Goheen (2014) which seeks to explain the significance of the story of the Bible.

[…] I wish it had but it hasn't. But it has [influenced me] […] in my work, my

marriage, my children, my interests whatever. (Dermot)

In spite of the fact that Dermot wishes the Bible's moulding influence had been more prominent, he is convinced that he has experienced it shaping major areas of his life. He also suggested that others involved in his life may be able to see that shaping and, if they were asked, could talk about it. Perhaps this is framed in this way as a recognition of life relevance. For Dermot, this influence of the Bible is real and tangible and touches more than his religious life.

One aspect of living within the *'grand narrative'* that Mary and Siobhan recount is their experiences of the ways in which the Bible shapes their understanding of how life works:

I don't know who I'd be or how I'd understand life outside of the Lord, and the

only place I've come to know who he is, is the Bible. So, yeah, I mean in terms of

how I think about things, it's not all the time, but in general, you know, that's

what I subject my thoughts to, or try to. That's what I believe is true, so in terms

of how I understand life and myself, I think it's shaped me and then hopefully it's

shaped my character, I hope, and that it will continue to. (Mary)

Sometimes I'm reading the Bible looking for answers and I don't always get answers but I do get confirmation or, and this is where you start sounding mystical, a sense that all is well, that God is in control and that it's not my job to fix things. And so in that sense I can't read it and go oh it's like a manual, where I can read something and go, oh, ok so that's not working cos of that, and that if we do that, that'll happen. But a sense of a broader picture and I've got to the stage now where I could not imagine living life without it because how do you explain stuff? (Siobhan)

In both cases the Bible provides a framework for understanding life, which does not mean, in Siobhan's case, that every question will be answered in the style of a *'manual'*. Neither of them give any indication that their engagement with the Bible is solely what Malley (2004, p. 105ff.) describes as a search for specific Bible passages they will find relevant for their lives. What the Bible does provide is an interpretive grid within which to make sense of life. Both Mary and Siobhan experience this grid as part of their relationship with God. Siobhan expresses it in what she terms a *'mystical'* sense of *'all is well, God is in control'*. For Mary the dynamic of the relationship is slightly different in that God is the one who is the source of her explanation of life (she is unable to *'understand life outside of the Lord'*), but the only place where she feels she has access to this is the Bible. And so the Bible is being regarded as the medium for understanding and experiencing God which allows Mary to make sense of life. For Mary,

however, this making sense of life and herself includes the expectation that the Bible will shape her and her character and will continue to do so.

The evidence of the interview data suggests the participants have experienced significant life changes as a result of the experience of living within the narrative of the Bible. However, it might be more difficult for participants to articulate these experiences in terms of the direct cause and effect pattern noted as typical of narratives of transformation even though they regard themselves as having experienced noteworthy elements of transformation.[107] It is important that both the value and the transformational potential of relating to the Bible in this way is noted and encouraged in faith communities.

Alongside these experiences the participants also recounted specific examples of how they experienced the Bible shaping aspects of their lives. This will be examined in the next section.

6.2.2 *'It's a shaping influence on me'*

A number of participants commented on the experience of the Bible being a general shaping agent in their lives even if they were not being specific about the mechanisms of how that shaping worked in practice:

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[107] See the comments on a similar phenomenon in Section 6.1.3

It's [The Bible is] a shaping influence on me […] the word of God is life-giving

and it's life changing. (Alice)

I was gonna say like an overarching presence. Does that kind of make sense? That

it [the Bible] does give shape to my thinking. (Kevin)

My mind will be shaped, my thoughts can be shaped by what I read in Scripture.

What I understand to be important or true puts things in perspective. And then

that will, oh I don't know the order, but it also affects the way I feel, and then

hopefully it'll shape the way I speak and act and what I do. (Mary)

In each case the participant is expressing their belief that there is a connection between their engagement with the Bible and some form of shaping in their lives. For Alice this is linked to her experience of the Bible itself as *'life-giving'* and *'life-changing'*. If, as Alice believes, the Bible has its origins in God, then for her, it will accomplish something. Alice uses the phrase word of God, which is often used as a synonym for the Bible. In this case it may be accidental that her use of the phrase is close, as Meadowcroft (2011) argues, to one of the ways the phrase is used in the Bible to indicate the means by which God accomplishes his purposes.

Kevin and Mary explain their experience of the Bible's shaping influence in terms of the ways in which their thinking has been moulded. Mary extends this to include not just her understanding but also her feelings, her speech and her actions. Both Kevin and Mary indicate a significant level of influence and shaping, even if it cannot be fully explained.[108] In a somewhat similar manner to the way in which Brian and Dermot describe their experience in terms of a *'grand narrative'* and a *'panorama'*, Alice, Kevin and Mary are recounting how their ongoing engagement with the Bible has become for them a shaping framework. They may not be able to recount repeated examples of how this has worked (unlike the *'literally life changing'* transformations of Section 6.1.1), but they are convinced that they have been changed and shaped.

Mary reflected further on this shaping and in doing so located it within the framework of relationship with God, one of the recurrent themes of the interview data:

> *It's not just an academic exercise where I'm trying to understand something through asking the right questions, which can feel academic. As I said before it's also that place where I'm meeting with the Lord so there's an emotional level. It'll*

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[108] The research will take the descriptions of the participants' experience at face value. The research methodology as it has been constructed is not able to either verify or deny these descriptions.

change my emotions, my attitudes, my values and then hopefully the way I live

based on all of that.

At this point in the conversation, Mary is reflecting on the ways in which the Bible shapes her at a number of levels and at the same time she is trying to hold together some of the tensions noted above between the academic and devotional frames used for Bible engagement. This is evident in Mary's reading strategy where even though the usual approach may be predominantly in a devotional frame she does not want to abandon *'asking the right questions'*. Elements of the tension are also evident in the way in which Mary locates her Bible engagement as part of her ongoing relationship with God, *'it's also that place where I'm meeting with the Lord'*. It is this context, according to Mary, that allows the Bible to have the deep effects that change *'my emotions, my attitudes, my values, […] the way I live'*. While the Bible may shape and influence people, for Mary it is when it is encountered as part of a relationship with God that the profound changes have occurred for her. This represents a noteworthy combination of the academic and devotional frames without collapsing the experience into one or the other. It also highlights a basic understanding of all of the participants that setting Bible engagement into the context of a relationship with God opens the possibility not just of a devotional frame for engaging the Bible but may also create contexts for considerable change. Although Mary does not mention it explicitly here this may also be closely

linked to themes considered in Section 3.2, namely that the voice of God can be experienced when someone engages with the Bible and when it is heard it is regarded as an authoritative utterance that demands a response.

Alice was actually not able to give a specific example of how the Bible had had a direct effect on her because she felt it had become an integral part of her life:

> *Where it's [the Bible] had direct [effect]? It's kind of hard because it's nearly like it's part of who I am. So I don't know if I can even think of something. I think it's sometimes, you just know, you know. (Alice)*

For Alice to be able to describe her experience of the Bible in this way suggests significant experiences of shaping. Alice is claiming the Bible had been such an influence on her and her understanding of herself that she feels she would know almost instinctively the way to respond to any life situation. It is perhaps something of a moot point as to whether such intuition will always prove reliable, but it is how Alice describes her experience.

Daniel couples the formative influence of the Bible with his own response to its authority:

I've given it [the Bible] authority over my beliefs. […] I think how it's formed [me] over a period of now decades is my view of the world. […] I feel like the Bible has formed my views of what life actually is, or what freedom actually is, or what actually is important. […] So I think that probably that broader sense of how I view the world now has changed as I reflect on the question. (Daniel)

It is Daniel's commitment to give the Bible *'authority over my beliefs'* which shapes the way Daniel perceives and interacts with the world; here he mentions 'life' and 'freedom'. In this context, Daniel considers the Bible's influence as formational, picking up aspects of Chan's language of spiritual theology (1998; see also Peterson, 2005). While Daniel does not talk about any of the mechanisms that have brought this about, he is aware that his ongoing engagement with the Bible over *'decades'* has changed his world and life view. This concept of how the Bible works captures something of what some of the other participants were trying to explain. One of the reasons why this means of explaining the Bible's influence is not prominent in the participants' conversation may be that it does not fit well with the priority given to direct relevance. Daniel talks about the shaping over a *'period of now decades'*; it is not easy to match such an explanation to the expectation of drawing direct lines of relevance between the Bible and life circumstances. This does not mean relevance is not important for Daniel; it is hinted at here and has already been seen in Section 5.2.1. It may be that when encouraged to reflect further on the

Bible's influence, the long-term shaping framework that it provides has come to the fore. It is worth noting that this understanding of how the Bible functions may provide a model for engagement that is more far-reaching and more empowering than a strong focus on immediate and direct relevance.

A specific example of a longer term formation as a result of engaging with the Bible was recounted by Brian. In addition to providing the *'grand narrative'* (6.2.1) to inhabit, Brian regards the Bible as being a shaper of his own identity, something he regards as very important to him:

> *My identity is somewhat complicated having moved around a lot in life. I've often found that speaking of my myself as a Christian is more straightforward than trying to place where exactly I'm from. […] I'm not someone who finds it terribly easy to say where I am from or who I am in that sense. So being known as a Christian and seeing myself as primarily a Christian on a personal level helps me in a very practical way deal with something of an identity crisis that would otherwise be there. It's one thing that's maybe a wee bit more straightforward than trying to quite nail where exactly it is that I'm from. But that is just a personal quirk and peculiarity. […] It may well for me fill up a wee bit of a gap that's there […] a vacant space within my psyche. I think in terms of how I see myself that the designation of Christian is a helpful one in terms of my own identity and self-awareness. (Brian)*

Even though Brian considers the way in which the Bible shapes his identity as *'just a personal quirk and peculiarity'*, it is actually a profound insight into one of the ways in which the Bible can be a powerful shaping influence. Inhabiting the *'grand narrative'* of the Bible in the way Brian describes in Section 6.2.1 provides the basis for constructing an identity that has its basis outside Brian's experience. Whether Brian is aware of it or not, conceptualising the Bible as a narrative of identity, both at a corporate and at an individual level, has, as Snodgrass (2011) recognises, significant potential for transformation. Brian, self-deprecatingly, attributes his desire to read the Bible in this fashion to what he terms the *'vacant space within my psyche'*. Even if Brian's perception of himself is accurate, it does not detract from the identity shaping and transformational potential of inhabiting the *'grand narrative'* of the Bible.

Conor has experienced his own *'big wow'* moments. He recognizes these can be limited in frequency and that it is unhealthy to *'just utterly rely on them big wow moments'*:

> *It's [the Bible] very much reminding me who he [God] is, his character, of giving me direction, of teaching me. And so it would be I suppose the consistency of it; it's not the big wow moment […] but it's the consistency of reading God's word. […] I think it's healthy not to just utterly rely on them big wow moments; I think they happen because maybe of an immaturity in our life. I know for that moment*

it was an immaturity in my life of not recognising God's sovereignty and God

needs to just [claps hands] stop me in my tracks, hold on there, wait up, I'm still

in charge here. And so it's the consistency of eating God's word. I literally use

that word eating because it feeds our soul, our spirit. […] I remember learning

very early on its like sometimes we like the dessert or the sweets but the word of

God it's about the meat and veg as well. And it's the meat and veg that builds you

up and so the sustainability and consistency of studying God's word whether it be

a letter of James or one of the Psalms. I find that definitely does lead me and guide

me and sustain me. (Conor)

Conor not only regards it as unhealthy to rely on the *'big wow'* moments, he

suggests they may happen as a result of *'an immaturity in our life'*. He likens the

Bible's shaping influence to the plain *'meat and veg'* food *'that builds you up'*.

There may be *'dessert'* experiences, which may be more pleasurable, but it the

ongoing engagement with the Bible that *'leads… guides… and sustains'*. With

some humour, Conor develops the analogy of the Bible's shaping influence

further, suggesting the experience of *'highlight moments,'* the *'big wows'* of

engaging with the Bible, belong in a much wider context of ongoing more

'normal' engagement to *'sustain […] for the day'*:

If you use the analogy of food there's highlight moments when you go out to a

five-star restaurant. Man, that steak was gorgeous! But most of the time you're

making your breakfast yourself, your making your lunch yourself, you're making your dinner for yourself. And we're not all five star chefs and it's enough to sustain us for the day, it's enough to keep us healthy, it's enough to feed us and it's the same with the word of God. (Conor)

In terms of how this shaping might be experienced, Conor expresses it in terms of *'wisdom', 'insight'* and *'revelation'*:

I would expect wisdom. I suppose when I read it [the Bible] I expect wisdom and I expect insight and I expect revelation. I'd expect, I suppose, not all the answers to life's problems, but I certainly would expect tools in how to live life as a Christian and tools to understand life as a Christian, as a follower of Jesus. I'd expect to get wisdom and knowledge. (Conor)

Conor's use of the term *'revelation'* alongside *'wisdom'* and *'insight'* may be his way of identifying and locating this expectation and experience as part of his relationship with God. The function of the Bible, therefore, is to provide the structures that Conor needs to negotiate life as a follower of Jesus. Conor was able to provide a specific example of this as he relates how his experience of fatherhood was completely changed. Conor's experience represents considerable shaping of his experience of being a father as a result of engaging with the characteristics of God as father:

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As I said being a father it has definitely shaped my understanding of fatherhood. I didn't have a dad growing up. My mam and dad were separated so I didn't really know a father figure. And so definitely the reading and getting to know the character of God as God the father has been very revealing and transforming because I would have had a very negative experience of […] father. And so I struggled with that in my early faith and I spotted it and that's why I wanted to learn, well, how do I relate to God the father because I didn't have a father. How does one relate to God the father? So I studied the character of God and learned what a father is supposed to be and so now that I am a father I'm able to take what the Bible teaches about the character of God the father, do you know, like a protector God, a loving God, a providing God. And so all of these characteristics I learnt from the Bible; I haven't learnt from my own experience of father I've learnt the opposite. So that would be I suppose a way the Bible has directly influenced me. (Conor)

This change was not something that occurred in a short space of time, but is part of an ongoing re-orienting and shaping influence of the Bible in Conor's life. The effects of this process seem profound as Conor recounts he has learned to reshape his experience of being a father, modelling it in the character of God and not the experience of his own upbringing. By his own admission this was

not a case of direct cause and effect from the Bible, but the ongoing influence of a range of theological observations.

After some deliberation, David recounts how he experienced God using the Bible to shape his life in graphic terms:

Like he's [God] hammered me about being honest and […] being faithful and all them kind of things. […] No, hammered's the right word, he has hammered me. I needed to be hammered, to get into shape do you know that kind of a way, and he's used the Bible to do all of that as well. […] Yeah, knocking the edges off. Like, David, you can't be going around just telling lies because you feel embarrassed, cos you were stupid, do you know what I mean? You tell the truth, own up to it, take responsibility, grow up. […] Knocking the lumps off, yeah. Well I'm supposed to becoming more like Jesus every day so I mean he's a lot of work still to do but you wanna see me thirty years ago, he's done a lot of work. […] And he taught me all of that through the word. (David)

Although some of the language might suggest otherwise, David was speaking positively about how the Bible has shaped his life.[109] The striking imagery is David's way of indicating the level of impact he has experienced; there is no

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[109] David's tone throughout this part of the interview was positive and, in places, almost playful.

suggestion of any sort of unwelcome influence. It is important to note David's

insistence, which resonates with Wright's (2011) suggestions, that the Bible is

the means by which God exercises his authority on David's life.

Section 6.1.3 suggested that the existence in evangelical faith communities of

stereotypical narratives of transformation may be exerting a strong influence on

participants' actual experience of the transformational potential of the Bible.

However, there also appears to be widespread shared expectation in such

communities that the Bible is a shaping influence on life. It is important that the

ways in which this is experienced are recognised, embraced and valued as

highly as the more idealised narratives of transformation. Even if Bible readers

are not able to construct a narrative of transformation that follows the patterns

observed in section 6.1.1 that does not imply they are not experiencing

significant transformations. It is interesting that the key characteristics of the

'literally life changing' narratives of transformation, the direct cause and effect

relationship between the Bible text and the subsequent transformation, and a

strong experience of relevance, are missing from these accounts of the shaping

influence of the Bible. This will become even more obvious in the next section

where some accounts of how the Bible functions as a reference point for life will

be explored.

6.2.3 *'I want it to be the foundation, my reference point'*

The experience of the Bible as a reference point for life is another facet of the Bible's shaping influence described by the participants. George's reflection on the influence of the Bible is that it is an anchoring point for him:

> *I guess the Bible has been the […] anchoring point to my Christian experience (George)*

Other participants expressed similar points of view:

> *It [the Bible] provides a whole set of guidelines about how we are living. […] It's my manual if you like for every day but in terms of my life it's very important because as I said to you we live in a complex world that I find difficult to understand a lot of the time. (Patrick)*

> *The Scriptures have been great points of reference over me life. (David)*

One of the ways in which this finds expression in the lives of the participants is through the principles and guidelines they find there. Aoife's comment about her children indicates an underlying commitment to the value of the principles of the Bible and their ability to mould lives in a positive fashion. In an effort to

pass on those guidelines of the Bible Aoife has introduced her children to the

Bible. This is something Aoife did not have in her childhood:

As I said [the Bible] is a guideline for me and it gives me everything that I want

my children to have that I didn't have at a young age. So they all have their own

Bibles and they have since they were small. (Aoife)

As he talked about the Bible guiding and directing how to live, Brendan had a

mnemonic, which he referred to more than once, to sum up his understanding:

A Christian who doesn't read the complete Bible will be an incomplete Christian.

[…] As a Christian I believe it's necessary. It's what feeds us, it's what guides us,

it's what directs us. I heard someone say the word Bible can be said like Basic

Instructions Before Leaving Earth. […] It teaches you how to live in a society that

is anti-Christ in a sense. […] When I'm reading the Bible it just gives you a fuller

picture of life's events, if I can describe it that way, and what's tomorrow's news.

(Brendan)

The Bible's instruction and guidance for life is one of the things that are

important for Brendan. He does not mean the Bible should be approached with

a flat literalism where everything in the Bible can be formed into an instruction;

rather the focus is the matrix of instructions, principles and guidelines that

enable him to make sense of life in what he feels is a context that can be hostile

to his faith commitments. One of the things that Brendan has experienced is an orientation of perspective where he is able to have a *'fuller picture of life's events'*. This moulding of world and life view, not so much in a philosophical sense, but more in the sense of knowing how to live, is important for Brendan. Although he does not use the word, this is close to the *'wisdom'* valued by Conor. Brendan sums up his view of the Bible and how its principles and instructions have been a life-shaping influence:

> *It actually is a good book; it actually does exactly what it says on the tin.*[110]
>
> *(Brendan)*

Bernadette honestly admits that although she thinks the *'correct answer'* to how the Bible functions for her should be as the foundation for her life, *'a reference point for everything'*, in practice it is something she feels she is journeying towards. In fact, she raises the question as to whether anyone can ever get to that point:

> *I think my relationship with the Bible, like I suppose the correct answer would be*
>
> *it's a foundation for everything. But I think that's actually something that I have*

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[110] This phrase was an advertising slogan for Ronseal wood protection products in the 1990s. According to Ronseal's (2019) website it has become "the third most known slogan of all time."

had to work on and I'm still working on and I'm still very much on my journey.

And that's what I want the Bible to be, you know, I want it to be the foundation,

my reference point for everything. But honestly I can't say that it totally is at the

minute. But I understand that it has the potential to be and I'm working with God

to get to that point, if anyone ever gets to that point. (Bernadette)

Bernadette's acknowledgement that the *'correct answer'* of the Bible being a

'foundation for everything' highlights this as one of the assumptions of the

evangelical community, even if it does not come easily. This is an example of

what Bebbington (1989, pp. 12–14) labels "biblicism" or what Malley (2004, p.

154) observes as the "evangelical Biblicist tradition." These formative

assumptions can be embedded so deeply in faith communities they are taken

for granted and not questioned. In other parts of the interview Bernadette

talked about how she had been questioning some of these inherited

assumptions and her experience of *'I'm working with God to get to that point'* may

be one of the results. Bernadette's perspective may also be informed by the

'already/not yet' theological and experiential tension which Ladd (1974; see also

Blomberg, 2018) regards as characterising Christian discipleship. Together this

seems to indicates that Bernadette considers the influence of the Bible on her life

as more than an implementation of a moral framework, though it is not less

than that, but one of the means by which she negotiates life with God.

Bernadette's understanding of the Bible and how it functions to shape her life

is, therefore, part of a much broader understanding of her ongoing relationship with God. Therefore, even when the participants talk about principles, guidelines and foundations, it is important to note they are often using the terms in the context of the framework of relationship with God.

In a very similar manner, and in spite of the mixed metaphors, Siobhan summarises her experience of the Bible over the years as a *'lens'* which is the *'cornerstone'* on which she tries to see things:

> *Over the years […] I would hope it has become more the cornerstone on which I try and see things. That sounds very clichéd. […] I'm trying more to let the Bible tell me what way to see things rather than my own way. And not just make it like thought for the day. […] It absolutely is [a lens]; everything that happens is seen through this lens. (Siobhan)*

Dermot identifies a range of areas of his life where experiencing the Bible as a point of reference has influenced his life. He views this Bible shaping influence as a *'more authentic'* Christianity than the expression of faith he had grown up with:

> *Different decisions that we've made in our lives. […] We certainly saw what that what we were doing was being faithful to a more authentic Christianity that what*

we'd been brought up in. […] What do I do with my money, for instance? […]

The principles of Jesus around money would be something that would have

affected how I live, and what I do with my resources. […] How I bring up my

children, in terms of teaching them the way of the Lord really, would be from the

Bible. […] The Bible being kind of underneath how I've worked, what kind of a

husband I've been, what I think is important in being a husband, and in being a

father. (Dermot)

Dermot's concern is not with individual verses of the Bible in some sort of

proof-text fashion, but living within the overall message of the Bible, which he

describes as living with the love of God in view. This is his way of describing

the framework of relationship with God that is an integral part of his

engagement with the Bible and that influences and shapes his life:

You know we're not kinda of running to the Bible verse for this every minute. But

I mean the basic reason is the love of God, it's to obey, to bring the kingdom of

God into the world, all those kinds of things. (Dermot)

All of the interviewees recounted examples of how the Bible functions as a

shaping influence in their lives. This occurred quite naturally as part of the

conversations, often without the participants being asked directly. The evidence

suggests a widespread shaping of the interviewees' lives and experiences,

perhaps representing widespread unspoken assumptions and expectations of evangelical faith communities. The shaping talked about by the participants may be an unconscious part of their ongoing experience of engagement that is rarely highlighted. Dermot's comment supports this as he suggests talking about the Bible and how it actually functions to influence life is not a normal subject of conversation in evangelical faith communities. Life change, it would appear, is expected (Smallbones, 2007); reflection on how that change comes about may not be:

I don't know if I've ever really described this in the same way to anybody in my life. So I have never sat down with someone you know like, what you've done in such a very open way. (Dermot)

The interview data suggests the participants have experienced considerable shaping as a result of their engagements with the Bible, even if they do not talk about it in the same sort of ways as the *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation recorded in Section 6.1.1. In fact, the key elements of a direct line of cause and effect between Bible and life and the experience of direct relevance, which are characteristic of the more dramatic narratives of transformation, are virtually absent from the narratives of this section. This does not mean the perception of relevance is absent, as even in the accounts of the Bible as a shaping influence there is a concern to point to the aspects of life that have been

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affected. However, relevance is not the same defining characteristic and driving force as it is for the *'literally life- changing'* narratives of transformation.

6.3 Experiencing transformation: concluding reflection

The interview data demonstrates that the participants believe they have experienced significant transformation as a result of engaging with the Bible, demonstrating for them what Thiselton (2012) argues is the formative power of the Bible. However, the manner in which this has been experienced and recounted varies considerably as the contrast between the *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation and the more everyday experience of the Bible both as *'generally not dramatic'* and as a life-shaping influence has shown. Some of the possible reasons for this have already been explored (Section 6.1.3), but some further reflection is necessary in the light of the material analysed in Sections 6.1 and 6.2.

The ways in which the participants have constructed the accounts of their experiences of the Bible facilitating transformation suggests there are certain acknowledged structures to the ways in which the interviewees have conceptualised and recounted their experiences of transformation. This perhaps mirrors the ways in which, as Luhrmann (2012) notes in a different context, narratives of conversion tend to follow stereotypical forms in evangelical faith

communities. The narratives of transformation are built on the assumption that the Bible is one of God's means of communicating with people and when what is heard from the Bible, whether the direct voice of God or the principles for life, is practiced, it will facilitate some form of transformation. When strong elements of the direct relevance described by Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b) have been perceived, the resulting narrative is most likely to be in the form of a narrative of transformation. However, when the perception of direct relevance is lower or even absent, the resulting account is much more likely to be of the Bible being a shaping influence. This does not mean the concern for relevance is completely absent in such experiences, as has been noted above. This highlights the importance, noted by Malley (2004), of attempting to understand the complex interactions of the factors that shape how the participants have experienced their engagement with the Bible.

The analysis of this section suggests there may be value in re-orienting elements of the expectations of how the Bible functions. The main themes examined in Chapters 3 and 4 create an overall framework that is predisposed to find direct relevance in Bible texts which, when created, is expected to lead to life transformation. As noted in Section 6.1.3 this framework may be too limiting and result in disempowerment in regard to the issue of transformation. To redress this a more wide-ranging way of orienting to the Bible needs to be constructed and embraced which allows the Bible to function as an agent of

transformation in the manner suggested by Holmes and Williams (2007) without having to conform to the stereotypical pattern of *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation. Such a reorientation would require a reduced emphasis on the perceived levels of relevance, but the result could be a more comprehensive and inclusive understanding and experience of how the Bible worked in practice and transformed people's lives.

Another theme identified that belongs to the cluster of complex factors that shape the participants' engagement with the Bible is 'Resolving dissonance'. It is not a surprise that the interviewees had questions about the Bible. From the point of view of this study, the ways in which the participants seek to resolve the issues that cause dissonance is another window on their experiences of engaging with the Bible. This theme will be explored in the next chapter.

Chapter 7 Experiencing and resolving dissonance

The chapter will consider the theme of Experiencing and resolving dissonance. In spite of the strong commitments to the Bible recounted in Chapters 3-6, all of the interviewees talked about how their engagement with the Bible raised significant theological and ethical questions, the majority of which were focused on the Old Testament.[111] Section 7.1 will explore and analyse some of these questions. The participants were also asked about their strategies to resolve the associated experiences of dissonance. Section 7.2 will examine these strategies. These are noteworthy from a practical theology perspective as they provide some insight on the ways the interviewees deploy their perceptions and expectations of the Bible to resolve some of the tensions generated by their experiences of Bible engagement.

A number of participants recounted how they had also experienced elements of what might be termed pragmatic dissonance in regard to preaching. While this is different to the experiences of dissonance examined in Sections 7.1 and 7.2, it is included in this chapter as it provides further insight into the participants'

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[111] The publication of relatively popular works dealing with difficult passages of the Bible is indicative that the problems are recognised.Examples include Wood (2016), Kaiser (1991) and Longman (2003, ch 2), Geisler and Howe (2008, 2009). Enns has written on issues in the Old Testament, both at a popular level (2019b, 2019a) and at a more advanced level (2005). Some of the more difficult ethical issues of the Old Testament are highlighted by Davies, E.W. (2006). Davies, A (2009) argues for a specifically Pentecostal response to ethical difficulties posed by the Old Testament.

engagement with the Bible and provides some perspectives that those engaged in preaching in evangelical faith communities are unlikely to hear.

7.1 *'I don't necessarily feel fully comfortable with it'*

The most widespread experience of dissonance among the interviewees was caused by the Old Testament. Not only did the participants find parts of it hard to understand, for some, the morality of what was recorded raised significant questions about the character of the Bible itself.[112] At a basic level some of the participants recounted how they found the Old Testament hard to understand. Alice likens her experience of the Old Testament to *'being in a forest'* and when she gets to the point where she feels *'I haven't a clue what I'm reading'* she returns to the more *'familiar'* terrain of the New Testament:

> *I mean that's one of the things about the Bible: there is really odd things in there and it is hard to read. […] So there's things, yeah, I do find hard. And, you know, they don't make sense. […] There's just so many hard stories. […] You start at Genesis and read; you'd be like agh, this isn't for me. […] But when you're reading it [the Bible], just as a book going through, you get lost. It's like being in a forest and in the end I'm like, agh, I haven't a clue what I'm reading, I don't know*

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[112] This phenomenon is also reported by Rogers (2016).

what I'm reading here so I'll skip back to the New Testament where at least it's

familiar. (Alice)

Part of the reason for Alice's preference for the New Testament is because it matches not only her preference for an easier approach but also her personal focus on Jesus:

I just shy away from certain things. […] I go towards the comfort of the Lord, I go

towards the promise of God, I go towards the person of Jesus because I love him.

(Alice)

Although Alice does not say it explicitly, the person of Jesus is one of the ways she resolves some of the dissonance she feels about the Old Testament. This was one of the strategies used by the participants and will be explored further in Section 7.2.4.

Aiden is reluctant to say that he finds parts of the Old Testament boring, but it is his experience:

Anything before that [Psalms] like, you know, I find it really difficult, just

because it's, I don't want to say, boring, but… […] Some of the stories I like:

David and Goliath, the story of Joseph and how his brothers were trying to kill

him. I love all that; there's just certain parts of it I'm just like, oh man. (Aiden)

Part of Aiden's difficulty is the nature of some of the Old Testament, particularly in comparison to how he experiences the New Testament:[113]

I mean a lot of the Old Testament for me is blood and, you know, kind of

brimstone and fire. […] And then you look at the New Testament and it's love

and caring and compassion. And I know there's still stuff in it but there's a stark

contrast, you know, between the Old Covenant and the New Covenant; I like the

New Covenant. (Aiden)

George is specific about what he finds difficult, but he has a practical and theological response to his experience:

I find long lists of genealogies are difficult; I think they're just hard. […] I think

anytime you read something you don't like it's a prime learning opportunity to

understand more about God than you did before. (George)

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[113] This type of question is noted by Longman (2003).

The elements of dissonance noted so far are linked primarily to not being able to understand parts of the text or to personal preference. In many instances, however, the dissonance experienced by the interviewees was at a moral level. Conor is aware he struggles with some of the elements of the Old Testament, especially when they are difficult to reconcile with his commitment to the Bible as *'the authoritative word of God'*. Conor is also aware that he is not the only one with questions about the Bible:

It's caused me questions. I believe the Bible is the word of God, it's the authoritative word of God, it's the inspired word of God and then there are parts of it I'm going really God, really? Like, why did you put that in there? […] And so you just struggle with it. […] The word of God is so important, its powerful and effective, and so you're trying to use the word of God to try and speak into people's lives but then people go, well, what about this bit and what about that bit? (Conor)

In a similar fashion Kevin has tried to find ways to reconcile his *'high view of Scripture'* with some of the accounts he encounters in the Old Testament, but, in his own view, he still struggles with aspect of this. There may be ways Kevin *'can philosophically maybe just about work that through'*, but he is still left feeling uncomfortable:

There are still parts of Scripture I'm going, because I have a high view of Scripture being God-breathed I think, and when in effect it seems to say God told us to wipe out everything under the sun including kids, animals. They are things that I wrestle with; you can philosophically maybe just about work that through, but that doesn't mean I don't have some questions. […] I don't square it very well. […] I don't necessarily feel fully comfortable with it. (Kevin)

There are passages in the Old Testament that Dermot has not worked out yet:

It's [the Bible] very clear on many things, but there are some things where it's a bit less clear. […] If I was, for example, to do something like what the Israelites did to the Midianites […] I'd wind up in jail obviously, you know, or worse. […] There's definitely parts that don't at the moment work. In terms of, like, there's gaps there that I haven't figured out. (Dermot)

Having admitted major areas of dissonance caused by the Old Testament, neither are prepared to relinquish or reinterpret their experience that the Bible is the word of God. This indicates a deeply ingrained commitment that is able to embrace and live with elements of dissonance. This highlights the need for strategies to resolve the experience of dissonance which, it would appear, is part of the underlying fabric of faith communities.

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Mary is aware that her questions have caused varying responses:

It [the Bible] can be a real frustrating place to be because trying to understand it all the time isn't easy. But it can be frustrating and fascinating at the same time because I am fascinated by how it works. So as much as it can be frustrating I think the frustrations are really more questions that are fascinating. […] All throughout the Bible though there are things that seem, you know if you took them as surface, or face value, it would be really hard to accept them or wonder how they fit because you could just sound like it's full of contradictions. (Mary)

The mixed emotions that Mary experiences may be the result of some of the underlying expectations about the Bible shaped by the faith community Mary belongs to. Because the Bible is regarded as God's communication, this results in an effort to remove some of the difficult questions. Mary is prepared to relabel her *'frustrations'* as *'questions that are fascinating'* perhaps because that enables her to maintain her underlying commitment about the nature of the Bible. The process seems to be at work for the issues which, if taken *'as surface'*, might result in *'contradictions'*. Mary seems to be suggesting that there are ways to read these texts so that they do not have to be experienced in this way, though she does not give any examples of how this is to be done. This suggests an underlying ideal formulation of the Bible, most likely informed by a concept of inspiration (see Section 4.2).

Patrick recounts some examples of where he experiences difficulties with the Old Testament:

So I understand that a lot of what's there in the Bible is not so easily understood. Some of it, you know, I certainly struggle with greatly trying to figure out what it means and what God was doing and all the rest and what relevance that has to me never mind anybody else. […] I have trouble with Genesis, yeah because I'm no scientist so when people ask me questions about that I struggle. And so they ask me difficult questions about creation and all that, and I haven't a clue, right. I don't know what happened and I don't know whether it's literal and or it's not literal. See, to me it makes no difference. I'm just happy that there was a big bang and God said light and there was light, know what I mean? […] I suppose the part that I struggle most with is the Joshua-led invasion of Canaan and the death of the Canaanite tribes, and how the writers went back and thought that is was, you know, a good thing that they were annihilated and so on. I still struggle greatly with that. I never made any sense out of it. (Patrick)

When asked how Patrick sets this alongside his conviction that the Bible was God's word, he acknowledges:

With some difficulty. […] It does cause me problems yes, major problems at times. (Patrick)

As Copan (2011) acknowledges, difficulties and questions about Genesis and the Canaanite conquest are not uncommon. However, Patrick adds that it is also his inability to see *'what relevance that has to me never mind anybody else'* which contributes to his experience of dissonance. When a lack of understanding or questions about the morality of the text is accompanied by a perception that relevance cannot be negotiated for the text, the result for Patrick is *'major problems'*. This is evidence that negotiation of relevance is deeply embedded in Patrick's expectations of the Bible.

Brian is aware that there have been attempts to explain the difficult passages of the Old Testament, and even though he is aware of some of the mitigation that has been provided, it does not stop him from feeling *'queasy about them'*:

> *There's clearly difficult passages in Scripture. Some of the imprecatory psalms mean that you have a lot to grapple with in terms of your understanding of God, and how some of the strongest of sentiments can have been inspired and how it could have been appropriate in the circumstances that prevailed back then. I suppose with a lot of other Christians the extreme measures that were involved, for instance, in the conquering of Canaan wouldn't make for easy reading either. I know there are ways of handling some of those passages that can give them a context and can mitigate something of the unease that they can arouse within you, but even at that you're sometimes still left feeling a bit queasy about them. […]*

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There's those passages that maybe Christians down through the generations and in our own day have always struggled with; I can feel something of that too when I come to them. (Brian)

Joseph's experience is notable because it is such an exception to the other participants, as he recognises:

The difficult things in the Old Testament, the wiping out of the people and all that, it bothers others but it doesn't bother me at all. You know I think that it's the justice of God there and that the amount of chances that they had to repent. I don't see the problem with those texts. (Joseph)

The issues raised by the Old Testament are not the only ones that created dissonance. Three of the participants talked about how the record of the way women were treated in the Bible was a problem for them:

I have spent quite a while thinking about the view of women in the Bible, and sometimes I find that frustrating. [...] That's probably one of the big issues I have grappled with in terms of the Bible is where women fit in. (Anna)

I find some of the Old Testament really challenging. [...] As a growing Christian I really struggled with a lot of what the Bible said and I didn't understand how

God could think those things were ok. But I've kind of shifted now more from that inerrancy type of perspective to actually looking at the Bible thematically and seeing actually how transformative it was, and how counter cultural it was and all of that. So I'm kind of in a wee bit of flux around that. There are still parts of it I don't like and I don't like you know references to slavery. I don't like how women were treated. […] I don't know, like, how Esther is venerated when I think she actually had a pretty awful time. (Bernadette)

The difficulty stretches into the New Testament for Dermot:

I guess a lot of things are resolved in Jesus's arrival. […] In some ways [things] are more difficult because they are post Jesus. […] I suppose personally my bias, if you like, would be towards the egalitarian[114] [view]. But I mean I'd struggle sometimes with 1 Timothy because it's hard to kind of, to square that one, you know. […] I listen to different points of view, I try to understand them […] when I really have done my best to try, I have to kind of leave it alone. (Dermot)

None of these three have found a resolution for their questions. Anna continues to experience frustration; Dermot feels that after trying to understand he has to

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[114] Dermot is talking about various views relating to women in church ministry; his preference is for an egalitarian view as opposed to a complementarian perspective. Gundry (2005) surveys the options.

leave things alone; and Bernadette remains in a *'bit of flux around that'*,

especially as there are bits of the Bible she does not like. Bernadette suggests

that her shift from *'that inerrancy type of perspective'* has been of some help to her.

It is most likely that Bernadette's use of the term *'inerrancy'* is something of a

shorthand to represent the way the Bible is conceptualised and used by the faith

community she has in mind, where texts appear to be read at a surface level

without much regard for genre and literary context; the examples she gives are

about slavery and women.[115] It is a move away from this type of approach to the

Bible that seems to have helped Bernadette move towards at least a partial

resolution of the discomfort she feels about the Bible's challenging texts.

The interview data suggests experiences of dissonance about the Bible is

widespread among the participants. The most common cause of such

experiences is the Old Testament. The readiness of the participants to admit to

these difficulties is significant given the shared commitment to the Bible as an

inspired text and as the focal point for God's communication (see Section 3.2).

In spite of the difficulties admitted, there was no wavering in the participants'

commitments to the Bible. For this reason, the strategies discussed to resolve

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[115] It is important to note that strictly speaking, it is not accurate to suggest that someone who is committed to a theological understanding of inerrancy will necessarily read the Bible in the sort of way Bernadette is implying. However, it seems as though she has encountered people who, because of the way they understand inerrancy, read the Bible in the way Bernadette describes (Geisler and Howe, 2009).

these experiences of dissonance are enlightening as they reveal some of the important underlying assumptions and attitudes of the participants towards the Bible. These will be examined and discussed in the next section.

7.2 Strategies for resolving dissonance

For the sake of clarity of presentation, the strategies to resolve dissonance adopted by the participants have been classified into four categories of response based on perspectives generated by the interviewees' narratives. These are: ignoring the issues (7.2.1); resolution based on elements of theological reflection (7.2.2); resolution based on the framework of relationship with God (7.2.3); and resolution based on the character of Jesus (7.2.4). In the participants' experience these strategies are not discreet alternatives, but are embraced in various combinations.

7.2.1 *'I skip over the bits that I just don't understand'*

The most basic strategy is to either ignore the issues or to consign them to the future for further study and reflection, which, as Conor recognises below, may not materialise:

I'm being honest, it's the busyness of life and I'd love to have time to take and time to just try to get into some things but [with the] busyness of life it's easy to go and just move on from that. I'll park that one. (Conor)

And so what I did, and if I'm honest I still do at times, is I skip over the bits that I just don't understand and keep going to what at least I can follow and make some level of sense to me. (Alice)

Ignoring them mainly. (Patrick)

These actions may alleviate elements of the dissonance experienced, but without being supplemented with one or more of the strategies noted below they do not address the underlying questions about the nature of the Bible itself. The next three resolution strategies are structured not only to reduce the experience of dissonance but also to provide some rationale for how the Bible can continue to be regarded as a communication from God in the ways outlined in Chapter 3.

7.2.2 *'God is much bigger and greater than me'* - theological rationales

Siobhan not only experiences confusion with parts of the Old Testament, she is also aware that it conflicts with her twenty-first century contemporary (*'leftie'*) viewpoints:

> *A lot of the stories are confusing, I've found particularly in the Old Testament you know a lot of it I don't necessarily, couldn't purport to understand. But it's true. […] I think as a twenty-first century leftie some of the Old Testament and the narrative of the way God's people interacted with the people around them, I find all that very difficult to relate to. And working my way through Deuteronomy and Numbers, what, how is that in the Bible? But that's what makes me know that it's true because if I were writing a holy book I wouldn't have put it in; I would have skipped out whole bits. I would have kept to the easier bits, a few of the prophecies maybe and couple of gospels but, like those things are baffling to me, but I presume that I just need to work harder at that. […] So I absolutely believe that all those other bits one day, probably the other side of glory, I'll go oh now I get it. […] God is much bigger and greater than me, and for some reason this is there and it's important. (Siobhan)*

Siobhan resolves the tensions that she feels about the Old Testament in two ways, which are linked. One important factor for her is that *'it's true'*, and that remains the case in spite of not being able to understand it and perhaps also

having some moral questions about it. In fact, it is the confusing nature of what the Bible includes that functions for Siobhan as proof that it must be true as, if it has been up to her, she would have *'skipped out whole bits'*, which, implicitly, includes those sections that conflict with her contemporary sensibilities. This may be a way for Siobhan to protect herself from her own experiences of confusion about the Old Testament. The second way of resolving the dissonance is to suggest that she has not done enough work on the text, and if she did, then some resolution of her questions would become apparent. The possibility of resolution in the future, either if Siobhan worked harder at a solution or *'on the other side of glory'*, is enough to assuage some of her misgivings.[116] Both of these resolution strategies have their roots in the underlying assumption that if the Bible is inspired it must be true and an explanation must exist for everything that it contains. This is similar to Malley's (2004, pp. 137–144) observation that the concept of the inspiration of the Bible in evangelical faith communities is shrouded in mystery.

In his reflection on the Old Testament Adam is aware of a tension between what it says, for example in the Ten Commandments and what it actually reports; in Adam's experience these are in conflict:

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[116] When Siobhan talks in this way about *'the other side of glory'* this is a subcultural way of talking about the afterlife, in this particular case after the return of Jesus.

I find […] the books in the Old Testament that talk particularly about Israel's relationship with adjoining countries and being conquered and conquering in turn and God telling them, you know, don't take any prisoners and so on, I find that hard to come to terms with. […] I mean at times it would appear to fly in the face of what has been stated by God for example in the Ten Commandments, you know, what does it mean you should not kill and then on the other end don't take any prisoners. It is not easy to explain, but I think that I have to trust that God is in control. […] So if I can't appeal back to a God of love but who is also a God of righteousness and justice then I'm kinda lost. (Adam)

Adam resolves some of the tension he feels by means of theological reflection in which his understanding and experience of the character of God, learned as a result of engaging with the Bible, is given precedence and is allowed to provide an interpretive filter for the questions of morality that have been raised. This mechanism of resolving dissonance is noteworthy as it involves setting one trajectory of biblical thinking, in this case the character of God as informed by both the Old Testament and the New Testament, against another (the conquest) and resolving the differences in favour of what Adam regards as the more comprehensive and biblically informed theme.

Conor's strategy for resolving dissonance is structurally similar to Adam's but his main trajectory of understanding against which to read the passages that

cause him discomfort is what he terms the *'overall narrative of God's redemptive plan'*:

> *There'd be parts of the Scriptures I'd struggle with - some of the Old Testament narratives […] and my understanding of God as a loving God and a forgiving God and a caring God. […] And so I know it's just one section and the Bible is an overall narrative of God's redemptive plan so that's what's sort of helped me reconcile that. (Conor)*

In practice there may be very little difference between the strategies of Adam and Conor. For both Conor and Adam it would appear this approach to the difficulties posed by the Old Testament allow both of them to remain committed to the Bible as an authority in their lives.

7.2.3 *'Sometimes I just have to cry out to the Lord'* - relationship to God

The strategies recounted in this section have their focus on the framework of relationship to God. This does not mean they lack theological content, but their focus is on the participants' relationship to God.

Patrick talks about the *'comfort'* he experiences as he combines elements of a theological response with a framework of relationship with God. It is Patrick's

underlying commitment to the Bible being what *'God says'* and his accompanying understanding of the character of God, *'what I know about God'*, that underpins his resolution strategy*:*

> *In many ways the Bible nearly is like a comfort to go back to and say, well, this is what God says. I mightn't really understand it that well and I might struggle with some of the views that are there because they don't seem to be coherent with the rest of what I know about God. And yet I have to believe that's what he says and that it says it for good reason. (Patrick)*

One of the causes of Patrick's experience of dissonance is that the elements he struggles with *'don't seem to be coherent with the rest of what I know about God.'* However, Patrick appears to resolve the tension by choosing to focus on the framework of relationship with God, even if he cannot understand the inclusion of the material that causes him tension in the Bible. Passages that might cause questions about the character of God are filtered through this experience.

Even though David wishes he could *'censor'* the Old Testament passages which he finds *'unpalatable'* and *'that's the stuff that would really disturb me'*, he reflects further on his strategy for mitigating his experience of dissonance:

I just leave that bit out. Just ignore that! What do you call that when you get the big black marker and you mark out bits of a letter you're not supposed to read, yeah, censor it. […] I think, like most of the stuff that would be unpalatable, would that be the best way for me to put it, for me anyway, would be Old Testament stuff, most of it. […] Like there's a lot of blood, there's a lot of Braveheart stuff in the Old Testament, do you know what I mean. There's a lot of chopping people up and killing babies, and all that, and that's all really weird and I have no idea what that's about. Well I have some ideas but do you know what I mean? I'm not gonna pretend I understand. […] I see all of that stuff, and that's the stuff that would really disturb me, it's like the ruthlessness and the sheer brutality of it. And even this morning, I think I read in Deuteronomy, it's like when you get to a town like, if they surrender put all the men in forced labour and keep the women and kids as your property. And, then, if they don't surrender kill them all and slaughter the kids, and slaughter the women and, and you're like, I don't know how, even in me own head, I don't know how I equate that with this is a loving God. […] I don't have a question mark around the Bible, as such, I have a question mark around what God was at. (David)

David has major reservations about parts of the Old Testament, especially those elements he describes as '*Braveheart*[117] *stuff*'. David's resolution of his experience

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[117] A reference to the violence in the film *Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995).

of dissonance is interesting. His issue is not with the Bible as such, but about what the God he regards as a loving God was doing in and through the events he finds difficult. If there are parts of the Old Testament that raise questions, then based on his experience of God he is prepared to interpret all of these problem passages through a filter that sees God as a God of mercy and grace:

> *The ultimate authority I think for me [which] comes from the book of the Bible is love and grace. So whatever I do with it, I'm supposed to do with it through that. [...] I've taken it on board that this is the deal; I don't have a problem with that. [...] Not that I doubt him [God], or that I doubt that he loves me or any of that stuff just his methods. Which are none of my business anyway. (David)*

David's framework of relationship with God is the means of resolving this dissonance. The God he has experienced and has come to understand provides an alternative to the *'stuff that would be unpalatable'*, so much so that David is prepared to accept these things as part of *'the deal'* of this relationship. Some of the strength and pervasiveness of this framework of relationship in David's experience may be due in some measure to the *'literally life-changing'* experience of God's love and acceptance that transformed his life, recounted in Section 6.1.1. If this is the case, then it is an example of how some of the topics considered in this research have combined in David's experience to create the beginnings of a personal theodicy.

In spite of the difficulty David has with these passages, he is prepared to think about how some of these texts may be relevant to him. However, he does recognise that in doing so he is at the very least putting a *'slant'* on the texts, even if he will not say he is twisting it:

> *Even in me own head I don't know how I equate that with like this is a loving God. I can twist it and go… Well not twist it even, but I suppose the slant I put on it is that God is saying those things are gonna drag you away from me, so you need to be ruthless in getting rid of them.[118] The stuff in my life I need to be ruthless in getting rid of, and I can equate it that way. […] I just don't understand that at all. I'm not going to pretend I understand it, I don't, and somewhere in my own heart and head I've had to just park that and go, I don't preach on them bits. Try and stay away from them cos they're just a little bit awkward. (David)*

Even in cases where David has major problems with the text, he is able to negotiate some aspect of relevance by deploying a contemporising hermeneutic and reading the passage in a devotional frame (Davies, 2009). The significant fact is that he is able to do this at all with a text that causes him such personal

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[118] This approach is similar to figurative or allegorical readings in the church fathers; these things represent sin which needs to be rooted out. Such methods of handling Bible texts have been common in the history of interpretation (McGrath, 1997; Soulen, 2010).

difficulties, texts that he says he would rather *'censor'*. This is evidence of how deeply ingrained the devotional frame is in David's experience and how 'creative' and useful it can be when the need arises. If texts such as these can be made relevant using the devotional frame, then with the right sort of strategies it would appear that any text can be made relevant for the contemporary context.

Other participants talked about how their relationship with God was the factor that enabled them to resolve elements of their dissonance with the Bible. Brian recounts how crying out to God has enabled him in the context of his framework of relationship with God to find *'space and freedom to park some of these questions'*:

> *I guess that sometimes I just have to cry out to the Lord or simply entrust to him unanswered questions. […] But having a big view of God as one who is sovereign over the details of our lives and yet not necessarily expecting to understand in the specifics where something has happened gives you space and freedom to park some of these questions in a way that, with a mechanistic view of life and this world, you don't have. (Brian)*

Similarly, Brendan's confidence in his framework of relationship to God enables him to live with the questions. His conviction is that if he needs to know answers, God will show him:

So reading some of these things […] it has never led me to question or doubt God or get angry with him or say why should I believe if God is like this. It's never led me to that. I've always just accepted I have to trust that God knows what he's done […] there's a reason for it. And I'm sure if I need to know he'll show me, he'll tell me at the right time. (Brendan)

The interview data suggests the participants' experience of a relationship with God provides a framework for negotiating elements of dissonance. This is the case even when the questions they experience are focussed on the nature and character of God. Dermot sums up what appeared to be true for the majority of the interviewees in terms of their relationship with God:

But thank God you know, he is bigger than all of that. (Dermot)

7.2.4 *'My go to is Christ'*

There are links between this final resolution strategy and the ones considered above as the character of Jesus is experienced in both theological and relational categories. There are also similarities in structure between the strategies considered in this section to those adopted in connection with the authority of the Bible (Section 4.1.2), namely a resolution by a focus on the person of Jesus. Several participants expressed their positions very clearly.

Alice's framework of relationship with Jesus provides her with the impetus she needs to stop her *'throwing my hands in the air'* when she encounters difficulties and problems with the Bible. This is similar to the way in which the framework of relationship to God functioned for the participants in the previous section, but in Alice's case it finds a focus in Jesus:

> *And it was very hard, I felt I was ploughing my way through stuff [in the Bible] and agh sometimes like, throwing my hands in the air, and I was like I really don't know. If it weren't for the intimacy of my personal relationship with Jesus I don't think I'd have got through it; I mean you couldn't. (Alice)*

Kevin considers Jesus as both a model and a 'filter' for his experiences of dissonance:

But I keep coming back to Jesus as the revealed word of God, completely and absolutely in my mind. And when I look at him, and all that he did and all that he says, I then filter that or look at everything through Jesus. […] And he had a high a view of Scripture. […] What I see is so compelling and how he used Scripture, and you know he never dissed it, you know what I mean, he never rebuked it. […] I keep coming back again to that trust, I trust Jesus completely in this. My go to is Christ - and then I'll try to work it out. (Kevin)

Kevin's perception of and orientation towards the Bible is determined by his framework of relationship with Jesus: *'I keep coming back again to that trust'*. Kevin's unreserved trust in Jesus allows him to model his outlook on the Old Testament on the example of Jesus. And, it would appear, where there are discrepancies between his experience of Jesus and the texts of the Old Testament, Kevin will make a conscious decision to adopt a perspective shaped by his relationship to Jesus: *'my go to is Christ'*.

When reflecting on the issue of patriarchy in the Bible and in church practice, Bernadette takes Kevin's strategy a step further and suggests that an understanding of the whole of the life and ministry of Jesus *'is much stronger than just reading a verse or two verses or a passage literally'*. This, for Bernadette, is *'what the Bible is about'*, and by implication, how she thinks it should be used:

One [thing] that I have been thinking about recently is like the whole idea of patriarchy, and how that certainly in the church that I go to, and I'm sure in many other churches, you know, is set up as the ideal model for Christian living. And there are certain things if you read them literally would indicate that that was the case. However, when you look at Jesus and what Jesus actually does and who he interacted with and the roles that he gave them and the importance that he gave them, you know that message is much stronger than just reading a verse or two verses or a passage literally. I'm much more comfortable with understanding who Jesus was and how he lived out his theology in how he interacted with people every day, you know, and that to me is what the Bible is about. It's about pointing to Jesus and saying this is how we expect you to live. You know rather than focusing on something that is laden with cultural stuff that we can never even start to understand. (Bernadette)

Bernadette's comments above are linked to her comment earlier about her shift from *'that inerrancy type of perspective'* (Section 7.1) which, in her mind, is linked to a very literal reading of some texts. There is a sense in which Bernadette is combining the strategies outlined in the previous two sections (7.2.2 and 7.2.3) and making Jesus and his life and ministry a focal point for how she resolves the dissonance she has experienced. This allows Bernadette to create a hierarchy of commitments where the life and ministry of Jesus is given a primary role.

Other problem texts can then be allocated a more peripheral position thereby providing at least a partial resolution to the dissonance she experiences.

7.2.5 Summary

The resolution strategies examined in this section have demonstrated the participants put considerable effort into resolving their experiences of dissonance. Apart from the approach of skipping texts that are not understood, the resolution strategies display considerable theological resourcefulness and creativity to address the questions that are being asked. It is noteworthy that the strategies explored in 7.1.2, 7.1.3 and 7.1.4 have a similar structure. In each case the participants have structured one element of their experience as the grid through which they frame their orientation to the problem texts and thereby reduce the dissonance they have encountered. If more than one of the strategies can be combined, creating a multi-faceted grid for framing an approach to the problem texts, the level of dissonance experienced can be further reduced. The overarching purpose of the resolution strategies is to allow the participants to maintain the commitments to the Bible explored in Chapter 3 and 4. The fact that such resolution strategies are deployed is evidence of the high regard the participants have for the Bible.

7.3 *'I would say probably least influential was pulpit preaching'*

As a consequence of the value placed on the Bible in evangelical faith communities (Bebbington, 1989; Tidball, 1994; McGrath, 1996), preaching has tended to occupy an important place in their practice. As participants talked about their experiences of preaching and to what extent it impacted their Bible engagement, a significant number recounted their disillusionment and dissatisfaction. This has caused a level of dissonance, but of a different type to that described in Sections 7.1 and 7.2, namely an ecclesial or cultural dissonance caused by the experience of the interviewees being contrary to the expectations of the faith community. It is an important aspect of the participants' experience of Bible engagement to examine.

It is not surprising that some participants were very positive in their assessment of their experiences:

> *It's [preaching] an experience which gets me out of my own head, which is always a blessed relief. And seeing the Bible handled and hearing what someone has to say that's not me is always a wonderful thing. Each one of us is blinkered by our own experience and therefore can only see so much. So it's lovely to have that exposure to what the pastor has to say, and the others who then preach from time to time in the life of the church. [...] You have that opportunity for exposure to the word refracted through different characters, through different temperaments,*

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through different styles of communication, and some connect with you maybe

more strongly that others. […] I'm very drawn to a sermon that might pose a

question and then endeavour to answer it. [119] *(Brian)*

It was, however, unexpected that so many of the participants had questions and

reservations about the preaching they were currently encountering. The

majority of those who expressed unease were not involved in a formal

preaching ministry; many of the positive comments emanated from participants

who had some sort of role in a preaching ministry in their faith community.

This section will analyse those comments that raised questions about preaching

as they highlight some important issues of Bible engagement.

Alice has had a mixed experience of preaching. She begins by recounting

experiences where the Bible has been misused:

I was at one [a church service] recently where 20 minutes in the preacher hadn't

even opened the Bible yet, or spoken of the word of God. […] I actually think it's

on the increase. […] It hurts me. […] To me the word of God is precious, and it

should be treated [as such…]. I suppose I've had different experiences. I've had

people who've shared wonderful sermons, deep from the word of God, then I've

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[119] This perhaps indicates a preference for the more inductive sermon (Lowry, 1997, 2012).

had others who literally plagiarised someone else's sermon. […] One of my

greatest sadnesses really and sorrows for the Irish church is the lack of teaching

and the lack of wisdom, I think, around the word of God. […] There was one

occasion where somebody was speaking on, you know, the story of the quail[120] and

they came and they preached on that, and it was someone else's sermon which

they'd downloaded from the internet. And they preached the quail as a blessing

and they said we should be praying for quail, and I was sitting there horrified cos

I was like they didn't read. If they'd even picked up their own Bible, and if they'd

even read to the end, these people were waist deep in quail and the Lord had said

it'd come out in their noses and I was like that doesn't sound like a blessing to me.

[…] I was horrified and one of my friends said she could see a vein throbbing in

my forehead. I was horrified, my eyes were on stalks and I was like […] you

cannot trust what's coming from the front. (Alice)

Underlying these misuses there is a concern that the church is not providing the

training and equipping that members of faith communities need to enable them

to engage with the Bible and the preaching does not often help:

Sure we're not equipped, we're not equipped and anyway you know you have

different levels of intellect, you've different people who have come sometimes from

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[120] This is a reference to the incident recorded in Numbers 11.

the most broken backgrounds like they're barely hanging on by their fingernails.

And you're getting sometimes these high level sermons or on the other hand

you're getting trash like the quail thrown at you. (Alice)

In the context of reflecting on how people learn to handle the Bible, Siobhan

makes a similar comment:

I suppose you assimilate and you perhaps maybe model and things like that but

it's all very ad hoc. […] I know it's mad isn't it? […] It is very abstract, and if the

Holy Spirit weren't involved it could be disastrous. (Siobhan)

Siobhan is not questioning the value of preaching. However, she is questioning

whether it is the best way of helping people develop tools for engaging with the

Bible themselves. The madness Siobhan is referring to is the expectation that

people in faith communities will be able to abstract the principles of how to

handle Bible texts as a result of observing in preaching the results of a process

of interpretation, assuming it is done reasonably responsibly.[121] This is a

practical expression of the findings of Section 4.3 where it was noted there was

little help for participants in engaging with the various genres of the Bible. This

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[121] Based on the data generated in his study, Rogers (2016, p. 168) argues that in the context of preaching there is "little explicit mediation of hermeneutical practices."

is an important issue for those engaged in any sort of preaching ministry to consider.

The other notable viewpoint of the interview data is the preference some of the participants expressed for their own personal engagement with the Bible because they felt the preaching they were currently experiencing did not relate well to their lives. When reflecting on how he has learned to engage with the Bible, preaching has not been influential for Adam. In fact, Adam is not convinced of the efficacy of preaching which is very similar to a lecture:

> *I would say probably least influential was pulpit preaching. When it came to how you lived your life it was much more an examination of the Scripture with other people who similarly loved Christ, but I suspect it has been things that have been picked up along the way. […] I have never found lectures helpful. For example, I hated lectures in college cos I just found them unhelpful and personal study was always much more helpful to me. And then when I came to teaching […] it was more in a seminar/tutorial setting or bedside teaching that I was happiest. […] At times I wonder sometimes how we can make the preaching more effective. You know it's easy to sit through a sermon and think oh, that's very good and immediately then forget it. And that's why, like I said, I never found lectures helpful. (Adam)*

Adam's experience is similar to Norrington's (2013, p. xi) self-acknowledged controversial argument that sermons "had only a small part to play in the life of the primitive church" and "much contemporary practice […] is injurious to the life of the Christian community."

Anna's *'God moments'* occur most often when she is reading the Bible on her own, not in the context of preaching:

> *I think the real, like I'd call them God moments, have probably come more when it's just been me and the Bible, rather than somebody else. (Anna)*

Anna is not a lone voice on this. David is convinced that he has received more from the Bible through his own *'sitting with the word'*:

> *I would say I, honest to God, I think I have learnt more over the thirty years sitting on me own with him [God], with a Bible than I ever did sitting in a preaching. Now I've had moments sitting under preachings and I've had moments in Bible studies, but the place where God's really impacted me was in that little room on me own. Just sitting with the word. (David)*

Although Dermot appreciates preaching as he reflects on his own engagement with the Bible the balance of his ongoing learning is heavily weighted to his own individual reading:

> *I love listening to good preaching, I love listening to the Bible being taught well. […] I think that hearing the Bible taught by others, by people who've got a gift of teaching and who minister it helps me again in how to live. […] I suppose in fairness my personal reading is probably more foundational to me. […] My personal reading at this stage probably is more central to what I learn, but that's not to say I don't learn from others, I hope I do. […] I suppose at this point in my life, it would be more I think the Scripture itself and my own reading of it and my own digestion of it, if you like, is probably the most critical factor. […] I'm getting an awful lot from my own engagement with the Scripture. (Dermot)*

For Bernadette the choice of individual engagement with the Bible is not just a matter of personal preference, but is based on an underlying theological perspective:

> *I think the Bible is a very personal things and it's most effective when you're engaging with it directly cos you're engaging with God directly, you know. And I think there is a certain role for church preaching maybe to give us another idea, or another opinion, or another interpretation, but I think God has created us to*

interact with him directly, regardless of our capacity, whether we're theological or

not at all. I really believe that we can interact with the Bible personally, you

know. That's when it's most enriching. (Bernadette)

Bernadette allows *'a certain role for church preaching'*, which seems to be focused

on suggestions of alternatives. The most important focus for Bernadette's Bible

engagement is her direct engagement with the Bible and, by extension, her

direct engagement with God. This suggests Bernadette has allowed a

particularly intense expression of the framework of relationship with God to

inform her perception and experience of Bible engagement. This has resulted in

the downplaying of the role of preaching. It is evidence of what Luhrmann

(2012, p. 13) describes as the shift in (American) spirituality "toward a more

intimate, personal, and supernatural divine presence."

The discomfort among the participants about the experience of preaching was

unexpected and raises questions about its effectiveness as a facilitator of Bible

engagement in evangelical faith communities. The structure of the participants'

experience of the Bible allows them to supplement this perceived deficiency by

the deployment of a personal devotional frame to facilitate their relationship

with God and ongoing faith development. The result is that community

dimensions are no longer as necessary, which may in its turn further reduce the

sense that preaching is something that is needed for faith development. This

trend can be seen in the interview data; this is something that those involved in preaching roles in faith communities need to consider and engage.

7.4 Chapter summary and concluding reflections

Sections 7.1 and 7.2 have highlighted both the extent of the experiences of dissonance and their causes, and the strategies that have been created to resolve those tensions. Given the views recounted in Chapter 3 and 4 and what Ward (2017, p. 61) terms the "normative" and "formal" theology examined in Chapter 1 there was considerable honesty among the interviewees about the issues and questions they had experienced with the Bible. The ultimate result of any of the resolution strategies is to protect and preserve the view of the Bible held by the participants, and to protect, as Malley (2004, p. 143) suggests, the "status of biblical authority." Lying behind these strategies might be perception that the Bible is in practice a placeholder for the participants' framework of relationship with God. The main themes of this research, with their theological nuancing, suggest that this is not a form of bibliolatry, but a recognition on the part of the interviewees that the Bible is a focal point both for their understanding of God and for their framework of relationship with God. There is a certain 'logic' to this orientation towards the Bible, a logic that find expression in the focus on the Bible that is a key part of all of the participants' experience.

A similar dynamic can be seen to be at work in the experiences of dissonance caused by preaching. If, as suggested above, the Bible is a placeholder for a complex matrix of experiences, then the participants would, as argued by Adam (1996), have a high expectation of one of the main modes of Bible engagement in evangelical faith communities, namely preaching. When participants experience the dissonance caused by their disappointment with the preaching they are encountering they are forced to find more effective and relevant ways of engaging with the Bible. The underlying matrix of their relationship with God is too important to the participants to rely on the results of poor preaching. This is something evangelical faith communities need to consider

Chapter 8: Conclusions

This research project has examined the experience of engaging with the Bible in evangelical faith communicates in Ireland. The framing of the project is outlined in Chapters 1 and 2. Chapter 1 maps the contours of the theological backdrop to Bible engagement in such communities. Chapter 2 outlines the qualitative research methodology implemented in the data gathering and analysis. These chapters inform the practical theology elements of the project.

The interviews were focussed on the experience of the participants in an attempt to generate with them an account of what Ward (2017, pp. 62–67) terms their "lived theology." The research was not testing any alignment with the theological issues explored in Chapter 1 but points of contact with theological frameworks have been noted along the way. The interviews created a wealth of rich data; this data is presented and analysed in Chapter 3-7. A quality assessment of the qualitative research in terms of data, process, analysis and outcome is included in Appendix 1.

This chapter will outline the contribution of this research (8.1) and then bring together the main conclusions of the research under the headings of the two overarching themes and the five associated main themes (8.2 and 8.3). In keeping with the practical theology dimensions of the project, each of the

sections dealing with the main themes will be accompanied by some theological reflection on the findings. The chapter will then consider aspects of the potential relevance of the findings to evangelical faith communities (8.4). A final section will reflect on some of the limitations of this study along with suggestions for further research (8.5).

8.1 Contribution of this research: empirical, theoretical and practical

This research has focused on the lived experience of Bible engagement of members of evangelical faith communities in Ireland. The data generated has been presented and analysed using a qualitative methodology informed by practical theology. This has provided a rich, inductive explanation of how people in evangelical faith communities experience and interpret their practices of Bible engagement. The empirical data and its accompanying analysis provide a previously undocumented thick description of the experience of Bible engagement in evangelical faith communities in Ireland and, as such, provides a unique insight into one aspect of faith practice in these communities.

The research has provided a number of wide-ranging contributions to the understanding of evangelical faith communities and their faith practices. These have been highlighted in the chapters dealing with the main themes generated

in the data. However, some further aspects deserve to be mentioned as they represent the major empirical, theoretical and practical contributions of this research.

The research has demonstrated that the framework of relationship to God is ubiquitous in all parts of the data and functions as the most dominant motif in the participants' engagement with the Bible. This results in experiential or relational processing not just in the actual processes of Bible engagement, but also in regard to the theological concepts that cluster around the Bible itself. The result is a matrix of practice and experience that is shaped around the participants' experience of an intimate and intense relationship with God (Luhrmann, 2012). While this may be unsurprising in connection with some of the faith practices noted in Chapter 5, it is important to recognise that it is also part of how the participants conceptualised their expectations of the Bible and the underlying theological frameworks that shaped their understanding and approaches to the Bible. It is thus significant for any understanding of how evangelical faith communities engage with the Bible that the extent and characteristics of this relational shaping are recognised.

The research has demonstrated that while the participants undertake their Bible engagement as an integral part of their framework of relationship to God, it is a theologically-informed endeavour, even if such theological elements are often

informal. The framework of relationship with God provides a unique axis along which both Bible engagement and theological processing can be undertaken. As a result, theological formulations that are part of the faith practice of Bible engagement are much more relational and functional, being driven from more of an experiential, bottom-up perspective rather than the trajectory of theory to practice that tends to be the more traditional (and sometimes more modernistic) approaches of evangelical theological discourse (International Council on Biblical Inerrancy, 1982; Grudem, 1994; Rogers, 2016).[122] This experience of the participants' framework of relationship to God needs to be acknowledged and, where possible, incorporated in the discourses of academic theology and particularly in the context of theological education for ministry within evangelical faith communities.

As part of the practical theology dimensions of the project it is important to reflect critically and theologically on some of the trends observed within evangelical faith communities (Rogers, 2016; Ward, 2017). In order to remain committed to respecting the participants "intentions and agencies" (Flick, 2007a, p. 74), comments about theological processing and faith practice will be focussed on the evangelical community at large and are not intended as a criticism of any of the individual participants. While the research has

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[122] This may be true of other faith practices, but was not part of the focus of this research.

highlighted the rich experience of the Bible in evangelical faith communities,

this does not mean there are not questions about authentic and innovative

(Rogers, 2016, p. 25) Christian practice. Where the data highlights that there

may be aspects of how evangelical faith communities conceptualise, interpret

and process Bible engagement practices that either demonstrate or pose

questions about authentic Christian practice, the practical theology aspect of

this research demands that this be noted. In Sections 8.2 and 8.3 the major

conclusions from each theme will be summarised and will be followed by some

theological reflection on the issues raised.

8.1.1 Location of this research

The research is a multi-disciplinary project and as a result contributes to several

fields of academic study. The primary contribution is in the field of empirical

and qualitative research in a theological context. Although it is not an

ethnographic study as understood and practiced by Malley (2004, 2009) and

Bielo (2009a, 2009b) it complements their work of as it adds a theological

dimension to some of the questions they are addressing in their work[123] and is

undertaken in an Irish context.

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[123] Rogers' (2016, p. 27, footnote 8) model of "theological ethnography" assumes that "all forms of qualitative research" can be included as an aspect as an element of the ethnography dimension.

The research also contributes to the study of religion and the sociology of religious communities in Ireland, and provides a unique insight into the "lived theology" (Ward, 2017, pp. 62-67) of evangelical faith communities. The research likewise provides a practical theology perspective on the Bible engagement practices of evangelical faith communities, complementing the more theoretically driven study of Rogers (2016) and highlights aspects of the potential dichotomy between "espoused theology" and "lived" or "operant" theology (Ward, 2017, pp. 60-62).

8.2 Encountering the Bible

8.2.1 Bible framing: Reasons for reading and expectations

Considering Bebbington (1989) and Tidball's (1994) accounts of the prominence of the Bible in evangelicalism, it was not surprising that the participants regarded the Bible as crucially important for their faith practices. However, what is noteworthy is that their perceptions of the Bible are framed almost exclusively in experiential terms. This is due in large measure to being part of a faith community that seeks and values what Luhrmann (2012) and Bielo (2009b) describe as personal interaction and intimacy with God. Theological concepts are present, but the relational matrix of faith expression results in these concepts being conceptualised in a different fashion to that of academic

theological discourse. In practice, the framework of relationship with God

seems to be the lens through which any theological understanding of the Bible

is processed. This was the case throughout the sample and suggests this mode

of processing is common across a range of evangelical faith communities.

In this "lived theology" (Ward, 2017) framework of relationship to God, the

Bible is engaged as a communication from God (Rogers, 2016). This is

evidenced by the way the participants used the phrase the word of God not just

as a theological placeholder but also as an experiential placeholder; the latter

was the predominant mode of use of the phrase. This was true across the

sample and there were no material differences across the range of

denominations represented. The practices of faith communities seem to embed

these perspectives and reading the Bible in such communities involves

embracing the assumptions embedded in the practices (Rogers, 2016).

The exact nature of how the communication from God works in practice was

vague, but participants were clear that even though the Bible is an ancient text,

it is a place where they felt they were able to hear from God. This is not a

normal way of reading texts and requires what Luhrmann (2012) argues is a

considerable change of mind to make it possible. This way of engaging the

Bible, Malley (2004) argues, is a distinctive of evangelical faith communities and

may be one of the reasons why outsiders often find it difficult to comprehend the practice of Bible engagement in such communities.

Framing the Bible as an integral part of a relationship with God explains important features of the data. First, if the Bible is the means by which God communicates, it becomes possible to read Bible texts as being directly from God. This creates a context for the privileging of relevance.

Second, not only does this promote relevance, it gives rise to a factor Malley (2004) notes, namely, the participants expect God to keep communicating with relevance as they engage with Bible in order to maintain their experience of relationship. This leads to the experience that the more relevance and specificity that is created, the more likely the perceived communication from God will be regarded as authentic. This, in turn, leads to considerable levels of expectation for the participants' engagement with the Bible.

Third, participants expect that when God's communication with individuals and communities is experienced in ways that are relevant, it is for a purpose. The expectation is that this will lead to life change. Therefore, the experience of the Bible as part of a framework of relationship with God is also closely linked to expectations of life transformation.

Theological reflection

The experiential focus for how the participants framed their engagement with the Bible, which was evident across the sample, highlights that the "lived theology" of the participants is potentially at odds with the "normative theology" (Ward, 2017, pp. 60-62) of evangelical faith communities which tends to be framed more often in 'modernist' terms along a trajectory from theory to practice trajectory (Rogers, 2016). This relational processing is at the heart of the participants' experience and needs to be recognised in any attempt to understand evangelical faith communities.

The ways in which the participants use the theological concept of 'word of God' serve as an example of the relational processing. What is more commonly a theological term for the Bible is experienced not just as a semantic term, but as a placeholder for the experience of the Bible being the location where the participants expected to receive a communication from God. The relational processing of theological concepts is a significant finding of this research and in this example, it seems to enhance aspects of the participants' theological understanding. This may be close to what Rogers (2016, p. 25) regards as innovative practice. In other contexts, as will be seen below, the results of some of this experience-based approach raise some theological issues for evangelical faith communities.

8.2.2 Experiencing the theology of the Bible

The research highlights that in order to understand evangelicals' Bible engagement, it is important to understand the effects of the framework of relationship to God they inhabit. This is an important practical theology insight as it highlights the unique manner of processing of theological concepts in the framework of relationship to God. This can be seen in the way in which some of the theological concepts about the Bible, as outlined in Chapter 1, are experienced in relational and functional categories. The concept of the authority of the Bible was linked primarily to an experience of the authority of God and not a doctrine of inspiration. Inspiration, therefore, was conceptualised as a result of this experience of authority. The Bible was a text the participants experienced as having authority; the concept of inspiration was a means of explaining that experience. It was, therefore, of little consequence to the interviewees that they were not able to explain in detail the concept or mechanisms of inspiration. Rather, inspiration functions for them as a theological add-on and conceptual placeholder for their experience of God and, by extension, the authority of the Bible. This is an important perspective as it is challenges some of the typical structures of academic theological discourse in evangelical contexts.

Given the high regard for the Bible within evangelical faith communities one of the surprising elements of the interview data is the lack of education

programmes to help readers engage with the Bible. The high value placed on

the Bible does not seem to translate into a high value on the means to handle it.

For example, only very few of the participants were able to point to any help

they had experienced in their faith communities to help them handle the issue

of Bible genres. For some participants, theological study had been the context

where they had learned to engage with issues such as interpretation or genre

with confidence and competence. The participants were able to identify this

dichotomy, but none were able to explain why it might have arisen.

The way in which the participants located their engagement with the Bible in a

framework of relationship to God may be a significant factor in this apparent

undervaluing of more conventional processes of interpretation. The relational

framework creates a context where, using what Malley (2004) identifies as a

devotional frame, it is possible for the participants to read directly from the

Bible what God is saying to the contemporary context without any necessity to

consider issues of interpretation or questions of genre. Engaging the Bible with

a primary concern to hear from God about the present tends to be more

concerned with relevance than textual meaning. The empirical evidence

suggests this interpretive framework is part of the textual practices of the faith

communities to which the participants belong. The interviewees have made

these approaches their own and were comfortable to use them, for the most

part, without raising any questions. If, as Malley (2004) suggests, relevance is

privileged, then modes of engaging the Bible that produce relevance are likely to be valued and practiced.

For some participants, questions about how they engaged with the Bible arose when they embarked on some form of theological study. Although they still inhabit the framework of relationship with God they do so with a much more critical and nuanced awareness of how the Bible functions. The desire for relevance is still present, but it is now located in a wider concern to take issues of genre and interpretation into account and develop relevance that is based on what they understand to be more responsible interpretations of biblical texts. Theological study seems to have enabled the integration of the academic and devotional frames while maintaining the experience of Bible engagement as part of an ongoing encounter with God.

Theological reflection

The empirical data generated by this research suggests that there are at least two inter-connected factors at work in the participants' experience of the authority of the Bible, one more sociological and one linked to faith practice. First, as noted above, the textual practices (Watts, 2006; Bielo, 2009b) of the interviewees' faith communities appear to function as a form of textual liturgy (Smith, 2009), the result of which is that the interviewees adopt the practices of the wider faith community for their own Bible engagement practice. This

suggest a need for critical reflection on the influences on what Rogers (2016) terms "congregational hermeneutics."

The second factor is the interviewees' experience of an encounter with the authority of God is transferred in some measure to their engagement with the Bible. This suggests a need for critical theological reflection on how the concept of authority is embraced and used in the process of Bible engagement. It is important to give due recognition to these influences as they can have significant theological implications for Christian practice.

The influence of these factors will also be observed in the next section on relevance as the evangelical faith community's construction and experience of the authority of the Bible in the manner suggested above feeds directly into the creation of relevance.

From a practical theology perspective, the absence of Bible education in the faith communities represented in the research is an example of the divergence of the espoused and operant theologies (Ward, 2017, pp. 60–62) of these communities. As noted in Chapter 2, evangelical faith communities tend to have strong statements about the authority of the Bible. However, in practice, the lack of commitment to developing Bible interpretation skills, in conjunction with the factors noted above about authority, opens up the possibility of a Bible

engagement strategy in which the normal rules of interpretation can be relaxed or ignored; Malley (2004) uses the term "devotional frame" for this. It would appear that the interviewees adopt approaches that will deliver what they expect from the Bible, namely personal relevance. If more conventional approaches do not 'deliver' the expected results, they may, in practice, become increasingly marginalised. The prioritising of relevance may serve to exacerbate these trends. These are issues evangelical faith communities need to reflect on as one of the unintended consequences may be an undermining of some of the core Bible commitments of the movement.

8.3 Experiencing the Bible in lived practice

There are portions of the data in this overarching theme that are surprising. Some of the implications have already been noted in the relevant chapters, but further reflection is necessary in the light of the whole of the research.

8.3.1 The search for relevance

The concern for relevance is an outcome of the convergence of a range of factors that were noted by the participants. Chapters 3 and 4 made it clear how the manner in which the Bible is conceptualised and the ways in which the issues of authority, inspiration and interpretation are processed by the participants

explains the value placed on relevance by evangelical faith communities. The interview data supports Malley's (2004) observation that much of the interpretive activity of such communities is to create relevance for the contemporary context.

At a human level, creating relevance from an ancient text is not an easy task, but it is one to which the participants are deeply committed. Whether they are aware of it or not, it takes considerable effort to achieve and the results from such efforts are regarded as significant. Not only does the creation of relevance lead to the potential for transformation it is also one of the reasons the participants gave as to why they regard the Bible as a unique book. This way of engaging with the Bible is highly valued in evangelical faith communities and, as Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009b) observe, is one of the ways in which such communities attempt to demonstrate that their beliefs and practices are based on the Bible.

One of the mechanisms utilised to create relevance is a devotional frame which functions alongside the academic frame, outlined in Section 1.5 and observed in the experience of selected participants in Section 5.2. Not only does the devotional frame facilitate the creation of relevance, it is also one of the mechanisms that allows the participants to use Bible texts as a justification for their beliefs and actions without any necessity to restrict themselves to normal

textual meaning. Such an approach to the Bible is very unlikely to have been taught as a learned skill; none of the participants mentioned this as a possibility either directly or implicitly. The devotional framework of reading and its associated functions are more likely to have been inherited from the shared expectations and observed practices of the faith community. As already noted, Smith (2009), in a slightly different context, suggests that liturgical practices, whether religious or secular, shape understanding and commitments; something like this may well be true for the interpretive practices that create the relevance evangelical church communities value.

For the participants who had completed theological study, the concern for relevance was just as strong as for those who had not. The one noteworthy difference was that for those who had completed theological study and as a result had reflected theologically on the issue of Bible engagement, the devotional and academic frames appeared to be, for some, more closely aligned. It would be interesting to test the degree of this alignment further.

Theological reflection

From a practical theology perspective, the concern shown by the participants for the Bible to be relevant to contemporary life is to be welcomed and embraced, especially as it appears to create communities and individual lifestyles that are concerned to engage with and embrace the Bible and, as a

result, be transformed by it. However, some of the processes adopted by evangelical faith communities for creating relevance raise theological questions.

From a theological perspective a case can be made for God communicating with individuals through the ministry of the Holy Spirit. Such a theological position is not confined to Pentecostalism or charismatic faith communities, although the actual experiences may be expressed in different ways (Fee, 1994; Turner, 1996; Warrington, 2009). In spite of the differences in emphasis, there is a theological justification for the understanding and experience of God communicating with communities and individuals.

However, the research has shown that there are some unintended consequences for evangelical faith communities in relation to the ways in which these various elements are processed. The end result of the trajectories encountered could, in practice, actually result in raising questions about the authority of the Bible. This is a question that needs to be recognised and considered, even if none of the participants were consciously aware of it.

As encountered in the empirical data, the devotional frame makes use of a contemporising hermeneutic to generate relevance. One of the consequences of the manner in which this is deployed by the participants is the shift of the locus of authority for faith and practice from the Bible to a process where personal

intuition is given a much more prominent role. None of the participants seemed

to be consciously aware of this tendency, even though there was evidence it

was occurring. As noted in Chapter 5 there may be cultural, societal and

philosophical issues involved in this trend. However, this is an issue that

evangelical faith communities need to reflect on otherwise they may be at risk

over time of the 'authority' of the intuitive supplanting the authority of the

Bible. Such developments may pose a risk to the identity of such communities if

they wish to continue to be identified as being within the framework proposed

by Bebbington (1989) and others (Meadowcroft, 2011; Ward, 2017; McGrath,

1996; Wright, 2011; see also Malley, 2004, 2009; Bielo, 2009b).

Another issue that arises at this point is how the Bible depicts its own

functionality in the life of a faith communities, evangelical or otherwise. The

question of whether the Bible presents itself as providing a source of unending

relevance is a matter that needs to be addressed. This is a significant issue for

the evangelical faith community's theological understanding of the Bible, and

the empirical data of this research has thrown it into sharp focus. It is also

noteworthy that the empirical data itself suggests a direction for a response to

the issue, namely that the most pervasive influence of the Bible was as a text

that questions and shapes, but not necessarily a text that is always experienced

as personally and immediately relevant. Moving in this direction may need not

just a theological rationale and underpinning, but some means of moulding the

expectations of evangelical faith communities about their engagement with the Bible, which in turn may mean a re-shaping of both textual ideology and textual practice. This may become an increasingly pressing issue for evangelical faith communities.

8.3.2 Experiencing transformation

Section 1.6 noted that the Bible was regarded by a range of theorists (Hays, 2004; Marshall, 2007; Snodgrass, 2011; Thiselton, 2012) as a life-transforming text. However, the theoretical perspectives said very little about how this was experienced in practice. The question of the relationship between the theory and practice of Bible engagement needs further critical reflection; the empirical data of this research provides some information for this.

The interview data shows the value placed on relevance has a natural corollary, namely transformation. The interview data was unambiguous about the fact that the participants had experienced transformation as a result of their Bible engagement. The most surprising aspect of this was the very sharp distinction between the *'literally life-changing'* and the *'generally not dramatic'* narratives (Section 6.1). When this is contrasted with the pervasive evidence of the Bible's role in shaping the interviewees' lives (Section 6.2), there are considerable elements of transformation that are significantly underplayed in the experience

of the participants and, by extension, in the experience of evangelical faith communities. The result, as suggested in Section 6.3, could be a widespread disempowerment of members of evangelical faith communities who do not feel they have experienced much by way of transformation because they are not able to construct their narratives of how the Bible has affected them into the more idealised and, according to the empirical data, highly valued *'literally life-changing'* narratives of transformation. The data suggests the experience of the participants has been subject to considerable shaping on this issue. It would be of interest to explore this further to investigate if there are other aspects of the practice of faith communities, evangelical or otherwise, that may have been, as Patton (2002) notes, inadvertently causing effects that were neither intended nor envisaged, such as the disempowerment observed in Chapter 6.

Theological reflection

The Bible presents itself as an empowering, transformative text (Kelsey, 1975; Thiselton, 1992, 2005b; Schneiders, 2002; Wink, 2010). The models for interpreting and processing experience need to match this. There is a rich body of empirical evidence that the participants have experienced a range of both minor and major life transformations as a result of engaging with the Bible; this needs to be recognised as a feature of evangelical faith communities and actively encouraged in the practices of such communities.

However, the same data also suggests the models used for understanding and conceptualising transformation need to be expanded and enhanced. This is, in practice, closely linked to the necessity noted in the previous section for redefining both how faith communities understand the function of the Bible and how their expectations of it work in practice. The data generated about the stereotypical narratives of transformation highlighted the potential for considerable disempowerment for members of evangelical faith communities. This is an experience the empirical evidence suggests could be avoided if evangelical faith communities adopted more holistic and realistic paradigms of the experience of transformation for communities and individuals. If these trends are not addressed, it may well foster patterns of Bible engagement that are even more dependent on personal intuition and even more removed from the more usual tools of interpretation; this demands reflection and action.

8.3.3 Experiencing and resolving dissonance

The high regard for the Bible adopted by the participants did not preclude them from acknowledging areas that caused them various intensities of dissonance. Some admitted to major questions about the Bible, most of these related to the Old Testament. Yet, even in the context of talking about their questions, none of the participants appeared to waiver in their commitment to the Bible and its authority. This is significant as it highlights an underlying faith commitment

that the experience of dissonance does not dislodge, even if, as the data has shown, it may cause considerable discomfort for the participants. This demonstrates how firmly embedded the experience of the Bible's authority is in the participants' faith journey.

Along with admitting difficulties with the Bible itself the participants were able to provide a rationale for their continuing commitment to the Bible. The most noteworthy part of these conversations was the participants' construction of resolution strategies which found their focus in the narrative of the framework of relationship to God. This is evidence of how far aspects of this particular narrative have permeated the experience of the participants and shaped not just their engagement with the Bible but also their whole expression of faith. When participants had questions about the Bible they found that the strength of their relationship to God significantly mitigated these questions. It would be interesting to compare the data generated in this sample with a sample from another Christian faith perspective. It may be that the responses encountered in this research reflect the prior commitments of evangelical faith communities and their understanding of the Bible.

Theological reflection

In spite of some honest recognition of issues that have cause dissonance (mostly with regard to the Old Testament), the participants recounted how they

deployed a range of theological resources and processing that in practice, for

them, represent serious attempts to resolve the difficulties they have

experienced. No one wanted to leave the OT behind, even when there were

serious questions asked. The strategies deployed to deal with the experiences of

dissonance have their basis in the theological commitments noted earlier in this

chapter, namely the experience of the framework of relationship with God. If

some of the previous reflections suggested some challenges inherent in the

framework of 'relationship with God' within evangelical faith communities,

here is a factor that would appear to be a strength for such communities. The

framework not only provides some 'answers' to the issues causing dissonance,

it also provides elements of theological stability to the participants where that

may not always be the outcome for such potential faith-destabilising issues.

One of the surprising experiences of many of the participants was their view of

preaching in their faith communities. Leaving to one side individual comments,

the data generated about preaching from those who are not preachers raises

significant questions about the theology and practice of preaching in

evangelical faith communities. Part of the problem may be linked to the ways in

which preaching is conceptualised and practiced (Norrington, 2013). The data

generated by this research suggests there are issues in regard to preaching that

evangelical faith communities (and, potentially, other expressions of Christian

faith) need to take seriously. Some specific suggestions are offered in Section

8.4.4 below.

8.4 Key learning for evangelical faith communities and the academic world[124]

From a practical theology perspective, the following are points of concern

raised by the data generated by this research. These are issues that need further

reflection in evangelical faith communities.

8.4.1 Bible education

In spite of the strong commitment to the Bible that was evident among the

participants, there was very little practical instruction available in their faith

communities on how to read, understand and apply the Bible to contemporary

life. The level of instruction provided to help people negotiate the genres of the

Bible was negligible. For a movement that defines itself to a significant degree

by its relationship to the Bible, this appears to be a major shortcoming. This is

not to suggest that faith communities need to focus exclusively on the more

academic frame, but if the devotional frame is going to be utilised as a means

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[124] Some of these suggestions could have broader applicability beyond evangelical faith communities. However, I do not want to presume that other Christian faith communities might find resonance with the findings of this study.

for creating relevance it is vitally important for the future of the evangelical communities in Ireland that Bible readers deploy the devotional frame in the context of a wider and more robust understanding of how Bible interpretation works.

The benefits of training in issues of genre and interpretation were recounted by the majority of the participants who had been trained in Bible interpretation and genre competence as part of theological study. They recounted that the experience had changed for the better how they engaged with the Bible.

In terms of practice, evangelical faith communities should consider courses of instruction in how to engage with the literature of the Bible (Rogers, 2016). In many churches in the United States of America the adult education class (often convened before the regular worship service) is a context where this type of provision could be offered. Something similar in an Irish context may be worth considering, as the sort of teaching and learning strategy required for input on genre and context may not lend itself to inclusion in a sermon in the context of a worship service.

In addition, those charged with teaching in evangelical faith communities need to be aware of how they might be deploying and utilising a devotional context. They need to find ways to make this explicit so they help their communities

understand and negotiate the differences between devotional context and more normal (or academic) frameworks.

8.4.2 Rehabilitate tools of interpretation

This suggestion is linked to the above, but relates to a slightly different issue. It is important for teachers and preachers in faith communities not only to be able to use tools of interpretation to construct talks and sermons, but also to include in their teaching and preaching instruction for how those tools can be used. Preachers who only use a devotional frame will not do this; sermons that are akin to lectures will not accomplish it either. In order to facilitate and enhance biblical engagement for their communities, those who teach and preach need to provide practical help and instruction on how to handle and engage with the Bible. It is not sufficient for preachers to simply present the results of their study; they need to supplement this with strategies to enable others to use similar processes for their engagement with the Bible. The context of a sermon may not be the best place for this (Rogers, 2016), but it needs to happen in some context. It is critical that such approaches are experienced as relevant by their hearers, otherwise such approaches will not be valued.

I also think it is important for preachers and Bible teachers in evangelical faith communities to be critically aware of the differences between the devotional

and academic frames and the theological and practical issues raised by their use. They also need to be able to help their faith communities to understand and appreciate the differences between the frames and how both frames relate to the authority of the Bible. Developing such an approach would need careful reflection and implementation.

It is important for Irish evangelical faith communities to reflect on how the privileging of the devotional frame to negotiate relevance may be reorienting people's understanding of how the Bible functions and destabilising the more usual processes of interpretation. This is not necessarily suggesting the devotional frame should be abandoned, but used with caution. Perhaps Irish evangelical faith communities need to develop an understanding and vocabulary to accompany the range of means of engaging with the Bible; this might be helpful for both the academic and devotional frames. One of the goals of such reflection would be to ensure that there is a recognition of a difference between the authority of the Bible itself and the levels of authority for anything that is derived from it, whether by the more common tools of interpretation or by means of a devotional frame.

Based on his study, Rogers (2016) suggest that pursuing hermeneutical virtue through hermeneutical apprenticeship may be one way of creating a context in faith communities where faithfulness to the biblical text can be enhanced.

Rogers (2016, p. 224) suggests that finding the means to developing the virtues of honesty, faithfulness, openness, courage, humility, confidence and community in hermeneutical apprentices could have a major positive impact on "congregational hermeneutics." If these were pursued and developed they would also function as helpful corrections to some of the issues noted in previous sections.

8.4.3 Questions about relevance and transformation

As noted in Chapter 6, the priority placed on relevance has a significant impact on experiences of transformation. While relevance is to be welcomed, the means deployed for constructing it may have far-reaching and unforeseen consequences; Patton (2002) suggests qualitative research functions as a mechanism to disclose these. The data presented above suggests that there is a need for ongoing critical reflection within evangelical faith communities about the models of relevance and transformation which are used and how the Bible is expected to function to deliver these. It is important that inclusive models of relevance and transformation are encouraged which encapsulate the range of experiences recounted in Sections 6.1.2 and 6.2.

The theological reflections in Sections 8.2.1 and 8.2.2 above suggest the need for evangelical faith communities to critically reflect on the issues of Bible

relevance and transformation. The processes used for the creation relevance and the shaping of narratives of transformation need to be subject to the scrutiny of practical theology concerns. The data suggests that current practices are producing unforeseen consequences and could have the potential to destabilise future experiences of Bible engagement.

8.4.4 Preaching

There is considerable dissonance expressed by the participants about preaching in Irish evangelical faith communities. A considerable number of the participants who were not involved in any formal preaching ministry in their communities recounted they preferred their own engagement with the Bible to any preaching they encountered. This may be due at one level to the increased individualism of the contemporary culture or it may be due to poor preaching; the reality is likely to be a combination of these as well as other factors. Whatever the cause, preachers need to reflect on these findings. When participants talk about looking for more relevance from preaching they do not mean the sort of direct relevance mentioned elsewhere in this study. Rather, it is more that they are expressing a desire that preachers reflect on how they can help members of their faith communities to engage with the Bible so that part of the response is, as Brueggemann (1995, 2009) suggests, to envisage and live for a different future.

Although it was not mentioned during the interviews, one practical step would be for preachers to consider implementing various forms of feedback mechanisms so they are able to monitor the effectiveness of their preaching (Chadwick and Tovey, 2001).

The data suggests that church preaching practice might benefit from some of the developments seen in the last decade or so in adult education. Moving from approaches that tend to focus largely on content (and are often delivered in a lecture-style form) to teaching and learning strategies for church preaching that deliberately incorporate participant learning as a major element in its planning and delivery may facilitate deeper participant learning and engagement (Blair, 2001; Bain, 2004; Ryan and Gilbert, 2011; Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2015). This should involve at the very least feedback mechanisms and the development of strategies that incorporate teaching and learning practices that span the various learning styles of adults. In theological perspective, reconceptualising preaching in terms of teaching and learning may once again create the context where preaching is experienced as an integral part of the discipleship of evangelical faith communities.

8.4.5 Bible and life

Some of the experiences of the participants raise questions for academic theology. The major example of this is the way in which the authority of the Bible is conceptualised. In the normal structure of academic theological discourse the rationale for the authority of the Bible is often considered to be inspiration; if the text is inspired then it has authority (see Section 4.2). However, for the participants the reverse was true. Their commitment to the Bible arises out of their encounter with God and as a result, as Wright (2011) suggests, they attribute authority to the Bible as part of their framework of ongoing relationship to God. The concept of inspiration then becomes a means to explain the prior commitment to the Bible's authority. In this context it does not matter for the participants that inspiration cannot be explained or even that it is shrouded in mystery. This cognitive processing is a perspective that needs to be acknowledged and, as Watson (1997) and Moberly (2000) appear to be suggesting, perhaps even embraced within academic theological discourse.

There are a range of ways in which to approach theological discourse and theological education. However, in order to avoid imposing a 'one size fits all' approach, it is important to recognise aspects of the theological processing that goes on within evangelical faith communities and, where appropriate, incorporate aspects of this within the academic discourse of theological studies. In addition, for theological education that takes place within the general orbit of

evangelicalism, engaging the breadth of the theological endeavour is essential, namely engaging with not just "normative theology" but with "espoused," "operative" and "lived" elements as well (Ward, 2017, pp. 60–62). This suggests that in such contexts the theological education should include a critical engagement with these relational and functional dimensions alongside other aspects of the curriculum. This might be seen, for example, in the development of a framework that seek to encourage virtues across the curriculum and in particular in the manner in which the Bible is engaged.[125]

8.5 Further research

This section will reflect on some of the limitations of this study and in response suggest some areas for further research.

8.5.1 Wider samples

Despite the richness of the interview data and the relatively early saturation of the data, the sample represents only a small portion of the evangelical

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[125] In a theological discussion of higher education, Higton (2013) argues that the pursuit of virtue should be a key part of university education. This pursuit is not limited to cognitive aspects of learning, but should also be the case in other learning domains. Vanhoozer (1998, pp.367-368, italics original) argues, similarly, that Bible readers need to pursue "interpretive virtues" so that a "their cognitive capacities exemplify […] *excellence*;" these interpretive virtues include "honesty," "openness," "attention" and "obedience." As noted in Section 8.4.2 Rogers (2016, p. 223) suggests seven hermeneutical virtues which, in the context of a local congregation could lead to a "more intentional, corporate and virtuous hermeneutical apprenticeship."

community in Ireland. Only two of the participants are located outside the Dublin area. Further research expanding the sample size and including more of Ireland's rich geographic diversity could be very interesting. A significant dimension could be added to further study if a significant sample from the growing number of ethnic churches in Ireland was a focus for the research.

8.5.2 Other Christian faith communities

This study has been focussed on one expression of the Christian faith community of Ireland. Similar research on the experience of engaging with the Bible in other faith expressions to allow the possibility of comparisons across the differences would be valuable, but was beyond the scope of this project. It would be interesting to explore the extent to which the themes generated in this research are representative of a wider spectrum of Christian faith traditions or if it is something distinctive to evangelical faith communities.

8.5.3 Additional methodologies

Other modes of research could supplement the findings of this project. For example, a survey approach may be able to add some perspectives on Bible reading habits (Village, 2007). An ethnographic approach based on a specific Irish faith community would also add dimensions to the overall understanding of such communities (Malley, 2004; Bielo, 2009b). There could also be potential

for a longer term action research project based on some of the findings of this research, perhaps testing some of the suggestions made in Section 8.3 (Coghlan, 2008).

8.5.4 Exploring themes

The data for the themes developed in this study reached a saturation level in the participant sample. However, many of the themes generated could be explored further and developed as insights for faith communities in Ireland. I think the themes of searching for relevance and experiencing transformation could become focal points for further research projects. These are issues that have not been explored at any depth in Irish faith communities.

8.5.5 Researcher with a different perspective

Section 2.6.2 recognised the influence of my position as an insider on this research. As Braun and Clarke (2013) and Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recognise this has both potential strengths and weaknesses for the research process. In this project the potential weaknesses have been mitigated by the commitment to researcher reflexivity (Section 2.2) and the engagement with research studies using different methodologies such as Malley (2004, 2009), Bielo (2009a, 2009b) and Luhrmann (2012). However, it could be valuable to

compare the results of this research with the perspectives obtained by a researcher located within a different frame of reference.

8.6 Concluding summary

This study has shown the rich range of experiences that members of evangelical faith communities in Ireland have of engaging with the Bible. Not only are such individuals and their faith communities defined by their relationship to the Bible, they are also communities who practice and experience Bible engagement in a way that is both relevant and transformational. This research has demonstrated how these experiences of Bible engagement and the more theological perspectives that form the backdrop to their Bible practices are located within a framework of relationship to God. This gives the participants' engagement with Bible a unique flavour and dynamic.

Evangelical faith communities appear to have developed textual practices which, for them, enables the Bible to relevantly address their beliefs and life practice. The Bible not only informs the participants about God but also functions as a means of ongoing active encounter with and communication from God. Such an approach is facilitated by a unique combination of practice and theological understanding to create a context where almost every aspect of reflecting on and engaging with the Bible is filtered through the framework of

relationship to God. This way of conceptualising the Bible requires, as Malley (2004) observed in his research, effort from the participants and their faith communities. Nevertheless, the end result is significant: the Bible is a text they value deeply and, as the participants themselves noted, it in turn 'works' for them.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Quality assessment

The quality assessment criteria below have been developed from Braun and Clarke (2013), Bazeley (2013) and Yardley (Yardley, 2008).
Relevant sections of the thesis addressing the quality issues are noted in brackets.

Data

Sample	A purposive sample across the Irish evangelical community was constructed with variation in age, gender, social class, church affiliation and theological study. (2.5.1) Contextual information is provided in Appendix D. (2.5.1) Participants' lives were respected and ethical procedures were followed at all points. (2.5.2, 2.5.3, 2.6.4)
Researcher presence	Steps were taken to address the presence of a 'professional' theological educator in the interviews. The data generated suggests this did not adversely affect the interview process. Levels of honesty from participants was significant. (2.6.2)
Methods provide required data	One of the aims of the research was to allow the lived experiences of the participants to be expressed and heard. The voice of the participants is a major part of the reporting chapters. (3-7) Appropriate methods were chosen for the research task; the choices have been justified. (2.6.1)

Process

Process justified and implemented	The research process and methodological frameworks were evaluated and a justification provided. (2.4)
Choice of method	These were chosen to allow the data to be generated; the methods chosen have been justified. (2.4) Other methods were considered, but not deemed necessary for this research. However, further research may use other methods. (2.4.1)
Data saturation	The levels of saturation reached for the data is satisfactory to establish and justify the overarching and main themes. (2.5.1)
Researcher reflexivity	All aspects of the research process were subject to researcher reflexivity, including the change in research direction noted in the Introduction. (2.3)

Analysis

Transcription	High quality transcripts were constructed. Every transcript was checked for accuracy and reliability. (2.6.3) Transcribers were required to sign Transcription Confidentiality Agreement. (2.6.3) The confidentiality and anonymity of the participants was respected and transcriptions were altered before inclusion in the final report to ensure this. (2.5.4)
Coding - all data given equal attention	Every interview was coded initially by hand. The codes generated were reviewed and evaluated during the transfer to Nvivo. (2.6.5)
Data analysis and themes generation	The researcher had a prolonged engagement with the data to ensure familiarity with data features and structure. Initial candidate themes were generated from the data during the analysis phase. The candidate themes were examined and evaluated in the light of further data analysis facilitated by Nvivo. At this point codes were reviewed and combined. On the basis of these reviews, final themes were generated from the data analysis. (2.6.4) The themes were checked before the report writing stage to ensure they were rooted in the data. (2.6.4) Participant data was treated with respect; as far as possible researcher meaning was not imposed on the data. (2.3, 2.5.3, 2.6.4)
Analysis presentation	This is presented in Chapters 3-7 with a rich description and analysis of participant experience, respecting participants' faith contexts. Analysis and illustration have been balanced to allow the reader to see the basis of the analysis in the data generated with participants. The data and the analysis are matched. Analysis tells a convincing story about the data and the research topic.
Overall good fit	There is an overall fit between what the project claims to do and what it achieves. The methodological description and reported analysis are consistent. The research is transparent and coherent.
Researcher position consistent	The researcher is positioned as part of the research process. The data has been generated with the participants; this has been acknowledged in the analysis.

Outcome

Research contribution	The research has both practical and theoretical impact. The research builds on existing studies to offer new insights into the experience of Bible engagement of members of Irish evangelical faith communities. The generation of empirical data in this context is unique; little or no empirical data exists for these communities. The empirical data will enable a better understanding of evangelical faith communities in the Irish context. Parallels with other studies in different contexts were examined and explored. However, the practical theology dimension within an Irish evangelical context is unique. Insights have been provided for an important issue of faith development that may have wider resonance than evangelical faith communities. Some of these insights have transformative potential for faith communities. Some of the findings have been expressed as insights for practitioners in evangelical faith communities based on empirical evidence. There are some insights for evangelical academic communities based on the empirical evidence.

Appendix B: Statements of faith: the Bible

The following sections are from various statements of faith from the Protestant tradition.

Evangelical Alliance Ireland

2) Scripture

The divine inspiration of the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments and their consequent entire trustworthiness and supreme authority in all matters of belief and behaviour.

From: https://www.evangelical.ie/statement-of-faith/

Church of Ireland (39 Articles)

6. Of the Sufficiency of the Holy Scriptures for Salvation.

Holy Scripture containeth all things necessary to salvation: so that whatsoever is not read therein, nor may be proved thereby, is not to be required of any man, that it should be believed as an article of the Faith, or be thought requisite or necessary to salvation. In the name of the Holy Scripture we do understand those canonical Books of the Old and New Testament, of whose authority was never any doubt in the Church.

From: https://www.ireland.anglican.org/our-faith/39-articles-of-religion

Presbyterian Church in Ireland (Westminster Confession)

Of the Holy Scripture

1. Although the light of nature, and the works of creation and providence do so far manifest the goodness, wisdom, and power of God, as to leave men unexcusable; yet are they not sufficient to give that knowledge of God, and of his will, which is necessary unto salvation. Therefore it pleased the Lord, at sundry times, and in

divers manners, to reveal himself, and to declare that his will unto his church; and afterwards, for the better preserving and propagating of the truth, and for the more sure establishment and comfort of the church against the corruption of the flesh, and the malice of Satan and of the world, to commit the same wholly

unto writing: which maketh the Holy Scripture to be most necessary; those former ways of God's revealing his will unto his people being now ceased.

4. The authority of the Holy Scripture, for which it ought to be believed, and obeyed, dependeth not upon the testimony of any man, or church; but wholly upon God (who is truth itself) the author thereof: and therefore it is to be received, because it is the Word of God.

6. The whole counsel of God concerning all things necessary for his own glory, man's salvation, faith and life, is either expressly set down in Scripture, or by good and necessary consequence may be deduced from Scripture: unto which nothing at any time is to be added, whether by new revelations of the Spirit, or traditions of men.

From: https://www.pcaac.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/WCFScriptureProofs.pdf

Methodist Church in Ireland
B.1 The supreme authority of scripture
The Methodist Church affirms that the Bible contains all that is necessary for salvation, and that nothing should be thought necessary to salvation which is not contained within the books of the Bible or which may not be proved from them.

In the Bible, which we seek to have in the most accurate and intelligible form possible, we have the record of God's revelation of himself in the experience of his people. As such the Bible is often referred to as the Word of God. This record of God's word to his people reflects the historical, cultural and religious circumstances of those people at various stages of history. Our circumstances are often very different from those in which the Bible was written, so we have to apply them with wisdom to our situation.

How then can we assess the authority of different parts of the Bible, and how can we hear the Word of God to us through its words? The Bible is effectively God's plan of salvation, which is crystallised in the life and work of Jesus Christ, described by the Gospel according to John as "the Word made flesh."

We must test scripture against other parts of scripture; never taking small parts in isolation, and ultimately all interpretations must be made in the light of the words and actions of Jesus.

The Bible was the source of authority for John Wesley. He described himself as a 'man of one book' yet at the same time he steeped himself in a wide variety of literature and learning and encouraged others to do the same.

From:
https://www.irishmethodist.org/sites/default/files/pdf/news/methodism_as_part_of_the_protestant_tradition.pdf

Association of Baptist Churches in Ireland

1. The Scriptures

The verbal inspiration and total inerrancy of the Holy Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments as originally given by God; their sole-sufficiency and final authority in all matters of faith and practice.

From: https://www.baptistsinireland.org/about/what-we-believe/

Appendix C: Self-disclosure statement

I have been interested in the Bible and how it is used in evangelical faith communities for over 30 years. Some of that interest can be seen in my career path since leaving theological college. I have worked with students studying theology and religious studies all over the UK and Ireland, some of these in contexts where students felt their faith commitments were not taken seriously.

Since 1995 I have lived and worked in Ireland, first as pastor of a Baptist church in rural Ireland and since 2003 as a part-time and since 2007 as a full-time staff member of the Irish Bible Institute (IBI). IBI delivers third level validated BA and MA awards in Applied Theology. IBI is committed to a model of holistic education that takes the dimension head, heart and hands seriously and this is embedded in the programmes we deliver. Designing and delivering modules at IBI has highlighted the need to be aware of and reflect on the interface between theory and practice. This context is where the ideas for this research project began and came to fruition.

I currently teach modules in Bible interpretation, ethics and preaching/teaching in a ministry context. Some of these interests have found resonance in this research even though that was not the manner in which the research was designed. I am currently an active member of an evangelical faith community and have seen many of the issues described by the participants in this research as an insider. For both my employment and my personal life I regularly engage with the Bible.

All of the participants would have been aware of elements of the above.

Appendix D: Questions about you

Engaging with the Bible
Some questions about you

In order to have a record of the range of people taking part in this research, I would be grateful if you could complete the following questions. None of this information will be used to identify you.

Please either write your answer in the space provided, or circle the answer(s) that best apply to you.

1	How old are you? (Enter age or circle category)						
		18-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	70+
2	I am:	Male		Female		Other	
3	I am:	Full-time employed		Part-time employed		Full-time student	
		Part-time student		Retired		Unemployed	
		Other:					
3a	If you work, what is your occupation?						
4	What is the highest education award you have achieved? Eg. Leaving Cert, Diploma, BA/BSc, MA/MSc, PhD						
5	How would you describe your racial/ethnic background? (e.g., White; Black; White Jewish; Asian Muslim)						
6	How would you describe your social class? (e.g., working class; middle class; no class category)						
7	Do you consider yourself to be disabled?				Yes		No
8	How would you describe your relationship status? Eg. Single, partnered, married, civil partnership, separated, divorced/civil partnership dissolved						
9	Do you have children?				Yes		No
10	How long have you been a Christian?						

11	How would you describe the church you belong to? Eg. Church of Ireland, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist, Pentecostal, charismatic, evangelical. Use as many categories as you need			
12	What role(s), if any, do you currently have in your church?			
13	In what ways have you engaged with the Bible in the past? Eg. personal reading, group study, sermons, online, etc. (Note as many as are applicable)			
14	Are you or have you been involved in any sort of Bible study group? If yes, please give details of group and frequency:	Yes		No
15	Have you ever studied theology in any formal context? If yes, please give details:	Yes		No
16	Which version of the Bible do you currently use?			

Thank you

Appendix E: Plain language statement for research participants

Ethics approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Research project details
Project working title: Bible engagement: a qualitative study of the experience of engaging with the Bible

This project is part of a PhD study within the School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music at Dublin City University (DCU)

Principal investigator: Steven Singleton (steven@ibi.ie) 086 363 1907

Primary supervisor: Dr Brad Anderson (brad.anderson@dcu.ie) 01 700 7048
Secondary supervisor: Dr Kieran O'Mahony (komahony1@me.com)

Details of involvement in the project
If you agree to be a participant in this project you will be interviewed by me about how you have experienced engaging with the Bible. The interview will not require any preparation and you will only be asked to talk about things you are comfortable to talk about. It is envisaged that this will take around 60 minutes and will be conducted either at Irish Bible Institute or another suitable venue.

The interviews will be recorded (audio only) to ensure that the data I am using is accurate. The interviews will be transcribed and subsequently analysed.

At this stage I am not planning more than one interview, but there is a possibility that I may request to speak with you again to enlarge on or clarify some things you have said. You are at liberty to refuse any further requests for information at any time.

As a follow-up to the interviews, you may be invited to attend a focus group to explore and discuss aspects of the research and its findings. The time involved will be of the order of 60-90 minutes and the group will take place either at IBI or another suitable venue. These discussions will also be recorded (audio only). You are free to refuse this request and it will not affect your involvement in the project.

Potential risks
There are no obvious risks involved in this study beyond those that would be encountered in the normal course of life.

Potential benefits to participants

There are no direct benefits to you as a participant, apart from the opportunity to articulate your narrative about how the Bible has influenced your life.

Most of the benefits from being a participant are indirect. It is envisaged that the data gathered in the study will enable churches and Christian educators to be better able to encourage engagement with the Bible that influences the way people live their lives.

Confidentiality/anonymity

The information gathered during this study (whether from interviews or focus groups) will be treated as confidential and stored securely either in a locked facility (hard copies) or encrypted (digital data) for the duration of the study. All of the material will be anonymised using codes and the codes will be stored securely. I will be the only person with access to the data and the codes. The data will be available to a limited number of other people (in every case with only the identifier codes): my supervisor (if requested), a qualified qualitative researcher (to confirm the validity of my findings), and a transcriber (to convert the recording into hard copy; if the recorded data contains any personal identifiers I will either remove these before they are transcribed or transcribe the material myself).

The final write-up of the project will include quotations from the interviews to allow others to understand the results of the research. Every effort will be made to ensure that you will not be personally identifiable. However, given that this is a small study, anonymity cannot be guaranteed. If you have any concerns about this, you can raise them with me at any time. If I am aware that what I am planning to report might uniquely identify you, I will ask you for your permission to use that material; you are free to refuse such permission.

I am required to point out that there are legal limitations to data confidentiality. It is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting depending on what is disclosed.

A copy of the results of this part of the study or the whole of the thesis will be made available to you.

Data storage and destruction

Unless I am using the electronic data (recordings, transcripts, and reporting documents), it will be stored in an encrypted form; I will be the only person who has access to the decryption key.

Hard copy data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet, which will only be accessible to me.

Data will be destroyed five years after the project is completed.
Hard copies of material will be shredded; electronic files will be securely wiped.

If any material needs to be kept beyond five years, this will only be done so with your express written permission.

Participation in this project is entirely voluntary and you are free to withdraw at any point in advance of data processing and formal analysis.

If you require further details about the study, please contact me.

If you have concerns about this study and wish to contact an independent person, please contact:
The Secretary, Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee, c/o Research and Innovation Support, Dublin City University, Dublin 9. Tel 01-7008000, e-mail: rec@dcu.ie

Steven Singleton

Irish Bible Institute student addition

The following paragraph was added to the Plain Language Statement for any current students of Irish Bible Institute.

If you are a current student at Irish Bible Institute, your participation in this project will have no effect on your academic progress at IBI. The project is completely unrelated to any part of IBI's provision (undergraduate or postgraduate). Your involvement in the project or a decision to withdraw will have no effect on your academic progress. If you do agree to participate the relevant academic management committee (BA Programme Committee or MA Programme Committee) will be informed so they can ensure this is the case.

Appendix F: Participant informed consent form

Ethics approval for this project has been obtained from the Dublin City University Research Ethics Committee.

Research project details
Project working title: Bible engagement: a qualitative study of the experience of engaging with the Bible

This project is part of a PhD study within the School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music at DCU

Principal investigator: Steven Singleton (steven@ibi.ie) 086 363 1907

Supervisor: Dr Brad Anderson (brad.anderson@dcu.ie) 01 700 7048
Secondary supervisor: Dr Kieran O'Mahony (komahony1@me.com)

Purpose of the project
The Bible is a foundational document for the Christian church. Within the context of a faith community, it is read not just as a set of historical documents, but as a source of doctrinal content, moral teaching, and devotional guidance. Churches expect the teachings of the Bible to shape the lives of those who belong to the community in some way. Within the churches there are various doctrinal and theological formulations about the nature of the Bible and its authority. However, these tend to be theoretical statements and while they may shape the context within which people read the Bible, they do not necessarily indicate how people actually experience their engagement with the Bible.

This project will investigate the ways in which people who belong to Christian faith communities interpret their experiences of engaging with the Bible in either formal (church, teaching sessions, study groups) or informal (personal reading) contexts. It is important that the actual experience of people who engage with the Bible is heard and critically engaged.

If you agree to participate in the study, you will be interviewed and asked to talk about your experiences of engaging with the Bible. The interview will use guiding questions, but the focus will be to encourage and allow you to tell your story of how the Bible has influenced you.

What is expected from you as a participant?
Full details of what is expected from participants can be found in the Plain Language Statement; you have already been given this.

Please complete the following to indicate that you have understood what is expected from participants as outlined in the Plain Language Statement:

I have read the Plain Language Statement (or had it read to me)	Yes / No
I understand the information provided	Yes / No
I have had an opportunity to ask questions and discuss this study	Yes / No
I have received satisfactory answers to all my questions	Yes / No
I am aware that my interview will be recorded and transcribed	Yes / No
I understand the issues about the limits of confidentiality and anonymity discussed in the statement	Yes / No
I am aware that non-identifiable quotations from the interviews will be included in the final research write-up.	Yes / No

Formal consent

I understand that I am being asked to participate in a research project about Bible engagement. I am aware that I will be interviewed about my experience of engaging with the Bible and encouraged to 'tell my story'. I understand that selected parts of what I say in the interview may be included in the final research write-up (but not in a way that allows me to be identified).

I understand my participation in this study is voluntary and that I can withdraw at any point in advance of the data processing or analysis stage. I understand that all measures will be taken to protect my anonymity, but I am also aware that total anonymity cannot be guaranteed. I am also aware that there are legal limitations to data confidentiality and that it is possible for data to be subject to subpoena, freedom of information claim or mandated reporting depending on what is disclosed.

I am aware that the recorded material and their transcripts will be stored in a secure environment and that all records will be securely destroyed five years after the completion of the project unless I give formal written permission to allow its ongoing secure storage.

I am aware that there may be follow-up focus group interactions and that I am at liberty to refuse to be involved in these.

I have been informed that a copy of the results of this part of the study or the whole of the thesis will be made available to me if I request it.

I have read and understood the information in this form. Any questions and concerns have been answered, and I have a copy of this consent form. Therefore, I consent to take part in this research project.

Participant's Signature: _____

Name in Block Capitals: _____

Witness signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G: Interview question guide

Area/issue	Question	Probes
General starter question	Why do you read the Bible? What makes the Bible different for you? How do you read the Bible? (As a heuristic question: like any other book; unlike any other book?)	Explore response
Why Bible is important Underlying issues of authority and inspiration	How would you describe (your experience of) the Bible? Why is it important for you? How would you describe your relationship to the Bible? How would you describe your knowledge of the Bible?	Where does this come from? If mentioned, what is meant by authority/inspiration? How these are experienced and explained Why do you describe it this way?
Engagement strategies Awareness of range of strategies	How do you normally engage with the Bible (small groups, personal reading, church, conferences, courses, other, etc.). How frequently do you engage with the Bible in these contexts? What are the differences you experience in these contexts?	Explain/enlarge on your experience
Reading strategies Genre Bible difficulties	What parts of the Bible do you read most? Are there any parts of the Bible you read less often or not at all? Why? Are there parts of the Bible you have difficulties with? Which ones, why?	How does the Bible work for you? Why; explain/enlarge? How does this cohere with your view of the Bible?
Bible education Genres	Have you had any help to understand the different types of Bible book? (Gospels, prophets, OT law, Psalms, NT letters)	How important is Bible interpretation? Where did you learn to interpret the Bible?

	If you were to describe how you interpret the Bible, what would you say?	Where are 'rules' of interpretation 'caught'?
Expectations Attitudes to the Bible	When you read/engage with the Bible, what do you expect? Why? What sorts of attitudes do you think are needed to read the Bible and hear God speak?	What is Bible for? How do you use it? What are personal and community assumptions about the Bible? What sort of responses have you made to the Bible?
Bible impact	Tell me about the way in which the Bible has been a part of your faith journey. Reflecting on your faith journey over the past few months or if need be years, what are some of the changes have you experienced as a result of engaging with the Bible? How does the Bible function in your life?	How does the Bible affect your life? How do you relate to what the Bible says? If the Bible is an agent for change, how does it work for you? How do you experience the Bible? Why?
Bible impact	Tell me about a recent incident where you recall the Bible having a direct impact on you. What influenced you to put this into practice?	Explore narrative Why this? How was this processed?
Community location Community of faith assumptions	How do members of your faith community think about and relate to the Bible? How do you know? Why? Does your experience of the Bible in relation differ from faith community/church you belong to on these matters?	What happens in your faith community with the Bible? Enlarge on experiences
God speaking	Sometimes people talk about God 'speaking' through the Bible. Have you ever experienced anything like that? How? When? What did you think of it and how did you react?	How is this experienced and verbalised? What is your experience

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Authority of the Bible	People talk about the authority of the Bible. In what ways do you think about the authority of the Bible – and in what ways have you experienced it (individual or group)?	Explain the experience Does the experience raise any questions about what has already been said?
	Final question Is there anything else you would like to say about your engagement with the Bible? Is there anything we have not covered that you want to say; anything that has come to mind during the interview that you would like to add?	

Appendix H: Transcription confidentiality agreement

Title of project: Bible engagement: a qualitative study of the experience of engaging with the Bible

This project is part of a PhD study within the School of Theology, Philosophy, and Music at DCU

Principal investigator: Steven Singleton (steven@ibi.ie) 086 363 1907

Supervisor: Dr Brad Anderson (brad.anderson@dcu.ie) 01 700 7048
Secondary supervisor: Dr Kieran O'Mahony (komahony1@me.com)

I am undertaking transcription of digitally recorded data for the above project.
I know that I am bound by ethical confidentiality guidelines regarding these data, and will not break confidentiality in any way.
I will not communicate about the data, or the participants, with anyone other than Steven Singleton.

☐   I agree to undertake this transcription in accordance with these stated conditions.

Signed:

Name:

Date:

Developed from resources available at:
Sage (2018) *SAGE - Student and instructor site for successful qualitative research.* Available at: https://studysites.uk.sagepub.com/braunandclarke/study/research.htm (Accessed: 11 January 2018).

Appendix I: Codes list

Lived experience of engaging with the Bible

Overarching themes

Encountering the Bible	Experiencing the Bible in lived practice

Main themes

3. Framing the Bible	4. Experiencing the theology of the Bible	5. The search for relevance	6. Experiencing transformation	7. Experiencing and resolving dissonance

Codes

3. Framing the Bible	4. Experiencing the theology of the Bible	5. The search for relevance	6. Experiencing transformation	7. Experiencing and resolving dissonance
Expectation	Devotional	Application	Instruction for life	Clear and cloudy
God communicates	Genre sensitive	Bible works	Cleat to do	Bible questioning
God unfolded	Literality	God communicates	Life changing	Jesus focus - difficulties
Reading strategy	Inerrancy	Holy Spirit	Relationship to God and life change	Preaching-sermons
Relationship to God	Inspiration	Inspiration - for self	Shaping f-work	
Reading strategy	Interpretation	Meaning making	Community	
Bible framing	Jesus focus	Relevance		
Bible artefact		Faith enhanced		
		Clear to do		