

# **Intimate relationships as means for ethical self-formation and social change in evangelical churches of Austin, Texas**

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I, Aleksi Knuutila, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

# Abstract

This thesis explores how evangelical Protestants of two conservative churches in Austin, Texas make and experience intimate relationships, and how these relationships shape their ethical self-development. It focuses on interpersonal relations within their church communities, with people in need and relations with divine forces. Both the meetings of church small groups and organised occasions for evangelism reflect a local ideal of intimacy, as they aim at conversation that is spontaneous, non-instrumental and self-disclosing. Evangelical discourse about intimate interaction understands it as an ethical tool: It allows participants to discover moral faults in themselves and to enrol others for self-disciplinary support. Such an ethical tool depends on a model of personhood that in the thesis is called forensic. Evangelicals following this model understood themselves as autonomous individuals held accountable to biblical norms that are separate from them.

Based on ethnographic material gathered from 15 months of fieldwork, the ethnography demonstrates that the performance of intimacy is often in contrast with the churches' relational ideology. Rather than relations that aspire to mutual disclosure, they also include tacit or explicit acknowledgement of power relations, negotiated reciprocity and measured distance. Moreover, in addition to the forensic model, responses to intimate relationships were also understood with a contrasting logic of personhood, as indeterminate and contingent on powers that are distinct from both the acting ethical subject and social institutions.

These statements connect with a growing anthropological literature on morality and relatedness that attempts to account for the richness and incongruity of ethical practice. Long-term participant observation makes it possible to understand personal

striving for piety not only in terms of its ideals and inherent logic, but also its potentially contradictory outcomes. The ethnographic material suggests evangelical norms and means of self-formation are associated with frustration and ambiguity, particularly as they aspire to be the singular source for ethical direction for all life domains in a context such as Austin that is characterised by a diversity of life trajectories. The flexibility inherent to the relational approach to ethical life, including the potential to switch between forensic and indeterminate modes of action, is creatively used by participants to respond to this tension.

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# 1 Introduction

Just as evangelical Christians maintain various different types of intimate relations that they conceive as instantiations of godly love, this thesis has several distinct ambitions which perform their own scholarly function while relating to the text as a whole. First and above all, this is an ethnographic account of some of the lay people that are most involved in the church communities and social initiatives in Austin Texas, a city known as the secular exception to the Texan bible belt. My account centres on a community of young evangelical Christians that had relocated to a poor inner-city neighbourhood, where I lived in one household of evangelicals, while also expanding to the congregations and activities of two associated conservative evangelical churches. It is an account of mostly middle-class individuals and families following a faint intuition to relocate to a place lacking some of their suburban comforts, and hoping it to reveal to them the real reason for them being there. It is an account of Austinites joining, like millions of other Americans, recurrent church small groups, and finding the relationships therein changing their faith. The thesis follows the many evangelicals that volunteer time and effort for those in need, and the creativity they apply to deal with the outright awkwardness of trying to develop authentic relationships with people in unequal position. It is also a description of how my informants tried to change themselves by engaging with the scriptures, and often were left frustrated as a result. It is finally also an account of how these various relationships come together in individual's striving towards a more pious self.

The thesis develops the analytical narrative that the life projects of becoming more pious individuals focus on and are shaped by the development of intimacy between people, as well as practices focused on the use of biblical language. I will



attempt to show that these horizontal relationships between people perform a work of mediation in two senses. Horizontal relationships can, firstly, act as vehicles for symbolic content, helping to express and realise the meaning of one's own personal transformation. Secondly, a relationship between two people can be the mediate contact with a third actor. This happens when human relationships are the means through which one's connection with the divine is developed. I will also put forward a functional explanation for the prevalence of intimacy in religious practice. The thesis will also show that the dependency of human relationships as mean for personal development made evangelical ethical practice flexible and adaptive. This was necessary in order to deal with a basic contradiction for normative practice, for which Christianity was defined simultaneously defined as the sole source for legitimate development of ethical character, but also was expected to be relevant across all quotidian life domains and relationships.

Thirdly, the thesis is a critical project. I join many anthropologists debating how the discipline should approach ethics, so to move beyond the dualities inherent in our normative traditions to a description of moral practices that incorporates their richness and incongruity. The 'dualities' I have in mind are present firstly in the opposition between a Durkheimian notion of morality as the unreflective, rule-like and forceful social order, that is set against ethical reflection that is characterised by freedom and choice (Robbins 2007; Laidlaw 2002). A similar kind of duality is similarly present in the juxtaposition of ethical judgment as something fundamentally directed at others (Pyyhtinen 2009; Simmer 1971) against an idea of moral formation centring on work on the self and refashioning embodied dispositions (Foucault 1979; Mahmood 2005). Theoretical work within the anthropology of ethics may at its best work to expand our ethical imagination. Given the focus of my fieldwork, the story developed in my thesis will also complicate the simplistic stereotypes of conservative Christians

that are present in much of public discussion and some academic accounts as well. Evangelicals are often portrayed as unwavering in their belief, with rigid conceptions of authority and a codified rulebook for every occasion. The people I got to know during my time in the field made use of a number of ethical idioms and often wavered in self-doubt. My work also shows that the basic social and moral issues that are central to many liberals, to whom I also count myself, such as the critique of materialism, individualism and consumerism, were also in their own form shared by evangelicals. They share the same moral conundrums common to many who dwell in American late modernity and cities undergoing rapid change, such as the search for stability in human relations, finding an appropriate reaction to surrounding poverty, and committing oneself to a place. My point is not to claim that evangelicals were less conservative than expected, nor that there is potential for some humanist moral consensus. Rather it is to say that the most relevant moral questions for contemporary Christians may not be the politically prominent ones, such as abortion or gay marriage, but those that spring from mobile urban life. As such even our understanding of this wider ethical landscape, in part shared by a wider public, can be deepened by understanding the evangelical experience.

Fourthly, my thesis contributes to anthropology of evangelical Christianity in the United States. A significant amount of ethnographic literature already exists that similarly contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the religion. The part of it that is most relevant for my analysis will be reviewed below. My analysis goes against the grain of some scholarship about evangelicals that describes it as a unified cultural group that is defined either by an opposition to aspects of modernity or an accommodation to it in disguise. The anthropology of Christianity has typically focused on groups and societies that have relatively recently experience Christian conversions. The analytical trope that is implicitly applied in many of these studies is one where Christianity is understood as a transnational

influence that has to be appropriated in a particular way for a local context (Bialecki et al. 2008). Additionally, what is particular and novel to Christianity in a location is seen as a re-articulation and continuation for previous ways of being that may stand in tension with the logic of Christian faith (Robbins 2007b). This work complicates this analytical framework by focusing on the active and ethical negotiation involved in my informant's life when they try to maintain an evangelical form of subjectivity in the context of urban sociality. Various social relationships that take place partly in spaces that were explicitly secular, such as workplaces, neighbourhoods or families, are simultaneously where evangelicals attempt to come to term with their distinctiveness, and where their spiritual aspirations mix with worldly commitments and influences. Secondly, I also take seriously the proposition that there are splits and diversity present even within individual communities of practice of Christians. I explain some of my ethnographic data with reference to the existing ambiguities and antinomies within evangelicalism, for instance concerning what the authoritative channels for mediating the divine are (Worthen 2013). These ambiguities, rather than pointing to a deficiency within contemporary American evangelical culture, are seen as one source of its normative flexibility. Before such abstract statements may be fleshed out with ethnographic material, I will review some of the relevant literature in following sections of this introduction.

## **1.1 Defining intimacy**

For somebody accustomed to the hymns of the Finnish Lutheran church, the music of American evangelical services was striking. The worship performers borrowed liberally from contemporary rock and pop music genres to play what sounded like love songs, addressed to God. The songs spoke of a desire

for intimacy with God, but also of a hope towards a kind of vulnerability and openness, “to strip away class, consumption, and a host of social markers in the pursuit of a relationship with Jesus” (Bialecki 2015). The impression is of a God that wants to have a close relationship with you, and of a church community that wants to embody the same principle. Almost every sermon would end with an invitation for new church visitors to join small groups where they could get to know other church members. What conceptual resources are available in the literature for understanding this local notion of intimacy?

Lynn Jamieson, in her book *Intimacy* (1998), has presented one of the most comprehensive reviews of conceptions of intimacy. Her work also demonstrates the difficulty of abstracting a comparative concept from the fuzziness of its cultural applications and the “potential overlap with related ... component practices such as trust, empathy and respect” (ibid, p. 23). Intimacy is about closeness, both in the sense of physical proximity as well as affective connection. The concept ties in with both the knowing in the cognitive sense as well as concrete actions of care, which in Jamieson’s occasionally cold prose “operationalise closeness” (Jamieson 2011, p.3). One condition often applied to intimate relationships is exclusivity, an expectation that, as we will see, is occasionally disputed in Christian practice that aspires to universality. Intimacy is an ideal as well as an index for various types of human relationships, tracing family, friends and kin, terms that contain their own normative implication. That these conceptions tie in with culturally relative conceptions of personhood and autonomy is particularly evident in the case of friendship, which is valorised as the domain of freedom and independent agents choosing to interact (Carrier 1999).

Jamieson critically engages with the work of Anthony Giddens, possibly one of the most influential recent accounts of Western personal life. In Giddens's analysis of the contemporary era of “reflexive modernity”, individual identity is increasingly

developed through self-reflexive and self-centred autobiographical narration, given the decentring of tradition in conditions of global capitalism (Giddens 1992). Giddens claims that a crucial site for the development of this autobiographical self takes place in the mutual self-disclosure of “pure relationships”. This is the new meaning of intimacy that has emerged in the North Atlantic context in the past decades. A pure relationship, for Giddens, is one that defines itself intrinsically, and depends on negotiation, transparency, compromise, concession inherent to the relationship itself. In a “post-traditional” society, external normative and institutional constraints lose in influence. The paradigmatic case of this change is the meaning of marriage. During the post-war years matrimony could be understood in terms of signing up to gender roles, such as the woman being dedicated to the domestic sphere. Now a marriage - even among some of the conservative evangelicals that I got to know - is more commonly understood as a commitment to negotiating the roles in a way that respects the autonomy of both parties (Cancian 1990). Giddens’s narrative clearly comes from a time marked by the celebration of the dizzying freedoms of globalisation. Another way of grounding this hierarchy, of relationships as primary to institutions, to Western liberal societies could be read from Elizabeth Povinelli. For Povinelli, the “intimate event” is a foundational necessity for the existence of an autonomous (or “autological”) subject, that simultaneously binds it to the social through a bond with a particular other (Povinelli 2006).

A great deal of specificity could be added to what the normative constructs of intimacy are for the context of Austin, though the anthropological literature on the topic of personal relationships appears sparse (Miller 2007; Bell & Coleman 1999). Mutual and uninhibited self-expression and romantic love certainly is the ideal for conjugal relationships (Bellah 1985). And as Thomas Csordas (Csordas 1997, p.19) notes, Americans often describe their other relationships, such as friends or one’s

work community, to be “like family” when they are most highly valued. What this implies is not unwavering loyalty or formalised obligation, as familial analogies would in some cultures, but that these relationships are so intimate that they could “tell them anything” (ibid). Anecdotally, a certain plainness and transparency is part of any interaction in America. Though the United States is a grotesquely unequal society by any measure, the texture of everyday conversation is egalitarian and dismissive of hierarchy. It values the quick overcoming of formalities and openness for participation in interaction regardless of social status. Terry Eagleton’s quasi-humorous treatise attributes this to the fact that American personhood depends on an externalisation: Only what is displayed on the surface is true, and keeping things to yourself can be unsociable if not outright offensive. “[I]n a country which dislikes the idea of living in a house which is attached to someone else’s, one’s inner space is constantly at stake in the public sphere. In this view, whatever is unexpressed has no real existence. What is inside you is valid only if it is externalised” (Eagleton 2013, p.58). Lionel Trilling has written a genealogy of notions of intimacy and authenticity, and posited that the valuation of sincerity that rose with modernity in Europe also had religious roots (1978). Since Protestantism placed the responsibility of validating one’s faith onto the shoulders of individual believers, the scrutiny of one’s own inner life and its correspondence with one’s actions became a matter of salvation, and became a virtue expected in social life. What the thesis is hence describing is perhaps a social form influenced by religious doctrine being reappropriated as means of developing devout subjects.

For authors such as Giddens the notion of pure relationships is descriptive, but it is possible to understand it instead as instead an account of a widely accepted normative ideal. This argument could be read, for instance, from the work of Viviana Zelizer (2000). She gives a familiar sounding operational definition of intimacy as the quality of long-term, emotional connections

measured by mutual informational exposure. The main thrust of Zelizer's work on intimacy, however, is a critique of the normative disassociation between intimacy and instrumentality or economic transactions. She refers to this as the discursive model of "hostile worlds", in which spaces of social interactions are segregated so that intimacy remains untainted by exchange and calculation. Through a description of how close relationships are negotiated in the American legal system, Zelizer claims that the reality is more complicated. For her, the question is "not whether intimate partners can or should engage in economic transactions but what sorts of economic transactions match which intimate relations" (ibid, p. 288). Intimacy is hence distinguishable by the various practices that increase and decrease contingency and exposure between subjects, which may include financial transactions, obligations and affective knowledge. Intimacy was not defined only by the extreme visibility and openness to negotiation typical for "pure relationships", but also involved the implicit recognition and management of power relations and conflicting agendas. This insight, however basic, of the tension between the practical and the normative as well as the presence of power and reciprocity even in intimate relationships will be revisited throughout the thesis.

The departures from the ideal of pure relationships may be particularly prevalent because intimate relationships appear to be a fraught and contested area of human life. "Virtually no-one knows how to do intimacy, [yet] everyone feels expert about it", Laurent Berlant (Berlant 1998) writes, referring to the constant latent vulnerability in close relationships, despite the industry of expert therapists and counsellors that exist in the United States to support them. The most intense human bonds have become simultaneously the normative core of individual life projects, yet stand in an ambivalent relationship to, for instance, the precarity of professional life. Yet the same tension within these conditions, when artfully made explicit, can turn also into a resource for

intimacy. This is suggested in Michael Herzfeld's notion of cultural intimacy, as "the recognition of those aspects of a cultural identity that are considered a source of external embarrassment, but that nevertheless provide insiders with their assurance of common sociality, the familiarity with the bases of power that may at one moment assure the disenfranchised a degree of creative irreverence and at the next moment reinforce the effectiveness of intimidation" (2014, p.3). In Herzfeld's view the defining source of intimacy is not necessarily the frictionless and transparent connections within one social space, but in the gaps demarcating several of such spaces. This is what he calls "disemia": "the formal or coded tension between official self-presentation and what goes on in the privacy of collective interpretation" (ibid, p. 14). Moments of embarrassment, irony and subversion that outsiders would not recognise feed cultural intimacy in Herzfeld's sense. By having this playful relationship to the "rules" of the situation, people are able to reconstruct their efficacy, and use the play itself as an index of proficiency in communication. Intimacy therefore connects not only to ethical values, but also to something that could be called its aesthetical performance. It refers to the content of ongoing relationships, but also to their expected public performance in changing situations.

One aspect of intimacy is hence the ideal of an immediate connection between two parties, untarnished by social position or institutions, that is sufficient to define the nature of the relationship. This ideal is, however, both undermined and renegotiated within actual relationships. In this sense, it is easy to draw analogies between intimacy and the practice of mediating the divine.

Within the next section on mediation, and in particularly through the work of Tanya Luhrmann and Anna Sthran, I will discuss how intimacy can also be a feature of people's experience of their relationship with God. Throughout the empirical chapters, I will discuss the specificities of local understandings of intimacy



in the evangelical communities of Austin. I will use the concepts of Jamieson, Giddens and Zelizer to translate and make intelligible local practices of intimacy. Where appropriate I will also use local experiences to point to potential for conceptual refinement and advancement in our understanding of the contemporary varieties of intimacy.

## **1.2 Mediation**

Intimacy in the American evangelical context is performed by communication. The prevalent picture of it is perhaps a talk in private, a mutual self-disclosure through unhindered speech. It is another image of communication that has become a central trope in the study of religion, namely that of communication technologies. Particularly the concept of “mediation” has attracted scholarly attention as an analogical device, motivated partly by recent historical processes in which different media technologies take prominence and shape religion (Engelke 2010b). In the work of Birgit Meyer, seminal in this niche, religious media are “a broad array of authorized forms that are to bring about and sustain links between humans and what, for a lack of a better term, I call the ‘transcendental’ - as an indispensable condition without which the latter would not be accessible and present in the world.” (Meyer 2011, p.61). Meyer’s theory of mediation hence posits an equivalence between a theological notion of mediation (as in Christ mediating between the divine and human), and the function of transmission as it is performed by media technologies.

Mediation is a relevant concept for my ethnography firstly in a fairly literal sense. Particularly the last chapter of the thesis describes the use of two different media technologies in devotional practice, Christian radio and the digital Bible. These various channels of consuming the Bible document of what is

sometimes called “mediatisation”, or the long trend towards a holy book that is not necessarily in the form of a monograph, but instead is distributed in numerous forms, including sound and digital text (Morgan 2011). Throughout the book practices around the holy word, even as the traditional printed volume, feature as a crucial way for my informants to make God tangible.

Also in a more general sense, the literature drawing on the notion of mediation has paid attention to how religious action is rooted in the lived environment and tangible things of the world. It is a theoretical stance that starts from the overcoming of ontological difference - between the immanent and transcendent - to produce what could be called an understanding of the material culture of religion or material religion. It informs studies that focus not only the ideational and semiotic in religion, but its outward expressions in the form of ritual objects, images or indeed communication (Engelke 2002; Keane 2007; Miller 2005; Coleman 2006; McDannell 1998). These are assumed to be not ephemeral but constitutive of religious power. As such, the materialist study of religion performs an analysis that is similar to the long-running secular critique of Christianity in that it exposes its artificiality (Hirschkind 2011). It points to its dependency on the manipulation of emotions or staging of performances, that ought to be embarrassing for some understandings of its spiritual operations. The aim of studies of mediation, however, is not to debunk faith in the name of secular reason but to take apart some of the basic binaries internal to some religions or secular understandings of religion, such as the opposition between material technologies and authentic religious experience. At the same time, the intent of this thesis is not only reiterate a statement about the tautological status of the material, or to propose an alternative metaphysics in which the distinction between the material and spiritual is overcome. Rather than looking at my ethnography as corroboration for the necessity of mediation, I wish to be sensitive to the local conception of what mediation is. I hope to use the perspective to work towards a re-

examination of ideas of the transcendent, the immaterial, and the spirit in evangelical practice.

One way in which I wish to challenge this anthropology of mediation is for its relative neglect of human community and relationships as what Meyer calls the experiential form for making divinity tangible. One way to articulate this point is to start from the critique of Charles Hirschkind (2011), who has taken existing studies of mediated religion to task for insufficient reflexivity about the implicit notions of religiosity and the transcendent employed. Following the more general theory of Talal Asad, he claims that a “Protestant theological sensibility” has been taken as the blueprint for such thinking. Within Protestant cosmology, in Hirschkind’s interpretation, the notion of exteriority takes on a particular meaning. The exterior is “an artefact that stands in a disjunctive relationship to the interior (or transcendental) essence which it (always somewhat inadequately) figures” (ibid, p. 93). The Protestants posit a distinction yet continuity between interiority and the transcendental, and oppose both to the exterior. The basic tension inherent in this, according to theories of mediation, is that the external (in the form of various media), is necessary for connecting interiority to the divine. Hirschkind’s cosmological model is ostensibly not valid for all of accounts of mediation (Engelke 2011), and I don’t wish to work out all of the theoretical nuances here. Yet I give some validity his point that the materialist study of religion has tended to equate the publicly accessible aspects of religion in opposition to interiorities - including the subjectivities of other people with which one shares a religious or other type of community.

This point about the continuity between the internal and the transcendental seems to hold, with certain qualifications, also in the work of Tanya Luhrmann, one of the most prominent scholars of North American practices of relating to the divine. Luhrmann is one of a relatively small set of anthropologists whose work has managed to cross over into wider, popular readership, while also participating in debates internal to the anthropological discipline (Luhrmann:2013us;

Luhmann 2012). Luhmann explicitly defines her work in contrast to descriptions of conversion and religious experience that focus singularly on the use and change in language (Luhmann 2004, p.518). She suggest that the manner in which God becomes real, in particular in the neo-Charismatic Vineyard movement she studied but also evangelicals more generally, is through through practices such as prayer and music having an effect on bodily emotions and psychological states. “[T]he pattern of new U.S. religious practice suggests that ritual practice and psychological techniques are not ancillary but central to contemporary spirituality. At least, congregants seem to want to experience the Gospel in intensely bodily ways that seem to make the message of the Gospel come alive for them in a way that it has not previously” (ibid).

Luhmann encapsulates her theory of emotion in the concept of “metakinesis”. The term is used to “refer to mind-body states that are both identified within the group ... and subjectively and idiosyncratically experienced” (Luhmann 2004, p.522). Luhmann uses theories of emotion from the discipline of psychology in a pragmatic way, to pinpoint the areas in which social and cultural factors can shape emotions (Luhmann 2006). One of such areas is what she calls the “representation” of emotion (ibid, p. 354), or the words and notions that are available for identifying and describing subjective feelings. Catherine Lutz, for instance, has identified *song* (justifiable anger) and *fago* (affection) among the Ifaluk, as particular types of emotions whose meaning its hard to translate to other languages (Lutz 2011). The significance of representation of emotion, however, goes beyond a mere labelling of emotion. Luhmann quotes Lutz in saying that “Concepts of emotion can more profitably be viewed as serving complex communicational, moral and cultural purposes rather than simply as labels for internal states” (quoted in Luhmann 2006, p.355). Similarly, the metakinetic understanding of presence of God implies particular emotive bodily states that are cultivated among the congregations. Through educative processes evangelicals come to recognise their varied private states as part of a shared experience, they “identify some thoughts as God’s voice, some images as God’s

suggestions, some sensations as God's touch or the response to his nearness" (Luhmann 2012, p.24). Their experience of their embodied state and thought processes, acknowledged through shared representations of emotion, become understood as signs of a relationship with an external being, the personality of God.

The quality of the emotion that Luhmann finds to be thus elevated to a pathway to God is particularly close to the concerns of this thesis, the intersection of mediation and intimacy. Getting closer to God is, for Luhmann's charismatics, not so much a case of understanding or even following biblical principles, but to developing intimacy in a "personal relationship" with God that in part resembles a friendship. Christ is personified: "Lover, father, of course, but more remarkably, friend. Best friend" (ibid, p. 28). What congregants at the Vineyard learn is to personally feel the love of God, themselves as the objects of an unconditional, forgiving and accepting relation. Many acts are still disapproved by God as sin, but the gravity of the misdeeds lies in the fact that they disrupt this relation to God. "The basic task of learning to respond to God is learning to believe that you are truly lovable, just as you are" (ibid, p. 68). The representation of experiencing God, shared amongst the Vineyard group, is one of being the object of an affectionate and accepting relationship, analogical to intimate human relationships between family or friends. Experientially, People at the Vineyard learn to hear his "voice" in their own internal dialogue. His care and concern extends to the various mundane details of personal life, such as the choice of a haircut (ibid, p. 54). Many of the means of achieving intimacy in this relationship are the same intuitions that would be applied to maintaining intimate human relationships, including the need to dedicate quality time to the other and to not hold back in any personal details during prayer.

Luhmann describes various means and techniques that make it possible to reach the right metakinetic states and to recognise them as the presence of God. Language plays a part in producing the experiences: Participants need to learn the "lexicon" and "syntactic themes", such as phrases and narratives of "walking with God" (Luhmann 2004, pp.520-522). One central technique is that of prayer,

which at the Vineyard ideally takes the form of undirected internal dialogue (when alone) or spontaneous public monologues while taking turns (when in a group). Luhmann understands the process of prayer as a directing and intensification of one's attention: "the central act of prayer is paying attention to internal experience—thoughts, images, and the awareness of your body—and treating these sensations as important in themselves" (Luhmann 2012, p.98). As a result, what is usually the disregarded background of our minds, the wandering thoughts and associations, are brought to the foreground. The outcome can at its most extreme be "dissociative" or "hallucinatory" (Luhmann 2012, p.522), interpreting these aspects of experience as part of some foreign agency.

Notably, Luhmann also counts human relationships, and in particular fellowship within church organisations, as part of the means to producing experiences of presence. She sees the house groups organised by lay people of churches as a collective setting in which people can practice what it is like to have religiously meaningful experiences. She details, for instance, how people guide each other in how to be moved by the reading the Bible (e.g. Luhmann et al. 2010, p.69). Groups are also the places where people learn the basic categories for understanding their own experiences, as well as places that establish the boundaries of what kind of reactions are genuine or authentic (Luhmann 2004, pp.520-522). Even when Luhmann's ethnographic material is rich, it appears fair to say that her theoretical system predisposes her to think of human relationships in terms of their instrumental connection to creating subjective and emotive experiences. Relational practices are religiously significant in so far as they facilitate metakinetic experiences that are personal in character. Where both the ethnographic data from my context as well as my theoretical interest depart from this, is in the understanding that human relationships in their own right be the medium for connecting with God. Relationships within the church community and in settings of ministry are not only didactic for or modelling relations with God, but a medium for this relationship with its own properties.

In highlighting the significance of human relationships to religious practice, I appear to echo a discourse that is often voiced by Catholics against Protestants. It is visible, for instance, in Charles Taylor's discussion of William James' work on religious experience. Taylor claims that James' understanding is limited by an individualist strand of Protestantism, which makes it impossible for him to consider that the divine may be "mediated by corporate, ecclesial life" (Taylor 2002, p.23).

Let us imagine further that these ways are in some respect inherently social: say, that we are called upon to live together in brotherly love, and to radiate outward such love as a community. Then the locus of the relation with God is (also) through the community, and not simply in the individual. (Ibid, p. 24.)

For American evangelicals, experience that is marked as sacred or inspired often features elements of surprise and a sense of some compelling and uncontrollable external agency, what Rudolf Otto called the "wholly other" (Otto 1923). In pragmatic terms, it would not be too surprising to see that, in a religious culture largely absent of rituals prone to produce unexpected events, the prime location for "irruptions of the real" (Lacan 2004), the impressive and surprising events, would be located in the complexities of human interaction. In my analysis, hence, I am trying to stretch the analytical reach of the concept of mediation, so that two quite distinct religious practices - attending to interpersonal relationships as well as scriptural resources - can be contained within a theoretical narrative.

Another ethnographer of evangelical mediation and intimacy is Anna Strhan, who has also worked on evangelicals in the North-Atlantic space, though in comparison to Luhrmann the focus of her ethnography, St John's church in London, has fewer charismatic tendencies (Strhan 2015uk). In terms of theory, Strhan's work takes a lot of influence from Georg Simmel's theories on the nature of the city and life within it. In Simmel's

description of the metropolis, its inhabitants often suffer from an overload of stimuli, and also struggle to integrate the demands of a number of separate life spheres into a coherent sense of shared norms.

Strhan shows how this tension caused by the multiplicity of norms in separate urban contexts is both made more apparent as well as seemingly solved by her informants' faith and their relationship with God. It is solved, because through various embodied techniques, such as the listening to sermons and evangelising carefully described by Strhan (*ibid*, p. 80-92), participants come to recognise a continuity in the presence of God. Divinity becomes a guarantor and model of coherence. To expand on this, Strhan refers to a lesser known text by Simmel, where he defines God as a transcendent source of coherence, a personality that is able to combine all the forces that divide all secular people. The religious sphere functions as a space in which people can create images of consistency that stand in contrast with the conflicts they experience in their own lives.

God's continuous coherence is for members of St John a refuge, but it can also be experienced as a demand. Like American charismatics, the British evangelicals learn to feel God's love for them. In contrast to the new-wave charismatic persona, in St John's the relationship with God is not only a pal, but can also be demanding. The central request of God is for "complete" devotion. The demand is internalised by the congregants often in terms of a fear of "idolatry" or "adultery", instead of outright sin (*ibid*, p. 152-159). The fact that one's actions don't stem from a normative source of attending to God is by itself understood as a transgression. Participants come to reflect how often they fail to respond to the demand in an adequate way. This failure also relates to the wider British society and their social position in it (the members typically being educated professionals). British expectations about reserve and valuation of privacy, for instance, would work against the call to evangelise in the workplace. And where the moral



commitments of a conservative church, related to gender and sexuality, are in opposition to widely shared social attitudes, the expectations of tolerance often go against speaking out.

Since it is impossible for the participants to completely escape into the coherence of religious experience, this sense of failure in the register of “idolatry” itself becomes a factor shaping their ethical practice. This sense of failure often drives the church community’s life, formal worship, Bible study and church participation as a whole. A significant part of the church’s energy and functions seems to revolve around helping people overcome their doubts, raised by their routine failures to live up to God’s demands. Even though in my case the reasons and logic behind it is different in my case, I will show how a sense of disappointment and shortcomings will also in my ethnographic case be a prevalent source of ethical action and inspiration, a point for which Strhan’s work is an important precedent.

## **Language and personhood**

Particularly within the anthropology of Protestant and Pentecostal cultures, language and the functioning of semiotic systems has been a central topic. This is to be expected given the centrality of the Bible as a form of revelation to Protestant theology and the use of practices such as creeds, witnessing and speaking in tongues for religious practices. Many of these ethnographies come from the United States and settings that are culturally close to my own fieldsite. One principle that will be evident, if constantly challenged, in my ethnographic material is that of biblicism and biblical literalism. The religious life sustained by this doctrine has been influentially documented by Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano & D. E. Miller 2000) in his

work on American Fundamentalist churches. In his account, biblical literalism encourages a reading of the Bible that inhibits the significance of the contextual or allegorical factors, instead looking for referential content as well as moral imperatives in the text. The text has the same referent for every reader, that is unambiguously determined by the divinely inspired author's intent. The significance of individual experience is diminished as something that is fallible and as such inferior to the revelation provided by the holy scriptures.

Another central source for anthropological understanding of North American relationships to language is Susan Harding, who has produced seminal work about the work of elite groups within American fundamentalism, focusing around the figure of Jerry Falwell (Harding 2000). Despite the literalist discourse, Harding understands Fundamentalist language to work through techniques of narrative and rhetoric, in which stories and principles from the scriptures are being re-imagined and made relevant. Their significance is extended to other contexts, through the principle of typological forms. The Bible consists of types and antitypes that continue their fulfilment within the context of individual believer's lives. The ethnographies of James Bielo (e.g. Bielo 2008; Bielo 2009b) have also demonstrated that, even within literalist churches, the hermeneutics of reading should be understood less as a form of discovery, and rather as a social practice in which people negotiate and assist each other in the use of textual resources. Also within the thesis, I will discuss several practices that make a biblicist theology normatively tenable.

At the same time, the anthropology of Christianity has been successful in demonstrating that the Christian relationship to language is far from unitary. An influential anthropological study that can be used as a contrasting case to American literalism is Simon Coleman's work on a Swedish Word of Life church (Coleman 2000). Coleman draws on Maussian theories of the gift in order to understand the speaking and circulation of words within the church in Uppsala and global prosperity theology

networks. In his analysis, words appear as “things”, as opposed to expressions of the speaker’s intention. Words act “physical signs of the presence of sacred power” (Coleman 2000, p.131) that both have tangible material effects, but also may be internalised to attain beneficial spiritual effects. Hence the borders of the subject in this context appear more porous: Individuals draw from their surrounding, including their semiotic environment, in order to constitute themselves as people capable of participating in the circulation of holy language. The type of person that is created by Word of Life’s religious practices is one that is “colonized” (Coleman 2000, p.115) by the Holy Spirit and sacred language.

An insightful analytical dichotomy that cuts through the variations of Christian personhood and semiotic practice is Jon Bialecki’s distinction between “centripetal” and “centrifugal” forms of language ideology and personhood (Bialecki 2011). Coleman’s account is a paradigmatic case of the application of centrifugal forces, i.e. the tendency to “highlight the outward origins of language, and of the exterior cardinal orientations that fix subjectivity” (Bialecki 2011, p.681). It implies that ethically correct actions depend on maintaining appropriate forms of external influence on oneself. Bialecki contrasts Coleman’s work with that of Webb Keane on Protestant forms of semiotic ideology (Keane 2007). Webb Keane contributes to a broader critique of modernity as something that represses its dependence on material substrates, drawing for instance Bruno Latour’s notion of purification. In Meyer’s terms, this expression of Protestantism depends on questioning the need for external mediation. What is most central for our analytical purposes, however, is his history of ascribing virtue to “sincerity” within Protestant Christianity, particularly with the notion that sincerity is constituted by a correspondence between external statements and a person’s internal state. According to Keane, this priority for Protestantism makes it necessary to create semiotic systems that see speech as originating from a person, denying the

significance of the social and material surroundings. Hence the analogy to “centripetal” forces, which fix the autonomous subject as the originator of action.

The two sides of this dichotomy are not necessarily exclusive ways of understanding a language, between which every single form of Christianity is forced to make a choice. A further useful aspect of Bialecki’s work is his insistence that traces of both the “centripetal” and “centrifugal”, despite their internal conviction of universality, can be found in any Christian practice. The logics are “chained to each other as uncanny doubles” (Bialecki 2011, p.684), and even religious practice of a short duration can be seen as an oscillation between the two. As I will show below, one historical reason for such a complexity within my own fieldsite is the impact within North American Christianity of the Neo-Pentecostal strand of churches, the offspring of which is the object of Bialecki’s ethnography. The so-called third wave of Charismatic Christianity was one of the influence for ecclesiological innovations for conservative evangelical Protestantism, including rock music on Sundays, but it also made popularised charismatic notions, generally of a “centrifugal” tendency, for a wider audience (cf. Hansen 2006). This effect is discernible also in many of the informal practices in my own ethnographic material.

Work on mediation, as well as Coleman and Keane’s exposition of language practices point towards theoretical questions about the nature and boundaries of subjectivity. Informed by this work, my study of word-based and relational practice in my fieldsite reflects the conservative evangelical conception of these as a way that both strive to improve their understanding of God, fulfil religious duties as well as work on their personal moral character. The nature of the process can be further understood by a reading of the literature on religious subject formation.

## 1.3 Ethics and religion

The previous section on mediation explained the ways in which the divine is made present and tangible in the immanent world. In this section I will focus on how it is that this manner of making God accessible comes to shape human relationships, particularly as these relationships are connected to individual life projects of individual people striving towards religious adherence. In doing so I wish to draw on the conceptual resources of ethical theory and the anthropology of ethics, both in order to provide relevance of my work to another field anthropological debates, but also to address the question of what happens to the notions and practices of ethics when they become subsumed within religion.

Christianity, like arguably all scriptural, monotheistic religions, places a demand to be the single unifying source of ethical direction. Though its message has to be contextualised over and over again, Christianity claims as its source a single supreme being, that overcomes the ways of any particular social and cultural groups. “God goes beyond the given; He is also one” (Martin 1980, p.11). Its model for human life is addressed to all peoples similarly. Hence the resources offered by religion present themselves as the primary means for ethical reasoning. The faith’s textuality can be understood in these terms, as an objectification to a medium that travels between contexts and aids proselytisation (Keane 2014b). A further mode of abstraction is to read the holy text, with its content ranging genealogy, mythical history and parables, in terms of principles that are independent from particular circumstances. American forms of literalism also have a long history of trying to find what the corresponding principles would be for the modern context (Boone 1989). From the evangelical perspective, ethical behaviour also has to be traceable back to authoritative means of making God present, that can be read as signs that empower and

give direction to subjects. This is another dimension that sets it apart from most other ethical systems. Ethnographic work, for instance that studying “ordinary ethics” (e.g. Lambek 2010b), suggests that everyday interaction, such as cordiality over a meal, includes the establishment and fulfilment of obligations and the negotiation of rules. But this ordinary morality is, unlike scriptural monotheism, valid from its own point of view even without organising unity or knowable source. Given this claim to monopoly on directing human affairs, there is a potential for a tension between the demands of religion and worldly ethics, as well as a wish for religious adherents to overcome the latter, a process that is also clearly played out by my informants.

American evangelicalism is also strongly influenced by what James Davison Hunter calls Christian pietism. This is the view that “the most important goal in life is having one’s being right before God” (Hunter 2010, p.26), a tendency often present in Protestantism but pronounced in the context of American individualism. As I will claim below, there was still considerable variation in what exactly this meant in practice, from submission to codified laws to discerning personally granted spiritual direction. Yet the normative for evangelicals methodically centres on the individual, as opposed to for example creating moral elevation as a member of collective. Though the content of Christian ethics is fundamentally other-oriented, to the point that some of my informants tended to neglect self-care, the altruistic acts are still empowered by an individual’s relation to God. “Transformed people transform cultures” (Colson & Pearcey 2011, p.295 cited in Hunter 2010 p. 16). This is what I refer to as piety throughout the thesis, the ethical conceived as an individual’s exercise of obedience.

## **The anthropology of ethics**

Given the need for abstraction in monotheism, many social scientific accounts see their normative logic as essentially deontological, or indeed deontological moral philosophy as a secularisation of monotheism. Since the religious moral code takes a textual form and needs to be applicable widely, it is expressed in “explicit sets of rules, understood as relatively abstract principles” (Keane 2014b, p.223). The idea that the normative could be captured in these quasi-legal forms of reasoning, “rules, rights, duties, commands, and blame” (Caplan 2003, p.3) and adherence thereto, has been both reformulated and critiqued in Western moral theory for a long time. For Nietzsche, this is the paradigm of the “morality of resentment”, of a transcendental judge standing apart from human life and placing punishing requirements on it (Nietzsche 2013). Within the discipline of anthropology, many recent authors attribute the prevalence of a norm-bound idea of ethics to the influence of Emile Durkheim (Laidlaw 2002; Robbins 2007; Zigon 2007). Particularly James Laidlaw (2002) has forcefully argued that Durkheim’s conception of morality has a law-like, legalistic character, even when it is not administered by a transcendental God, but through the intersubjective phenomena of “social facts”. The precise content of the norms is hence relative to a particular society, but in each case their mechanism of functioning is the same, through the authority and compulsion that collective holds over individuals. According to Laidlaw and many other anthropologists, Durkheim was also to blame for the discipline’s relative neglect for normative behaviour up until a couple of decades ago. By conflating the moral and the social, Durkheim made ethics “more a dimension or aspect of living than a separate department with institutions of its own” (M. M. Edel & A. Edel 1959, p.7).

My thesis follows several strands of anthropological thinking that provided a more nuanced picture of ethics. My first point of reference will be the work of Saba Mahmood, whose work I will use both as a source of ideas, but also as a point of reference to define my own position against. Mahmood's ethical theory, like that of many of her colleagues, draws on a neo-Aristotelian interpretation of Alasdair MacIntyre and Michel Foucault (Mahmood 2001; Mahmood 2005). It sees morality, in its deontological sense of norms and moral codes, as internal to particular prescriptive practices, and the performance of these practices as something that aims to produce a particular type of subject in a manner that is generative and teleological. In Mahmood's work on the Egyptian Islamic piety movement, for instance, she describes ethical formation as the progressive production of pious dispositions, working towards the point in which these inclinations become automatic and involuntary, "non-deliberative aspects" of one's character (Mahmood 2005). This approach to ethical practice depends on an accord between the exterior markers and bodily acts and their effect on human subjectivity. Appropriate normative dispositions are not only expressed but created through practices such as veiling and praying, which bring about and cement the right affective responses such as a visceral fear of God, until disobedience to God becomes nigh impossible. Reflective freedom is applied to limit itself in light of an ideal of a more authentic being that is realised habitually. This analytical framework is attractive even for an analysis of Christian ethical practice, as it takes seriously the reality of objective rule-like principles as one aspect of normative behaviour from the point of view of my informants. At the same time, it offers some insight on the quality of the practices that make the rules inhabitable to them, in part by following authoritative forms of shaping their own habits and building up situational knowledge for applying the principles.

While Mahmood's work is powerful, particularly in challenging liberal thinking on projects of political emancipation,



I will give my work a contrasting reading in some respects. Firstly, Mahmood's work arguably presents the Egyptian piety movement largely in its own terms. She accepts the movement's description of the promoted projects of self-formation as taking the form of progressive discipline and perfection. This is a point that has been made clearly in Samuli Schielke's work (2009), that claims Mahmood to have an insufficient focus on the practical outcomes of practices of self-formation, instead taking the declared intentions of the practitioners as the whole truth. In reality the results of the striving for greater piety have complicated results, including frustration and doubt as well as compromise with other systems of value. Schielke hence ascribes an "illusion of wholeness" (citing Ewing 1990) as Mahmood's fundamental error. An understanding of the outcomes of practice of religious becoming is also in the centre of this thesis, making it attentive to potential shortcomings and outright failures in ethical practice. At the same time, I will also show how these experiences of foundering of established systems of working on one's subjectivity can in themselves be interpreted using religious frames and come to take on a spiritual significance.

Schielke's critique also points to the reality of complexity and incongruity in moral systems. He points out that there are "several key moral registers, each with values, terminologies, discourses, and fields of their own", out of which Islamic piety forms only one, without guarantee for monopoly. More generally, the manner in which people negotiate and compromise between various commitments and ethical systems is a common theme in the anthropology of ethics (e.g. Das 2010). Michael Lambek, for instance, in his accounts of ordinary ethics, writes about the variety in the "vectoral qualities" of culture, the multiplicity of which has the effect that "in real life, practices impinge on one another, and judgment must be exercised continuously" (Lambek 2010b, p.23). Lambek has also worked to systematise some claims about this difference. One aspect of this work relevant for the thesis is his discussion on the significance

of continuity and discontinuity for traditions of ethical thinking, inspired by Lambek's work on spirit possession (2013). He suggests that ethical pursuits involve a dialectic between two constructs of personhood, the ideal types of which he calls the forensic and mimetic person. The forensic person refers to an identity that has continuity over time, and that is ascribed with moral responsibility for its actions, and is understood as a bounded individual defined by its conscious intent and reasoning. As the term "forensic" implies, this manner of objectifying personhood is characteristic for courts of law. The mimetic, in contrast, refers to persons that draw from other culturally available characters (or what Lambek calls "personnages"), to become or personify something else. This refers to one source of discontinuity in personhood, that finds its most mundane expression in the various roles related to work or economic agency that we play in our ordinary lives. Lambek paraphrases these theoretical terms in the following:

Viewed mimetically, the person is a subject, informed by others and their representations, and susceptible to the passions. Viewed forensically, the person is an agent, characterized by her own actions and accountable for them. (Lambek 2013, p.839.)

The forensic model of personhood is the dominant frame for ethical thought in the modern West, institutionalised in images of continuous and bounded images of possessive individualism (McPherson 1962). To counter this, Lambek claims that "ethics entails a judicious balance between forensically maintaining commitments in continuous practice and mimetically initiating, accepting, or submitting to new ones in discontinuous performances."

A conceptualisation of discontinuity may well be necessary for capturing in particular the quality of Christian ethical practice. Joel Robbins has suggested that the preference for continuity is one of the reasons for the relative neglect in

anthropology of Christianity as a subject of study. Robbins points to the important of discontinuities both in Christianity's relation to its historical past, in breaking away from Judaism, as well as in individual biographies in which conversion is experienced as eventual rupture. In contrast, Robbins identifies in anthropology a tendency for "continuity thinking", for instance in notions of culture that understand it through its means of reproduction and hence require it to have an enduring quality. Consequently, narratives of conversion that make claims about rupture are seen as epiphenomena of more fundamental and stable processes such as political or economic influences. Some ethnographic work, drawing particularly on Pentecostal Christianity, has already attempted to study moral practice while taking seriously the informant's point of view about discontinuity. Girish Daswani's work, for instance, follows "rupture as an ethical practice" (Daswani 2011) in which a sacred presence is sought in the immanent in the for of surprise and indeterminacy, while still maintaining some "interstitial norms" for the continuity of authoritative practice (see also e.g. Reinhardt 2014; de Witte 2011). Pentecostal ethical practice as described by Daswani consists not just of cementing behaviour boundaries, but also creating relatively stable and legitimate ways of overflowing them.

One way to conceptualise discontinuity, which I will return to in the analysis of my ethnography, comes from Jarrett Zigon. His work on the anthropology of normative practice is based on a distinction he makes between morality and ethics, admittedly in a way that departs from much of previous moral philosophy. He understands morality specifically as the model of social values that are stable and that people enact, at least to a degree, in a way that is unreflective and habitual. The existence of morality in this sense accounts for the reproduction of the everyday social life and the types of persons that participate in it. In contrast, the performance of ethics consists of contingent and situational moments in which the background of customary activities is put

into question. “Ethics... is a conscious acting on oneself either in isolation or with others so as to make oneself into a more morally appropriate and acceptable social person not only in the eyes of others but also for oneself” (Zigon 2008, p.261). Ethical transformation hence takes place through consciousness and intentionality when “moral breakdown” (Zigon 2007) occurs, “when for one reason or another the range of possible moralities available do not adequately ‘fit’ to the context” (Zigon 2008, p.263) While morality consists of the scripts for appropriate living, embodied in our sensibilities and dispositions, we act ethically at those moments in which these established ways appear problematic and force us to reflect on them.

In this thesis I will not follow Zigon’s vocabulary of ethics and morality specifically. Instead I will use the word ethics in a general or multivalent way, referring to the mutual implication and dependence between a norm-based and embodied morality, as well as conscious occasions of reflection and judgment. Indeed, I will claim that what makes evangelical ethics match some of the high expectations placed on its capacity to shift between these two moral registers. A functional reason for why an open-ended ethical practice is valuable for contemporary evangelicals may have to do with the manner in which their religious practice relates to wider secular society.

## **1.4 Engaged orthodoxy**

In this thesis I use the term “evangelicals” numerous times, even though my informants only rarely referred to themselves with in this way. It is a cumbersome term, but no other made itself available for navigating the fragmentation of Christian diversity. For my informants, the word would simply have referred to those engaged in the activity of evangelising, a duty most of them felt but which they didn’t associate with a

particular subset of Christian identities. Within public discourse, in contrast, “evangelicals” is often rather loosely as an umbrella term for all American Christians with conservative persuasions. The sociologist Peter Berger has recognised that a precise definition of the category is a challenge, and that he feels that he simply “knows it when he sees it” (Berger 2010). I don’t believe ethnographic work requires a precise and exclusive set of criteria given a priori, but I do need to briefly outline the historical influences as well as previous anthropological work that will give some important context for my own case study.

The roots of evangelicalism go back to reformers movements following the birth of Protestantism. The basic premise articulated by Luther, *sola fide* or justification by faith, as opposed to the Catholic emphasis on good works and the church institutions, set the basis for both individualism and critique of icons that are still part of evangelicalism. What exactly constitutes faith is historically a contentious matter, and for Protestants it involves both individual agency, a choice on part of the individual, as well as an opening to a higher source of agency. In the United States, starting in the mid-eighteenth century and going through several iterations, Protestant revival movements taught a concept of salvation, or the acceptance of birth, as a “new birth”. Early revival leaders such as John Wesley and George Whitefield, emphasised the experiential aspects of conversion in what they called a “religion of the heart” (Balmer & Winner 2013). Already at this time it was possible to perceive also other basic features of contemporary evangelicals. Oft cited in this context is the historian David Bebbington’s typology, which identifies evangelicals according to four criteria (Bebbington 1989; see also Noll 2001 and McGrath 1995). These are firstly biblicism, in its manifold expressions including inerrancy and sufficiency; crucicentrism or an understanding of atonement that is based on Christ’s sacrifice; the expectation of an event and experience of conversion; and activism, or the belief

that the reception of the gospel implies effort within the world that culminates in its communication.

In 19<sup>th</sup> century, the term “evangelical” referred generally to all Protestants. Since then, the meaning of the term has shifted together changes in how the American religious landscape is divided, following splits such as those between liberal mainline Protestant churches and conservative Fundamentalist, Pentecostal as well as recent so-called emergent forms of Christianity. For the sake of brevity, I will only give a brief narrative that defines contemporary evangelicalism in contrast to Fundamentalism and emergent Christianity. Fundamentalism as an explicit identity can be traced back to the publications of booklet series of *The Fundamentals* between 1910 and 1915. These defined the basic tenets of conservative Christianity, and attempted to defend it against biblical criticism, scepticism about supernatural phenomena as well as Darwinian evolutionary views, which had been changing Christian views since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century (Noll 1992). Also the Social Gospel movement, from the point of view of Fundamentalists, had put in question the central importance of individual conversion for Christian theology. Later, the rift between strands of Christianity, what the historian Timothy L. Smith called “The Great Reversal” (1957), became more obvious. In the 1930s the fundamentalists turned explicitly inwards, and explicitly viewed separatism as a viable social strategy. The building of new schools and churches were programmes of priority, and co-operation with other Christian or secular groups was shunned. At this point, the understanding of Christianity as a vehicle for social progress became the monopoly of the mainline churches (Williams 2008).

The “new evangelicals” of the 1950s challenged this orientation. Leaders, most prominently Billy Graham, and more intellectual influencers such as Charles Fuller and Harold Ockenga, sought to challenge the separatism of the fundamentalists. These groups understood their faith as a force of its own right, that ought to be used to engage with contemporary

culture and intellectual life, for instance in the production of arts and popular culture with a potential wider reach. Carl Henry called for a renewed mission of compassion and social responsibility (Henry 2003), as something that was essential for the church to maintain its social authority. In public discourse today, the term “evangelical” confusingly can contain both Fundamentalists and so-called neo-evangelicals (and also occasionally Pentecostal or neo-Charismatic churches). The churches in which I did my fieldwork would explicitly position themselves as heirs to the programme defined by neo-evangelicals, as theologically conservative yet innovative in their ecclesiology. When I speak of evangelicals in my texts, it is this strand of Christianity, though still loosely defined, that I refer to.

Christian Smith has tried to define the distinctive features of the neo-evangelicals with analytical detail, and has condensed it to a point about “engaged orthodoxy”. Smith is one of several American evangelical sociologists that is able to execute research projects with large surveys, clearly driven by a concern for the future of conservative Protestantism in the United States, and wanting to find pragmatic points of intervention. At the same time, he tries to show that there is still a thriving evangelical culture in the country, and tries to isolate some of the ingredients behind its success. The notion of engaged orthodoxy Smith understands as defining groups that are

...fully committed to maintaining and promoting confidently traditional, orthodox Protestant theology and belief, while at the same time becoming confidently and proactively engaged in the intellectual, cultural, social, and political life of the nation. (C. Smith & Emerson 1998, p.10.)

In Smith’s view, it is precisely this quality of engagement that lends the subculture its strength. It is the pluralism inherent to the American religious landscape that makes it favourable for an orthodoxy of this type. In claiming this, Smith departs from

many previous social scientific accounts of the nature of conservative religion.

Peter Berger has been influential in creating a common narrative about religious fundamentalism as a reaction to modernity (Berger et al. 1973). His theory is effectively a phenomenological variation of Durkheimian sociology, that understands modernity as a form of subjectivisation, or centring of the subject. No longer able to rely on social forces on providing a stable definition of the world, the self has to turn inward and make a choice between numerous available ways of rationalising life. The attraction of conservative religion can be understood as an antidote towards this anomie. They offer “sacred canopies”, which are explicitly antagonistic to the fragmentation and permissiveness of liberal culture. As a response and counter to it, the evangelical culture provides people with unambiguous and strict demands, such as those described in Steve Bruce’s work on Fundamentalists, with patriarchal structures of familial authority and unambiguously prescribed patterns of behaviour (Bruce 2001). For this stance of resistance to modernity, traditional values need to be guarded, lest they lose their distinctiveness.

American evangelicals are often described using precisely the opposite narrative, that of accommodation. Particularly the work of James Davison Hunter (Hunter 1983) has been influential in claiming, based on survey data, that there is both diversification and dilution within evangelical groups. He points to the cultural shifts of the 1960s as the moment that signalled a clear end to the power of the symbolic boundaries defined by conservative Christianity, a sea change that has happened to the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when evangelical Protestantism had immense influence in defining the basic parameters of moral propriety and family life of the American public. Hunter's surveys suggest that evangelicals themselves had grown more tolerant of non-Christian ways of life, accepting of potential changes in their belief including alternative readings to scripture. Hunter’s



explanation for these changes is based on changes in the social status and education of those adhering to a conservative faith. In the first part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, conservative evangelicals were concentrated in the South, less education and also less likely to be based in cities than Americans at large. Over time, evangelicals have become more upwardly mobile, they more often attend higher education and, according to Hunter, no less because of the ecumenism of the church, they are more likely to be in direct contact with followers of other traditions.

One influential agent in this accommodation are denominations or church movements, such as those in Donald E. Miller's quasi-ethnographic study from the 1990s of "new paradigm churches", megachurches that don't have clear denominational affiliations (D. E. Miller 1997). Miller chooses several of the defining churches of third-wave charismatic Christianity, including the Calvary Chapel and the Vineyard Christian Fellowship, as sites of his fieldwork. These are theologically distinct from many of the larger American denominations, but arguably have been influential in determining many features of the functioning of contemporary megachurches across the US. Miller explains the rapid growth of these quasi-denominations with a number of appropriations from wider American culture, such as genres of expression used in worship services. Vineyard churches were among the first to experiment with electric guitars and rock songs on Sundays. Other contemporary influences were also fairly informal organisational structures and the encouragement of participation of lay people in leadership. Moreover, the church has become keen to translate biblical values into practical advice in areas such as business life and leisure, and activities such as sports and music are thought of as potential channels for the influence of the gospel. The immediate justification given for the subsumption of such activities to Godly influence is that of evangelism and sanctification, but it also lends a dimension of enculturation to church life that can have far-reaching consequences. According

to Mathew Guest, it allows a creation of “a rich subculture which ... shares many affinities with middle class lifestyles and values: expressivism, harmony, mutual support ... and a sympathy with a reflective, embodied appreciation of human experience not unlike that driving the alternative therapy industry.” (Guest 2007, p.65).

For both Berger and Smith, conservative Christianity is a thoroughly modern phenomenon, not an anachronism but an active reaction to to a new cultural situation. In contrast to Berger, Smith’s claim is that the pluralism that is associated with modernity is not the threat that mobilises conservative evangelicalism, but rather an environment favourable for it. This is because it produces boundary work that forces people of faith to constantly maintain but not completely settle their relation with the world outside of the boundaries of their own group. This conflict, rather than being a sign of weakness, Smith claims actually animates religious life, simultaneously forcing evangelicals to define their own distinctiveness while also encouraging them to look for opportunities to engage beyond their own community.

While this thesis is not concerned with giving an explanation for the prevalence and continuity of conservative religion, Smith’s theory of engaged orthodoxy has some relevance. It suggests that we should take as a central part of the lived experience of evangelicals the maintenance of a uniquely Christian form of subjectivity across the full diversity of biographical trajectories and life domains that are typical for a city like Austin. Engaged orthodoxy implies a stretching of the evangelical subject position, in that it sets no limit to the range of relevant contexts while still in the least nominally insisting on the single source of normative inspiration. Smith’s work suggests that we understand the nature of that engagement with the secular world as something that is negotiated and creative, and potentially offering insights to the religious practitioners themselves. In a similar vein, Simon Coleman suggests that the

traditional focus of anthropology of Christianity has been to describe the effects of evangelisation on the people that are its objects. At the same time, Coleman points to the fact that the experience of being on mission itself is constitutive of the evangelical self. He points to the fact that “[I]ndividual or collective evangelical identity can be constituted in the very act of extending out into “the world” in order to missionize” (Coleman 2005, p.664). Stromberg, for instance, refers to the fact how the original experience of conversion is recounted many times when it is communicated to others, thereby reproducing it (Stromberg 1993). While the application of evangelical morality cannot be reduced to being on mission, following Coleman’s proposition of taking the evangelical position seriously can take us to the study of engaged orthodoxy as lived religion.

## **1.5 Outline of the chapters**

Through a focused review of literature, this introductory chapter has defined a small number of key themes that argument builds on: intimacy; religious practice as mediation; ethical self-formation as the pursuit of piety; and engaged orthodoxy as the posture with which these relate to the American context. The following empirical chapters are not organised according to these themes. Rather, they are separated by different types of relationships that my evangelical informants have and respond to. My thesis has three empirical chapters about interpersonal relationships, describing, respectively, the way intimacy works within church small groups, within an evangelical community in inner-city, and with people in need. The two final chapters about people’s relationships to themselves, studied through private devotional activities focusing on the scriptures (or more generally language that is considered “biblical”). The themes I have noted are covered in the chapters, but in a variable-

geometry way, each chapter highlighting a different aspect of a small number of the themes.

The chapter following the introduction describes the context of my study in more detail and explains how I collected my ethnographic material. In a manner that is largely descriptive and drawing from my own experiences, it situates Austin within the larger Texan religious landscape. It describes the two churches that were the focus of my fieldwork as well as one significant immediate influence on their priorities and organisation, the missional movement.

Chapter 3 is the first of the ethnographic chapters that focuses on so-called church small groups. These are events where that are planned to support and perform the ideal of intimacy that centres on mutual self-disclosure. The chapter shows how the social interaction in the groups enables, among other things, making the scriptures and norms perceived therein relevant to individual lives.

Small groups are scheduled occasions for the intentional cultivation of intimacy. Chapter 4 describes the committed few who changed their life circumstances to make interpersonal intimacy a continuous feature of their lives. The chapter is about the community of evangelicals that relocated to a historically African-American inner-city neighbourhood. The chapter describes how the material surroundings, with curtailed private space and frequent interruptions to life patterns, played a role in their ethical self-development. Instead of the articulation of given norms, here the ethical potential of intimacy was found in moments of breakdown that made reflection and problematisation necessary.

One theme surfacing in previous chapters is how intimacy, even when it aspires to spontaneity between equal partners, depends on artificial social situations and relations of power. This inescapable artificiality becomes a problematised issue in

chapter 5, which describes relationships between evangelicals and people in need in various social outreach projects. This chapter most clearly captures the challenges of relying on the evangelical normative projects across a variety of contexts outside of the church community. It shows that one aspect that gives evangelical ethical practice flexibility is the multiplicity of models for ethical personhood contained in it.

The remaining two empirical chapters are about people's relationships to themselves, which are mediated by various word-based practices. Chapter 6 continues on the theme of the tension between the idealised discourses on ethical self-formation and their practice. It describes people's experiences engaging in the devotional reading of the Bible, which due to the applied local semiotic ideology was a frequent source of feelings of shortcomings and guilt for local evangelicals. The last empirical chapter continues on the theme of the connection of means of mediation and ethical self-formation. It describes how routine devotional activities related to holy texts were influenced by two forms of media in particular, namely Christian Radio broadcasting worship music, as well as systems for reading the Bible in a digital form.

## 2 Setting and methodology

In order to see as much as they can of the city, visitors to Austin often walk to the summit of Mount Bonnell. The highest point of the city gives the most impressive views towards Lake Austin, a portion of the dammed Colorado river and the western limits of the official boundaries of the city. The lake is lined with some of the city's most expensive villas surrounded with generous green space, and with good timing a visitor can enjoy the scene with a sunset that delivers both tolerable temperatures and an unusual violet tinge unique to the city. The view towards the east and the centre of the city is less appealing, as the increasingly crowded skyline is often obscured by the smog of the traffic.

Mount Bonnell is one of the more visible parts of the Balcones Fault, a geological zone that runs across South-Western Texas. It is the dividing line between the more fruitful soils of East Texas and the rugged Hill Country towards the west. The city's location would suggest that it belongs neither to South, defined by its plantation economy, nor to the frontier culture of the American West. And though Austin will in the near future be a city with a majority population of Mexican-Americans, neither is it genuinely a part of the Hispanic world of San Antonio and the Rio Grande Valley. The location of the capital city of Texas was chosen in a rather coincidental manner, as Mirabeau Lamar was charmed by its rolling slopes, and believed that the nascent state too would deserve a city that, following Rome's tradition, would be built on seven hills (Kerr 2013). Perhaps its position on geological fault lines fated it to a history in which it was uncertain on which side to fall, and forced to mix irreconcilable elements.

The core of the city was laid in a grid pattern already in 1839, and most of the streets are still identified by numerals depending

on their distance from the point of origin that is the Texas Capitol Building. The coherent structure is, however, broken up by the natural features of creek beds and parks, and a person driving along a road to outside the original settlement area will find a change in curvature and straying away from the other ordinal streets (Tretter 2012). In a style that borrows from Haussman's idea for Paris of connecting sites of power with lines of sight, there is an uninterrupted view from the state capital building to the tower of the University of Texas, setting in stone the prominent position of the city's two original centres of power. Yet this connection is in a skewed angle, as the grid surrounding the campus does not conform with that of the capitol. The city may have originally been built by people who wanted to impose their order on pristine nature, but the outcome suggests this was only achieved to a degree.

More recently the city has been shaken up by the sheer scale of its growth. A long political clash between pro-growth politicians and an organised group of environmentally minded constituents reached at least a temporary settlement in 1998, when development in the city's more naturally pristine western side was curtailed (Swearingen 2010). This directed more pressure for residential and commercial spaces to downtown and the central parts Eastern Austin. A high-rise condominium building in downtown Austin is now the highest residential building of the state that prides itself of its scale. Meanwhile the Eastern part of the city, historically the location of black and Hispanic minority communities, has in the past years experienced a dramatic elevation of property prices. Some of these communities, which until 1968 were segregated and practically forced to live in the east, are now displaced to surrounding suburban areas. At the time of writing this, the Austin metropolitan area is experiencing the fastest growth of all urban areas in the US.

The changing groups of people that the city consists of - the imported academics and IT workers, the Texan business people

and minorities, the endangered ageing hippies - take pride in it as a distinctively non-Texan place. The city is, as many proverbs would have it, a “blueberry in tomato soup” or “Moscow on the Colorado river”. The precise nature of the Austin’s deviancy might be difficult to pin down. Historically much of what made it a distinctive city in Texas was its structure of employment fixed on governmental and educational facilities, which in combination with low living costs attracted a vibrant cultural and service sector. Relative to agriculture and oil business that were prominent in many other Texan cities, the trades of Austin promoted an atmosphere of social equity. During the 1960s and 1970s, the city was the centre of Texan hippie culture, and birthed a vibrant community of musicians, a later iteration of which has also been the focus of brilliant ethnography (Shank 1994). In ideological terms the city is often known as a liberal enclave, though its leanings towards lefty libertarianism are balanced by a more conservative suburban constituency. Austin was also the site of the founding for the American Atheist society by Madalyn Murray O’Hair, and today hosts a number of vocal atheist organisations.

This chapter situates my ethnography, by describing both the geographical, intellectual and institutional focus of my study as well as the practical means of its execution. It starts with explaining how Austin, Texas was for evangelicals both a paradigmatic case of a place where Christianity had lost its cultural prevalence, but also a site in which they could attain a truer form of religious practice. The chapter continues by describing the missional movement, an evangelical programme that was a central influence in my fieldwork. It also describes the two churches that were the main focus of the ethnography, before ending with a description of the practical methodology for collecting my material.



## **2.1 Austin: Secular haven or true home of Christianity?**

On an admittedly simple level, the position of Austin in the religious landscape of Texas is expressed through a rivalry between universities. The nemesis of the University of Texas (UT) in Austin is Texas A&M University, at College Station, a two-hour drive east from Austin. The two schools are flag bearers for two separate aspects of Texan identity: A&M stands for rural roots and tradition, while UT, and by implication Austin, stands for urban sophistication and the Lone Star state overcoming its past through high-tech business. This tension has played out in the history of the state numerous times in the battle between urban and rural interests. For many Texans it may also be an internalised tension that is never entirely solved, as people thoroughly embrace modernity yet celebrate the rustic past of the frontier (Burka 2011).

Though the universities' teams now compete in different dimensions, the rivalry used to find its clearest expression in college football. It is in this area too that the overt Christianity of the A&M culture found a telling expression. The Aggie War Hymn, a tune sang during every game together with certain gestures such as locking arms, includes a verse about "sawing Varsity's horns off". This is a reference to the Longhorn, the mascot of UT's football team, embodied in an actual longhorn steer called Bevo that is brought to the stadium for every football match. Yet the War Hymn also is a reference to a Psalm that mentions "All the horns of the wicked also will I cut off". In fact, many t-shirts that were produced specifically for the football games included this bible, in the New International Version translation, under a picture depicting the UT Longhorn with its horns broken in half.

Though Christian phrases and imagery can be seen in American public life, in College Stations and the bible belt of the American South more widely, they are ubiquitous in a way that makes them almost casual and taken for granted. American evangelicals have a long history of creating Christian variants of various cultural products that matched consumer needs while being explicit about their Christian character (McDannell 1998). Their cultural industry has created a vast mirror universe that replicated metal music, action films, women's magazines, clothing and even yoga instructions in a recognisable but uncannily changed manner. Their products were safe from damaging influences such as nudity or profanities, and often had some more or less explicit spiritual didactic function. Many of the consumers may appreciate the products as playful examples of kitsch, or even as a way to stand up to appropriation of religious authority by institutions (Nolan 2006). In bible belt culture, faith also becomes a part of daily interactions. From people who had lived in College Station, I had heard that at least smaller companies would often begin their business meetings in prayer. Many businesses used religious imagery in their marketing: You could not only hire a plumber that was Christian, but specifically a Christian plumber. Similarly, also college football games would often begin with pre-game prayers, followed by the national anthem. The imagery used in official occasions often mixes with symbols specific to the United States as well as the Texan identity, creating an amalgam where "patriotism, piety and products all coalesce" (Nichols 2008). The "lived religion" (Hall 1997), in which the everyday and experiences are given faint religious framings easily mixes with the civil religion in which national symbols are given a sacred significance.

The difference between Austin and the wider bible belt were not necessarily that Christianity would not have been visible in the city. If anything, the trend for the capital city may have been to become less secular. While statistics describing religious

adherence on a local level in the US have issues related to constancy over time and sufficient sample size, they do suggest a direction that is supported by anecdotal evidence. According to Association of Religion Data Archives, about 39% of residents belonged to a Christian denomination in 1956, and the percentage had hovered around 46% ever since the 1980s (ARDA 2010). In particular the Catholic and conservative evangelical denominations were growing, possibly as a result of the rapid influx of people from other parts of the United States to Austin (Laycock 2003). Also many prominent locations at the intersections of highways had fairly recently built buildings for megachurches there, and many long-term residents claim that various Christian events in the city, such as concerts and large Easter services, had grown in size.

Yet expectations about the public presence of religion in Austin were different. Many informants, and particularly those that worked in the large tech companies such as Dell and Texas Instruments, told me about the company's policies that curtailed religious talk in the office in order to make it an environment welcome to the various faiths of their employees. They felt even saying grace around a shared meal may feel awkward when it is unclear whether others would join in. Austin had also experienced some public contestation related to religious signs in public spaces. A monument next to the Capitol Building of Austin displays in text the ten commandments, and has been there since the 1960s. In 2005 the US Supreme Court handled a case made by an Austin lawyer, deciding against the case that the monument was in conflict with the constitution's first amendment that prohibits government from unduly favouring one religion. Similar interventions in the public sphere were also recurrent billboards that had been purchased by atheist organisations in Austin with deliberately provocative messages questioning religious authority, thereby testing the limits of such public expression. At the same time, the city was famed for its tolerance, including tolerance for religious activity. The urban

studies scholar Richard Florida claimed Austin as one of the paradigmatic cases of cities of the “creative class” (Florida 2005). His theory posits a virtuous loop between tolerance and economic prosperity, as an open-minded urban atmosphere attracts the talent to a city required by knowledge-intensive industry.

Austin’s tolerant attitude found a tangible expression in the standards of dress, which were more relaxed than other large Texan cities. This feature of Austin was easily appropriated by the evangelical churches as part of Christianity too. A highway advertisement prominently displayed an arm with a large tattoo saying “Broken”, while inviting people to church with the slogan “No Perfect People Allowed”. Such a display of ink on skin may well seem unlikely for evangelical churches of previous decades or other parts of Texas. Many sermons that I listened to also connected the supposed quirkiness of the inhabitants of Austin to a Christian narrative. After all, those who had been justified by God didn’t need to follow the expectations of the wider society. In this sense Christians were the original eccentrics.

In fact, evangelical communities across of the United States have been relaxing their attitudes towards a number of lifestyle issues. Particularly Pentecostal and Baptist denominations in the American South were known to place demands on the appearance of their members, and question behaviour such as drinking, smoking, dancing, or playing cards. Survey research published by James Davison Hunter (Hunter 1983, p.69) suggests that evangelicals in the least claim to still follow strict moral boundaries related to sexuality, while the mores particular to other aspects of lifestyle have loosened.

Still, almost everybody I encountered in the city had in some manner been affected by this cultural legacy of American Christianity. Many people who had attended Texan churches as a child had grown up in household that only allowed safe, Christian music inside. A worship music performer I knew had

lied to their parents claiming that ska music had religious origins in order to make it accessible to him. Hunter interprets this change as a sign of evangelicals accommodating their faith to late modernity and its moral individualism. From the perspective of my informants, this development rather reflected a development towards a more nuanced ethical and religious sensibility. Reactions to the faith of one's parents are as manifold as people themselves, and certainly the younger generations in the US are filled with people who choose to reject their religiosity. Perhaps surprisingly, many of the people I came across during my fieldwork, in the liberal yet theologically strict churches, thought of themselves as doing precisely that. For numerous evangelicals in Austin, stepping into the lifestyle associated with the city, its diversity, ease about appearance or outright hedonism, may be congruous with returning to a more authentic Christianity. They understood it in terms of a rejection of the legalism of past years, that had dictated arbitrary codes of behaviour for congregation for purposes of distinction. They presented varied theological reasons informing their choices on matters such as dress and alcohol, for instance speaking about how they affected the effectivity of their witness or the likelihood for sinful transgression for those around them. Still they thought that such behavioural features could not be determined with the same rigidity that their stance to pre-marital sex or sexual orientation, about which the Bible was unequivocal.

For the members of evangelical churches in Austin, the evangelical subculture was instead the object of frequent commentary bordering on ridicule. The many books, films and blogs that offered a sustained critique of the excesses of evangelical subculture were a constant source of humorous reflection, for instance when people were acting out scenes from the film *Saved* that depicts the hypocrisy of a Christian high school. It would be too simple, however, to think that the young evangelicals in Austin reject the mainstream of evangelical culture to simply have succumbed to greater secular influence, to

practice their faith with lower intensity or even to have accommodated their position. They had reasons intrinsic to their faith for believing that they were doing something more authentic. Within evangelical order of the world, it is a priority to keep one's faith pure from external influences, and hence the term "cultural" can have surprisingly negative connotations. A form of "cultural" or "nominal" Christianity is one that only functions through social processes that are external to religious influence, and has lost its salvific power through the dilution of its doctrine with cultural influences. And it is this verdict that many of my informants generalised to Christianity in the Bible Belt more widely. Certainly a social situation in which people take pride in overt expression of their faith, and attend church because of the power of expectations or mere habit has the potential to foster participation for the wrong kind of motivation.

A significant share of my informants had moved to Austin from elsewhere in the United States. Austin was attractive to and celebrated by evangelicals for reasons that they shared with their secular cohabitants, the employment opportunities, the still relatively low living costs that went together with the sheer comfort and excitement of its cultural opportunities. The churches that thrived in the city appeared to be the ones that were able to translate the pull of the city and its qualities into a meaningful and positive part of the individual narratives about religious development. There was little sign in Austin of the historical evangelical wariness for cities, that had previously seen urban areas with their commerce, cosmopolitanism and distractions as an area hostile for religious life (Teaford 2006). Many churches asked their congregations to channel the attachment to the city to various programmes that were attempting to deal with Austin's complicated social issues, such as its relatively large homeless population. Typical targets for their outreach activities were the formerly segregated, historically African-American neighbourhoods of East Austin, that also in parts now had a large Hispanic population. The

churches narrated social issues as partly a result of the spiritual shortfalls that were caused by the disunity of its churches. Churches, and specifically the two that I focused my fieldwork on, saw social interventions as a central way for the evangelical community of the city to legitimate itself, and sought to have an active role in channelling and giving resources to services alongside those that were provided by the local government and voluntary sector. This was one way in which the appreciation of the city with such a strong identity was translated into a practical engagement.

The social mission was in the minds also predicated on a spiritual renewal. The number of people who were not active Christians by standards of Texas, and it was not lost on the pastors that this gave a sense of urgency and efficacy to their calls for lay involvement in evangelism. Many sermons I heard in the city talked about the necessity of understanding America, or “our own backyards”, as a potential ground for missionary work, and Austin itself was a location that was particularly fruitful for a revival in churches. Austin was framed as a frontier, in spiritual terms an exemplar of what the future of the United States could appear like, would the American church not succeed in maintaining its vibrancy. In order to reach the inhabitants of this city with gospel, the church itself could not remain the same. In the next section, I will outline some of the novel ideas that were circulating within the national evangelical community and that had also been taken up by both practitioners and lay believers in my fieldsite. They see what they called the missional movement as a response to the historical moment, the nature of urban life as well as the role of the church within it.

## 2.2 The missional movement

The Moody Theatre is a concert venue in downtown Austin that is best known for being the location where the long-running television programme *Austin City Limits* is filmed. Outside of the downtown high-rise that houses the venue is a statue of Willie Nelson, the iconic musician that is strongly associated with the city, with his braids and bandana. The venue has a reputation with many that follow American music, but the first time I visited it was for a conference on exchanging the latest ideas in the evangelical subculture. It was early 2013, I was in the first months of my fieldwork and still in the midst of finding a productive way of doing my fieldwork. An evangelical conference had rented the Moody Theatre, and a large banner with subtle graphic design projected the theme of the event “Making Disciples”, just above Willie Nelson. The event was classified itself a “network” of those interested in “gospel-centred missional communities”.

Inside, the 2,700 seats of the auditorium fill up almost to capacity every time when the worship band plays. Between the songs, there are female performers in spoken word, alternated with some of the most famous young evangelical pastors. David Platt, an evangelical rising star who at only 33 years shepherded his own megachurch, speaks with wailing voice about the responsibilities of Christians. His sombre style is balanced with Francis Chan, another influential young pastor, with a more humorous and motivational tone. After the plenary programme ends, most of the audience disperses to workshop sessions, on themes such as “Forging everyday people into everyday missionaries” and “Developing a holistic strategy for making disciples in the urban context”. Later that night the workshops would turn into networking events that centred around the evangelical “collectives” and “innovators” that had spoken at the



event. The feel of the event was like a cross between a trade convention and an evangelical rally.

I had come to the event with the hope of picking up something about recent trends in evangelical culture as it was represented in Austin. As I sat in on the worship music and the short sermons that followed it, I paged through the conference booklet, and read some short essays that it contained. When preparing for my fieldwork, I had already come across the idea of the “missional movement”, the loose alliance of church builders and reformers that was behind the conference as well. In literature that is specifically anthropological, the term is largely associated with the emerging church and small, nimble Christian communities (Bielo 2011; Packard 2014; Marti & Ganiel 2014). The notion of a missional church has equally been promoted by prominent conservative evangelical figures such as Tim Keller and the Gospel and Our Culture Network as well as Mark Driscoll who previously headed the expansive Mars Hill Church. At the conference, the influence of this discursive formation for the conservative evangelical establishment was evident. Both of the churches that I did fieldwork in were either funding or speaking at the conference. For them, the word “missional” itself was used frequently in their communication and material. It worked like a “condensation symbol” (Graber & Graber 1976), invoking something about the church’s priorities merely through the choice of words for those who were familiar with evangelical terminology. Despite this identification, throughout my fieldwork I also learned to qualify the significance of church movements for popular religious practice. The conference turned out to be less insightful to me as an update of recent evangelical thinking. It was rather revealing for the way in which participants sought to appropriate and make use of the ideas that were presented there.

The significance of this model for churches was most clearly articulated to me by a member of the Lifeway church staff, whom I interviewed later in my fieldwork. The pastor explained

to me that, in simplest term, about 20 percent of people in the United States currently attended a church. How could the remaining 80 percent be reached? For the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the answer had been to build more churches, and to apply the insights of market research to make them more appealing to people (Vaughan 1993). Starting in the 1980s, new church buildings have looked like office buildings, with few discernible Christian symbols, as this was shown to speak to the largest market segments. According to the pastor that I was interviewing, this approach, often ascribed to a set of forces called the church growth movement, worked as long as the church as an institution was central to American society. For churches such as Lifeway, it became untenable at the moment when evangelical churches came to realise that their efforts were merely moving churchgoers from one church to another. The more attractive church services were only pulling congregants from churches that had not reformed their style to meet the preferences of their audience. The pastor appeared genuinely concerned that within a generation the impressive buildings built by American megachurches might be empty, unless they find the right strategy for engaging with contemporary society. This concern gives some context to the apparent buy-in of the evangelical elite to missional organisation: From the perspective of the church professionals, the missional movement was not only a theological correction that emphasised the duty of every Christian to fulfil the Great Commission. It was also an attempt to ensure the vitality of American evangelical culture.

Missional speakers and authors associate their message with a particular historical era that they call “post-Christendom”. It is part of a narrative of a pluralisation of ways of life and a decline of the power of the church to define dominant values, but sees this in part not as a threat but an opportunity. Within the narratives offered in the missional conference, essentially this historical change placed the Christian churches back into the initial position of the apostolic church of the first centuries. They

became sacrificial, devoted communities focused on being messengers of God in the surrounding largely idolatrous world. The missional imperative consisted essentially in change of direction in Christian activity. During the time of post-Christendom, to reach the 80% the churches could not expect new members to come to the spaces dedicated to Christianity. Instead the spatial logic had to be reversed, and Christians had to enter and be active in other spaces, the city at large, their workplaces and leisure activities, where the unreached masses already were. The large churches of the past decades were not only criticised for their investment and prioritisation of buildings for church functions, but also neglecting to recruit lay people into the activities of discipleship, that is building up stronger Christian followers both within the church body and outside of it.

The idea that quotidian life is a primary site for religious expression has a long history within Protestantism. Max Weber connected this to Luther's notion of the calling, through which daily work, when done with piety and dedication, could be a way that God could be served amidst one's everyday life (2005, p.158). This can also turn out to be a terrifying prospect: For people such as the Urapmin, as described by Joel Robbins (Robbins 2007a), it is a struggle to comply with the Christian value system in a variety of mundane contexts. What the missional churches were advocating was the potential for a revaluation and sacralisation of Christian quotidian existence, with specific expectations. The pastor I interviewed explained to me that a big part of his job was to explain to congregants how that they could start being missional where they already were, to "see who God has put in their life" for that purpose. One term that was frequently used in the missional conference was "life-on-life relationships", which referred to relationships that were built up within the goals and settings of regular life, while still containing the purpose of sharing the gospel and developing Christian subjectivity. When done with this intentionality, to invite one's neighbours for dinner, to organise a carpool to work

or to visit a coffee shop was to be part of the church. Much of the “discipleship”, or the development of a more devout life was to take place not within within the actual institution of the church, but these mundane activities that are undertaken with a Christian mission in mind. This is one defining frame for activities that we will return to in the empirical chapters of the thesis, when discussing the performance and experiences of these types of relationships.

To further define the type of theology that my informants in Austin subscribed to, it is helpful to contrast them with another body of thinking and theological movement, namely the emerging church. This loosely connected group of individuals, congregations and scholars, often referring to itself as a movement, had its roots in the English-speaking world and has become a visible presence within American Christianity since the 1990s (McLaren 2010; Jones 2011; Tickle 2012; for an anthropological description see Bielo 2011). One aspect of emergent groups is that they have sought a “shift from a ‘modern’ to a ‘postmodern’ Christian consciousness” (Bielo 2009a, p.221), thus forming a surprising audience for academic discourses on postmodernity that within the university context are perhaps on the wane. Also many of the innovations of the emerging church, such as their experimentation with forms of Sunday service performances, as well as methods of long-term social engagement often referred to as “neo-monasticism” (Murkowski 2015) have proved influential even with some conservative churches. The emerging church share with the conference that I have described the themes of defining the church through tangible and authentic relationships between its members, as well as the hope to bring the church communities’ activities to everyday situations where other people were present. There was even terminological overlap: Authors associated with the emerging church would also often speak of the “missional movement”.

Yet, my informants would clearly and recurrently distance themselves from emerging Christians. To see what the difference lies in, it's helpful to trace the path of some of the authors that my informants often read. The names that I would most recently encounter were the likes of Tim Keller, John Piper and Donald Miller, in addition to older Christian authors that had become popular in evangelical America, such as C.S. Lewis and Oswald Chambers. The contemporary authors were often pastors, had a Calvinist bent, and were trying to understand how the evangelical church may maintain a cultural relevance in present day America. They had professional connections between each other, often working in the same church development networks and publishing houses, such as the The Gospel Coalition. Another widely read pastor of this same category, Mark Driscoll, had in the past identified himself as part of the emerging church movement as well. He had often shared panels with people like Tony Jones and Doug Pagitt, some of the founders of the church group. Around 2003, however, Driscoll consciously broke with the group. In the least according to Tony Jones, their differences lie not necessarily so much in contrasting positions of doctrine, but on the epistemological grounds on which those positions are taken. Members of the emerging church often explicitly refer to themselves as "postmodern", and conservative evangelical use this label to denote what they distance themselves from. (Hansen 2008, p. 141). In Driscoll's words:

Inerrancy is a watershed issue. Penal substitutionary atonement is a watershed issue. Heaven and hell are watershed issues, and homosexuality is a watershed issue (quoted in *ibid*, p. 139).

This stands in clear contrast to Jones' aim to be "living on the shifting sand, as opposed to be looking for some foundation" (*ibid*, p. 231). Similarly, James Bielo has observed communities of the emerging church that try to define the commonality of their congregation not in terms of shared believe but common relational practice (Bielo 2012). In contrast to the emerging

church, also the churches in which I did my fieldwork did define their theology through some points of doctrine that was considered inerrant and unnegotiable, also including views typically regarded as socially conservative. For instance New Church Austin, the second church described below, taught its members a distinction between “open-handed and closed-handed issues”. The former were open to debate, while the church expected people to accept the latter after their conversion. While questions such as predestination and eschatology were regarded as open to debate, members were expected to agree on biblical inerrancy, “complementarian” gender roles and the need to repent on homosexuality.

The audience of the conference was relatively varied. Many were leaders and practitioners within churches, or the various ministries and consultancies that participated in the economy around religious life. Listening to the same presentations and workshops were were many young people who were active as volunteers in various tasks in their churches and lay members who had not found their niche yet. Talking to the participants, I sensed a clear enthusiasm for the notion of a missional church they were hearing. There was a novelty to it, a feeling of a reorientation of the church that had only barely begun. It offered a broad set of options for participation, effectively removing the distinction between professionals and lay participants, and encouraged everybody present to think of themselves as participating agents of this change. As such it was an example of the dynamism of American evangelism that felt compelled to find new forms of religious life, while also adhering to their own religious tradition (Worthen 2013). For many in Austin who had an ideological mind-set that included some optimism about the potential for social reform, the framework of lay initiative was one way in which they could follow this aspiration while keeping their faith and church communities relevant to it. It was a way of taking their faith commitment seriously while distancing

themselves of the dominant public perception of Christian social mission that was associated with the Christian right.

Throughout the conference the speakers would often express a slightly dismissive stance towards theology or codified understanding. It is common for evangelicals to see mere “head knowledge” as inferior to the development of one’s “heart”, or the motivational core of one’s character (Elisha 2008). The speakers of the conference often added a third term to this distinction, speaking of “hand knowledge” that one gains through first-hand through practical activity. This also pointed to the fact that the kind of message that people were taking home from the missional conference was quite a subtle one. Evangelical culture has often been accused of being anti-intellectual (Noll 1995), but in the case of evangelical meetings like this it was for the clear purpose of winning adherents to a practical programme. As much as the transmission of developed ideas, the event was geared towards the production of a structure of feeling, to connect people’s private endeavours with a collective project.

Having said that, the evangelicals I met and spoke to later on also exhibited a significant amount of reflexivity and even occasional cynicism about movement for change within their own religious communities. When I was reading blog posts about the event afterwards, I noticed how many of them prefaced their expressions of support with making it obvious they knew it was like “yet another conference”. Those who had spent a longer time in the church had gone through reorganisations, changes of language and new initiatives before, and could place these in context with their own experiences.

This is worth noting out also to point to the value of making an ethnographic study of the reception of new religious ideas such as those of the missional movement. I’ve spent some in this introduction describing the discourses and sentiments surrounding the movement, as they were significant in contextualising the churches that I worked with in the field of

American religious expression. At the same time, any understanding of the lived experience of the participants in these churches will show that these ideas or organisational forms are only one among many cultural, theological and historical imperatives. My ethnographic study will attempt to be sensitive to the creative agency inherent to church participants as they make choices between various potentially contradictory religious resources that are available in the evangelical field, and moderate their understanding of them through their own experience. In the coming chapters I will detail disagreements, for instance, about how to interpret the call to love one's neighbour unconditionally, what role the church institution should play in organising community activities, or what it means to draw on God's agency when striving for a more virtuous life. This means that while referring to the missional movement is a way of distinguishing the churches I worked with within the larger evangelical subculture, my study is one of the living practice of the people within them that appropriate the movement's ideology in a selective and creative manner. I will next give a brief description of the two churches that my fieldwork concentrated on.

## **2.3 Lifeway Austin**

The main focus of my participant observation were two churches, which I will here refer to as the Lifeway church and New Church Austin.<sup>1</sup> As I explain below, my choice of churches was partly pragmatic, but I also consciously aimed to have some

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed the names of both churches in the text as well as the names of the areas in which they operate. This is another means of providing anonymity to my informants. Having said that, it would not require a lot of research to be able to determine which churches I did my fieldwork in. When negotiating access to the two churches in question, they did not set as a requirement my not naming the institutions, or them not being evident in my research. Hence my main aim in changing these names is to protect the anonymity of my informants, for most of whom I did give the assurance that they would not be identified in the publication.



diversity in my approach. The theological commitments of both churches were similar, with direct or indirect affiliation to the Southern Baptist Convention, influences taken from the Reformed tradition, and a continuationist yet careful stance toward gifts of the Holy Spirit. Both took seriously the “missional” model of directing their church communities to active evangelism within their cities. The churches were very different in scale. New Church Austin was located in a shop front of a strip mall, next to a Mexican restaurant and a space for Zumba dance classes. On the best Sundays, it gathered about 40 people to its services, though the number of individuals that were active within its network of small groups was larger than that. In contrast, Lifeway church had 5 separate locations for its services (called “campuses”), that had several services on any given Sunday and typically drew about 8,000 people to them. Most of my Sundays would be spent attending a New Church service in the morning, often staying to have lunch with its members afterwards, before driving to the other side of town to go to an evening service with people from Lifeway.

The Lifeway church had been founded in 2002. It had undergone relatively quick growth in its early years, propelled by a famous contemporary Christian rock singer who headlined in its main campus, as well as brief collaborations with the university’s football team’s quarterback. Lifeway managed to consistently grow its membership and attendance, despite a significant degree of turnover of its members. A member of staff estimated to me that about 60% of the church’s regular attendees were students, most from the local university, where the church appeared to enjoy a status of high monopoly within evangelical groups. During the time of my fieldwork, the church had about 7,000 people who had formally joined as members of the church. This made it one among the half-dozen largest churches in Austin, but still modestly sized in comparison to the largest megachurches in Texas. About 3,200 of these people were at least signed up to one of the recurrent small group meetings

affiliated with the church. This figure, as well as the fact that less than half of the membership tithed or gave to the church regularly, gives some indication how much typical members of the church would engage with the institution.

Like many other churches, Lifeway sought to embrace its position as an “elective parochial” (Guest 2007, p.69), understanding itself a “temporary home” and “sending church”, an institution that equipped people with skills they could use elsewhere. Out of the annual budget of 17,5 million dollars, about a quarter was spent on what was categorised as mission, including both local charitable and organising activities, as well as supporting overseas missionaries and funding. Roughly a third went to the church’s counselling centre as well as an institute that trained pastoral and administrative staff, as well as worship leaders and the production of services. One of Lifeway’s priorities was hence mentoring and training young people to be professionals in the wide range of functions that a modern large-scale church performed. The opportunities presented by Lifeway also made it attractive to many people who wanted to make a living within economy of evangelical institutions, “working for the kingdom” as they would put it.

Like most churches, Lifeway kept detailed accounts of its members. Every Sunday service had one or two volunteers count the number of people in the pews, and the register of members was updated with information including the time they had last donated. The church chose not to publish even aggregate figures about its membership, and for good reasons this information was not available to me as a researcher. I also chose not to undertake any surveys of the church demographics or to get a quantitative grasp of factors such as age, gender, education or ethnicity. One reason for this was, in addition to the costliness of the effort, that my participant observation inevitably slanted towards only vaguely defined subsection of the whole church’s population. Generally, this group was the people who were most active within the church and happened to be easily accessible by me.

In terms of its organisation and bylaws, Lifeway was similar to many non-denominational churches, in emphasising the autonomy of the church itself, and placing significant decision-making powers in the hands of its lead pastor and the board of elders. The elders included the pastors and assistant pastors of various Lifeway campuses, but also members of the congregation (exclusively men) who were seen as particularly gifted to be responsible for helping in various functions of the church. The elders could be nominated by any member of the church, but were assessed and selected by a committee led by the executive pastor. During my fieldwork, I heard some criticism concerning the homogeneity of the group of elders. With a few exceptions, all of them were wealthy, middle-aged, white men. For the critical voices, the election to the board of elders was a convenient way to ensure that some wealthy families would commit to participating in the church. As a rule, however, the governance of the church was barely ever a topic of discussion among the laity. The board of elders, steered by the lead pastor, had the final say about establishing doctrine, teaching, policies of spending as well as defining the tone of worship, and church-goers at Lifeway appeared to trust them to fulfil this responsibility.

As a whole, the age range of Lifeway participants was relatively broad. Even though undergraduates alone constituted a majority of the church, it also hosted numerous young families, and as my later chapters will show I ended up also meeting some empty-nesters through the church, some of which were already in retirement. The church included a visible if small proportion of Hispanic and black people, and as far as I could tell they were they were practically invariably from a secure middle-class professional status. Most of the people connected to the church were white. Among some of the people I met through Lifeway who were trained for “church planting”, or the founding of new churches, it seemed to be a generally accepted principle that a church could reach either economic or ethnic diversity, but

attaining both simultaneously was infeasible. Lifeway partnered with several other churches, some of which had black or Hispanic congregations, and in its social programmes Lifeway would occasionally refer people to them.

As a rule, the people that I got to know through Lifeway had attended higher education and worked in what Americans would classify as professional employment. The people that I formally interviewed did also include those working in telemarketing, installing curtains, working in bars as well as people who were unemployed. The only women I met who worked exclusively as homemakers were from the generation now in their forties or fifties. Southern evangelicals would historically have formed families in quite a young age, many getting married during university years or in their early twenties. The culture in Austin appeared to be more mixed, with a significant proportion of the church body still single in their late twenties.

Lifeway still had a feeling of an institution that was professional and culturally capable. On a superficial level you could glean it from the people attending, the young people that attended with either relaxed fitness wear or fashionable outfits, and the priorities of their services which had high production value without the occasionally gaudy excess typical to some other megachurches. The sermons appeared to reflect the taste of the fairly academic audience by being analytical and demanding, while still maintaining a biblical focus. Lifeway also made its investment into various social welfare programmes a visible part of its identity, and worked to support an infrastructure for both directing volunteers from its congregation as well as bringing various charitable organisations together. The experience of those participating in this work are detailed in chapter 5 of the thesis.

Despite this culturally progressive impression of the church its theological commitments and social attitudes were conservative. No pastors of the church were women, though

female staff members actively participated in teaching outside of liturgical occasions. Church members who were planning a marriage were encouraged to attend marital counselling provided by the church, and the materials used in this counselling were explicit about a biblical model of gender roles that was complementarian in character. While equal in value and dignity, the roles of man and woman within a family are distinct. The husband is in a position of power, though this hierarchy is qualified by the call for the husband to submit to the wife's needs. During a series of sermons that were given after my fieldwork, the church took the stance that same-sex attraction was not a sin though acting on it was, though this message was also moderated by an emphasis on the fact homosexuality was not necessarily a sin of greater gravity than other misdeeds. As in many churches, same-sex relations were a contentious issue, which also led to a number of people leaving Lifeway.

Lifeway was part of a recent trend in American churches to build a presence on multiple sites. Instead of a single large base for their church, that could contain thousands of people for a worship service, they operated 5 separate locations throughout the city, the majority of which they only rented for the weekend. The staff of the church occasionally talked to me about how this fundamentally altered the functioning of the church, since the movement and setting up of equipment required substantial volunteer input. But it also allowed the church to use the tithes it raised in a way that was not solely focused on the development of real estate for further growth needs. One exception to this model, namely the refurbishment of a building in a deprived neighbourhood of St John's, is further explored in chapter 5. A multi-sited approach may fit well to Austin, where the church audience is marginally less inclined to drive long distances than elsewhere in Texas. According to the investigative work of Lauren Sandler on one of the churches pioneering the multi-sited approach, Mars Hill in Seattle, the approach was also attractive because it allowed the churches to expand geographically while

at the same time circumventing zoning regulations that would have put breaks on the extension (Sandler 2006).

Even though the Sunday services required quite a lot of hands, Lifeway had a large enough pool to make these operations happen. One pastor that I spoke to thought of the weekly build-up and tear-down associated with the services as an apt opportunity to identify the people that had the interest as well as the characteristics for leadership roles among the laity. The church offered training for these people, as well as a changing variety of different kind of programmes, from mission trips to facilitating adoption of orphaned children, for avenues where people could make use of their skills.

The church's involvement in facilitating volunteering and the community of its congregants was often seen as a double-edged sword. Especially in its current growth phase the church had many resources and professionals available, and as I've mentioned, some young people were attracted to Lifeway because it was seen as a path for them to build up skills and credentials that would allow them to work in the evangelical charitable niche in the future. On the other hand, some of my informants felt following the blueprint defined by an organisation, for instance on how to run small groups, took away from their authenticity. One couple who had relocated to the St John's neighbourhood, for instance, felt like the church's involvement in different projects and locations was too fickle and dependent on creating a sense of novelty for their services. They also chose not to follow the church's format for small group community meetings, the so-called "missional communities", as they wanted to organise meetings that exclusively focused on participants lives and concerns. Creating a sense of intimacy within the church community, hence, depended on individuals selectively making use of the resources and interpretative frameworks when participating in the church community and building their own social connections.

## 2.4 New Church Austin

New Church Austin existed in a different kind of niche for a church than Lifeway. It was my impression that Austin, as perhaps any Southern city of its size, always had one or two small evangelical churches attracted a disproportionate amount of attention and enthusiasm, in the least among young evangelicals that were looking to have a more active relationship to their churches and that felt disillusioned by larger institutions. These small churches would come up frequently in conversations as churches doing something differently, and stand out on social media as well as coffee shop notice boards for those who, like me, kept their eyes open for this type of information.

New Church had been in a similar kind of position about one year before I began my fieldwork. It had rented a space in the backroom of a central independent coffee shop, and had quickly grown to be consistently fill the space that seated about 50. During the time that I was connected to the church, it had already moved to a location it envisaged as its missionary target, a more residential part in South Austin. Some pastors referred to this area as the “graveyard of churches”, and it was likely one of the larger localities of Texas with the smallest share of people belonging to religious institutions. The pastor of New Church talked claimed that it was one of the first places in Texas where unchurched people were growing up with unchurched parents.

It was my impression that the church community, however, soon discovered many practical challenges of locating themselves in such a secular context. As a consequence of its move to South Austin, a significant part of its membership, including some of the previous church elders, had decided to leave the church. It never completely regained its earlier energy

or significantly grew the number of its supporters. During the time that I spent there, it was clear that the core group of the membership was dedicated to the church, yet in terms of its finances and the workload placed on both volunteers and staff with families appeared unsustainable. It was particularly difficult to retain families with children, an important demographic for any strategy of church growth, because the teaching and facilities that New Church was able to provide for children were modest. In its early phases, the church had received financial support from the church planting network that it had been a part of. During my fieldwork, however, it depended exclusively on the tithes and donations of its members. The church's financial state was discussed openly during biannual member's meetings. A wealthy member had given a substantial amount to the church, that allowed the organisation to temporarily run with a deficit. The sense of the meetings was, however, that unless some other unexpected aid would appear, as a gift from god like all that was received, significant changes in its current operations would have to follow.

Churches of this size would typically have a space for themselves only for a handful of hours of a weekend, during which volunteers would set up and dismantle the equipment necessary for a church service, but New Church had decided to rent a storefront on a small strip mall. The space it used for its own services, but it also allowed it to provide facilities for Christian music events and various meetings, such as that of a company running theological study groups that I also participated in. The church's space had a handmade feel to it, with a stage built out of pallets, paintings by members on the walls and a ramshackle collection second-hand furniture akin to a coffee shop in the back. The reuse of materials, the pastor told me, pointed to the principle of redemption. The music during the services made a similar home grown impression, as a varied group of the musically talented members played the music together, often only having practiced together briefly every



Sunday morning. For a small church, the personality of the lead pastor also did much to define the mood of the church. The man who founded New Church was not a highly educated man, but was young enough to load up his sermons with ironic yet credible references to popular culture. His own past, with a spell in prison and late conversion, gave some authority to his vision of the church as an active participant in projects of social improvement in the locality.

New Church was part of a church planting network that had grown large in the United States in the past decade. At the time of writing this, the network had grown to be associated with over 300 churches, and also reaching three continents internationally. “Planting” is a term that is used to describe starting autonomous churches that are aided by some parent body that typically offers training for leadership, help for compiling an initial group of supporters, and early financial support. The network also provides something of a recognisable brand for planted churches that attracts new participants to them, as it provides some predictability about the tone of the church’s teachings and its theological commitments. Consequently, the network also aimed to harmonise the aims and message of New Church. In the classes that it provided for those hoping to join the church, it provided a clear list of theological issues that it considered non-negotiable, and those that were a matter of personal conviction and open to debate. The inerrancy of the holy word, as well the basic Christian theological premises such as the trinity of God and the resurrection, were things that every person after conversion were expected to profess. One’s precise position on Arminianism and Calvinism, or the significance of the gifts of the spirit, the church encouraged debate in, as long as it did not result in divisions within its group. Like Lifeway, New Church defended many socially conservative theological tenets, such as a complementarian position for conjugal relationships as well as the sinfulness of homosexuality.

In terms of its demographic New Church Austin was similar to what I encountered at Lifeway. Because of the smaller numbers, the age range was not as broad. At 31 years when I began my fieldwork, I found myself occasionally being the oldest person in social occasions. At the same time, only a single young university student was present in the church. The fact that the congregation had several people working as nurses had become an in-group joke. Other common occupations included teachers, doctors, people working for the army, yet also a football coach and a man working in retail were part of the church's active core. These professions seemed to mirror an ideal for middle-class evangelicals, which was to aim for service work that included a tangible component of care, yet was economically secure and lucrative.

Inevitably, the experience of attending the churches would be very different. Because of its few resources, New Church Austin depended on the constant involvement of its members to even run its basic services, and some of my informants alternated between performing with the worship band on the stage and receiving newcomers at the door. In the masses of hundreds of congregants attending Lifeway church it was easy to be lost in the crowds and have a momentary connection to the church. In contrast, at New Church Austin, people who began to frequent the church quickly became familiar faces, and they also quickly came to recognise the needs the church had for continuing its operation, both in terms of finances as well as filling basic roles in the Sunday operations, in music, logistic, child care and ushering. When one of the active participants of the church left, as happened when a theologically trained elder accepted a paid position of a youth pastor, the reorganisation of volunteer tasks had to be organised by the church. Typically, whenever a new church plant was formed, it would start with a selected "core team", a group of people that was roughly self-sufficient and where everybody was assigned with specific roles. New Church Austin had also began its journey with such a team. It had,

however, lost many of its elders when the church had relocated from the central coffee shop location to the more residential strip mall, as this change had made the divisive questions about the church's priorities more pertinent. New Church was now dependent on an on-going recruitment of participants.

The experience of active church participants was also comparatively difficult because of a lack of older, more experienced people that would guide their work. One of the hard-working participants told me that the church never really had had the "white hairs", as people were in their forties at the most. She was concerned about the lack of opportunities of being "poured into", the local phrase for being disciplined by more experienced people.

The larger set of responsibilities on the shoulders of lay New Church congregants also made a mark on the everyday of the church community. In the recurrent small group meetings, for instance, the leaders of groups responsible for creating the content and themes for meetings. The meetings themselves occasionally had to focus on problems that had surfaced in the church, or co-ordinating and preparing people for participation. The building of relationships and intimacy between people that often was the sole focus of the group meeting, at New Church had to take place in part in the goal-oriented activities that people participated in together. In one small group discussion I witnessed, the group leaders talked about the need to "bring in more disciples" to the church, not only as an expression of church duty, but to ensure the sustainability of the organisation. While in many churches this responsibility would be dispersed, in their case they were effectively the church's core group. "Church growth. It's on us", the leader reminded everybody. In the discussion that followed, many church participants discussed the guilt that they felt for feeling hesitant about accepting this position. "I just thought 'Shit, I didn't sign up for that.'", one young woman confided. At the same time, she had thought that

what attracted her to the church was precisely that she wouldn't only be a "consumer" there.

Despite this contrast between New Church and Lifeway, I take my experiences from these churches as much as complementary as contrasting. In the activities outside of churches, such as volunteering opportunities for ministries, there was a considerable amount of overlap between members of both congregations. Both churches shared largely the same ethos, not only in taking inspiration from the so-called missional movement but also in wanting to navigate between what they saw as excesses of other established American churches. Both were wary both of calculative exploitation of culture wars by preaching on hot button issues such as gay marriage or abortion, as well as the tendency to focus on teachings attractive for their pragmatic value, "centered on successful methods of adjusting to stresses of contemporary American life" (Killen & Silk 2004, p.90).

My later ethnographic analysis will also focus on many features of a small granularity in evangelical relationality, that I believe are features of American evangelical culture also outside of my fieldsite. Both groups shared in what Simon Coleman has called "part cultures", or particular iterable cultural forms that are distinct from the wider cultural environment (Coleman 2010, p.800). My following chapters lay out many of the common tropes, techniques and means through which the social relationships that evangelicals consider ideal come to be. In some of the following chapters I focus on my observations from Lifeway church exclusively, which I will make explicit, but most of the material I present draws from my contact with informants from both churches.

## 2.5 Methodology

In many respects, the focus of my ethnography was different than that of ethnographies of small societies or village life. One prominent idea of an ethnographer expects them to be inserted in the middle of some small settlement, within a group of people with dense social connections and relatively similar backgrounds. Within this vantage point, the anthropologists can observe almost everything that takes place within the culture in question, and write an account about the society that is seemingly comprehensive. My own work can hardly aspire to any claim on holistic representation. The material that I present for this thesis is the product of my social relationships in the field, which traced a variety of contexts and touched on many groups with a degree of exclusivity, and yet were as much characterised by chance and opportunism. The knowledge that these gained from these connections produced should be qualified accordingly.

In my defence, I could say that the types of social connections that I had in the field were almost out of necessity similar to the ones that many evangelicals in Austin had. Interactions in churches were purposefully designed and structured, all the way from the running order of events to the architecture of church buildings, to create space for open-ended interaction and connections with previously unknown people. At the same time, the scale of even small church gatherings was such that it forced people to find a niche within the faith community. The church was often conceived as a composite of smaller groups within which each participant had a strong link and frequent interaction with each other. And according to people's personal preferences and resources, they offered shifting levels of commitment to various activities and projects that individuals could volunteer for or take responsibility in. For many Christians, this type of participation would easily span across several churches, with no necessary loyalty to a single church. These basic avenues for

social connections, the Sunday services, small groups and volunteer programmes, were also for me often the first point of contact for informants.

Before starting my fieldwork, I had oriented myself to churches in Austin based on their presence on the Internet, the often elaborate websites that the churches had produced. I had been looking for a church to work with that would have embodied the concoction of influences I imagined could only be found in Austin, where stringently conservative theology would mix with a positive affirmation of the refined consumer culture and urban social forms characteristic to the city. My initial strategy was to introduce myself to the churches with email, and to in the least get an acknowledgement of the church administration or the pastoral staff, before I would start attending. The answer to my emails were friendly but a little distant. It seemed like they were passed around the organisation, and while a default friendliness was applied to them, they didn't know exactly how to respond. I felt like I was creating suspicion before anything else. Once I was in Austin and began visiting churches there, I also was confronted with many of the nuances between the churches that were not immediately apparent to me from the way in which they presented themselves on their websites.

I realised the ideal way for me to gain consent and to build trust with church communities was to proceed in an informal way. The first month or two that I was in the city, I undertook what locals would have called "church shopping". I had a programme of seeing two or even three church services every weekend. I also tried to get to know various faith-based initiatives outside of the churches in the city, such as the ministries based on the campus that I too was affiliated with. After a visit or two to churches, except for the largest ones, I would as a rule be introduced to somebody from the pastoral staff. It was something of an implicit goal of the members of the congregation to get new visitors to be on first-name terms with

church staff as soon as possible. Though the formal power pastors held varied a lot based on the organisation of the church, they were in a position of moral leadership, and I felt comfortable being active in the space of the church if I they both knew and had received well my dual status as a participant and ethnographer. I tried to meet with the pastors as often as I could for coffee or lunch, to talk to them about their views and experiences, but also to explain my approach to my work.

In many respects Christian churches and groups are likely among the easiest groups to study ethnographically. After all they did congregate on regular basis and ran their activities with an ethos of openness and hospitality, perhaps not unrelated to their uncertainty about the long-run viability evangelicalism in the US. Over time the way in which I found ways of being with others changed too. I began to receive invitations to small groups or to have dinner with individual members or couples in these groups. The small group as an organising device became not only the means through which I came to know others, but also one of the topics of my thesis. The space of small groups was particularly difficult to navigate in terms of research ethics and attaining consent for participation. I made the choice against the use of formal ways of confirming consent such as the signing of consent forms. Such an approach would have seemed to be out of place when compared to the manner in which participation in these groups was negotiated by other members. Instead I described my project and what I was trying to achieve the first time I joined the group, and informally discussed my participation with the group's leaders. Only in one small group that I attended did I sense an opposition to an informal and continuous checking of consent, which ultimately made me stop attending. As a rule, people seemed quite relaxed about my sitting in with a notebook and occasional inquisitive questions.

The ideal of small group meetings was to strive for spontaneity and informality, "life-on-life relationships" in their terms, and some of my best insights from fieldwork I also found

from such occasions. Particularly the Lifeway church that I developed strong connections with had active and regular meetings of young people every Friday night over craft beers. During the week I would play sports with them, and during one particularly intense period of participatory observation I joined in three times a week to at a Lifeway campus to a Crossfit session, a group fitness programme, and lifted weights to the rhythm of Christian dubstep music. Where it was possible, I also tried to make myself useful. I volunteered in social ministry projects, both working at a homeless shelter as well as so-called street ministry, a group of people that walked up and down along a street close that bordered university campus and handed out food to young people living on the street. My modest contribution to Lifeway was to stand by the door as a greeter on occasional Sundays. I agreed with their media team to make a photography project of the inhabitants of the St John's neighbourhood they were active in and took pictures during a festival and various smaller events that were associated with the area. To be fair, often my output did not appear to match the church's professional standards, and ultimately I didn't see any of my output appearing in their publications.

Another way in which I got to know the life of my informants was through my living arrangements. After I had spent some months on the field, I got to know of the community that was associated with Lifeway that was based in the neighbourhood of St John's. Within the neighbourhood there were about 18 separate households that consisted mostly of people affiliated with Lifeway, who in a variety of ways conceived of their presence there as urban missionaries. Generally, they were actively working to revive what they saw as a traditional sense of place-based community, while some also sought to live together in a way they termed "intentional", supporting each other's religious development. My first contact with this particular community was through weekly potluck meetings after Sunday church service in the backyard of one of the inhabitants. After



befriending some of the men attending, I took the opportunity to live with them. This previously unplanned part of my fieldwork ended up lasting for the final 9 months of my stay in Austin, and was the main inspiration for the findings in chapter 4.

Inevitably, the quality of my interaction with others depended greatly on the individual. In a context such as Austin one of the main constraints for learning about others was simply the busyness and lack of time on part of my informants. Moments spent with me would have been subtracted from family time, studying or dedication to work. The nature of the city of Austin, a car-dependent city without much public space let alone sidewalks, was such that few spontaneous encounters between people took place. Casual meetings with people, just like the formal interviews that I conducted, had to be planned beforehand and placed into the calendar, making the process even more demanding. The position that I held as an anthropologist, mostly rich in time but poor in most other resources, I was often making requests from other people from a seemingly disadvantaged position. With these people, my own ethnography felt like what in anthropology has been called “studying upwards” (Nader 1974). I felt like some understood the chance to talk to me in the idiom of witnessing, as following their duty to speak about the significance of faith for their life. Though initially interesting, such conversations often turned out to be repetitive, and I felt like the understanding of people that I gained often depended on having a longer relationship. This experience further spoke to the value of sustained fieldwork as a method.

Naturally there were also people in comparison to whom I was extremely privileged. And naturally there were people that I was able to establish rapport and an empathetic connection with more easily. Some of them were more accepting of my status as an ethnographer and more curious of me as a foreign person. I tended to naturally attend to meetings and projects where I felt it was easiest for me to engage in conversations and activities that felt most productive. Consequently, the most enduring friendship

I established, though not exclusively, with people that were similar to myself, in terms of their education, middle-class status, cultural interests and even ethnicity.

Time ended up being a major constraint for myself as well. During weekdays, when practically everybody I knew worked a day job, the evenings were the only time when it was possible to have any contact with informants. I spent the daytime sitting in my home or in student cafes, writing up my fieldnotes and reading. I tried to maintain a schedule where I filled the evenings with arranged meetings with informants, either joining them in their houses in small groups, doing interviews or attending social events. Weekends were prime time for socialising, but also times when many informants had made some social plans of their own. Hence even my own time to spend with informants was clearly finite, and simply scheduling meetings, so that I had the chance to meet people on most evenings without much double bookings, was a significant task in itself.

The status of my own soul turned out not to be a significant impediment in my studies. When describing myself to my informants, I often described myself as something of a “cultural Christian”, having gone through a Lutheran upbringing in the confines of the Finnish state church. This was a notion that in itself led to much curiosity and numerous conversations. In a sense the precise state of my own convictions was fairly irrelevant to my informants. From the evangelical perspective, somebody who had been brought up into Christianity and had not had a clear conversion experience was essentially not a Christian in a full sense. The personal narrative was more important than the classificatory identification of myself. I soon came to realise what made the greatest difference to being received well by many evangelicals was whether or not I was interested in their activities also on a personal level, apart from any instrumental objective of mine such as research. They were hoping for the kind of vulnerable personal involvement that is perhaps the hallmark of good participant observation, and which I was keen

to follow, even when their convictions occasionally proved more troubling as they were transformative.

During my 15 months in the field, there were 7 different recurrent small groups that I attended more than 4 weeks. Some of these would come to end as people moved around, and sometimes I chose to focus on one of them instead of the others. The groups that I joined typically had either slightly older people, often empty nesters or retired people in them, or alternatively people of my age, around 30 years old. Small groups for people that had family required different kinds of arrangement, such as child care, and families in this stage of life tended to stay together. The exception to this was one small group focused solely on men that I participated in, that met weekly before work hours, and worked without the constraints specific to children. Interacting with men in this group gave me some understanding of the familial issues and beliefs of my informants.

In my fieldwork I complemented participant observation with semi-structured interviews. I was conscious that there were certain topics that would not spontaneously arise in the regular interaction, for instance what evangelicals called “stewardship”, or their financial management following divine dictates. I also sought to ask for clarification about themes such as behaviour in private relationships that were only alluded to in other discussions. In total I completed about 80 interviews. These included some fellow church goers that I would otherwise have not been intensively in touch with, as well as many people from church staff. I also participated in 3 mission trips, exclusively with men associated with Lifeway, that took me twice to southern Texas and once to Nicaragua. Overall, the spreadsheet that I used to keep a log of all fieldwork situations clocked up about 240 different kinds of scheduled occasions or unplanned encounters that I wrote about in my fieldnotes.

Many of the groups in which I participated, small groups, ministries and households, were entirely separate from each other

and might not have even known about each other's existence. In contrast to a study that would have bounded, defined object of a study, I built contacts with a distributed population of people. If I can make any kind of claim towards generality, it is not because I had a complete picture of particular cut through the Christian demographic of Austin. It is rather that I traversed a network, particularly of the conservative evangelical churches of a missional mind-set, that led to a fairly diverse set of interactions with different people. If there's any claim on generality that I can make then, it is to say that I identified particular and iterable manners of creating social relationships and corresponding subjectivities across this network that I traced. It makes me able to claim that there are these patterns of sociality that are typical across in the least the middle-class conservative evangelical churches that I frequented. Each of the following chapters seeks to describes the way in which evangelicals care for distinct types of relationships, those with other people, themselves or the sacred texts.

### 3 Small groups

Towards the end of my fieldwork, the Lifeway church was running an initiative to attract people attending the Sunday services to the small group meetings. Small groups were recurrent gatherings of 5 to 15 people during weekdays, usually in the homes of laypeople. Lifeway had placed large cardboard maps in the hallway of the local high school it had rented out for the church every Sunday. Little handwritten tags pinned on the map, in the residential neighbourhoods or occasionally overlapping at popular coffee shops, described the nature of the groups: “freshman girls”, “Cedar Park gospel transformation”, “relaxed New Testament-focused group”. A volunteer next to a laptop was always at hand to help the curious access a Google Maps based interface that pinpointed the location of various groups. Inside the high school’s gym, where the music performances and sermons took place, the pastors spoke for five consecutive weeks about the biblical basis for “missional communities”. This was the term Lifeway had chosen for the small group meetings to highlight their ultimate goal, that of equipping people to make evangelism a part of their lives. The sermons followed a close reading of parts of the Book of Acts, to state the conclusions that a genuine personal response to the gospel entailed joining other believers in fellowship, in a community that was both prefigurative of God’s kingdom but also helping to spread the good news about it. The church made this easier, the pastors exclaimed, by launching 200 new missional communities that summer. After five weeks of the initiative, interns working for the church enthusiastically blogged that they had managed to increase participation in the groups by 50 percent. About 3,000 of the churches 8,000 regular attendees were now part of a missional community. So great was the identification with this programme that Lifeway as a church

frequently referred to itself as a “network of missional communities”.

Evangelical culture had high hopes for small groups. Though participation in corporate worship was indispensable to their theology, the churches expected the greatest aid for developing one’s faith as well as a significant part of expressing its fruit to take place within these weekly meetings. Though it was difficult for me to make a thorough comparison, it is possible that the groups were particularly important for Austinite evangelicals. I often encountered a general weariness towards the evangelical establishment and church institutions, and the spontaneity of meetings of a smaller number of people often produced the sense of a more authentic experience of faith. Individual groups often commanded greater loyalty than affiliation with any congregation. It was not uncommon for people to change churches or stop going to Sunday services altogether, while still striving to attend every meeting of their long-term small group. Describing the warm interpersonal bonds she had developed in her missional community, one of my informants even believed it was closest she had ever come to experiencing heaven.

Throughout my fieldwork, I came to recognise the organisational pattern of a small group, the informal sharing of personal detail and a response in prayer, in a variety of settings. In an evangelical youth camp, teenagers broke into groups of a dozen and following a sermon about idolatry, and were encouraged to talk about the things they worshipped more than god. On a mission trip to Nicaragua, men formed circles with people from Nicaraguan Protestant churches to confess their sexual sins to each other, via translators, even though the format caused bewilderment among the Nicaraguans who hadn’t done this before. A Christian business networking event I attended consisted of some presentations about how to turn business practice into ministry, followed by a small group-like interaction where people talked about “where they were at in their faith walk” and exchanging prayer requests. A course in evangelical

theology that I took fairly quickly became split by gender and turned into an occasion in which men could talk to each other about their sin and “receive encouragement”. A church-based rehabilitation group I visited too split its participants into gender-segregated groups for affinity and prayer, obviously following the long history of groups such as twelve-step programmes that make therapeutic use of intimacy (Kurtz 1979).

What my informants hence perceived as the focus of collective religious action was not necessarily what happened on Sunday, but during weekdays, and joining not a line of worshippers facing an altar but a circle facing each other. The most significant social formation was not an individual in relation to a congregation, nor necessarily any dyadic relationship such as that between pastor and an individual, but a believer as a member of a trusting group with reasonably fixed boundaries. It is a similar diagram to what David Martin found in changes within the Anglican church as he wrote: “God is seen as the midpoint of a social circle not as the apex of a pyramid of being. The people are seeing God as they face each other.” (Martin 1980, p.97). Yet even in the small group, a hierarchy is undoubtedly present. The mature Christians support those who have been recently reborn, and this structure works towards individuals submitting their lives to divine control. One change implied by the small group structure was a less distinctive authoritative role for pastors and church staff. As the sermons I referred to above suggest, in churches such as Lifeway pastors describe their role as facilitating the creation of networks of intimacy. They themselves are embedded as well in these networks, albeit in a central position and the authority that they claim often stems from the relational work that they achieve.

Small groups at both Lifeway and New Church Austin did have selected leaders that were responsible for facilitating the discussion. The leaders of small groups participated in preparatory trainings and had reoccurring meetings with church staff. The majority of the small group training focused on the

goals and the procedure of running the groups, with the hope of creating the kind of informal, spontaneous interaction that would be attractive to participants. The connection to the church was only partially about maintaining orthodoxy in teaching - training for the small group did include a section on what at Lifeway was called the “non-negotiables of the gospel.” The expectation was that every leader would continue to interact informally with the staff of the church, and establish a network of “discipleship”, in which correct authority would flow from the mature believers in the church such as the pastors, through the leaders, to the laity that was participating in the small groups.

This chapter, however, limits itself to the scale of the small groups. What did intimacy look like in these groups, and what did it achieve? The chapter starts with a section detailing the cultural context of small groups, including a brief review of the numerous other studies that have explored the same social form in other context. This section is followed by the discussion of the two alternating moments in the typical script of a small group meeting. The first is the discussion of texts, which are typically church sermons or Christian books. The final section of the chapter describes intercessory prayer, in which participants take turns in addressing God with the needs and concerns of other people of the group.

### **3.1 The cultural context of small groups**

There is certainly nothing new about church communities meeting in people’s homes. The American South in particular had a long history of church events outside of Sunday services, often with expected attendance Sunday schools and bible studies on Wednesdays (Heyrman 1998). The genealogy of the model I encountered at Lifeway and New Church Austin has been traced Justin Wilford (Wilford 2012) to South Korean megachurches. In



the early 1980s a Korean megachurch in Seoul, the Yofido Full Gospel Church, managed to grow to an unexpected scale with over 800,000 weekly attendees. One of the church's ecclesiological innovations was what it called the "home cell group" with recurrent meetings in a host's home. The model was imported into the United States by church growth consultants, rebranded as "the Metachurch" or the "Covenant model", thereby weakening the organisational system of strict pastoral accountability in favour of creating spontaneous interaction. Even today, numerous different titles for the social form exist, often displaying differences in emphasis between core function of the group, from teaching the bible to behaviour change or evangelism. The recent trend among many Austin churches, including the Lifeway and its "missional communities", was to conceive the small group as a unit to support activities within the localities that people lived in, including evangelism and volunteering. This outward-facing work is detailed in chapter 5, while this chapter focuses on the private interactions between participants of small groups.

By the 1990s many influential American megachurches, such as Rick Warren's Saddleback Church and Bill Hybel's Willow Creek, made the Korean invention a central part of their strategy. Their research, following conventional market research methodologies, revealed that in a suburban context people's preference was for communal connection rather than doctrinal precision. The "small group", as the accepted term came to be in the evangelical way of speaking, was a necessary counterpoint to stadium-like congregations that offered little chance for social interaction. Rick Warren's successful manual, *The Purpose-Driven Church* (Warren 1995), includes a diagram of concentric circles. The two outermost circles, labelled as "community" and "crowd", are the people least committed to the church whose main contact to it will be the Sunday services. Consequently, according to the book, it is important to keep the Sunday services attractive and free of divisive theological issues. The circle's

centre, the “core”, the church’s most dedicated groups, should according to the book be primarily taught and directed through the small groups. In this way the basic division of labour between different parts of the church institution was set.

The prevalence of the small group can of course not be explained solely as an American church innovation. Robert Wuthnow, who has dedicated several books to the topic, sees them as a phenomenon comparable to support groups and groups focused on activities such as book clubs (Wuthnow 1994). With this definition, he claims that no less than four out of ten Americans regularly participate in small groups in some form. For Wuthnow the small group is the paradigm of a novel form of association that is a substitute for place-based neighbourhood communities or ethnic groups that according to him are inevitably on the wane. They exist to provide meaningful community, but at the same time also redefine people’s expectations of community. As a form of sociability it concentrates on the needs of the participant and gives them a high degree of control over participation. Unlike a community that is focused on location that and despite the valorisation of reciprocal dependency, membership in the small group is voluntary.

Wuthnow’s work places the existence of small groups within an American meta-narrative of increasing individualisation that is prevalent in public discussion (see for instance Putnam 2000). Work within anthropology has added some nuance to understanding of American individualism. Claudia Strauss, for instance, claims to find a disjuncture in American ideas of agency, that alternate between a voluntarist model of autonomous agents and a conception where social structures are thought to be entirely determining (Strauss 2007; see also Kusserow 2004 and Lakoff 1996). Jon Bialecki, in an ethnography of prayer meetings - a social form not dissimilar to small groups - has shown them to include both moments that emphasise autonomous individuality as well as a porous form of dependent personhood (Bialecki

2015). My ethnographic material displays a similar kind of ambiguity, with the small group simultaneously both expressing intersubjective dependency as well as independent self-reliance. My focus in this chapter is, however, largely on how the interpersonal relationships play a role in developing people's relationship to the divine.

Monographs of ethnographic work with Christian communities often include at least a chapter about recurrent meetings in domestic environments (for example Webster 2013; Strhan 2015; Guest 2007). Consequently, the entirety of the literature on the topic is too diverse to thoroughly review here. The anthropologist James Bielo has done some sustained ethnographic work focused specifically on the functioning of small groups of various Protestant churches in Michigan (Bielo 2009b). Bielo understands small groups as a social form that mitigates the tension between evangelical values of evangelical scriptural absolutism and personal reflexive intellectual capabilities. He describes the "interactive frames" that structure interactions therein, including unwritten rules such as the principle never to openly question the statements of others. Bielo points to the utility of building of mutual agreement to help readers grasp the relevancy of biblical texts. His results hence put in question the literalist notion the meaning of biblical texts would be a pre-defined given. Instead the process of interpretation emerges from human interaction in a manner that is fundamentally open-ended.

Intimacy, in Bielo's analysis, seems largely distinct from the groups' interpretative activity, and a value in itself for evangelicals that hope to embody Christ. "The hallmark of a successful Christian community is one that is open, always willing to share personal thoughts and feelings. One's Christian family is ideally a safe haven" (Bielo 2009b, p.76). Following Tanya Luhmann, Bielo explains this ideal by reference to the analogical connection between human and divine relationships. Perhaps the primary ethnographer of neo-charismatic experience

of God, Luhmann has documented extensively the effort that evangelicals go through in order to experience God as a conversational partner. She finds that the followers of these self-techniques tend to experience Jesus as somebody with the personality of someone like an intimate friend. “This God is not without majesty. But He has become a pal”, Luhmann writes (2004, p.517). Participants in small groups use these vertical relationships as their model for horizontal relations, with other people. Intimacy is a way to make God present.

The relational intimacy of small groups is at the same time understood to be an implicit critique of the institutional religion in general, and in particular existing organised religion in the US. The confines of close interpersonal connections are where faith can be practiced without such corruptions. Bielo has done ethnographic fieldwork also with the contemporary progressive Christian movement of emerging evangelicals. His work details the various narratives of “deconversion”, through which individuals ended up in emergent communities from conservative denominations. Because of these personal trajectories, it is difficult for the emerging evangelicals to conceive of themselves as a group united around a set of doctrinal beliefs. This is why Bielo claims he can see relational commitments as one of the highest priorities for his informants, in the absence of shared religious creed to be transmitted and maintained (Bielo 2012). My research suggests, in contrast, that while doctrine was seldom at the centre of the discussion of small groups, they still served a crucial role in maintaining a particular evangelical sensibility.

### **3.2 Sharing creates biblical relevancy**

There was no point in knocking. The cars on the driveway suggested that almost all of the guests had arrived already. Clutching the humble salad that I had prepared myself, I opened

the door, and walked towards the back of the rancher house, where I found everybody assembled around the sturdy wooden table of the open-plan kitchen. My arrival was announced like every other, with some elation and the rather careful form of hugging I had grown used to. It was Wednesday, the traditional day for a Bible study for the devout of the South, and we had come together for the contemporary variation of it, the church small group.

People grabbed each other's hands to form a circle around the table, and with their heads bowed listen to the man of the host family, Jimmy, went through a quick but heartfelt prayer to bless the food. The food of the occasion, taco soup, guacamole and various desserts, was almost exclusively homemade. People felt at home in the house, and reached into the cupboards to get their own plates, and fill the pitcher of ice tea with ice from the refrigerator. The room was filled with faint Christian soft-rock music played from the Pandora radio system in the adjacent living room. The television screen slowly rotated a selection of family pictures of the parents and the children. The discussion around the table was lively, dominated by three men whose joking fed of each other, and occasionally became like a performance for everybody else.

This group was, rather exceptionally for the Lifeway church it is connected to, made up of middle-aged people. Apart from the host family who had children, the four other couples were empty nesters. The men worked in secure professional jobs, such as middle-management in the oil industry or advertising. One of the women had stayed home to teach her children herself, but not out of a conservative objection to state-mandated curriculum, but for worries of the local school's quality. She was now a teacher, as was another wife in the group.

After the dinner, the group playfully jostled for seating space in the living room. It was time to discuss the week's sermon. Small groups in general are oriented towards texts. A meeting

would, as a rule, begin with a shared meal that every participant contributed to. After having a meal together, a group would typically move from the kitchen into the living room, and gather in a circle facing each other. Many would hold a well worn copy of the Bible in their hands that they had been carrying for years with them, possibly together with another book that the group is reading together. Lifeway church, like many others, provided some sheets with discussion points that related to the sermons on the previous Sunday, to allow many groups to follow the series of sermons in their conversations. Many of the small groups that I participated in had developed points of interest or ambitions of their own, and took the initiative to select texts to discuss themselves. During my fieldwork, I read collectively through some books ranging from guides on biblical manhood by John Eldridge to the far more liberal “neo-monastic” ideas of Shane Claiborne. Often the books that were read were commentaries on how to apply a Christian position to various life domains, such as work, family life, or one’s financial management. A visit to the Christian section of any bookshop would show that a significant share of the Christian publishing sector formatted their books for such collective consumption within small group. The books were printed with sufficiently brief chapters followed questions for group discussion, and for some publications an edition for small group leaders was published separately. The frequent use of the term “biblical” in the books titles (as in “biblical manhood”) pointed to the fact that the texts, like sermons, ultimately established their authority by reference to the passages of the Bible.

Doctrinal accuracy of teaching was, however, relatively rarely the topic of discussion within small groups. Within the groups that I visited, it was common that there were two or three people, frequently men, who would want to discuss analytical merits of arguments and follow up biblical references. This type of discussion was, however, often met with a kind of “role distancing” (Goffman 1961), or a tongue-in-cheek put-downs or

self-conscious references to the part that these people played in the discussion. The role of the group's facilitator was to maintain a sense of equivalence of all statements, so claims for the accuracy were often qualified as subjective. Even more so, the discussion was often not about the meaning of the text as something that is separate from the reader. Rather participants would talk about what they found particularly impressive, the parts of the texts that personally had an affective reaction to, or even personal events that they associated with what they had read. In practice the text often functioned like a pretext for bringing up details about one's personal life. Participants would follow some tangent from the text to some personal concerns or worries of theirs and allow others to close the loop by their own interpretations of the possible connections between the two.

This type of reading was similar to what Bielo had found in his ethnography of small groups focused specifically on the Bible (Bielo 2009b). He describes the interpretative frame in the following way:

In other words, they establish how they relate to what is being portrayed. This takes shape around a series of questions: am I doing what I understand the Bible to be saying? Is my life in conflict with scripture? Am I working toward the example set forth by biblical characters? Is scripture challenging my life of faith and daily habits? Is it affirming them? (Bielo 2009b, p.60)

Bielo relates this manner of approaching texts to the evangelical theology of biblicism, which also the churches in Austin that I frequented subscribed to. Whatever spiritual principles were to be adhered to had to be traced back to a biblical source, and the bible had to provide a comprehensive set of guidance even for present-day dilemmas. For Protestants, the site of application of religious ideas is the everyday - one's work, family, social relationships and so forth. Here then, is was the evangelical dilemma related to language: The God-breathed

word, that speaks in abstract principles and archaic phrases, needs to be connected to the unique particularities of individual lives. According to Bielo, evangelicals are implicitly turning the necessity of biblical relevancy into a virtue. The “ideology of relevance” is that the Bible is not only sufficient as a source of revelation for people, but also “the Bible has the unique capacity to be always relevant and appropriate” (Bielo 2009b, p.59). There is an assurance that an individual reader will be able to find this relevancy based on their relationship to the text.

Some of the challenges of these expectations related to biblicism are further explored in chapter 6. The point I wish to make in this chapter is to claim that it is not only the “textual ideology” described by Bielo that aids the creation of relevancy. Also the discursive environment of the small group and the social relationships contained therein facilitate a productive relationship to biblical materials. Reflecting publicly on one’s own life in the small group created the conditions where people drew on the associative capacity of others. Sharing narratives from personal life often elicited other people to talk about relevant biblical passages or principles, or what role faith had played in a similar situation. When people spoke about problems they faced, often the rest would not respond by offering particular solutions or personal support. Instead, the group often presented new framings or interpretations of the life situation in religious register.

For example, during the small group meeting that I described in the beginning of this section, the theme of the small group discussion was safety and authenticity within the church community. This had been the topic of previous Sunday’s sermon. One of the women participating had taken the initiative to print out sheets of paper, prepared by Lifeway church to aid the discussion in the week’s small groups. The print-outs always had half-a-dozen bible verses on them that had been used in the sermon, and simple questions to act as prompts for discussion. The following brief vignette of the small group discussion was



descriptive in that it displays what the groups inherent ideals are. Especially the later ethnographic details about prayer also give a sense of how intimate relationships are both built in practice but also limited in their scope.

“Do you think you have a safe environment?”, Laura, one of the women quoted from the paper to initiate conversation. Everybody in the room concurs. This group has been going for a little over a year, and the level of comfort that people have being together was palpable. “I don’t think it gets any safer. Seriously, I do. And you guys have prayed for us about all kinds of crazy stuff”, one man said. He says that everybody who had been coming to the group had at some point “unloaded some heavy things”. The same was not true for all of the groups he had attended. Here, the sense of safety generated within the group enabled a sense of shared burden, offering genuine issues to the group, which are matched by prayer. One of the participants explains with reference to an intuitive rapport between members of the group:

“You know, I come in and Jim knows how I feel and I don’t even have to say anything. You know, it’s literally true. Even when I haven’t said one word!”

One of the women raises the question of the biblical significance of authenticity and openness. “What does that have to do with Jesus’ model.. See I wasn’t there [at the sermon], so I’m having trouble following this”. Some of the most studious in the group grab the notes that they had written down from the sermon and scan through them, but in the end the answers the group gives are in part their personal interpretation as well. “Jesus modelled authenticity”, one of the men suggests. Jesus had been an example of what it is to be real. His relations with the Pharisees had demonstrated this. One other man makes the point that there is something sacrificial in these acts of honesty. “Someone just has got to unload into that room, in order for that barrier to break, for that dam to be broken”. People had to act

different from how they would act in their usual social circles. Especially in the “high-end social circles”, the man continued, there was a lot of whitewashing, pretending everything was fine. While behind the scenes it was “all just tornados”. Lastly, another man suggests that “it’s all about Jesus”. Even though their discussions are about their most intensely personal matters, they aim to understand the manner in which Jesus is “working in their lives”, and do this in order to draw closer to him.

Within small groups, then, other people were playing the role not unlike that of a preacher giving a sermon, in trying to expand the relevancy of biblical sources through extension and analogy. By discussing the details of one’s personal life with others, the small group draws on the collective capacities of association and inference to perform what Coleman calls “narrative emplacement” (Coleman 2000, p.118), or self-description using biblical ideals, narratives and characters.

Yet my informants never accepted biblical manners of speaking uncritically. There was also a second, distinct sense in which intimate interaction within the group facilitated embodying and living out biblical language. Most of the evangelicals I met in Austin had grown up attending a church, and were self-conscious and often sceptical of the established forms of expression contained in it. These includes the tropes in sermons and music, but also the language used in expressing oneself in environments such as the small group. Hence I often heard comical remarks of explicitly Christian vocabulary, of phrases such as blessings, “God moments”, anointments, and so forth. A website authored by an Austin evangelical, the Dictionary of Christianese, carefully details the development of vocabulary specific to American Christianity. The danger with this phraseology was that it could be used in a formulaic way. Only adopting the right kinds of words would be a false kind of narrative emplacement, if the person had no internal conviction of their reality. The small group, as a setting in which lay people practiced speaking in a way that was expressive of their religious

convictions and experiences, was particularly risky for this type of excess.

One brief moment made clear to me how the small group process helped people overcome this problem. A small group I attended had people reminisce about the first impressions that various participants got from each other. A young woman had said she had been initially “put off” by one of the most enthusiastic people attending. “You were just always talking like, ‘yeah man the spirit just drew me’, and that just made me think like, ‘hold down’”. Later, after getting to know the person, her attitude changed. “Now talking to you is such a blessing. I know you are for real, that you’re real like this, and not just trying to be a superchristian or something.” This dialogue is quite anecdotal, but the process appears obvious. In a situation where people are thoroughly acquainted with each other, they felt comfortable attributing truth and authenticity to each other’s narratives based on cues that went beyond what they said. The development of relationships helps establish a context that mitigates the inherent cynicism towards traditional language. When one is sharing not just a narrative tradition, but also a horizon of personal events, an interactive space as well as an affective connection, there is a wider basis for the creation of shared set of attitudes and beliefs. This aspect of small groups recalls Webb Keane’s description of Protestant norms of sincerity. Though sincerity in the historical sense he outlines connects language use to the expression of individuality, it is tied with an obligation towards others: “in being sincere, I am not only producing words that reveal my interior state but am producing them for you; I am making myself (as an inner self) available for you in the form of external, publicly available expressions” (Keane 2007, p.211). One of the uses of intimacy is that it makes the resolving of this obligation a simpler affair, by making language use happen in a richer context.

It is hence possible to understand the significance of small groups in relation to the central place that drawing inspiration

from language and attempting to live through canonised texts has for Protestant forms of Christianity. Small groups are formatted so that people produce an interpersonal intimacy by speaking publicly about their life events and views. This use of language also helps them to overcome some of the inherent tendencies for alienation specific to Protestant notions of language, specifically the need to contextualise biblical narratives in personal lives and to reproduce them in a sincere way. One way of describing this would be to say that the resources common to evangelical culture, the shared terminology as well as the scriptures conceived as a body of text universal to all churches, were brought to relation with individual life circumstances, within the intersubjective process of the small group. Another aspect of the group was also to reframe particular events as religiously significant in themselves. For this effect I will turn to the practice of intercessionary prayer in the groups.

### **3.3 Prayer makes God immanent**

Prayer achieves many things, and in the order of evangelical events it marks the beginning and the end. Through reiteration in the voice of a person praying, it makes explicit both the purpose of an event by translating them into another way of speaking, into requests to an all-powerful God. The meetings of small groups always begin with an opening prayer, made by a single person, most typically a male host of the session. When there was a meal to be had, the opening prayers were a cursory blessing of the food. Otherwise the opening prayer would mention the goal of the meeting (such as learning a specific thing about the Bible) with a plea for God to be present.

The prayer that ended a small group is a more challenging affair. It had to be a comprehensive reflection of what had come to pass in the gathering. The discussions of small groups would

often contain so-called prayer requests, concerns that relate to family, health, employment or finances, or religious lapses. Some groups took these seriously enough to write the topics down on their phones or pieces of paper to make sure that the needs of everybody are covered comprehensively. The explicit requests are supplemented by any other worries or needs that are brought up in the free-flowing discussion during the small group. Ideally the group is a place where the burdens of one's soul would be publicly voiced, though in unusual cases people would make "unspoken requests" - prayer requests which only God would know. Anybody with enough confidence may join in the closing prayer, the only rule being that a person may not pray specifically for themselves. Whatever one's personal needs were, they had to be acknowledged and taken up by another person in the group. This form of comprehensive, collective talking requires some coordination, and usually small group leaders would designate a person to begin and end the effort.

The prayer is marked with a shift in posture. Eyes are averted and bodies often oriented downwards or upwards, away from the plane of the people that are present. This is perhaps a simple way of reminding participants that the speech, now, though spoken by the entirety of the group, is directed to someone who is present, but not visible. The desired tone of voice is serious and reverent, though a touch of humour and goodwill from the earlier discussion often carries over. Despite not looking at each other, people often include sarcasm or exaggeration into their prayers to elicit laughter or amusement from others, thereby revealing how collective prayer never completely ceased to be like a conversation among those present. The desired style of speaking is very informal. A common instruction is to pray as if addressing Jesus as a friend sitting on a nearby chair. The implied spontaneity can express sincerity, the clarity with which it reflects a person's intentions, but also moments of being directed or moved by spiritual influences. In practice prayer is regardless filled with phrases that have become convention, and

just as with sharing person detail, it is easy to spot those that had grown up as members of churches and had repeated the format for decades.

In prayer the content of what is said changes in a striking way. When making an intercession for others, all of the agency in the matter is attributed to supernatural forces. Prayers hence make explicit the theological tautology that all good emanates from the divine, and people often spontaneously enumerate ways in which he could act out his power: please send angels, have the Holy Spirit move, God imprint this on our hearts, and so forth. The prayers sound like an exaggeration of an evangelical point of view, in which everything that takes place is attributed to God or the corollary agents of the devil, the world and flesh. In this way it is similar to how Susan Harding has described witnessing as a ritual of fundamentalist Christians. She understands conversion as adopting an internal language that works in the “supernaturalist order of interpretation” (Harding 2000, p.59), and is externalised in the speech of witnessing. It is also possible to understand prayer as a rehearsal of the attitude famously recommended by C.S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 1952), of going through ritual motions “as if” one believed in them, thereby ultimately being able to perform the belief sincerely. There is hence a clear contrast between the sincere talk that is the meeting’s mainstay, and the closing prayer. From the potential struggles and failures of the past, the prayer refocuses on a potency that can deliver from human ills. The seemingly arbitrary and confusing obstacles that people face are translated back into the purposeful template of God moving in the world. After a way of speaking that aims at sincerity, attempting to contain social constraints, the group now invites external inspiration.

One emotional example of a prayer request leading to a response like this came from Karen, a teacher in her late forties. She would come to the small group meetings late every time, since she would have dinner with her husband who, much to her

grief, chose not to participate in the church. Karen had participated in the small group for only a couple of months, a shorter period at the time of the event than me personally. As the host of the small group was drawing the session to a close and asking others for prayer requests, Karen responded with frankness she hadn't she hadn't expressed before.

"I would like a prayer for my son. He's, uh..", she starts. A little pause showed how difficult it is for her to speak about this. Karen says her son is barely able to pass the requirements from school, and had been fired from the job that he held. "He's just very, very lost.. And my daughter is too." Karen began to some sentences about her daughter, but ultimately decided not to go say anything specific about her daughter. Her voice faltered a little bit as she is fighting back tears. She admits that she doesn't know what to pray. She says she knows that God is there, but it's still hard for her to see her children not accepted and the pain that they go through. Karen mentions that there had been mental illness in her family, she herself had lived with it, and how it pained her to see it pass on to her children. "There was one bad night when she wanted to commit suicide. And I know exactly what that's like, so..", she said.

By the end of what she has said, Karen seemed to sob silently for a brief moment, and then quickly composed herself. She let out a a deep sigh. "They will be in our prayers", a man from the group consoled her. "It is good for us that you share that with us. And I hope you feel it's good for you too." The same man, greying and a long-time regular of this church, immediately managed to turn around the mood of the situation. He asked where the daughter lives, and then pulled out of his memory some anecdotes about a restaurant that is located close-by.

As the prayers started, everybody in the room shifted their posture. The host of the small group took the first turn, and with a monotone, rhythmic voice gave his spontaneous response to what had just been said.

“Lord, we just ask that you send angels.. to guard over them, to build angelic protection among them. Father, we know what's going on, and ask that you cover them in the blood of Jesus. Their apartments, their books their car, everything around them, Lord we just pray that the enemy can't come near. And we pray that during those time they will see that light, that they will get a glimpse of it, that there will be somebody who will be in their lives who will allow them to get a glimpse of you, and your power, and your love. I just ask that you drag people, you send people to them, to show them that love.” (Paraphrased quote from fieldnotes.)

For evangelicals, the intensity of one's prayer life for others is also an index of the intensity of one's concern and care for others. The assumption is that these moments of prayer would be impossible if one did not really have “a heart for” others. The topics of prayer that have been vocalised within the confines of the group should, at least to a degree, remain in the private prayers of participants as well. I often heard people speak about feeling guilty for not including someone in their prayers, or conversely being surprised about how much a person came up in their prayers. A man in a small group session confided to the group that he was unable to pray together with his wife, which to him exposed the lack of love in their partnership. In a certain sense praying for others functions as a test for your sincerity. Prayer is an act during which the connection between a person's interiority and exteriority is most transparent.

Because of this, the exercise of prayer also traces of community of Christians that are intimate in the sense of extending care to each other. Even though there was a lot of diversity in accounts of the conditions under which prayer turned out to be effective, its beneficial effects were often given as a justification for the need to share private and personal details about life. My informants took this power seriously. Hence without the safe environment in which people could talk about their needs, the small group's common sense would go, one



forfeited God's power in one's life. This was a something of a functional justification for the need for believers to be sincere about their life and to bring their concern to others. The effect of prayer then is to create something like a unit of believers, a collective that could be said to go through the work of experiencing divine acts together.

Prayer is the externalisation of needs and hopes, imagined as unified with the will of God. It is the memorable paraphrasing and repetition what would take place in the event of God's graceful answer. One pastor of Lifeway made this explicitness into an outright instruction, as he told the congregation to "pray big", to not fill their prayers with typical phrases such as asking God to "bless" a person but to name their hopes in a manner both audacious and as specific as possible. One of the discernible outcomes of prayer that it forms a set of shared expectations for the small group as a whole. One of the small groups that I participated in during my fieldwork gathered mainly retired elderly people, who had a long history praying for each other ailments and witnessing healing. During my fieldwork I would receive emails from members reporting improvements in their or their acquaintance's health. The messages would soon gather responses from others, often with elation about prayers being answered. Against the backdrop of expectations defined by prayer, the agency of God became discernible to everybody in the group.

By contributing to this shared outlook of anticipation, collective prayer facilitated a particular way of relating to the divine. In producing an experience of a materiality, the significance of prayer has in other contexts been noted as something that contributes to a somatic emotion of alterity (Csordas 2004) or the "absorption" into an imaginative dialogue where an inner voice is attributed to a divine agent (Luhmann et al. 2010). In contrast, for my informants God was making frequent interventions into the external world, which evangelicals had to learn to be more conscious of through practices such as

collective prayer. Evangelicals in Austin did speak about “nudges”, or intuitive senses of direction received from God, or emotional reactions such as “having peace” about a decision or “sensing darkness” in a place. But frequently the presence of God was in fact determined retrospectively, in the circumstances of some personal event. Even outside of prayer, the format of discussion within small groups facilitated such reasoning. In many groups, the recounting of some big life event, such as a change in jobs, would often produce the follow-up question would be, “Where did you see God in that?” What exactly counted as legitimate grounds for inferring God’s actions was difficult to pin down. Many particular cases will be ethnographically explored in other chapters in more detail. At times my informant’s reasoning resembled that documented by Vincent Crapanzano (Crapanzano & D. E. Miller 2000) among fundamentalists, who searched everyday events for relevancy and lessons similar to the patterns they look for in biblical narratives, or the “godincidences” of Scottish evangelicals, who attempt to inhabit a world where seemingly coincidental events always demonstrated divine agency (Webster 2013).

On the surface of it, the emphasis of the small group would seem to confirm what Steve Tipton (1984) has called the “therapeutic understanding of spirituality”, i.e. the orientation of contemporary congregations and religious life towards responding to individual needs, particularly of an emotional and psychological type. The supportive environment could be seen only as a particularly intense system for self-help that confirms a sense of agency for overcoming obstacles. To do so, however, would not allow the practice to be interpreted in its own terms. In the discursive format of the small group and the interpretative frames that it encouraged the articulation and potential resolution of individual needs becomes enrolled into a practice that has also a religious character, and gives participants ultimately the chance to cultivate a sense of intimacy with God. Collective prayer contributes towards what Csordas has called the “ritualization of

life” (1997). His work has noted how certain embodied techniques that are applied in ritual contexts are not simply inactive in other situations. The quality of experience that the techniques sustain are carried over to everyday conduct, so that the boundary between the sacred and quotidian is effectively dissolved. Within the small group, this circle is closed, as the private experiences with a religious significance are disseminated and made public again within the confines of the group.

### **3.4 Conclusions**

This first empirical chapter described a social setting designed for creating particular types of intimate relations. As such it is also a good point of departure from which to describe the ideals and expectations that evangelicals attach to intimacy. The small group is a space that is focused on both mutual disclosure as well as acts of caring that follow from these disclosures. Even when small groups are focused on understanding some shared texts, such as books or sermons, the meaning of the texts is often sought in relation to the details of participant’s lives. The implicit norms in the interaction, such as not expressing judgment of other people’s interpretations or statements, facilitate a sense of “safeness” in the interaction. This is conducive to a sense of intimacy that depends on, as in Viviana Zelizer’s formulation reviewed in the introductory chapter, on “mutual informational exposure”. This sharing of personal detail happens in front of the group as a whole and remains exclusive to it. The sense of shared intimacy is hence created within this semi-public voluntary space, broader than any dyadic relationships but still more confined than any public space. The small group affords people a significant amount of control about the terms of their participation and little expectations of strict reciprocity or obligation. As would be expected from a group of this kind, there

is a significant amount of variation in how intensely people participate. As the case of Karen outlined above shows, some people choose to disclose their lives selectively, or do so in small steps.

The groups perceive intimacy not only as goal in itself, but also as a condition for members of the group to establish relations of care or outright dependency. The most important means for caring within the group is prayer, through which the challenges and worries of other people are repeated and offered to God to be solved. The centrality of prayer life in maintaining group intimacy speaks to Lynn Jamieson's critique of theories of intimacy, stating that it is defined not solely through informational disclosure, but maintained through "component practices" such as care for others.

A common explanation for the success of evangelical churches in settings such as contemporary suburbs, even against the relative decline of denominational and mainline liberal Protestantism, has been its efficient meeting of social needs. In my fieldsite, I encountered this priority for instance in the slogan that churches should take care of "belonging before believing" (originating likely from Richardson et al. 2008). What my ethnography suggests is that the quality of interpersonal relationships is not only an additional benefit to religious practice, but something integral to the successful construction of religious experience. Intimacy is not just a secondary advantage but a social process that is in part consciously mobilised by evangelical churches. Evangelical small groups translate the pervasive hope for community into a process that also builds up the conditions for religiously meaningful experiences.

The norm for speaking in small groups was concerned with sincerity, or perfecting a match between spoken words and a person's interiority. Yet achieving this correspondence was seen like a cumulative process. In Keane's description of Protestant language ideals, speaking begins from the self, and practices such

as the reciting of creeds “entails a normative tilt toward taking responsibility for those words, making them one's own” (Keane 2007, p.71). Within this form of Protestantism, the self with its beliefs had to be given, with relative stability, that could be reflected in the medium of language. For evangelical small group participants, the use of language appeared to have more of a potential for discovery. The sharing of personal events in the group might lead a person to uncover analogies of biblical narratives, thereby seeing aspects of their biography in a new light. And the intimate knowledge that participants built up about other people was a necessary condition for them to be able to assess the sincerity of others.

Intimacy hence had instrumental value in that it responded to some of the tensions inherent in the Protestant manner of understanding the functioning of language. The participation in close relationships within the context of the small group helped to overcome some of the challenges of mediation specific to the faith. It helped evangelicals to relate to the scriptures, the body of revelation that was given to all equally. At the same time, I have attempted to show the significance of small group participation for relating to the potential immanent presence of God, in my informant's quotidian events. I suggested that the repetitions and iterations of people's expectations of the future, narrated within prayer in a frame of tautological supernatural action, produced a horizon of anticipation shared amongst the group. Against this outlook, the actions of God became discernible.

## 4 The inner-city missionaries

“When Jesus is risen from the dead”, Matt explained, “he is not just a spirit. He has a new body. He breaks bread. He eats fish.” Matt was a junior pastor at the Lifeway church. He was answering a set of my standard interview questions about what he saw as distinctive in his church’s practices. Matt claimed that “traditional churches”, or older evangelical churches in the city of Austin, had a narrow understanding of the gospel. They thought the gospel was only for the soul, and not for the body. He calls them “escapist” in their thinking. And ultimately they were so because they misrepresent the scriptures. “Because in scripture, heaven is earth.”, he says. “Heaven is a renewed earth.”

“In the gospels,” he continues, “it's Jesus in the world. Jesus taking on this first century. Jesus is a particular man, wearing particular clothes, with a particular language, communicating a particular gospel." Matt used the idiom of renewal frequently. He thought of the gospel as a message of renewal, restoration and reconciliation. When God rises again, God renews all things of creation, by returning them to the glory of their form before the Fall. "And his body becomes the paradigm of that”, Matt said, “The event of renewal is played out also in the recreation of the body of Christ.” This is also how Matt understands the purpose of his church. He says they don’t want to be reductionist, and reduce the gospel down to its spiritual dimension. “We are trying to learn how to communicate the hope of Christ that transforms things spiritually, yes, but it also transforms things socially, and it transforms things culturally."

Obviously Matt was part of a long theological history of coming to terms with Christ’s corporeality and the relation between divinity and the material world. Matthew Engelke has pointed out how the presence and absence of God is a central problematic within Christian thought, as the issue of how to

relate to divinity has been simultaneously solved and complicated by the figure of Jesus (Engelke 2007). He both became part of the world, and finally was risen. In his seminal ethnography, Engelke shows how in Zimbabwe's Masowe Friday Apostolic Church, the dilemma concerning presence and absence is solved by connecting it to another dichotomy, namely that of materiality and immateriality. Forms of communication such as transient speech become preferred in religious practice, because the immaterial is seen as an index of the immediacy of the divine. In opening up the immanent, material world as the scene for God's redemption, Matt's theology mirrors recent continental catholic thinkers such as Bruno Latour, who also has criticised the modern settlement between science and religion that gives the latter responsibility only over "disembodied souls" (Latour 2009).

At the same time, the anthropology of Christianity has also shown that some forms of Christianity can display different ways of coding transcendence and immanence, or even posit some form of continuity between them (Cannell 2006). In Matt's story, materiality and presence are not clearly opposed to each other. The restoration of the body of Jesus is significant not only because it guarantees a potential for salvation after an ambiguous absence of divinity. The restoration of the body of Christ is also an icon, a precedent for the transformation in creation that the era of redemption will bring about. It defines all of material creation, as something that is not only sustained by God, but has the potential of being completed in its form, by virtue of God being active in the world. And it is the mission of the church, in Matt's effectively postmillennial theology, to be God's agents in creating that change. The absence of God from the material world is not a necessity, but a contingent fact that can and ultimately will be overcome in redemption.

This discursive formation around the the renewal of the world was one of grounding and justifying a vision of the agency of the church. In my view it was a way to give license to active work

towards social improvement and community development, while maintaining some conservative theological priorities. What I witnessed in Austin seemed in accordance with the claims of some commentators of a renewed interest in social causes among evangelicals (Steensland & Goff 2013). That such a stance was not without controversy could be seen in, for instance, Rick Warren's recent statements against the Social Gospel. The theology of material renewal, as voiced by Matt, could be put into context following the recent work of evangelical author James David Hunter. He points to the fact that the recent history American evangelicalism has been characterised by an idealism, in understanding their agency over society in terms of a struggle between worldviews, and Christian action centring around winning over souls. Such a position was consistent with both the political approach of the Christian Right (of the moral majority variety), which Hunter describes "defensive against" the secular world. Giving up this idealism would, Hunter continues, allow Christians to be a "faithful presence", embedded and active in the manifold existing cultural and social processes. This appeared descriptive of the theological settlement that was present in Austin as well. It still gave individual relationships to God and the spreading of the gospel primacy, yet the same time offered this evangelism as means for social improvement.

In Matt's description, the fact of Jesus' bodily existence had further particular implications. The corporeality of Jesus is not a divine mediation that would make the transcendent reality present and consequently would allow for an escape from particular circumstances. Instead Jesus' existence provides a model for being embedded in the world. The fact that Jesus was in flesh did not only mean that he had his own body, but also that he was situated somewhere. He was in relation to place, people and customs. In Matt's understanding, though Jesus was the embodiment of universal will, Jesus too, had a culture and a context. And since the ethical practice of evangelicals focuses on the imitation and embodiment of Christ, they too were to



understand their cultural, social and geographic positions as potential channels of grace into the world.

This chapter will not focus specifically on the elaborating the theology that Lifeway church subscribed to. Rather, it will follow the lived experience of those that were participating and acting out the initiatives that the church thought to express and cohere with these theological notions. The focus of the chapter is a neighbourhood that had been chosen by Lifeway as the locus of its efforts for renewal. It was a place that had been given a particular meaning and value as a stage in which the healing power of God, via the presence of the church and its members, could be made manifest.

The chapter begins by describing Lifeway church's relationship to the neighbourhood, which is materialised in the form of refurbishing a nursery in the neighbourhood. The rest of the chapter describes the experiences of people affiliated with Lifeway who had relocated into the neighbourhood to be inner-city missionaries. Despite the fact that the discourses of the church described evangelical responsibilities in terms of service to neighbours and presence in public places, I found the change in people's domestic setting to be a potent influence on their ethical practice. The following sections alternate between the nuclear family and the household of young men. The first ethnographic vignette of the family concerns their motivation of relocating into the area, wanting their choice to reflect God's agency, an impression that was reinforced by their lived relationship to the neighbourhood. With the case of the house shared by men, I describe the local attempts to overcome secular materialism, as well as the manner in which discomfort and domestic disputes were experienced in a religious register. It also complicates the significance of intimacy for evangelicals by reading events that took place in male cohabitation in the light of Jarrett Zigon's idea of moral breakdowns. The last ethnographic section about the nuclear family suggests that the capacity of the domestic setting to provide moments that are unexpected and

revelatory was however constrained by the fact the homes were as much necessary tools for the provision of care and hospitality.

## **4.1 Objectifying God's power in St John's**

In 2006 the main pastor of Lifeway took a sabbatical in the Caribbean Virgin Islands. Together with his wife the pastor stayed in a cabin on the side of mountain overlooking a gorgeous bay. The vacation was well deserved: the previous five years had seen his church grow from a modest operation in a high school gym to a multi-location megachurch with thousands of members. The pastor tells the story of this trip in a partly autobiographical book of his, that explains how the church began their project of running a mission in inner-city Austin. The only activity that he recounts from this vacation period is reading the Bible with a searching enthusiasm. One passage in particular, Amos 5:21, stood out from the book and struck him as particularly meaningful. The excerpt makes the puzzling claim that the worship of the Jews left God unhappy. Was it possible that the apparent success of his own church was in fact only profligacy, and Lifeway, just like the ancient Israelites, was in fact not fulfilling their obligation towards the poor? Through this biographical narrative, the leader of Lifeway showed that he, like many thinkers in American evangelical history (G. S. Smith 2000), faced a fear of prioritising growth and institutional survival over participating in improving worldly society.

An intense session of prayer followed this revelation. In his mind, the pastor thought of the St John's neighbourhood, a place he knew of being "under-resourced, impoverished and withering under the highest crime rate in the city" (quote from the autobiographical book). He swore he would lead his church to this dark part of the city, if that would truly be God's will. The pastor then describes a phone call he received not long after,

despite being on holiday. It was from a real estate agent that had tried to help him locate a site for their church facility. The estate agent said he has some land for the church, in a reasonably central location, but explicitly doubted whether the church would want to purchase it. The property, a nursery that had not been used for decades, was in a run-down state and would require extensive refurbishing. The area surrounding it was used for drug trafficking and prostitution, and the ground around the property was practically covered in crack pipes, needles, condoms and smashed bottles. However, when the pastor heard that the building was located in St John's his response was an immediate positive. With this narrative of providence expressed in wild chance, the church's unique relationship to their site of mission was established.

The area now known as St John's had initially been settlement of freed black people. The land had been purchased by St. John Regular Baptist Association, a group of a few dozen preachers that were responsible for the black souls of a few adjacent counties, during the Reconstruction era. The financial state of the Association deteriorated in the Great Depression, and its leader reverend A. K. Black began to sell small lots of land to sharecroppers and black families that worked in the city of Austin, a few miles down the road. The area didn't become part of Austin before 1951, though even then the presence of municipal services remained ephemeral. Before the 1970s the streets were unpaved, and treacherous when it rained, making inaccessible the single point on the side of the neighbourhood from which water could be drawn. In the 1960s, a survey for the Community Renewal program counted 286 families, all black, with a median income of \$1,854, living in rural conditions (cited in Brick 2013, p.39). The history of the area was still evident in the names of the area's streets, where Bethune, Providence and Blessing Avenue crossed each other in grid formation.

The Western border of the neighbourhood was the Interregional Highway 35. For long even after the Civil Rights

era, the six lanes of the motorway would set in stone the division between the white West and to the coloured East. Today, the easy access that the heavily trafficked highway gave to the city would come to define the future prospects of the area. Anybody walking through the neighbourhood could see many signs advertising the sale of properties, often by absent landlords. The wave of rising property prices in Austin had stopped a mile or two further south when the financial crisis started. At present the neighbourhood was the most central area of Austin in which the property prices hadn't jumped yet.

But there were signs of a change everywhere. J.J. Pickle Elementary school, a streamlined glass and concrete block unlike anything in its vicinity. The facility was now a little more than ten years old, and housed also a library, a neighbourhood centre and space for health and social services. It was the first tangible sign that the city was seriously willing to put its weight and resources to improving the area. A lot of new construction was happening and the often neglected old houses were being renovated. Most African Americans families had already moved out of the area in the past few decades. Many families with sufficient means had left for the nearby suburbs in order to get away during the periods when the neighbourhood was characterised by crime and violence. Others had to leave when the rents or property taxes became too much for them to bear. The A.K. Black Memorial Church still stands in one corner of the neighbourhood and attracts a steady crowd every Sunday. Very few people from this congregation still live in the neighbourhood founded by their patron, but they drive from other residential areas to the church that they or their parents had come to in their youth. According to the 2013 American Community Survey (ACS 2013), there were about 10,000 people living in the area now, three quarters of whom were Hispanic. The area now housed many migrant workers had moved there from Mexico and that lived in close quarters in the old ranch-style houses and small condominiums. During the mornings, one could see day

labourers looking for short-term work on the side of the highway's access road closest to the area.

This was the setting where Lifeway church wanted to have a positive impact. During the time of my fieldwork what had been a nursery bought by Lifeway had become a functional building. The single two-storey grey brick building was now surrounded by a pristine lawn and large parking space. During my many visits to the building, its insides felt new and unsullied. Its bare concrete floors and large rooms reminded me of the trendy warehouse conversions of industrial cities. Every Sunday a hall in the building hosted three separate worship services, yet afterwards the foldable chairs were collected away, leaving the sanctuary space empty and ready to be used for other purposes. The building's wings provided premises for a food bank, a charity teaching English as well as a pregnancy resource centre, and a Christian business running a fitness programme called Crossfit held its session in a garage on the building's side. The church conceived of the old nursery as a space that it could use to support a network of organisations, both secular and religiously informed, that it could connect the vast reserve of Christian volunteers to, both from Lifeway and other Austin congregations. In investing to build facilities that were not primarily for Sunday services, the church wanted to both signal its priorities. It also helped it respond to the needs of its members, who progressively viewed the church not only as a liturgical unit, but as a channel to a changing array of recreational, educational activities as well as volunteering programmes.

A group of people from the Lifeway also moved to live in St John's. Around 2010 a pastor from the church counted 18 households of Lifeway members that they knew living in the neighbourhood. Since then the number of evangelicals had likely increased, though nobody kept precise count. One wealthy family connected to the church had chosen to invest their resources into applying community development with Christian principles in the area. They had bought about 10 properties, and rented part of

them out under market prices to both people in need as well as young people associated with the church. Over the years at least 100 young men and woman, often fresh off from college and starting some new temporary jobs, had moved into the neighbourhood with varying levels of commitment to the mission of redeeming St John's. Once they were there, the church itself held little oversight for them. The work of urban missionaries was by nature meant to be organic, as opposed to being part of a planned and organised effort, bringing a divine influence to the mundane moments and encounters that they had by virtue of living in the neighbourhood.

St John's and the refurbished nursery hence represented many things to Lifeway. The building itself, made new again after falling into disrepair, was like an icon of God's power and his healing activity in the world. The church called it "a physical representation of our mission to maximize and catalyze restoration efforts" (quote from church website). It was a tangible objectification of God's commitment to restore the world with the church as its representative. For this purpose, the location of the church was significant as well. The building was like an anchor for the church in what they often called "a dark place", a position where divine intervention was needed. It was a material grounding for a long-term co-presence in the place that for them was a necessary condition for the type of agency they were trying to achieve. For individual believers it was a place in which they could strive to overcome their own sociocultural background and baggage, in trying to relate to people that otherwise would be strangers to them. For those that moved to St John, the rearrangement of their social connections and lifestyles was often experienced as an opportunity to commit to a spiritual path of greater intensity. It is this last aspect that I hope to describe in the following ethnographic vignettes, the first of which focuses on the arrival of a family into the neighbourhood.

## 4.2 "He knows what we can handle"

Millie and Torrence Bennett, the parents of one of the families of urban missionaries associated with Lifeway, were from a small city in Oklahoma. They had travelled the world to a degree, through mission trips to Mexico and a holiday in the Maldives, but it was their commitment to their local Baptist church in Oklahoma that made them perceive a calling to go abroad as missionaries. The couple say that God put it on their heart to spread the gospel in Egypt, and until the very last minute they thought that this would be their new life. After attending a year's worth of preparatory training, saying goodbye to friends and even selling most of their possessions, it so happened that god "closed the door" to them going. Bad news about instability in the country, associated with the Arab Spring the country, started to accumulate. The couple felt the spirit pull them towards Austin, Texas instead. Like many other evangelical individuals and families that I interviewed in St John's, the arrival of the Bennetts to the neighbourhood was more of a result of happenstance rather than careful planning. In the end this made it easier for their presence to be incorporated into a religious biographical narrative.

After they arrived in Austin, the Bennetts rented a single bedroom in the house of an acquaintance. It was a difficult time, during which both the family's and their resolve for finding a new home were tested, but Millie and Torrence remember them in bitter sweet terms also as a period of great intimacy. Torrence found a job working for a real estate agent, and they found community in the local churches, the Lifeway church. They attended a bible study that also included a young man that had recently moved to Violet Crown Village, a set of apartments located in the St John's neighbourhood. One evening when the small group was praying together, Millie felt moved, and asked whether they could keep praying for a little longer. She asked for

more guidance from God and a little later announced to the group, with tears in her eyes, that she believed God had told them to move to Violet Crown Village. Retrospectively, Torrence thought, it made complete sense. Out of the 150 apartments in Violet Crown Village, about half housed refugees from around the world, many of them from the Middle East. The Texas Administration for Refugees, the public body responsible for paying for the first three months of accommodation, had chosen it as one of the places to which to direct their customers, no doubt attracted by the compound's cheap rent. For the family that had already received training in how to work with Muslims and people in the Middle East, this appeared like a fortuitous place to be. Torrence now saw how in parts of their previous path God had prepared them to be there.

At the time that I spent with the family, Torrence worked in administration of a real estate office only a ten-minute drive away. The job had the advantage of reasonably flexible hours, which had the advantage of allowing him to attend to his primary work at this stage, building relationships with his neighbours. When it was needed, Torrence would at times return to the house during the day, to support his wife in taking care of the two young children, to connect with their neighbours and to respond to their requests. Many of their neighbours had moved to the US very recently and were confused about basic questions related to livelihood. The Bennetts often gave rides to those who still didn't own a vehicle. They helped with forms and tried to direct people to places where they could get employment or resources from social work. They said it would have been easy to feel overwhelmed by the amount of physical needs around them, and the couple could easily have spent all of their time attending to their neighbours. At no point had the couple made a big deal about their presence in the complex, but the word about the helpful neighbours had gotten out, and now they have people knocking on their door often.



They felt like the amount of contact that they had was just right. "He knows what we can handle", Millie said, referring to God. "If I had five families in one day call me..". There were, however, times when the couple had to work to establish some privacy. At least once a month the couple wants to have a date night that is dedicated only to themselves, and during that time they have to close their curtains and the light by their front door, to make sure nobody will be offended when there is no response to a knock. They wanted to also show commitment to being there for their neighbours, and that they could be trusted more than the whims of social security agencies or, in their view, even the local mosque. It was hence difficult to turn people away from the door. Recently Millie and Torrence had to renew the lease on their apartment. They had started to have concerns about the security of staying there. In past months police cars frequently patrolled the complex, and one night a SWAT team had deployed flash grenades to break through a barricade in somebody's apartment. Millie and Torrence thought long about whether or not it was the right thing for them to stay. Like many other people who thought of themselves as inner-city missionaries, the safety of their children determined the limits of the risk that they were willing to accept.

In the end, they continued their lease. "He's in control, he's got us no matter where we are at", Torrence explains. "Just because we are in a place with a higher crime rate, it doesn't mean it increases the odds that something is going to happen. If we trust that God is in control, if we believe that, we are going to stay." Making the decision to stay was a moment for the couple in which they could confirm their feeling that they were "all in, as far as whatever, whenever, wherever." Just as before, they cited as the key to their decision a discernment of divine voice, an influence that they found hard to describe in any other way. But the voice of god might just as well take them somewhere else. "Definitely, living here, it is a day at a time. We really don't make plans long-term."

The attitude of Torrence and Millie towards their life and their future was one that was idealised and prescribed by many parts of American evangelical culture. Jane Guyer, for instance, makes an interpretation of dispensationalist theology and the recent cultural successes such as those of the apocalyptic *Left Behind* series, to suggest that evangelicalism is characterised by a vacation of the mid-term future, with an emphasis on both the continuous present and the indeterminate salvational future. Within this understanding of time, the near future is not something that evangelicals can exert agency over: “No stages to reach for, no synergies of forces picking up on one another over time: no organization and no midterm reasoning” (Guyer 2007, p.416). While my informant’s religious teaching bracketed the dispensationalist understanding of coming rapture in favour of an effectively post-millenarian hope to do God’s work in the world today, the implications for their understanding of time and agency are similar. As they sought to do “the ontological work of giving oneself over to an external moral force” (Elisha 2008, p.70), the surprises and contingencies of their own living environment became more like a resource than a hindrance. Being saved and a follower of God meant a break with a biographical past, but also signing on to a future determined by God’s will that was by its nature unknowable, and the act of relocation became a way to tell one’s own life story in these terms.

The anthropology of Christianity has noted how evangelicals depend on the internalisation of external subjectivity, through adopting sacred language in personal mental dialogue (Harding 2000) or the phenomenological experiences of embodied otherness (Csordas 1997). For the evangelical inhabitants of St John’s, however, it was the external settings of their life that allowed them to live through a sense of personhood that was characterised as an intersubjective sharing with divinity. This was in part because there were aspects about their own lives and ambitions for their surroundings that they felt their personal

agency did not extend to. In many respects, I found the accounts of settling into St John's similar to those described in the ethnography of Brian Howell (Howell 2012). His work was a study of the evangelical culture surrounding so-called short-term mission trips, where American Christians visit developing countries (in his case the Dominican Republic) for brief periods of time. Howell described in particular the narratives that people learned before the trips, and how they shaped their expectations and behaviour, and finds that the closest correspondence for these narratives was with those employed for both tourism and pilgrimages. Such travellers are searching for "meaningful experiences of encounter and otherness" (ibid p. 52) that can be found in "rituals of intensification" (ibid, p. 56). Quoting the anthropologist Ovar Löfgren, Howell describes the setting of these moments in the following way:

These are not conscious rituals or planned moments; indeed, they only work if they "take us by surprise" and "send a shiver up [our] spine"... Yet while these moments (or at least the feelings that accompany them) are not planned, they are anticipated and expected, desired and described, long before the trip begins. (Ibid, p. 54.)

Even though families such as the Bennetts were looking for a place to stay long-term, my ethnography shows that they still often understood settling in a place like St John's in terms of a crossing of cultural boundaries. The connection between the short-term mission trips and inner-city evangelical life was more than purely analogical. Omri Elisha has noted that there exists an "exilic consciousness" (Elisha 2011, p.184) among suburban evangelicals in relation to inner-city areas, in that they felt both a historical lineation yet cultural distinction to those parts of the city. Similarly, the evangelicals that had relocated to inner-city Austin often described their life as neighbours to Hispanics, Middle-Eastern refugees and even blacks in terms of a joy of discovery of foreign cultures and ways of life. Later in this chapter, I will refer to the inherent tension between this hope of

experiencing one's life in terms of "encounter and otherness", and the need to establish stable relationships of care. Before that, I will give some more description of the experience of settling into the inner-city neighbourhood, by focusing on the household of young men that I lived in personally.

### **4.3 Personal possessions and anti-materialism**

In the prayer room, above the doorway which was flanked by packed bookshelves, someone had written with a marker pen the word Jezreel in large letters. It was the informal name of the household, originally from biblical stories of a verdant Middle Eastern valley, and literally meant "God will sow." The name reflected the founding idea of the men living there. They wanted to spread the seed of God's word to places where the churches' presence would seem most unlikely, in the inner-city neighbourhood of Austin that, the inhabitants felt, had been largely abandoned by evangelical churches. The group of men living together understood themselves as analogous to the early Christian churches, and occasionally drew on rules of ecclesial discipline defined in the gospel of Matthew to respond to disagreements.

This household was also where I lived for 9 months of my fieldwork, benefitting from the hospitality of the people living there. During that time, the house had between 4 and 6 people who counted as actual members of the house. Guests, such as myself, were welcome to stay as long as they did not become a hindrance to the life of the members as well as the goals of the community as a whole. During my stay at Jezreel the group of people in the house would change roughly every month, with either members of Lifeway wanting to move into the neighbourhood, or some young men in need being offered a temporary place to stay. What I come to find was that the

inhabitants experienced God working in the house not only to send his message outward. Often the most religiously meaningful experiences took place within the walls of the house, in the interaction between inhabitants.

The long-term inhabitants of the house had ended up there through various trajectories. They were all ethnically white, and with the exception of two members had gone through higher education. Like many living in St John's, about half of the men were working in faith-based organisations or were preparing to go to mission abroad. For somebody gathering funds to travel and live overseas, the almost negligible living costs of Jezreel were attractive. Jezreel was one of about a dozen households in St John's with inhabitants that were affiliated with the Lifeway church. Within this evangelical community, it was known as the place that could host male visitors temporarily. It also had the reputation of being the most intensely "missional" group, that performed hospitality and participation in the lives of neighbours most actively. At least once a month someone was sleeping on the couch who had no other place to stay. During the five years they had lived in St John's, the inhabitants had made some effort in building relationship, and had been particularly successful with children and young adults who lived close to the house. Children from a neighbour family would run through the house almost every day, often as I sat by the desk of the prayer room writing up my fieldnotes.

The house had two bedrooms upstairs which the members of the household slept in. Both of the rooms contained two metal bunk beds, which meant the house could in practice accommodate more than the six men that currently lived there. Another bunk bed down stairs, in the passage between the living room and the back of the house, was dedicated to guests of the house. The backyard, paved over and shared with Mexican family on the other side of the duplex, had been turned it into a space for parking and storage. This hardly reduced the sense of a lack of space in the house. On the shelves and wardrobes of the

house belongings often mingled with those of other members and those accumulated from previous inhabitants. The space hardly made possible what Grant McCracken isolated as one part of the American notion of “homeyness” (1989), namely arrangements that allowed for display for the personal significance of objects.

One of the people who lived in the bedrooms upstairs was Peter, one of the three founders of the household who still lived there. Peter had grown up in Pflugerville, a suburb just outside of Austin, in what seemed a strictly conservative family. As a descriptive anecdote, he mentioned that his parents had never taught him the “myth” of Santa Claus, as they thought such outright lies could constrain a Christian upbringing. Peter had first come in contact with the St John’s neighbourhood shortly after his conversion experience, at the age of 22, when he was in the same small group with some of the first people from Lifeway to move into the area. He had seen how a colleague of his, called Matt, had lived in an arrangement, not unlike current Jezreel, with six men sleeping in bunk beds in a single room, and had been impressed by their principles and conviction. Matt had been a particularly apt influence for Peter since their life histories had been similar. Both had studied finance at the University of Texas, Matt a few years ahead of Peter. After graduating Matt had given up seemingly lucrative professional opportunities in the industry, and instead followed a religious calling to work in faith-based charities, doing sports-based social work with young people in the area. Soon after his graduation, Peter had decided to follow this example. As a symbolic first gesture had sold the investment account with which he had been his work as a financial broker, during his university years. He now works at an organisation helping volunteers from churches take part in various natural disasters local to the state of Texas.

Peter had become something of an authority in the house. The housemates organised a weekly dinner together every Monday, which often included guests from outside of the house. Often whoever was around stayed until later, when people watched a

film or discussed books that they were reading together. Peter was vocal in the discussions, both around the dining table as well as other occasions. Many dinners took on a slightly didactic nature, when he eagerly offered his interpretation to different topics, often pulling out his Bible to read the relevant passages aloud. His understanding of how a worship and prayer should work also gave shape and style to the shared moments, as he often played the music that he was passionate about and asked others to join in prayer with him. Whenever there was some disagreement or conflict in the house, for instance about house chores or guests overstaying their welcome, Peter was expected to take initiative on the matter, even though all of those who were considered members of the household were consulted.

Peter kept a fairly clean appearance, a button-up shirt and slacks. He was precise about his money, and tried to limit his purchase of clothes to the periods when sales were on. This sense of order and cleanliness did, however, not very often extend to the house as a whole. Peter was often unhappy about the tidiness and hygiene of the place, and often made last minute efforts to clean up when visitors arrived. He hoped the environment would “reflect the Lord’s peace”, or in the least make the people attending dinner or occasional parties feel like they were welcome. The dining table that was next to the open kitchen was often covered in papers and dishes. The prayer room, a dark but cosy space, had a wardrobe that was overflowing with clothes, towels and cans of food. They were slowly collected for the moments in which some acquaintance of the house would be in need of them, though supply generally exceeded demand. The bookshelves of the prayer room had received the most loving attention. Their topmost shelf showed numerous translations of the Bible carefully sorted by translation. Overall, the impression was far from that of inner-worldly ascetics, or the rational management of desires and human organisation.

Occasionally someone would suggest a system to allocate housework on the basis of a rota, or to delegate responsibilities

for bills or washing up to individual people, yet during my stay such arrangements turned out to have short lifespans. This was not unrelated the manner in which people in the house approached conflict or resolutions to it. A sense of anger or punishment towards other people was out of the question, and generally the misdeeds of others were forgotten even before they were forgiven. In some cases, the housemates even celebrated a sense of serving others when they were taking care of mundane tasks such as doing each other's chores. The shortcomings of household management were revalued in light of evangelical virtues of serving others.

While evangelical teachings on the matter have a complex history (Eskridge 2006; Witten 1995), both of the churches I frequented in Austin preached about American modernity as alienated, because of its ultimately frustrating pursuit of happiness through commodities. This message was also reflected in the way that my format housemates spoke about their relocation to the house. They placed value on the fact that the environment almost forced upon them a different relationship to their own goods. One of the housemates, John, often told a story about how he carried in numerous boxes when he was moving into the house, only to realise that there was no way that he could keep them. With a didactic narrative, he claimed it was only when realised he had to ask himself which clothes to keep, instead of what he could give away, that he managed to slim down his wardrobe. Now the clothes were stored in wardrobes and loose piles in the bedrooms, and John occasionally walked in the house comically proclaiming that he was wearing somebody else's trousers after not finding his own.

Peter described a change in his attitude to his car, a sporty Ford Escort, in similar terms. It was the nature of the house's backyard and the streets around it that any car left there would eventually be discovered with some cosmetic damage. "For the first time someone hit my car, my heart sank a little bit, but you know, later I learned to be at peace about it", he said. "Dude,



whatever, I thought.” Now he claims that he is happy to lend his car to other people, against all the instructions that his parents had carefully given him about it. He gives rides to people when they are asking for help on the street, not caring about how having someone who hasn’t washed for weeks and has dirty clothes affects the state of the car. “Stuff brings separation”, he described the attitude he believed to have overcome.

Daniel Miller has tried to show that the idea of human greed and materialism functions in Euro-American cultures like a cautionary myth that people define their own activities against (D. Miller 1998). The image of unconstrained secular consumption serves as a boundary case for ethical commentary that defines the way that people think about their own activities, even when no particular person they know would fit the myth of an uncontrollable (and paradigmatically female) consumer. Several aspect of life within the household, as well as St John’s more widely, made it easier for people to perform as well as discover means for making this particular boundary. The prudence allowed by lower living costs fit the Christian model of good stewards of finances. The living environment may well have approximated Arlie Hochschild’s (1989) description of men that postponed the founding of conjugal households while maintaining lower priorities for housework. It also made possible a narrative of distancing oneself from the alienating enchantment of consumer goods. While this is the general imaginary that my informants used to position themselves as virtuous agents of personal finance and consumption, some ethnographic vignettes can further specify the way that particular events contributed to their biographies of ethical self-development.

#### **4.4 Living together and moral breakdown**

For Texan evangelicals one point of reflection at which the conflict between worldly pursuits and religious virtue crystallises is the car. Even more than homes, cars are markers of social status part of a person's public persona, visible to others in various life domains, and thus inviting social comparison. They require care and service with substantial financial implications, hence binding people's resources and attention. This notion of the car as a form of consumption with a dangerous potential for selfish dispositions was made tangible to one of my informants, a neighbour in the St John's neighbourhood, through an unexpected event. One morning Brian had found his car, parked outside of his house, with its window smashed in. His papers, necessary for his work, were strewn along the pavement. My neighbour's initial reaction to what seemed like a senseless crime was one of anger and anxiety. He wanted to punch whoever did it in the face. Yet for Brian the event took a moral character as something that compelled him towards further piety. Minutes after he was convinced that the spirit had pointed out to him, in his words, "I told you."

In his mind, Brian had connected the event to something he had encountered in his daily study of the Bible. Only a few days before, he had read a part from the book of Hebrews that stuck in his mind, as he found it confusing. He had focused on a passage that encouraged the reader to remember the one's moment of conversion and how you "joyfully accepted the plundering of your possessions" (Hebrews 10:34, NIV). It was only after what had happened to his car that he felt he understood the passage. He says he felt humbled as a result, and since then hasn't felt the need to lock his car. Brian's conclusions, about his misplaced trust in worldly possessions, were close to following the standard instructions of the Austin evangelical sermons that I attended. Yet from his point of view, it was the emotional shock related to losing his car that was a demonstration that this simple lesson had not hit home. With self-deprecating humour, my informants often laughed at what tricks God had to resort to in order to make

the point to his thick subjects. What such moments achieved, pregnant with intervention of the Holy Spirit, was not necessarily new revelation, as it was an improved access to being transformed in response to the existing Christian message. In these stories, the use of outward, material signs that imprinted themselves on individuals was like a last resort for a loving God that knew the state of his subjects whom he couldn't otherwise get to listen. The religious significance of the event was confirmed, after the fact, by virtue of the seemingly fortuitous association with the biblical passage.

What seemed to be happening in Brian's case was that the events surrounding his car and his reading took on a surprising form of what Webb Keane has called "ethical affordances" (Keane 2014a). That is, the properties of the material settings were such that allowed Brian to ascribe an ethical evaluation to it, based on his perception of divine intent. Similar processes of reasoning between transcendence and immanence have been ethnographically documented in other Protestant contexts. Joe Webster, for instance, finds the inhabitants of a Scottish fishing village seek experiences of enchantment, based on the semiotic ideology that denies the possibility of coincidences (Webster 2013). Keane too, in his ethnography of Indonesian Christian converts, finds that features of the material environment, such as torn cloth or lost valuables, were interpreted as "non-natural" signs, that is "registering intentions of persons or other agentive beings" (Keane 2003, p.419). The evangelical practice of daily readings of the Bible was one thing that provided substantial material for associative reasoning. The sense that biblical passages can find their ultimate referent within quotidian events is also common among charismatically influenced Christianities, as has been shown for instance in Jon Bialecki's description of "prophetic scripture" among third-wave charismatics (Bialecki 2009). What was specific to the context of St John's appeared to be that it was valued specifically as a place that was charged with such ethical affordances. It was an environment that, with

frequent crimes directed at property as well as a built environment that was poorly maintained, often failed to mediate basic human needs. As such it had the potential for transcendental mediation. The manner in which these moments took on a meaning that was specifically moral can be shown with another ethnographic vignette from the Jezreel household.

I have already described how the members of Jezreel found a redemptive aspect in the lack of space and disorderliness of the house. They perceived it as enforcing on them a way of living less defined by value attached to material goods. At the same time, the conditions of the shared house guaranteed that a significant part of social interaction and the negotiation of social relationships had to revolve around managing the way they related to their possessions, in terms of organising chores and maintenance.

Within the household and the wider church community, sharing a household was understood to be a way of working on one's inherent selfishness, but more specifically also a way to prepare one's character for the cohabitation that would eventually follow with marriage. This would occasionally show in discussion amongst the people in the St John's community. For instance, Peter knew a young woman who was living in the same neighbourhood by herself, and sometimes would comment disapprovingly on her motivation. When the woman had mentioned that other living with other people could make her angry, another person in Jezreel replied, "Well, good luck with marriage!" "If you think you have trouble living with other people, you are in for a surprise, wait until you are married", Peter continued. Also in church sermons the fact that more people were now living in single person households was seen as an unhealthy mark of a society that had capitulated to personal needs.

It was Peter that gave the most elaborate description of how he experienced this process. This is how he described moments when he had found other people intruding into his belongings:

It's in those moments of stretching, somebody touching my notebooks, wearing my shoes, somebody accusing me of something that just like, quite frankly, just seemed a stretch. Whatever it might be, being taken for granted, whatever it is, these things when they happen, which causes like, unhealthy things to rise up in our hearts, self-pity, you know, resentment, you know, whatever it might be, it really exposes the stuff in our own heart that is not of god.

What I found striking about Peter's account of social conflict, as with other people in the house, was how little attention was often placed on the reasons or motivations of the other people in question, when considering the moral significance of the moment. The intentionality of the other person could be delegated to the status of secondary cause, subservient to the true transcendental agents active in the situation. The type of response that Peter was attempting to exercise in these moments was to instead "search his heart", to turn the revelatory moment into an introspective impulse. That such revelations would point to the need for self-examination is again a familiar trope of Christianity (see for instance Robbins 2004), but here the ultimate outcome is not necessary confessional, or based on the technique of externalising one's shortcomings. What seemed distinctive of this process of introspection was its tendency to acknowledge a porous form of personhood that is ultimately if imperfectly dependent on the figure of God. So Peter continues his description of the "stretching" aspects of life in St John's:

"It squeezes me to trust in the Lord more. It makes me bring it before him, saying, God, restore me in this, why am I resentful in this moment, what does it mean to pray

for those who persecute me? Or you know whatever it might be, show me how to love people.”

Within Jezreel, this way of reasoning did also occasionally appear to limit establishment of actual intimacy. Of the people in the house, Peter was most prone to giving biblical interpretations of events and motivations. His advice for others often centred on the use of prayer and other devotional activities for exploring answers. Occasionally some of the other housemates admitted, even in Peter’s presence, that they did not wish to seek his counsel because they expected a response of this type. They could find his reaction predictable, even unemphetic. One of the people living in the household, Jeffrey, for instance, sometimes had a flu or a headache, conditions he felt may have been exasperated by the environment. Jeffrey explicitly mentions that he had not wanted to mention his condition to others, as he did not want to receive the care of others in this form. He would feel like he was being dishonest participating in the prayer, as he often doubted the healing power of prayer. “Instead I just take Advil” (an anti-inflammatory drug), Jeffrey explained.

The setup of the house community had as its implicit aim to be a kind of public space that was shared by everybody in the house. Within close quarters, little could be hidden, and so every participant would submit themselves to the benign surveillance of other inhabitants. Perhaps predictably, what often seemed to happen was that the intimacy of the common and shared space was supplemented by more frankness and sharing that took place in the particular relationship between two men. One of the three founding members of the house, for instance, had spent the past year trying to gather funding to go and work as a missionary in Costa Rica. As he only worked sporadically, and focused on planning his trip and building a network of support, I often shared the house with him during the day when others were at work. Over the months, it had become obvious to me that he found his present situation difficult, as he was struggling to make progress in his funding and the period when he was living in

Austin with reduced means continued. Despite picking up on his worries, I only heard them vocalised when Peter was present and clearly directed at him. And when the man told everybody over dinner about a change in his plans, that instead of Costa Rica he was going to work in a school for missionaries in Kansas, the announcement was news to all but a couple of people in the house.

Despite these limitations, the cohabitation between Christian men in the house created a kind of necessary intimacy between them, that made them aware of the personal habits and shortcomings of each other. Through the types of challenging events described by Peter this took on a religious significance as a positive revelation of the various dependencies that each one of them harboured. It allowed for the performance of faith, in the sense suggested by Omri Elisha, as the “a totalizing, incorruptible intersubjectivity that remains perpetually elusive yet no less real” (2008, p.58).

The moral logic of this process could be captured with the concept of a “moral breakdown”, developed by Jarrett Zigon (2008). Following Martin Heidegger’s distinction between the ready-to-hand and present-to-hand, Zigon claims that it is during moments when a practical engagement with one’s material and social surroundings that actors may become “ethically attuned”. The analogy is based on Heidegger’s phenomenological description of two modes of being as they relate to the use of tools: It is only when a tool cannot perform its practical task that the details of the action become an object of reflection. In applying the same analogy to ethics, Zigon claims that the normal baseline of human action follows a habitual or rule-driven engagement that includes in the least a lesser degree of reflection, and hence is less ethical in character. Zigon makes a distinction between situating morality as the regular, habitual pattern of human activity, distinct from ethics which requires a conscious considering and decision.

This analytical framework has drawn criticism from other anthropologists. Laidlaw (2014, p.116–137), for instance, makes the point that ethnographic inquiry into moral behaviour should explore the variety of cultural ideals, and not assume that the model of an oscillation between conscious breakdowns characterised by reflection and a return to the “existential comfort” of habitual action is universally descriptive. Laidlaw (2014, p.116–137) further questions whether human habitual action is thoroughly unreflective, drawing from Bourdieu’s notion of the habitus.

Within my own ethnographic case, however, the notion of moral breakdowns is illustrative. With Zigon’s valuation of at least temporary moments of individual awareness that are followed by a refinement of previous personal behaviour find a clear analogy with Christian narratives of conversion. And even though evangelicals wouldn’t classify exceptional events such I described above as *ethical* as such, my ethnographic material shows that life in a situation of cohabitation and in a deprived neighbourhood was valued precisely for its potential to force the problematisation of issues of piety. From an evangelical point of view, the quotidian, habitual life was morally risky and less valued, as it was associated with worldly influences and their bodily desires (or “the flesh”). The insight gained by the events of breakdown is further to be incorporated into a person’s character and habitual action by further pursuit of piety. Such an “ethical affordance” may, however, not a stable feature of the environment.

## **4.5 The home as means for care and hospitality**

When the family of Torrence and Millie first moved into the apartment complex of Violet Crown Village it felt like a shock to them. During their initial clean-up, Millie accidentally pulled up



a floor tile, only to reveal a nest of cockroaches hidden below it. The gutter outside of their window broke and their bedroom was flooded. They struggled with the size of the flat that, for the standards of the American South, was modest. The family's two daughters share a small bedroom upstairs that has room for little more than their two beds and assortment of dolls and between it. In their living room, a bookcase separates a pair of sofas from the older daughter's working desk. It is there that Audrey can do the home work that has been set by her mother, who home schooled her. In my discussions with the people in the inner-city neighbourhood, many accounts about settling followed a similar pattern. There was an initial strong reaction to potential discomfort or outright danger in the neighbourhood. Such struggles were often interpreted in the key of personal sacrifice and service for others, matching the Christian virtues, but also the narrative of the changed priorities of Lifeway church, as they were presented by the main pastor in the text above. This was, however, a way of understanding one's biography that was difficult to maintain.

When I made my visits to their house, the Bennett family had lived there for close to two years already. Millie cared for their home with the precision and intensity typical to mothers who worked at home, and they had made progress in making their home comfortable. The decoration of the house was neat, yet impersonal, reminding me of an extended stay hotel. The only things that spoke directly about the family are some framed photographs of the children, and pictures of the family printed on canvas. The little motivational slogan "Faith, family and friends", and the text "Rejoice" in wooden letters are the only visible markers of religiosity. "Thank God for Ikea, because it's nice and cheap", Millie said. Pointing to the furniture in the living room, with a consistent dark plywood and a colour-matched red in the pillows and drapes, she explains that they get almost everything from the Swedish furniture manufacturer. They also knew many other missionaries who had passed on furniture to them as they

had left. The availability of cheap furniture had allowed the family to settle in a place without great financial commitment to remain there.

Millie and Torrence claim to not mind the lack of storage in their apartment. They had “given up most of our junk” anyway, in the period when they were planning to leave to become missionaries, even most of their clothes that they thought would be unsuitable for the new warmer climate. The only things they claim to have conscientiously wanted to keep were family pictures and Christmas ornaments that were lodged away in a garage in Oklahoma since they expected not to be using them in the Middle East. Perhaps in preparing for their mission they wanted the finality of their decision to be reflected in the irrevocability of getting rid of their possessions. Yet the couple also displayed a clear indifference in particular towards memorabilia. Torrence himself claimed that he had particularly little attachment to things. When prompted about it, he mentioned one box of memorabilia that he had in his childhood, which contained old pictures taken in school and little toy soldiers. One day, as an adult, he just looked at the box and felt like he could find no reason to keep it. I quizzed him about whether there he thought in spiritual terms about loosening his hold on things. As I asked him whether there was some spiritual motivation for maintaining this attitude he paused momentarily as if he were surprised and shrugged: “Not really.”

Millie clearly hoped their home to be something like a haven for her children, who she tried to make sure would enjoy all the the things she expected to be part of an American childhood. She told me how she had made the effort to dress up her daughters for Halloween and drive them around to do trick and treating when there were few children around that would celebrate the occasion. Providing home schooling for them appeared to be less about passing on religious values as it was about concerns of quality and safety related to the schools that were located close-by. Even during my fairly short visits to the Bennetts, I was

never the only guest. A child from a Pakistani family they knew was staying with them while their parents were elsewhere, and occasionally the doorbell rang with someone hoping to have a chat or to ask advice. In this way, the home also doubled as a location in which the relations of care for their own children that the family prioritised could be demonstrated and extended to their neighbours.

To understand the experience of settling into St John's, I find it useful to again refer to Brian Howell's ethnography of short-term missionary trips (Howell 2012). Howell pointed out that evangelicals hoped to find in foreign locations challenges they could overcome, to express a transformative movement towards authenticity and vitality. They followed what Andrew Walls called "self-denying life of the ideal missionary" (Walls 1996) in attempting to perform genuine self-sacrifice and service among the relative poverty of the people they encountered. The narrative of the self-denying missionary was however easily frustrated. Howell shows how a significant share of evangelicals on short-term mission trips struggled to fit their experiences into their narratives, and were disappointed to find that their travels were also "occasions for pleasure and indulgence". The evangelical travellers did their best to distinguish themselves from "mere tourists", to approach a quasi-liminal experience of moving outside of their regular patterns of life.

Similarly, also the people that had come to inhabit St John's would, after initial periods of adjustment, feel like their existence turned more homebound and secure than they had expected. Many found that the lower rent or costs of property in the neighbourhood actually gave them life chances that previously had not been accessible. Some people in the area had the opportunity of purchasing more than one house for themselves, given the low property prices. Though the houses were often in poor condition, with water damage and rotten materials, the new owners could easily refurbish them. Those with the means to do this would often also be conscious that they would be benefitting

in the likely future event that the market valuation of the area would turn to their favour.

As the Bennetts did, for many an investment into their house was also justified as means for hospitality and openness to interaction with neighbours. Whether this interaction would materialise was, however, uncertain. One person I interviewed had lived in St John's previously but ultimately had moved to the suburbs with her family. She had felt like the idea of a place-based community in the area was difficult, not least because its transitory nature. Most of their neighbours, both the evangelicals present as well as Hispanic families, would move house frequently. Having moved into a large suburban house, she was uncertain whether her priorities reflected a responsible use of their personal finances, or a Christian sense of "stewardship" of their resources. She explicitly questioned whether an investment into their domestic sphere could be justified through hospitality in the following way:

"I call it 'swimming pool idea', where they say, we're going to build a 30,000-dollar swimming pool, and we're going to invite all of the kids of the neighbourhood, and we're going to get them all saved because they're all going to spend time at our swimming pool. It's going to be great, and Jesus is going to love us for it. And then, you know, they hardly ever have anybody there."

In a classic anthropological account of hospitality, Julian Pitt-Rivers describes situations of hosting in terms of guests as a form of radical alterity, whose moment of arrival can never be known beforehand (Pitt-Rivers 1968). Preparations for hospitality help to contain the otherness of the strangers, and to stabilise the relations between the stranger and the host community, which are potentially marred by a lack of trust and understanding. Even when Pitt-Rivers' notion of the guest as the total outsider seems out of place in Austin, still for evangelicals in a place like St John's, domesticity has a similar kind of ambiguity. For families

such as the Bennetts, creating a comfortable home was part and parcel of both caring in familial relations as well as extending care to neighbours. It presents both an openness to unexpected strangers, but also a way to contain its risk.

## **4.6 Conclusions**

This chapter described the difference the urban and domestic setting makes for evangelical pursuits for personal piety. The chapter started with the point of view of the Lifeway church, that grounded the evangelical community in the neighbourhood of St John in an idea of a sacrificial presence that works towards restoration. Through the ethnographic example of a family, I showed that this open-ended and unplanned commitment to the area could be experienced in a religiously significant way as trust and dependence to divine powers. In my fieldwork, however, I found that many of the formative experiences that local evangelicals had were related to domestic affairs and occasions. In particular, the lack of personal space in the buildings easily connected with evangelical narratives related to distancing oneself from secular materialism. Moreover, locals experienced domestic disputes as well as unsettling events in the neighbourhood in the register of moral breakdowns, as occasions that necessitated ethical reflection and ultimately provided impulse for a reform in their character. Ultimately, however, the home was also understood as means for caring for one's family as well as being hospitable to neighbours, which meant that it couldn't remain as the source of providential surprises for long.

Both this chapter as well as the previous one focus on settings that evangelicals had hoped to be conducive or even ideal for attaining intimacy. The small group, analysed in the previous chapter, is a safe space for personal disclosure. Among the trusted members of the group, participants would break out of

their typical social personas and discuss their personal grievances. This chapter showed how the shared households in the neighbourhood of St John's were expected to create a similar kind of controlled publicity. Because of the close proximity of people in the house, the inhabitants would know each other's lives extensively out of necessity. The members of the community in Jezreel understood this kind of enforced disclosure to be not only specific to these large households, but an indication of the kind of shared intimacy that was typical to marriage and family life.

The kind of relationships I observed during my stay at the Jezreel household were, however, different from this ideal. Some of the house members, such as Jeffrey, were frank about withholding information from other inhabitants. Where relationships involving sharing and disclosure did develop, they often were between two people, instead of being facilitated by the moments when everybody in the household was in the same place. If there was a sense of being close to everybody else who people shared a house with, it was rather not to be found in intense communication, but in the accepting and taking for granted the presence and intrusions of other people, without the need for constant acknowledgement or response. As described in the chapter, the lack of space and constant messiness was a concern, but still it was a situation that the people sharing the house were willing to put up with. This displayed what could be described as a type of "ambient intimacy": instead of seeing the exchange of information as the focus of relationships, the fact that people could share a space even without such exchanges was seen as a sign of intimacy. This point can be taken to further complicate the initial definition of intimacy that was reached in the previous chapter.

Whereas the small groups could be described as a progressive building of trust and knowledge of others, what proved ethically potent in the case of co-habitation were the points of rupture, in which domestic processes of living together were strained. These

were normatively significant for questioning the basic moral parameters that people used to assess their personal self-development.

In addition to this type of interpersonal intimacy, the informants also viewed the neighbourhood as a site that was privileged for intimacy with God. When talking about this type of intimacy, my informants foregrounded a different set of things. People such as Millie and Torrence emphasised that they were operating without a long-term plan, under the minute guidance from the divine. The surprises and failure of routine in their environment was often seen as a resource for a route of action that did not originate from their own volition alone. The logic of self-formation in this kind of practice was one that moved unpredictable and potentially moved through sudden changes and revelations. In this sense, it differs from the temporal structure of many theories of ethical character development. Saba Mahmood, for instance, describes practices of the women's mosque movement in Egypt in terms of a "sequencing of the performatives" (2005, p.163) that have an accumulative and progressive effective in shaping one's body according to normative ideals. The breaks in routine I observed in St John's, in contrast, were valued precisely because the rupture they provided in steady functioning of ordinary life, making my informants reflect on their ethical status.

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The chapter revealed some unique aspects about the ethical import of intimacy for evangelicals. In discussing shared households, it focused on a form of intimacy that was not necessarily, as in the continuous dialogue of small groups, based on continuous self-disclosure. Rather it was a form of intimacy that was built on co-presence, enforced by the milieu of the home that left no options for personal space. Whereas the small groups could be described as a progressive building of trust and knowledge of others, what proved ethically potent in the case of co-habitation were the points of rupture, in which domestic processes of living together were strained. These were normatively significant for questioning the basic moral parameters that people used to assess their personal self-development.



## 5 Relational ministry

Following a thanksgiving potluck with homeless people, many discussions within the church focused on whether the event had been a success or not. The meal had taken place in the storefront space of New Church Austin, to which the dozen members in their twenties and thirties brought carefully prepared turkey and various vegetarian imitations. The space that usually was filled by rows of fold-up chairs for Sunday service now occupied a handful of round tables for people to eat on. The goal for the event had been to help out some about dozen homeless people that a charity connected to the church worked with.

In their discussions following the event, many church members voiced appreciation for “simply having blessed” the homeless people, and through it offering them the kind of experience that many without families struggled to have. They felt it was a tangible gesture valuable in its own right. Others wondered whether it had been a wise use of their time and investment. After all, only six homeless people showed up to the event, and some wished that they could have reached out to a larger number. Another worry was whether there had been sufficient and real interaction between church members and the homeless. After the meal was over, the pastor of the church had merrily shaken everybody’s hand, and made some introductions, which had been seen as a way of overcoming the barriers. However, Stephen, a church member that knew some of the homeless from his volunteering activities, had been the only one to sit on the same table with them.

From the perspective of Stephen what had happened was precisely what one would expect. It would have been outright strange if someone would have actually aimed to sit on the same table, or made the effort to do so. “They're just like you and me”, he said, “they don't want you to come up and falsely sit down

like you're on some mission or whatever." He explained that it was embarrassing for them to be there and have a group of church people come "kind of staring at them". He described the banter that had taken place on the table he sat at. One of the men there had remarked to his face, "I hope your cooking is better than your carpentry", referring to the time they had spent together woodworking. He felt like this man didn't want to let Stephen off the hook just because the church was providing for them. "You cooked the turkey and I ate it. It's not going to make us good friends", Stephen described his attitude. The clumsiness of the situation was actually a measure of the agency of the recipients of the food, who chose to act with mild subversion, to make the inherent inequality of the situation apparent.

But Stephen did think that the situation would change if he would just sit there and not go away, and not have his "church feelings" hurt. And they have had several conversations since then. Stephen believed that if they would have these dinners over and over, every week, "just like regular life", people would start to get to know each other, like they know the people that sit next to them in church. They would recognise that, after all, they do have something to talk about. They could bring up personal things in the conversation, since they had developed sufficient trust. The church ministering to homeless people, he thought, cannot be like a food pantry, where you would just focus on feeding people soup, and all you would say is, "Hi, thanks, you have been such a blessing." People would have to work through the inherent awkwardness of the situation in order to know each other. A repetition of such encounters would produce real attachments between people, which would allow them to truly recognise each others as equals.

The church event, then, was trying to achieve something a little paradoxical. People had come together for the ostensible purpose of giving food to the homeless, but in order for them to relate authentically any instrumental goal of the occasion would have to be moved into the background. The ultimate hope that

people from the church had for the homeless was to improve their life conditions, a goal that was also indistinguishable from the transformation that would result from a personal conversion. But for this occasion to be successful, they wanted to meet in spontaneous interaction, in which the hierarchy between giver and receiver and the agenda related to proselytising would be forgotten. A significant part of the local idea of a “building a relationship” was about a developing connection between people that was motivated by little less than the genuine attraction for intimacy between people, and untainted by an imposition of an agenda or format that would direct the interaction towards some desired end. The dilemma, I thought, was not unlike that of the fieldworker. My own presence in the church was motivated largely by my wish to produce ethnographic research. At the same time, the successful completion of the work would depend on me building the types of social relationships that overcame the roles of a researcher and an informant. Whenever I participated in events such as the thanksgiving potluck, I walked away with attachments that both complicated my own motivations and allowed me to fulfil my initial task better.

Much could be said about the significance of, for instance, eating together, but in this chapter will not focus on the particular context of this church, nor on churches working on homeless in general. Instead I wanted to use this ethnographic snapshot to illustrate something like an ideal or model for social action that can be abstracted from a wide variety of evangelical social welfare activities that span the entire list of organised food pantries, mentoring projects, after-school activities for children, bible studies in poor neighbourhoods, to even informal interactions in one’s own private relationships.

After all, I encountered the same dilemmas that Stephen experienced related to instrumentality and avoiding procedure in a number of different ministry activities in Austin. One man who had been running a food pantry told me about the tricks that he had pulled, in response to being frustrated by the lack of

interaction that he had with his “clients”. He had responded to the perceived dilemma of artificiality of interaction with some subtle changes in the way that the social situation unfolded. He chose to always bake the bread a little bit too late, so he would have to come to the other side of the counter and give it personally to people. Soon, he said, he would know them by name. Another large operation related to feeding the homeless took bags of food carefully prepared in by suburban evangelical volunteers and drove a truck filled with them into the centre of the city. One of the staff members of the charity told me that the truck delivery was intentionally designed to always end up at a random location in the city. This was done so that, according to the people running the operation, there would be a less “objectifying” relationship between the evangelical volunteers handing out the food and those in need of it. There were fewer policies and rules in place, and the truck itself could even include a random set of things in it. In this way, it was hoped, the encounter would not be “just about shelling out food”, not a scheduled provision of material goods according to pre-defined expectations. By creating more complicated, unpredictable interactions, it would be easier to recognise the other person as human.

These examples display attempts to transform rather conventional social welfare activities to have a focus on creating interpersonal bonds. This is what local evangelicals called “relational ministry”, or just “building relationships”. Such activities require a tangible, face-to-face presence of a believer in the life of somebody outside of the church, and establishing long-term interaction or actual intimacy. The relationship is characterised by Christian virtues such as graceful forgiveness, humility and mutual vulnerability, but also by a mutual sharing of personal detail about one’s life and the knowledge of the other that this enables. While this kind of is approach a general ideal for interaction with anybody, but participants in relational ministry typically develop intensive, continuous relationships

only with a small number of people. Stephen, for instance, could develop a more intense relationship with the particular people that he knew from his volunteering activity. This is acceptable particularly as the manner of building relationships was seen as an expressive of one's own personality and gifts, which may not be appropriate for establishing intimacy with everybody.

Much of my my own ethnographic material that I present here is from my own participation in so-called church small groups with missionary intent, in food pantries as well as from my experiences living in a household of people that had relocated into a poor neighbourhood in order to be a missionary presence there. Though churches taught such services to be a Christian duty, it was generally only the most committed, those with what Omri Elisha calls "moral ambition", that participated and volunteered on on-going and regular basis (Elisha 2011). The people that I developed relationships with during my fieldwork were almost always university educated and professional. It was in the churches that attracted this demographic that, contrary to their reputation, congregational studies had found the norms and priorities that promoted social outreach work (Cnaan 2002; Ammerman 2005). Such priorities were displayed also in large, suburban and theologically conservative churches. Many of those who most enthusiastically took part in the programmes were either enrolled in university or recently graduated, and hence in a life situation that provided both a significant amount of free time as well as the wish to learn about vocational activities to inform one's own choices.

This chapter hence describes the functioning of intimacy in the context of another type of interpersonal relationship, that between socially engaged evangelicals and people in need. The chapter describes the experience of participating in efforts of charity, such as preparing and delivering food for the homeless, that are organised according to principles of relational ministry. The efforts put the creation of authentic, long-term human bonds as a priority, which the gifting of material goods was subservient

to. The chapter also draws my ethnographic material about informal occasions, outside of organised charitable programmes, during which Christians encountered people in need and attempted to respond to them following similar kinds of principles.

What this chapter contributes to the argument of the thesis is to show how people experience intimacy when they are confronted by its artificiality. It describes moments, such as the negotiation of the conditions for the giving of material goods, that force people to qualify their expectations of the authenticity and autonomy of intimate relations. In a sense, the artificiality of social action is a given of anthropological analysis, at least within its modernist paradigm. It describes a context which encompasses and to a degree determines the quality of social phenomena (e.g. Strathern 1995). As such, anthropology points to the contingency of social phenomena, and shows how they have a basis in history, power, and other aspects of local context. In this way it is possible for anthropologists to describe the functioning of small groups through notions such as “interactive frames” (Bielo 2009b), or the culturally shared scripts that give shape to the interaction. This chapter has a related but different aim. Instead of demonstrating the social contingency of these evangelical pursuits, it is about how intimacy attempts and fails to overcome such contingency. It is about the experience of trying to achieve a relationship that is pure in the sense that it is free of social roles or interests, within a setting that makes it practically impossible. In other words, it is about how evangelicals come to terms with the necessity of mediation in their human relationships.

The first section of the chapter describes the cultural context that defines both evangelical social outreach work as well the reasons for an emphasis on personal relationships as means for delivering it. This is followed by a brief explanation of the basic concepts that local evangelicals applied to the social engagement, those of “grace” and “being incarnational”. This thinking

includes the ideal of offering others the equivalent of a free gift, i.e. one's presence and resources without the expectation of reciprocity. The last part of the chapter details one particular dilemma that evangelicals have attempting to deal with the consequences of such an ideal, which become apparent when the material provision of goods is a part of the activity. Intimacy is shown to be both a resource as well as problem for responding to this dilemma. Finally, the chapter describes how experiences from these relationships, responding to both the artificiality of the relationships as well as the dilemma of the "limits to giving", relate to evangelical subjectivity. I interpret the various narratives that evangelicals tell of their experiences serving others using Michael Scott's notion of *ontopraxis*.

## **5.1 The cultural context of relational ministry**

The point of this chapter is not to claim that a prioritisation of interpersonal bonds as such would be a unique feature of Christianity and Christian organisations. In fact, it is easy to point to a parallel emphasis in both government policies and the wider landscape of welfare provision even within. Services under titles such as mentoring, counselling and coaching have an established position as social service techniques, and occasionally evangelical social ministry organisations would also frame their own activities in these neutral terms in order to access wider funding and institutional affiliations. State social policy reform in recent decades has worked to move the public provision of welfare to this direction, for instance through public-private partnerships and the personalisation of welfare services (Needham 2011, p.71)

One ideological influence in this reform that is also a strong voice in evangelical culture has been the notion of compassionate conservatism, as it was articulated by Marvin Olasky and

adopted as a platform of in the early presidential career of George W. Bush (Olasky 2000). Compassionate conservatism attempts to delegate welfare provision from state institutions to local civil society, who through both tangible human relationships, moral authority and the exercise of “benign suspicion” (Olasky 1996, p.53) are able to ensure that welfare provision is balanced with maintaining personal responsibility. Particularly for adherents of a conservative ideology of work and personhood, who believed that the indiscriminate distribution of resources was destructive for human character, the emphasis of personal relationships was one way cutting the Gordian knot between social improvement and enabling passivity. It was a narrative for a social programme that fitted a conservative mindset, as the distribution of material goods could be embedded in potentially hierarchical relationships. In his discussion of the evangelical notion of “accountability”, Omri Elisha has shown how something analogous to Olasky’s model is applied, if in a contested way, in Tennessee megachurches. Their concept of accountability implies reciprocal obligations for the beneficiary of the aid in exchange for continued benevolence. It places the Christian benefactor in a position similar to a paternalistic authority, to encourage others to follow biblical standards as closely as they themselves.

This ideological connection is however not a necessary feature of the technique. What makes relational ministry an attractive model for achieving this in the contemporary US may well be its ambiguity. Intimate relationships as means for extending welfare can be viewed in a positive light by people with varying ideological inclinations, while they bring different interpretative frames to supplement its meaning. Though he may be critiqued for his philosophy of language and binary simplifications, the work of George Lakoff (1996) has provided corresponding heuristics for describing different ways of imagining relationships in the United States. He claims that conservative ideology is based on a “root metaphor” of parental



relationship that idealises the “strict father”, or a figure that teaches children to be self-reliant and disciplined by offering clear sanctions. The respective liberal metaphor is that of the “nurturing parent”, who allows the child to pursue their own notion of happiness within the context of sufficient resources and open communication.

Correspondingly, conservative evangelicals may understand relational ministry as means to enforce biblical authority and to exert the agency of the church in society. Broadly, it is a way to building a social structure that includes hierarchies that work as the appropriate locus for development of individuality. As my ethnographic material below shows, social imagineries of this type were present at my fieldsite. I did, however, also encounter many who understood ministry as many liberals may understand relationships as a rebuilding of a traditional sense of local community, or extension of care in an egalitarian register. Hence, while they are united the banner of Christian relational theology, people involved in relational ministry may well bring different personal intuition to their work.

The use of personal influence as a means for creating change also fits the recent changes in organisational strategy of many larger churches. They had moved from an emphasis on the congregation as a cohesive unit sharing a doctrine, to the church as one entry point among many to social networks and opportunities of participation that believers could choose from. My fieldwork also took place during a period when many evangelical leaders as well as scholars of evangelicals perceived a renewed interest on social issues (Pally 2011; Steensland & Goff 2013) Church organisations were pushed to create the flexibility and novelty of ideas necessary for “providing active churchgoers with opportunities to increase their commitment and participation in church affairs” (Elisha 2011, p.42). Relational ministry appeared to be a way of escalating the demands placed on individuals, without creating much of a drain on church resources. Ministry of this form could frame the social lives of

participants in their entirety as occasion for missionary work, yet at the same time sending them out as individuals that function autonomously from church institutions.

Yet relational ministry is not only an artefact of the ideological setting of contemporary Texas, it was also a theologically motivated and meaningful practice that was a source of formative experiences. In the next section, I will briefly describe the vernacular theological notions that shape and find their expression in relational ministry, in particular the notion of “being incarnational”.

## **5.2 The theology of embodying grace**

Practically all of the churches in Austin that I worked with had chosen to include the amelioration of the social issues of the city as part of the stated vision of the church. Many sermons in the churches listed details about poverty, substance misuse, and failing families and schools, while instructing the congregation to understand themselves as agents of healing. They were directed particularly to the more deprived eastern side of the city. One way of intensifying one’s religious commitments was to volunteer in faith-based organisations active in this space, or even to relocate to the poorer neighbourhoods in order to be a direct presence there. It seems plausible to attribute the visibility of such themes in the city to a large population of university students and young people, who because of their stage in life could easily invest time and resources to social engagement. The ideological climate of the city was also more accepting of welfare provision than Texas at large (Swearingen 2010).

The role of building interpersonal relationships in various social initiatives was clearly articulated by one of my informants, Jake. He was the executive director of a network supported by

the Lifeway church that worked to connect church volunteers to social outreach initiatives. Such initiatives were typically organised not by churches themselves, but faith-based or “para-church” organisations that received funds and volunteers from a number of churches. The network, as well as evangelical churches more widely, did also co-operate with some ostensibly secular charities, such as the food banks in Austin. The only conditions were that the charities did not do anything that was clearly unbiblical, such as assistance in abortion, and that the work was about people, as opposed to, for instance, aiming to improve nature.

Within these broad criteria, Jake explained to me how they prioritised different opportunities for volunteering, by using a metaphor of getting from crawling to running. The mission of the network is, Jake explained, to facilitate relationships between the church and “the marginalised”. Handing out tins in a food bank was like crawling, since it was really only about exposure to the setting and the experience of volunteering. It wasn’t the most valuable work, according to Jake, as it only put volunteers in contact with people from the area only occasionally and superficially. Over time, however, they would progress towards running, or activities such as mentoring, which Jake understood as a form of work “where relationships are being built, that can be called discipling, or even adopting other people”.

In mentioning discipleship, Jake equated the connections built during contemporary ministry with the biblical model of relationships created by Jesus and his apostles. He went on to describe the mission of the network as facilitating these relationships, and then letting go, so that believers themselves can be incarnational, or “to be Christ and be his agent in the world we are interacting with”. To do this in a person-to-person relationship, he said, was going to be “the most convincing thing, and the way that Christ has decided to work, in order to point people to Christ”.

What exactly was it that Jake meant when he was talking about being incarnational? For evangelicals, doing altruistic acts is perceived as a duty, and some amount of theological deliberation as well as pastoral guidance is spent on trying to define the boundaries of this duty. Whole congregations were called to give not only to monetary donations, but to “sacrifice” the more personal resources of their own time, skills and presence. At the same time, ideally believers should not be following a dictate to serve the poor, but would do such deeds as the outcome and expression of one’s own transformation as a born-again believer. As an “incarnation”, the acts and presence of an evangelical ought to be an icon and demonstration of God’s agency.

Protestants believe that they have already attained their salvation in accepting God’s grace, regardless of the amount of good works that they perform. Evangelicals in particular are convinced of their status as part of the elect, because of their Pietist inheritance that allowed individuals to receive emotional confirmations of salvific grace, often in the form of dramatic conversion experiences. During my time in the field, I practically never encountered somebody questioning their status as part of the elect. Afterlife in itself was found as something of a curious subject that was not addressed often in discussion. The principal concern for those who were performing good deeds was to develop their own sanctity in the present life, as a faithful reaction to the grace that one had already received. This presented itself as a continuous self-project which was charted in the gradual scale of “maturity” or “growth in Christ”, which meant both the attainment of certain internal dispositions as well as deepening reliance on sharing in the agency of God. Work in the service of others in social initiatives was both an index of that maturity as well as the means of developing it, or “growing a heart for service”.

What did this look like in practice? During my fieldwork, I often tried to pry on the reasons why my informants were

working on social outreach, or to find out the norms or rules that structured their activities. The answers were often challenging for someone trained as an anthropologist to digest. People would often only say that they were doing things just because it felt right for them, or because they had happened to run into the right kind of person. From such incidental connections, I was struggling to abstract the rationalities or social norms I was trained to look for. Later on I started to think that the evangelicals were in fact not being excessively spontaneous, but narrating their lives according to a logic of action specific to them. They were in fact doing their best to follow brief glimpses of a larger plan that remained unknowable to them by necessity. It was difficult to figure out why people were doing things, because they thought they ultimately did not know either.

One informant that exemplified this way of approaching decisions was a woman in her early twenties that I will call Sarah. I had met Sarah when I personally participated in a volunteer ministry helping homeless young people, focusing on an area called “The Drag” in front of the University of Texas (more about the practicalities of this ministry below). Sarah wore her hair very short, which made her stand out from the typical female church volunteers, and walked in the warmth of Texas autumn with the typical student gear of burnt orange University of Texas t-shirts. There was something almost impressive in Sarah’s presence on The Drag: She knew by name practically all of the youth living on the street that we encountered, and greeted them with warm hugs. Especially with the women, a minority among the homeless, she would take her time sitting down a few steps away from the rest of the group, and engage in long and focused conversations.

Sarah had moved to Austin to study two years ago, from the small town of Franklin, Texas. As for many, her freshman year had been trying out the many options opened up by her new independence. In Franklin, Sarah had attended the Baptist church that her parents had belong to for decades. In Austin, she had

been a part of Lifeway with many of her classmates for about six months, but in the end found it “too focused on the show every Sunday”. She was also troubled by the church’s teaching on homosexuality as a sin, and said she was still working out her own views about it. Sarah had found an alternative both in a small church she now attended, similar to New Church Austin, that met in a local coffee shop. But she also started to see participation in social outreach and volunteering work as a way to work out her faith. She had switched her degree’s major from accounting to sociology, hoping that it would better support her aims of Christian service. She worked part-time for at a hotline for victims of domestic violence, and also volunteered at the ministry for homeless youth where I met her.

Sarah describes the way that she developed a passion for working with the homeless as a series of seemingly guided accidents. During her first summer in the city, she had been walking on a street close to campus, and had felt that she “just knew that I had to go and talk to this homeless man, called Pewey”. She said she had barely encountered people living on the streets before, and in her view they were “almost like animals”. And she ended up sitting for 2 hours in front of a CVS, a pharmacy chain store. She saw the way that other people looked at both of the two, and was confused by the fact that from the perspective of others something unusual or questionable was happening. She continued the conversation all the same. She says she “realised for the first time, that it’s literally a person that has feeling, and a past, and a future, and dreams for the future”. The joy she experienced from that conversation was so significant that she couldn’t explain it in any other way than “Jesus wanting her to have joys, so she would continue to do it”. She she continued to look for more opportunities to learn about Jesus and her own “heart for service”.

In this way, my informants did often attribute the concern they had for others, including the poor they were providing for, to sources external to their own volition. These were also sources

that could be called upon and whose transformative capacity could be cultivated. Numerous prayer sessions that I witnessed include pleas for “receiving a heart for the poor”, referring to “the heart” as the motivational core of the evangelical religious subject. Within such prayers, the source of one’s motivations was effectively placed apart from one’s self or one’s will, to an external source that also legitimated and purified the resulting actions. Having the right kind of heart was not only part of developing oneself as a religious person. It is also necessary in order for the charitable action of helping others to be performed in a potent and effective manner. Without a right heart, charitable activities were thought to become twisted by a person’s prideful tendencies or hunger for power. Many of the people that I interviewed saw these concerns of motivation as a demarcating line between secular or governmental activities and the relief that was given out in conjunction with the spirit. Only the latter could extend aid in a fruitful way, as it overcame the limitations of the fallen human character. This was one of the several sources of criticism of public provision of welfare.

In addition to motivation, god was seen to supplement human agency. Volunteering in various forms of social engagement activities were effectively an experiment for detecting one’s own spiritual gifts, or the capacities that had been given by God for meeting the needs of others. Again, even though Christians have the duty to respond to the poor, only some individuals have been endowed with the gifts that give them a particular capacity to do so. The validating sign for the existence of spiritual gift could be the discovery of a certain ease or skill or positive emotion in doing something. Particularly short-term mission trips are a part of evangelical culture that are framed with the expectations of producing such discoveries, reinforced in the preparatory training for the trip as well as reoccurring prayers throughout. The discovery of a new heart or spiritual gifts was one way in which people validated the purpose of their action, or attained a sense of

being part of the will of God, an overarching plan that they could only partially be aware of themselves.

In relying on the agency of God, people then understood themselves as embodiments of god's grace. As such their presence could, in the right circumstances, work to transmit grace, or to have other individuals accept it. Within the activity of social outreach, it was the the provision of material goods that often provided these circumstances.

### **5.3 The limits to giving**

The groups that were organising charitable activities were keen to involve volunteers at every stage of their operations. One of such faith-based charities that focused on helping young people who lived on the street organised volunteers to collected donations from food banks, and another group of volunteers worked in a church kitchen to make sandwiches out of them. More volunteers sourced a sufficient amount of other goods helpful for the homeless, including socks, water bottles and bibles in small print. Other participants came together to enclose a set of goods into sealable plastic bags in the right combination, before the last troop handed them out on the street. The end of every volunteer event was also an occasion for prayer, in which every participant reiterated one's hopes and values as they related to the work. Occasionally some groups, including the organisation working with youth on the street, would pray in a way that was not only for God but also directed at the goods that were to be given away. The organisation for youth on the street, for instance, stood around the bags they were to hand out and asked people to "pray over" them, placing their hands on the bags or pointing to their direction. Even though the people in the room then might not be the ones that do the work of handing out the bags and of being in continuous contact with the young



homeless, they could still be a part of those encounters by praying that the bags and their donation would have the desired effect.

The prayers over the bags stated hopes that they would not just be handed over, but that they would lead to conversations and genuine connections between people. Ministry would ideally consist not just of acts of goodwill, but also create encounters that had a transformative potential. The gifts were to bring about both material and spiritual changes. Worldly improvements, such as meeting the material needs of a person, were already a sign of God's grace, and valuable in itself. Yet only individual conversion could sustain such improvements. Though the spreading of the gospel was expected to be a socially and materially transformative practice, connected to utopian visions of harmonious society, missional practice could not do without the sharing of the gospel. The giving of material goods had to be accompanied with the right kind of speaking. The sharing the good news was a necessarily linguistic act.

Evangelicals understood acts of generosity as externalisations of the grace that they had received. Altruistic deeds, be it in the form of giving to their own churches, spontaneous responses to the people they encountered in their everyday life, or the investment into long-lasting relationships as part of outreach ministry, aimed to reach a level on which they would be sacrificial, radical or risky in character. Sometimes these acts were hoped to be occasions where the spirit is made visible, potentially in a spectacular way, and so make the Christian community distinctive and attractive. As a person that reflected, to a degree, God's character, the bodily presence of a believer would be a tangible objectification of him to another person. But often the hope was, as it was the case in my ethnographic snapshot of Stephen, that charity would simply provide occasions of interpersonal connectivity, or opportunities for long-term relationships. In such cases, the fact that the interaction included an exchange or transfer of resources was in fact downplayed.

Being charitable was hence a performance that realises the power of grace, but also brings about its transmission. The goods that are given away as gifts are a necessary material prop, but every successful performance culminates in words that make the meaning of the act explicit and have potency in the transmission of the gospel.

With this notion of what charity is, the provision of material goods often became a problem for evangelicals. One practical question to which socially engaged evangelicals had to find their own answer was what the appropriate limits to giving were. Since the evangelical posture towards meeting material needs was meant to be a response to grace, a gift received freely from God, giving was ideally to be done without conditions and expectation of return. At the same time, many thought that such an expression could be effective only if it was constrained by accountability that defined a reciprocal set of obligations. Even though Christian compassion came with no expectation for reciprocity, the hope was that it came with such evocative power as to be transformational. In practice, it was at the latest when the evangelicals began to speak using religious phrases and mentioning their motivations that these expectations were made explicit. For many charitable activities with strangers, it was a dilemma and source of awkwardness to decide when one's motivations would actually be made public.

The charity that compiled plastic bags for homeless people also encountered this issue. They did their work by walking a circle, usually on the same path, along two streets close to the university campus. This was where a particular demographic of the city's homeless, young people and travellers, would spend their time. A group of volunteers would drag the plastic bags behind them in a small cart, and walk until they encountered the people that they had come to serve. Many of the volunteers came to the street recurrently, and would joyously greet the homeless persons, often with warm hugs. The loose instructions given by the charity were not to offer any goods outright, but wait for the

people in need to request them. After exchanging news with their acquaintances, or other pleasantries with the occasional homeless youth the volunteers didn't know, no interaction would end without an offer of prayer for the other person. Often with hands on the shoulder of the recipient, the volunteers would bow their heads and ask God for help in the worries of the other person. This appeared like a way of speaking in a religious register without being confrontational - though many recipients of help did turn down the offer. The prayer worked as a way of effectively showing their own religious motivation in a recognisable form, without stating it explicitly.

For the charity in question, as for many other ministry operations, the hope was that the entirety of the interaction would lead to curiosity and an opening in which the full gospel with its evocative power could be shared. The evangelical gift is intended to be free, but it has its place within a wider network of beliefs and activities, and as such it has to be recognisable to be part of the symbolic economy of the faith community and speak its language. It aims to make its receiver realise that they were part of a larger spiritual economy that included a personal debt that could not be repaid. A common evangelical slogan states that "salvation is free, but it is not cheap" - it could be received without reciprocity, but it also implied a change in one's allegiances. Hence people engaged in evangelical charity were eventually expecting their activities to bring about personal reformation or in the least expressions of gratitude.

In many cases, there was no obvious solution between these competing ideals, between grace freely given and accountability. Another way in which my informants responded to the situation was by redefining the parameters of the exchange, in particular the nature of the gift given.

### **Redefining the gift**

The dilemma related to giving was felt particularly clearly by individuals who were in a position where they received requests frequently. This happened for instance persons working in the so-called benevolence ministries of churches, first in line to respond to direct pleas for help directed at churches. My fieldwork also followed closely the individuals that had chosen to relocate to inner-city neighbourhoods for purpose of ministry, and who aimed to build long-term relationships with their neighbours by virtue of their presence there. Yet even more peripherally involved individuals often had to find their own solutions and to learn what a way of giving was that was both productive and religiously expressive. This was especially true because ministerial activities often took place outside of clearly defined institutional and normative contexts that would have supplied clear rules and limits for interaction. Many faith-based charities offered situations, such as work behind the counter on a food bank, in which clearly defined roles and procedures were available. Yet for evangelical churches every member is called to ministry, and the context of the activity was potentially every domain of one's life. Even when some charities offered clearly framed situations in which volunteers could interact with those receiving aid, it was often seen as a sign of success if that interaction continued and extended into other contexts. The most devout church members occasionally also sought to multiply the occasions in which they could spontaneously come into contact with those in need, for instance by having bags of goods in their car, ready to be handed out to individuals begging by traffic lights.

In particular, the people who had chosen to live in a deprived neighbourhood for purposes of charity often went through a trajectory of differing interpretations about their role there. Many of my neighbours told me stories detailing their early enthusiasm in trying to build relationships and support their poorer neighbours, and how some of the attempts resulted in dramatic

failures. One household of young evangelical men had offered a place to stay for a person living on the streets, only to have to violently remove him from the premises some weeks after. Another informant had been giving financial assistance to a neighbour of his until he discovered the funds were being spent on drugs. Such stories reflect a culture within evangelical churches that is almost celebratory towards risk. Deeds that exposed oneself to potentially fraught moments were a measure of one's trust to God, and the act of making oneself vulnerable through excessive love echoed the example of Jesus.

One potential aspect of this trust too was to leave the consequences of giving to God. It was common for many urban missionaries to describe their own activities as “just sowing the seeds”, emphasising how ultimately their agency in improving the lives of others was only in mediating the power of God, who was ultimately responsible. Giving in an unexpected way or to complete strangers was particularly potent in allowing people to experience giving in this way, as it signalled going against the expectations of the social context. Disregarding the outcomes of one's action could be an expression of moving away from the worldly economy to “a form of sacrifice that uses exchange to demonstrate the presence of faith” (Coleman 2004, p.433).

It was, however, particularly difficult to maintain ministry as an action that was not goal-oriented within the context of a continuous, on-going relationship with a recipient of aid, as was often the case, or indeed the ideal, in relational ministry. The people who moved into inner-city neighbourhoods for purposes of missional living did so, after all, for the purpose of being a constant presence there. Over time the participants became increasingly aware of the complicated outcomes of their own interventions. Many realised that the kind of improvements they were hoping to see in the lives of the people they were helping occasionally depended on secular expertise and resources that they did not have, such as those of social workers or people

specialised in substance misuse. Others worried about their giving enabling unhealthy habits to continue.

One obvious way in which groups, such as the volunteers preparing bags of food and clothes, dealt with the issue was to provide more goods in-kind, instead of giving money or things with obvious exchange value. Such gifts were often deemed “safer” by informants, or more conducive to a healthy interaction with recipients since one did not have to address how the gift was being used.

Another strategy that these informants started following was to learn to express unconditionality in a more subtle manner. Two of my informants, for instance, started to leave the house without carrying any money on them whenever they went to places where they encounter begging or people they knew from their ministry. They appreciated the fact they could truthfully respond to requests for resources by saying that they simply could not help, effectively removing the question of material provision from the interaction. Instead they could offer, in the words of one informant, “a listening ear or a hug”. What they provided unconditionally, then, was a posture of compassion and openness to relationship. Many faith-based organisations informally also defined their objectives in a similar way. Staff from the carpentry workshop in which Stephen volunteered, for instance, told me how they had managed to only help one or two individuals to get accommodation or come to Christ. But they proudly stated that their success rate in loving every single one was 100 percent. In such cases, then, relationships became the substance in which generosity and the presence of grace were expressed.

Even an unconditional supply of intimacy and openness to relationship, however, could turn out to be problematic. This was illustrated by some of the experiences encountered by Sarah during her volunteering work. She understood the ministry’s message of expressing care and openness unconditionally to

others, and was able to easily embody it when volunteering. What she came to realise was that it was difficult for her to completely control the manner in which others, both the people helped by the ministry as well as Sarah's family, interpreted these gestures. While she was able to perform them with good will, their reception depended on the wider context. Sarah explained how, in the first months of her participation, she had been accused of being attracted to other women. "Girls on the street thought I was into that", she said. Sarah later thought it was a misunderstanding, "because outside of family relationships, people in society don't care about each other in the way that Jesus calls people to care for each other". People mistook Sarah's offer of intimacy as implying a relationship of a different category, and equated her offer of care with romantic love. When she first realised this, she felt embarrassed, and wanted to run away. The only thing that kept her returning was the example of the leader of the ministry, a man that Sarah thought exemplified an almost sacrificial persistence and choice to return to the group of homeless despite their occasional rejection. "I want to be ready to change things", Sarah said in our interview, "and just continue doing it."

It was just as well possible that a relationship of charitable care turned into actual romantic love, with consequences for all other relationships. After working for the ministry for about a year, Sarah began dating one of the men she had first met through work. John had been in prison for 8 months and after being released he had found a place to stay through another charity helping homeless people. John still had maintained some connections and friendships with his previous homeless community. According to Sarah, the time when she had started to see John more frequently had been a challenge:

I thought, everybody is going to think that I don't care for them now. It's hard because there just are some people that I can relate to better and they are in a different stage of their life. ... And I don't want anyone to think that I am playing

favourites. But I think Jesus does want specific relationships to grow deeper at certain points in life.

The immediate challenge for Sarah was how to express a universal relationship, that of unconditional giving, in a situation where she was developing a deeper, particular relationships with a single person. Sarah made it clear that she hadn't really found an answer to have to solve this problem. "It's complicated.. I don't always really know what I'm doing!" Yet her time participating in the ministry had made her more conscious of the need to complement her posture of care for others with a sensitivity of how her actions would be perceived.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the intimate relationship with a previously homeless person also troubled Sarah's family. "I made the mistake of mentioning about him being homeless, and they don't accept it. Or they don't understand it." They explicitly opposed her choice. Sarah also felt like it put her in a strange position with her cohort at university, where she constantly had to explain her actions to others. Sarah feels like these moments have given her a first-hand experience of the discrimination that homeless people give, as well as another chance to confirm her commitment to the ministry. "It's a real thing, and maybe I wouldn't know it without this", she said.

The recipients of the ministry may not have thought of the situation by judging its functioning relative to an ideal of Christian service. The situation was complicated by the fact that the homeless charity was distributing resources, and even though the recipients of their help had access to various other services, the ministry was still effectively in a position of power over them. It may well be that some of the recipients of help were bringing into the situation their previous of experiences of service work with a bureaucratic logic that grants every individual in the abstract equal access to resources, and a corresponding expectations of fairness. When speaking to the leader of the ministry, he explained to me that the homeless



people did not necessarily have a notion of “parallel relationships”, or the fact that extending more love to one individual was not at the expense of others. Hence the “clients”, as the leader called them, occasionally felt like the volunteers were abusing their position and resources when they developed more attentive relationships with particular individuals. As a consequence, he had maintained a policy of asking some volunteers, including Sarah, to temporarily stop working in the capacity of giving out food when they had developed more intensive, caring relationships to some of the homeless. It was, however, more common for participants in ministry to understand the on-going relationship between giver and recipient not as a problem, but rather as a way to overcome some of the dilemmas related to the provision of material goods.

## **5.4 Intimacy as an ethical resource**

It was an imperative of evangelical common sense that charitable giving was to take place in the context of the intimacy of an interpersonal relationship. As I have described above, relational ministry was the antidote to practice of welfare that understood the recipients only in terms of their material needs. Yet in my fieldwork I encountered a variety of notions about how exactly relationships were to mediate giving.

The evangelical men, who were residents in the household that I lived in as well, had become acquainted with young men from the neighbourhood or homeless people who occasionally stayed there. When these were in trouble with their parents or had no place to stay, they would occasionally sleep on the sofa or join us for dinner. The household had only vaguely and fleetingly defined rules about what was permissible for both members of the house as well as visitors. When the latter were found to overstay their welcome, they would be encouraged to do some

chores, such as cleaning up or cutting the grass as part of an exchange. A Mexican boy from the neighbour's house, who had befriended some of the men in the house, was welcome to stay but only if he would participate in washing the dishes and wiping surfaces. Another young man had been offered the sofa for a bit for the weekend. After some slightly heated conversations with people in the house, I could see him on the front yard with the lawnmower.

These were examples of imagining relationships of aid as a vehicle through which certain norms, those of hard work and self-reliance, could be talked about, demonstrated and enforced. Particularly at moments when demands for resources became pronounced, the moral logic described by Elisha as accountability was evident. A person could then be held responsible in exchange for the help that they receive also by reference to some of the normative categories present in evangelical culture. A continuous relationship and interpersonal intimacy was then instrumental for accountability. Knowledge about the priorities and actual material needs of the other were used to assess whether it would in fact be productive to meet requests for further assistance. The continuous face-to-face interactions also offered frequent opportunities for verbal challenges and reminders, as well as occasions to mentions of biblical themes. I occasionally saw, for instance, my evangelical neighbours talk to the Hispanic youth they had known for years, exhorting them to "become men", which involved working harder in order to take up employment, and to accept personal responsibility for oneself and one's family.

For some of my informants, the connection between a believer and a person in need was imagined in a paternalistic way, and a relationship of mutual trust and respect was a guarantee that the receiver of help could be held accountable. A relationship with a long history could provide means of influence for maintaining such accountability. A history of offering help

had the tendency of moving from the expression of free compassion to a measure of import in the other person's life.

In contrast, some cases displayed a different relational model, where the development of an interpersonal relationship was imagined as precisely a way to overcome the prescriptions of normative categories. This was partly evident in small details of how evangelicals used language in occasions of ministry. One issue evangelicals struggled with in their work, and one I've had to deal with in writing this chapter too, is what terminology to use when referring to the people they are reaching out to. Any label, be it "the homeless" or "clients", appeared to get in the way of appreciating the fullness of the other person. And many of my informants ended up calling the people they were helping "like family" or "friends". One of my informants, Sarah, who volunteered for the same homeless charity I have focused on in this chapter, described her experience by saying:

And it's not like I even do anything, I literally just go for two hours and talk to friends. And it's not even a big deal, it's just like, I don't even feel like I'm even working with homeless people. I'm just talking to people, and.. I want to see reconciliation.

"Friends" and "family" are certainly normative categories too, but they imply a situation where one is not acting out of a sense of duty, but because one is compelled by the history and particularity of one's relationship. They imply a connection in which one's responsibilities and hopes are overdetermined by the interaction with and knowledge of the other person, and the knowledge of the other person is sufficient to flexibly negotiate the limits to giving. Thomas Csordas describes the distinction in the following way: "When an American refers to a group of friends or co-workers as 'like a family,' the connotation is more likely to be that members are intimate and so close that one can 'tell them anything' than that they are loyal solely because an obligatory social relationship exists" (Csordas 1997, p.20).

What I took Sarah to mean was that for her the encounters were not different from accountability because of a different set of norms being relevant. The difference was not necessarily the contrast between reciprocity and the unconditionality of grace - even within family and friends, demands had to be made sometimes. It was rather that the conditions for the exchange unfolded through by following the flow of the relationship itself. An anthropological analogy for this process could be found in the description of functioning of families and kinship. The authors Finch and Mason, influenced by the work of Janet Carsten (2000), critique a view they ascribe to previous anthropology, of understanding kinship primarily as structure or system that works according to culturally relative principles. This doesn't mean that kinship works according to individual volition either. Rather, Finch and Mason claim that relationships "are created and sustained through contact, conversation and a common life over long periods of time" (Finch & Mason 2013, p.164). Given the complexities of familial life and diversity of relationships, there is a high degree of negotiation and flexibility concerning what the appropriate norms are in every case, and how the position of different people relative to these norms should be defined.

For Sarah, the open-endedness and flexibility of negotiation within relationships is also grounded in an impression of divine immanence. When I asked her how she had ended up working for the charity, she described it in the following way.

I just really found so much joy from these conversations, that I felt it cannot be explained in any other way than Jesus wanting me to have these joys. So she would continue to do it. ...

The Holy Spirit leads me to love these people, even when I think it's not possible to love them. And I don't know how, I really don't know what I'm doing, I don't know anything about being homeless like, I've been very privileged.

For her, then, the open-endedness of the process was a value in itself. She had found the volunteering activities to be powerful in determining her own commitments and convictions. This aspect of the process is I will try to describe using Michael Scott's notion of "onto-praxis".

### **Christian service as onto-praxis**

In this chapter I've outlined some practical issues related to evangelical charity, in particular the complicated position that the exchange of material goods has in it. Yet evangelicals experienced these challenges as more than just pragmatic issues to be overcome. In the stories that evangelicals told, their concrete problems were often framed as trials and tribulations, through which people learned to know the nature of God more or thought to have come closer to him. Hence these concrete practices and their awkward contradictions are not only the material through which an anthropologist can demonstrate the metaphysical commitments that people hold, but also means for my informants themselves to raise questions about the reality they inhabit, and work out their own position towards it. Since there was an analogical link between extending compassion to people in need and the work that God was doing in the world, the experiences of trying to express that love provided a tangible, accessible material for people to reflect on. Charity with its dilemmas is a space in which people can confront and work out a resolution to what could be called ontological problems. When people are finding the limits to their giving, they are also grappling with the problem of how exactly it is that they can partake in the being of God.

Evangelicals take it for granted that the creator not only sustains the world, but is active in it. There are a variety of eschatological ideas about how precisely the kingdom of God

will be established and the role of people in it, but there is little doubt that the conditions are in place for an ultimately inevitable restoration between creation and God. The kingdom is, as one central evangelical slogan has it, “now and not yet”. From the two constituents parts of this paradox, the now and the not yet, it is possible to read two ideal types for how evangelicals understand their participation in activities such as ministry, that for simplicity’s sake I will call the metonymic model and imitation (following Mayblin 2012). The metonymic model posits a continuity between God’s love and that which is expressed between people. Evangelicals on ministry are the hands and feet of Jesus, through which he makes himself manifest in the world in the present, and the unconditional expressions of grace can be effective in changing reality. The acts of giving transcend social norms and circumstance, and create an immanent presence of God. This is the concept I connected with the logic of action portrayed in the ethnographic example of Sarah. The second model, that of mere imitation, is more cynical from an evangelical’s point of view. It presumes an ontological distance between God and humanity, not only because based on the difference between the finite and infinite, but particularly due to the depravity of creation and man in sin. God is still active in the world, but only as one among several actors. The love of man may imitate that of God, but it can only reflect it, never entirely mirror it. The kingdom is coming, but it is not yet fully actualised, and as such the fallibility of human flesh and the opposition of the devil will taint any expression of divine love. What can unite people is as much the realisation of their mutual brokenness as it is the healing power of unconditional love. It was this second model of imitation that my informants gravitated towards when they talked about perceiving too much darkness in others for them to effectively be included as recipients of charity, or moments of humility where people realised the limitations of their own capacity to help.

While evangelicals were coming to terms with their own metaphysical commitments, their activities aimed at making others undergo similar kinds of thoughts. Evangelical charity is often accused of being individualist in character, and ignorant of structural effects on poverty as well as collective solutions. The sociologist Christian Smith identifies this tendency as the “personal influence strategy” (1998, p.187), which also Omri Elisha confirms in his ethnography, in finding that evangelicals move “as if by gravitational force” (2011, p.109) to thinking about dyadic relationships and demonstrating love through individual example. Based on my fieldwork, my impression was that accusations of reductive individualism could go both ways. In one of my chats with a local pastor, for instance, he told me about his participation in the activities of a secular conservation charity, planting and weeding on one of Austin’s greenbelts. He described the conviction of the environmentalists with admiration, but at the same time thought that they were not entirely conscious of what they were doing or their own motivations. From a purely worldly perspective, he thought, one could not understand the fundamental reasons that people were called to respond to nature in this way.

One framing of the pastor’s claims is to say that evangelicals perceive themselves to be acting within a milieu that includes many actors of a larger scale, and one’s individuality is dependent on maintaining a relationship with them. If one does not maintain a reliance on God, then it is worldly culture or satanic influences that come to define one’s individuality. Even though the practice of evangelical ministry often takes place through individual dyadic relationships, they are understood as effective only insofar as they propagate a different experience of the interface between individuals and this structure. The understanding of an individual in the least within theories of liberalism, and arguably American vernacular ideas more widely, assumes an individual with a degree of autonomy that stands in relation to an aggregate (Kusserow 2004). In contrast, it is

possible to understand conversion in terms of an acknowledgement of the necessity of ontological dependency to God, and an on-going mixing of one's being with divinity.

What the actual activity looks like or what the outcomes are that such ministry delivers are may well be unpredictable. Relational ministry is an approach in which physical and personal proximity is combined with social distance, and that seeks to mediate God through unmediated contact between people. In some cases, it is able to overcome tensions of hierarchy related to serving strangers, by mobilising the intuitions and skills linked to most intimate relationships as well as the attraction and outright need that many have for such relationships. Evangelical welfare agencies aim to create situations in which people respond to the experiences that they have relating to others as well as their increasing intimate knowledge of them. As such, the model of action is intentionally and inherently open-ended, creative and not easily instituted in rules or regulations. The inventive character of the practice arguably goes beyond the creativity that can be ascribed to any human practice as an emergent mixing of various cultural and material elements, as it is often described in anthropology (for instance following a practice-oriented or phenomenological account of human action as in Ortner 2006). The particular unpredictability of relational ministry stems from the fact that it includes an ingredient, the fullness of human personas, that it aims to bring out in a way that makes it irreducible to other present components and grants it its own agency.

I wish to claim that the experience of my informants could be made understandable using the concept of “onto-praxis” by Michael Scott (2007). He has developed the theoretical construct in his ethnography of the Arosi people in the Solomon Islands. Like many post-colonial Christianised cultures, the Arosi live in a situation that include the need to resolve between two orientations to the world, or what Scott calls ontologies. The pre-Christian “poly-ontology”, in which each matrilineage is seen to



consist of separate categories of being, stands in contrast to the mono-ontology of Christianity that posits a common source for the creation of humankind. In order to understand the local response to this incongruity in ontologies, Scott creates a theoretical construct that synthesises the notion of “mythopraxis” from Marshall Sahlins and Pierre Bourdieu’s notions of habitus and agency. He cites the work of Sahlins as one that shows how mythology is expressed and lived through within historical actions, such as the functioning of Hawaiian kinship system that reflects relations internal to their mythology. Drawing from Bourdieu, Scott suggests that such a relationship can exist between cosmological understandings of the world and what Bourdieu called habitus, or the structurally determined internalised dispositions of actors with varying positions within a field. Onto-praxis, then, is “the organization of praxis as the situational engagement of social agents with ontological categories—even to the point of sometimes transforming the terms of the deepest stratum of ontology” (Scott 2007, p.20). Without the theoretical language, what I take Scott to mean is that the quotidian problems and activities individuals face also allow them to both raise question and find answers that relate to the fundamental issues that Scott calls ontology. Onto-praxis in the case of my informants was that their experiences of interacting with their neighbours were a primary resource for making tangible and relatable their commitments to distinct notions of accessing the divine.

The many attempts at redemptive intimacy allow for a movement between practical theological positions. For the people that I encountered in my fieldwork, the accumulation of experiences appeared to move them towards an understanding of their relations as metaphors for God’s love, instead of its metonymic instances. After sustained contact with recipients of aid, for instance the people that I lived with in St John’s revised their practices of ministry to be more cautious. Yet the outcome of the experiences could well be ultimately unpredictable. After

all, the theological questions internal to American evangelicalism about the manner in which the church works to prepare worldly society for the saviour's return as well as practical and political questions about the church's involvement in social welfare have a long history and are likely to remain controversial.

Experiences from immediate contact in situations of Christian service are a potent resource for thinking about such themes. They are one of the dominant forms of evangelical onto-praxis for several reasons. Firstly, as explained above, the Christian faith gives a special status to both members of the church as well as human relationships as expressions of love. They have the potential of transformation by partaking in the being of God. The uncertainty about whether or not such a connection is possible is captured in the paradox of "now and not yet". The fundamental unpredictability of human relations and intimacy allows participants to relate to this paradox and portray both sides of it. For the ontological model that posits human contact as a site in which other-worldly agency can manifest itself, the creativity and surprise that is part of human interaction makes it a plausible location for the in-breaking of the divine. This is particularly the case since the framing of the interaction in relational ministry has been institutionalised and stabilised in a relatively weak way, and encourages experimentation from participants.

## **5.5 Conclusions**

This chapter explored the meaning of intimacy, especially in thinking about how it relates to local notions of authenticity. The local ideas could be compared to Giddens' notion of the pure relationship, described in the introduction, in which the conduct of a relationship is negotiated between partners without regard to social institutions or norms. In the same way, the relationships that evangelicals strived towards, both inside of the church

community and in social ministry, were to be ideally free of instrumentality or roles determined by the social context. Such an aim proved hard in particular in situations of social ministry, the chapter's focus. This was for many not an activity that was outright goal-oriented, yet it was difficult not to do social engagement without some hope of a certain kind of response from its recipients.

As a response, people engaged in ministry framed social situations in a manner that made them more conducive to authenticity and intimacy. They made sure that people would meet each other repeatedly, so that they would get to know each other in ways distinct from cues offered by the social situation. Also inversely, some moments, such as the handing out of food from trucks in unexpected locations, were made to be fleeting in character, with the hope that not putting people in the roles of giver and recipient of aid would create authentic interaction.

As the similarity to Giddens' argument shows, the connection of intimacy and authenticity here has wider cultural purchase. There were, however, specific ideals that evangelicals brought to bear in the intimate relationships that formed a part of their social ministry. They expected their participation to follow not from a sense of duty, but from being "incarnational", or inspired by their change in character that results from their life as Christians. My informant Sarah, for instance, found emotional confirmation to this effect. Moreover, following ideals of Christian service, participants aimed to make their intimacy not exclusive to particular people, but in principle open to everybody in need. This was understood to be a foundational criteria of intimacy as an expression of Christian care. Sarah, in particular, however had to come to realise that she could not completely control the manner in which her actions were received and interpreted by others, who were expecting similar gestures of intimacy to be defined by their exclusivity to certain groups or categories of people.

This chapter suggested a productive relation between two distinct dilemmas mentioned in the beginning of the conclusions. With the local ideal in mind, relationships are deemed authentic when they result from an interaction that is not distorted by concerns such as social expectations, norms or roles. The first section of the chapter uses an ethnographic narrative from a thanks-giving dinner to show how working towards such an ideal is a paradoxical affair, particularly for evangelicals. They have to design a setting so as to allow for spontaneous interaction, and the event is never free of the instrumental concerns that they bring to it. The second related dilemma is one of a cosmological nature. Evangelicals wished to be agents of God's redemption in the world, but the actuality of God's work in the present is only partly realised. The chapter discusses how this ambiguity of God's presence was experienced by focussing on one prevalent issue of social ministry, namely determining the limits to one's generosity of material goods. For this purpose, the intimate relationships that evangelicals attempted to build with the recipient of such aids were both a resource for managing these limits, but also escalated the need to find these limits. The suggested connection between the two dilemmas, those of an unmediated horizontal intimacy, and an unresolved eschatological verticality, is that of onto-praxis. The experiences of building relationships as part and parcel of social engagement was also from the perspectives of evangelicals the means by which they could make tangible and build personal commitments on the basic Christian ontological themes. Intimacy presents the means for thinking of oneself as either the extension of God's agency in the world in a concrete sense, or a mere metaphorical expression of his love in the world.

The chapter points to an inherent flexibility or ambiguity in the use of intimacy in evangelical normative practice. Evangelical participants in relational ministry sometimes encouraged recipients to conform to evangelical norms, like those of "biblical masculinity". In such cases the intimate

knowledge of others helped maintain accountability, as continuous interaction made possible verbal challenges and reminders, and it made possible to assess whether material provision was productive for achieving the norms in question. In contrast, the development of intimate relationships could also be used in cases where the uniqueness of relationships was a way to overcome the prescriptions of normative categories. For some of my informants, for instance, the knowledge they had accumulated about another person was sufficient for avoiding labels such as “the homeless”. They felt their aid not to be motivated by a sense of duty but the history and particularity internal to the relationship.

## 6 Devotional reading

In the summer of my fieldwork, I had the opportunity to participate in the Christian men's camp of Lifeway church, in a remote camp ground of the Texan Hill Country's arid landscape. In between sermons and worship music, there were breaks that offered a choice between rather manly outdoors activities or breakout sessions with practical topics. Eager for some clear statements that I could fill my notebooks with, I decided to pass mountain biking and clay shooting, and enrolled instead on a discussion. A session titled "Being good a steward of your time" seemed appropriate. The session was led by a young pastor of the church who was evidently keen to capture the attention of his audience, middle aged men in shorts and baseball caps, with a performance that was unusual by church standards. He carried a sizeable glass jar onto the stage, and encouraged the audience to think of it as the time contained in one single day. Next, he poured sand to make a thick layer on the bottom of the jar, stating that the sand represents the time sinks of life, such as getting ready for work, eating, and so forth. The last props he used were rocks, representing the greatest priorities of life, such as a loving relationship to your family and giving time to God through reading the Bible and prayer. One might already guess how this object lesson concluded. The rocks could not fit the jar when the sand was in the bottom. It was only when the rocks were first placed in the jar that the sand could be poured into it, and all the elements would fit. To be a steward of your time, the pastor said, was to schedule "God time", and be relaxed about the rest, "since God has promised that these things will be added to you".

This was only one of numerous ways in which churches described private devotional activities. American Christians typically referred to time set apart for devotional activities as

“quiet time”, solitary periods during which one’s focus was given solely to correspondence to God in the form of reading, prayer and worship. For Protestants these devotional forms are more personal and varied than for many Christian groups that prescribe specific activities such as the use of prayer beads. As an addition to reading, the activity was most consistently encouraged in my fieldsite was journaling, and many made use of devotional publications, published in a format that makes sequential reading easy. The book considered locally to be a classic in this genre was Oswald Chambers’ *My Utmost for His Highest*, originally published in 1924, that contained 365 short inspirational essays. A common instruction, voiced also by the young Lifeway pastor, was to recurrently and regularly attend to some translation of the scriptures directly, with somebody else’s interpretation and commentary at most aiding contact with the original text but not replacing it. This reading during quiet time was to take place alone, though often within the context of a reading plan set collectively by one’s church small group and with the aim of discussion in the group. Quiet time was preferably the first thing of one’s day. Just as rites of sacrifice commonly require “wholeness and completeness” (Douglas 1966), the presenting of the first and purest of a type, ideally the earliest moments of one’s day should be dedicated to devotion. This was also analogical to tithing a portion of one’s money, in which the first transaction (notably before paying tax) in one’s account was to be to the church.

The effects of reading, and devotional activities more widely, were indeed seen as a method for “spiritual growth”, a metaphor for increasing piety that suggested the growth of one’s spiritual being could be analogical to the maturation of oneself as a corporeal and social person. Yet in the reformed theology that the churches followed recognised reading the scriptures as one of the “means of grace”. This meant that it was a means through which the sanctification of believers took place, while crucially placing the agency for effecting this personal change to divine forces.

The scriptures are a means through which God applies grace to his church. This meant that any efficacy that the acts would have could be independent of the intentions or efforts of the person who immediately undertook them. As a consequence, the ethical significance of personal discipline (Foster 2009), or any deepening commitment to devotion was on ambiguous grounds. As the young pastor of Lifeway was urging the men in his audience for a more diligent dedication of their time, he was also saying that the consequences of their choices, in terms of spiritual development, were not in their hands. This chapter will follow the consequences of this theological and practical arrangement in the normative practice of my informants.

In the previous chapters, I have discussed evangelical practices of forming pious selves in terms of their internal logic, but also by trying to describe their practical outcomes. It was not uncommon for these outcomes to include ambivalence, guilt or a sense of outright failure. This chapter develops this theme of moral shortfall by examining how it relates to evangelical notions of grace. Anthropological writing has already acknowledged the complexity of notions of grace and the “contradictions arising between its various senses” (Pitt-Rivers 1992, p.425), and the chapter tries to contain the nuances of the variety in usage. It begins with an examination of how the idea of grace features as a part of devotional reading of the Bible. One of the challenges of this practice is the tension between the goals of trying to attain a better hermeneutic understanding of the scriptures, while also using the text as a site for developing a relationship with the divine that is characterised by shared agency and a lack of human effort - being moved by grace. The second part of the chapter deals with grace as a quality of relationships, that evangelicals are encouraged to also extend to themselves, as a response to their potential ethical shortcomings. The chapter hence shows that the local notion of grace both escalates expectations for self-cultivation in a way that threatens their coherence, while also



forming a basis for people attempting to come to terms with their own failures.

## **6.1 Reading as means of grace**

When the pastor at the Christian men's camp was encouraging the male audience to read daily, what did they imagine would happen in the event of reading? The comparison of semiotic ideologies and an ethnographic understanding of the experience of reading have been frequent topics in the anthropology of Christianity (e.g. Bielo 2009; Crapanzano 2000; Malley 2004). In the introductory chapter of the thesis I have already pointed to ethnographic work on American evangelicals that indicate textual practices can blend or alternate between different semiotic ideologies. The Bible can be seen, following the literalist interpretation of the Bible, as unchanging and sufficient revelation, but also as something that displays new relevance to each believer aided by God's charismas.

This tendency for complexity in reading practice was present in my fieldsite as well. In common use of language, people would discuss questions based on what the Bible "says" or "tells us", implying that there is a single definite answer for in the least a subset of moral questions. Churches frequently instructed people on what the correct manner of reading required. The pastor of Austin New Church confided to a group of men once that he was afraid that few in the church really had the capacity to read the Bible properly. To do so required interpretative capacities that could broadly be called rational: the ability to take into account the historical context, the genre of the text, to work comparatively with several translations, and so forth. There was, however, not a clear consensus on what the appropriate rationality for reading was. Some pastors proposed a Christ-centric heuristic for reading, whereby even the Old Testament

was read as implicit statements about the character of Jesus. At other times, a moralistic framework was suggested, where every biblical passage was read as a normative statement, possibly using typological reasoning that allowed narratives to be instructive by being exemplary (Harding 2000).

Within evangelical folk theory of reading, it was just as plausible to understand engagement with biblical texts not as interpretation, but as something that allowed a personal, dyadic connection with the divine. The supernatural grace of God grants an individual person a unique perspective into the text and makes it relevant for that person. This is what Jon Bialecki called the “dialogical” way of understanding Bible, as opposed to that of “dissemination”, in which the meaning and sense of the text is the same for all of its recipients (Bialecki 2009). As I have described, reading often took place on moments that were framed as devotion, moments specifically addressed to God. The culture of “quiet time” includes the production of an emotional state of calm and gratitude. Reading in this context was often described in relational terms, as something that not only develops one’s relation to the divine but as a privileged site for experiencing it. As happens during the prayers that open sermons, I often saw people pray to God for power to receive the word before opening their Bibles. The text itself was described in animist terms, as something that is “alive” or “speaks”.

For my evangelical informants, contact with the scriptures was a valuable thing in and by itself. It was part of understanding and expressing the glory of God, and as such in the core of what worldly existence was about. Yet the power of God’s word was also validated and demonstrated by its effect on people’s character and their dispositions in everyday life. This was a further sense in which the engagement with the Bible was to overcome mere understanding and assent to propositions. My informants sought to be “filled” with the bible and to embody it. This was often described with metaphors of containers, also found in several passages of the Bible, claiming that people are

like “vessels” or “a cup”. As containers, the theory went, people would always be filled with something, and it was preferable to let the scriptures be one’s determining influence. Narratives of this type point to the complicated and conflicted significance of quotidian and secular life for Protestantism. It is both the scene in which the power of one’s faith is fulfilled and demonstrated. At the same time, it is a source of potentially corrupting influences, other things that could “fill” a person’s character. The Bible was understood as a channel for God’s grace that could substitute for the negative effects of other influences in personal lives.

One of my informants who articulated most clearly what this liveliness meant for him was Mark. I had met Mark initially when I had been looking for a temporary place to stay in my initial months in Austin. Though I didn’t choose to live in his house, ultimately too far in the North to be convenient for me, we got along well immediately. Mark was analytical and articulate, and enjoyed responding to a barrage of questions from me. He had a bachelor’s degree in history and archeology from a small, conservative faith-based university in his home state Ohio, but most of the theological ideas he held he had taught himself, in response to problems he had encountered. And most of the issues he was still trying to resolve seemed to relate to his period of eight years working as a missionary in Turkey, a time that in his own words had been a “painful failure”. The Christian community that he was part of in the Middle Eastern country failed to support each other, according to Mark, resulting in both burnouts and a failure of their missionary goals. It was for the relatively lucrative job market that Mark had come to Austin, where he had found a wide variety of temporary jobs, including selling vacuum cleaners and working as a product manager in a tech company. He was still hoping to return to Turkey one day, now with a community of believers that trained to attend to each other with grace before going. Indeed in Austin, I occasionally met him in the midst of his proselytising, in a Starbucks by the

university campus, a place that he referred to as “the mother lode” for meeting Turkish students in Austin.

He referred to himself a “Calvinist charismatic”, a combination of terms that would usually be seen as opposed to each other. Mark had ended up holding this theological position after a series of events in which the right relationship to the scriptures was of great practical significance. For him it referred to finding a kind of balance between his dedication to the scriptures, a traditionally Calvinist orientation, and the charismatic emphasis on personal experience. This was a balance that he felt an honest reading of the Bible itself prescribed. He thought the scriptures were full of God’s answers to the needs of his followers, and people with moral issues should go to the Bible first. At the same time, he felt that “the word without experiencing God is void. If you don't experience god, there must be something wrong with you.” During his time as a missionary in Turkey, a young American had come to work as an intern for him. Mark soon realised that the newcomer was not ready to help in his ministry, and their relationship quickly turned into an intimate mentorship. Mark found that the newcomer had devotional habits that were not helping. He was reading the Bible for an hour every day, but doing it “like a robot, like a machine”, without being “emotionally engaged to God”. This was, in Mark’s view, a common and counterproductive effect of growing up in the American church. In Mark’s view, the church’s prescription of reading as a method for becoming a better Christian only encouraged a false, mechanical relationship to the scriptures. “If you are reading the bible just to read the bible, it's not going to help, it's not going to help you”, Mark said. In order to be a vehicle of God’s grace, the readers had to be truly moved by the primary form of God’s revelation, the scriptures.

In practice, the ways that my informants established a personal, experiential connection with the scriptures was by establishing links of relevance and by affective confirmation. The former, also described for instance by Jon Bialecki in the form of

“prophetic scripture” (Bialecki 2009), was an associative form of reasoning whereby the real sense of a read passage is only determined in light of later quotidian events. My informants often described how part of the readings from their “quiet time” periods or sermons would initially be opaque to them and yet remain in their thoughts for a while. At some later point time, possibly days away, they would encounter some event with which the passage would correspond or appear appropriate for. One case of such prophetic scripture was described in chapter 4, in relation to the notion of “moral breakdowns”.

At other times, the index of a personal connection to scriptures was only the affective or bodily reaction to it. One personal event of great emotional power that almost every evangelical had gone through, and that hence many compared their experiences of activities of piety to, was the event of their conversion. Many would remember having an unusual interest for the scriptures then and a sense of fulfilment from improving their understanding with it. While the church rarely created expectations that such a relation to the scriptures should be expected to last, I often heard people talk about it in a nostalgic way, and express regret that they no longer had the same experiential response to the holy texts. Moments of conversion and early participation in religious activity were often like the affective paradigm, the “peak experience”, to which the intensity of later religious life was compared. It is this sense of shortcoming, among others, and the part that they play in ethical practice, that the rest of the chapter turns to.

### **The conditions for effective reading**

Both Lifeway and New Church Austin taught their congregants that devoting one’s time and reading the scriptures were practically a necessity for a committed Christian. This duty-

like framing lent a utilitarian edge to people's relationship to time. There was a degree of guilt about the moments of the day that were spent simply relaxing, that could always have been substituted for more edifying activities. Many tried to schedule a certain amount of time that they could dedicate specifically for reading in the mornings. For my informants, the impetus was not only for a rational reorganisation of their day, but also towards meeting expected minimum standards of daily devotion, against which they could understand their performance on whole. The pastor of New Church Austin, for example, stated that as a rule of thumb, a good day dedicated to God ought to include prayer, worship and reading scriptures, with about 20 minutes dedicated to each.

Since daily devotions were largely private activities, I felt like I got the most reliable picture of how they were performed and how people felt about them by talking to the people that I shared a house with. When I first arrived into the house, I was inquisitive about the routines and collective activities in the household. I was given a detailed overview of the cleaning rota, but questions about private religious pursuits were answered only cursorily. I later realised that it was a sensitive topic. Many of the people living there felt like they could have done more. At the same time one of the founding ideas of the household had been to create an environment of mutual support and accountability towards such practices. Hence the personal limitations also touched on the justification for the whole arrangement of living. The inhabitants had found some kind of balance in an accepting silence about each other's intensity of dedication.

All the same, in the early hours of weekday mornings several people who had gotten up early to pray and to read had to share the scarce common spaces that was available. In these moments I got to observe the little tricks that were employed in order to build an environment where people could attend to the scriptures in an appropriate way. The house had a dedicated "prayer room", where another person might sit in privacy behind a closed door,

and where occasionally other people from the neighbourhood would arrive to start the morning together in prayer. Another person who shared a bedroom with others upstairs would often sit on the couches of the living room, occasionally wearing protective ear muffs to block out the sound of others preparing breakfast close-by. Sometimes fans would be turned on in the living room to create additional white noise so that people would not disturb each other. This was partly to avoid waking the people who might still be sleeping in the bedrooms, but also to maintain a sense of privacy between inhabitants. After only a few days there, I noticed an almost monastic unspoken expectation of less eye contact and talk between inhabitants in the mornings.

These practical steps taken in the were of course peculiar consequences of our shared living situation, but they made obvious the expectations for a successful performance of devotion more widely. Piety in this form required a disciplining of one's attention, that took place through one's momentary social isolation and a regular dedication of one's time to god. The focus is less on the development of a well-defined comprehensive bodily position, such as the "receive position" documented by Coleman in charismatic churches, the bodily alignment appropriate for the internalisation of the holy word for taking in the holy word (Coleman 2000, p.135). Reading required above all privacy and sustained attention.

The devotional reading of the Bible was, however, not something that could be done in a mechanical, disciplined manner. There were subtle expectations associated both with the experience of going through the practice as well as its consequences. The performance of means of grace was a complicated expression of agency. They were simultaneously meant to be an expression and celebration of the faith that a person already attained, as well as the means for developing one's faith. Reading was understood as an event in which one would objectify and surveil the worldly aspect of one's existence, that included both one's "the flesh" as well as mental facilities.

And a successful performance of the devotion was understood as one one in which these recalcitrant worldly aspects of one's personhood were progressively placed under the control of the spiritual self that was conjoined with the agency of God. Hence the performance of reading as a means of grace presented a unique form of challenge. It was a striving, a sacrificial offering of one's time, but when successful it should be experienced as a lifting of one's burden, as the part of one's self that made such effort difficult was weakened. Reading was hence connected to a particular experiential aesthetic of conquering of resistance and a spontaneous affective confirmation. And reaching this kind of experience was for my informants at least as much a concern than merely maintaining a structured use of time for a progressive understanding of the Bible. After all, a declining enthusiasm for the Bible was not only a detail about one's personality, it was read as an index for the robustness of one's faith altogether.

Even though my analysis is otherwise quite different, an analogy can be made with Slavoj Žižek's description of the logic of contemporary morality. In Žižek's account, in contemporary permissive society, ideology works not by way of prohibition and definition of duties. Instead, its injunctions are equivalent to a father who would state: "You know how much your grandmother would love to see you. But do go and visit her only if you really want to." (Žižek 1999) The catch should be obvious, as the statement contains not only an implicit order but also the expectation that the child should enjoy the visit. The price paid for a permissive logic in which subjects are supposedly free to pursue their own enjoyments without constraining duties, is that the guilt and fear of not attaining pleasure turns into an implicit duty. The manner in which people dealt with this tension is detailed in the next section.

### **Experiencing shared agency**



In the church small group discussions that I participated in one common topic was guilt about one's lack of devotional activities or worries that one was not executing them right. I will give an illustrate the variety of opinions with a series of quotes from different individuals in one group. This group that I frequented consisted almost exclusively of older couples that were empty nesters. They had been meeting together for a couple of years, and I appreciated the discussion above all because they were able and had the courage to question typical evangelical narratives based on their personal experiences. When speaking about devotional activities, the group pondered for a long while about their motivations for attending to the scriptures. They worried about the fact that they were doing in an instrumental way, in order to get "rewards" or to meet their own personal needs.

One older man in the group disputed such instrumentality. He described how he got up in the very early hours to read and pray, and felt he could do it "because I love the lord, and I have a relationship with him". He was able to maintain an impression of being a "recipient" of God's actions, and he felt like the act was internally motivated, as valuable in itself. In the group's conversation, these claims were met with some doubts. A woman in the group often sat alone in the mornings and felt disparaged. She would just sit in the family's living room by herself, and before reading she had to start with a prayer: "can you (God) even make me desire to do this right now". Another man in the group said he felt like he was reading the Bible because of a "causative relationship". Even when he didn't feel like it, he was reading in order to reorient himself, "because I know I will receive a blessing, and God will begin to reorient my thought life and my spirit". His impression was that the Bible included promises about the use of means of grace, expressed in clear form of statements of almost the "if, then" logical form. Since the

scriptures had such promises, there could be nothing wrong in reading the Bible and expecting blessings.

The last woman to comment on the matter quoted a sentence, “God tells me the truth when I read his word”, to illustrate her understanding. She claimed that the meaning of the sentence would be wrong if she would reverse its constituent parts. “When I read his word, God tells me the truth” would place the locus of initiative on the part of the reader. She preferred the first part, in which her act of reading was merely the context in which God took the initiative. For the woman in question, the fact that it was God who was in control at those moments was a relief. She was able to account for the fact that she was struggling to do it, simply by the fact that it was not to be expected that her flesh would be inclined towards the word. She depended on God for her capacity in the effort, and her failure merely marked her fallen state.

The local theories of agency clearly had the capacity to account for failure, and even provided some relief for cases where even the born-again could not attain standards of piety. Yet there was reason to think that the persistence of such a state easily proved frustrating. Such experiences wouldn’t often be voiced even in the relatively private settings such as church small groups, but I got an impression of them from people that I had a longer relationship with.

One of the people in the house I shared, whom I will call Tony, was very conscious of the fact he was unable to make reading play an appropriate part in his life. Tony was trained as an electric engineer and now working at a company producing computer hardware in Austin. What he particularly appreciated about living in St John’s Tony was that it was a good setting for his practical projects, such as a chicken coop and hydroponic garden in the back yard. On any typical day, Tony would immerse himself in these projects having come home from work,

and follow up any social occasions that would spontaneously arise.

Despite being highly educated, reading wasn't something he did for pleasure. Instead of a conceptual sophistication, Tony seemed to seek to develop the expression of his faith in a relational manner, for instance in developing friendship with a homeless couple he was mentoring. All the same, Tony had committed to follow the collective Bible reading schedule of the Lifeway church, that allowed participants to go through the canonical scriptures in a common rhythm within a year. He had tried a number of tricks in order to make his devotions more regular. He had set up several different alarm clocks to go off in the morning, one of them in the hallway so that he knew he would have to get up to stop it from starting and waking up others in the house. At times he felt too tired to attend to the text, and allowed himself to spend the 30 minutes allocated for reading mostly in prayer. For later in the day, he had said further alarms on his phone as reminders for setting his mind right. Late in the morning, he should remember to thank god for his steadfast love, and in the evening an alarm went off reminding him to be grateful for his great patience.

Tony thought such "tricks" were not ideal. He cited a principle he had heard from a Lifeway sermon, that instructed people not to "try more", but instead to "submit more". It referred to a distinction commonly made in evangelical popular devotional guidebooks, stating the futility of attempting to perfect oneself without acknowledging one's dependency on divine assistance. Tony also felt that the environment of St John's had made his devotional practices harder. It was not just that he was busy, but that there were many things around him that he had to react to. The homeless couple he was mentoring might call him with some need, or people could be spending time in the house unexpectedly. Within the shared space of the household, it was difficult for him to keep up with a planned schedule.

In the least, Tony said, when he was reading the Bible he did it because he was enjoying it. He found it a true benefit to “start the day with the truth”, which stood in clear opposition to everything that took place in the rest of the day. He wondered out a loud, was he making a call upon the Lord in order to be strengthened, or did the relationship that he already has with the Lord work in his life, hence making him stronger? Tony confessed that he did not know what happened on those moments. It was impossible for him to narrate his devotional experiences using the basic evangelical narrative of a spiritual overcoming of his flesh. Instead he accepted the basic ambiguity that was related to the distribution of agency in moments of devotion, and probed the practical limits of spontaneity and effort in sustaining the practice.

These ethnographic anecdotes suggest that there is a clear precarity in Bible reading as an ethical technique. Attending to the holy word was expected to both reinforce one’s religious character, as well as being as being an index of the status of one’s faith. The instability of the experience of piety can in part be understood based on the position of language in the local evangelical culture. Practices of reading differ from Christian religious practices that include some very tangible experiential signs of the fact that the Holy Spirit dwells in the person. Such visible markers that are often institutionally authorised and emotionally persuasive include speaking in tongues, corporate singing and the rituals such as the Eucharist. These practices display a power to dispel doubt and draw clear boundaries around those that constitute the body of Christ, to demonstrate “their autonomous force and their production of tangible results” (Coleman 2006). Instead, American conservative evangelical churches define their approach to the scriptures in opposition to the emotive ways of being in touch with the spirits, particularly against the expressive charisma of Pentecostals. Next we turn to a further exposition on why the practice of attending to written

language is an unstable way to provide experiences of participating in God's grace.

### **Why language fails to transmit grace**

Even while the appropriate form of reading is defined, as explained above, as a competent hermeneutic process, evangelicals also acknowledge reading as an embodied form. Reading needs to be done at regular intervals in order to have the right kind of relation to other quotidian life and performed in appropriate social and sensorial isolation, and so forth. There is a particular aesthetic or mood that devotional moments often attempt to produce, one of an atmosphere of gratitude and reverence. Many evangelicals also expect an embodied affective confirmation of their acts of reading, as Tony did in his hope to be able to read without personal effort and exertion. Hence the practices of reading are not exactly defined by a "fantasy of immediacy" (Engelke 2010a), or a semiotic ideology in which the presence of the divine would be coded through the appearance of an absence or irrelevance of the durable materiality. There is a subtle bodily aspect to the appropriate execution of reading.

Many strands of Western semiotic analysis are premised on a distinction between ideas and things, and the prioritisation of the former. Ferdinand de Saussure is the canonised scape goat for articulating these priorities, while anthropologists such as Webb Keane have argued that such ideas stem from wider cultural shifts defined by Protestant movements such as Calvinism (Keane 2003; Keane 2007). At the same time, many philosophers that do take the material substrate of human experience and semiotic practice seriously have found that language, and especially its written form, obstructs the experience of the conditions of its own working. Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes

his experience of reading Descartes's *Second Meditation* in the following way:

The wonderful thing about language is that it promotes its own oblivion: my eyes follow the lines on the paper, and from the moment I am caught up in their meaning, I lose sight of them. The paper, the letters on it, my eyes and body are there only as the minimum setting of some invisible operation. Expression fades out before what is expressed, and this is why its mediating role may pass unnoticed, and why Descartes nowhere mentions it.

Merleau-Ponty claims that in describing the “verbal cogito” Descartes is following to an extreme thought that is mediated by language, as opposed to attention to the bodily reality of the reception of language. The *Meditations* took this bias so far that it led, in the book's narrative, Descartes to doubt the reality of his own material existence. Reading is inevitably a material practice that involves a particular posture, attending to a block of text with the movement of one's eyes, and so forth. Yet the attention largely concentrates on the writing, that according to Bourdieu “tears practice and discourse out of the flow of time” (Bourdieu 1990, p.261), rather than the embodied conditions for its comprehension. Matthew Engelke expresses a similar point by applying the metaphor of “the humility of objects” (Engelke 2007 p. 31 referring D. Miller 1987). The artefact of the written word has the quality of humility, in that it tends to hide its own significance in making the process of signification possible.

This aspect of the functioning of written language may be what creates the propensity for frustration in evangelical devotional reading. As I explained above, evangelical theology emphasises that the words and their hermeneutic apprehension are a way in which God has reveals himself and allows the church to have a relationship with him. Yet many crave a form of interaction with the divine that goes beyond this. They expect that the reading of the scriptures will give the relationship to

divinity also an experiential aspect, that is embodied in a passionate response and that will help people overcome uncertainties related to their faith. According to Anna Strhan (2015, p.214), the written word however has the tendency to seem “less real” than more tangible forms of religious experience, such as the heightened emotional states of charismatic practice. The discipline and patience that a dedication to reading requires also fits poorly, according to Strhan, to the contemporary emotional culture that tends to offer both quick rewards and intense experiences. For this purpose, the practice of private reading, which can easily push “the body below the threshold of consciousness” (Morgan 2012), offers only a precarious solution.

The faith of my informants hence supplied them with means of personal self-perfection that had a clear potential for frustration and failure. Yet in addition to the ethical means, Christianity also offered an interpretation for those very shortcomings and how a believer should respond to them. This is addressed by the next section that deals with the notion of grace and the practice of having grace for oneself.

## **6.2 Grace as a relation**

In his seminal ethnographic study of the Pentecostal conversion of Papua New Guinean indigenous people, Joel Robbins describes the moral tension the Urapmin experience between the traditional, communal norms and Protestant ethical individualism (Robbins 2004). This tension results in “moral torment” and the recently converted thinking of themselves as inevitably sinful people. The values of their previous, traditional way of life, in which the proliferation and commitment to relationships was central, are now deemed sinful. The narrative of historical change that contemporary young evangelicals

subscribe to is different. They distance themselves from the growing individualism both within worldly society as well as what they imagine to be the established Christian church in America, and instead seek to re-establish the cultural relevance of Christianity that is on defensive. While in some respects the direction of the ethical self-fashioning is opposite, what both the Urapmin and Austin evangelicals share is an acute sense of their own shortcoming in approaching their ethical ideals.

This, it could be argued, is not only a feature of the ambiguous relation that the Protestant faith has to quotidian life, but also on a general level a common feature of religious life. James Laidlaw (Laidlaw 2014), for instance, has criticised some approaches to the anthropology of ethics for assuming that ethical systems have some universal telos, such as existential comfort or human excellence. He points out that many religious traditions encourage their followers to build an awareness of ethical shortcomings, and coming to terms with the certainty of ethical shortcoming is itself developed as an ideal. “[T]he deliberate cultivation of such a sense, as a precondition for ethical insight or sensitivity.” (ibid, p. 175). A sense of comfort in one’s position, or an impression of complete mastery over one’s moral being can be read simply as “obtuseness and insensibility” (ibid, p. 175). This section deals with how this cultivation of knowledge of one’s own limitations is part of contemporary evangelical practice. It focuses in particular on the local notion of grace, which simultaneously is the divine force that allows people to overcome their limited human nature, but also defines a normative stance that people should take towards their personal deficiencies.

In Christian thought grace is the mercy shown by God towards humanity and the world that grants favour in this world as well as a share in eternal life. The notion is central to vast amounts of theology as well as great theological disputes. The churches that I based my work in, Lifeway Austin and New Church Austin, took a Calvinist position in their sermon and



teaching. Lifeway taught in the introductory classes for new members the principles of “irresistible grace”. New Church Austin in its teachings also took a Calvinist stance, though it classified the nature of grace and salvation as an “open hand issue”, that was on the conscience of individual members.

For the purposes of my ethnographic project, however, what matters was how these theological notions were mobilised in mundane discourse and practices of caring for the self. In this respect, my informants were informed by the numerous and partly conflicting ideas circulating in wider evangelical culture as much as they followed the theological patriarchs. Grace was the cosmological relation between divinity and humanity that was the basis for salvation, but its usage was not limited to this. Evangelicals speak of “having grace”, but don’t understand it in the same way as certain Catholics do, as the recurrently reinforced state of having been redeemed of sin by sacraments such as confession. Neither is grace used in a way that would approximate its colloquial meaning, that of an elegance of movement, which Julian Pitt-Rivers claims is analogical to divine grace because of its ultimately inexplicable origin (Pitt-Rivers 1992).

One way in which I occasionally heard my informants use the term was to label themselves in a self-deprecating way as “extra grace required”. This did not mean that they required divine justification of greater proportions. The statement was often sometimes made in front of one’s small group, or speaking of another participant in the small group, to signal that particular forgiveness and patience was needed within the group’s relations of care. Similarly, people spoke about “having grace for” another person or for oneself, which meant giving pardon and support regardless of the merit of the person, or indeed oneself. The local understanding of grace was hence close to its cognate term “gratuity”, in the sense of a rejection of expectations of reciprocity within relations.

Particularly in chapter 5 I described the practical consequences of applying the idiom of being graceful in complicated interpersonal relationships. This chapter will rather focus on the ethical work that is required for reaching the state of having grace within personal projects of piety. In this sense, grace is more than a logic for relations that people strive for. For evangelicals, “grace” also names the enabling divine force that allows them to change. To attune themselves to this power often goes along with the cultivation of an affective reaction that is similar to another cognate of the word “grace”, namely gratitude. This section describes the emotional journey that starts from people dwelling on their own guilt and sense of sin, which then develops into a heightened sense of dependency and gratitude for God that lastly confirms the participant’s sense of agency over their lives.

### **Grace and contemporary ideas of God**

One illustrative example of the local notion of grace that I came across in my fieldwork was related to how it was taught to children at the Lifeway Austin. The so-called children’s ministry, the separate space to which parents could bring their children while they attended the Sunday’s worship service, has an important task for churches. It both attracts families with children to the church with the quality of its service, and also takes on some of the responsibility for the transmission of Christian ideas between generations. The manner in which the teaching of children often took place in the immediate past was through the retelling of biblical stories in an engaging fashion. In reading out loud of books or acting out plays with the children, biblical stories were rehearsed. In these stories the most prominent characters of the Bible were often presented as role models that embodied character traits that were desirable. Esther was a

particularly obedient girl, for instance, and Abraham was listened to what God told him to do, and so both of them were rewarded with great responsibility.

A staff member from the Lifeway church told me how their aim was to change the teaching. He said that the teaching that focused on heroic individuals attained favour didn't truly reflect the gospel. If the attempt was to try to be as good as possible so that God would finally use us somehow, it was "almost the opposite of the gospel". It was not a recipe for "grace-filled change". He was afraid that the current way of teaching things could bring about a generation of Pharisees and division between the children, when one competes against the other in terms of who can be seen as the most righteous ones. If anything, the biblical stories should emphasise how the patriarchs and women in the Bible were loved despite of their faults. Esther was an adulterer and Abraham an idol worshipper. Yet still God extended his love to them, and they were transformed by his pursuit.

Here, like in many strands of Christianity, awareness of one's weakness of character changes sign to be a resource for ethical becoming. To know that "sola gratia" applies also to oneself just as well is a realisation that church culture encourages people to dwell on and repeat in their minds. The emotional import of this realisation, however, was not one of fear and dependency, but rather a joyful liberation. This was reflected in the way that my informants and much of contemporary evangelical culture imagined and depicted God. Reformed churches, that also Lifeway and New Church Austin identified with, were historically associated with the likes of Jonathan Edwards and his fiery jeremiads and the "religious melancholia" observed by Robert Burton in Puritan England (Campbell 2005). For the Puritans God was an unflinching arbiter of potentially arbitrary justice, whose grace should not be taken for granted. Yet also in the recent American past the judgment of God had been a source of anxiety. Many of the people that I got to know in Texas that

had grown in conservative churches told me of fear being part of their religious upbringing. As children they had been shown frightening films about the eventuality of rapture, and around Halloween they walked through “hell houses”, evangelical versions of haunted houses that focused on performances that graphically displayed the perils of damnation.

Today some of the “hell house” performances survive, but they are rather gaudy amusements that play with the imagery of hell. At Lifeway and New Church Austin, God was not a cruel judge. Instead he was trying to teach people that they themselves should accept his way of viewing the world and people’s deeds, a way that was characterised by forgiving love. The fear of being judged and the wish to perform better to please God, were in themselves a part of the fallen nature of humanity. The basic task of a believer was to learn to think of oneself as truly loveable in God’s eyes, just as the children were beginning to be taught at Lifeway Austin, an act that was tantamount to accepting his graceful love. Such a benevolent image of God reflects a wider trend in evangelical culture, which in many parts has reversed the fire-and-brimstone tone of the Christian right since the 1980s, but it arguably also reflects wider contemporary American theories of motivation and personhood. In line with the American tradition of techniques of self-motivation, which Barbara Ehrenreich has called the “ideology of positive thinking” (Ehrenreich 2009), suppression of doubt and uncertainty are not seen only as a way towards a positive mood and experiences. According to the ideology, to focus one’s will with optimism and a sense of possibility is what creates the capacity to act in the first place.

How do people come to experience confirming and enabling grace? Sermons commonly encouraged listeners to reflect on the nature of Jesus’ mission the earth his sacrifices for human kind. Driving home the import of these acts of mysterious proportions would nurture a love for Christ as well as the appropriate motivation for piety. During my fieldwork I very rarely

encountered excessive depictions of the suffering of Christ, such as have been a long tradition reaching from Matthias Grünewald's paintings to Mel Gibson's *Passion*. One sermon I listened to at Lifeway described the consequences of the incarnation in a contrasting way. The fact that divinity took on the fleshly existence of a man was descriptive of the humility and will to serve that everybody should emulate. But it also showed that the fragile, lowly existence among the poor and lepers could become a beacon of holiness when it incarnated divinity. And the same could be true for our own troubled existences. The emotions listed in sermon were love, gratitude, joy, hope and "desire to grow into what God has already made us". Only towards the end of the sermon did it mention the "coming judgment" as a reason to avoid sin. The outcome is an emotional regime (Riis & Woodhead 2010) that made people conscious of their own guilt, while encouraging them to overcome it with exclusively positive emotions such as gratitude and outright joy for the gift grace.

In addition to speaking about the gospels, sermons I heard in the field often also mobilised narratives from the Old Testament as means to elicit gratitude for God's mercy. Stories such as the fall of Adam and Eve were read as prefiguring and pointing towards the purposes of "missional God", i.e. a divinity who can be understood largely in terms of an extension of grace to fallen creation. Listeners were implicitly encouraged to place themselves in the position of biblical characters, equating the tragic developments of the biblical stories with their own need for redemption. The music of Sunday services at evangelical churches equally captured the emotional tone. The genre of so-called contemporary Christian music, which was almost exclusively played at the churches I frequented, does include a variety of religious messages and moods. Yet the music performed at church services often had an effect that participants described as "positive" or "encouraging". Chapter 7 describes the

affective uses of religious music in private devotion in more detail.

### **Grace and self-objectification**

In one of his contributions to the anthropology of ethics, Webb Keane explores the relationship between semiotic systems and moral action by focusing on the consequences of people giving reasons for their actions (Keane 2010). Since people are, at the least in principle, opaque to each other, like surfaces, deliberation and justification in various social systems depends on what is an externalisation of people's reasons and motivations for action. It is possible that this externalisation also changes the way that people reflexively relate to their own actions. A clear example of the moral significance of externalisation is from Keane's own work on Calvinist religious practice, within which the ability to give accounts and rationales of one's actions was considered a hallmark of being a responsible and mature subject (Keane 2007). The complicated notion of grace, as I have described it, also plays a part in creating a particular economy of moral externalisation for evangelicals. The idea of a self relating to God's grace both firstly gives an ethical frame for such communication, both encouraging providing accounts for one's actions as well as defining a way that others should relate to those accounts. It also defines a particular idiom in which people can objectify and reason about their own behaviour.

A brief example of the former aspect this I encountered in a discussion I had with the youth pastor of the Lifeway church. The pastor told me about one person that was part of his youth congregation, that had not been to church for a while after being caught smoking pot. The pastor's interpretation was that the child was staying away because "coming to church because it would feel like facing his failure". He raised it as an example of how,

unless we “accept grace-filled love”, we are more inclined to hide our sin from our loved ones. “Just because we don't want to own our crap, and we have a hard time believing that someone can love us through it.” The pastor feared that the children were learning the wrong kind of attitude from their middle-class, high-achieving parents as well as competitive schools. According to him these emphasised working hard for reward, an attitude that he found unbiblical. The posture that he wanted to teach the young people participating in his youth ministry was one of “sitting in our mess, and somebody loves us.” The same interview also illustrated the boundaries of grace as a normative basis for moral openness. He says that if he found his own son using drugs he would have to be punished, while somehow communicating the principle of unconditional acceptance despite the punishment. Even familial relationships should be graceful, but they also have other responsibilities that are not there for the church community.

Also many adults that I met saw grace as a central notion guiding their self-development. For Raul, a member of Lifeway who was already in his early forties, the notion had been particularly important. When I met Raul, through a small group for men at Lifeway, he often seemed slightly upset, and offered his own contributions slightly nervously. Raul had previously worked for the Austin tech giant Dell, but had been unemployed for some years now. He was going through something like a mid-life crisis, and had recently also struggled to limit his use of alcohol. I had gotten to know the man better when I joined him and another unemployed Lifeway member for a trip to Oklahoma. This was just days after a tornado had hit Oklahoma City, and a group of friends from Austin had decided to gather resources and drive over to the neighbouring state to offer help. It was something of an American cliché to go on a road trip to find oneself, but the car journey proved a good opportunity to discuss personal challenges and how the men responded to them.

Raul had come to believe that his issues were related to reconciling with the fact that his father had left the family when he had been a child. He had ultimately never understood how someone could have decided to leave their family so suddenly. Yet until Raul was in his late 30s, he didn't properly think about this issue "I just pushed it away", he said. He believed his later relationships had suffered as a result. "I just didn't want them to be able to leave". He became, in his words, "a perfectionist, obsessive compulsive". He felt this search for perfection had paralysed his life. His response had been to "go off the wall", and take whatever he could to suppress, both alcohol as well as prescription drugs. At some point a couple of years ago Raul had been so anxious that he hadn't been able to do a basic psychological test that required connecting words to images.

In response to his situation, Raul has found the notion of grace liberating. He has realised that "I don't have to take of myself". With little hesitation in his voice, he says:

"I can work in the world the way I am, the way I was created. ... Nothing, absolutely nothing, happens in God's world by mistake. Until I could accept my alcoholism, I could not stay sober. Unless I accept life completely on life's terms, I cannot be happy."

This kind of attitude is, for Raul, not a given, but something that he works on methodically. Even when he talks about this disposition of acceptance, he often prefaces it as something that he "has to" achieve, instead of something that he already has incorporated. During our trip to Oklahoma, during moments of tiredness and stress, Raul often became distant and reserved. He said that the trip had been an experiment for him on how to stay focused on his positive attitude. On a typical day at home, he would often begin the day with carefully selected devotional passages. He still says that he is still slipping into ways of thinking that imply self-judgment hundreds of times every day,



despite trying to focus. Sometimes his awareness of these slips have helped him change his pattern.

Another evangelical setting that encouraged speaking openly about one's faults in order to receive validation was the small group meeting, as detailed in chapter 3. In both cases the act of externalising something to others is implicitly meant to speak as a demonstration and a performance of a meta-ethical principle, of striving for personal transformation with the normative principle that one's acts are already forgiven. In this sense, the act of voicing one's personal life to others is also an act of self-formation. It also tacitly implies the existence of a social space with others that have the same normative expectations. In this respect the situation is analogical to Michael Warner's claim that evangelical genres of speaking have contributed to the way in which Americans publicly state their own identity, since the latter relates to the evangelical testimonies. "One way that fundamentalists have contributed to the culture of minority identities is by developing the performative genres of identity-talk. Sentences like 'We're here, we're queer, get used to it' take for granted a context in which people are accorded the power of declaring what they are." (Warner 1997, p.230.)

The meaning of Warner's "identity-talk" stems from a context in which minorities see themselves as separate from mainstream society, yet want to claim the power and autonomy to speak. In contrast, the setting of "grace-filled talk" depends on the perception of a community that shares the same normative frame.

In addition to the objectification that takes place through speaking about one's sins, evangelicals also learned to treat part of their own inner life as if it were like an object. This was a mode of reasoning about one's activities that depended on a self-objectification in a literal sense, in qualifying one's own agency. As a brief example, Peter from the evangelical household in which I lived had chosen not to seek out a partner, but to dedicate himself to ministry until God put in place the circumstances in

which he would find a wife. There had been a brief period of some weeks in his life during which he had felt attracted to a woman, and had pursued the relationship. Something had gone wrong in the relationship that Peter described only as “not having peace about it”. He had come to conclude like he was acting against the will of God in his life. Looking back at that time of his life, he now thought it had been purposeful in that he had inadvertently, softly steered the woman in question towards Christian community. As a result of their period together, the woman had started to think about participation in church in different way, an outcome that Peter took to be the fundamental reason for what he had done. Peter believed his own perceptions of his actions, as deeds caused by his own choices, were secondary to the primary causes of the divine working towards redemption. This kind of reasoning seemed pervasive among my informants, and so mundane that it would have seemed tempting to dismiss it as merely a manner of speaking. It was to observe one’s previous choices, transgressive or not, in a way that attributes to them a reason or motivation distinct from one’s own subjectivity. A person discerns a purpose for their actions that goes deeper than their own understanding, a purpose that leads, as if by cunning of reason, towards their or other’s future sanctification.

There is a long history, naturally, of narrating Christian self-formation in terms of God’s mysterious work on human motivation. In Augustine’s *Confessions*, he rewrites his own biography so that the apparent contingencies of his life actually become necessities in the path towards his eventual conversion. “You brought it about through me, and without my being aware of it” (Augustine 2006, p.125). Similarly, an attribution of wider divine purpose is one way in which people also learn to observe and rationalise their own failures and shortcomings. God’s grace was such that from evil may issue greater good, within chains of causation that left even their own intentions unknowable. The everyday reasoning of my informants hence suggested that they

could give accounts of their actions within a representation economy where, as in Joe Webster's ethnography, "providence abolished the possibility of coincidence" (Webster 2013, p.9).

The manner in which grace is a part of contemporary evangelical life can be read in contrast to the most influential exposition of how economies of grace translate into ethical behaviour, namely Max Weber's *Protestant Ethic*. Weber reads Calvinism as the purest expression of the Reformation's logic, in which grace was removed from the Catholic institutions as well as disenchanting nature, and ascribed to a transcendent deity indifferent to human striving (Weber 2005 [1905]; Reinhardt 2015). The resulting anxiety about salvation was, in Weber's famous theory, what first produced the ethos of accumulation for its own sake. Uncertain about whether they had received God's grace, the Calvinist busied themselves in worldly activities that read as signs that relieved their anxiety.

American evangelicals are generally set apart from European counterparts, in the least after the Second Great Awakening, by a belief in the assurance of salvation at the moment of conversion. Despite Calvinist theological commitments, the soteriological ethos is Arminian: Jesus wishes to save you, would you only let him. Contemporary Americans, in contrast, were largely certain of their status as part of the elect. The economy of grace is marked less by a lack and transcendental gap as it is by an excess that is difficult for its receivers to accommodate. Hence the relation between quotidian life and hopes for salvation in the process of self-formation is the reverse of Weber's narrative. Where the Puritans engaged in worldly labour in order to seek confirmation of their salvation, contemporary evangelicals look to the reality of having attained grace as a source of emotional inspiration that would allow them to step out into the world with the confidence of their own faith.

## 6.3 Conclusions

The chapter has juxtaposed two distinct aspects of evangelical culture, namely devotional reading as well as evangelicals having a graceful attitude about their own failures. I have claimed that it is possible to understand both as areas of practice in which evangelicals attempt to experience and express a sense of receiving God's grace. Devout readers of the scriptures were expecting not only not exercise their worldly capacities for interpretation, but also to have the text provide an experience of speaking to them personally, in a moment in which they join in with the agency of God. I moreover claimed that this manner of partaking in God's supernatural grace was unstable because of its dependence on the written word. I make the case with a brief comparison of evangelical textual ideology to arguments about language from Western philosophy, particularly Merleau-Ponty's claim that language "promotes its own oblivion".

The second part of the chapter dwelt on a connected but different sense of grace. Evangelicals often spoke of "having grace for" somebody, including oneself. Grace was hence a quality of a relationship, in which gifts are given in a gratuitous manner. The most significant of such gifts was of course the sacrifice of Jesus himself, a theme that was commonly reflected on in corporate worship and devotions. Evangelicals reminded themselves that their sin and shortcomings were already redeemed in the act of Christ, and hence they could also extend grace to themselves. Dwelling on the certainty of their own salvation was understood as a way to encourage a personal transformation towards piety. Given this type of relation to oneself, the act of speaking within an evangelical community that shared a posture of grace became an act of self-transformation.

In the act of "having grace for oneself", the forgiving nature of interpersonal intimacy becomes an analogy that people use to

understand their relationship with God, and by extension the kind of care they ought to provide for themselves. The prevalence of this graceful relationship with God was already described above when going through the work of Tanya Luhrmann, one of the prominent authors on the North American imagination of God. Luhrmann showed how specifically Neo-Charismatic and more generally American evangelicals came to think about God not only as a father, but also as a lover and a friend, somebody who loves you just as you are. The significance of sin lied not so much in their transgression itself, but in their potential to disrupt this loving relationship. The care that God offers to his followers, according to Luhrmann's material, extended to various intimate details of their personal life, such as choices related to purchases or domestic decoration. The work that the neo-charismatics undertake to maintain this intimate connection resembles in many ways the work necessary for human intimate friendship: the dedication of quality time to the other and not withholding personal details during prayer.

Also in my fieldsite, the basic task of a Christian was to learn to think of oneself as loveable in God's eyes. The notion and experience of God as a personal figure that loved one in a graceful and forgiving way was presented, moreover, as an ethical tool aimed towards personal reform. Church culture encouraged people to dwell on the sacrifice of Jesus, and to repeat it in their minds. The emotional response to this thought was not meant as one of fear and dependency, but rather joyful liberation. The result was an emotional setting that encouraged to people to be conscious of their sins and sense of guilt, but also to encourage them to overcome these with positive emotions alone, such as feelings of gratitude in response to the gift of grace.

The chapter contributes to the understanding of evangelical practices of self-formation by paying attention to a boundary case, where difference between the normative and the normal was obvious. The case of devotional reading was one that clearly broke what Samuli Schielke (Schielke 2009) referred to as the

“illusion of wholeness”, where the description of normative practices departed from their actual outcomes. At the same time, the chapter showed how the register of “having grace” made it possible for my informants to incorporate failure into their religious biographies.

## 7 The digital Bible and Christian radio

In our times, John Wyclif is known mostly as the instigator of one of the earliest English translations of the Bible. During his lifetime the 14<sup>th</sup> century reformer also headed the religious movement of Lollards that fought corruption in Catholic churches and produced scholastic notions that caused such controversy among Oxford theologians that the Archbishop of Canterbury had to intervene. At the centre of Wyclif's thinking was a complex metaphysical theory, positing five different levels of being, which were also the planes on which the Holy Scriptures existed (Leff 1999, p.515). At the apex of this ontology was the Book of Life, the archetype of truth, that was embodied in the living person of Jesus. In the fifth level, the lowest realm of life, were actual books of the Bible in the sense of printed words and codices. These Wyclif thought were hierarchically inferior. "Individual manuscripts are of no greater value than the beasts from which they are made", he wrote (quoted in Minnis 2009, p.108). With his theory, Wyclif gave scripture an existence and reality that was independent of and overcame that of actual, tangible books. Even if every single copy of Bible was to perish from the earth the reality of their truth, and with it that of one's faith, would remain the same. He believed the word of God had an existence that was independent of any material manifestation, indestructible, and hence its apprehension could also not depend on engagement with any particular material or semiotic form. If this was not the case, "then all Holy Scripture could be damaged by the leather-maker, torn apart by a dog, or corrected by a buffoon" (ibid).

Wyclif's thinking helped set in motion the Reformation centuries after his time, but his scholastic constructs have largely lost their relevance. Yet the same theological questions, about the

relationship of the biblical word with its material forms of expression, still commonly surface even in the United States. In some respect it appears as if Wyclif's vision of an immaterial essence of the Bible had come true in the contemporary world. In a place like the United States there are so many material manifestations of the Bible - in publications, audio books, imprinted in numerous commodities from bumper stickers to T-shirts - that one could easily have the impression that the scriptures have gained freedom from any single type of material form.

From the perspective of my informants, Wyclif's theological worries didn't seem most pressing. Their struggles with the Bible concerned how to make it meaningful for their own daily lives, and how to manage their daily rhythms so that they could include sufficient contact with it. Though the emphasis on reading the Bible and including it in church life was strong enough to produce high levels of biblical literacy for many, it was just as important for them to produce experiences of being affected by the text, and to try to find ways of producing relevance between the text and their daily actions. The description of these various folk practices shows how the manner in which the text is received is not primarily about semiotic purity or exegetic brilliance. The way that people make use of the text and seek to encounter God through it was as much shaped by very mundane influences, such as convenience, people's pressure on time and their emotional self-regulation.

This chapter combines ethnographic insights from two domains of evangelical practice into one narrative, detailing various practices of accessing the Bible and biblical language for purposes of care of the self. These practices take place in a setting that combines literalist semiotic ideology, that discounts the pragmatic and contextual aspects of language, with a carefully designed media system for transmitting biblical resources. The chapter begins with a brief discussion of the history of American evangelicals' relation to printed Bibles. I



follow this by describing the consequences of the most recent paradigm shift of its textual form, namely the adoption of reading of the Bible with electronic devices. One of the most prominent effects of the digitalisation of the scriptures is the intensification of a pre-existing ethos and a script of how to read the Bible, which prescribes a consistent, daily internalisation of the holy word, for it to be externalised in the basic affective mood of everyday life.

The second part of the chapter moves from the carefully designed system of reading into a seemingly unplanned devotional setting, namely the car. Somewhat unexpectedly, to many of my informants their daily commute was the single moment most significant for what they considered devotional activities, both in terms of time spent as well as affective impact. For this they heavily depended on local Christian radio stations, which broadcasted music that they classified as “biblical”, and allowed for an immersive practice that combined several Christian genres of language use: worship, prayer, and a reception of the holy word. The section describes the complicated ways in which the aesthetic of the music as well as the associated affective reactions allow for a reproduction of faith and conviction.

## **7.1 The Random Access Bible**

It was 1850 when an American novelist first reached such popularity that her work could be called a bestseller. The first novel from previously unknown Susan Warner, *The Wide, Wide World*, attracted a circulation of hundreds of thousands, and maintained its popularity for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In the style of Victorian sentimentalist novel, the book details the growing up of its protagonist, Ellen Montgomery, largely through her inner emotional reactions. The generous reviews from the Christian

Review, as well as Godey's Lady's Book likely contributed to its initial success (McDannell 1998, p.221). Early in the novel, the story's protagonist Ellen Montgomery accompanies her mother on a trip to purchase her first Bible. As the mother is gravely ill, she hopes to leave in the child's possession the holy book as a sign of her spiritual heritage. The shopping trip begins with the sale of the mother's favourite ring to fund the venture, and ends with the two in the bookstore examining the dozens of available bibles. Ellen is clearly moved by the luxury of choice: "Such beautiful Bibles she had never seen", Warner writes, "she pored in ecstasy over their varieties of type and binding, and was very evidently in love with all of them" (Wetherell 1852). Ultimately her mother advises her to buy a leather-bound red one because of its sufficiently sized type.

Hardly anyone reads or remembers *The Wide, Wide World* anymore, but the book is often in texts about antebellum American literary and biblical culture, as a vivid description of how the Bible stood in the middle of concerns related to faith, family and fashion. In the book Ellen reads the Bible with her mother, who sees herself as the principal agent of Ellen's religious upbringing. Still in early Victorian times, when books were valuable and scarce, reading was often a group affair, where often the father as the household's authority read the holy word out loud (R. J. Zboray & M. S. Zboray 1996). In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Bible was also above all a domestic object. It was not only bound to the home, it was also prominently displayed there and in its own designated location in the house. The Bible even served as a container for the most valuable documents, such as family records and insurance papers (McDannell 1991).

Still for the modern reader perhaps the most striking feature the novel excerpt is Ellen's open admiration for the physical qualities of the book. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the affective response to the object was hoped to be part of the civilising effect of the Bible itself. During the time, the right taste was less an expression of strictly personal preference, but a capacity for

higher sentiments. It was an ability that could be cultivated with objects of high quality, and domestic editions of the scriptures were seen as embedded in a domestic circulation of sentiments of sympathy and benevolence (J. Howard 2014, pp.215-216). In contemporary days the ease of reproduction has reduced the attraction of singular, expensive Bibles and brought about a more pragmatic relationship to the books. Excessive decoration and investment into a book that is itself valuable would be seen by many of my informants as a misplaced emphasis, or even an idolatrous attachment to the object of the Bible itself instead of a dedication to its content. At the same time, as we will see below, contemporary Bibles are still carefully designed for the correct affective responses that facilitate reading, only now the guiding principles are those of consumer psychology instead of Victorian sentimentalist ethics, as we will see below.

In contemporary America, Bibles are still frequently gifted, on occasions such as baptisms or graduations. I received several copies too as presents during my fieldwork, with signatures from groups of individuals inside, for instance to commemorate the end of my fieldwork in Texas. I had met several evangelicals who had converted later in their life and would harbour the first book of scriptures that seized their attention around the time of them becoming Christian. The value of a particular book in these cases was their inalienability, the singular connection that it has with its owner's particular life events as well as continued use. Though most own several editions of the holy book, with varying translations and supporting materials, often a single edition attracted particular attachment. The same copy often followed with to church services and small group meetings alike, and its owners take pride in the manifold markings and patina that demonstrate a history of extensive use. My informants commented on the familiarity that a long use of the same volume created, and how it fell open in their most trusted passages almost out of its own volition. For people that hope to be shaped

by the book, the marks of their interaction were confirmation of their deep involvement with it.

This section describes the consequences of a relatively recent development how readers relate to the scriptures, namely reading on digital devices. Given the position of Bible copies as the “material anchor for nostalgia” (Rakow 2015), it is no wonder that its gradual replacement with digital media has faced some opposition. Also collective practices of church communities are changed by the new media.

### **The digital bible in church life**

Imagine you are arriving to a Sunday church service in an American church. In larger churches, you would be likely to see a Bible even you set foot into the building. Many congregants will walk from their cars into the worship hall carrying their Bible with so-called bible covers, handbag-like containers with patterned leather or embroideries, designed to accommodate some of standardised dimensions of printed Bibles. As you’re stepping into the church, a volunteer is by the door to greet you and press a leaflet into your hand. These bulletins would in the past often contain the chapter and verse references you need to locate the handful of Bible passages that the pastor will make use of in the sermon. Once you have taken your place in the church hall and the sermon begins, the Bible also plays a part on the stage, as liturgical or ritual device. In Protestant churches, sermons are often given with the pastor walking into the front of the church with a bible in his hand. The message is obvious: The pastor themselves are no authority, but as somebody who brings the book into the pulpit, they convey the word of God. It is easy to convey this visually, as everybody shares expectations about how a Bible would be bound, with its generous leather book

covers. Some churches in the past made the visual sign even clearer with oversized copies, so-called lectern Bibles.

In larger contemporary evangelical churches, such as the Lifeway Austin, this would seem out of place. Watching a sermon at Lifeway was like being audience to a broadcast session. After the live worship music had finished, the preaching was transmitted to several other locations, or “campuses”, of the same church, as well as being recorded for on-line video and podcast. The pastor made sure not to step too far away from the podium lest he should wander out of reach of the cameras, and occasionally gazed at them while mentioning the existence of other campuses, to keep the remote audiences happy. Every sermon included half a dozen carefully chosen Bible passages, which had been loaded into the Powerpoint-like presentation systems beforehand, and at a signal of the pastor the technicians project the words simultaneously onto the large screen of the church hall and the displays of remote viewers. In order to read the passage out loud, the pastor of Lifeway picks up an iPad from his podium, and gives it a couple of casual swipes. Instead of a lectern Bible, the digital projection of the word onto multiple surfaces at the same time is the expectation here.

Even though the text is audibly spoken as well as visually presented, a significant part of the congregation still looks to locate the passage from their own copy of the text. The practice perhaps highlights the fact that even the corporate service is meant to serve the individual relationships that congregants have with scriptures. This habit is supported by the church too: As a rule, the rows of folding chairs that fill evangelical churches have Bibles placed below them, and at Lifeway volunteers walk through the aisles handing out free copies of the Bible. The pastor himself begins his reading with a line such as “Open your Bibles at Isaiah 5:35”. At a church such as Lifeway, a clear majority will raise to their eyes not a book, but their mobile phones or tablets. Especially within this young congregation, but just as much among everybody accustomed to new touch screen

devices and e-ink readers, the electronic reading of the Bible has been widely adopted.

Within handheld devices, there is one software provider that has risen to a nigh-monopoly position with their product, the app simply named “the Bible”. The platform is produced by a church that originates from Edmond, Oklahoma called Lifechurch.tv. According to the statistics published by the church, by the end of 2014 their software had been installed on over 160 million devices (Youversion 2015). On average over a hundred thousand individuals would be reading the Bible on a particular moment, though the church’s engineers monitoring the application could discern a clear increase every Sunday morning, as the eyes of millions of American congregants scanned the passages synchronised with their pastors (Eyal 2013).

Lifeway accommodated electronic readers to the extent that it had preloaded its sermon plans onto the Bible app’s platform. The bulletin papers now only contained information about upcoming events of the church, and a blank to which notes could be written. Information about the sermon could be found on digital devices, in Lifechurch.tv’s platform, where the users of the Bible app could locate the current sermon, and click the hyperlinks placed there to have the corresponding passages of scripture in front of them.

Public discussion of the use of handheld devices in social situations often focuses on breaches in previously held norms regarding attention and attentiveness (Crawford 2015). David Morgan writes that traditionally congregants “may not share the same thoughts ..., but they do share the same disposition of a corporate embodiment...” (Morgan 2012, p.176), and from my own church background I too had expected church services to follow the old spatial and psychological arrangement of Christian churches of sitting together oriented oriented to a single point in the front of the church hall. Megachurches such as Lifeway, in contrast, strove to maintain an ethos of being

permissive. One could arrive late, clutching a styrofoam coffee cup from the church foyer, and discreetly greet the familiar faces on the pew, while the service continued. The effect that mobile devices may have had, now that their use was even encouraged by the church, was to remove even the last constrictions for the wandering of attention. According to my informants, it was only within the past three or four years that mobile phones had been openly used in the houses of God. Their presence now seemed comfortably accommodated in the subtle norms of interaction of church event. This leniency extended to the setting of the church small groups, settings intimate enough that attending to one's phone could have been expected to feel inappropriate. Even though the groups of about a dozen church goers sat in circles facing each other, the occasional search on the Bible app for just the right verse was common. Even though church meetings were accepting, many evangelicals still had concerns about their relationship to the scriptures changing as a result of its digital mediation.

### **The digital and the analogical word compared**

Evangelical commentators occasionally described the digitalisation of the Bible as a loss. In a post in the influential blog of the Gospel Coalition, Matthew Barrett, for instance, reminded pastors of the power of a physical Bible as “a visible symbol of God speaking to his people, the master Shepherd feeding his flock” (Barrett 2013). Barrett raises some of the doubts that have been part of a public discussion concerning digital reading more widely, for example the significance of the fact that the context and placement of a passage of text is less apparent on electronic devices than physical books. But his writing too explicitly claims that the digital reading implies an ephemerality or a loss of the physicality of the text. “Digital texts

are ephemeral; they are ontologically diminished”, he quotes from another author. And if the proclamation of God’s word, one of the means of grace of the Protestant church, takes on a more virtual character, it would sit poorly with the other sacramental means of grace, such as baptism and the Lord’s supper, which have their efficacy by virtue of their material existence.

It was rare, however, for me to hear criticism of electronic reading from my informants, apart from some humorous remarks about nostalgic attachments to older books. In some respects, the people I knew in Austin even felt like they could achieve a more genuine connection to the text through their new medium. This was in part because of the change in the material form that the text took when accessed digitally. As I have discussed in previous chapters, Protestant theology has as a rule questioned the potency of human-made images and icons as means to approach God, and claimed that God had revealed himself in a sufficient manner in the scriptures. The text is able to carry forth God’s revelation untampered by worldly influence, and language was a privileged medium for influencing human interiority. The potential point of slippage, as pointed out frequently by scholars of material culture, is that the material manifestations of texts could themselves become like idols. For the American context, David Morgan, for instance, has written the 19<sup>th</sup> century history of American Protestant movements to bring the Bible and regular readings into public schools. Protestant imagery of the time portrayed the Bible as a “public monument” around which the diversity of the nation could assemble. The Bible became an object with quasi-sacramental significance, to be revered in order to secure the unity of the nation (Morgan 2005).

Such tendencies in American civil religion were, however, something that contemporary evangelicals were conscious and reflexive of. One of my informants, for instance, talked about how he had been carefully taught never to place the Bible on the floor as a child, to show it the same kind of care that was dedicated, for instance, to the American flag. Though he thought



that the message of the Bible was that worship should be directed at God exclusively, he felt that the special status granted to the book expressed the holiness and respect that he felt for the text. Sometimes the allure of printed Bibles was associated with consumerism. The pastor of New Church Austin, mentioned in a sermon how he “geeked out” on his Bibles, and must have owned in the least 10 different editions and translations proudly displayed on his shelves. These included the Green Bible, which highlighted in green letters every reference to nature. In his eyes, the collection of copies of the Bible was disconcerting because he felt he had succumbed to the commercial motives of the publishing industry that promoted such behaviour.

The material form of a printed book also gave affordance to some practices of using the Bible that were dangerous from a religious perspective. The local folk religion also knew an exercise, occasionally referred to as “Bible roulette”, in which the holy word is flung open and the passage under one’s finger would be read in terms of its future implications. This is a Christian practice that can be traced all the way back to St. Augustine’s conversion, who followed a voice he heard to fortuitously read a relevant passage of the epistles. Idiosyncratic ways of reading are frequently ethnographically recorded. Brian Malley (Malley 2004) found what was termed “bible dipping” with Baptist evangelicals, and Simon Coleman (Coleman 2006) has provided a detailed analysis of the decontextualisation of biblical language. Pastors in churches such as Lifeway actively discouraged such forms of associative readings as going against an appropriate understanding and interpretation of the text, yet the practice obviously resonated with the local folk religion, in which seemingly random events would be interpreted as signs. In any case, the form of a codex, an ordered set of printed texts, clearly provided opportunities for such religiously questionable accessing the text. Informants also often talked about their own religious upbringing encouraging engagement with the holy book that in hindsight they would regard superstitious at worst or in

the least encouraging a superficial approach to reading. In Texan religious summer camps, children are introduced to the exploration of the scriptures through a game. The teacher names one of the more obscure books in the Bible, and the children race through their copies, raising their hands once they hit its first page, hoping to be the first one to reach it.

The fact that the systems such as the Bible app provide hyperlinks for moving through passages and don't rely on a single ordering of texts obviously makes these practices obsolete. Yet at the same time, it is difficult to agree with a conclusion that the digital form Bible of the would be some sense less material or closer to the virtual essence of the holy word. If anything, one of the most valuable features of handheld devices was that they could be a more pervasive presence in the lives of their readers.

### **The design of the digital Bible**

The user interface of the Bible app prominently displays a selection of thousands of different reading plans. The software encourages users to select from plans that show passages related to practical concerns (such as “fighting addiction” or “improving your work life”), or endorsement from Christian celebrities, such as Billy Graham or the hip hop artist Lecrae. The plans are carefully built, starting with passages that are easier give people early rewards for their commitment. Using a principle called “endowed progress effect”, the designers of the app built the reading lists with the belief that once people had begun following a plan, and had already invested some of their time, they would be more likely to stay on course (Eyal 2013). The Bible app will remind them to stay on it by sending notifications throughout the moments of the day, in points of time that are calibrated based on the data of people's responses. Evangelical church culture often promoted the use of “accountability partners” to keep check on

spiritual progress, and the app is able to fulfil this role with precision, as it is able to objectively track how much reading is actually done.

Lifetchurch.tv's slogan for their digital work was to "bring God's word into your daily life". The church achieved this by drawing from insights from a school of design called persuasive technology, as well as modern methods of data analysis. Since the system recorded how often it was used and how users responded to particular types of messages, the app's creators were able to fine-tune their version of the Bible to maximise reader retention. In a recent interview the Innovation Leader of Lifetchurch.tv, Bobby Gruenewald said the app was designed to create "habitual Bible readers" (Eyal 2013). The system was hence built with the same normative ideas about what it meant to engage with the Bible properly that I described in chapter 6. The ideal was not only to produce a rational interpretation and relevance for the biblical text, but also to attend to it in a regular and recurrent manner.

One could have imagined that some Christian institutions would be nervous about one church holding so much of the attention of world-wide Bible readers, or so many American churches allying themselves with a platform that was associated with one non-denominational church from Oklahoma. Even though denominations have arguably lost in their significance in recent American history, still religious pluralism is one of the nation's values, and the "dissenting denomination" has historically been a central religious form (Coleman 2005, pp.656-657). The investment into the Bible app has some affinities with the attitude of companies printing and distributing printed Bibles. Most participants in this industry account for their careers as forms of ministry that try to find the widest possible audience for scriptures by selling it effectively (see for instance Balmer 2013; Noll 2001)). The cumulative logic of an ever expanding business easily subsumed the Great Commandment of spreading the word. Lifetchurch.tv's calculative expansion of their user base by the

means of consumer psychology of data surveillance appeared to be the contemporary expression of the same religious motive.

Another aspect that made the reading system acceptable was its focus on the biblical texts alone. Given the app's investment into translations, one might be surprised that it provides no access to linguistic analysis or commentary. No interface provides the kind of explication of words that many Protestant pastors are trained in, or explanations that would help the interpretation of difficult passages. This set of priorities fits well one form of literalist understanding of the Bible, in which the words themselves are seen to be divinely inspired, and hence can be appreciated without additional resources or contextual information. The same principle, a focus on the original text alone, is also the one that the international Bible Associations agreed on as a settlement, to bring in Christian groups of various convictions in the work of distributing Bibles. Already in the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century they chose to focus on Bibles "without note or comment" (Howsam 1991 cited in Engelke 2010a, p.816).

Yet it's hard to avoid a conclusion that the change in the means of accessing the Bible also brought subtle changes to the understanding of what the holy word consists of. For many of my informants, the easy access to audio versions of the Bible as well as other multimedia resources was perhaps the most tangible change. The Bible app, for instance, would deliver any passage in the voice of Charlton Heston by the press of a button, and many of the more obscure Old Testament stories were linked with video resources such as the History Channel's *The Bible*. This TV series, popular at the time of my fieldwork, may easily have been the most popular media for Old Testament narratives. Many of the people that I got to know during my fieldwork, such as one of the evangelicals that I shared a household with, struggled with forms of dyslexia. Peter, for instance, developed a habit of listening to the Bible while also having the text in front of him. They benefited from the Bible being available in various types of

mediums, as particularly the option of listening to the Bible proved most valuable for them.

With software such as Lifechurch.tv's, accessing the Bible becomes a carefully designed user experience, in which the presented user interface and the choice of information on the screen encourage certain behaviour. What mobile information technology achieves easily is a simplification of the "operational sequence" (Lemonnier 1986), i.e. the steps and conditions that are required for a successful reading. The mobile phone can be read in any situation where the screen can be held in front of one's face, for instance, which would potentially allow a reader to catch up on their Bible routine while queueing to pay their groceries. There is no need for additional resources to find an appropriate plan for reading the Bible systematically, to track progress, and so forth. The centrality of the reading plans in the design of the Bible app is not only to encourage a systematic reading of the Bible, but also to exploit the opportunity offered by digital technology to quickly and consistently move between separate parts of the text. Several digital resources, including the Bible app and the website such as Bible Gateway, translate the division of chapters and verses into independent excerpts of text, that can be referred to and presented to the reader directly.

When following a reading plan, the original order of the text in the Bible is replaced with one that closer matches the interests, needs and convenience of the reader. With this type of reading the Bible appears less like a bounded object, that ties several texts together as a complete ordered whole. This is what digital humanists refer to as "dissolving the covers" of a book, or the "atomisation" of its contents (e.g. Wagner 2012). When reading a printed Bible, it is difficult to avoid the impression that one is reading a particular location, a position that is meaningful also meaningful in light of a theological interpretation of succession or completion when moving from the so-called Old Testament to the New. With digital systems such as Lifechurch.tv's Bible App, this would be only one among several orderings of the text. In a

sense the fluidity of the content of the Bible is a return to how the texts were organised in the earlier period of their existence. Before the printing press became an economic way of producing bibles, the codices of the scriptures would often vary between copies, and the sense that a believer should read the entire canon did not arise before the Pietists of the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Beaudoin 1998)

The design of the Bible app also presents value judgments about what is important and what is not. One of the clearest attractions of the Bible app is its presentation of a variety of translations, which can also be placed simultaneously next to each other on the screen. The easy accessibility of numerous translations is certainly not a theologically neutral feature. The days of a denominational preference to a particular translation, such as some conservative churches attachment to the King James Version (White 2009), are likely past. Within the evangelical world, there have occasionally been controversies about intentional choice of translation, or pastors discouraging readers of trying to understand the finesse of translation. The evangelical pastor Mark Driscoll, for instance, has voiced opposition against too much analysis of the specific meaning of the Letters to Ephesians' injunction of wives to "submit" to their husbands, as most translations would have it (Wilkinson 2015). Though the original Greek does not perfectly match any English phrase, a reader who compares numerous translations will get some sense of potential variety in rewording. In this sense, the ease of movement between translations also means some popular control over the power of defining interpretations that established churches have.

The design goal of the Bible app is to achieve a daily, consistent and systematic reading of the text by itself. This is made easier precisely because the Bible is now located in a device that is multi-purpose in nature. Because of this, the tablets and mobile phones are often carried with their users wherever they are going. The other user scenarios that the devices have

also present opportunities for capturing the user's attention, through functionality such as notifications that pass between sets of software. It is another surprising confluence between elements of different types that the principles of software design, focused at the formation of habits and retention of users, would find a willing reception among Christians that want to improve their devotional behaviour. The next section of the chapter details another way in which people sought to make biblical language permeate their quotidian life, namely the use of Christian radio.

## **7.2 Praising God on Four Wheels**

Bob was somebody that I only met a few times at the church, in the rushed moments between services. Bob was a church workhorse, an active lay leader at Lifeway church and occasionally musician in its services. He always seemed to have somewhere to go. As Bob heard that I had developed an interest in people's relationship to Christian music and their cars, he did insist that we sit down so that he can tell me about his own habits. He had worked in the promotions team of a national Christian radio station before, and so he also had tried to professionally understand how Christians made the time they spent in their cars into sacred moments. Now Bob worked on sales, a job that he thought was "not Christ-related", but still something that, he remarked, God had given to him. Much of his time in the car was taken up by tasks that were directly related to his work. He made sales calls, and while he was driving around he worked the phones to arrange more demonstrations for the product he was selling. Yet particularly when commuting to and from his workplace, the car was an amazing space for him. He explained that his most important daily devotional activity was praying in the car. The first ten minutes of every morning commute, when he didn't yet have to concentrate on his work, he

would first spend in silence. Then he would start going through his favourite biblical passage, listing the fruits of the spirit from Galatians (5:22). “Love, joy, peace, patience, kindness..” This helped Bob lay out the “foundation” and “tone” for his day. In his work, Bob explained, he encountered a lot of negativity, customers unhappy with his product and hostile responses when he is looking for new clients. Bob felt he didn’t always have the right reaction to those situations, but the regular recitals in the morning at least gave him a spiritual basis for acting right. He needed to stay positive in order to make a sale, but also to exemplify the fruits of the spirit. In Bob’s description of preparation for making sales, Christian virtues and what is necessary to create sales for his company fuse into a single, harmonious whole.

Having his quiet time in the car, Bob was simultaneously more alone than ever, while also developing a certain kind of intimacy. The car was, in his words, a “self-contained environment”, and this seclusion was particularly powerful thing for him. “You can scream, you can pray, you can yell, you can talk in tongues, whatever you want to do.” He was able to transform the environment, choose to pray loudly, or to listen to noisy rock music, according to his need any moment. Historically the difference between Catholics and Protestants is sometimes crystallised in the fact that the former pray with their eyes open and the latter closed (Keane 2007, p.2). The privatised space of the car, for contemporary evangelicals, lent itself to loud, occasionally shouty prayer. At the same time, there was a sense that he was not alone as a driver. Prayer, and devotion more widely, was obviously directed at divinity. Even though Bob thought of it as having a rejuvenating, personal effect on himself, he thought about this period as one in which he could serve God, instead of addressing his own needs. Bob also implied that he was not alone in a rather literal sense, because of a co-presence of divinity in the car. “It's like he's in the car with you in a sense. Because nobody can hear you, unless they're not in the car.”



The car as an environment also subtly changed the way that Bob related to the scriptures. When he was driving during the day, and had no calls or voicemail to attend to, Bob often played an audiobook version of the Bible from his iPhone. He appreciates doing this in the car above all for pragmatic reasons. It saves him time. When I ask him whether the medium or the setting of the car make any difference to his reception of the scriptures, he said no:

"No, because its god's word. It's god's word. If it's through a digital device, or pages, or even if it's somebody tapping you on your shoulder and saying, you look like you need a hug, god can use people like that. You can still hear a word that he wants you to hear, even on your iPhone."

Bob does explain that being on the move might make him understand the relevancy of biblical passages better. As a mundane example, he says he may listen to the bible, "and you may think well I'm not really getting it, and suddenly, 'bing' [referring to a text message]. I look it up, and I see, urgent prayer request needed, that's a man from my small group who needs prayer". Receiving the word in a setting that was, even given the limitations of using text messages in a car, close to everyday social interactions, provided some means for Bob to make meaning out of the biblical passages. This theme was even clearer in some of my other interviews. One of my informants, for instance, talked about the truck that he often drove starting at 5 each morning, before the traffic had built up on the roads. And he switched from local Christian radio station to others, depending on which ones he liked in each locality, intermittently praying on whatever came onto his mind. He spoke of the open roadscape and empty roads being a particularly impressive influence for him on those moments. Hence the practices such as audio bibles, that bring the text *in situ* and closer to quotidian evangelical life, may create a new relevance for the texts but allowing it to be recontextualised.

Bob was only one example out of numerous people that I met who said that praying in the car was one of their primary devotional activities. Many of the most committed church-goers that I spoke to would make the effort of having a separate “quiet time” by themselves, for prayer and reading, in the mornings. Almost all confessed that this time was at least complemented, sometimes solely focused, on the time that people were alone in their cars. When pressed about it, my informants generally said that it was the most convenient time for them to “talk to God”, simply because it might be the only time in their lives when they were not with other people. The work life as well as domestic life was often a time when people had the duty to respond to the needs of others, or it was a moment that people actually wanted to dedicate to “quality time” with other people. The moments moving in between various life domains, behind the wheels, took on a surprising sacred meaning. The rest of the chapter makes some more general conclusions about how the experiences of being behind the wheel took on a religious significance for people in Austin.

### **Redeeming the time in traffic**

In his *The Breaking of the Image*, David Martin castigates church reformers for ignoring the role of rote and repetition in religious practice. Efforts to modernise liturgy, in his Anglican churches as also elsewhere, do violence to the familiar rhythms and passages that have built up into habits throughout individual lifetimes. These layers of collective accumulated sequences are for him the conditions for true spontaneous expression. They bring memory and membership to one’s self. “Chants, scales, tables and repetitions are ways of freeing the attention by making a lower hierarchy of habit purely automatic. An absolutely familiar sequence allows the mind to stand outside for a moment:

in suspension, in recollection, in interpretation, or in ecstasy” (Martin 1980, p.86). What Martin identified as a trend for the Anglican church, the change in the quality of liturgy, has a longer history in American evangelicalism. The church services, from musical performances to the manner in which the pastor’s sermon, emphasises spontaneity, and contemporary churches seek to distinguish themselves by adopting new practices and styles. Similarly, in private religious practice, there was hardly a canon of practice that generation after another would grow up with, but rather practitioners would be encouraged to experiment with different religious resources and mediums.

The performance of these partly habitual sequences in liturgy produces, according to Martin, an experience of agency particular to religion, that he terms the active-passive voice (Martin 1980, p.129). One chooses and is chosen, adopts and is adopted, freely accepts a divine invasion. In a successful liturgy, it is possible to experience the active-passive. This modality of agency has the power to “lift the mind out of a groove and also totally to absorb the attention”. It brings stillness inside of movement, capture and liberation, sleep that is awakening. One could ask whether Martin’s description of the active-passive voice could just as well apply to many quotidian, routinised activities. Also the daily commute behind the wheels can be experienced by drivers simultaneously as absent-minded immersion as well as absolute lucidity.

One surprise that I encountered during my fieldwork was the frequency with which the commute made in one’s car was counted as being “time with God”. I occasionally heard pastors tell their congregations that they could make use of the time driving to listen to God’s word or other religious recordings. The larger church, including Lifeway, also made this easier by publishing the performances of their worship musicians and the pastor’s sermons as podcasts and CDs. Another thing that obviously made the commute an attractive time for devotion was what Arlie Hochschild called the “time bind” (Hochschild 1997),

in which long working hours meant that even family time had to be organised and scheduled with respect to efficiency. For those with family and children, the time they spent in their cars was frequently the only time that they had to themselves. Average commuting times in Austin varied significantly, but averaged around 30 minutes, and for people living in the surrounding suburban areas could easily be 45 minutes (ACS 2010). From the perspective of the drivers, there was also the hope of turning the experience of the daily drive, along the monotony of Austin's elevated highways and often enduring bumper-to-bumper traffic levels, into something that felt less aggravating. Religious practices were a way for the drivers to translate inevitable steps of their everyday routine into rituals of their own choice and design.

Religiously loaded practices while driving were however not only a matter of practicality. In my discussions with evangelicals, they named some things about their psychological states while driving as conducive to prayer itself. One informant said that there were few moments in their lives when they were able to "tune everything else out" to the same degree. Since the action of driving itself can become thoroughly habituated, it does not require extensive attention. If no stimulus, such as the audio played in the car, grabs a hold of one's attention, it is free to roam. Within the social sciences, scholars have produced phenomenological accounts of driving, which often describe the car forming a somatic extension of its drivers (Dant 2004; Michael 2001), or in terms of its movement eliciting affective responses and shaping one's perception of the surroundings (Sheller 2004).

The way that my informants narrated their experience focused, in contrast, heavily on their introspection. Many talked about how their drive was a time to go through one's plans, hopes and worries, particularly at the beginning of the day. One example of this was a woman I got to know at the Lifeway church called Elvia. She was one of a few people I had met at

Lifeway who had been born in Mexico, and had moved to Austin as a child, to live with her relatives, as her parents stayed in Monterrey. Growing up, Elvia had surveyed much of the American religious landscape, participating both in charismatic churches as well as a congregation that was part of the Church of Christ denomination. She had found Lifeway through word of mouth, and ever since starting to attend it had felt “like family” to her. In my experience, Elvia didn’t seem like she was particularly close to others in the church though. As a member of the welcome team, she was the first contact for people coming to the services, greeting people, opening doors and handing out leaflets. She appeared to enjoy a role that gave her a tangible sense of helping out, but preferred to stay in the background during the social occasions of the church regulars. Something of a similar attitude, of detached attentiveness, was also present in her practices of praying.

When talking to me, Elvia spontaneously brought up the topic of her experience of driving. Unlike many other people that I had spoken to, Elvia did not say that sound helped her get into a reflective mood. She said she often turned the radio off altogether, “so I can hear”. Often when she is driving, she is just looking around, at other cars and the landscape passing by, and something, or someone, will pop into her mind. She may see a face, potentially of an unknown person. And she prays for them. Sometimes she will look at the people around her, other people in traffic, and pray for them. Especially motorcyclists or people on bikes, she says, as she fears for their safety.

For her, Elvia told me, Christ is like a person. "He's the one that is always with us. That teaches us, that guides us, keeps us out of danger." She says she often has an intuitive feeling that urges her to do something, or leave something undone. She believes these are occasions when she is genuinely in touch with the holy spirit. She takes it as her duty to not let these opportunities of following the spirit go by. For instance, when she feels like she should speak to someone, or an opportunity

presents itself to pray to someone. During the introspective moments when driving, when concentrated on silent prayer, she also explores these subtle directions of the spirit. And sometimes they also point towards concrete actions, even in traffic. Elvia told me how she once followed a nudge to go shopping with a homeless person, whom she had seen with a sign at a traffic junction.

At the same time, Elvia told me the car isn't the only time when she "spends time with the Lord". Elvia works at the desk of a hotel, a place that doesn't allow her to take many breaks or to display her devotional practices publicly. She says she would still pretend, for instance, to look out of the window, and have a brief moment of prayer. Or sometimes she would take a book with her, such as Timothy Keller's devotional collection of Psalms, to the restroom and read it in secret. The privacy of the car was for Elvia hence clearly defined in contrast to the public space in which she worked, where she felt constrained in exercising the devotional techniques she had grown used to.

Like Elvia, many evangelicals would interpret their internal dialogue in terms of an on-going conversation with divinity. "Because she has been walking with the lord many many years, and so I just talk to him like I'm talking to you", one of my interviewees said, while another called it "praying without ceasing". There was, however, a range of possible interpretations for these introspective moments. After all, following the basic Christian theories of personhood, the human subject was divided between flesh and spirit, and one's own thoughts were sometimes also observed with slight fear as consequence from these tainted influences. Their mental life was a consequence not only of their connection to the transcendent, but also of influences of their own flesh and other spirits. One of the people that I lived with in my evangelical community, for instance, told me about the moment that he, in his own words, realised that his thoughts were not his own. He was reminded of the fact that etymologically

Satan meant “the accuser”, and that some of the more aggressive attitudes in his own minds were actually from this dark source.

The focus on devotion on the move also inevitably gave prominence to certain senses. Personal time spent with God was generally referred to as “quiet time”, but in the car it was often the opposite. The necessary ally in creating sacred was the car’s audio equipment. Exploiting the auditory privacy, they created what Michael Bull calls the “automobile habitation” (Bull 2001), making the space of the car their own by the use of the car’s sound equipment and radio. The great majority of the people that I interviewed routinely jumped between the several Christian radio channels of Austin. On Austin’s broadcasting, it was possible to find at a dozen channels, in English and Spanish, that for part of the day had exclusively Christian content. The options for a spectrum from the volunteer-run AM frequencies with a focus on talk and sermons, all the way to some simulcasted national radio programming that has millions of listeners. American Christianity has a long history of using radio as a medium for evangelisation, beginning with the likes of Charles Fuller, whose *The Old Fashioned Revival Hour* featured folksy preaching and a gospel choir (Schultze 1988). Today it was the approximation of the commercial “morning zoo” format that held the attention of Austin evangelicals, particularly shows produced and broadcast by two local FM channels. They consisted of two recognisable radio personalities switching between so-called contemporary Christian music, and occasional quasi-testimonial messages from listeners describing their challenges and religious experiences. The whole show, as its advertising blurbs ventured to mention, was “safe for the whole family”.

The light-hearted banter of the radio hosts, however, was barely mentioned in my interviews. Many people instead talked about the difference the words of the Christian pop music that they heard. And it was not so much an aesthetic appreciation of lyrics, but instead a sense that the words were doing a certain work on them. One aspect of this power of words was that they

were perceived to have some relation of being derived from, though not equivalent to, to the text of the Bible. Within evangelical culture, it is common to ascribe a status of being ‘biblical’ to many types of textual material, even when these did not attempt to directly reflect passages from the scriptures. A sermon, for instance, or a popular book were often considered ‘biblical’ to the extent that they would in some sense convey the message of the Bible. The same quality was extended by many to the contemporary Christian music as well. This was expressed, for instance, in saying that listening to Christian music allowed one to “start the day with the truth”, which is the same expression that was often used when discussing the effect of starting one’s day with the Bible. Some of my informants even talked of a dislike of worship music, particularly when it came to music performed in their own church community, that they still chose to attend to it for its lyrical content. One of them dismissed their worship services as unnecessarily flashy and unappealing, yet said he still repeated the words intently in his mind, because “God clearly says anything with his words is holy”. The maintenance of a sense of biblical fidelity within the lyrical content of their songs was a precondition for the listening experience to be religiously significant.

### **Performing praise**

Music that was deemed “biblical” made worship possible. When evangelicals behind the wheel were singing along Christian music, as they frequently were, their song was not only for their own amusement. It was directed at somebody, namely God. Any visitor to the Sunday services at the churches I frequented would see participants sing along to the worship songs, but in a way that was hardly audible. In contrast, the car was appreciated as a place in which they could address their



appreciation to God without restraint. In doing so, they felt that they not only repeated the songs of the lyrics, but claimed them, becoming authors of new speech acts directed at God. The great majority of the evangelical songs included personal pronouns instead of definite nouns, often referring to God as “you”, or “our God”. Perhaps this convention of use of purely indexical terms subtly suggested a form of intimacy that could be established on the moment of singing. The type of linguistic acts that were taking place can be understood with Erving Goffman’s (Goffman 1981) popular schema, that distinguished between animators, authors and principals of speech. The people performing the mobile devotions of singing in their cars actually believed that they were not the *authors* of the words. Ultimately they were speaking out a language that was, if not a direct quote from the Bible, in some subtle sense biblical, or reflecting the Bible’s message. At the same time, they placed themselves as the *animators* of the text, the vehicle through which the utterance is made, as well its *principals*, seeing the song as their own a statement and reinforcement of their own convictions. In this way, it was possible to turn even the daily commute into a context that allowed people to develop complicated relationships to their own beliefs.

As I described in more detail in chapter 6, evangelicals expressed the need for a consistent and repetitive connection to biblical material also extends to practices of reading. One’s faith is something that is not only matter of stern choice, nor a stable conviction, but a matter that needs constant care and reproduction, partly through linguistic resources. It is, however, easy to see how contemporary music is a medium that lends itself more easily to such a regime of repetitive practice. For many of my informants, the Bible as a book seemed for many so vast and foreign that they couldn’t imagine to conquer it in the entirety of their lifetimes. In contrast, music with its repetitive structures, build ups and releases, provided a soothing object of attention, not requiring the same degree of discipline to be enjoyed. One of

my informants talked about this difference with a cinematic analogy, “To me it's like watching a movie with no background score. I would think that that would make the movie really dry. The music brings emotion to the words, it expresses the words in such a greater (sic) way.”

Another aspect of the experience of biblical materials was every person's affective reaction to it. To the extent that one expects a word to do its work also through an affective reaction, in a sense music is text that is already paired with its own interpretation, a sentimental tone that comes with a force that almost demands imitation. When describing what kind of worship music they listen to and what it does to them, a common range of adjectives that my informants used were: uplifting, calming, pleasant, positive, and peaceful. The choice of such terms perhaps also attests to the fact that the emotional range of the songs played both on the radio as well as Christian worship services is fairly narrow, expressing a kind of grateful, docile cheerfulness. The desired effect of the music appeared to be different during the commute than Sunday worship services. Music in the churches is seen as pathway out of the ordinary, peak experiences, tentative encounters with God and being entirely absorbed in an environment that has been designed for the multi sensorial experience down to the last detail. Music in the car, in contrast, was described as an emotional corrective, like one of many motivational techniques for which Americans were widely known. The music was set to provide a “foundation for the day”, or to “prepare one's heart”. One female doctor I interviewed put it like this:

“It just sets my day. I'm personally ministered to most through music. I notice if I don't take even just two minutes, to get a little bit of praise and worship into me, even if it is in the shower or getting ready in the morning or in the car..

She explained that since she was working in an environment with lots of “non-believers and people of other faith”, it was particularly challenging for her to “hold on to what she believes”, i.e. to speak in appropriate ways and to display the right characteristics in her relations. She felt that the music not only prepared her for this, but also stayed with her for the rest of the day. She says it “reminds me to be steadfast”. Often the car radio does not create an experience of unusual absorption, but rather undirected listening, where the music fades in and out of one’s most lucid consciousness, and the godly words echo as a feature of the background, as one hopes they will for the remainder of the day.

Another informant of mine who displayed an intense and articulated relationship to music was Peter, whose personal history I described in chapter 4. For him, music was simultaneously worship, a good in itself, as well as an index of his current spiritual well-being. When describing his daily practices, Peter said that he didn’t wake up every morning and feel overwhelmed. But in the best mornings he gets up and there are “psalms coming out of my mouth”. Before he does anything else, he just wants to praise God. Peter talked about this appreciative, praiseful way of being as something that he aims to make a “habit”, or a “lifestyle”. On the best days, Peter his “heart just follows that”, and this emotional state helps to shape his behaviour.

Yet there were distinct “seasons” in how he felt about his life. Peter also felt dedicated to his work, in a faith-based charity coordinating volunteer work between churches. Often he let his focus on the work take priority over caring for himself. Like so many people that I met in Austin, Peter maintained a friendly disposition in social occasions even during moments of stress. People who had lived together with him for some time could all the same read some cues about his moods. On some difficult days, he would sit in front of the keyboard that was in Jezreel’s

prayer room, and improvise some songs while praying through the few chords that he knew on the piano.

When I asked Peter about his relationship to music. “Man.. We were made to worship him!”, he replied. When he is singing spiritual songs, he feels like he is “made right on the inside”. He mentions some doubts that he had about his identity and self-worth that he had as a younger man, and how his conversion allowed him to overcome those doubts. When he attends to worship music, he feels the same emotional security, on a smaller scale. Singing is for Peter something that is close to prayer, like prayer with rhythm. During a song, he thinks about the various challenges in his life. When he sings by himself, he also spontaneously comes up with relevant lyrics. Prayer for him becomes more intense, when it is combined with music, and he can continue longer.

During my fieldwork, I also encountered a lot of scorn and even parody of the type of worship music that was played on Christian radio stations. This was particularly true among young people that had spent their youth growing up with the genre of Christian contemporary music, in many cases with their parents keeping them away from fully secular music. One person from New Church Austin, who like many in Austin was an aspiring musician himself, derisively called the music of Sunday services “Coldplay karaoke”. He thought the music played should reflect local idioms and concerns, instead of poorly mimicking global trends of popular music. For him, like many other critics of Christian rock music, also the basic tone of the music was unambitious. It was sugar-coated, emotionally flat and full of platitudes. In this respect, my informant’s points echoed long debates within Christianity about the place of popular tastes or outright kitsch in religious practice. Colleen McDannell, among others, traces the social history of the use of kitsch within popular practice as well as the theological thinking that in the twentieth century often favoured the detached and indifferent aesthetic of modern art (McDannell 1998, p.166). McDonnell

makes the point that Protestants were more prone than Catholics to utilise and provide for the preferences of the larger public because of the structure of independent congregations, and how liberal Protestants want “art more in the with contemporary secular art” (ibid, p. 197).

At the same time, I doubt that many of the frequent listeners of Christian radio were unaware of its excessively positive tone. Their experience, however, suggests that this emotional quality could be experienced not as something pandering to their taste, but actually a trial. Listening to the music, I was occasionally reminded of the attitude of one of my previous housemates, who insisted on responding even to difficult moments in his life with a smiling prayer. I had seen him empathetically listen to the worries of homeless people in the neighbourhood we lived in, and respond with by saying “it takes guts to worship Jesus in this kinds of moments”. It seemed that something similar was happening for the many who drove to work in Austin, with their familial and professional worries in mind, listening to the excessively affirmative worship music. The emotional flatness of worship music was not so much a denial of the existence of suffering, as a way to try to courageously overcome it by taking on the sentimental stance widespread in the local expression of one’s faith. It was an attempt to induce an experience of security and love despite the challenges of the circumstances. Music was hence an area in which people can explore and create connections between words, emotions and their faith.

### **Christian music and biblical fidelity**

Music has always been a source of both inspiration but also tension for American evangelicalism. Musical innovation reflected and embodied new spiritual movements, but could just as well hinder the previous generation’s adoption of new ideas.

Contemporary American church music has been thoroughly influenced by popular and in particular rock music, and there were occasional debates about its religious consequences both among high-profile evangelical authors as well as between lay people. Today's concern about religious music is the fear of it losing its distinctiveness, of being "all things to all people" (Graves & Fillingim 2004, p.45) in the sense of moving towards common denominators. Many fear that the music losing its capacity to communicate the gospel and the distinctive nature of Christian worship as a religious act.

What exactly the conditions were for music to be "biblical", as my informants called it, was difficult to define explicitly. Stylistically there was little continuity with what had historically been the music performed inside of churches and as part of liturgy, such as hymns or gospel. An endless variety of styles, from hip hop to heavy metal, were marketed as 'Christian music', with an well-developed production, retail and promotion industry serving this part of the market (Hendershot 2004). What allowed a performer to count themselves as part of a Christian genre was lyrical distinction as well as the expectation to express Christian ministry as the ultimate purpose of their work (J. R. Howard & Streck 1999, p.54).

The popular Christian radio programmes in Austin would exclusively focus on pop and soft rock music, that often left little to doubt about their religious purpose with their explicit mentions of Jesus and use of biblical phrases. One good example of the style of music that was placed, that was also one a global powerful source in shaping the musical habits of evangelical Christians, was been an Australian church called Hillsong. Their music is surprisingly ubiquitous in global evangelical culture, and I have encountered them in worship services not only in North American, but also South American and European churches. As a Pentecostal church, Hillsong differed theologically from the churches that my informants belonged to. Yet the most frequent criticism raised against Hillsong, as well as

much of contemporary Christian music, concerns their vagueness and lack of explicit theological messages. Even many of the songs that are used in worship services replace terms for God with first-person pronouns, “you” or “he”. Since the music often speaks explicitly and emotively of love and intimacy to “you” or “him, it is not difficult to see how such music could be misunderstood as music about interpersonal love relationships. Evangelical commentators referred to the style, derogatively, as “Jesus as boyfriend”.

There is clearly nothing new about the potential overlap and mixing of means used to express love to God and love of a worldly kind. Many mystics and members of monastic orders in medieval times, for instance, used explicitly erotic and bodily language to describe their union with Christ. The facile interpretation would be to see these descriptions as outcomes of repressed sexuality, an interpretation rejected by many authors, such as Simone Weil:

“To reproach mystics with loving God by means of the faculty of sexual love is as though one were to reproach a painter with making pictures by means of colors composed of material substances. We haven’t anything else with which to love.” (Weil 1956, p.472)

In practical terms, the way that the large majority of Christian listeners demarcated between Christian and secular music appeared to be simple. They turned to certain gatekeepers, the commercial broadcasters that claimed a specifically Christian identity with specifically Christian programming, and expected them to have made an informed choice on the matter. Christian sensibilities required a distinction between the religious and profane in music, and commercial operators were quick to provide material that adapted to these expectations. Evangelicals in Austin and the United States more widely were delegating a responsibility to radio channels not unlike that which they had given to churches. They expected these authorities to translating

biblical ideas into cultural forms meaningful to them, while maintaining conformity to the spirit of the scriptures. The agreement was analogical to the analysis of Susan Harding of evangelical magazines aimed at young women in the United States (Harding 2009). Harding has previously pointed out how within Christianity participants in communication often occupy two unequal positions, that of “the lost” that listen, and the “saved” that speak (Harding 2000, p.42). The Christian radio channels are, just like the evangelical magazines, “unorthodox in the sense of being unlicensed”. They implicitly claim to channel the scriptures, and ultimately God, but do so without explicit authorisation. Neither the Christian performers nor the organisations running the broadcasting operation wield the kind of institutional accreditations and affiliations that typically validate the position of churches. Just like other channels in which quotidian practices and cultural products take on a religious role, The central role played by radio as a medium hence plays a part in the “dispersion of biblical authority” (Harding 2009, p.471) and the Protestant principle of the priesthood of the believer.

### **7.3 Conclusions**

Simon Coleman is one of several authors who has called for an anthropological study of biblicism (Coleman 2009). Such a comparative study should be distinguished from the study of the Bible as such and looking beyond the established theological and hermeneutic concerns, to focus instead of the “context, indexicality, and performance” surrounding the holy text. This chapter has hopefully showed how contemporary American evangelicalism is fertile ground for making such comparison. Donald E. Miller suggested that one aspect typical to “new



paradigm Protestantism” is a continuing commitment to evangelical biblicism, combined with a looseness about the finer details of hermeneutics (D. E. Miller 1997), a description that with some qualifications also extends to the conservative evangelicals of my fieldsite. By tracing two distinct practices in which my informants were in contact with what they considered biblical material, digital reading devices and Christian radio, my chapter has touched on the prevailing "undecidability about exactly what kind of object the Bible is” (Bialecki 2009).

In addition to a study of material biblicism, the chapter gave further detail on the work involved in building a sense of intimate connection with God, as it was detailed in chapter 6. As Luhrmann details in her work, being able to experience God as a continuing presence and figure akin to a caring friend requires effort and deliberate practice. Over and above the practices of prayer and listening to music that Luhrmann describes in detail, this chapter talked particularly about the material arrangements and practices that people make use of when wanting to make the devotional attention to God a habitual part of their mundane life.

More specifically, the chapter discussed how contemporary forms of media, radio and the digital bible, help with one challenge of mediation particular to the evangelical emphasis to scripture. Evangelicals generally accepted that God’s written word was the primary (if not necessarily exclusive) medium through which experiences of the divine took place. The Bible in its various forms was not only the most important and reliable way to learn about God, but also had to offer didactically relevant resources, that could be used for ethical self-improvement as well as normative direction in everyday life. The obvious challenge in establishing this relevancy is bridging the gap between the old narratives in scriptures and contemporary experience, a challenge that many anthropologists already have studied (e.g. Coleman 2000; Bielo 2009).

The ethnographic data from this chapter suggests that this production of relevancy is in part aided by some of the affordances of modern technologies that mediate the scriptures. Christian radio, also playing songs with lyrics that profess to be “biblical” in nature, allows the words to be received in a wider range of contexts, and during periods of time when individuals are switching contexts of their lives and preparing to act in another location. The digital Bible not only makes the Bible travel more easily, but presents its contents through reading lists that can be selected based on the concerns and preferences of its readers. These types of opportunities for recontextualisation help produce relevance.

Protestant material culture is generally known for its austerity, and elevation of words of material manifestation of God. My ethnographic material points to the fact that the Protestant emphasis on language can also make possible a certain creativity for new material arrangements and a proliferation of new practices for transmitting and consuming texts. These move to fill in everyday spaces and individual needs in a way that can just as well be carefully designed or thoroughly accidental. With handheld digital devices, a new kind of network of actors is created, one that is highly responsive to the daily constraints and practices of its users. The carefully designed network attempts to bring together not only technology, but churches, publishers, highly designed user interfaces, to create an effective transmission of the holy text to disciplined users. In this respect, the car appears as something like the opposite of digital reading technology. Within social scientific literature, the car and car-based mobility more widely are often described as the paradigmatic example of producer of externalities, or of unintended consequences. It is what Chris Pinney calls the “automonster”, a vehicle that offers a promise of movement without constraints, but whose effects end up engulfing our bodies, cities and even world politics (Pinney 2002).

The chapter showed how the biblical verses of music on Christian radio were used in the emotional work required when transition from one domain of life to another, and to maintain a constant disposition of sacredness. Songs are arranged so their message is simultaneously biblical and “uplifting”. The manner in which digital devices allowed reading to become part of everyday life, in contrast, recalls Elizabeth Shove’s studies of time use and the contemporary notion of convenience as temporal flexibility (Shove 2003). On the one hand, individuals try attend to their their devotional activities, such as reading or prayer, in a systematic yet flexible manner, potentially scheduling them but also making use of chances to attend to the Bible and prayer in openings between activities. It hence may be that the general Protestant hesitation about codified ritual and processes of devotion gives its approach the necessary flexibility to accommodate religious material into mundane events and to serve ordinary worldly needs.

## 8 Conclusions

I began the thesis with a discussion of anthropological work that studies religion through its forms of mediation. This was the idea that religion could be understood by focusing on its practices, “the middle grounds that substantiate them” (Engelke 2010b, p.371), and above all as a practice that manifests the divine or transcendent in some tangible form that can be experienced. I had returned from my fieldwork with the intuition that a crucial way for evangelicals in Austin to make their God accessible to them, in addition to the scriptures, was by attending to and committing to interpersonal relationships, specifically ones that were defined by local ideals of intimacy. For them, relationships were meaningful for two reasons: Since Christian ethics mandated a love for others, relationships were a key site for expressing and performing what it was to be a moral person. Those same relationships were also the way that people sought closeness and knowledge about the divine. In practice, both of these aspects were often subsumed into each other. To overcome the distance to God was to partake in a personal transformation towards being a more pious person. Hence the thesis describes the difference that intimate relationships, as well as practices focused on the use of Bible, make for evangelical self-formation.

To do this, I have relied on the work of one influential strand of the anthropology of ethics, that examines normative life as self-directed practices of discipline, working towards creating subjects that reflect goals inherent to religious traditions. In these conclusions, I will select in particular the work of Saba Mahmood as a partner for conversation, pointing out what seem to me the limitations of applying her theoretical insights in my fieldsite. This is not meant as an exercise in refutation or to claim that Mahmood is incapable of explaining evangelical phenomena. Rather I am making use of her brilliance of

exposition, to both translate aspects of evangelical practice into a theoretical language and to compare it with evangelical methods as an alternative path of self-formation. For the rest of the conclusion, Mahmood's work provides a pragmatic narrative that allows me to repeat and link various aspects of my empirical chapters into a single argument.

In the thesis, I have often separated from my ethnographic material what I have seen as fairly stable and iterable modes of building relationships, between people, texts and divine entities. My analysis has not focused extensively on describing the unique lives and biographies of particular individuals. Instead I have worked in fairly abstract terms, describing cultural and relational logics of evangelical personhood and how these underpin certain religious practices that are portable and repeatable in character, even when they are not necessarily formal or codified. They exist as aspects of the evangelical "part cultures" (Coleman 2010, p.800) that can itself be exported across contexts.

Such an analysis begs the question why these techniques would appear prevalent in contemporary Austin, and how exactly these forms of practice correspond with wider structures. Throughout the text, I have made this connection liberally with the usual tools of the sociological imagination, highlighting correlations and contradictions with larger economic and social factors. One of the structuring influences is naturally the heritage of Christianity (albeit it culturally complex, cf. Cannell 2006). In concord with my starting point in the notion of mediation, the basic dimensions of variation in these practices appear to derive from the options available for making the Christian God present. They played on the ambiguity of a God that was separate from the world and had been abridged with it through the figure of Jesus (Engelke 2007). Hence evangelicals were able to move between modes of morality that could be dichotomised as either finding direction through participation in God's being, or making relevant the scriptural revelations of an absent deity. In this respect the relational logic was as complex as that of neo-

charismatic churches (Bialecki 2009), even when their teachings differed.

Another structuring factor can be discerned from the structure of my thesis itself. Each empirical chapter focuses on a particular type of relationship, such as those inside of church communities, with people in need, or the relationship that evangelicals have with themselves. The organisation and trajectories of these relationships varied, but what united them was the aim to draw ethical inspiration for appropriate action from religious sources. This notion, that also extended to other life domains that my thesis did not cover, I connected in the beginning of the thesis with Christian Smith's concept of "engaged orthodoxy", or the hope to remain dedicated to this single source of subjectivity while engaging in the full range of secular contexts.

This concluding chapter draws these elements together in two sections. The first of them discusses how local experiences of intimacy shaped practices of self-formation, by comparison to Saba Mahmood's ethical theory. The last section of the chapter pulls together conclusions about how evangelical practices fall short of their discursively established goals and ideals. It suggests that the reality of multiple, incommensurate logics for mediation and personhood may lend the ethical practice adaptability.

## **8.1 Ethical affordances of intimacy**

I will use Saba Mahmood's work on embodiment and habituation (Mahmood 2005; also Hirschkind 2001; Asad 1993) as a way to translate and put into context aspects of evangelical ethical practice. As I have explained above, Mahmood's work stems from an attempt to understand the form of ethical self-formation within the Islamic tradition, making use of conceptual

tools from virtue ethics and post-structuralism. In short, Mahmood presents a critique of liberal theories that place the autonomous subject in the centre of both ethical action as well as emancipatory political projects. Based on the work of Michel Foucault, Mahmood describes subjectivity as always placed within historically particular discursive traditions that include virtues and norms external to the subject, such as humility and the fear of God. The study of morality hence ought not limit itself to the description of these moral codes, but rather describe the ways in which persons create a relationship between themselves, inclusive of their embodied existence, and these moral codes and other cultural resources.

For the purposes of the present analysis, I want to highlight a small number of aspects in Mahmood's work that will, if only partially, help us understand also the context of my fieldwork. Firstly, Mahmood understands work on the self as a form of internalisation of moral resources that takes place through the progressive production of pious dispositions. It aims towards the point in which virtuous inclinations become automatic and involuntary, "a 'natural' part of one's disposition" (Mahmood 2005, p.130). In Mahmood's account, the effectiveness of the formative activities depends on a correspondence between the exterior markers such as bodily acts and the ideals in question. Wearing a veil, for instance, will make a person act in a humble way even if they don't necessarily feel so at the time, until eventually the disposition becomes so natural to a person that it would be nigh impossible not to follow it. Hence the logic of the practice is one where reflective freedom is applied in a way that increasingly limits this freedom, in light of an ideal of more authentic being that is realised habitually.

Secondly, it is worth noting that this logic of practice implies a particular structure over time. This is what Saba Mahmood refers to when she writes about the "sequencing of the performatives" (2005, p.163), or the manner in which the practices targeted at shaping one's body for ethical ambitions

follow each other. Mahmood claims that the ethical formation in the mosque movement has the logic of “sedimented and cumulative character of reiterated performances” (ibid). Similar to Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, each iteration builds on past ones and is judged against a common standard, which is expected to measure the increased proficiency of ethical performances.

Mahmood’s theory does shed light on some aspects of evangelical life in Austin. One prevalent daily devotional activity, which I described in chapter 7, was listening to radio broadcasts of Christian worship music. Contemporary Christian rock music was understood by my informants as containing lyrics that were “biblical” in character, and the affective responses they held to the music to “prepare one’s heart” for pious behaviour. Worship was often in the uniquely solitary part of the, namely the morning commute, with the hope that the response to the divine words that was carried over to worldly activities such as one’s work life. This was a mundane way to build up “visceral capacities” and the “affective-volitional responsiveness” (Hirschkind 2001) that helped perform a particular set of ethical virtues, which were especially important for many middle-class and service professions that required a perfection of “emotion work” (Hochschild 1981; Moreton 2010) Also the theologically central practice of reading scriptures was understood as a method of self-discipline. As I discussed in chapters 6 and 7, the most committed of evangelicals attempted to read the Bible daily. Their hope was that an increased contact the holy word would go hand in hand with an experience of intersubjectivity or outright dependency on the Holy Spirit.

Interpersonal intimacy also had a role to play in the progressive constitution of personal dispositions. One social form in which an internalisation of norms and intimate interpersonal relationships overlapped was what evangelicals referred to as “accountability”, where other people were recruited to play the role of exterior conscience, making other people conscious of



their misdeeds and supporting them in keeping up standards. Relations of accountability were one of the justifications for evangelical small groups, though during my fieldwork the actual practice of such groups was as a rule not directed at judging or directing behaviour. Yet in principle intimacy that is required and constituted by disclosing personal details in small groups is meant to provide the occasion for corrective interventions and encouragement by others. Where accountability turned out to be more prevalent was in the social programmes where evangelicals volunteered to work with people in need. In chapter 5, I showed that volunteers sometimes encouraged recipients of help to act in ways that conformed to evangelical norms, such as those of “biblical masculinity”. The intimate knowledge of the others in this case helped maintain accountability, because intimate interaction provided opportunities for verbal challenges and reminders, as well as means to assess whether material provision for the other was productive for achieving the set norms. In the register of accountability, intimate relationships hence become external supports for the performance of what Michael Lambek has termed the “forensic person” (2013), continuous identities that are responsible for their past and future deeds.

Yet there were moments in evangelical ethical practice that appeared to qualify Mahmood’s model of gradual embodiment of external norms. In such moments normative ideals were not pre-established and given, but rather they emerged in the course of action or their correct manner of application learned. These were moments that included indeterminacy and a questioning of what is currently acceptable, and not only at points of failure of ethical practice but as its intended outcome. Intimate relationships in particular often functioned as a site in which the relevancy of Christian virtues was discovered, and ethical shortcomings or character faults previously hidden were made obvious. How this ethical form differs from those previously described is made apparent in the analysis from chapter 5. While evangelicals that hoped for accountability used their relationships as means to

encourage the following of norms, in other occasions the unique trajectory of interaction in relationships was a way to overcome the prescriptions of normative categories. For them, the intimate knowledge they had of another person was sufficient grounds for avoiding labels such as “the homeless”, and they felt their aid not to be motivated by a sense of duty but by what was internal to the relationships, its history and particularity. It implies a connection in which one’s responsibilities and hopes are overdetermined by the interaction with and knowledge of the other person, and open to a negotiation with reference to parameters internal to the relationship. One could compare intimacy in this function to Henrietta Moore’s “ethical imagination” (Moore 2013), that is means for bringing normativity into relationships that are inherently generative and inventive in character.

This was hence an example of a practice that was not so much goal-directed as it was helping participants discover what the appropriate goals were in the first place. Chapter 4 discussed this aspect even more explicitly. It focuses on the experience of the community of evangelicals that had relocated to the inner-city neighbourhood of St John’s following the church’s hope to recommit to a sacrificial service of the poor. How the evangelicals that lived in the neighbourhood experienced their presence there was more subtle than this public discourse. The concept that best captured the ethical form of their life turned out to be less one of sacrifice or the reflexive control of one’s selfish desires. Many of my ethnographic examples related to the challenges of close cohabitation that were typical for the younger members of the local evangelical community, and that produced a kind of intimacy between inhabitants that was enforced on them by their living circumstances. These challenges, as well as property-related crime and chance encounters with neighbours in the area, were valued for their potential to interrupt the habitual functioning of one’s life’s patterns. They were interpreted and narrated, in a manner recalling Augustine’s retrospective reinterpretation of his biography in light of God’s providence, as

moments through which God can yield an edifying influence on individual lives. I applied Jarrett Zigon's (2007) notion of "moral breakdown", or events that force a conscious ethical reflection of issues at hand, to understand the process. Hence what many evangelicals in the neighbourhood appreciated about life in the neighbourhood was precisely its tendencies to interrupt the regular patterns of action, the habituated forms that were potentially associated with worldly influences and their embodied desires.

An open-ended approach to moral resources could also be found in the way that people related to the scriptures. In chapter 3 I showed that the discussions within evangelical small groups, carefully prepared to foster an intimacy of sharing personal details, also aided the production of biblical relevancy. In the knowledge of the personal narratives of others, participants could perform a task similar to that done by pastors in their sermons and suggest analogical extensions that reached from biblical narratives and principles to biographical life situations. It combated one of the central problems of literalist biblicism, namely the need to make a translation between the holy text that was the universal to all and the particular life circumstances of individuals. Chapter 7 showed how this dilemma was eased also by the use of new media tools that allowed for a geographic extension of contact with sacred language. The manner in which digital bibles or Christian radio extended to places, such as commutes or breaks where the Bible was read, gave the holy texts another context that aided its application.

As I explained above, Mahmood describes ethical self-formation as a process where change is cumulative. Practitioners approach some point of perfection, perhaps in an asymptotic manner, getting closer without ever entirely internalising the ideal. Many accounts of ethical practice from the anthropology of Christianity and Pentecostalism, that could be counted as part of Fennella Cannell's call for "ethnographies of change" (in commentary to Robbins 2007b), appear like reversal of this form.

These accounts take seriously the fact that, from the informant's point of view, ethical change aims at or is narrated in terms of discontinuities. Girish Daswani, for instance, writes about the appropriate administration of openness and indeterminacy in Ghanaian Pentecostalism that equips people to respond to the "rupture" in their personal biographies created by conversion (Daswani 2013; see also Reinhardt 2014). In these models change is not gradual but defined through punctures in time.

For the forms of normative practices that I contrasted with Mahmood's theory, neither of these types of temporal organisation appear entirely accurate. What I would like to suggest is that there is a dynamism to intimate relationships that itself could serve as an imperfect analogy to the rhythm of evangelical ethical practice. Within people's relational life there was a tendency for both the long-term as well as abrupt developments. The reasoning used for pursuing or not pursuing new intimate relationships was similar in complexity to any mundane thought about relationship, and included elements of experimentation, exploration and entrepreneurialism, as well as finding a balance between existing commitments (Das 2010). Even if particular relationships that endure over time may grow in intensity according to some scale of mutuality or exposure, as a meeting of two intentional beings they are always outside of the control of any single party, and any life typically cycles through the closing and opening of new intimacies. Particularly many of my young informants in Austin were mobile people for whom change in professional and personal social circumstances was a constant. This is for me one explanation for the quality of change over time in evangelical ethical life that fills it with cyclical periods of questioning, rather than a pattern of ever deepening piety. Evangelicals themselves humorously note how many times they have been born again and churches present quasi-regular rallies of repentances, that interspersed project of escalating adherence with moments where one's basic ethical coordinates are redrawn. This ethnographic material hence supports Joel

Robbins' (Robbins 2014) claim that ethnographers need to take seriously the claims of their informants to the reality of discontinuous change and temporal organisation. What I have suggested is that some part of the oscillation between continuity and rupture in the life of Austin evangelicals can be understood by the fact that interpersonal relationships, conceived as a central means for self-development, give the practices their own temporal pattern.

Thus far I have highlighted the ethical potential inherent in the indeterminacy of human interaction. I want to close this section by pointing out an affordance that is in a sense opposite, namely the capacity to find closure, structure and boundedness within the relational practice I have described. This capacity stems from the fact that intimacy offers not only resources for the inculcation of dispositions or ethical reflexivity. It is also a process through which responsibilities and commitments between people are formed (Lambek 2010a, p.27). The type of person that is developed in part by these relationships is one that is responsible to and holds duties towards other people. This is explicit in the local notion of evangelical small groups, which strived to be interdependent communities of care, even where my informants' families were largely materially self-sufficient. And for relationships that are explicitly about care, as in social ministry, intimacy is expected to mediate and modify the manner in which these obligations are both understood and fulfilled.

In chapter 5 I discussed the various affordances that intimacy provides particularly in solving the dilemma of "limits to giving" that those engaged in social ministry faced. This referred to the ambiguous place that the provision of material goods to people in need had for evangelical participants. Though gifting was ideally conceived as a reflection of the grace that believers themselves had received from God, and hence had to mirror its unconditionality, relations of exchange soon had to develop some elements of reciprocity to avoid the fear of "enabling" unproductive behaviour by the recipients of aid.

The use of intimacy as the context for the establishment of relations of aid makes this contradiction liveable, in that it not only escalates interpersonal expectations, but channels them to a finite number of persons. One way of thinking about this is by reference to the material “anchoring” that I have shown necessary to practices of intimacy. Chapter 5, for instance, detailed how the production of intimacy sometimes took place during carefully crafted moments, often around a meal, that allowed people to respond to each other in a manner that was spontaneous. The description of small groups in chapter 3, moreover, showed how the domestic environment of the small groups allowed people to mobilise the various courtesies and expectations of hospitality that they had been brought up with to provide structure for their interaction. In both cases relationships developed through the offer of finite “undivided” or “quality” time. Such objectifications of intimacy by necessity restricts the range of people that can participate. In this sense intimacy offers a cut to the potentially limitless scope of normative demands the potentially large number of people that they could apply to. It is Marilyn Strathern’s influential idea that the expansive logic of the dividual and the network of relations that make up a person has to be “eclipsed” at some point, as in a ceremonial display or initiation ritual that highlights one strand of the network while hiding others (Strathern 1996). Just so intimacy is able to “cut” the network of ethical conditioning and allow the embodiment of godly unconditionality. In this way the closure related to local ideals of intimacy made the dilemma of “limits to giving” liveable.

## **8.2 Failure and adaptability in ethical practice**

Though human relationships in the church community were a matter of high stakes and complicated ethical import - from the

expression of religious duty, to the development of certain ethical dispositions - there was little sense of an authoritative form for carrying them out. In many anthropological accounts of charismatic Christianity (e.g. Csordas 1997), prayer meetings are understood as a kind of anti-ritual, in that ideally are a form spontaneous action, free of the formalism and codification associated with established ritual. For contemporary evangelicals, to talk of “relationships” was to invoke a similar structural opposition (Elisha 2011, pp.20-21). To perform relationships was something that could not be taught by the religious establishment or be done by following instruction in the first place. Working on relationships drew on the basic skills of hospitality, manners and politeness, and the structure of feeling of informal joviality Hervé Varenne has identified in Americans, and called the sense of being free to “drop in anytime” (Varenne 1986). What loose direction the church and other community leaders gave to social occasions was only implicitly contained within the “interactive frames” (Tannen & Wallat 1987) that defined expectations for interaction. Despite the significant stakes and loose definition, every evangelical was expected to know how to do intimacy. Consequently, it was no wonder religiously meaningful relationships also had the potential for frustration and awkwardness.

Potential tensions became particularly obvious in situations where people were intentionally trying to create intimate relationships. Chapter 5 described “relational ministry” events, which were designed to create specifically spontaneous interaction between evangelical volunteers and people in need. The ideals implicit to such a design were however easily disappointed, especially since the organisation of the ministry aimed at reoccurring and long-term relationships. These revealed the instrumentality inherent to participation, differing agendas, and the potential for a need of defining the relationship in terms of an exchange. These challenging experiences within ministry could engender doubt, but were often also religiously formative.

One way in which the negotiating the terms of these relationships of aid became religiously significant I described using Michael Scott's (2007) notion of onto-praxy, the idea that people develop their ontological commitments through the quotidian problems and activities they take part in. The evangelical volunteers that were confident in maintaining a posture of unconditional giving with people in need were assisted by their conviction that in their aid-related activities they could participate in and be directed by God.

The ethical practice, however, that was most revealing about how evangelical responded to a sense of falling short of ideals or outright guilt was regular devotional reading, as described in chapter 6. For committed believers, this was an activity where, perhaps paradoxically, expectations for an appropriate type of performance were set high, yet the activity was to take place without a sense of effort or exertion. In principle attending to the Bible was meant to be a nourishing moment in which the reader could partake and be shaped by the agency of God. Drawing from the philosophy of language of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, I explore the reason why reading in particular was a devotional form not well suited for producing such experiences. Following Merleau-Ponty's work, reading tends to move attention away from the embodied conditions for its comprehension, and thus "promotes its own oblivion".

The same chapter also made the point that there is, within evangelical Christianity, what is like a relief valve for pressures related to perceptions of one's own failure. Ever since Augustinian reading of original sin, humanity's failure to attain moral perfection has been a theological given. Like in many other religions (see e.g. Laidlaw 1995 for Jainism; and Lester 2005 for Catholics), developing a sensitivity to one's personal limitations for reaching perfection is a precondition for ethical insight. The potential failure of ethical self-formation is hence folded into the theological narrative that defines it. Within the local American moral vocabulary this was understood in terms of



“having grace for oneself”, as it was explained in chapter 6. To be graceful for oneself was about developing second-order preferences towards one’s own performance in matters of piety, affirming them regardless of outcomes. With an attitude that would equal God’s unconditional love, a person is to accept oneself, warts and all. The local motivational theory furthermore understood grace as an active source of ethical capability. While earlier Protestants, in the classical account of Max Weber, engaged in worldly activities in order to attain certainty of their election, in a way the reverse is true for contemporary evangelicals. Almost without exception my informants were already convinced of their own salvation, and were looking to the reality of that state as a source of emotional inspiration that would allow them to step out into the world with the confidence of their own faith.

As I’ve mentioned, anthropologists including Fenella Cannell have claimed that the discipline’s treatment and relative neglect of Christianity has been caused by the impression of it as the “impossible religion” (Cannell 2005, p.339), with a cosmology that is based on a radical discontinuity between transcendence and the visible world. Cannell uses the example of João de Pina-Cabral’s ethnography of popular Portuguese Catholicism, that recognises local saints that have “incorrupt bodies” (de Pina-Cabral 1969). Pina-Cabral reads these rituals in light of the fact that local Christianity effectively denies the value of bodily existence, sexuality and fertility, despite the fact that these are inevitable present in the reproduction of human society. Cannell claims that anthropologists have come to expect a similar world-denying asceticism from Christianity in every local instantiation, as a compensation for this cosmological tension. Hence the anthropological prejudice in the past has been to universalise a disjuncture that necessitates failure in religious practice. In contrast, the recent work on anthropology of ethics, such that I have cited that focuses on Islamic practice, has been accused of the opposite tendency. For instance Samuli Schielke (Schielke

2009) has tried to qualify Saba Mahmood's work on the Muslim piety, pointing to how even the most devout experience value conflict, ambiguity and disappointment. In Schielke's view, Mahmood's focus is too much on understanding projects of self-formation in their own terms, failing to acknowledge the outcomes of such practices. From his ethnographic observations, he describes cases such as conflicting values or conscious breaking of self-discipline, that go against the discourse internal to Islamic piety that sees it as a perfectionist project. Citing Katherine Ewing (Ewing 1990), Schielke claims that Mahmood's account of the mosque movement suffers from an "illusion of wholeness", in not including the element of contradiction on ethical practice.

In this thesis I have tried to capture both the several incommensurate scales applied in evangelical life projects, as well as their occasional incapacity to provide meaningful progress in my informant's biographical projects of self-development. As such, in my analysis I have maintained the tension between Christianity as an "impossible religion" and the fault line of an "illusion of wholeness". I've sought to understand the creative agency of my informants that allows them to retain an impression of the coherence and comprehensiveness of piety as means for improving their lives.

The stakes for being able to successfully use these self-techniques are significant. Like Egyptians described by Schielke, my informants lived in an environment in which the discursive space is dominated by the claim that Christian piety is the unique vehicle to a successful life. This demand on evangelical ethical practice can be located in the ambitions determined by the posture of "engaged orthodoxy", which defines worldly culture even outside of Christian authority as the stage for living a good life, and the experiences of doing so as an important source of ethical inspiration. It stretches the applicability of techniques of self-formation, while still maintaining that they have a distinct ontological basis. Admittedly my ethnography has focused on the

pursuits for evangelical piety close to explicitly religious communities and practices, instead of focusing on the specific life domains that the techniques sought to improve, such as familial or professional life. I did observe some individuals turning to their faith in moments such as being out of work or losing their marriages, occasionally with results that were far from ideal. While in practice my informants would direct their life according to numerable influences, the most committed would consistently return to the practices of their faith as an answer. As I've described, the strengthening of interpersonal relationships, for instance through invitations to small groups, was a common approach for improving the lives of those both inside of the church community as well as when reaching to those outside of it.

Lastly I wish to claim that the fundamental antinomies that I have described as inherent to evangelical culture - such as the ambiguous relation between God as being accessible in the immanent environment as opposed to the timeless scriptures, or the logics of ethical practice that alternate between accumulation of dispositions and the discovery of new prerogatives - may be something that evangelical ethical practice draws on flexibly when facing ethical conundrums. This was most clearly displayed in the material presented in chapter 5, that showed how participants in evangelical ministry negotiate between various logics of subjectivity.

In this sense my work is part of a body of work that understands religious practice as a response to or dealing with incommensurate or outright paradoxical aspects of human existence and imaginaries of reality. Within anthropology and the social sciences more generally, several authors have understood religious life in this vein (e.g. Engelke 2007; Keane 2007; Csordas 1997; Bynum 2011; Zizek & Milbank 2009). They present a comparative register not only of tensions local to each case, but also differing arguments about whether this tension plays out as a necessarily imperfect purification, a dynamic

dialectic or a paradox. For my case I find illustrative the work of Caroline Humphrey (1997), who contrasted two logics of morality. She sees Western Christianity as the paradigm of a consistent and universally applicable moral frame. It stands in contrast to her ethnographic understanding of Mongolia, where ethical life depends on multivocality, pliability and the possibility for people of a choice from a range of ethical models. While the official discourse of the evangelical churches I visited largely fit Humphrey's generalisation about the Western church, my ethnographic work shows that the ethical projects that my informants lived through were more complex. There the tensions specific to evangelical Christianity proved as productive as they were problematic (for a similar argument see Forbess 2015). Hence the different iterations of evangelical subject positions options are used as a resource in a creative way, in order to make the evangelical framing of people as ethical agents relevant to a wide variety of life situations. In this way, the cosmological disjuncture and normative multiplicity inherent within evangelical culture make it more plausible to follow the project of engaged orthodoxy.

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