Facilitating spiritual understanding through hermeneutical and critical Bible engagement: What can be learned from the experience of a group of Christians reading the Bible with a course developed from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders?

ROCHE, AMY

Facilitating spiritual understanding through hermeneutical and critical Bible engagement: What can be learned from the experience of a group of Christians reading the Bible with a course developed from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders?

Abstract

This study responds to concerns about the gap that has been identified between biblical scholarship and pastoral uses of the Bible. It does so by exploring whether critical hermeneutical approaches that are found to be helpful in scholarship can be made accessible to ordinary Christians in a way that enriches their faith. In order to investigate this, I first develop a Bible course from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders, whose approach to the Fourth Gospel integrates Christian Spirituality with critical scholarship. This course is then used in an empirical study with a group of Christians in order to see how the hermeneutical theory is experienced by participants.

The first part of the thesis gives an analysis of Schneiders' work in its wider context, and then offers an account of the methodology and context used in developing the study. I also describe the context of the study, which took place with women at an international church in Lebanon. Findings showed that one benefit of critical questions is that they allow Scripture to speak not only in ways that support what is believed, but also take readers beyond their existing presuppositions. An evaluation is given to show how specific aspects of the reading approach help the process of understanding. However, facilitating this in the context of a group required the question to expand beyond hermeneutical concerns. It was crucial to facilitate a sense safety, and openness. Insights are offered from educational theory, which are shown to be valuable to hermeneutical and spiritual perspectives of understanding. This is argued to be most helpfully viewed as a multi-directional dialogue that requires facilitation between readers and text, with one another, and with God.

Facilitating spiritual understanding through hermeneutical and critical Bible engagement: What can be learned from the experience of a group of Christians reading the Bible with a course developed from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders?

Submitted by
Amy Roche

A thesis in one volume
for the degree of Doctor of Theology and Ministry

Department of Theology and Religion
University of Durham
2019

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements

This dissertation would not have been possible to complete without the help and support of a number of people.

I wish to thank my wonderful supervisors Professor Chris Cook and Dr. Richard Briggs. In particular, as my first supervisor, I owe a great deal to the virtuous reading patience of Richard Briggs. I appreciate his enthusiasm, insightful comments, and steady confidence that has been like an anchor.

I also wish to thank for the participants of my study who I cannot name, but who allowed me to share in their spiritual journeys. I am honoured to bring to light your voices.

My thanks also go to Mary Daniel for her patient proof reading.

I would like to express my appreciation those who provided financial support the support: To the Bible Society for their generous award, and to the Women's Continuing Ministerial Education Trust, and the Diocese of Winchester.

Thanks also go to my loving family; for the encouragement of parents who have made me believe I can accomplish the things I set out to do. My deepest appreciate also goes to my children Abbie, Beth, Grace, Zach and Levi, and sons-in-law, Christian and Chris; for the various ways they have empathised with the ups and downs of the research journey, and graciously accepted as normal the strange times of the day their mother has been found to be writing at her desk over the last six years.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my husband, best friend, and partner, David, for inspiring and supporting me to follow my dreams; for musing and discussing ideas and for making the journey together an adventure. Without your love, vision, (and a very firm push!) this thesis would never have been written.

CHAPTER 1: Introduction

1.1. Background and personal interest

At a recent dinner party, I overheard a conversation that illustrates the underlying concern from which this thesis question was born. The person opposite me used a common expression in passing, about the "evil of money," then, turning to the church warden beside her, ruefully added that she actually had no idea whether this was really in the Bible or not, as she had never actually read it. The church warden leaned over and replied; "I shouldn't worry, I *have* read it– twice in fact– and if I were you, I wouldn't bother!"

Underlining the warden's flippant comment, there transpired to be a sense of frustration with parts of the Bible that are either seemingly irrelevant or more seriously problematic to the point that they are better avoided. In a simple way, this illustrates the heart of a concern I have felt for a number of years working in pastoral contexts with the Church Mission Society, which led to the development of this thesis question. It illustrates difficulty more widely experienced by Christian adults who would like to make sense of the Bible, but find the task too discouraging or uninspiring to persevere with. This impression corresponds with reports of decreasing biblical literacy among western Christians[1] that defies an increase in the provision of published and online resources for Bible engagement. My question, then, seeks to further knowledge about ways that Bible engagement can be facilitated in a way that helps deepen understanding and enrich faith.

More specifically, the question focuses on a hermeneutical approach. This is not intended to ignore that a breadth of other methods of small group Bible engagement can also lead Christians to deeper faith and understanding. My reasons for this focus developed from further questions arising from evaluative research of a Bible Society

[1] Colin J. Greene and Martin Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008), p. 91; Andrew Village, 2007, p. 53; CODEC (Communication in the Digital Environment), at St John's College, Durham University, https://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=8234 [accessed 6 June 2017].

hermeneutical course that I undertook for my Master's Degree.[2] It had been written in response to recent research; including a major project undertaken by Bible Society and Cardiff University that focused on the use of the Bible in pastoral practice.[3] I found that much in the subsequent literature produced resounded with my own experience and shed light on key issues concerning Christian readers and biblical hermeneutics. For instance, observations revealed that readers across denominations often rely on approaches of parallel correlation, or 'proof-texting,'[4] and lack skills to develop mature theological understanding of Scripture.[5] Without ignoring that these devotional practices also reflect an earnest desire to hear God, they have been associated with an unconscious, 'consumerist'[6] tendency to 'raid […] the Bible to find support for one's experience.'[7] Without suggesting this is the whole picture of ordinary reading practices,[8] there is often a problem is that, rather than being allowed to speak in its own 'voice,' Scripture in this sense can be reduced to a mirror that reflects what a reader already thinks.[9]

The seriousness of implications for the way Christians engage with the Bible is reflected in the bold statement made in a recent report by the Anglican Consultative Council (ACC), which contends that 'how Anglicans engage with the Bible turns out to be just as

[2] Called, 'H+: Making Good Sense of the Bible;' referred to in a discussion of Hunt's research.
[3] This was the basis for a three-volume series: *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church,* ed. by Paul Ballard and Stephen R. Holmes (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005); Referred to in subsequent footnotes as BPP; Gordon Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask (*London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006); and Stephen Pattison, Trevor Cooling, and Margaret Cooling, *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry: A Workbook* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007).
[4] John Colwell, 'The Church as Ethical Community', in *BPP*, 212-24. p. 213.
[5] John Rogerson, 'The Gift and Challenges of Historical and Literary Criticism', in *BPP*, p. 133.
[6] See Chapter 6.2, below, footnote 82.
[7] Derick Tidball, 'The Bible in Evangelical Spirituality', in *BPP*, pp. 258-74., p. 259. Similarly, see Anthony C. Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading,* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992), p. 25.
[8] For an important defense of the merits of ordinary Bible engagement see, Gerald O. West, *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003); Carlos A. Dreher, *The Walk to Emmaus*, trans. by Paulo Ueti Barasioli (São Leopoldo: Centro de Estudos Biblicos, 2004), p. 56.
[9] Kevin J. Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), p. 15, and Richard S. Briggs, 'The Role of the Bible in Formation and Transformation: A Hermeneutical and Theological Analysis', *Anvil*, 24,3 (2007), 167-82, pp. 171-3. See also discussion below about research showing strong links between readers and the kinds of meaning they perceive.

important as its content.'[10] This report followed investigations of reading habits across the Anglican Communion. Some of the key findings were the identification of disconnections, for instance between the way church leaders and congregants understand the Bible, expressed as a gap between 'the academy and pew.'[11] Observing reading groups in the UK, David Allen found two main responses to a second kind of 'gap,' that is between the historical background of a text and its meaning for today. He reported that readers either 'just jumped the gap (and "fell"), or recognised the gap but didn't see the value in seeking to traverse it.'[12] A key point across both of these research projects is the need for pastoral practice to facilitate more self-aware approaches to Bible engagement.[13]

In recent years, increasing attention has been given to the way Christians read the Bible; much of which relates to the now established field inspired by Jeff Astley's pioneering of an empirical approach to what he calls 'ordinary' theology.[14] A variance of meanings can be inferred from the related term 'ordinary' (Bible) readers.[15] It overlaps with the idea of lay Christians, but has the benefit of including denominations that do not identify a clergy/lay divide. My use of 'ordinary' denotes Christians who are not formally theologically trained. This field of study reflects the increasingly important interest in biblical studies on the reader, as opposed to a former, post-Enlightenment focus on the author and historical-criticism.

---

[10] *Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery: The Bible in the Life of the Anglican Communion* (2012), Available online at: http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/FULL.pdf [accessed 7 January 2016].

[11] Stephen P. Lyon, 'Mind the Gap! Reflections on the "Bible in the Life of the Church" Project', *Anglican Theological Review*, 93, 3 (2011), 449-62; James D. G. Dunn, 'The Bible and Scholarship: On Bridging the Gap between the Academy and the Church'. *Anvil,* 19,2 (2002), 109–18; Andrew Village, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

[12] David Allen, 'Gathering Together to Read the Bible Matters!', in *Deep Engagement*, 2012, 19-21, p. 21.

[13] *Bible in the Life of the Church*, ACC, 15, 14, 1 (2012) available online at: https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/39714/bible-project-acc-15.pdf p. 2. [accessed 7 January 2016]; Village, *The Bible and Lay People,* p. 94.

[14] Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

[15] See Cherryl Hunt, 'Promoting Biblical Engagement Among Ordinary Christians in English Churches: Reflections on the Pathfinder Project' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2016), pp. 39-41.

1.2 Previous research with 'ordinary' Bible readers

There is neither space here, nor necessity to the question, to attempt to give a full account of this research, as excellent surveys are given in recent publications.[16] However, a few pointed observations of other research findings help set this thesis in context.

Particularly helpful is David Ford's classification of three subfields. These are social-scientific approaches (being an aspect of the multi-disciplinary project of Practical Theology), contextual studies, and observations of particular Bible study methods.[17] My thesis reflects aspects of the first, as it engages with Practical Theology and some feminist concerns; and also with the third, as I also investigate a particular reading approach. This means that, despite a temptation to turn to fascinating possible themes emerging from my group's intercultural context, (which would fit within Ford's second category) this would have been impossible within the same study.

Hans De Wit has studied intercultural dimensions of reading in a large-scale international empirical research project.[18] This observed ordinary readers from more than 25 countries studying a Johannine text, then reading it again in partnership with a group from a different country. Results of his extensive data analysis included affirmations of the benefits of reading the Bible in light of other (or at least *an*other) cultural perspectives. Anthropological concerns in this and other studies have further expanded understanding about the way various cultures and groups read the Bible in various places in the world. Brian Malley, for example, explores how Evangelical Christians in North America perceive and engage with scripture, with key factors including tradition, hermeneutics, and the congregation.[19]

---

[16] Andrew P. Rogers*, Congregational Hermeneutics: How do We Read?* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 8-12; Ruth Perrin, *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals: An Exploration of the Ordinary Hermeneutics and Faith of Generation Y,* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016), pp. 16-9; David G. Ford, *Reading the Bible Outside the Church: A Case Study* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018), pp. 25-9. Mark Powell, *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap between Pulpit and Pew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

[17] Ford, *Reading the Bible*, pp. 24-32.

[18] *Through the Eyes of Another: Intercultural Reading of the Bible*, ed. by Hans de Wit et al., (Elkhart, Indiana: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 2004).

[19] Malley, *How the Bible Works,* 2004.

South African professor, Gerald West, has had a primary concern for the transforming and liberating outcome of Bible engagement. This has led him to question the roles of biblical scholars in contexts of Bible reading alongside poor and marginalised communities. Drawing on multiple dimensions of liberation, inculturation, and postmodern hermeneutics, he argues for the emerging opportunities and benefits for biblical studies to extend further dialogue between the academy and readers in poor communities. To this end, West has developed the approach of Contextual Bible Study (CBS), the basic outline of which may be characterised by the six 'C's' of community, criticality, collaboration, change, context, and contestation.[20] West's model has since been used, adapted, and studied in other contexts. For example, Alison Peden and John Riches analyse CBS with prisoners or ex-offenders in the UK.[21] Most significantly, perhaps, in terms of the UK context, is Louise Lawrence's accounts of five reading groups from particular communities in the West of England, which demonstrate how CBS enables 'explicit engagement between texts and contexts of the present.'[22] In order to help contextual connections, texts are selected for the potential relevance they have to certain contexts. It shares some similarities with the approach which I developed in my own study, in that it includes critical questions, gives space for different views, and provokes change. Despite these strengths, two important criticisms associated with CBS relate to issues that become important in my own study. These are a need to recognise and account for the influence of the facilitator and safeguarding against an imbalance towards context, where this compromises the text's own message, and can lead to 'eisegesis.'[23] Nonetheless, CBS's primary concern to identify meaning that is translatable to 'real life' means it has been fruitful across a breadth of situations and places.[24]

[20] 'Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual', *The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development & Research,* (2015) available online at, http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/RESOURCES_OF_UJAMAA/MANUAL_STUDIES.aspx [accessed 7 January 2020].

[21] Peden, 'Contextual Bible Study at Cornton Vale Women's Prison, Stirling', *Expository Times*, 117, 1 (2005), 15-18; *What is Contextual Bible Study?: A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent*, ed. by John Riches (London: SPCK, 2010).

[22] Louise J. Lawrence, *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (London: SPCK, 2009), p. 23.

[23] Andrew Rogers, 'The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts', *Journal Practical Theology,* 4, 1 (2011), 132.

[24] Peden, 'Contextual Bible Study at Corton Vale'; Riches, *What is Contextual Bible Study?*.

Questions about the role and outcomes of the small group model itself have also raised interesting findings elsewhere. Robert Wuthnow is an important example. His analysis of the Bible's function in small groups in the U.S. revealed that its purpose is primarily social; towards the building of community and support, but is not being effectively used to enhance or deepening biblical understanding.[25] Equally concerning is Roger Walton's findings about the role of Christian small groups based on research in the UK. He warns that such groups often overlook or miss the church's wider calling to serve the world; and that they resemble religious versions of introspective 'self-help' meetings.'[26] Conversely, a more hopeful view results from Rogers' survey of multiple kinds of Bible engagement (such as in preaching, worship songs and small group), as it leads him to defend small study groups as being potentially the most fruitful means of developing biblical engagement in a space for reading that is 'transformative yet affirmative (of tradition).'[27]

Like Hans de Wit**,** Andrew Village analysed the outcomes of gathered Bible studies that invited lay Christians to engage with a specific passage. With the purpose of understanding how ordinary Christians read the Bible, he conducted a qualitative study using questionnaire surveys of over 400 church members from a breadth of British Anglican churches. This presented a varied view of lay reading practices, including evidence that some 'fairly sophisticated processes'[28] are used in decisions about how literally certain Bible passages should be interpreted. His findings help redress a balance and avoid the danger of over-simplifying and dismissing as inadequate the reading approaches of ordinary Christians. Nonetheless, Village reinforces that greater reader awareness is needed, commending the important role adult theological education can play in churches in redressing tendencies to focus on the reader's own 'horizon' rather than that of the text. It is still, he contends, the smaller number of

[25] Robert Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community* (New York: Free Press, 1996).
[26] Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 218.
[27] Ibid, p. 23. See also Bielo's positive vision of small group Bible study following his study within American Evangelical churches, in James S. Bielo*, Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).
[28] Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p. 66.

readers whom are 'theologically literate,' which prefer, by contrast, to stick close to the safer world of the author.[29]

While my research does not share Village's quantitative methods, a theme he addresses that concerns my question is the place of critical questions in non-scholarly Bible engagement. The contention is that where critical approaches are used they also strongly correlate to readers with higher general levels of education. Village is careful to avoid suggesting that 'sophisticated' or critical approaches are necessarily the way forward for all lay readers. He warns of a risk that these might damage readers' engagement with the text as Holy Scripture, relating this outcome with 'education that becomes mired in controversies about the world or the author;'[30] and more implicitly, when the spiritual value of connecting one's life to Scripture is overlooked for 'a pursuit of some kind of objectivity.' The extent to which this damage is a result, in fact, from faulty approaches in education, therefore, merits further consideration. This is the subject of an important question that became increasingly significant in my own investigation.

Concerns about the use of critical approaches with ordinary Christians are reinforced by others, including Cherryl Hunt,[31] whose recent research bears some similarity to this thesis, in that it is based on Christian responses to a range of Bible resources; including a course designed by Bible Society to facilitate a hermeneutical approach to the Bible.[32] Hunt's findings highlight that readers perceive a division between cognitive and spiritual methods, often expressed as 'head' and 'heart' approaches.[33] Significantly for this thesis, despite fascinating insights offered by the hermeneutical course, it was felt to be detached from the heart, echoing the caution that critical content in education can damage faith expectations. In agreement with this, Hunt's concluding proposals stress a need for resources that integrate cognitive and spiritual approaches.

[29] This reference to world of the author will be discussed in relation to Anthony Thiselton's concept of two horizons in Chapter 2, below.
[30] Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p. 94.
[31] Hunt, 'Promoting Biblical Engagement'.
[32] This was called *H+: Making Good Sense of the Bible*, and is the same course I evaluated during my Master's Degree.
[33] Hunt, 'Promoting Biblical Engagement', pp. 2, 202.

Despite these important themes, my study shares more in common with Andrew Rogers' approach that is concerned with the transformational impact of engaging with Scripture; which he comes to view in terms of a 'hermeneutical apprenticeship.'[34] Rogers' quest is to know what are the hermeneutical practices underlying various forms of Bible engagement. An advantage of his approach is that he reports on a number of different levels of church life, such as the impact of implicit hermeneutical presuppositions in the lyrics of worship songs, as well as activities that are more explicitly or intentionally interpretive exercises; such as preaching. In doing so, Rogers' is concerned with the notion that change that results from Bible engagement, and common themes include explorations of the metaphor of 'horizons.'[35] A difference, is that my approach focuses in more detail on how this change may be facilitated in the specific space of small groups, and attends more directly to issues outside of the hermeneutical discussion in response to matters arising from a pastoral perspective.

In this regard my study has a different intention to that of a number of researchers who have extended knowledge from observing the way certain categories of people read the Bible, by identifying patterns and tendencies. For example, Melody Briggs found that children read the Bible in an imaginative way that seeks the sense of the text with a plot-driven focus of the text; 'sometimes embracing it, and sometimes rejecting it.'[36] Ruth Perrin explored how young evangelicals in Britain engage with themes such as gender, violence, and miracles in the Bible; revealing a nuanced understanding of their theological views and identity.[37]

David Ford also based his investigation on reader-response theory, but a difference was that he took the Bible 'outside the church' to workers in a chemical industrial plant.[38] His focus was their particularity as readers outside the church, rather than their particularity as men, in a similar way that although my group is made up of women, my focus is not primarily a study of gender but on what my participants experience as

[34] Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, pp. 23, 66-71.
[35] Ibid, p. 65, See discussion in Chapter 6.5, below.
[36] Melody R. Briggs, *How Children Read Biblical Narrative: An Investigation of Children's Readings of the Gospel of Luke*, (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017), p. 131.
[37] Ruth H. Perrin, *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals: An Exploration of the Ordinary Hermeneutics and Faith of Generation Y* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016).
[38] Ford, *Bible Outside the Church,* p. 93.

Christian readers.[39] In other respects, Ford's study differs from my own: It is based on individual and not group responses; and the reading approach does not make assumptions about the texts' religious validity. Despite this, an important issue for my study that is stark in Ford's findings is that despite the texts having a degree of agency and power, this is evidently, very limited. Predictors of interpretation are correlated with readers' 'attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, feelings, personality and expectations,'[40] but which are shown to relativise the power of a text's meaning to aspects of the reader-identity, or disposition. This confirms significant elements of reader-response theories that were, admittedly, the framework for Ford's project; and is problematic for a theology of Scripture that hopes to know God's word through the Bible. As Ford rightly observes, the power of readers to inform the outcome of reading, whether in relation to a certain ideological view, context, or experience; is common across a breadth of studies of Bible reading.[41]

It is a common view in biblical studies that critical distance provides a necessary balance in respecting the 'otherness' of the text,[42] for instance ways that its original language, historical context, audience, or underlying worldview is different. Investigating this through exegesis gives weight to important meaning in the text that the reader will not automatically understand from an initial reading. A further challenge for pastoral practice also observed by ACC, however, shows that clergy, who have academic training, often find it difficult to bridge the gap between biblical scholarship and congregants;[43] and find themselves 'stuck uneasily in the middle.'[44] A concern is that presenting issues raised by historical criticism may be 'too complicated or disturbing.'[45] As discussed above, this warrants consideration. At the same time, a criticism is also stressed by a number of recent writers that lay Christians should not be left in ignorance of matters discussed in scholarship that may help them navigate

[39] Reasons for and implications resulting from focusing on women are discussed in chapter 3, below.
[40] Ford, *Bible Outside the Church*, pp. 93, 184.
[41] Ibid, p. 20.
[42] See a fuller discussion in Chapter 2.4.3, below.
[43] In the next chapter I will discuss this gap, and ways it is changing.
[44] Mark Powell also highlights differences between the methods and interpretations derived by Clergy and lay readers, in *What Do They Hear?*, 2001.
[45] Gordon D. Fee, 'Exegesis and Spirituality: Reflections on Completing the Exegetical Circle', *CRUX*, 1995, XXXI, 29-35, p. 4; Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible,* p. 2; Ballard and Homes, *BPP*, p. xiv.

pressing questions and develop a more mature understanding of the Bible.[46] Herein lies the interest of this thesis.

In what follows, I will discuss academic approaches that take seriously the transformative purpose of the Bible as Holy Scripture as an authoritative resource for the Church and its spiritual formation.[47] My aim is to select and set into practice some of this theoretical work to contribute to knowing how scholarship can be made accessible to facilitate understanding that is not only informative but also spiritually enriching. Setting theory into practice will include calling to question some of the assumptions on which the theory is based, as a result of the way it is experienced by lay Christians. For this reason, my study contributes to the mutual critique between pastoral practice and biblical scholarship, underlined in the insightful work of Paul Ballard and Stephen Holmes, who make the following argument:

> If the use of the Bible in pastoral care is to be considered faithful or professional, it needs to be responsible to biblical scholarship [and] it is part of the task of Biblical Studies both to demonstrate the usefulness of its various ways of handling the text […] and to listen to the critiques offered by those engaged in pastoral practice.[48]

These questions share a broader concern expressed in the final report published by ACC, which is poignant to this thesis; 'How can we draw on the insights of the academy or scholar in a way that those in the pew both *understand* and are *enriched* in their Christian living?'[49] Behind this question are two issues. The first is the matter of how approaches from biblical studies may be made accessible. What kinds of hermeneutical approaches might be helpful; and in the shape of what kinds of materials? The second issue is how methods that have belonged in academic contexts can meaningfully connect with Christians? How, if at all, can the peril of critical questions harming faith be avoided? Is a critical stance appropriate for all Christians? To what extent might readers' experience confirm or negate the contention that critical distance is a

[46] Ian J. Dickson, 'The Bible in Pastoral Ministry: The Quest for Best Practice', *JATE*, 4, 1 (2007) 103-21, p. 109, Ballard and Homes, *BPP*, p. xiv, 'The Gift and Challenges of Historical and Literary Criticism', in *BPP*, 121-34, p. 133; Thiselton, *New Horizons,* 1992, p. 8; Village, *Bible and Lay People*, 2007, p. 53; Oliver, *Holy Bible*, p. 2.
[47] See Chapter 2, below.
[48] Ballard and Holmes, in their introduction to Part II, in *BPP*, pp. 118-9.
[49] ACC, *Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery*, p. 11.

necessary aspect of spiritually mature understanding?[50] Can adults can be facilitated to learn from these methods and approaches, and if so, how? What is the role of pastoral practice in this process?

Although all practical theology offers prescriptive as well as descriptive levels, it can also be evaluative. In this regard, my project shares something in common with Diane Westmoreland's study of how adults in Anglican Parishes can grow in spiritual maturity;[51] which is also based on an original course designed as a basis for the evaluation. But Westmoreland is looking at prayer rather than the Bible. Fergus MacDonald is the only researcher I have found that includes spirituality in a study of Bible reading.[52] He asks how far meditative engagement with specific Psalms facilitates spiritual growth in university students.[53] A key difference, however, is that MacDonald's participants were young adults on or beyond the fringe of the churches. For this reason, he facilitated a dynamic between the texts and popular culture, appealing to the Psalms in terms of their qualities as classic text, rather than as part of Holy Scripture.[54] A positive outcome was that respondents resonated with the Psalms presented in this way and they facilitated a quest for deeper meaning and an ability to confront God with complaints.

It is well-known that the perspective of a researcher cannot help but impact a project. For this reason, it is helpful to acknowledge that my own experience of the Bible has been, from a young age, a means of spiritual formation and enrichment. However, it was coming to formal theological study as an adult that gave me resources to articulate difficulties that I also found with the Bible, which I did not find space to explore in church contexts. Although I am Anglican, my former experience, including pastoral lay ministry with the Church Mission Society has included other denominations, which means I also have an affinity with a variety of approaches to the Bible. My motivation in

[50] Various views about this will be further discussed below, in chapter 2.
[51] Diane Westmoreland, 'Can Spiritual Maturity Be Nurtured in Northern English Anglican Congregations? An Exploration of Whether Parishioners Can Grow Spiritually through an Experiential Course on Prayer Using Methods Based in Ignition Practice', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2011).
[52] Fergus MacDonald, 'The Psalms and Spirituality: A Study of Meditative Engagement with Selected Psalms Among Edinburgh Students' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Edinburgh University, 2007).
[53] Ibid, p. 2.
[54] Ibid, pp. 32-33.

this project is impacted by a desire to support other Christians pastorally, for whom barriers to Bible engagement are a stumbling block to spiritual growth. This raises complexities regarding the dual nature of my role as researcher and lay minister, which will be discussed in more detail below.[55]

1.3 Understanding the thesis question

This thesis builds on former research that has indicated the need for pastoral practice to make provision for Christians to engage with the Bible with more aware interpretive approaches. The question seeks to know what can be learned from the experience of a specific group of Christians reading the Bible with a course developed from the work of Sandra Schneiders. The course, then functions as a case study. The purpose is to further understand the practical implications of putting the theory into practice with ordinary Christians, including the important heed of caution that critical approaches can be experienced as unhelpful to readers' devotional engagement with the Bible. For this reason, my investigation is distinctive for the way it is incorporates critical hermeneutical approaches with Christian spirituality. This is a key reason for basing the study on the work of Sandra Schneiders, whose work aims to integrate methods associated with both of these fields; and which she articulates with meticulous methodological clarity. Themes and questions arising from interrogations with her hermeneutical approach contribute to the framework on which I base my Bible course in the empirical stage of my inquiry. An additional distinctive in this is that I am viewing understanding as a 'process' (asking how it happens), as well as a 'product' (that might be described as meaning.)[56]

Further questions of interest include the following: Will there be benefits of engaging with a hermeneutical approach? Which aspects of the theory will be most significant to the participants, and will any aspects be shown to be unimportant or unhelpful? Will the data reveal any significant considerations that did not arise in Schneiders' approach? Having begun with these questions, however, in the course of the project my underlying

[55] See Chapter 3.9, below.
[56] This distinction will be discussed below in Chapter 2.4.5.

focus on hermeneutical questions evolved.[57] The impact of the group context upon the process of coming to understanding, as opposed to an individual reading context, transpired to be more important to the outcome than I had anticipated. This is an important implication of the concept of 'facilitation.' In addition to questions about the reading approach, it includes additional practical, interpersonal, and pedagogical issues that arose as being necessary factors that cannot be disentangled in an authentic telling of the hermeneutical outcomes. Attention to other key terms in the question will further clarify the aim of this thesis.

1.3.1 Spiritual understanding

A fuller discussion below explores my intended use of the term 'spirituality,' given its enormously broad usage today. For now, it suffices to say that I am referring to the lived experience of Christian faith. This is dynamic. It is a movement 'toward fullness of life in Christ, that is, towards self-transcending life-integration within the Christian community of faith,'[58] but also incorporates all spheres of life.[59] Spiritual understanding is real but difficult to articulate; it indicates holistic learning that is more than cognitive knowing.[60] Beyond knowing things *about* God, it is also an experience that can be described as a sense of 'knowing God,'[61] and therefore may also be affective, relational, and transformative. Philip Sheldrake makes this point clear in a discussion of what is distinctive about the self-implicating nature of knowledge in the discipline of Spirituality,[62] which he categorises as a sub-discipline of theology:[63]

> Beyond information […] lies a quest for the "truth" or wisdom embodied in a tradition or text and how this may be accessed. This aspect of coming to understand a tradition or text confronts us with the questions "What

[57] Jane Agee, 'Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22, 4 (2009), 431-47,
[58] Sandra Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', *Studies in Spirituality*, 8 (1998), 38-57.
[59] See Chapter 2.1.3.
[60] Ellen T. Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine,* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[61] This relates to Schneiders' view, see chapter 2.4, below.
[62] Following Schneiders, I am using the upper case to distinguish Spirituality as an academic discipline; although the lines are sometimes blurred, there are points at which it is helpful to make this distinction.
[63] Schneiders does not. See Chapter 2.2.1.

> difference does this make?" and "What could or should our response be?" This is the transformative dimension of the study of spirituality and involves judgment (this makes sense, is important and of value) and appropriation (we seek to make this wisdom our own).[64]

In this view, the 'heart' is not divorced from the intellect but implies '"the whole self." It brings together sense impressions and is the principle of unity and the interpretation of reality as a whole.'[65] My use of the term 'understanding' will also be expounded in terms of its hermeneutical meaning, where a person who comes to understand something may be changed, in some way, by what is now understood. In Schneiders' words, transformational Bible engagement means 'to be intellectually enlightened or personally converted.'[66] Despite the importance of further engaging in the meaning of these terms in relation to Schneiders' work, however, initial definitions of spiritual understanding remain flexible throughout the progression of this study as they are nuanced by the experience of participants and what they articulate.

1.3.2 Facilitator

'Facilitator' has the benefit over 'leader' as it implies a limited role in group learning that is consistent with a theological view of God as the ultimate 'teacher,' and a pedagogical emphasis on the learner's initiative.[67] However, I do not avoid the more commonly used word, 'leader,' given that these assumptions can also belong to what is intended by good leadership.

1.3.3 Hermeneutical and Critical Bible engagement

'Engagement,' as opposed to 'reading,' is helpful as it can include different activities, such as listening to Scripture being read, reflection, discussion, and prayer, as they contribute to processes of coming to understanding. It also avoids the possible implication that the Bible, when it is being read, is passive; whereas engagement might

---

[64] Philip F. Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010), p. 37.
[65] Ibid, p. 44.
[66] *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture, 2nd edn. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999),* p. 13. Following Richard Briggs, I am not distinguishing between the terms Christian formation and transformation, See, 'The Role of the Bible in Formation', 167-82, pp. 177-8.
[67] This idea will be explored in Chapter 6.2.1.

suggest something is going on in both directions. This will be discussed in terms of a theology of Holy Scripture and a hermeneutical view of a text's power to speak back to a reader.[68] MacDonald gives a befitting summary of the meaning of Scripture engagement in connection with United Bible Society. He proposes that it implies interaction, deference, transformation; and that it is transcendental (enabling people 'to encounter God'), and missional (where growing in Christian maturity includes commitment to the Church and service of the world in need.)[69] Having clarified that this is my intended meaning, however, I also sometimes use the expression 'Bible study group,' which was a much more natural term for participants.

In a sense, all Bible engagement is hermeneutical if this is taken to indicate that levels of interpretation are at play in any reading of a text. However, using the adjective 'hermeneutical' indicates that the activity of interpretation, whether occurring consciously or unconsciously, is an important implication in this study. Biblical engagement becomes critical when it seeks to explore questions of grammar, structure, language, context, and authorship to interrogate the meaning of texts.

1.4 Overview of chapters

Having given some background to the research question, the following chapter will introduce the work of Sandra Schneiders, and elaborate reasons for focusing on her work. It will explore the broader context of her fields of study; most importantly, other approaches to biblical scholarship that assume a link between authentic Bible engagement and personal transformation. This will demonstrate what she has in common with contemporary writers who are seeking to reintegrate theology and New Testament scholarship, and also highlight particularities in her approach; notably that she extends theological interpretation to include the discipline of Spirituality. A distinct feature of this is its interest upon the human experience of God in the process of biblical interpretation that is not limited to a reader-response methodology.

[68] See chapter 2.4.1, below.
[69] MacDonald, 'Psalms and Spirituality', p. 187.

Following critical analysis of the theory, chapter 3 sets the scene of the empirical phase, with an explanation of my context as a mission partner of the Church Mission Society in Beirut, where the Bible course took place. This group emerged from my role in lay ministry in an international Anglican congregation from which the group is formed of women volunteers. Following this is a methodological discussion about my qualitative approach, including key issues arising, such as implications of my insider role as researcher. Methods of data collection include transcriptions of the course that I wrote and facilitated, three focus group discussions, and one-to-one interviews.

Chapter 4, then, presents details of the 8-week Bible course, with a rationale for the way it is founded upon Schneiders' approach to the Fourth Gospel. The task of translating scholarly theory into group studies is helped significantly by the scrupulous clarity with which Schneiders delineates her approach to New Testament interpretation.

My findings are then presented in two stages. Chapter 5 is intended to offer a window into what happened in the Bible course. It gives detailed attention to the voices of participants to show what is important to their experience of spiritual understanding. This is consolidated into eight main points that were affirmed by the participants as accurately summarising what was most significant in their experiences of the Bible course. These are:

- Finding confidence as a reader
- Identifying with biblical characters
- Recognising the impact of reader bias
- The significance of *un*learning
- Seeing women alongside Jesus
- Being motivated by seeing God inspiring others in the group
- A sense of solidarity as a group
- Getting to grips with John's Gospel

Chapter 6 interprets the significance of these findings in two sections. The first part addresses issues about the task of facilitating understanding, some of which I had not foreseen at the outset. I argue that facilitating understanding requires moving the

starting place assumed in literature, to consider firstly how Christians may first need to be equipped for the activity of 'spiritual reading.'[70] While Schneiders concept of 'encounter' and Anthony Thiselton's development of the concept of 'horizons' offer various insights, I suggest dialogue is the most authentic metaphor for the way understanding can be facilitated. More than a literal conversation between a group of readers, multi-directional communication needs to be enabled between the readers and text, and readers and God. This does not necessarily result from the reading materials or approach, but from the facilitator's role. Some features of this role that are valued in educational theory (such as facilitating risk by establishing safety,) are shown to be equally valid to hermeneutical and spiritual perspectives of understanding; where the dialogue between reader and text, and reader and God also require facilitation.

The second part of the analysis shows aspects of the approach that had the most significant impact upon spiritual understanding. Key findings are that a hermeneutical approach contributed to reader-awareness of their own 'lenses' of view. Acknowledging these was a crucial way that meaning emerged from the text in ways that surprised or moved readers beyond their starting assumptions. This critiques aspects of Schneiders' account of presuppositions; but supports her emphasis on other ways she promotes the role of self-awareness in reading. My findings about presuppositions are set into four categories, and related to factors in the reading approach that enabled these to be recognised by participants. The first three categories are perceptions about the Bible, how it is read, and experiences of culture and church tradition. The fourth is the most fundamental category, which relates to a reader's underlying perception of God. The significance of this theme is enlightened in relation to Christian Spirituality, and new insights come to light in terms of its importance to biblical hermeneutics. My recommendations include that a facilitator's awareness of these categories may help in the direction of dialogue that may otherwise be dismissed as insignificant to the task of understanding a biblical text. Confidence in the ultimate goodness of God was linked with prayerful reflection, and furthered the key disposition of openness.

The conclusions in chapter 7 return to address my starting questions. Having found that a hermeneutical approach can achieve integrity between critical and spiritual concerns,

[70] See my discussion in chapter 6.2.2.

I explore what was crucial here. Conclusions relate to benefits of the cognitive and affective aspects of imaginative engagement and its relationship with a literary view; which may lead to critical questions but also is highly motivating. Critical engagement led to some personal struggle with the text that calls for pastoral sensitivity. However, complexity did not discourage the group despite diverse levels of education and biblical knowledge. This was also due to a sense of commonality and authentic relationships, although diversity of culture and church tradition also inspired open-mindedness towards the text. The points in my conclusion will present further suggestions for pastoral practice.

In this introduction, the background, researcher interest, and rationale for this thesis have been presented, some terms clarified, and the following chapters signposted. In broad terms, this thesis seeks to make a limited but original contribution towards bridging the gap between biblical studies and ordinary Bible readers. We now turn to explore in more detail the literature that provides a framework for the empirical study that will follow.

CHAPTER 2: Sandra Schneiders and transformative approaches in biblical scholarship

2.1 Introduction: The work of Sandra Schneiders

This chapter will introduce the work of Professor Sandra Marie Schneiders, starting with an overview of her background and work in a number of fields to which her career has contributed. This will be followed by a selected survey of other approaches in the field of biblical studies that have in common a transformational approach to Scripture. This sets Schneiders work in the wider field of biblical studies and brings to the fore aspects of her approach that are commonalities with some other contemporary theories of transformational interpretation. This leads to a return to the subject of Schneiders' writing that is the key interest of this thesis, which is her theory of an integral hermeneutical approach that consolidates her work in other areas; notably Spirituality and feminist theology. At this point some of the distinctive aspects of her approach will be highlighted in relation to other writers, and a selection of these characteristics will be presented as a distilled framework of principles that inform the creation of the Bible course used in my case study.

Sandra Schneiders is a sister of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and Professor Emerita of New Testament Studies and Christian Spirituality at the Jesuit School of Theology in Berkeley, California. Her career has produced significant work within Johannine scholarship, as well as in Spirituality, feminist theology, and religious life in the Catholic Church. She has served as president of the Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality, and of the Western Region of the Society of Biblical Literature, and among the board of directors of Catholic Theological Society of America. Schneiders' has also received a number of awards,[1] including *The John Courtney Murray Award* **,** the *Association of Catholic Colleges and Universities Monika K. Hellwig Award* for Outstanding Contribution to Catholic Intellectual Life in 2013, and in the following year, the *Barry University Yves Congar Award for Theological Excellence* in 2014.

[1] Jesuit School of Theology website, at; https://www.scu.edu/jst/about/people-of-jst/faculty/sandra-m-schneiders-ihm-std/ [accessed 20 June 2019].

2.1.1 Spirituality

Beyond concerns relating to the Roman Catholic Tradition, Schneiders has also made a significant contribution to defining and pioneering the increasingly significant field of Spirituality.[2] Her vision does not reduce Christian spirituality to the interior life.[3] Stressing its essential relationship with Scripture, Schneiders advocates a journey of spiritual transformation that is communal, social, and ecclesial, as well as personal; and directed ultimately towards a broad vision of 'the fostering of the reign of God in this world.'[4] Writing in 1989, Schneiders observed that, despite the increasing academic interest in Spirituality,[5] it still lacked a satisfactorily 'articulated approach to its subject matter'[6] that characterises a mature academic field. Her career since then has been a significant contribution to achieving this outcome, with her writing being widely respected as an authoritative voice in defining and developing the discipline of Spirituality and Christian Spirituality.[7] As Schneiders' underlines, Spirituality is not the systematic theology of the spiritual life in the same way that Trinitarian theology is the systematic theology of the triune God.

> Spirituality is concerned with the spiritual life which is today understood as the vital, ongoing interaction between the human spirit and the Spirit of God with both poles receiving equal attention and the focus being on the fact, the modality, the process, the effects, the finality of the interaction itself.[8]

[2] Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1998), 55-64.
[3] 'Biblical Spirituality: Text and Transformation', in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually*, ed. by Andrew T. Lincoln et al. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 128-50, pp. 128-9; Schneiders, 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', *Studies in Spirituality,* 8 (1998), 38-57.
[4] Sandra Schneiders, *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003), p. 20.
[5] Philip Sheldrake, *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (New York: Orbis Book, 1998), p. 5.
[6] Schneiders, 'Spirituality in the Academy', *Theological Studies,* 50, 4, (1989), 676–97, p. 696.
[7] See *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Sandra M. Schneiders IHM*, ed. by Bruce H Lescher and Elizabeth Liebert (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).
[8] Schneiders, 'A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality', in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (London: John Hopkins, 2005), 49-60, p. 51.

Clarifying a distinction between the Christian experience of faith and the academic discipline is critical.[9] One of the results of this is seeing that it is appropriate for scholarly study of this existential phenomenon as individual religious experience,[10] wherein Schneiders' approach is associated with at least two important legacies that have ingrained interdisciplinary study and hermeneutical methodology as principles 'at the heart of academic Spirituality.'[11] This followed Schneiders' preference for a hermeneutical rather than anthropological approach,[12] although she accepts that the approach a student takes will be subject to practical considerations about academic context and competencies of the researcher. By this, Schneiders is not suggesting either that a certain hermeneutical approach (such as Ricoeur's theory), nor any one hermeneutical agenda (such as feminism) should be taken up as a fixed method for investigation.[13] Rather, she contends that understanding the Christian spiritual life as experience requires an interpretive strategy.

Within this, cultural and theological anthropology can be useful, as the human spirit must not be confused with a former perception of its separation from the body. But these fields do not provide an adequate framework: as 'spirituality is not simply transpersonal psychology.'[14] For example, other fields, such as feminism and psychotherapy, have recently become invaluable means of understanding that are integral to the 'spiritual life project'[15] of some Christians. For similar reasons, a theological approach can ignore important experiences beyond formal and ecumenical boundaries, and a historical approach is limited to certain publically available contexts.[16] Spirituality is, therefore, intrinsically multidisciplinary. While theology and the history of spirituality are usually minimum requirements, it can draw on whatever additional methodologies are appropriate.[17] The range of subjects of discussion,

[9] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2016, p. 417.
[10] Lescher and Liebert, in their introduction to *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Sandra M. Schneiders IHM,* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006), 1-11, p. 4.
[11] Philip Sheldrake, 'Spirituality and its Critical Methodology', in *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, 2006, 15-34, pp. 20-1.
[12] Schneiders, 'A Hermeneutical Approach', 2005, p. 50.
[13] Ibid, p. 56.
[14] Ibid, p. 51.
[15] Ibid, p. 52.
[16] Ibid, p. 55.
[17] Schneiders, 'Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?', *Horizons*, 13, 2, (1986), 253-74, p. 253.

including suffering and evil, interfaith aesthetics, and gender, are exemplified in a collection of essays in the book, *Exploring Christian Spirituality.*[18] Written in Schneiders' honour and based on foundations she laid, this work further testifies to the scale of Schneiders' impact in this field.

2.1.2 'Biblical Spirituality'

In relation to these achievements, Schneiders is credited with having pioneered the emerging academic field of 'biblical spirituality,' which integrates the discipline of Spirituality with contemporary critical biblical scholarship.[19] In a similar way that theological interpretation is closely associated with biblical *theology*, Schneiders' approach to biblical *spirituality* is related to what she calls 'spiritual interpretation.' The differences between these disciplines will be clarified, shortly, in a discussion of the way Schneiders distinguishes the disciplines of theology and Spirituality. To put it simply, biblical spirituality is 'participation in the embodiment of religious experience in the biblical text in order to transform lives of believers.'[20]

> The primary aim of biblical theology is *knowledge* and clarity is the hallmark of its quality. The primary aim of biblical spirituality is *transformation*, which is less concerned with clarity than with appropriation.[21]

As affirmed in an introduction to the recently published collection of essays in *The Bible and Spirituality*, biblical scholars seldom pursue connections with past or present-day categories of the phenomenon of spirituality.[22] However, the ultimate purpose of understanding is more than knowledge, it is personal and communal transformation. This, of course is not an original enterprise. It shares characteristics of patristic and medieval church practices before they were rejected by post-Enlightenment, positivist scholarship as inadequate, premodern thinking. Schneiders commends, for instance

[18] Lescher and Liebert, Introduction to *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, p. 1.
[19] See Lincoln et al., introduction to *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays*, 2013, xv-xix, pp. xii.
[20] 'Biblical Spirituality', *Interpretation*, 70, 4 (2016), 417-30, p. 423.
[21] Ibid, p. 421 (author's italics).
[22] Schneiders notes some exceptions to this in her introduction to *Written*, 2003, p. 2. Christo Lombaard also engages with methodological and contextual implications of biblical theology in South Africa, acknowledging the pioneering work of Philip Sheldrake in the UK and Kees Waaijman in the Netherlands, alongside Schneiders in North America, 'Biblical Spirituality and Interdisciplinarity: The Discipline at Cross-Methodological Intersection', *Religion and Theology*, 18, (2011), 211–25.

Augustine and Origen's commitment to the transformative purpose of the text as Sacred Scripture among the 1500 years of faithful, pre-critical, spiritual interpretation. Since the development of critical scholarship, however, and despite the concept appearing in recent popular literature,[23] a focus on Spirituality is still regarded as 'something of a novelty in the modern biblical academy.'[24] This is not diminishing the importance of other scholars who share a commitment to the Bible as Holy Scripture also bring to the Christian life; it is making a distinction about an explicit methodology that incorporates the discipline of (Christian) Spirituality.

Within biblical spirituality, Schneiders demonstrates three categories of interest. Firstly, it is the spirituality of the people at the time the text was *produced*. This is the task of scholarship, and discerned by exegesis and criticism. Secondly, the spirituality that is the *focus of,* or the 'literary embodiment'[25] of the text; which is the subject of biblical theology and biblical spirituality. Thirdly, biblical spirituality investigates the lived experience of faith that has been and continues to be 'produced in a diversity of ways *by* encounter with the text.'[26] This third category is Schneiders' primary interest, and is the project of hermeneutics. Seeing the Bible as locus of encounter leads her to the subject of how Scripture can be experienced as transformative, and how it should be interpreted to this end.

> Biblical spirituality in this active sense of transformative interpretation does not mean reading into the text whatever one already thinks [...] Rather, it requires willingness to be not only affirmed but also interrogated by that which is "other," by that which challenges us to fidelity in the living of our Christian vocation and strengthens us to do so in ways that can be genuinely surprising.[27]

[23] Paula Gooder, *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person* (London: SPCK, 2016).
[24] Another exception is Gordon D. Fee, who has contended for some time that exegesis is a spiritual activity, see 'Exegesis and Spirituality: Reflections on Completing the Exegetical Circle', *Crux,* 31, 4 (1995), 29–35, but this is not aiming towards cross-disciplinary engagement.
[25]Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2016, p. 418.
[26] Sandra Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', *Interpretation,* 70, 4 (2002), 133-42, p. 134-5. Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2016, p. 418.
[27] 'Biblical Spirituality: The Real Connection between the Bible and Life', *Calvin Theological Journal,* 37, 1 (2002) 184-5, p. 136.

2.1.3 Johannine Scholarship

Along with history and theology, therefore, Spirituality always plays a key role in Schneiders' hermeneutical approach to The Fourth Gospel. This is evident in her books, *Written That You May Believe*, and *Jesus Risen in our Midst,*[28] which merit some attention, before we return to broader methodological questions about the impact of Schneiders' distinctive view of the relationship between spirituality, theology, and biblical interpretation. Both these books have in common the theme of *believing* as featuring as the core of Johannine theology and spirituality and, more specifically, view the Resurrection narrative as a 'synthesis' of Johannine spirituality.'[29] Schneiders describes her approach as being 'an attempt to engage the spirituality of the biblical text through rigorously critical study undertaken in the context of living faith.'[30] Her intention is that her incorporation of historical, literary, and feminist ideology criticism, along with theological and spiritual analysis is most effective for a transformative reading.[31]

Written That You May Believe[32] is a collection of essays that include synthetic thematic readings of the Fourth Gospel before presenting studies of seven encounter narratives. A recurring theme and motif is the hermeneutical significance of John 20:30-31. It states the purpose of the writing; and, in Schneiders' view, points to the importance of symbols and representative figures; (5) that is, literary characters whose experiences are symbolically representative of future disciples and/or readers.

> Jesus performed many other signs in the presence of his disciples, which are not recorded in this book. But these are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name.[33]

[28] *Written That You May Believe*, is referenced above, and will be referred in following footnotes as *Written*. Sandra Schneiders, *Jesus Risen in our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013).
[29] Schneiders, *Written*, p. 1.
[30] Ibid, p. 1.
[31] Ibid, p. 5.
[32] Page numbers for this book will be noted in the body of text in this section.
[33] The Bible, New Revised Standard Version.

The Fourth Gospel therefore is a particularly apt biblical book to study with spiritual understanding in view, as its explicit purpose echoes the view that proper interpreting and understanding are not merely informative but also existentially transformative. Moreover, it has been increasingly recognised as having been structured and shaped with literary features intended as a primary way to mediate meaning: we are not 'eavesdropping on a past conversation […] The Gospel was written *for us*.'(11) Therefore, despite the importance of historical-critical questions (especially concerning the Johannine community) (5) it is primarily a literary reading that will enable a reader to become 'caught up in the Jesus-story [and] drawn into the salvific revelation dynamic.' (11)

Rather than argue the case for one thematic model, several 'overlapping and interrelated' literary structures contribute to reveal depths of meaning, including reading John as; a trial narrative, as a covenant relationship with Jesus as the bridegroom, as a new creation of six symbolic 'days', and as a new 'exodus with Jesus as the new Moses.' (25-26) Some of the most significant literary techniques that impact readers' understanding are devices of double meaning, literal misunderstandings, irony and paradox, and dialectic. Dialectic, as Schneiders explains, functions similarly to paradox in presenting the reader with 'apparently irreconcilable claims that challenge her or him to transcend the available options and embrace a new truth.' (31) This occurs, for example, when Jesus responds to the disciples' theological question about who was responsible for causing blindness at birth of the man they encountered, answering that neither this man nor his parents sinned. (31) The difficulty of this leads to apparent confusion. However, the ultimate purpose is not to confuse the reader but serves as part of the theological and spiritual process of revelation. Throughout the narrative, blindness is significant as a symbolic spiritual state that can be overcome by an authentic response to Jesus' self-revelation. This occurs as an encounter between Jesus and a believing disciple, who must be 'shaken loose from the convictions, the verities, the prejudices, the commonsense assumptions that constitute our everyday "knowledge."'(32)

What is demonstrated in this brief exploration of Schneiders' Johannine scholarship is the way she integrates questions of spirituality with theological (and other) approaches

to interpretation. The particular way Schneiders' conceives of the relationship between spirituality and theology will be shown to be crucial here. Before we turn to examine this, however, it is helpful to see the wider conversation within which her work speaks.

2.2 Setting Schneiders' work in a wider conversation

This chapter began with a brief view of the scope of Schneiders' writing. In what follows I will return to her writing to examine in more detail the key area of her work that is pertinent to this thesis. This is her interdisciplinary approach to biblical interpretation, which integrates much of her other work in theology's neighbouring fields of study. Before this, it is helpful to take a step back in order to view how Schneiders' work sits in the wider context of other literature. A number of commonalities will be shown, indicating ways that this approach goes 'with the grain' of other key thinkers in contemporary biblical scholarship, with whom there is a shared vision of the transformative purpose of the Bible as Holy Scripture. Recognising common ground adds weight to reasons for basing an empirical study on one particular author and also allows contrasts to then be drawn out as distinctive features of Schneiders' work.

2.2.1 The relationship between Spirituality and theology

A common view about the relationship between Spirituality and theology may be exemplified by Alistair McGrath's summary of the matter in his excellent introductory textbook to Christian theology; that theology is about theory, spirituality about 'practice, the Christian life.'[34] This simplification, is perhaps unhelpful, however, and does not tally with what is evident in much of the rest of his work that demonstrates the very practical implications for the church and beyond of various developments in theological 'theories.' Although this formula is repeated in the 2017 edition, however, here McGrath at least adds acknowledgement that the question of how spirituality and theology interact has recently become the subject of intense debate.[35] The principle juxtapositions of this debate are voiced in the recently published book, *Exploring*

[34] Alistair E. McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 25.
[35] McGrath, *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 6th edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), p. 93.

Christian Spirituality. In particular, here, Philip Sheldrake is a significant conversation partner. Formerly a president of the *International Society for the Study of Christian Spirituality,* and the author of important publications on the subject, he is also respected as an authoritative voice in contemporary study of Christian Spirituality. During the recent development of this field, one of Sheldrake's strongest points of contention concerns Schneiders' methodological view of Spirituality standing as an independent field and no longer as a sub-discipline within theology.

While agreeing that spirituality is not reducible to a second phase of practical application of Christian doctrine, and that it has a distinctive role, Sheldrake insists that Spirituality must maintain its proper place as an integral influence that characterises authentic theology. To deny this, he argues, leads to 'a reductionist view of theology as abstract and definitive.'[36] Contemplative and prayerful engagement with Scripture, for instance, is properly the task, not only of spirituality, but of all theology. Sheldrake insists that, 'the "vocation" of spirituality is to remind theology'[37] that despite its commitment to critical interpretation and technical methodologies, it must not separate itself from 'the wisdom found in lived experience and practice.'[38] While formal theology still often regards its task as 'informative rather than performative', being a theologian in fact is more about the quality of 'being' than about the analysis one produces.[39]

Sheldrake's vision of the ultimate purpose of theology is important to note, as it articulates some key, shared assumptions that undergird some of the approaches to theological interpretation that are discussed below. The call for more serious incorporation of spirituality into formal theology has been Sheldrake's plea throughout several decades of writing. This is expressed throughout his work. *Images of Holiness,*[40] exemplifies his aim to contribute to contemporary efforts to reclaim the essential unity of theology and spirituality that, as Sheldrake recounts, were progressively divided from

[36] Philip Sheldrake, 'Spirituality and its Critical Methodology', in *Exploring Christian Spirituality*, 15-34, p. 26.
[37] Ibid, p. 30.
[38] Ibid, p. 30.
[39] Ibid, p. 6.
[40] Philip Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness: Explorations in Contemporary Spirituality,* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

the time of late scholasticism.[41] Inadequate doctrine is one factor leading to a neglect of the communal and social nature of the Christian faith. It may be corrected with a vision of the Trinity and Incarnation, which reveals 'a social, involved and incarnate God as the basis for all Christian life:'[42] This brings us to look at certain approaches to theological interpretation that view its academic endeavour as being tied up with the calling to Christian living.

2.2.2 Theological interpretation

Although this area of study covers a great breadth, and its link with biblical studies is still complex and contested,[43] the most important approach for integrating faith and scholarship has been a renewal of theological interpretation. Beyond a brief sketch, it is not my intention to review the many complicated developments within theological interpretation[44] over recent decades for two reasons. Excellent critical accounts are available in other recent writing,[45] and moreover, a historic view does not lead in a logical way towards the different assumptions behind Schneiders' focus on spirituality in interpretation. A more helpful way to interrogate Schneiders' work within wider New Testament scholarship will be to explore a selection of specific approaches that share the broad intended transformative outcome of faithful scriptural engagement. Considering their various strengths and weaknesses will give greater critical insight to the subsequent analysis of Schneiders' hermeneutical approach, make sense of her stance regarding the distinctive roles of spirituality and theology; and highlight the distinctives of her approach. However, acknowledging certain key-points and themes in the development of theological interpretation gives a useful basis for what follows.

[41] Ibid, p. 11.
[42] Ibid, p. 92.
[43] Richard S. Briggs, 'Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Method and Truth in Context', *Anglican Theological Review*, 97, 2 (2015), 201-17, p. 201.
[44] For the same reason I am not giving a historical overview of the developments in the study of biblical hermeneutics, which Andrew Rogers achieves well in *Congregational Hermeneutics*, 2015, pp. 41-54.
[45] See Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008); and Stephen E. Fowl, 'Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Its Future', *Anglican Theological Review,* 99, 4 (2017), 671–90.

Walter Moberly distills the complex possible meanings of theological interpretation into the idea of 'interpreting the text of the Bible as Scripture; the "word of God."'[46] In agreement with this, the aim of recovering a transformational approach to the interpretation of Scripture is a characteristic of what might be seen as a broader postmodern reclamation of trust in theology as providing a reliable framework for interpretation, which the Modern period dismissed as outmoded or naïve.[47] Stephen Fowl, a key proponent of theological interpretation, defines it as 'that practice whereby theological concerns and interests inform and are informed by a reading of Scripture.'[48] Fowl associates four benefits with this approach; being its coherence with premodern hermeneutics; shaping and being shaped primarily by Christian communities; being pluralistic in its methods; and resisting the fragmentation of theology.'[49] Similar benefits are echoed by the four authors of *Reading Scripture with the Church,* including the crucial, additional point that a theological framework brings much needed boundaries to the problem of potentially limitless plurality of emerging interpretive approaches.[50]

The beginning of the emerging recovery of theological exegesis is associated with Karl Barth and Rudolf Bultmann. Barth, as Treier points out, esteems Calvin's model of taking seriously the humanity of the biblical text without failing to 'keep […] its subject matter primary.'[51] Subsequently, James Sanders and Brevard Childs' respective theories of canonical criticism and a canonical approach were highly influential; with Childs' *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (1979) regarded as being among the most discussed books of the 1980s.[52] It aimed to forward recovery of the Bible from secular interests back to its authoritative position as a text that can only be understood

[46] Walter Moberly, 'What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 3, 2 (2009), 161-78, p. 162.
[47] See Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 143.
[48] *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings,* ed. by Stephen E. Fowl, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997), p. xii.
[49] Fowl, in his introduction, *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture,* 1997, xii-xxx. This shows a more integrated vision of biblical studies and systematic theology is shared by Craig Bartholomew, Joel Green, and Christopher Seitz; editors of this book series, *Studies in Theological Interpretation.*
[50] A. K. M. Adam, Stephen E. Fowl, Kevin J. Vanhoozer, and Francis Watson, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation,* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).
[51] Daniel J. Treier, *Introducing Theological Interpretation,* 2008, p. 17.
[52] Tremper Longman, *Introduction to Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999), p. 19.

according to its historical identity as a witness of God's self-revelation, formed in the context of his people.

The same concern motivates Carl Braaten and Robert Jenson's *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church.* The selection of essays in this book interact with Childs' canonical method as it identifies a unity of themes and purpose in the Bible in its entirety, being the word of God revealed as the 'norm for the church's faith.'[53] This volume reads with a slightly defensive tone in support of Childs, criticising the oversight of the many other scholars who have 'ignored his major works or dismissed his approach as too Barthian.'[54] Perhaps this sense of indignation contributes to the rhetoric of a polarising of interpretation seen in the hands of one of two groups: Either historical critics who approach the text with their own set of commitments, sometimes linked to 'ideologies that are alien or hostile to the faith of the Christian church,'(xi) in opposition to those who still treat the Bible as 'the word of God and as the canonical source and norm of the church's faith.'[55]

An enormous benefit of a canonical view has been the gift of a renewed vision of a coherent view of Scripture as a metanarrative in an increasingly fragmented, contextualised, and relativist notions of 'truth' in the increasingly pluralist West. This overarching story is a defining feature of New Testament scholar, Tom Wright's legacy.[56] His work (like Schneiders') stands in firm denial of a binary view between theological and historical approaches. While providing a significant and nuanced understanding of scriptural authority, he warns that a uniquely theological interpretive model can result in a narrow view, correcting that 'the bible doesn't just live within the church because the church [...] is always open to God's world.'[57]

Wright prefers that theological interpretation is complemented with an appreciation of the Bible as being also literature and history. History, in particular, grounds meaning to

[53] Ed. by Carl E. Braaten and Robert W. Jenson (Edinburgh: Eerdmans, 1995), p. xi.
[54] Ibid, p. x.
[55] Ibid, p. x.
[56] Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005); inspiring, for instance, Craig G. Bartholomew and Michel Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).
[57] Tom Wright, *Scripture and the Authority,* p. 4.

its context and should mitigate against too much weight being given to passing philosophical and ideological trends from obscuring its message.[58] Although Wright gives an important reminder to avoid reducing the project of theology to interest within the walls of the church, such an assumption is not necessarily reflective of what is often intended by 'theological' readings, as further demonstrated in Walter Moberly's vision of its purpose being ultimately a 'transformed humanity,' as mentioned above. Perhaps the urgent question here is the question of how the Church's scripturally informed self-understanding corresponds with or stands in rejection of the wider societies of the world it serves.[59]

Another shortcoming, however, to theological, and in particular a canonical focus, is raised by Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann. His objection is that it can lead to hegemonic interpretations that are oppressive of the 'little texts'[60] that are essential to keep in tension crucial complexities and uncertainties. These respect the need to keep listening to what God might say in the complexities of people's lived experience. Setting biblical studies in conversation with contemporary concerns, Brueggemann argues for the need to balance responsible scriptural interpretation and obedience of the word. He firmly rejects the possibility that the 'oppressive' and 'hegemonic' theological approach presents a single right way to interpretation, asserting that, if taken as such, is to 'reduce or eliminate texts that are unwelcome,'[61] those which disrupt or seemingly contradict the norm. Rather than serving as a singular answer to the inadequacy of historical criticism, canonical approaches have failed for the similar way that they have become an oppressive alternative as a dominating force in interpretation.

Writers such as Walter Brueggemann also regard valid theology as itself inseparable from lived experience and practice, stressing that 'what finally counts is the practice of particular texts.'[62] Others, such as A. K. M. Adams, agree that reading Scripture

[58] Ibid.
[59] Richard H. Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).
[60] Walter Brueggeman, *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg,1991), pp. 32, 223, 282.
[61] Ibid, 178.
[62] Walter Brueggemann, *The Book that Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005) p. xiv; similarly argued by Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning,* 1998.

theologically is itself ultimately about a 'lived expression'[63] of the text and is concerned to find possibilities for incorporating exegesis and theology, which move beyond theories to become 'signifying practice.'[64] In agreement with this, Rowland and Bennett advocate that what is required is a 'hermeneutical competency,'[65] that is an ability to discern in accordance with the Holy Spirit what the Scripture teaches us: but this is not about formulaic or prescriptive behaviours for living. It is an orientation that equips us to respond according to the mind of Christ; 'not a *what*, but a *how:*'[66]

2.2.3 Performance interpretation

Nicholas Lash's concept of authentic interpretation as 'performance,'[67] uses the analogy of music and the Arts to liken Scripture to a printed musical score, as a text that only becomes the fullness of the music it symbolises when this is translated into a performance. True interpretation comes not in studying the theory of a musical score, or the text of a play, but in the moment of its performance before an audience. In a Beethoven symphony, for example, there has to be more than technical accuracy that moves the audience to be inspired or consoled; which come from 'a kind of *creative fidelity* that allows the musical score to come alive again in the present moment.'[68] In the same way, the biblical text must be 'translated' from the page into the lived lives of 'those who adhere to this body of texts.'[69] Just as creative space is given to interpret music intuitively in improvisation, each generation of disciples are called to reinterpret the Gospel according to their context; but this improvised performance can only result from understanding of the musical key, rhythm, tempo, and style that are determined by the text.

[63] A. K. M. Adam, *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006), pp. 155-6.
[64] Ibid, p. 1.
[65] Christopher Rowland and Zoë Bennett, 'Action is the Life of All: The Bible and Practical Theology', *Contact, The Bible as Pastor*, 150 (2006), 8-17, p. 12.
[66] Ibid, p. 12; Richard S. Briggs, '"These are the days of Elijah?": The Hermeneutical Move from 'Applying the Text' to 'Living in its World'', *JTI,* 8, 2 (2014), 157-74.
[67] Nicholas Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 37-46.
[68] Ibid, p. 40.
[69] Ibid, p. 40-41.

In Stephen Barton's insightful reflections about a performance approach, he justifies it by demonstrating it 'goes *with the grain*'[70] of what the New Testament says about itself. This is shown, for instance, in the way the ending of each Gospel leave a dramatically open-ended story. While Christians are right to talk about 'Holy Scripture,' Barton also joins Lash in correcting that 'it is not, in fact the script that is 'holy,' but the people: the company who perform the script.'[71] A strength in Barton's view of performance interpretation is his demonstration of the ecumenical implications of this approach to the New Testament. He not only demonstrates this in highlighting the work of proponents from the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist Traditions, he also challenges scholars not to ignore the gift of more sacramental traditions such as Orthodox churches, which honour the way truth is also mediated to believers through 'the lives of the saints.' (201) Using an example of Saint Seraphim of Sarov's encounter with Jesus in a mystical 'transfiguration' experience, Barton urges that, more than being informed by former saints, Christians today can participate in the reality of the biblical narrative 'through the passage of time in the lives and the communion of those who have themselves been touched by the "weight of glory."' (201)

Despite the strength of these insights, two possible difficulties arise from the constricted link between experience and interpretation that is evident in Barton's view. This first appears to be implicit in his (rightful) ethical concern about interpretations of scriptural responses to poverty in the New Testament church. Barton illustrates his view in recalling a discussion of a study group of exegetes considering the idea of the 'community of goods' in Acts (chapters 2 and 5). Their response was to endeavour to extrapolate ethical 'norms and principles' from the narrative. Barton's objects that this kind of attempt to condense narrative into abstract ethical principles has the effect of diminishing and 'neutralizing' the text. (204) True interpretation of the New Testament cannot be captured intellectually but is enacted in the lives of those who are engaging with the narrative in a continuation of the living performance. His argument follows that without personal involvement in social experiences of solidarity with the poor today, an interpreter is as misplaced and helpless as 'tourists stranded on a foreign shore.' (204)

[70] Stephen C. Barton, 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52, 2 (1999), 179–208, p. 180 (author's italics). Page numbers for this article will be noted in the body of text in this section.
[71] Lash, 'Performing the Scriptures', p. 42.

A problem arising from this, however, is whether this limits the scope of what a reader can meaningfully understand to the portions of scripture that relate to their existing experience. In this case, how does this give scope for the transformational power of Scripture as God's word to bring the result of growth in a believer's Christian life that may lead to a more authentic performance?

Secondly, without questioning that Barton is emphatically right to bring the crucial corrective to recent, spiritually impoverished methods of biblical studies, the nature of the relationship between critical scholarship and the Church's living enactment of the Gospel remains ambiguous in his essay. Importantly, Barton does not ignore what he calls the 'risk and struggle' (207) of seeing interpretation as performance. History, and in particular perspectives from feminism and liberation theologies, have illuminated performances which are 'depraved and appalling.' (207) Rather than answer this with practical guidelines, he urges the need for courage to resist cynicism and for humility to recognise the part we also play in inauthentic performances.

His vision is for a culture of apprenticeship where NT interpretation is 'critically open;' not only to the witness of faithful saints and the Church, but also listening to other faith communities and those outside the church. (207) In this way, the responsibility of how performances may be judged as faithful or shamefully unfaithful are assigned to the Church faithfully listening to critical voices; those of other traditions and those beyond the church. In this account, scholarship is subsumed within the wider operation of interpretation. However, this seems to be a lack of trust that critical scholarship might also offer a necessary perspective from which to offer additional contributions to this critique. The result is a lack of clarity about how inauthentic interpretations may be identified and corrected.

Barton makes an excellent point in stressing that authentic performance depends on humility to listen to critique. Elsewhere this theme has been developed into a discussion of interpretive 'virtues'[72] and/or the ideal reader of Scripture. However, Barton's vision

[72] The following are important examples: Richard Briggs emphasises humility, wisdom, trust, love, and receptivity, *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010); Vanhoozer advocates a 'hermeneutics of humility and conviction,' *Is There a Meaning,* 1998, p. 463. Thiselton recalls Dilthey and Betti's call for openness, *New Horizons,* 1992, p.

of a culture of apprenticeship leaves questions slightly unclear about where the power or authority lies to judge or authorise authenticity in interpretation. This may be problematic, given the weight of influence contemporary culture might have in this model. Although, as illustrated in his examples, culture can sometimes be a legitimate judge of the Church, [73] Barton is less clear how Scripture itself also functions as a theological critique of ungodly aspects of culture, and their manifestation in the Church. For instance, feminist and liberation critiques of the church's performance cannot be reduced merely to their cultural sources (outside of the church), but should be seen as insights emerging in conversation with fresh, critical interpretations of scripture that sharpened or challenged former readings. Conversely, the exposures and correctives of previous oversights and bias might be argued to demonstrate that it was also Scripture's own authentic voice that came to be heard more clearly against former readings that had emerged from unconscious cultural assumptions.

Tom Wright's work might have served as a more fruitful dialogue partner in place of Barton's slightly less apt choice of Rowan Williams, here. Wright has famously extended a similar analogy of a play to depict the historic continuous narrative of Scripture more specifically as five acts. This later inspired Craig Bartholomew and Michael Goheen's popular book, *The Drama of Scripture*,[74] written, as the title implies, to inspire Christians to 'find their own place' in the ongoing biblical story. Two of several beneficial characteristics of Wright's approach to performance interpretation are, firstly, that it highlights the urgency of a missional view of the purpose of Scripture as it testifies to and models the Church's fundamental calling to the world as the continuation of the People of God, and of Jesus' bodily presence on earth. Secondly, it speaks meaningfully to the theological question of biblical authority. Likened to actors charged with improvising the final act of which the script is missing, coherent and faithful performance of the whole story requires the Church, like the actors, to give thorough

33; Andrew Rogers promotes seven virtues in *Congregational Hermeneutics,* 2015; Paul J. Griffiths emphasises humility, 'Reading as a Spiritual Discipline' in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. by L. Gregory Johnes and Stephanie Paulsell (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 32-47; and see also Alan Jacobs, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Cambridge: Westview, 2001).

[73] Rowan Williams reminds us that 'the Church judges the world, but it also hears God's judgment on itself in the judgment passed upon it by the world,' *On Christian Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 39.

[74] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture,* 2004.

attention to details of existing texts for the previous acts. For Wright, the biblical scholar's responsibility to historical, theological, and literary interrogations of the New Testament are inseparable from the understanding that authenticates their performance.

Barton, like Lash, takes a rather pejorative view of the historical critic as 'consumer,' while dismissing the literary critic as 'tourist.'[75] This an understandable response to the Post-Enlightenment conventions that rejected reading from the 'bias' of faith, and may reflect that some time has passed since these comments were made. His view might be enriched, however, in dialogue with other contemporaries who considered critical phases of inquiry to be an integral part of the transformative process of interpretation.[76] Barton's view raises questions about way the church's interpretation (when this is its living performance of the text) is held to account; and by whom. There are good reasons behind the thinking that the academic roles of textual critic, historian and the philologist are 'subordinate to the larger project of *embodying* the testimony of the text.'[77] This takes seriously a renewed theological emphasis on the public and missional responsibility of the church, within the world it serves. A problem, however, is what is lacking in a strategy to safeguard against other instances of what Barton rightfully criticises as 'appalling' performances of the church, recognised today in feminist and liberation theologies.

There is merit in Barton's suggestion that congregations are critically open in three ways: to other Christian denominations, to other faiths communities, and to others 'outside' the church. (207) The importance of this has been seen as correctives have and are challenging racist and androcentric theologies in the Church, which Barton relates these to a greater awareness resulting from political liberation movements. This example, however, illustrates an important question that merits further attention than it is given here, which is the significance of the subsequent rethinking in biblical

[75] Taken from Nicolas Lash, 'What Might Martyrdom Mean?', in *Theology on the Way,* 1986, 82-7, (p. 187).
[76] See Gordon D. Fee's reflections on his personal experience of the transformational power of New Testament exegetical inquiry, in 'Exegesis and Spirituality: Reflections on Completing the Exegetical Circle', *Crux,* 31, 4 (December 1995) 29-35. And Sandra Schneiders' discussion of reasons to see critical processes of interpretation as central to enabling the voice of Scripture to be heard above
[77] Barton, 'Performing the Scriptures', p. 184, (author's italics).

interpretation upon the church. While this may have been triggered by issues raised in wider culture, Barton may be underplaying the significance of the subsequent critique of the church not only in light of these issues but in a crucial re-evaluation of Scripture's own message which they bring to light.

Tom Wright, however, stresses that a temptation of the Church is to uncritically subsume cultural ideals and philosophies and so project their values upon the biblical text.[78] It is this confidence in a renewed understanding of Scripture's account of women and men that is ultimately transformative of the church's ongoing performance of the Gospel, as distinct from a similar movement for good taking place in the world. This brings into question how a performance model allows Scripture's authoritative witness to God's Word that includes a reciprocal critique of other cultural values that are *un*godly influences in both the church and world.[79]

2.3 Key distinctives of Schneiders' approach

In this section, the concern is to identify and explore the ways in which Schneiders' work is distinctive from other scholars who share a view that authentic biblical interpretation is necessarily transformative. For many authors, this matter is the subject of theological interpretation. Schneiders, however, draws a distinction that frames discussions of human experience within the discipline of Spirituality, rather than theology. Having explained this, we will then look at how this gives a different way of considering an alternative view of interpretation as performance.

2.3.1 Spirituality and theology

Sandra Schneiders may be seen as belonging to a wider movement within biblical scholarship, which insists that true interpretation is transformational. A distinctive is the importance she gives to making explicit her methodological assumptions, including the crucial role critical scholarship and aesthetic engagement both play in the process of understanding. In agreement with Barton, faithful interpretation may be evidenced on

[78] Wright, *Scripture and the Authority*, p. 69.
[79] Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture*.

one level by its fruitfulness, but she insists that a responsible response to inevitable interpreter bias requires self-awareness of the hermeneutical processes that lead to a particular interpretive outcome, as this allows for greater scrutiny and accountability. Schneiders gives a detailed account of her own view of the relationship between critical scholarship, tradition, theology and transformative interpretation. This includes engaging more directly with the question of 'how' it is that the text can be revelatory, and how readers can be transformed by encountering God through the text. This, Schneiders argues, is a question that includes theologies of inspiration and revelation but is primarily understood in its context as human experience of faith. For this reason, understanding belongs ultimately within the field, not of theology, but of Christian Spirituality.[80]

This categorisation may be clarified by exploring Schneiders' perception about the disciplines of theology and spirituality. For Schneiders, misconceptions about spirituality include the idea; on one hand that is a preoccupation with introspection, or

> "bad theology in therapy"; or on the other hand being something that completes what is missing in academic theology; amounting to something like '"theology done right;" that is, theology done with heart as well as head engaged.[81]

Although this may at first seem plausible, it limits the usefulness of spirituality to what is lacking in contemporary theology. An historical perspective, albeit slightly over-generalised, is helpful for understanding from where these misconceptions arise.

> Until the Middle Ages, theology was not equated with dogmatics (the forerunner of systematic theology) and was not divided into subdisciplines such as Christology and ecclesiology, nor was it separated from biblical studies or spirituality. All theology was faith seeking understanding; it was also understanding seeking transformation, the transformation of self and world in God through Christ in the power of the Spirit.[82]

Since the Modern separation of academic disciplines, however, the term 'theology' needs to be clarified from among several contemporary meanings of the term, which

[80] This is what I am acknowledging in employing the expression 'spiritual understanding' in this thesis.
[81] Schneiders, 'The Discipline of Christian Spirituality and Catholic Theology', in *Exploring Christian Spirituality,* p. 198.
[82] Ibid, p. 199.

may include a broad use of confessionally committed religious studies in the context of, for instance, Catholic or Lutheran universities. Schneiders clarifies that in this discussion, 'theology' and 'spirituality' refer more precisely to the relation between *systematic* theology and the *academic* study of spirituality. This distinction is helpful for understanding Schneiders' key argument that, despite the well-meaning intention to re-establish the study of theology as a unified academic discipline that incorporates personal transformation, this is actually an unrealistic ideal.[83]

> There are scholars in both spirituality and theology today who long for the reconstruction in the modern context of this premodern and integral approach to theology as theoretically reflective and articulate "lived Spirituality." I share their nostalgia but not their confidence in such a revival.[84]

2.3.2 Biblical spirituality and interpretation as performance

Similarity between the performance approach and Schneiders' vision of biblical spirituality may be seen in the way it also sees true interpretation as the lived experience of personal and communal faith. In fact spiritual formation through biblical interpretation is never artificially separated from the way Christian formation occurs as a believer 'comes to live habitually in the world of the NT [New Testament] revelation.'[85] In a recent article, Schneiders also depicts interpretation as performance using an analogy of drama and music, but in this account, the point is to show the unique and complementary roles of biblical theology and 'biblical spirituality.'

Likening the role of a symphony composer with writers of Scripture, it is theologians (and not biblical scholars) who are likened to musicologists and their ultimate contribution of technical knowledge,[86] while the various interpreters of the music– from conductor, musicians, and even the audience–are equated with participants in biblical spirituality; they share interpretive roles that is essentially 'transformative

[83] Ibid, p. 200.
[84] Ibid, p. 199.
[85] Schneiders, *Revelatory*, p. 168.
[86] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2016.

participation.'[87] Performing relies upon but, Schneiders contends, is distinguishable from the primarily theoretical role of musicology, which is the task of analysing and explaining the features of music. Similarly, a theologian's concern with either Pauline theology or Christology etc. will involve questions about language, history of the development of the text, its context and subsequent reception; and contribute to accurate ways of understanding the text.[88] A crucial point that Schneiders makes well, is that she is not suggesting that the two undertakings are totally separate or should be separable.

> One can hardly imagine a great musicologist who never participates in the making or appreciation of music or a conductor or musician or experienced listener who is ignorant of musicology

A musicologist will almost certainly also include participation and experiences of live performances; and in the same way a theologian will be concerned with the extent to which their work is reflected in church practice and the consequential lived experience (spirituality) that is enriched and informed by the theology: 'But the two operations are distinguishable; their purposes differ.'[89] This distinction between biblical theology and spirituality corresponds to a similar relationship between theology and 'theopoetics.'[90] Whereas theology is seen as discourse about God, theopoetics is a field of study concerned with experiencing as well as understanding God 'in an aesthetic, i.e., a participative, rather than an abstract rational or discursive way.'[91]

The term theopoetic(s) can be both a noun and adjective, in a similar way that the term hermeneutic and hermeneutics are used. Theopoetics recognises that most of the Bible is composed not of dialectical or propositional material, but theopoetic texts;

> literary narratives (epics, myths, short stories, drama), lyric compositions (poetry, hymns, Wisdom literature), and various kinds of particularly biblical literary forms such as midrash and parables, rather than of a strictly historical, legal, or theological nature.[92]

[87] Ibid, p. 420.
[88] Ibid, p. 420.
[89] Ibid, p. 420-1.
[90] See p. 425 of the same article for Schneiders' indicative list of conversation partners in this emerging field, including commending Marcus Borg (for New Testament) and Walter Brueggemann (for Old Testament) approaches to theopoetics in biblical interpretation.
[91] Ibid, p. 424.
[92] Ibid, p. 424.

Schneiders contends that a reason contemporary literary methods are and have been fruitful in recent scholarship is due to their attention to the way aesthetic engagement of a text is integral to a full grasp of its meaning: A crucial point that she is right to criticise modern biblical scholarship for having missed. Beyond the critical analysis, like the performance of a symphony, interpretation of scripture should entail the 'full realisation' of the work of art.'[93] At this point, analysis

> cease[s] to be the focus of attention as the audience loses itself in the music. In fact, the better all these elements are achieved and coordinated, the less obvious they are as the performance unfolds.[94]

The analogy of music is complemented with that of theatre. In particular, Schneiders describes the particular aesthetic power of Thornton Wilder's play, *Our Town*, where the narrator, in role of stage manager, converses with the audience, who become real participants 'as if everything in the play were taking place here and now in their "own town."'[95] Schneiders suggests that a similar experience is the kind of aesthetic or theopoetic engagement anticipated in biblical spirituality.

> [Readers] find their own inner landscapes and outer lives illuminated in subtle or shattering ways. They experience various kinds and levels of transformation or conversion. They are not reading "about" things that happened to other people in other times but experiencing in a new way their own consciousness, their own life, in and through the biblical material they are reading.[96]

This, however, is a description of the way Scripture has the *capacity* to engage believers; a picture of how interpretation is ideally like a continuous performance of the New Testament message, understood as being the whole of one's life. Unfortunately, as Schneiders notes, the experience of many Christians is that encountering the Bible is more like taking 'a brief vacation in a fantasy land before returning to "the real world."'[97] This is a question of Christian spirituality. But its answer, Schneiders believes,

---

[93] Ibid, p. 428.
[94] Ibid, p. 428.
[95] Ibid, p. 429.
[96] Ibid, p. 430.
[97] Schneiders, *Revelatory*, p. 168. From this point, pages from this book will be noted in the body of the text.

lies in the field of biblical hermeneutics, where the challenge is understanding how Christians come to inhabit the world of the Bible.

> The world of New Testament presents Jesus' first disciples and some of those in the crowds that listened to his preaching as totally caught up in the world he spun out in his parables and aphorisms and discourses. They followed him with enthusiasm, leaving behind the structures and relations of ordinary life in order to enter into and live according to the coordinates of this new world. The problem of New Testament hermeneutics is precisely how later believers, who do not hear the earthly Jesus but encounter him only through the text, who are overfamiliar with the stories and know how they turn out, can experience the invitation into the world before the text that will be as truly transforming for them as it was for those who first heard the parables and followed Jesus. (168)

It is with this important question in mind that we now turn to Schneiders' approach to interpretation that she has elucidated in her book, *The Revelatory Text*. Written as a 'metaproject' (13) reflecting on hermeneutical theory itself, the approach explained in this book provides a foundation for the Bible course used in my project.

2.4 *The Revelatory Text*: A hermeneutical approach

The aim of this book is to present a coherent account of the way interpretation can allow Scripture to function as locus of divine revelatory encounter in order that meaning may progress from engagement with the text in an experiential and holistic kind of understanding. This occurs both in the aesthetic process of interacting with the text and with former and subsequent lived experience; which is an ongoing process within interpretation. The book, is therefore multidisciplinary, drawing on philosophical hermeneutics, theology of scripture, and critical biblical scholarship. The audience Schneiders writes for, however, includes Pastors and theologians in their role mediating between the academy and the faith community. (13) At the heart of this work is also the author's commitment to make Scripture 'available as a faith resource to the oppressed as well as to the privileged among its readers;' (5) with women identified as being among the most oppressed within other groups and the most alienated from the biblical text. (3)

Schneiders recalls a key, early motivation for her work arising from her experience as a student in the1970s Parisian Institut Catholique. Perhaps the most significant event

impacting her work followed early phases of what Schneiders found to be 'the liberating results of the Second Vatican Council allowing biblical studies greater freedom from dogmatic control.'(1)[98] During this time, a mixture of appreciation of and dissatisfaction with contemporary scholarship sparked her quest to develop an integral hermeneutical theory that built on critical scholarship while safeguarding a faith position that takes seriously the biblical text as Holy Scripture. (21) Addressing this question is the purpose of Schneiders' book,

In the second edition of *Revelatory Text,* Schneiders recalls in the prologue the telling outcome of difficulties arriving at the French translation of its title, which finally resulted in a particularly insightful expression; 'Le Texte de la Rencontre.' This plays on the expression 'la *tente* de la rencontre', denoting the meeting tent where Moses encountered and spoke with God, which, as Schneiders explains in relation to John 1:14, served as the Old Testament allusion 'undergirding the Johannine understanding of the Incarnation itself as the "tenting" of God among us for the purpose of intimate and transformative encounter.' (xix) With this encounter in mind, the book is organised into two sections. Consistent with the principle that the object of inquiry precedes method, the first section wrestles with questions relating to the identity of the Bible as the word of God and as the normative tradition of the Church. The second section interrogates issues in the project of interpretation. Schneiders' interpretive approach is finally demonstrated in a case study of a passage in John's Gospel.

2.4.1 The New Testament as sacred Scripture

The first part of the book introduces the issues in the project of interpreting the New Testament, including what it means to talk about the Bible as the 'word of God.' Crucial to the discussion is recognition of this metaphor's limitations as the author refutes untenable fundamentalist views of Scripture with the striking warning that 'literalized metaphor is the cancer of the religious imagination.' (30) The real referent of the expression 'word of God' is not strictly the Bible, but divine revelation; specifically, the divine self-giving of God in Jesus, which is mediated through the text by faith. Revelation

[98] The implication of Vatican II for Catholic scholarship, faith, and women in the church, are discussed further in *The Bible and Feminism*, pp. 31-33.

occurs through faith in an interaction between a self-aware reader as Scripture brings to 'symbolic disclosure […] that which is primordially disclosed in Jesus.' (53) Like inspiration, revelation is always a relational, dialectic process.

> It is essential for an understanding of revelation to resist the insinuation of the simplistic imagination that wants to equate revelation with the imparting of otherwise unavailable information. Revelation, as we shall see, does have a noetic dimension, but that is not its defining characteristic and certainly not the place to start an examination of the subject. Personal revelation, even in the human order, is first and foremost self-disclosure [...] Revelation, although one person may initiate it, is necessarily a mutual experience of personal disclosure giving rise to a mutual treasuring of what has been shared, for the "what" is really a "who." (34)

Similarly, inspiration is understood as God's self-giving throughout successive human experiences that created and shaped the text, including through complex processes of archaeological research, language, translation, interpretation, and personal mediation. (53) Albeit under the influence of the Spirit of God, an impact of human fallibility is that the text requires constant revision in emerging human contexts.

More explicitly stated in the preface to the second edition, this means that 'the biblical text is not "revealed" in the sense of being communicated directly by God to the author.' (xviii) In order to justify that this view does not contradict Catholic teaching about scripture's authority and inspiration, Schneiders recalls the analogy of the Incarnation expressed in 'Divino afflante Spiritu' by Pope Pius XII. The purpose of her use of this analogy, however, is not to defend a theory of inerrancy, as it sometimes has been employed,[99] but to parallel Jesus' experience of human limitations with those inherent in the texts of Scripture. Reconceptualising the authority of Scripture away from infallibility then calls for further clarification about the way it is still authoritative. This results from a distinction between 'unilateral and absolute' as opposed to a more appropriate vision of the 'dialogical and relative' authority (55) that Schneiders associates with the Bible. It does not coerce obedience and appeals not primarily for an intellectual response but for one that is 'affective and moral.' (56) This kind of authority may be understood, for instance, in the kind by which friendship makes a valid claim to

[99] See Peter S. Williamson, 'Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church', *Subsidia Biblica*, 22 (Rome: E.P.I.B., 2001), p. 39.

warrant a response of fidelity; not in the threat of sanction but in such a way that failure to respond accordingly results in 'the diminution of the self.' (56)

Related to this approach to authority is the question of how the Bible, and the responsibility of its interpretation, may be understood to belong to the church. This calls for a closer examination of what is assumed in the concept of tradition as it is illuminated by Gadamer's development of Heidegger's theory of effective historical consciousness. This sees the fluid nature of the relationship humans have with history as participants and not bystanders; whose perspectives of history are constantly revised by new meanings of truth which enrich and develop it in new historical and social contexts within which the interpreters are implicated. From this point, as Schneiders argues, normativity of scripture follows from one's doctrine of scripture. When tradition is rightfully released from its familiar confusion with fixed dogmatic propositions it can be recognised on three levels to be a) the foundation, b) content, and, c) mode, of the church's effective historical consciousness.

Firstly, in opposition to a positivist paradigm, Schneiders' concept of the Bible as locus of encounter means that tradition as foundation becomes 'the ever-deepening guiding influence on our thought and action of an ever-deepening familiarity with God in Jesus.' (59) Secondly, when seen as content, tradition is the foundational gift handed down through the church, most specifically the person of the Holy Spirit, originally imparted by Jesus to reveal God with the purpose of his reign in the world. (80) Tradition is not fixed dogma, but is dynamic interaction between the present faith community and existential situations it faces: It is not 'inert treasure but a living experience that transforms and is transformed by the believers in whom it is carried.' (74) This explains why the content of tradition may be understood as its historic consciousness that is shaped and reshaped as the living Church transmits it to new generations. (74) Accordingly, Schneiders rejects the assumption that the key normative character of apostolic tradition is its temporal immediacy to the historical Jesus. She asserts that we have today a much 'wider and more profound appreciation of the meaning of Christ for human history' (75) than did the first generation of Christians. (75) Finally, tradition may also be viewed as the mode by which successive generations access the content of tradition.

Having seen how the New Testament is understood to be Scripture the three subsequent headings of Exegesis, Criticism, and Hermeneutics, structure the second part of the book. This demonstrates how, as, may be authentically interpreted using familiar categories of as overlapping interpretative processes exploring the worlds behind, of, and in front of the text.

2.4.2 The world behind the text

In looking at historical issues 'behind the text,' Schneiders reframes the question away from how the New Testament may be demonstrated to be historically reliable to ask how it is related to its subject matter, which is 'Jesus the Christ as primary instance of revelation.'(100) Schneiders agrees with the displacement of a former confidence in exegesis which aimed to uncover what the text originally meant (123) agreeing that Heidegger's principle of historical consciousness prevents a reader from 'stepping outside' of their own historical horizon and into the ancient biblical world to understand the writer's original intention. Further insights from Ricoeur cause this 'distanciation'[100] from the author as liberating the text and leading to multiple possible meanings in relation to the reader's context.

Although the primary question about Jesus has historical dimensions, in her preface to the second edition, she qualifies her intended use of the well-used expression 'behind the text' for its unhelpful inference that the aim is to gain positivist knowledge about the way the world was– and the way *Jesus* was– at the time it was written. Her intended meaning denotes not an objective view of the past, but rather the relation of the text to its subject matter, which is Jesus. To be clear about this requires distinguishing four distinct but overlapping ways of looking at Jesus. (xx-xxx) The addition of extensive new details in the preface is extremely helpful on this point, in responding to an important period of controversial debate in biblical studies regarding the question of the 'historical Jesus.'[101] These revisions, however, require some care on the part of the

[100] A term coined by Paul Ricoeur, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 131-44.

[101] These debates in the 1980s and 90s included the contentious work of the 'Jesus seminar' in North America, comprising of scholars broadly contending, from a historical view, for a human and not

reader to avoid misunderstanding when assimilating the reworked categories into the rest of the book.

Schneiders clarifies that the first level, the 'Actual Jesus' is intended to refer to Jesus as he now exists and whom we encounter in the written word, the sacraments and the gift of his Spirit. (100-1) This is brought into focus in the preface, in conversation with Marcus Borg's distinction between the 'pre-Easter Jesus' and the 'post-Easter Jesus', which recognises a continuity in identity of Jesus of Nazareth in his earthly career; the 'pre-Easter Jesus' (often unhelpfully referred to as the 'historical Jesus') with the now glorified Jesus (the 'post-Easter Jesus.') The pre-Easter Jesus was subsumed into the post-Easter Jesus in a similar way in which an adult has a continuation in identity with the child she once was but no longer is. The identity she had as that child has direct bearing on her present identity and personhood as an adult because her former experience has continuity through time with the person she is today in adulthood. But it is possible to talk about when she 'was' a child, being a person she no longer really 'is.' That is an identity she can recall but no longer has in the present.

In agreement with the important work of Luke Timothy Johnson[102] Schneiders' argument stresses that this *Actual Jesus* is the primary referent of the Gospel writers. The gospel authors wrote from the perspective of having experienced the risen Christ, and 'never intended, or claimed, to present the 'historical Jesus' to their readers.' (xxvi) In relation to the Fourth Gospel, this is evident in multiple accounts of faith claims about Jesus' identity, such as in John 4:42, when the Samaritan people recognise Jesus as 'The Saviour of the world.'

The second level of talking about Jesus as the 'Historical Jesus' is also revised in the preface in response to the recent debates. Schneiders corrects that this term is more fitting to non-scriptural accounts of Jesus, as the New Testament is written with theological purposes. The third view is the 'Proclaimed Jesus,' referring to the Actual Jesus as he is witnessed to and presented by successive generations by the Church; and

divine conception of Jesus of Nazareth. See Marcus Borg, *Jesus in Contemporary Scholarship* (Valley Forge: Trinity Press International, 1994), and Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for The Historical Jesus and The Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

[102] Johnson, *The Real Jesus,* 1996.

so believed in by Christians. Finally, the 'textual Jesus' denotes the non-negotiable and normative foundation of the proclaimed Jesus, contained in the New Testament Canon.

2.4.3 The world of the text

The 'world of the text' concerns firstly the *content* of the text as witness (this is especially significant to the Gospels) and the *form* of the text as 'linguistic and textual.' (151) One of the results of this is seeing that human witness can never be a perfectly accurate account, it will always be biased and restricted by the limitations of language itself. For this reason, criticism is needed, and on a simple level may be seen in three divisions of historical, textual, and audience criticism. The latter includes sociological or psychological analysis of the original and/or later audiences of the text, and Schneiders sees these as being a more 'speculative' type of criticism. (125) Her view of historical criticism is distinct from positivist attempts to determine the factual reliability of the gospels: history does not determine the form and content of the Church's faith, but it does have important theological and spiritual implications. This is illustrated with the importance for the Catholic church of discovering that Jesus did not appoint Peter the first pope or institute seven sacraments. (116)

Like historical criticism, literary methods are indispensable. Crucial to exploring the world of the text is perceiving the symbolic and metaphoric qualities of language; which 'simultaneously reveals and conceals that which it renders present.' (139) Likened to a Work of Art, the surplus meanings of a biblical text are validated in light of the way a modern depiction of 'Hamlet' can speak meaningfully to audiences, for instance, in twenty-first century America. (144) In support of Ricoeur's concept of 'semantic autonomy,' this means that distanciation of the text from its situation is both necessary and helpful. It allows a 'surplus of meaning,' (123) with possibilities for new valid interpretations to unfold in fresh contexts. In opposition to authorial intent as a safeguard of fixed, objective or 'literal' meaning,[103] Platonic categories of 'ideal meaning' serves as the standard by which a multiplicity of possible interpretations may be held

[103] Beyond acknowledging that this is a widely-contested term, there is not space to enter into arguments here. See Rowan Williams, 'The literal Sense of Scripture', *Modem Theology,* 7,2 (1991), 121-33.

accountable. Just as the rules of tennis constitute the 'ideal game' of tennis, the ideal meaning provides 'a structure that governs the actual playing in which tennis in the full sense of the word occurs as event.'(167) 'Ideal meaning' exists as a dynamic structure derived from three factors; the dialectic between sense and reference, the genre, and the style of the author (xxxii). These govern the locus of the connection of this text to its subject matter (Jesus) serving as a crucial 'objective pole' which is argued to guard against relativism (152) in providing a boundary of validity and truth.

One of the roles of criticism, then, is to guard the text against naïve literalism, that can result from interpretation amounting to a reflection of the existing preunderstandings of the reader. Schneiders accepts Heidegger's demonstration that all understanding necessarily begins with preunderstanding, but follows Ricoeur's engagement with this idea as part of his theory of understanding. The first point is showing that preunderstanding is, in one sense, a positive–or at least neutral thing; it signifies the starting place from which a reader is enabled to engage with a text and formulate questions. (142) With Ricoeur, Schneiders describes it as the 'initial guess at meaning.' (158) Preunderstanding is a culmination of everything in a reader's present knowledge and experience that relates (or is perceived to relate) to the subject matter. Accepting the ontological sense that understanding is at the heart of what is means to be human, and more specifically, being human *in the world*; this means that understanding always includes social dimensions. But the text has its own meaning, which is scrutinised in subsequent interpretive methods 'that correct and expand the preunderstanding into the meaning that is finally understood.' (157)

For Schneiders the critical phase of exegesis and criticism are the assurance that the text's own message is given space to challenge the reader's preunderstanding, and not risk being subsumed within it, as stated more explicitly elsewhere.[104] What is not clear in this discussion, however, is what is means for preunderstanding to be faced with new meaning that challenges a reader to make a substantial change in their thinking. Elsewhere in her book, Schneiders uses the term 'presuppositions' in a way that conveys its more negative potential to restrict understanding. This is implicit, for instance, in her critique of the 'hidden and unexamined' presupposition in modern

[104] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2002, p. 136.

historical scholarship that took the Bible to be an historical document. (21-22) In another sense, following the masters of suspicion and successive ideology critics, Schneiders contends in a summary of the problem of interpretation that not only is 'presuppositionless understanding' (20) impossible, but that presuppositions are not neutral but usually affected by 'conscious or unconscious power interests and agendas' (20) that are tied up with the social position of the interpreter. This becomes more confusing when seeing that the terms are used interchangeably (82, 89). Most notably in the case study, where the term presupposition is used to make explicit Schneiders' intellectual and feminist positions that frame her interpretive approach.

Anthony Thiselton, gives a discerning critique of the nuances intended in the origins of these terms, which is helpful guide to some of these ambiguities.[105] He suggests that the intended meaning of pre-understanding might be better expressed by a 'horizon of expectation.'[106] This highlights the sense that not only is there an initial place of contact between text and comprehension, but that what is already perceived will be changed to make room for what is discovered to be new meaning,[107] Thiselton also corrects that a notion of cognitive, conceptual beliefs can limit Dilthey's actual concept of pre-understanding as including pre-conceptual experiences that also form pre-understanding. Thiselton prefers John Searle's use of 'pre-intentional background' to express this wider meaning. However, as evident in some of his famous book titles, Thiselton's preferred expression holds fast to the metaphor of horizons. This has the benefit of conveying that understanding is not only moveable, making sense of the positive concept of background understanding as present scope of view, but also the negative possibility that a reader might unwittingly distort meaning in line with one's existing view 'by failing to note the differences and distinctiveness which characterise the horizons of the biblical text, in contrast to our own.'[108] It also has the benefit of suggesting a horizon might be a broader shared space with others who have a similar scope of view, allowing for the importance of the idea of effective historic consciousness that shapes not only individuals but communities and traditions.

[105] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 44-6.
[106] Ibid, p. 34.
[107] Ibid, p. 45.
[108] Ibid, p. 46.

Schneiders' lack of discussion of these points may invite criticism that no explanation is given to show why the presuppositions she lays forth in her case study (based on her own ideological agenda) do not seem to be susceptible to revision from engagement with the text. They serve more as one of many possible valid frameworks for the interpretation. In consistency with the book's purpose as a metaproject of interpretive theory, it would help to add more explicit discussion about the extent to which certain presuppositions (or preunderstanding) may not need to be vulnerable to revision in each fresh encounter with a text.[109] This book is characterised by lucid structure and articulation of an impressive breadth of hermeneutical and theological considerations. But this one point might benefit from additional clarity, given its importance to the practice of transformational reading and its implications for pastoral contexts of Bible engagement, which is also an ultimate concern of this book.[110]

2.4.4 The world before the text

The world *of* the text evidently overlaps with the third perspective of 'the world before the text;' which concerns hermeneutical view, which finds connections between the text and the 'here and now.' As understanding is both a process and a product it has epistemological and ontological implications. Following Ricoeur, we see the process of understanding as a dialectic between explanation and understanding. Explanation involves exegesis and criticism, but is not adequate by itself. It requires a further 'dialectic alteration' with understanding, until it is integrated in the world of the reader, called 'application,' or 'appropriation,' and which Gadamer famously named a 'fusion of horizons.' (126) This fusion is more than the process. Its result (or 'product') is an existential change in the knower; an experience of conversion by participation in the world before the text.'[111]

[109] This lack of clarity between both expressions may be an echo of Rudolf Bultmann's work, which includes a rather confusing and highly subjective distinction between presuppositions and preunderstanding, in 'Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961), 194-200. Thiselton has done well to clear a path through ambiguity on this matter with his convincing argument for the preferable concept of a reader's horizon. Thiselton, *New Horizons*, pp. 45-46.

[110] Studies in pastoral contexts show that Christians are often reluctant to consider revising established views, John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

[111] *Revelatory,* p. 168.

Explanation is a process of 'abolishing all the obstacles to understanding offered by the text itself,' (126) such as cultural implications of meaning. Stages of 'suspicion' must be followed by participation in the world the text projects in returning to a 'second naïveté.' As the first of two stages in appropriation (aesthetic surrender and existential appropriation), this requires the reader to surrender to the dynamics of the text long enough to be 'caught up in its existential horizon.' (126) While leaning on this philosophical theory, Schneiders is justified in critiquing Gadamer's terminology of 'application' as being a weak expression of its intended coherence between change or action that results from the interpretation itself. 'Application' may infer passivity, which is not a true account of the dialogical process that Gadamer is describing. Understanding, Schneiders emphatically agrees, is integrated into the reader's own world of meaning. (126) A better phrase is 'appropriation,' reflecting that understanding is a process of interacting with the text in the context of lived experience. (174) Appropriation is like the effect on the audience who become in some sense involved in the play they watch. A benefit for pastoral practice, of Schneiders' use of this metaphor is the way it also reinforces the legitimacy of recontextualisation.

> Unlike that which is inferred in the term 'application', although this may include subsequent 'decisions or actions to be carried out later as a result, [...] it is itself not something added on to the interpretation but the terminating moment of the interpretation itself.' (196)

This *ontologica*l level of knowing, as Gadamer taught us, is the more fundamental level of understanding. More than a moment of insight, it means being existentially 'modified' or transformed as what is understood is integrated in one's experience. (159) Furthermore, this occurs 'within the horizon of effective historical consciousness because that is the only consciousness we have.' (161) The pressing challenge Schneiders sees in biblical hermeneutics is to understand how this can happen in an encounter between a Christian and text; 'how the scriptures can become revelatory text.' (169)

Having argued in what preceded that transformation is an integral aspect of interpretation, Schneiders appeals to Ricoeur's depiction of appropriation occurring in progression from 'the first naïveté' to 'the second naïveté.' This process began with an

initial unselfconscious 'immediacy of reader to subject matter.' (169) Before a return to naïveté, the second phase involves multiple critical processes, agreeing with Freud, Neitzsche, and Marx in their suspicion of the power and strategies undergirding texts, and the need to help guard the reader from the text and also to guard the text from a reader's naïve literalism. In particular, Schneiders agrees with Ricoeur's call to set criticism as a necessary process of distanciation to counterbalance the trust and immediacy of the subject matter. (169) The dual purpose of criticism is to 'protect the reader from the text and to protect the text from the reader.' (169)

In this view, criticism is 'sifting the text for error and deceit' and 'enhancing our appreciation of the text's power by revealing its structures.' (169) More specifically for New Testament interpretation, Schneiders emphasises three developments in criticism: interrogating the text in its criteria as witness, and (following Bultmann) as having a certain mythological worldview, and ideological or power influences. The latter is of particular relevance to Schneiders' feminist position. Ideology criticism is shown to have uncovered not only historical and scientific inaccuracies in the Bible, but also renounce morally objectionable views.

This leads us to ask how to interpret morally unacceptable material, ideas, and ideologies within the text?[112] How may it be either legitimate or possible, as Schneiders believes it is, for an interpretative process to 'repudiate morally unacceptable subject matter of the text without repudiating the text itself and its truth claims'? (175) The primary concern for a Christian reading Scripture, however, is personal transformation through and beyond this informational interpretation. In the philosophical view Schneiders takes on this, understanding, as discussed falls within epistemological and ontological levels. In the first sense,

> when the dialectic between explanation and understanding has achieved itself, the mind comes to rest in understanding, that is, in the experience of meaning. (158)

[112] This follows Rudolf Bultmann's legacy of uncovering influences adherent to a text that is hidden in imperceptible universal assumptions from which is it produced. *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958), and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's pioneering embrace of the simultaneous oppressive and liberating power of Scripture; *Bread not Stone: the challenge of feminist biblical interpretation,* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

The second stage of appropriation is existential interpretation of the text as it transcends itself in its horizon of surplus of meaning and its development through effective history. Here, Gadamer's dialogical process of interpretation of the expanded meaning of the text becomes critical to Schneiders' account. The significance this has for biblical interpretation is illuminated in an analogy borrowed from Linnell Cady.[113] (66) Expressed in its original 18th century text, the American Declaration of Independence states that 'all men are created equal', with its application intended at that time to refer to adult, white, property-owning males.[114] The real question in the text however concerns the issue of equality that is being acknowledged, and which lies in common humanity. If humanity is now realised to be inclusive of others (women, children and slaves) the affirmation is now understood to apply to them too, despite the limited intentions in the minds of those who originally framed the term. Likewise, this expanding consciousness entitles Christians to bring important questions to the New Testament text.

A merit in Schneiders' refusal to reduce transformation to 'some willed change in attitude or behaviour' (196) is that it leaves space to account for the Holy Spirit's work. However, it is unfortunate that the present category of 'in front of the text', being Schneiders' primary concern, is shorter than the first two categories. Despite the intellectual effort involved in the former stages, it is possible to infer a suggestion of passivity in locating transformation in 'the effect on the reader of the interpretation process itself,' (196) like the way a play affects its audience. (196) A more balanced view of what Schneiders is saying about appropriation of meaning, however, may be found by including Schneiders' later writing on the subject. This will be even more important in light of her discussions about the way transformative understanding occurs.

In a more recent essay about biblical spirituality, Schneiders gives further details of the way she views the process of transformation. The process of reception, enabled through

[113] Linnell E. Cady, 'Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology', *Harvard Theological Review*, 79 (October, 1986), 439-63.
[114] Schneiders also uses this illustration to good effect to demonstrate her approach to feminist interpretation in 'The Bible and Feminism: Biblical Theology', in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 31-57, pp. 48-50.

perception, is crucial to Bible engagement and is the central means by which humans receive God's gift of salvation.[115] This is reinforced in recognising that '*the organon of perception of the Risen Jesus is the whole person*.'[116] In this holistic understanding, Schneiders demonstrates that as well as seeing Christian spirituality as being integral to authentic biblical hermeneutics, so too interpretation belongs firmly in the domain of the living faith environment. The power of God's word though Scripture transcends what is achieved by cognitive understanding and relates interpretation to a relational and 'spiritual' knowing of God. It also frames understanding of God's word in the life of the faith community, through liturgy or in meditative prayer, including ways 'God "speaks" to us,' especially through liturgical proclamation of Scripture.[117] In these contexts and in engagement with scripture Christians engage with the *"sense of the faith", or the sensus fidei;*[118] which refers to the believer's Spirit-given capacity to experience revelation that has followed Pentecost. It relates each believer to the content of faith and to the community of believers.

Crucial to this process of perception is imagination, which has been increasingly understood as integral to the 'synthesizing and integrating of sense experience,'[119] which can be taken generally, and also too for experiences of God. Imagination mediates the relation between corporeality (what is experience through the body, or senses) and religious experience in the way it 'constructs reality in its "wholeness."'[120] Schneiders (following Rush) contends that while 'the bodily-based imagination is [...] the human subjective pole of the revelatory experience, the biblical text is the objective pole.'[121] 'Objective,' in this sense, is not inferring that the text has a single, fixed meaning. Although, while this is clear from a wider reading of the author's work, it perhaps could be more fully clarified in this particular essay. For instance, rather than saying 'the text

[115] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 135.
[116] Ibid, p. 144 (author's italics).
[117] *Revelatory*, p. 41.
[118] The origins and meaning of this term is discussed along with the similar concept of 's*ensus fidelium,'* by Daniel J. Finucane in his book, *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996), 655–89.
[119] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 138.
[120] Ibid, p. 138.
[121] Ibid, p. 139.

has a literal or fixed meaning', in *Revelatory Text*, the objective pole is more aptly associated with a Platonic notion of the 'ideal meaning' of the text.[122]

Schneiders' engagement with 'ideal meaning' is one of the ways she refuses to allow the biblical text to be relativised to the subjectivity of the reader. As a plurality of possible interpretations rules out a single 'right' reading, this has to do with ways of setting boundaries for 'valid' readings. Here, Schneiders proposes two 'global criteria' of validity. The first is a need for the process to engage with all the exegetical processes that cannot be left undone.' (165) For instance, an Old Testament prophetic text, naturally, requires historical study. The second is the 'fruitfulness' of an interpretation; meaning the extent to which is might 'illuminate the faith of the community.' (165) This criterion assumes commitment to historical approaches while being open to a multiplicity of diverse methods. The unity between interpretation and religious experience offers further possibilities for ways to bridge the disciplinary gap, specifically in rendering the book relevant to an intended readership of pastors and theologians who mediate 'between the academy and the community of believers.' (13)

Schneiders' second category of valid interpretation is the efficacy of interpretation 'to illuminate the faith of the community without violating the canons of good exegetical and critical method.' (165) On this point, her unifying approach to biblical spirituality is characterised by the fruitfulness she aspires to; enabling interpretation to return to its proper theological category of facilitating communities in deeper revelatory engagement with the Word of God.

2.4.5 Key features selected to use in the Bible course

This exploration of a breadth of Sandra Schneiders' integral approach to New Testament interpretation are the basis for the Bible course, the aim of which is also to facilitate a deepening understanding and experience of God. This will be explained in more detail in Chapter 4. Before turning to the context of the study and its methodology, the following gives a brief summary of key elements I have selected from Schneiders' work to provide a framework for the Bible course.

[122] *Revelatory*, p. xxxii.

- Including theological, spiritual, feminist and literary perspectives, and historical insights.
- Critical questions.
- Raising questions about the relationship between the Bible, the Word of God.[123]
- Focus on encounters and Resurrection narratives, and their mediation of spirituality. [124]
- Opportunities to develop self-aware reading is encouraged and facilitated.
- Prayerful engagement in a Lectio Divina approach and 'receptivity.'[125]
- Inquiries behind, of, and in front of the text, with priority for the latter.[126]
- Plurality of interpretations.[127]

[123] Although Schneiders does not do this, I will base this discussion on the prologue of John, which gives a befitting exploration of this theme, and sets the scene well for reading John.
[124] These are central to Johannine theology, and to mediating belief in the Risen Jesus, see 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 143; and *Written,* p. 1.
[125] Schneiders gives insightful reasons why *Lectio Divina* offers a helpfully integrated approach to transformative engagement with the Bible, in 'Biblical Spirituality', 2002, pp. 139-40.
[126] More than seeking the meaning for contemporary audience, Schneiders' quest is 'to discern the contemporary meaning of the text, that is, the meaning for the interpreter.' *Written, 2003*, p. 175.
[127] See *Revelatory,* p. 123.

CHAPTER 3: Methodology

3.1 Practical Theology Methodology

This research draws on Practical Theology methodology, which sees understanding as growing out of processes of critical conversation between theology and human contexts. Transformed practice is the purpose of Practical Theology, but is not simply the end result of reflection, as might be said for Applied Theology. Instead reflection is enmeshed in the lived context and is also shaped by it. It is thus both theoretical enquiry, in reeking to 'understand, to evaluate, to criticize,' [1] and a practical discipline, which also aims to guide and transform future practices 'which will inform and shape the life of faith.'[2] Appropriate to my research question, the aim of all Practical Theology includes helping to bridge the gap experienced by Christians between Bible and real life.[3] In the words of Judith Thompson, it is 'an illumination between theology and practice that leaves neither unchanged.'[4]

This is reflected in the methodology behind the model of an instrumental case study.[5] This takes an issue or concern, and then focuses on one bounded case that gives scope to explore and illustrate the issue and practical implications that ensue. It is a helpful framework for facilitating a hermeneutical approach with a small group in view of my twofold purpose: Firstly, this seeks to understand how the approach to reading is experienced by the group; secondly it considers ways in which this experience might differ from or challenge the approach, and its premise or assumptions.

Pattison and Woodward give a helpful account of Practical Theology as a negotiation between a number of divergences; for instance, between theology and other disciplines. A key example of this is reflected in the way my own methodology requires multiple

[1] John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006), p. 36.
[2] Swinton & Mowat, p. 12.
[3] Ibid, p. 4.
[4] Judith Thompson, Stephen Pattison, and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection* (London: SCM Press, 2008), chapter 5.2 (kindle edition).
[5] John W. Creswell*, Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edn. (London: Sage, 2007), p. 74. See a fuller discussion of this model below in Chapter 3.4.

ways of seeing how a person might be changed as a result of engagement with a text. The central, theological view of what is happening sees that Christians are formed or transformed as a result of engagement with the Word of God through the Bible. A philosophical account gives other insights regarding how change might be viewed as a process of coming to understanding, when understanding is recognised to be a fundamental quality of being human. New or expanded understanding results in a changed self. In addition, insights from the field of education become relevant to the same discussion of how change occurs, in my analysis and conclusions.

In addition to the relationship between theology and other disciplines, there are a number of other polarities identified by Pattison and Woodward which may also be negotiated in creative tension, and of which the following are most pertinent to my research.

- Particular situational realities and general theoretical principles
- What is (reality) and what might be (ideal)
- Written texts and other 'texts' of present experience[6]

Practical theology is more than an academic tool; it is also a way of seeing things. It involves a curiosity that 'asks good questions about the nature of reality.' It involves a posture that is open to continual learning, including openness to the risk of finding one's own way of thinking has been wrong or inadequate. This means the reality of the methodology is not tidy. However, the challenge of articulating the how understanding develops is a crucial way to set the necessarily subjective and self-involved aspects of knowledge within systematic processes where meaning may be reviewed at a critical distance.

To this end, and based on the image of the pastoral cycle, Richard Osmer describes the four essential phases of practical theology.[7] These are the descriptive-empirical task (what is going on?), the interpretive task, (why is this going on?), the normative task

[6] *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology,* ed. by James Woodward & Stephen Pattison (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), p. 16.
[7] Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 4-10.

(what ought to be going on?), and the pragmatic task, (how might we respond?) Osmer emphasises that his depiction of the 'four tasks' is not intended to infer a simplistic chronological succession, but is about mutual interconnections. Insights emerge from an interweaving of these processes, where reflection 'often circles back like a spiral.'[8] This is fitting for my own research approach, which accepts an interpretive paradigm of dialogue in a 'back-and-forth interplay between the horizon of the interpreter and the horizon of the text, person, or object being interpreted.'[9] It is possible to see this in the way that my underlying observations and motivation for this research developed from a long-standing concern to help other Christians engage with the Bible in spiritually enriching ways. More intentional reflections on particular situations and people in my own context of ministry led to a discernment of connections with the wider context of key issues for the use of the Bible in contemporary pastoral practice, in what might be thought of as descriptive-empirical phases of reflection.

This led me to turn to view different perspectives of the processes involved in human transformation, notably from the field of philosophical hermeneutics, and from relatively new points of contact between biblical studies and Spirituality. Hoping to address the interpretive question of 'why this is going on?', these views are set in critical dialogue with theological ideas about how Christians might be changed by revelatory encounter with God's Word. With multiple potentially relevant theological themes (including questions of inspiration and revelation), it is necessary to be selective. This is achieved by using Schneiders' work as a focal point. For instance, this allows for explorations of arrange of relevant issues, such as the way that Scripture relates to the Word of God and to Tradition in the normative phase of reflection, while providing a necessary parameter.

In this way, the initial descriptive, interpretive, and normative processes lead to focused empirical inquiry with a specific group of people, to give the opportunity to observe what happens in practice. Analysis and evaluation of meaning will involve discerning connections between particular stories and experiences in relation to the theological themes, as well as with the hermeneutical theories. All of these processes feed back into

[8] Osmer, *Practical Theology,* p. 11.
[9] Ibid, p. 23.

further reflections about the theory, and Schneiders' specific approach; which lead into the pragmatic phase, where suggestions are offered for pastoral uses of the Bible in the context of small group studies; including reflections about the role of the group facilitator.

3.2 The research question

The purpose of the rest of this chapter is to explain how the fieldwork phase of research relates to the preceding theory as part of the thesis as a coherent whole. Firstly, a return to the thesis title recalls what precisely the question aims to answer, and shows how it fits within the broader framework of Practical Theology methodology. The nature of the question leads to the choice of method. These are described with an account of the research context and description of the participants. Issues of confidentiality and ethics are then considered before a discussion of the techniques and approaches employed in the process of data analysis. The thesis title is as follows:

Facilitating spiritual understanding through hermeneutical and critical Bible engagement: What can be learned from the experience of a group of Christians reading the Bible with a course developed from the work of Sandra M. Schneiders?

The purpose of this question is to further understanding of the practical implications of Bible engagement that incorporates critical hermeneutical approaches with Christian spiritual formation. The nature of this question is evaluative. It began with a critical analysis of the work of Sandra Schneiders, in connection with a selection of other contemporary writers, and explained reasons for the particular focus on her work. Themes and questions arising from interrogations with Schneiders' hermeneutical approach contributed to the initial framework for the empirical inquiry that follows. The practical implications resulting from implementing a specific hermeneutical approach are necessarily in the specific context of a certain group of Christians. Learning from the perspective of the participants through mixed methods of data collection enabled the theory to be challenged, endorsed, and/or nuanced with practical insights from particular human experience. To this end, deductive and inductive

methods of data analysis are employed, with reflections and evaluation leading to practical recommendations for pastoral practice for leading small group Bible studies.

3.3 A method of evaluative research

With the purpose of the research being to evaluate a certain approach to biblical engagement, it is apt to note Zina O'Leary's explanation of evaluative research as that which attempts to determine the value of some initiative, in identifying its 'consequences as well as opportunities for modification and improvement.'[10] In this project, the consequences and potential requirements for modifications relate to the reading approach used in the Bible course, which is the 'initiative' being evaluated. Any methodological outlook leads inevitably to the selection of appropriate methods. Here, Bruce Berg's discussion of case studies is helpful, as these are associated with theory building or testing, or a combination of both, which is fitting to this project. Within a range of different kinds of case studies, Berg's description of the nature of instrumental case studies provides some help to seeing how the methods and methodology of my research fit together.

> Instrumental case studies provide insights into an issue or refine a theoretical explanation, making it more generalizable. (Creswell, 2002; Stake, 1994). In these situations, the case actually becomes of secondary importance. It serves only a supportive role, a background against which the actual research interests will play out. Instrumental case studies often are investigated in depth, and all aspects and activities are detailed but not simply to elaborate the case per se. Instead, the intention is to help the researcher better understand some external theoretical question, issue, or problem.[11]

This helps to clarify the significance that the study of a specific group has within my project. Details about my particular group are important to analysis of the experience but do not become the principal focus. The aim goes beyond understanding the dynamics of the group. That which is experienced serves to form evaluations of the 'external theoretical question' (seeking good practice for engaging with biblical

[10] Zina O'Leary, *Researching Real-World Problems: A Guide to Methods of Inquiry* (London: Sage, 2005), p. 207.
[11] Bruce L. Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 8th edn. (Boston: Pearson, 2014), p. 156.

hermeneutics in pastoral contexts). This requires discipline to keep other interesting questions subservient to the primary question. For instance, the multicultural backgrounds of participants will be recognised as an important feature of this research context, but it is outside the parameter of my question to attempt to analyse possible links between certain responses and certain cultures.

It was not only methodologically necessary to attempt to also nurture conditions in the reader(s) susceptible to existential understanding or spiritual growth, it was also a factor that I am motivated by a desire to facilitate spiritual growth in the women, who I was already pastorally connected with. As a researcher, this is of secondary importance to the project, but as someone with pastoral responsibility, this feels at times like the most important thing. This conflict of roles bears on the research, and will be discussed further below.

3.4 Sources of Data

3.4.1 Bible Course

The main body of data was generated from delivering and observing the outcome of Bible studies with a small group of Christian women. The focus on women is for a number of reasons. As well as avoiding potential social and cultural complexities that may arise from myself, as a woman, leading Bible studies that include men, it respects the way that that some women find greater freedom to speak in the company of women only, which is particularly important in some of the cultures to which the participants belong. Secondly, this helps focus the issues relevant to biblical interpretation, such as the way certain critical tools exemplified in Schneiders' approach (such as liberation and feminist ideologies) may be important to women's spirituality.

With the purpose of understanding what happens in practice when a group engages with an integral, transformational approach to Scripture, I developed an eight-week Bible course based on an interpretation of Sandra Schneiders' integral hermeneutical approach to reading the Fourth Gospel. The primary aim is not to assess degrees of spiritual progress in the participants over the course of the bible studies. While some participants may express that some change has occurred, the main concern is not to

quantify this change, but to understand how and why it happened, along with other kinds of experiences and responses that may result.

An easier, and less time-consuming way to conduct this research would have been to use ready-to-use materials, such as Bible Society's recently published book; *Making Good Sense of the Bible*,[12] intended as an accessible introduction to biblical hermeneutics that is conducive to personal faith. However, my decision to use Schneiders' approach to 'biblical spirituality' is important to my focus on the relationship (including the tension and challenges) between biblical studies and Spirituality. Schneiders' intentional correlation of these disciplines offers a unique clarity towards the discernment and analysis of connections between theory and experience. For this reason, I also could have used study guide materials in Schneiders' book, *Written That You May Believe;*[13] but this would rely participants to read this book, which I judged to be unrealistic and unhelpful for my purpose.

As well as lucid accounts of her methodological approaches to reading the New Testament, including in-depth studies of the Fourth Gospel, Schneiders' work includes philosophical and phenomenological discussions of what is happening when a person is changed by encounter with Scripture. In order to evaluate ways in which a group experience this approach, the focus is on a specific passage each week, with questions of inquiry probing what is most fitting to the text from Schneiders' fourfold approach of historical, literary, theological and spiritual interrogations. Thus, my Bible studies reflect a quest for transformational understanding as readers progress from their presuppositions, through critical inquiry, to post-critical phases of reading which require a receptive attitude in order to 'surrender'[14] to the dynamics of the text, leading to what may be called 'existential appropriation'[15] as the reader finds new understanding by which she is in some way changed.[16]

[12] See Foreword by Paula Gooder, in *Making Good Sense of the Bible Together* (Swindon: The British and Foreign Bible Society, 2015).
[13] Study guide questions are in the second edition, written by John Wronski, pp. 269-96.
[14] *Revelatory*. p. 172.
[15] Ibid, p. 172.
[16] Further details of what is contained in the Bible studies, and how and why certain choices have been made, are discussed below in chapter 4.

As this was a newly formed group, it was helpful to explain to participants how the questions would be asked.[17] Rather than ask each individual in turn, I opened them to the group to give time for more reserved members to think about their responses, before prompting those who do not answer to reply, if necessary. At the end of meetings, participants were invited to share something they might 'take away with them' from the evening. As well as contributing to the principle of learning together as a community, this gave me opportunities to hear respondents' perceptions about the way they relate what they have understood to their lived experience of faith.

3.4.2 Focus groups and interviews

Group discussion was appropriate to the aim of group Bible studies that are intended to inspire spiritual growth in the context of community. I held three focus group discussions. The first was half way through the course, with the aim that I could then adjust my approach if necessary. This took place after the week 4 Bible study, and then at the end of the course; with a whole meeting devoted to give extended opportunity for participants to discuss their experiences and responses. The third was set at a later date. I realised how important it was for me to present my findings to the group for their feedback, to be 'reviewed and corrected by the participants.'[18] This ensures their voices are represented as authentically as possible, gave opportunity for revisions, and is one of the most effective ways to validate findings in conjunction with other strategies of triangulation.

As the success of focus group research depends, to a great extent, upon the experience of the moderator to create a relaxed atmosphere and to draw in to the discussion those who are shy,[19] an advantage was that I already had experience of leading small groups and had an existing relationship with many of the participants. A further benefit of focus groups is that the interactive discussion can provide a richness of data that can be missing from individual interviews. As Tim Sensing observes, 'one person's response

[17] Berg, *Qualitative Research Methods,* p. 156.
[18] Creswell*, Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, 2007, pp. 44-5.
[19] See, for instance, H. Russell Bernard, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches* (London: Sage, 2000), p. 210-11.

may prompt or modify another person's memory of an event and its details.'[20] A caution that perhaps should be added here, however, is the risk that this compounds the dynamics of stronger and more passive characters with who may feel shy about sharing, and especially when their views differ to others.

I initially planned to give feedback forms before the final focus group, to give participants time to articulate their personal reflections prior to the discussion, and also make me aware of minority opinions so I could appeal to these in the discussion if necessary, to limit the risk that opinions of dominant group members might 'skew the results.'[21] However, after beginning the Bible course, I changed this idea and decided to conduct interviews. This was for two reasons. The number of participants was high and remained at around 17-18 people each week. For this reason, I decided that giving the opportunity for individual interviews would be an important way to make sure I had heard from everyone; including hearing in greater depth–and especially about the experience of quieter participants.

Interviews gave me the chance to try to understand more about the *process* of understanding (how things came to be understood), which was less important to participants in focus groups than exploring the *outcome* (being what kinds of new insights had resulted, and their importance). I also realised that written feedback forms were not suitable, as a few of the participants expressed nervousness about the idea of writing their responses in English, and said they would prefer to talk to me. Speaking also meant I could clarify any linguistic ambiguities. So I invited those who felt happy about an interview to arrange a time to meet with me, and offered more time after the interview to discuss any further questions they wished, as so many matters arose during the course that I could not give time to. As I had not discussed interviews in my information sheet prior to the course I was careful not to make participants feel pressured.

[20] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Thesis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011), p. 120.
[21] Helen Cameron and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM, 2013) loc. 2081 (kindle edition).

I conducted interviews with 14 of the total 18 participants. The interview questions included categories that I was concerned with that were emerging from my early analysis of the focus group; for instance, personal experience and understanding of God, impressions about the group dynamics and the approach we used to read the Bible. However, a main aim was to offer space for respondents to talk about what was important in their own experience. This required an informal approach so that I was not controlling the subject throughout the interview. For instance, many respondents talked about what they would now like to learn or focus on in a group, and discussing this helped reveal what was important about their spiritual experience.

3.5 Limitations of the research

A methodological limitation of this project is that the data is all taken from one group. Comparisons between two would have further enriched my findings, and in particular if it had been possible to run another group with men only, or a mixed group of men and women. If I could have known that the large number of volunteers were to have remained committed to the end of the course, I could have decided to run two women's groups each week. But it was not practical to try to divide the group after the first meeting as it would not have given an even split of numbers; and one group would have been too small for my purpose and prevented the rich cultural diversity which was a unique characteristic of this fieldwork. Another methodological limitation was that I was not able to run a pilot course, due to time constraints and due to the limited number of English-speaking volunteers in my context, which would have made it difficult to form an additional group.

Despite these limitations, I have made efforts to ensure that this study has validity as what might be called a 'single instrumental case study,' where 'the researcher focuses on an issue or concern, and then selects one bounded case to illustrate this issue.'[22] In agreement with Creswell's advice, the essential thing to do is verify that the findings are based on an accurate account of what happened, through 'multiple strategies to confirm or triangulate data.' I have achieved this in my addition of the third focus group, and also in adding one-to-one interviews, strengthening the validity through further

[22] Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry,* p. 74.

triangulation. However, while the benefits of triangulating data are broadly agreed upon, as they enable 'a more detailed and balanced picture of the situation,'[23] this does not mean that caution is not necessary. For instance, Sotirios Sanrantakos argues that there is a lack of evidence to show triangulation results in greater validity, and that it can in fact be used 'as a way of legitimizing personal views and interests.'[24] On the other hand, this is a risk in any method. The important point is that authentic uses of mixed methods have the benefit of overcoming the deficiencies of any single method of data collection.[25]

3.6 Context of research

The context of this field research is the International Congregation of the Anglican Church in Beirut, Lebanon, where I work on staff, serving women's ministry, youth and children's ministry, and leading family services and events, and where my husband was Vicar. Lebanon is still recovering from a civil war (1975-1990), evident in the bullet holes and scaring of bomb damage on buildings, and countless half-built structures without windows, but gratefully received as cheap accommodation for many Lebanese and migrant workers struggling to make ends meet. Alongside are small portions of the city which have been rebuilt to match Lebanon's formerly famous opulence. Amidst such a backdrop of towering hotels, concrete structures and fine restaurants, nestles the quaint bell-towered structure that is the home of All Saints.

This is the main meeting place, heavily guarded every Sunday morning with armed army soldiers supported by several vehicles, mirroring the scene outside city Mosques on Fridays. However, with informal hospitality in the form of regular Sunday lunches in our home, participants also were more personally familiar with me from having gathered to eat at my home at various times. The congregation (around 120-150 people) is made up of between thirty and forty different nationalities, in addition to many Lebanese. The English language is used, apart from a number of convivial, joint

[23] *Teachers Investigate Their Work; An Introduction to Action Research Across the Professions,* ed. by Herbert Altrichter et al, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2008), p. 147.
[24] Sotirios Sanrantakos, *Social Research*, 3rd edn. (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005), p. 146.
[25] Ibid, p. 146.

services each year with the Arabic congregation, which is made up almost entirely of Lebanese members and led by the Lebanese Rector. This congregation holds services earlier on Sunday mornings, and the style is more formally Anglo-Catholic than the relative informality of the International congregation. My hope was that the Bible study group would include a breadth of cultural diversity in a way that reflects the context within which I served.

It was important to consider possible implications of conducting research in a language that was my own mother tongue, but not that of most participants. Moreover, my work is largely based on Western scholars and theologians. Although research volunteers already choose to belong to an Anglophone worshipping community, this potential imbalance of power in the project itself may be criticised. O'Leary wisely warns of the potentially profound impact of unrecognised power, as '[b]oth the integrity of knowledge produced and the well-being of the researched are dependent on the ethical negotiation of power and power relationships.'[26] My hope was that encouraging participants to bring Bibles in other languages to the course, and giving opportunities to discuss diverse cultural meanings, I was also demonstrating the limitations of English, and not honouring it above other languages; all of which relate to a reader's cultural perspective. Despite this, O'Leary is right to reinforce the need to remain aware of unforeseen implications of power imbalance in this cultural and linguistic context.

3.7 Practical details of the Bible course

The research group meetings took place in the church on Tuesday evenings. They followed supper together, which was the usual format for the church's mid-week discipleship courses. I also intended this to enable people to eat and relax together before focusing on the Bible study and discussion, which lasted for up to one and a half hours, ending at around 9:30pm. Eating together before reading together was also an implicit reflection of the value of holistic spirituality; talking about 'ordinary' aspects of life and deepening friendships is not irrelevant to what we do when we read the Bible

[26] O'Leary, *The Essential Guide,* p. 28. I agree with the importance of discovering covert forms of power relationships in research, although, on this point I think that the author's categories in her 'table of power and privilege' may benefit from acknowledging its own possible geographical bias.

together. There were a total of eight Bible studies, allowing time for extended focus group discussion on the ninth evening, which followed a special meal planned as a small 'thank you' to my volunteers. A dilemma was considering that a longer course would allow more time to develop themes and approaches in greater depth, but I decided against this, as previous experience with the congregation has shown that short Bible/discipleship courses suit people (usually six or eight-weeks long), and I feel it would be impractical to find enough participants able to commit to a longer course.

3.8 Recruiting participants

Participants were women from the All Saints International Anglican congregation of Beirut, forming a group that I anticipated would be around 10-12, but in fact settled at 17-18 people. I gathered volunteers by making an announcement in church that I am looking for women who were interested in studying the book of John, to help my Doctoral research by participating in a course of nine meetings. Volunteers were asked to try to read the Gospel of John before the start of the course to get the most out of the discussion, in the same way that pre-reading works for a book club. As well as hoping to produce the most 'fair' selection, I believe this random approach was the most ethical way to avoid the possibility of coercion that may result from selecting volunteers in person. For the same reason, the written announcement of invitation to participation in the church notice sheet and the verbal announcement to the whole congregation emphasised that participation in the Bible studies was strictly optional. Those who contact me to respond to the invitation were given a detailed information sheet which gave a clear account of what the research would involve, along with a consent form to sign.[27]

3.9 Confidentiality and ethics

The process of preparing the university ethical consent form was helpful for thinking through various implications.[28] In accordance with the Data Protection Act, these forms gave clearly communicated boundaries for anonymity, protection of information, and

[27] See appendices 2 and 3, below.
[28] See appendix 3.

the right to withdraw from the research. While I sought to assure participant confidentiality, the nature of focus groups is that confidentiality also relies on trust between participants to protect the confidentiality of what is shared with the group. For this reason, at the start of the course I verbally clarified the importance of not repeating anything outside of the group.

Written consent included for audio-recording of the Bible studies and focus groups. Recording meant that I could focus my primary attention on the spiritual dynamics of the studies, devoting time as soon as possible after the meetings to note non-verbal data in my research journal, and then using the recordings of spoken data to listen back to. This, however did not suffice to resolve various possible implications for group members resulting from my dual role. Unlike before, I was no longer only concerned with spiritual matters, but now also with observing and recording information. While pastoral leadership requires empathy and care, research requires a different boundary of professional distance to facilitate analysis and interpretation. In the focus group discussion, my primary purpose was not to 'offer opinions and substantive comments'[29] that would be appropriate to pastoral responses to what is said, but to listen to and interpret what was happening.

While having attempted to diminish risks as far as possible, I was aware that there may be difficulties for participants resulting from my conflict of interests. Magolda and Weems emphasise the unforeseeable nature of ethical dilemmas arising in fieldwork, underlining that '[e]ven the most responsible researcher cannot possibly anticipate what might happen until he or she is in the thick of dealing with actual people and actual situations.'[30] As for any researcher, my primary ethical responsibility was to 'do no harm,' and to be ready to identify and respond to any sensitive issues arising, such as possible links with personal experiences of bereavement in discussions of the narrative of the raising of Lazarus.

[29] Berg, *Qualitative Research*, p. 159.
[30] Peter Magolda, and Lisa Weems, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?', *Journal of College Student Development,* 43, 4 (2002), 496-9, p. 496.

A disadvantage of the context was its unique setting; there is only one Anglican church in Beirut. Having disclosed some general details about participants' nationalities, ethical responsibility to my commitment to anonymity meant that I had to take care in my reporting of the data. Although exposure of identity would be unlikely, it would technically be possible if I were not careful in the way I relate names to information that was given etc. It would have been helpful for the reader, for instance, to have more details about individual participants corresponding with my analysis of what was said, but although this has not always been possible, I have been able to give considerable detail without compromising the ethical confidentiality I promised.

3.10 The impact of my 'insider' role

My existing ministerial role with women bears on this research. Established relationships of trust are important for creating an environment where people feel they can share personal and spiritual experiences with a group. Other practical advantages included the ease of gaining access, and the opportunity to use the church building and facilities for the research. As a familiar person, my presence may also have caused 'less of an impact on the flow of social interaction'[31] than that of an 'outsider' researcher. Participation in the community also gave me an understanding of the group that would take an outsider some time to learn, and meant I already share a sense of a common faith language. While being careful to avoid taking assumed shared meanings too far, this may give a sense of greater freedom to respondents to share ideas because of a confidence that they will be understood. Although former views of a simplistic dichotomy between insider/outsider status have since been seen in terms of a more complex and fluid reality,[32] there is a potential double impact of researching with participants that are known; upon my research and analysis, and upon the participants. If unacknowledged, this impact, as Dwyer warns, can become an impediment to the research process.

[31] Eric A. Jensen, and Charles Laurie, *Doing Real Research: A Practical Guide to Social Research* (London: Sage, 2016), p. 15.

[32] For instance, see Justine Mercer, 'The Challenges of insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a Double-edged Sword and Resolving Delicate Dilemmas', *Oxford Review of Education,* 2007, 33, 1-17; and, Nicola Savvides et al, 'Journeys into Inner/Outer Space: Reflections on the Methodological Challenges of Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status in International Educational Research', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9, 4 (2014), 412-25, pp. 412, 417.

> It is possible that the participant will make assumptions of similarity and therefore fail to explain their individual experience fully. It is also possible that the researcher's perceptions might be clouded by his or her personal experience and that as a member of the group he or she will have difficulty separating it from that of the participants.[33]

This struck a chord with a tension between my dual roles of ministry to women and researcher. Dwyer recalls Asselin's observations about the particular jeopardy of role confusion for inside researchers, being 'familiar with the research setting or participants through a role other than that of researcher.'[34] For instance, I saw that care should be taken to notice when participants may rely on shared meanings in their answers, and be ready to ask them to expand or clarify. Encouraging people, when possible, to articulate what they meant was also helpful for avoiding a risk that clichés or religious jargon served as easy ways for participants to answer, for reasons such as wanting to fit in with the group, or appear 'spiritual', or give answers they thought I hoped to hear.

Clear communication was especially important to consider with people using their second language. My experience and personal knowledge of participants was helpful here, including habits I had acquired of speaking in simple, unambiguous English, and trying to recognise and avoid using unconscious culturally-specific examples.[35] Having to work harder and be intentional in my own language and think carefully about the meaning of English words may also have helped counter the effect of familiarity upon data analysis, which can lead to 'an emphasis on shared factors between the researcher and the participants and a de-emphasis on factors that are discrepant, or vice versa.'[36] I endeavoured to keep asking myself, "is the way this immediately sounds to me really what this person is meaning?"

---

[33] Corbin Dwyer, 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8,1, (2009), 54-63, p. 58.
[34] Ibid, p. 58.
[35] A helpful resource has been Brian Hurn and Barry Tomalin, *Cross-Cultural Communication: Theory and Practice,* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013). For instance, discussing the diversity of meaning in certain physical gestures and the importance of facial expressions (p. 91); and the need to use uncomplicated English and using tactics such as sign-posting and summarising to aid clear communication (p. 84).
[36] Dwyer, 2009, p. 58.

I had learned something about this in a previous research project, where I saw how familiarity can challenge research in the course of my own process and analysis of an in-depth interview with a female missionary who had made transitions with her family across different countries. From this process I learned of ways that my own experience clouded certain issues and prevented me from probing or critiquing certain assumptions, which would, and should, have led to more rigorous analysis. A shared understanding of certain aspects of personal and emotive experiences of resettling children, and religious concepts such as 'trusting God's guidance,' meant I did not sufficiently clarify, expand on, or question what these ideas meant to my respondent Reflecting on reasons for this, in preparation for this present project, I found resonation with Dwyer's citation of an insider researcher who commented, '"my empathy and enthusiasm for a subject dear to my own heart may have kept them from considering certain aspects of their experience."'[37]

Sharing my interpretation of key points during the focus group gave an essential opportunity for any misconceptions to be identified, and receiving feedback from an annual presentation of my research progress to fellow Doctoral students provided an additional occasion to listen to further checks that helped validate my analysis. However, more than any one action, I aimed to keep a continuous stance of critical reflexivity, which enables recognition and equips a researcher to counter emerging impacts of positionality. As well as serving ethical purposes, these measures also raise the credibility of the research in enabling greater transparency to the reader.[38]

3.11 Response Bias

Having alluded to the fluid and complex reality of a researcher's relationship (insider/outsider) with a community, it is important to consider the impact of having a particular role of ministry within my church community that can be associated with a sense of status. Within the broad problem of response bias, there is a tendency for participants, (consciously or not), to sometimes give answers that they think will help

[37] Ibid, p. 58.
[38] Savvides, 'Journeys into Inner/Outer Space', p. 412.

or please the researcher; and this may be compounded in insider research where there is some kind of power imbalance. Moreover, prior to this research, I had noticed that people from certain cultures have greater tendencies to give positive feedback towards those in ministerial roles, for instance as a way of showing appreciation or respect. While this may be simply a subjective observation, it was a further reminder of the need to recognise the impact of cultural differences in the interpretive process of data analysis. For instance, noticing certain respondents for whom it 'goes against the grain' to express something that they feel sounds like criticism was important for valid interpretation.

A risk of inauthentic responses would have been accentuated had I decided to direct the focus of the thesis question towards an approach of action-research that assessed the spiritual growth of participants in order to critique the Bible study approach. This may have given reasons for participants to believe that the success of my task as researcher depended on evidence of their spiritual progress, which may have resulted in some participants feeling pressure to manufacture, or exaggerate responses. However, it was still necessary for me to encourage participants to speak freely and honestly; explaining in the first meeting—and periodically reiterating—that although my hope was that participants will be in some way enriched by reading the Bible together, it was equally important for me to understand what might feel like negative as well as positive experiences, or a lack of connection with the Bible. Furthermore, I stressed that the materials in the Bible studies were derived from the work of other writers, stressing that there was no risk of causing me offense by expressing criticism or negative comments about the materials.

3.12 Data Analysis

My use of a research journal was an intentional way to enable me to identify instances when participants said something that I suspect may be, for any reason, inauthentic; for instance, if awkward body language seemed incongruent with a positive verbal response. Journaling also gave a further degree of thorough immersion in the data, which is important for effective data analysis, and for the same reason, I manually transcribed my recorded data. Throughout this continual process of moving between

'data and research question, aims and objectives, theoretical underpinnings, and methodological constraints,'[39] reflexive analysis is key.

Inductive coding allowed identification of unexpected themes or patterns that rely not on predetermined concepts, but on 'the disclosures that occur in human interaction.'[40] For instance, it is enlightening to pay attention to what is happening in moments when participants seem to be '"on the same page"' or when something said provokes laughter or recognition.[41] The inductive approach looked for patterns and meaning in people's experience; noticing repetition of themes, or common 'aha!' moments that seemed to indicate something resonated for the group. In analysing the data without computer assistance, I was able to 'get a feel' for the data, as Bernard suggests,[42] that led me to recognise and interpret other important aspects of the participants' experience that added to the outcome of my questions. A useful resource was O'Leary's approach to stages of analysis that provided a helpful initial framework.[43]

- List as many assumptions and preconceptions as possible. As well as helping to recognize bias, this might help 'elicit potential categories for explanation.'
- Note general impressions from careful reading of the data, including feelings arising.
- Line-by-line, manual examination of all data sources to reduce the data and sort it into themes. This process included four approaches:
    - Exploring words that are repeated, noting their context and significance.
    - Exploring concepts: Some arising from previous literature, others inductively, bearing in mind to be wary of fitting data into predetermined categories.
    - Exploring linguistic devises such as 'metaphors, analogies, and even proverbs.'
    - Exploring non-verbal cues, which should be captured (as far as possible) on the transcripts.

With the above structure in mind, in my initial analysis I was committed to allowing categories to emerge from the data to avoid the risk of forcing the data into

[39] O'Leary, *The Essential Guide,* p. 231.
[40] Cameron and Duce, *Researching Practice,* 2013, location 1868.
[41] Ibid, location 1867.
[42] Bernard, *Social Research Methods,* p. 445.
[43] O'Leary, *The Essential Guide,* p. 263-5.

presupposed categories, and also avoid missing something important that I had not considered. My early thinking saw three emerging categories of group dynamics, the process of understanding, and the participants' interests, as overlapping circles relating to a central question, which was spiritual experience. However, as I begun to work with this idea, I decided it had less clarity and purpose than the three categories developed from Schneiders' work, which in fact made good sense to the themes emerging in the data. For this reason, I kept these in mind in my continued analysis, and used them to demonstrate the relationship between my findings and the theory I began with, but I was not satisfied with attempts I made to use them in a rigid way and so they do not feature as such in the main analysis. I also saw the need to broaden these categories beyond Schneiders' primarily philosophical focus to include different kinds of matters arising inductively. For instance, Schneiders' discussion of the condition of the reader is expanded from a principal focus on the function of the imagination in reception and her brief treatment of the significance of a reader's disposition, to include the experience of struggle and risk, as well as other emerging issues impacting readers in a group context.

CHAPTER 4: Formulating the Bible Course

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter is to explain the thinking behind my development of the Bible course; its link with the methodological aims outlined in the previous chapter, and with my earlier discussion of Schneiders' work. Before selecting passages for this course, I compiled lists of key features of Johannine Spirituality, and of essential components in an integrated hermeneutical approach. I then looked for passages in John which cover the themes of the first and for which lend themselves to inquiry via a breadth of methods and critical approaches.[1] A list of aims for each week serves as a checklist for me to see which themes, interpretive tools, key words/images, and names for Jesus are covered over the whole course. Following the first week's focus on the Prologue of John, subsequent weeks concentrate on narratives of personal encounters with Jesus, three of which are with women.

As previously discussed, Schneiders identifies three symbiotic categories relating to the process of transformative Bible engagement,[2] which link with corresponding considerations for constructing a Bible course. 1) The condition or nature of the text (content of course), 2) the conditions of the reader (pastoral considerations and spirituality), and 3) the conditions of the reading process (hermeneutical approach). Following a discussion of each of these categories, I give a weekly overview of the course to clarify the rationale behind materials which are in the form of A5 printed handouts to be given to participants (shown in appendix 4). Clarity about the content and general coherence of the course will serve as preparation for the analysis of data in the following chapters, which describe what happened when this Bible course was put into practice. To avoid unnecessary duplication, footnote references indicate where issues relating to key literature are discussed in other chapters.

[1] In a brief email exchange with Professor Schneiders (2/11/16), she kindly replied to endorse the selection of materials as a viable way to represent her overall approach to the Fourth Gospel.
[2] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2002, p. 133; see discussion in Chapter 2, above.

4.2 The conditions of the text

Considerations of the nature of the text include theological and literary perspectives. In the first week, the issue is broadly explored in the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God; and in the second week, the more specific nature of the Fourth Gospel, as a symbolic witness capable of mediating the presence of Jesus. This agrees with Gadamer's philosophical principle that questions pertaining to the object of inquiry precedes those of method.[3] Within this, my focus on narrative encounters is partly a reflection of an emphasis in Schneiders' own Johannine scholarship. Narrative texts may be the most intellectually inclusive, and also helpful to participants who may have little experience of reading the Bible, for whom some of the more abstract Johannine passages may be less accessible. In the limited space of eight weeks, I intended the narratives to give a sense of a journey of encounters with Jesus through the eyes of different characters. Just as they face the opportunity to respond to Jesus' self-revelation with faith, the narratives invite the reader to engage with the spirituality *within* the text to enable participation in the spirituality produced *by* the text.[4] A focus on the importance of Johannine Resurrection narratives as 'theopoetic' text in Schneiders' later work[5] is also respected by giving prominence to two such passages in weeks 7 and 8.

4.3 The conditions of the reader(s)

The conditions of reader(s) I am concerned with is summarised in the following. Firstly, it is hermeneutically necessary to have (or to develop) self-awareness as a reader, to perceive, for instance, some implications of culture, gender, social status etc. upon one's interpretive view. To this end, an opportunity is given to discuss the findings of research conducted with students from different countries reading the story of the Prodigal Son, which clearly evidence that different interpretations corresponded closely with readers' contexts.[6] The poignancy of this explicit discussion with a multi-cultural group is intended to initiate openness to different perspectives within the group. Secondly, the

[3] A principle that Schneiders' work concords with. See *Revelatory,* p. 23.
[4] See Schneiders 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 130-31.
[5] Ibid, p. 144-6.
[6] Powell, *What Do They Hear?.* A similar question to mine is used for the same purpose in Session 5 of, Gooder, *Making Good Sense of the Bible.*

possibility of transformative understanding is related to a reader's attitude of receptivity. Although this is a personal question that cannot be determined by a group leader, the approach is structured in a way that encourages and nurtures 'conditions' such as faith and expectation and earnest listening.[7] An invitation to consider these qualities is mentioned in my introductory welcome in week 1, but more importantly, the prayerful reading of the passages model and invite a disposition of faith and openness to God 'who speaks in and through the text.'[8] An additional consideration for readers in a group context, which is outside of Schneiders' concern, is the need to facilitate different learning styles.[9] In practical terms this translates into the provision of small notebooks along with an allowance of time of quiet reflection to give space for people who need to write or reflect quietly to formulate their thoughts before participating in discussion.

4.4 The conditions of the reading

The third category concerns the approach to reading. At a general level, the structure of each week may be seen as a kind of sandwich of slow, prayerful readings around a central activity of analysis and discussion, reflecting elements from the tradition of *Lectio Divina.* This is helpful for the fact it is fitting to Schneiders' approach (when critical scholarship is incorporated),[10] and because the approach is also consistent with the Anglican tradition to which participants belong.[11] Key features of the 'conditions of the reading' in this course comprise the following principles from Schneiders' integral hermeneutical approach, especially as delineated in *Revelatory Text.* Although these processes are not assumed to be distinct, separable stages; in the same way that it is necessary to discuss them as such for the purpose of clarity, so it is practically useful in planning of group study to distinguish 'stages' in the process of holistic interpretation.

- Consideration of the New Testament's particular relation to the Word of God
- Reader self-awareness of positionality, bias, and of presuppositions

[7] Virtues or spiritual qualities of readers are discussed in chapter 7, below.
[8] Schneiders, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 140.
[9] Insights from educational theory, and their implications, are discussed in chapter 6 and 7, below.
[10] Schneiders gives good reasons that *Lectio Divina* offers a helpfully integrated approach to transformative engagement with the Bible, in 'Biblical Spirituality', 2002, pp. 139-40.
[11] Resources using approaches to *Lectio Divina* with groups include the Church of England's Pilgrim Course, http://www.pilgrimcourse.org/the-course [accessed 13 February 2017].

- Critical inquiry including questions of history, theology, and textual analysis
- Focus on the spirituality of the text, including the Resurrection narratives[12]
- Engagement with feminist theological approaches
- Priority for the meaning for the reader today[13] (I take this in both senses of personally and corporately as a community of believers)
- Plurality of valid interpretations that may extend beyond the writer's intended meaning[14]

Another principle resource is Schneiders' book, *Written that You may Believe,* with a few of the questions used from John Wronski's studyguide, published in the second edition,[15] (although I did not use many of these questions as they mostly require in-depth understanding of the book.) Weeks 7 and 8 are based on materials from *Jesus Risen in our Midst*. Where appropriate, simplified aspects of Schneiders' interpretive theory are presented in the written materials or in something I explain verbally. The intention is not to present a fixed interpretation, but make space for different views within a learning community. For this reason, the handouts are to be used as a guide, with time given for participants' own questions conversation points. The following outline gives a general view of the way the studies are structured.

- Opening prayer
- Brief introduction, with recap of key themes from the previous week[16]
- An opening question to help acknowledge presuppositions[17]
- Reading of a primary narrative text to generally include the following:
    - An initial slow reading (aloud)

[12] These are central to Johannine theology, and to mediating belief in the Risen Jesus, 'Biblical Spirituality', 2013, p. 143.
[13] More than seeking the meaning for contemporary audience, Schneiders' quest is 'to discern the contemporary meaning of the text, that is, the meaning for the interpreter,' *Written*, p. 175.
[14] *Revelatory*, p. 123.
[15] *Written,* p. 296.
[16] This is in agreement with Brian Hurn and Barry Tomalin's advice for enabling clear understanding for people using second languages, see *Cross-Cultural Communication: Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), p. 84.
[17] Tom Wright also recommends this use of an opening question in his guidelines for leaders in *For Everyone Bible Study Guides: John* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 2010), p. 142.

    - Share a brief response (a phrase that stands out, or a brief question that comes to mind) without further discussion
    - Time to explore and discover using my prepared questions and other questions arising
    - Giving prompts for understanding relevant historical context, theological, spiritual, and literary insights
    - Identifying the key question/theme(s) of the text
    - Make room for a plurality of possible interpretations
- Return to become 'caught up' in a prayerful return to the text[18]
- Opportunities to journal privately to help personal reflection
- Feedback or discuss what the text might mean 'here and now,' personally and/or corporately

4.5 Practical considerations

Each week starts with an open question, before reading the Bible passage, to give opportunity for presuppositions to be voiced. In the first three weeks this is also intended to give an opportunity for participants to articulate aspects of their spiritual experience of knowing God through the Bible. This discussion is intended to give tools to those who may not be used to reflecting on or discussing their experience of personal faith, and help build a common vocabulary that I can also use throughout the course to limit the risk that my own way of articulating spiritual experience might be a limitation. It may also facilitate ease of communication between people from different religious traditions; and cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, and also may help participants to acknowledge, expand, or revise the constraints of habitual concepts.

The questions are: How we view the Bible, how we understand the idea of revelation, and how we can know or experience the presence of God with us. The first question invites discussion about how the Bible relates to the "Word of God," and how reading the Bible relates to our experience of God. In the second week, I invite discussion about the meaning of revelation, intended also as an entry to a central theme within Johannine

[18] *Revelatory*, p. 174.

spirituality.[19] The third question asks how we know or experience the presence of God with us. The relevance of these questions will be returned to in my analysis and evaluation of data, along with certain values that are implicit in the course.[20]

[19] *Written*, p. 48.

[20] A brief overview of the key content, themes, and approach used each week are given in appendix 1, below.

CHAPTER 5: The Bible Course: A Descriptive Account

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents an overview of what happened in the Bible course and what was experienced by participants. The organisation of this material results from a number of revisions leading to the way I ordered and grouped the citations within categories in this final form. My immediate concern when initially facing the manual transcriptions was to avoid unintentional methodological 'eisegesis;' in attributing disproportionate weight to certain comments by forcing them into contrived categories. For this reason, I began with inductive analysis, using processes recommended by O'Leary, as outlined in the methodology chapter. My initial use of colour-coordinating led me firstly to identify four categories which I named: spiritual experience, previous experience of (or views about) the Bible, the impact of reading as a group, and hermeneutical approaches and issues. However, as I worked with these categories I found they did not in fact help, as many respondent comments qualified for more than one category and so the overlap proved them somewhat arbitrary. Still aiming at allowing the voices of the participants to 'speak for themselves,' a subsequent attempt to present this chapter resulted in an unorderly chaos of comments that was not helpful for the reader.

For this reason, the following description aims to give adequate coherence that I believe conveys an authentic overview of data, selected to bear on the heart of the thesis question. I have used verbatim quotations, but have corrected minor grammatical errors– usually the tense of verbs–when the intended meaning was clear to me, but misleading or confusing to read, and I have sometimes added explicatory words are in square brackets. I also removed stammers and repeated expressions such as 'you know,' and 'I mean,' unless the pauses were important to understanding the tone.

Underlying the structure of my analysis is an awareness of Schneiders' three categories of conditions of text, reader(s) and reading. These serve here mostly to inform my selection of data without constraining a natural overlap of these categories; leading to a more structured discussion as the data is 'tidied up' in subsequent analysis and conclusions. Before this, it is important to maintain a degree of messiness, and "back

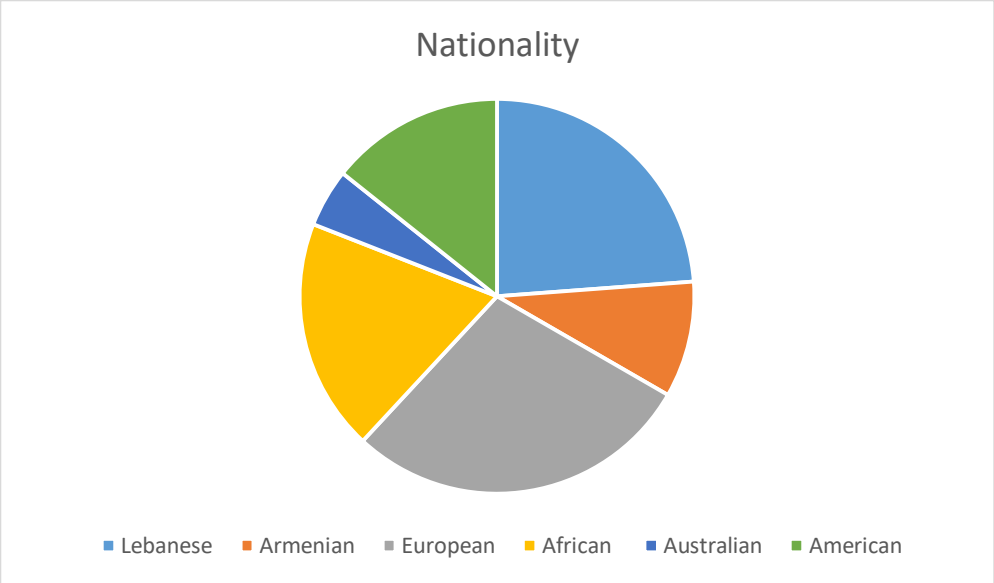
and forth"[1] between themes respects the nature of the experience as it occurred. My findings concur with this. However, signposts are given along the way, mostly in footnotes, to show how my choice of headings and subheadings is alerting to key themes, theories, and writers that will be significant resources for further analysis in the next chapter. Before coming to the main body of data, the scene is set with a description of the fieldwork context.

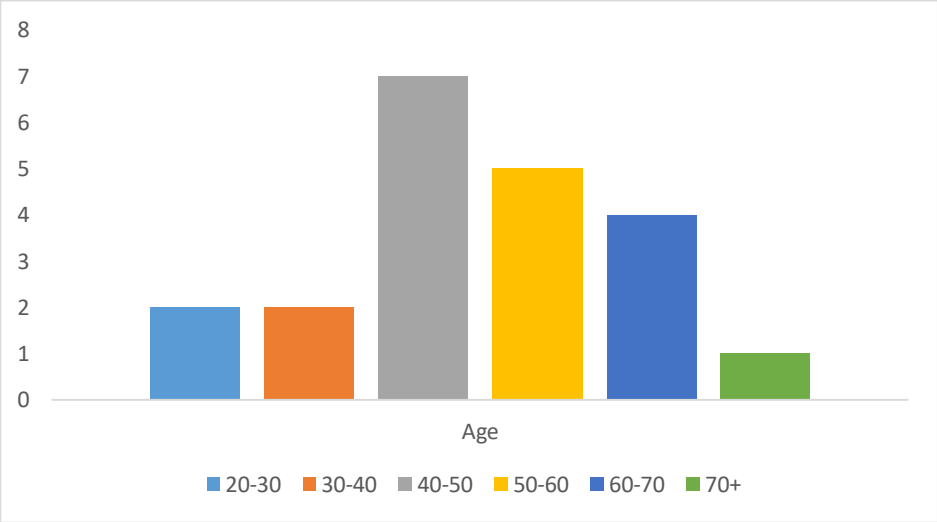
5.2 The participants

The total number of participants involved was 21, with a core of around 17 regular attendants. There were a broad range of ages and nationalities, as shown below: Lebanese (6), Armenian (2), Kenyan (2), American (3), British (4), and one of each of the following; Dutch, Malawian, Ugandan, and Australian. However, these categories do not reflect the more complex cultural identities of many of the participants. For example, two of the British women are married to Lebanese husbands and the third has lived in Lebanon for several decades. Only three participants have always lived in the same country, and five regard a foreign country other than where they were born as 'home,' for instance where they have raised children or have other family connections. Only one participant is not fluent in at least a second language.

This is generally reflective of the international make-up of the congregation, which includes a significant proportion of 'transient' people who come to work in Lebanon for short or medium-term periods, and often come from different Christian traditions. Only a small minority of the congregation have been baptised in an Anglican church or consider themselves to *be* 'Anglican.' Hence, the Bible course group included people from Baptist, Maronite, Catholic, Orthodox, Evangelical, Jewish, and other kinds of religious backgrounds; or a mixture. One person's experience included a ten-year period during which church meant meeting with Christians in informal house gatherings in a gated community in Saudi Arabia. Visual simplifications of the various countries of origin and ages, however, still offer a useful way to glimpse the group's diversity.

[1] In the words of a participant, cited below.





The fact that only five of the participants were not university educated is an additional particularity of this congregation that may not be reflective of congregations in many other social contexts. The Bible studies and focus groups produced around 14 hours of data, and the thirteen interviews, (each around 30 minutes) produced a further seven hours of data. Altogether I had around 21 hours of data, which I transcribed manually. I encouraged participants to try to read the whole of John's Gospel at home (in any language) prior to the beginning of the course, most people did not manage this before the first week, but it was helpful that the participant who had never read anything in the

Bible before did so, and many others read part or all of John at home as the weeks progressed.

The mealtime before the Bible study was referred to by several participants as being important. I cooked for the first week, but others wanted to contribute in subsequent weeks, which added a sense of hospitality and sharing to the table. Only one participant commented that the meal took up time she would have preferred spent in extended reflective prayer. Most agreed that, as Yora[2] said, "it really helped the Bible studies" themselves in providing space for "friendship" or "fellowship" at the beginning, which enabled discussion. A significant number of participants mentioned the importance of the group feeling like, as one said "family," and six referred to as a "safe place," or a "safe haven," where "you can ask questions and share opinions."[3] Importantly for Luna, "whether they wanted to say something negative or positive they knew they were still welcome to share." Nina said the thing that was "very special" for her was that "friendship grew" even for those who initially did not know each other, and even more significantly, that "I think everybody feels really *heard*."

An example of the way listening skills and patience developed, and in particular from the diverse nature of the group, is evident in Nour's comments about an early difficultly she had tolerating views that she regarded as insulting.

> The fact there were so many different people in the group, it helped see that even if I disagree with someone about something that's important for me, that person will not say stupid things all the time…For instance, I felt really angry when Maya said that remark about women, that they are more emotional than men and that they cry more often. This kind of idea is not something I will listen to, it is proven that this is social conditioning… but in fact I also learned that even though someone might say something stupid, that I view as stupid and a view I do not wish to sit down and listen to; that even then there might be other things they say that are not stupid. That it doesn't mean everything that person says will be stupid and they might even say some other ideas that are interesting and different to my own that I can learn from.

[2] Pseudonyms have been used throughout this thesis.

[3] Gordon Oliver's overview of research in pastoral uses of the Bible underlines a need for the Church today to create opportunities for realistic discussion, which he urges is a 'major foundation for the liberation and transformation of people that forms the purpose and the bedrock of truly Christian engagement with Scripture,' *Holy Bible,* 2006, p. xvii.

For Luna, the building of relationships with each other is mutually connected with personal relationships with God.[4]

> We were all very close in this group, there was a bond… and the others now, when I see them at church, we have something between us... You made us all feel very relaxed, whoever had a problem could lay it aside. It is 'us and God', and 'us and each other.'

Rita's comments show a connection between interpersonal honesty and acceptance with understanding of the Bible that is not only intellectual but also personally meaningful.

> When you are here we are all as a family. And we are talking directly. Maybe something is wrong– that doesn't matter, we can understand each other. We love to come. It is easy to get into the heart, to the mind, easy to communicate with each other. And that is beautiful.

After the meal, participants brought hot drinks to the other side of the hall, where the chairs were arranged in a circle, with small tables for Bibles, pens, handouts and notebooks. I had prepared the materials based on my anticipation of a smaller group which could be seated around a table, but realising the numbers would be too many, I changed this, with the result that managing the sheets on small coffee tables was awkward for some people. Each week, the opening question helped make a transition from the noisy bustle of table conversations to focusing on the Bible. Although the group was large, questions were discussed as a whole group. My aim was to facilitate those who prefer or need time for initial quiet reflection by inviting everyone to a silent pause after the first Bible reading. However, despite my efforts to make this work, one or two participants still immediately used the pause to begin with their questions. So in week four, I suggested to the group that participants who needed a few minutes to reflect quietly or make notes sit on the other side to those who wanted to converse in pairs before the whole group discussion; and feedback about this was good.

[4] The significance of this interconnected view of spirituality will be discussed Chapter 6.3.3.

5.3 Spiritual talk and spiritual reading

The opening questions have been shown to have been important; but this was more than being helpful ways to reveal data; it was also helpful to equipping participants to engage with God and the Bible with greater intentionality and self-awareness. Discussion, in the first two weeks in particular, served what transpired to be a crucial need to find common language for experiences of faith and God. Moreover, not everyone in the group had formerly articulated–perhaps not even formerly reflected upon– their assumptions, beliefs, or experiences. Just as this proved to be beneficial to their understanding, so too were some aspects of the reading approach that also initially required learning.

5.3.1 Finding language to talk about experiences of God through his Word

In the first three weeks of the course I used the open question to give opportunity for participants to articulate their thoughts or experience of knowing God in relation to reading the Bible; asking how we view the Bible and the idea of revelation, and how we can experience the presence of God with us. [5]

Responses to the first question included a range of metaphors ranging from a secret garden, an anchor, food to nourish, a map *and* guide, a jigsaw, reference book, and a light to illuminate the way. Most common was the idea that "whenever I read the Bible it comforts, it soothes me and calms me down;" "it relaxes me." As this was early in the first meeting, I returned to the question another week, commenting that I noticed how everyone had expressed entirely positive concepts of the Bible, and asking if anyone would wish to nuance or add anything to their ideas. Here the subject of violence arose, and difficulties reconciling a perceived difference in the nature of God in the Old Testament compared with the New. The metaphor of food was expanded to include strange, "spicy" or "foreign foods" that we are not sure we like the look or the taste of.

[5] Following previous discussions in Chapter 1, I am using the expression 'spiritual experience' here to acknowledge concepts in Schneiders' work but also to denote various ways that participants experience and articulate faith. Ways that my original intended meaning of the expression becomes expanded and nuanced in light of insights from the data will be discussed in the following Chapter 6.3.3.

Later still in the course, more affective language was used to express that the Bible can also bring about unsettling or "heavy" feelings of shame and guilt. However, the significance of giving space for early reflection was apparent from the first week, where the discussion probed possible breadths of meaning of 'word' in John, 1:1-18, (including in different languages,) and what the 'Word of God' might mean in this passage when described as being 'God and with God' from 'the beginning.' Hannah's response captures a sense of reverence and awakened expectation that the group clearly connected with, which was evident as her idea that "you can't read it like a novel" was repeated by others at various points in coming weeks.

> I always really thought of this [The Word] as being, like, the *Bible*. And I don't mean *literally*, like the book of the "Bible" [smiling] was always there with God, but like the written record testament, like someone else said– wisdom. Actually, thinking of the Bible as the Word… it says 'the Word *is* God. So the idea of the Word as a *sacrament*,[6] it suddenly adds, almost like a *whole weight*… which makes me think I've previously been like way too flippant. This has kind of flipped it in my mind; that it's not like I might pick up a novel, but it's yeah– it *is* a holy sacrament, and there is a holy activity taking place when you read it– more than just the practical words on a piece of paper that might give us information– there's so much *more* than that.

In the second week, participants' descriptions of the idea of revelation included "revealing" or "changing" things; "uncovering" or "discovering some new understanding," and "like an 'aha!'" When Grace talked about sensing the "Rhema" word of God "speak" through the Bible, some found this helpful and others were interested and asked her to explain more:

> Sometimes you read the Bible, and something just stands out for you and you feel it speaking, and everybody else maybe not thinks the same but you *feel* it.

I noticed that expressions about knowing or feeling something are often used to mean the same thing, with the term "I feel" or "I feel that…" occurring more frequently than "I/we know," concerning anything about faith or the Bible, "I know" was only used once

[6] Of the two metaphors I included from Schneiders' work, her engagement with the idea of the Bible as sacrament became a helpful way to understand the tension between trust and suspicion in an interpretive process.

to refer to a characteristic of Jesus, although it was sometimes negatively inferred with the expression "I *didn't* know that…" The expression "I/we *don't* know…" was much more frequent, referring, for instance, to something not known about the text in question.

My third question about the way we experience the presence of God with us evoked a common idea of comfort and a lack of anything disruptive. Adjectives like "warm and reassuring," were used; "safe, as someone is near you," that God is "someone I can call out to when I'm scared" and "talk to when I am alone." "His invitation is 'come to me all you weary.'" Most concepts were entirely positive, a sense that God shows me he is with me to reassure me. Luna was not alone in her concept that God "backs her up," taking the idea further in a semi-humorous illustration that suggested God's presence is like "support."

> He [God] can be the referee in times I am arguing with my husband or something [laughs] He can be on my side… [smiling] we are two against one.

When I responded in equal good humour to add that she is lucky, as God usually seems to side with my *husband*, the assumption that "God is on my side" seemed affirmed by more than one person among the laughs muttering, "I had never thought of that!" Overall there were strong associations with knowing God or his presence, with feeling not only comforted and assured, but also that God generally agrees with our position. Only one person qualified that God "may or may not answer my prayers" when she finds herself in need of help. There was little to suggest possibilities of either God's presence or the Bible as being disturbing or disrupting.

5.3.2 "You can't read the Bible quickly like a paper back": Slow reading

The open question was followed (or sometimes preceded) by a prayer which may have corresponded with the hope of knowing God better through his Word, or the need for God to still our minds in preparation to receive his Word. The very simple act of insisting on a slow, initial reading of the passage was mentioned by over half of the women at some point, with several later saying they had also taken to reading the Bible

much more slowly at home.[7] For Nina, a benefit is that "it gave open-mindedness to the people. It sets a way of looking at it and it helps for people to be open." Furthermore, reading deliberately slowly was felt to help participants engage on a personal level with the passages; it was "more enriching," it "helps you not just read the story but actually be *in* it." "By myself I wouldn't have read it so slowly, significantly. I wouldn't have extracted the interpretations, different meanings. Patience…you need patience." And as others comments in the focus group agreed;

> You can't read the Bible quickly like a paper back. You have to go, "oh, hang on a minute, let's read it again; let's see if we got it right." Or there might be some other things that we have to go back to.
>
> You have to feel it, to see. To feel you are inside to see, to feel what is going on. If you are not *in* the Bible then you will not see it, what is going on around. If you are not inside you will never understand.[8]

Before bringing questions to the text, this lingering gave space to invite participants to repeat a word or phrase from the passage that strikes them as important, interesting, confusing, or for any other reason.[9] This concept clearly resonated, and was picked up in the focus group and in several interviews.

> I found it very enriching, very deep, because of the method of study. I have not previously studied the Bible where you read, take *time*, and it's like, "what stands out?"

5.3.3 "Really reading it for *ourselves"*: Freedom for personal reflection

Throughout the Bible course, participants expressed a sense of appreciation for, as one person said, "permission to explore" ideas and meanings. Eight participants made reference to the word 'free' or 'freedom' in remarks about the space given, and being "allowed" to question, to move "off script" and to share ideas and opinions,[10] For several participants, like Joy, this was a new experience. "I found different and more

[7] Ellen Davis advocates for unhurried attentiveness, in *The Art of Reading Scripture*, ed. by Ellen F. Davis and Richard B. Hays (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), p. 153.
[8] Sheldrake, *Explorations in Spirituality*, p. 40.
[9] Reflecting aspects of *Lectio Divina;* befitting to Schneiders' theory for reasons discussed in Chapter 4.4.
[10] The relevance of this point will be discussed in the following chapter in relation to some feminist theories about the significance of facilitating women's voices in conversations about faith.

profound that there was *freedom* to say what you want, what you found out, without having to stay with what was on the 'script.'"[11] There was a general sense of excitement in the group with similar expressions echoing this sense of personal discovery. Janice was finding she enjoyed reading the Bible now, rather than going to church "just because you think you *should* […] here, you *want* to read the Bible because you're really reading it for *yourself*."

As well as being more enjoyable, this was crucial to gaining "proper understanding". Mischa contrasted the way she felt she was now learning, with the style of Bible teaching she had known in school, to which certain discussions sparked "little flashbacks." But the difference was that back then, "it probably wasn't going in as proper *understanding*, you know. It was probably 'being a good girl' and just listening." Crucial to this distinction was the freedom for honest reflection, freedom to "ask questions," and as others said, to "give our opinion," and to "say what we want." This gave a sense of collective emerging learning, which happened from the first week. For instance, as Lara's linguistic knowledge opened up insights about possible theological implications of the word 'Word' (of God.) The following week, the group was eager to engage with what Lara discovered from further questioning an Armenian Pastor. Samar, who loved art, brought small coloured pictures of an eastern painting of the Samaritan woman with Jesus at the well, which she distributed at the end of week 5 for the women to take home. For Hannah, the invitation to reflect and probe personal responses to the text led to new discoveries that challenged some of her previous assumptions:

> What is amazing is that really it is all about how we've been *taught* to read it, rather than actually... that we're reading it for *ourselves*; you know, how you read the same stories the way you've always seen them.

Others agreed that, as well as being an inspiring approach, space for personal response helped enable the kind of reading which connects with God, or with something he is communicating through the text.

[11] This learning style can found across a breadth of denominations, for example, see Einike Pilli, 'Longing for a Better World: Towards a Critical Approach in Adult Christian Education', *Journal of European Baptist Studies,* 5, 1 (2004), 18–39.

> Yeah it was *refreshing*, because I'm used to being part of Bible studies where there's a list of set questions where it's… more *boring*, whereas yours was like "what stood out to you?" And it was nice because different things stood out to different people and it was really nice to hear how God was prodding people or inspiring people.

5.4 Making connections[12] and finding meaning

This section describes some key ways that meaning emerged from the text, including some of the approaches (such as narrative and empathy) processes (such as struggling with potentially uncomfortable meanings) and particularities of the group (such as the diverse backgrounds) that were found to be significant.

5.4.1 "Maybe for *us* it's like that": Imaginative reading[13]

A significant amount of questions arose from interest about the narrative characters. Having discussed Jesus' effort to "get through" to Nicodemus, including his reference to Moses' snake in the desert, interest turned back to Nicodemus himself. Joy commented that it is "a shame we don't hear whether Nicodemus believed or didn't believe, whether he was changed. Did he just go away as he came?" This concern led Gheeta to investigate further implications from evidence in subsequent passages that we turned to (7:50 and 19:39) concluding that he must have responded to Jesus' words. She compared Nicodemus' initial struggle to respond to Jesus with the way that even the disciples, later, were afraid and hid, contending that while they are "counting the cost of following Jesus in the aftermath [whereas] Nicodemus is doing this previously." She explained:

> …the *context* of this verse, we read in chapter 7… [the rulers] are calling the temple police to come and take Jesus away, talking about, "have any of the *rulers* or the *Pharisees* believed in him?" It's like, well it's just all those ignorant, poor, uneducated, sinful people who believe: And into that, Nicodemus kind of puts his neck out, [arguing] "*But our law says*…" when they were all rallying against Jesus. The way I read it, it was a really significant thing that he did that, when the disciples were hiding and

[12] Andrew Rogers also discusses the significance of a similar process of 'making connections,' See *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 95.

[13] The significance of imaginative and empathetic engagement with characters and the group's enthusiasm towards this approach will be discussed further in Chapter 6 and 7, below.

> afraid… And I wonder how much money it cost to provide 75 pounds of spices? I mean, that's an act of worship, and offering a sacrifice.

Several times Nicodemus had been contrasted negatively with other characters who were quick to respond with demonstrative faith in Jesus (the disciples in chapter 1, and the Samaritan woman.) However, seeing him in a new light, as one who ultimately became faithful to Jesus, was seen to give a different significance to his initial struggle to believe, validating his own way of taking time to process Jesus' words. This led to what Joy referred, in her interview, as seeing the importance of the "whole journey of following" and not just the beginning, as "one of the deep revelations" she had.

> I remember acting it out in my mother tongue at Sunday school... I knew that he came at night…and okay, so what? But I learnt that the encounter with God does *not end* in this night…at the time Jesus died Nicodemus was mentioned again, which tells me that in his own quiet way…he *kept* it, that he *kept it to the end*…and so it was challenging to me that I need to *keep*. The challenge, did I *keep it to the end*? So for me that was also a revelation. And that spoke to me miles.

Others talked about different kinds of "outcomes" from their reading. Grace related to the way Nicodemus struggled to get beyond his familiar ways of thinking, and felt that in the same way she has been "blocked by some philosophies or big thinking … doing [the same] as a Pharisee," putting her own "stumbling blocks of do's and don'ts" instead of simply "*seeing Christ* in just a simple passage; and that he loves me." Nour responded to a question about what Jesus wanted Nicodemus to understand about being born of 'water and Spirit,' saying that he needed to "remember the heart and forget the details; the strictness of each 'letter of the law.'" In a later interview, she explained how this realisation had brought new clarity to see the way she had been doing her work as a professional translator. People had said to her before, stop focusing on every grammatical detail, or you can miss conveying "the real meaning" of what someone is saying. She saw a parallel with Nicodemus, and realised she can also change her focus to enable effective communication and understanding.

Questions about the characters themselves were an important focus of concern. For instance, in thinking about Jesus' healing of 'the man born blind' (John 9), the question was posed concerning the hostile response of the Jews who 'did not believe' despite the evidence that the man they knew to be blind was now healed. As often happened, the

breadth of participants' answers included considerations of the historical, political, social and religious contexts, as shown in the following extracts of a single conversation about reasons for the Jews' response to Jesus.

> Rita: "Because the Rabbis are there, they don't want to make the Rabbis more angry."
> Maya: "Because it is not easy for a human "to change his belief. We are born Christians– we are born to believe in a certain way. For them they saw something new. It's not easy for them to accept it."
> Nour: "It's about power"…"and taking control."
> Samar: "Maybe they would lose their source of income."
> Gheeta: "Or maybe as Rabbis maybe *they* were the ones who were supposed to open the eyes of that blind man."
> Rita: "They believe their Saviour is not coming now, he's coming later."
> Maya: "Because the prophets that came before, they used to fight with swords, like Samson, like David."
> Judy: "They wanted and expected [a Messiah] who would get rid of Roman rule."
> Sylvie: "Because they were still following the Old Testament ideas […] and for them to comprehend that Jesus was part of God, part of the Trinity, it was new and terribly confusing."

For Grace, the answer involved a making a personal connection from a kind of empathy with the Pharisees, who she said contrasted with the "childlike faith" of the blind man, and which led to a realisation she later described as one of her "main revelations" from the course.

> …the Pharisees, they're so, "*we know* it all … we know all the answers" […] and I think it is *our* attitude too. We can be open-minded and ask Jesus, "What do *you* want to say, what is it you come to bring us?" Instead of "I know it all." That is what it is at the end; the Pharisees say to Jesus "What, you think that *we* are blind? You think *we* don't *know* what we are saying? We don't *see* it?" And he says because you have this attitude you *don't* really see what is going on. And maybe for *us* it's like that.

5.4.2 "The picture kind of *grew*": Diversity and shared understanding in community

Reading and discussing in a group was clearly a key to understanding for many participants.[14] This may be shown as other questions led to the predicament faced by the blind man's parents, who also refused to acknowledge Jesus' healing, and included a similar breadth of considerations about the gravity of their situation. For instance, one participant added to a collection of ideas about loss of income and religious exclusion the insightful detail that, "as an oppressed minority, I mean, if you get put out it's like, who are your *kids* going to marry?" Similarly, thinking about the question, "Why do you think the blind man had such courage?" many responses came from imagining life from his perspective, as shown in the following excerpt. An exception is in the last response, where Samira's interpretation results more from a link between the character's situation and theological principles from other biblical texts (citing here from 1 John).

> Yora: It says a couple of times, "you were born entirely in sin." And at the beginning the disciples even ask, "did he sin or did his parents sin?" It sounds like he'd been taught that he was... *trash,* from the beginning– because he was blind, I assume. And now here's someone who not only heals him– but he's *worth* healing. He's *worth* taking care of…
> Cyla: And it would be just *amazing*, being able to see for the first time after being born blind. I just can't *imagine* how horrible life would be not being able to see, and then someone heals you - it's like wow! I' will tell *everyone* how amazing you are!
> Samar: And where he saw that these people, the Pharisees, were attacking Jesus he got *angry*– that's why he got courage.
> Samira: "Perfect love casts out all fear." Actually he saw that Jesus loved him so much, this is why.

On another occasion, the group engaged in an extended and enthusiastic exploration of Jesus' metaphor of being born again, in his conversation with Nicodemus. Thinking about the physical image of new birth, reflections included how a new baby begins to see after birth, and becomes aware of hunger for the first time, like, "as a new believer I have a first realisation that I am spiritually starved… I need spiritual food." Judy suggested that the name label attached to a new baby in hospital, which uses the

[14] While Schneiders' work makes clear that interpretation of Scripture is not an individual activity but takes place in an integrated way in church life, a discussion of *how* this might happen as part of a hermeneutical process is a central theme of Chapter 6, below.

parents' identity, mirrors how "being born in the body of Christ, it is about being identified with Christ." This led to a discussion about Middle Eastern concepts of family identity, and biblical implications of children having their father's name as part of their legal identity, translated in a contemporary legal requirement for the father's first name to feature on personal identity cards and legal documents. An appreciation for the sense of others listening and building understanding from local culture was expressed by one Middle Eastern participant, who talked in her interview about the impact she had found of reading with different cultures.

> It's beautiful. I'll tell you why. When we are together each one has an opinion coming from its own place, from its own heritage, from its own culture. And we see other people's culture and at the same time you see our culture. It's very important because there are small bits, pieces between the lines, which you will not understand except from the people who are living in here [the Middle East] or there, or there, or anywhere in the world.

In interviews, nine women raised the same point, with an appreciation for the breadth of cultures and viewpoints, for instance as it "so enriched" the passages with deeper understanding, like "layers" of meaning. [15]

> All of us had different ways of interpreting - I remember about Nicodemus, the baby being born, they are hungry, they belong to the parent, they need food to grow… everybody has a different way - it's nothing that's right or wrong, and each of us built on the other and the picture kind of grew. So it was fresh understanding, more than what I know on my own. For me that was very, very critical, to understand the depth of it and not just reading the stories.

The image of a collective "picture" connected with a significant proportion of language alluding to the idea of understanding in visual terms, as "seeing something new" or in "new light." In the first week Nour was extremely hesitant to put forward an opinion that the three viewpoints in Mark Powell's study[16] might *all* be valid interpretations of the 'Prodigal Son' parable: "This might seem like a joke, but is it possible that the three reasons, could be right at the same time?" After the course, this idea seemed to now make more sense as she talked about a highlight of her experience being the diversity of

[15] See Kenneth E. Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*: Cultural Studies in the Gospels (London: SPCK, 2008).
[16] Mark Allan Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001), pp. 12-21.

cultural backgrounds in the group, and how much she "loved hearing so many different ways of answering the questions, depending on people's views and experience." Grace articulated why, not only diverse cultures, but also different stages of faith, enriched her understanding:

> Normally you might all be from the same country, and you all have the same experience, you all go through the same things, but it was good to hear the diverse views, like "I have never read the Bible," or "in that church this was how we did things." For me that was very enriching to learn about all different cultures; and also to emphasise that our backgrounds influence how we understand the Bible; where we come from, how we've been through.

5.4.3 "Struggling!" with Jesus words

A much more troubled tone was apparent as Maya highlighted the "weird" and "aggressive" expression (spoken by the blind man to the Pharisees) that "God does not listen to *sinners.*" (John 9:31) Her concern was shared by Lara; "who are those sinners? This is difficult." Maya, who had recently started coming to church, expressed offence at this idea, conveying an initially defensive tone with folded arms; but then made efforts to consider others people's ideas:

> I do not believe in this! I believe that God listens to everyone, even to sinners, because he can give chances to sinners to believe again. [Pause] What do you think? [quieter] Is it *true* that God doesn't listen to sinners?

By this time, another participant had researched in a commentary that suggested an alternative translation for "sinners" here as "impostors or fakes": The point being that in such a case "God wouldn't be healing when *Jesus* is asking." This seemed to be received as helping towards a solution. However, further difficulty arose for Mischa, who was wrestling with an apparent contradiction in Jesus' words with her conception of Christian beliefs. The atmosphere in the group at this point was quiet in respectful response to her earnest tone. I described in my journal that this moment felt to me as if there was something bigger at stake behind this discussion that was of shared importance to other participants.

> I must admit, I'm struggling with that, [verse] 39 through to 41, to the end. 'Jesus said, "I came into the world for judgment, so those who *see* may *not*

> see…" *Struggling!* '"…now you say you see, your sin remains."' But Christian teaching is that *none* of us are without sin…I can't make the circle here, those two sentences…*really struggling!*... Have to do some hard maths on this one.[17]

The difficulty posed here was clearly taken seriously by the group, but as we were already slightly late ending of the session, I suggested we return to the question next week. After closing in prayer, however, a few participants returned to the subject. Samira had found a way to make sense of this passage in context with and other parts of the Bible that she knew well, which seemed to inspire others to see a way forward, and the conversation continued:

> Samira: "I came into this world for *judgment,*" but in another instance Jesus says, "I did not come into the world to condemn." We can take the example of the woman who was caught in adultery. Everybody was condemning, but Jesus never said that "you are an adulterer, you are a sinner." He did not judge.
> Nour: Maybe 'judgment' is not 'condemning,' maybe judgment is just "you are doing it wrong, *this* is how to do it."
> Nina: He is shining his light on the situation so that people can *see,* can go to the light…
> Samira: Exactly…
> Nina: …His light on what is life, what is death. I think it is not to point out anything, just to shine his light. So people can see.
> Samira: Yeah, that's what I think.[18]

5.4.4 "Lord, if you had been here": Identifying with Martha

Another moment at which the group resonated with something important resulted from reflecting on Martha's painful experience that Jesus knowingly delayed coming to heal her brother, Lazarus. Understanding this passage came predominantly through a profound sense of empathy with the characters that was triggered by focusing on

[17] Pastoral implications for adult learners encountering new knowledge that disrupts existing belief, named by John Hull as 'cognitive dissonance,' is discussed in Pattison et al, *Using the Bible,* 2007, p. 67; and see further discussion below in Chapter 6.4.2.

[18] This exemplifies a tendency in the group to solve, smooth over, or 'iron out' tensions, raising questions about whether hermeneutics and pastoral practice offer compatible responses to different contexts and reasons for which someone is struggling with a biblical passage. See also Bielo, *Words Upon the Word,* Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*.

Martha's lament[19] '"Lord, if you had been here, my brother would not have died."' (v. 21-22) Recognising the centrality of this became apparent from recognising its verbatim repetition by Mary, and had an illuminating effect on the meaning of the passage. For Mischa, the repetition showed the phrase is a "foundational piece," suggesting that it represents a profound human and personal question:

> It echoes still to a myriad of different situations: If Jesus was here we wouldn't have so many refugees; there wouldn't be poverty in the world. Mum and Dad wouldn't have died. And it's the same theme.

The way this insight inspired others is apparent in the following responses, which show similarities and differences in the way empathy with Martha's struggle with this theme brings understanding that involves specific implications for faith or spirituality or personal growth.

> If you have a dream in your heart and you pray about it you know that God will answer your prayer…But what happens suddenly, instead of the dream to come true, it *dies*? But it is this that happens when Jesus says "this illness does not lead to death." Martha and Mary believed that their brother would live, but suddenly he dies. "I [had] hope in this situation-*WHY?"* The question 'why', which many of us pass through. I believe the answer is that without dying there is not resurrection. Because it says in the word also 'if the grain of wheat does not die it will not produce.' So it has to die so it will be resurrected. That's the lesson maybe that we have to learn.
>
> Many times, like Martha, we feel he is taking a long time to answer our prayers, waiting for something that is not happening. But 'he knows the beginning from the end.' I'm sure he knows what is best, and he knew… there was going to be Resurrection. Maybe there's a better option for you. Because we just see the here and the now… So it may be that that waiting period in your prayer life…and it's frustrating...that's why, for me, what stood out was "if you had been here…BUT *even* now, I know God will give you what you ask for." So *always* have faith; like Martha is full of faith.
>
> I was able to see, to pick out the aspect of this *presence* even when he is *absent*. I was seeing how Martha felt "Jesus, if you had been *here*…" and she was in the pain of *feeling* his absence. But I was reading that even in the absence, his presence was there. So that for me came as a new revelation of the times of pain that reminds me of his presence though I don't *feel* him close to me, I may not *feel* it, but that was something that came back about Martha's relationship with Jesus.

[19] Identifying which questions the text itself is concerned with has been discussed, above, as being key to authentic interpretation.

Another moment of a particular sense of connection with the same passage came as a result of empathising with Jesus himself,[20] triggered by seeing that this narrative passage is situated shortly before preparations for his death (which Jesus prophesies in the following chapter.) This empathy opened up a possible way to see that Jesus' absence from Martha and Mary may somehow be compatible with his compassion and love.

> Sylvie: Could it also be, the whole story of Lazarus, the waiting, and Jesus *feeling* human pain, is it a foreshadowing of his own– because it's very close– and could have been avoided if Jesus had wanted to play the game a different way. But the plan was to go down this *terribly painful* one.
> Gheeta: I can imagine, like if I was sick with something terminal, and I knew if I was going to die, and then someone close to my family dies, and I was watching my kids process that death, I would be thinking, "how are they going to be when I die?" So I can imagine Jesus watching the weightiness of death and watching the response of those closest to him.
> Sylvie: And he is the only one who knows - they haven't got the whole story yet.

5.5 Recognising the need to interpret

In addition to more instinctive responses to the text, it is demonstrated in what follows that the group came to recognise the significance of certain strategies in reading that were not generally apparent at the start of the course; strategies that are needed because meaning does not always automatically emerge but depends on some more intentional stages of questioning and interpreting.

5.5.1 "I think John and I have an understanding": Literary approaches to John[21]

For Lara, the thing that 'stood out' from the first week was the poetic repetition and emphasis about 'the Word;' *of* God, *was* God, *with* God, in the opening verse of John. Her

[20] This exemplifies a strategy in which answers to interpretative questions are somehow sought in connection with Jesus' character, expressed more explicitly by another participant below.
[21] The benefit of enabling participants to grasp deeper insights will be related to the concentration on one particular book.

own words in what follows show that her questioning led to new understanding that was deeply meaningful. Lara had not read the gospels before, but was familiar with the stories from years of church attendance. Her initial curiosity in the prologue of John was heightened as we looked at echoes of the Genesis creation account in the structure and language of the opening of John that led to new insights in subsequent passages as she pursued the theme. For instance, in the second week we briefly referred to a passage from Romans that described Jesus as being the 'new Adam.' Lara was animated about seeing how this connected with the creation theme, and which led to a personal sense of discovery about Jesus that was deeply significant, shown in her comments the following week.

> Something came up here in John. In the last study I told you I realised that Jesus is the second Adam. I didn't know that it was written. I went home and told my husband about this, he said "Yes, it's written!"...that the new, the second Adam, is Jesus. Genesis, and even Adam… you have the Gospel of John, and instead of Adam– now Jesus. It's *very* nice the way it is written. And it's *difficult*.

Whether it was due to the quantity of content packed into that evening, or that she was distracted in her own thoughts, Lara did not realise we had read this together; but it was deeply significant to her that the idea dawned in her own mind that Jesus, calling himself the 'Son of Man,' was bringing to being a new era in the history of creation.[22] This insight came from her probing and comparing texts, including bringing to our attention that there is no birth account in John, mirroring Adam's entrance into the story as an adult as she recounted again to me in her interview.

> The introduction, we don't know about the birth of Christ. There is not any birth of Adam, right? Suddenly he created, and they sinned. Suddenly we see here in John there is no birth […] God created Jesus, the Son of God, and he came to save our sins; as if Adam sinned and Jesus now came; a new creator, to wipe our sins and died for us. As if the world is created again, a new world, reborn. This is the main idea, and the idea of eternal life… this was something more spiritual for me compared to others [gospels] it's more *close* to Jesus–you *feel* more close to him.

When I asked what she meant by the word 'spiritual,' Lara clarified that she meant that the focus was more on Jesus himself than on the miracles, so "it makes you *feel* closer to

[22] The importance in Lara's experience that it was her own curiosity and questions that led to new understanding will be discussed in chapter 6.6, below.

Jesus." Farah also expressed, in the first focus group, that she resonated with discussions about the text, such as searching for and underlining apparently simple, key words; or observing connections from noting special language or images together using a flip chart.

> I sense that you've taken a kind of literary approach and I've never seen anything like that before for reading the Bible, and I really love it. Like you started by asking us what words we see, and show how these are recurring and have such meaning. For me it's like the word 'reveal'. I think, 'reveal,' that's just so deep and it means such a lot.

For Farah, more than learning about "the historical things, and what exactly was happening at the time," attention to meaning in the text was the most helpful, and "extremely meaningful." A general consensus of the group agreed with Samar's description of John as "tricky." Despite this, a certain familiarisation came from focusing on one particular book so that you learn "how to extract the meaning," the "deeper meanings;" "it needs attention" and by looking closely, as another participant said, "you can then start to understand the other passages." For Joy, and several others, looking at the use of words was helpful to incorporate into her devotional Bible reading at home.

> I question myself, why is this word written, repeated again? Then there was the methodology of looking at the verbs which are used in the style of writing, and I find myself applying this. I'm looking; what verbs are there? What do they mean?

5.5.2 Looking "*behind* what is being said" Language and meaning

Rita was new to reading the Bible, and spoke with great excitement each week about everything she was discovering. She did not express the same need to do any of the "hard maths" that some others experienced. "The first time I read it, it goes *in* me. I understand everything…John is very easy…it's very nice." However, this was an exceptional view. Most participants found there were "hidden" or "deeper meanings" but all agreed that it was helpful to stay with one book to get an "overall feel" and to "really digest" the book as a whole, exemplified in the following comments.

> You kind of get to know the style, and know that you need to read that again […] I mean John's style is kind of cryptic, he's saying something but

> he's saying something *else*. I don't know that I would have picked up on that *at all*, had we not seen that pattern throughout the whole book.
>
> I have better understanding now. I went back and read John again but now I read more in depth- not to say I was reading shallow before, but it is more significant now, I could say I analyse better and I *re-read*.

An awareness of the need to interpret the Bible was evident in many comments, such as the way reading is not straightforward; "you're backwards and forwards with it and there's a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations," and that "it needs more attention, more work," also that "Sometimes we read the Bible literally, and we don't really dig deep and look *behind* what is being said." This sentiment is shown in the following.

> It is hard to understand when I started to read first, before we started to meet, I read it. Later in our study we found deep meanings. I did not know that these sentences mean also something else. It needs interpretation– maybe *all* the Bible. It's not easy to understand.

Similarly, Sylvie commented that "this is the whole thing from these Bible studies I've come to realise; the words used are very specific in the Bible. It seems like just a casual story, but they are not." However, recognising the importance of "specific" words posed further problems for reading a translated text, shown as discussion continued:

> Mischa: …it depends on the accuracy of the translation from the original text [...] It's so important to get the subtle yet vital differences.
> Farah: It can put a whole different slant on it.
> Sylvie: It is also context, as well–what a word or a phrase meant in those days.
> Mischa: Historical context, yes, I suppose it had to be blended in to the Jewish context and the bigger picture.

The following discussion of John 20:15 concerns further implications of translation in response to the English word "woman" translated from the New Testament Greek, γύναι, to express the way Jesus addresses Mary (mirroring the way we noticed he addressed his mother in John 2:4.) Here, the question turns on the interpreter's choice between valuing the language of the text in its "classical" form, or making revisions in translation according to shifting meanings of words; and includes some opinions about the tone of the Arabic translation of the same expression.

Samar: There we have that word 'woman' again, it would be politer to say 'lady,' or something.
Nour: That translator didn't care about women it seems, they could have found *anything* better in English.
Sylvie: Do you think that's a symptom of our society today; that the word 'woman' is not held in [respect]…
Mischa: …Spot on.
Luna: But it's the same in Arabic, 'Emrra,' [Arabic word for woman] it's used in poetry, and it's a really *nice* word, unless you're really angry; but it is respectful.
Nour: No, I would be offended, if someone said 'Emrra,' I would expect to be called 'Idet', that would be 'Madam.'
Luna: Yes, but it's classics.

5.6 Interpretive challenges and critical questions

Much of the group discussions were lively in tone, and, as discussed above, came with a general sense of openness and ease; including when opinions were different. However, it was significant to observe certain points at which things were more difficult to speak about; in particular, when the general atmosphere of the group was slightly more hesitant, cautious, or uneasy. As it will become evident in what follows, this was significant for several reasons. They reveal a willingness to venture beyond the ground of former assumptions to grapple with uncomfortable questions and experiences that led to some important (and perhaps unexpected) disclosures.

5.6.1 "Where am *I* in the story?" Women in the Bible and in the Church

In spite of Luna's defense of the Bible's language as a classic text, the discussion above went on to consider stages of translation from Jesus' spoken Aramaic, with several participants feeling that the choice of translators to use a word which had "disrespectful" connotations and would be felt to signify demeaning intentions to women today indicated it was not a true reflection of what they believed Jesus would have intended in his own words. I noted in my diary at this point an 'awkwardness in the atmosphere,' with more pauses and hesitations in comments than the usual flow of conversations. This reflected a tension about language that arose in the second week, in a passage from Romans. (5:14-19) The excerpt shows an initial difficulty Cyla found (as did the group in general) to discuss matters relating to women and the Bible, which she

later conveyed as being deeply important to her. For now, the tone was uncomfortable. It followed questions about Jesus' self-designation as "Son of Man." Cyla volunteered to read one of the passages, but then preceded with several very marked pauses, indicating her discomfort with the text's masculine language.[23] But she did not directly articulate her discomfort, and neither did others draw further attention to her; perhaps in sensitivity to a cue to move on in the sudden speediness of Cyla's final sentence.[24]

> This passage was talking about death came to all mankind… 'through Adam's sin' [raises eyebrows, looks up]… and *Eve's* [laugh]… and er, so…then the passage was talking about 'through the obedience of one man,' um… we 'can have life, through the one man Jesus Christ,' so because of his sacrifice, we all– *men and women*– [looks up, uncomfortable smile] '…can have… can have forgiveness and have life.' [speaking faster:] So I guess it's comparing death through Adam and life through Jesus.

Beyond, the mixed feelings about the role of translators, this discomfort showed a bigger underlying question being whether the Bible "supports" what was called the "priority of men" in churches (a subject that came to the fore before we had read two of the three key narratives about women.) The following dialogue is a response to an opening question, which expresses Hannah's thoughts about a gap between the theological claims and the "culture" of her previous church (in a western context.) As she spoke she leant forward; the tone was softly spoken, as if the conversation was treading closely to something that was not safe.

> Hannah: Women are allowed to 'lead' in church when it's something to do with the children. The women have been pigeon-holed into, obviously, what someone has decided they can do […] even in a church where they would *of course say*, "no, men and women are *equal*" [laughs] …actually there's been a subconscious culture where [leaning forward and whispering] *that's not the case*. And that's depressing.
> [Pause]
> Mischa: But the disciples are all *men*. If they weren't… well I know there's some debate about one or two of them, but in the main the

[23] This bears on a strategy in Schneiders' feminist approach, which challenges interpretations that 'privilege the male/masculine at the expense of the female/feminine.' *Revelatory,* p. 184.
[24] Given the importance of the increased confidence for enabling discussion of difficult matters (such as why some of the Bible seems to prioritise men) it will be important to pay attention to factors that enabled this growth in confidence in the group.

disciples are male, so it sort of echoes the sense of male priority, or dominance.[25]

Grace: They [women disciples] definitely are there. But I think it's like they take a back road.

This led some further discussion of different contexts of church experience that bear on the question of women's roles in the Bible. Many in the group expressed personal empathy with the sense of exclusion the Samaritan woman was imagined to have experienced from the text. Several participants resonated with a sense that in the Middle East, "women are excluded" in churches, for instance; "we cannot have a group like this, women are not allowed to get together to have fellowship together, it's very, very difficult." The phrase "not allowed" was used 29 times in similar contexts, including describing strict rules about what women must or must not do or wear in church, and another participant describing how an unmarried woman in a previous church in Africa who had a child would be "driven away," while a man in the same position could "still be usher or elder in the church." While the injustice of this was easy to see now, it was not easy at the time.

> I thought that it was a given… that women are… the service I did was *cleaning* the church. I thought that was probably where women (belonged?) cleaning the pews, and… afterwards I started asking, so is this *all*?... But sometimes we don't want to ask because that is how we have been socialised.[26]

Another participant expressed her hesitancy to question these things in church because "you're frightened of getting …smacked down, or something very prescriptive being given to you." For this reason, "Mary and the tomb was definitely an "*aha*! moment" that gives an incentive to take a closer look at the Bible, "it says to me if there's that one there's bound to be other treasures as well." For Yora, the most important "nugget" of the course had been "getting to a certain level of understanding" that reveals the significance of women in the Bible. Important here is that reading of the Bible is often

[25] Language asking how far the Bible "supports" or "mirrors" or "reflects" church culture (rather than how far the *Church* mirrors the *Bible*) highlights important questions about the authority of Scripture in relation to culture and Tradition, See Schneiders, *Revelatory*, pp. 64-78. Chris Rowland and Zoë Bennett also warn that 'the Word of God can be masked behind the word of the church,' in 'Action is the Life of All', pp. 8-17. Moreover, the excerpts above indicate the significance for ordinary readers of exploring and acknowledging their experience of these power dynamics, see Chapter 6.5.3, below.

[26] Rosemary Radford Ruether, 'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation', in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible,* ed. by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), p. 139.

done in "a quick swipe," which I understand as indicating a superficial way that it too hurried to bring to the fore important meanings in the text. Yora's comments also highlight reasons this inadequate understanding can also be problematic for women and girls in her western, "liberated" context.

> It's hard to explain to my girls, who can't, at this point, have the depth of understanding… all they see is - well it's all *boys* and no *girls*. There's nobody for me to look to and say, I'm like *her*. I see that a lot in my girls, actually, a lot. Like, "where am *I* in the story?"…There are a lot more female role models now they can look to–a lot more women actors, women in positions of power– than there were when I was growing up. But the Bible has stayed the same. So it's not until you get to a level of understanding that we're talking about. In just a quick *swipe* you don't see it.

5.6.2 "Now *we* feel included:" Jesus and women in the Fourth Gospel

Examples of the things that might be missed in a "quick swipe" include the counter-cultural affirmation Jesus showed the Samaritan woman, as questions probed contemporary tensions between Jews and Samaritans, and boundaries between religious and social roles of men and women. This was particularly poignant for some participants, who agreed with Samira that "women are not treated well by men in some countries, especially in the Middle East. They are secondary, or something." Jesus' response was therefore striking, as "he treated them in a gentleman-like manor," and took her seriously in a long and thought-provoking conversation.

> Samira: When you ask something from somebody, it means you are respecting her… Jesus is respecting her; 'give me a cup of water'… she is feeling that he wants to talk to her, she is *somebody*. She feels included because somebody is fellowshipping with her, somebody who is a Jew, she is a Samaritan, *how*?....This is great and she feels *included*.
> Nour: Now *we* feel included. For once a woman has a *role*.[27]

Several participants were not familiar with the story, but for those who were familiar, new insights emerged. For example, new insights into Samaritan theology revised Gheeta's initial impression of the woman's comments as deliberate "excuses or

[27] This expression represents a repeated idea of experiencing a character's encounter with Jesus in a narrative, as a point of entry as a reader to a closer proximity to Jesus.

objections," showing instead that her participation in this "boisterous back and forth" was taken seriously by Jesus as a theological discussion. Moreover, comparisons in the text with Nicodemus showed her as being "more frank" and "more open to Jesus;" she "believed more," despite Nicodemus, having been more qualified. Unlike Nicodemus, her story did not end in "so what?"; nor did she somehow "disappear from the story." Rather, "this amazing woman believed in Jesus more, and ran and *told* about Jesus." Comparison between these characters, which set a woman in a positive light, emerged as increasingly significant in light of Jesus' encounters with other women such as Martha and Mary Magdalene. Joy later reflected;

> It reminded me that the women have a very pivotal role, a very important role, in the church, in the family, in the society, you know, in the Gospel of Jesus… I did not previously have the depth of revelation of how deep or how significant the women were.

Perhaps most significant to many in the group was seeing Jesus' first post-Resurrection appearance to a woman; and her commissioning to tell the news. This was "really, really significant– that a woman got the message." Another participant described this as having been "a bit of a shock- a pleasant shock- but, ooh, blimey, I hadn't realised the significance of that moment until I'd discussed it in a group like this." Similarly, for another:

> I found this incredibly important. I did not know that the first person that saw Jesus after the Resurrection was a woman- this has all been dampened down. I always feel that the Bible is quite masculine in its approach, but when I'm reading this I think, no it's not– "What's the problem here guys?" So it was an eye-opener for me in that sense. It's powerful that the first person was a woman.

Questions and discussion about the nature of Jesus' bodily Resurrection took considerable time in week 7, with different ideas about why Mary did not recognise Jesus in the garden, leading to a diversity of complex theological questions; the nature of his body and present whereabouts, the nature of the Trinity, heaven, and about the bodily resurrection of people who have died. It was not possible to stay as closely as usual to the planned questions, as questions about foundational Christian theology were causing some to be confused about the passage. Later Gheeta reflected in her interview, that it was slightly frustrating to have to stay on basic questions and not move on with the deeper questions. On one hand she would have liked me to have kept "more firmly

on task," but on the other, "it was so exciting when people get to those big questions as a result of reading." For Judy, moments like this were a highpoint of reading the Bible together, and important to respect as "a Holy Spirit invitation."

As a consequence of this sidetracking, however, we did not return to questions that were pressing for others, including the many times repeated question of whether "women can actually be disciples." But feedback in the focus group was positive about time given at the end of week 7 to look at material from the additional handouts. On this evening, focus on the text resumed an interest in reasons that Mary may have stayed in the garden after the disciples left; suggestions including that she was either "more devastated" than they, or "more faithful" to Jesus, or "believed in him more." The key point that brought agreement was the significance of this "incredibly special role" having been given to a woman who was also privileged by Jesus choosing to reveal himself firstly to her after his Resurrection. As Lara discerned, this ending is to a story which began with the first message also given to a woman, in the Angel's announcement to Mary. Cyla shared that the result of "seeing" these new things was a deepened personal assurance in her relationship with God:

> It's seeing these wonderful things about women that I've never focused on before, I've never been taught... it's really refreshing to read it in a new light… because, you know, even though I *know* in my head that women and men are the same in God's eyes, usually is about the men, and, you know, women must submit to the man… I guess church tradition and everything…so it's nice. It makes me feel more *loved* by God.

For a participant who had always cleaned pews in her previous church, she saw new ways that "women can play a part." Having explained to me in her interview that she was "encouraged about what I can *do*," she subsequently joined the church council. Other participants articulated various kinds of impact the readings about women had on them, being for many participants some of the most "revealing" or "refreshing" experiences, or "highlights" of the course. Gheeta expressed this in the focus group:

> I feel like there was such a solidarity, we as women have struggled with the Bible, we've struggled with church, we've struggled with male dominance in culture, whether that's church culture or [wider] culture…that was really interesting. Even coming from like a western, liberated, feminist whatever, still feeling solidarity with "what is our place as women?" "where are the women in the Bible, are they just sort of side-

> lined?" like, kind of all asking the same questions, I thought that was really interesting, sad, frustrating, powerful, and uniting all at the same time.

5.6.3 "*Un*learning": Recognising and removing "lenses" that obscure our view of Jesus

A problem, however, with "seeing wonderful, new things about Jesus and women in the Bible" was the way, as suggested in Gheeta's remarks above, it cast light on a significant and unsettling disparity with the experience of a significant number of the group, particularly in churches. Looking back in the final focus group, Mischa's comment that this had had an effect like "opening Pandora's box" was met with nods and agreement by others. The following excerpt by another respondent highlights some of these difficult questions coming to the fore.

> I think it's hard to see through the cultural context, to see Jesus' view of women accurately because, I mean we're informed by this culture and it's very sexist. Even what is often spoken from the pulpit is often… I mean, who are the heroes that are *preached* about? Even 'though there are women who travelled with Jesus, who supported his ministry… you never *hear* about *them*, you hear about the *men*. So I think it's hard to see through all of that to come to an accurate conclusion about how Jesus sees us, because it goes so counter-culture to how our religious culture views us. It's hard to not assume that Jesus shares the views of the religious leaders in my setting.[28]

Likewise, Sylvie and others wondered "is this only talked about in women's groups?" Nour saw a similar problem, believing that "in the heart of it [in the Bible] it's neutral but sometimes people try to explain it in a way that makes you feel that it's only for men."

A second kind of disparity emerging from the Resurrection narratives was a lack of a certain anticipated feeling of "shame" and "guilt." In chapter 20, the section of text which "stood out" to Grace was, Jesus repeated phrase "peace be with you," which he kept

[28] In addition to important questions about the power that is particular to women's faith development, a parallel may be drawn here with a process of questioning the impact of Tradition and authority that entails 'stripping away the layers of encultured patriarchal values and beliefs [in] often a profoundly disruptive process.' See, Sherry R. Anderson and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred Women*, New York: Bantam, 1992), p. 18.

saying in his first encounters with various disciples following his death and Resurrection. Having explored at some length how "terribly guilty" the disciples must have felt, having hidden, run away, or denied Jesus before his death, this greeting was not "what you would expect he would say." This point was concurred by others who compared their experience of "remembering what Jesus did," for instance, while participating in Holy Communion, which seemed to "give a different feel to it." As Nour said, "I found how loving and tolerant Jesus is, how he loves everybody, even if they're not perfect but especially the ones who are isolated." Even for other characters who we expected *should* feel ashamed, Jesus did not seem to bring this effect.

> This Samaritan woman, it's like a *revelation*– it's like "Wow! You're the prophet, you have told me my whole of my life without me telling you anything." You know, it's like scales falling off your eyes and seeing what you really are. And instead of being ashamed of that, runs to tell the good news to the whole village, that joy of first knowing Christ, of wanting to share.

For one participant a pervasive negative association with Christian teaching meant that she did not feel able to read the Bible by herself, for fear it may confirm a dread of judgment that she associated with Scripture, which, as she explained privately to me in her interview, had come from teaching both in church and school.

> The way the Bible was taught in a way that makes you feel… *threatened* and… *blamed* and… s*hame.* Following Jesus made you feel afraid what would happen if you did not do the right things.

While this experience was more extreme than others', it nevertheless corresponded with a general experience of shame that several in the group also associated with Jesus' death and Resurrection, expressed in clusters of repeated words such as "shame," "guilty," and "judgement," expressed 26 times in reference to experiences with the Bible. Joy later recalled to me the resonance she felt with the new insights others found about Jesus, leading her to a personal "revelation" that "the guilt was taken away."

> The women were discussing how you carry all that *guilt* about causing Jesus to go on the cross. We fail to enjoy sometimes the positive side. And it's like we carry the *guilt,* I think one person shared how all through they carry the guilt of "you made me die on the cross because of your sins" for me that was - *I need to see* that actually there is triumph. I mean he *triumphed*. And I need not to carry the guilt because the guilt was taken away. So for me that was a revelation.

One of the moments of common resonance on this point was evident when Gheeta put into words the change that had come about in her thinking from the same readings.

> Leading up to Easter... I remember just feeling so *bad;* so *guilty.* Because growing up in a church tradition that… "it is our sin that put Jesus on the cross", which…I believe is… *true*…*but*…I think I would get *stuck* there. But when I look back over these stories…and I think, shifting from trying to figure out what to confess, to thinking about all these different interactions of Jesus… that he didn't *just* do that for the person that he was interacting with; he did it for *us*. Because we *see* ourselves in those stories. We see ourselves as the outsider, we see ourselves as the woman who had all these husbands, or as Nicodemus sneaking in at night out of shame… and then remembering his mercy and compassion. And instead of trying to figure out how to beat the system… confess the right things so that I can take communion and not be in the wrong… but focusing on, that he did it out of *love*, out of this desire to connect with every one of us, in the way that he connected with all of these people.

The idea that, we "see ourselves," echoes of the idea that, "now we feel included," because of Jesus' actions towards the Samaritan woman. However, even more than the important discovery of "seeing ourselves" in the passage, the main point of reading for many participants seemed to emerge as being to "see Jesus" in the text, which is closely related to ways he may be experienced, such as *knowing* and/or believing in him. The following excerpt from the focus group illustrates a movement Gheeta experienced in terms of the priorities she associated with reading the Bible in a group format. After the second week she had spoken to me about her concern and confusion about the way I was not correcting all the answers participants offered that were "clearly wrong." I had explained my reasons for giving this kind of space for people to express their views as part of their learning journey. This is the conversation Gheeta refers back to in the following excerpt, where she explains a shift in her own priority for Bible engagement away from a sharp right/wrong division towards a more personal kind of knowing Jesus as the ultimate purpose of gaining knowledge about the Bible. [29]

> I loved focusing on [Jesus] interacting with people. I think I always need to go back to that. I think I can get sort of…*lost* in all my questions in my

[29] Schneiders' emphasis on the symbolic nature of language offers a way forward for a possible tension in pastoral contexts of hermeneutical Bible study and spiritual formation, when the first may prize intellectual understanding that may not give room to anticipate the Christian experience of mystery and *un*knowing.

> mind… and you said this when I was asking you; about giving *answers* versus sort of *suspending* the desire to answer questions, and allowing people through the process to find that the answer to the question is not an answer, it's a *person*. And I feel like it was really profound, and that in the end that very clearly was what happened, because you didn't become the 'answer man,' you let people ask questions and not necessarily give answers, and maybe that's a combination of how you facilitated and what Scripture does when we read it in this way, but I really felt it came back to "the answer is Jesus," and how he interacted with people. And that's who God is. And I don't really know if I have any of my *questions* answered. I probably have *more* questions.

Another challenge in the task of seeing Jesus, however, came from realising that the Jesus in the text was so different from "*that* Jesus"[30] which resulted from views or "lenses" that do not seem to match a closer look at the gospel narrative, and which were now discerned as requiring "unlearning."[31] For Nour, the prayers "really helped" not only to learn how to "communicate with God" but also served as a key way to understand the passage itself; "how to focus on the core message, the real one. After all I had to unlearn…like many of us." With "seeing Jesus" clearly, in order to "be close to him" and to follow him as key aims of reading the Bible, a serious challenge is not only what more we have to learn, but how we can see beyond former patterns of thinking of Jesus to be free to move forward to a new vision.

> Cyla: It's scary as a parent, with young children, to think that, you hear so many stories of how the version of Jesus that we adore… is so different from *that* Jesus. And how do we teach our kids in a way that doesn't load them with shame and guilt and fear? And you want to teach them the bible in a way where they *see* the women, and they *feel* like a part of the story, and not load them with things that will take them 20 years to *un*learn.
> Mischa: *And* the rest! [Laughs, nods, chatter of agreement.]

[30] The impact of one's image of God upon one's spirituality merits particular consideration when this is set in context with the activity of biblical interpretation, see Chapter 6.5.4, below.
[31] Schneiders' account of the need to acknowledge, or state, one's presuppositions is much more straightforward than the way this was experienced in this group, as discussed below in Chapter 6, especially 6.4.3.

5.7 Summary

This chapter has set the context in which fieldwork was conducted, described the people and the process, and given space to the 'voices' in the group in order to form a summary of what was experienced in the Bible course. The categories of text, reader(s), and reading were implicit here as a number of key emerging themes were explored, and will be returned to more directly in what follows. Some of the most significant aspects of the reading approach concerned imaginative engagement and making empathetic connections with characters, which was one of the ways many participants found a new way of "seeing themselves" as part of the story. Reading slowly, with the space for personal reflection was also important, and a creation of freedom or permission to ask questions and offer opinions.

This freedom led to the discussion of pertinent critical questions, including the way former perspectives of women in the Bible were coming to light as being inadequate depictions of "this Jesus" that was being encountered in the stories. A need to engage deeply and thoughtfully with the text on numbers of levels became apparent, including questions of translation and the way church traditions influence our understanding. The course was felt to have been helpful for enabling a deeper understanding of John's Gospel, including insights from literary questions. It also opened up a number of crucial questions that participants were keen to continue exploring together, showing a movement away from the entirely *comfortable* role that many had associated with the Bible at the start of the course. At the same time, the group was motivated to read the Bible more, with a sense that God was active in the activity, speaking and "prodding" people in different ways as Jesus was being revealed more clearly and personally.

CHAPTER 6: Analysis

6.1 Introduction: Originality of research and Focusing on key questions

In the previous chapter, I presented the analysis of my research to describe what happened when a specific group of Christians read the Bible with a hermeneutical approach. The purpose of this chapter is to present an evaluation of my findings in view of the theory on which I based the course. The wider significance of my discoveries will lead to further implications for pastoral practice with the Bible in the following chapter. However, before launching into analysis of my findings, it is helpful to revisit the purpose behind my questions, as it is distinct from other empirical studies in ordinary hermeneutics and Scripture reading that I am building upon. These often seek to better understand the way readers relate to the Bible by attending to their comments about certain biblical texts and what they mean.[1] However, my study is not primarily to describe habitual practices of reading, but to test out an approach arising in hermeneutical theory, so that the experience transpiring from it may be related back to the theory.

My questions in this chapter are in two sections. The first matter is to address the three following issues that arose: The importance of discussion as locus of learning, a distinction between reading the Bible and being a reader, and the impact of the role of the group facilitator in the process of understanding. These questions emerged alongside some revisions in my assumptions behind the questions I was asking, which were initially poised towards matters about the reading methods and approach. A change in focus that occurred may be viewed in a way my own horizon of view was expanded in the process of engaging with others and with the Bible. This resulted in a shift of emphasis in my thesis question, as I found that an honest reporting of the most important hermeneutical findings of the reading approach would be skewed if extracted from implications of the interpersonal context in which they took place.[2]

[1] ACC, *Deep Engagement*; Perrin, *Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals*; MacDonald, 'The Psalms and Spirituality'; Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*; Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star,*
[2] Wink, *Transforming Bible Study,* p. 67.

Having attended to this, I will show, in the second section, ways in which a hermeneutical approach was experienced as helpful or significant, and which elements from Schneiders' approach were found to be most important. My focus will be on ways that readers' presuppositions were revised or changed, arguing for the need to distinguish key categories of presuppositions that are important to spiritual understanding.

In light of my findings, the final chapter will revisit specific questions arising in related literature to see ways in which my findings offer some contribution. For instance, in light of pastoral difficulties between a head/heart divide, how have I found it is possible for a group of Christians to find a sense of integrity between critical and spiritual approaches to reading the Bible? And how do my findings indicate that a hermeneutical approach with a group bears on the question of *how* Scripture can be allowed to speak in its own voice?

6.2 Becoming readers of the Bible: "Come and see"

One of the key learning points arising from this study is seeing a gap between assumptions in hermeneutical theory about what it means to be a reader, and how that relates to the experience of lay Christians approaching the Bible. It points to the need to be intentional about what is the best starting point for facilitating Bible engagement, in seeing that participants needed to progress towards the kind of reader confidence that is usually assumed in biblical hermeneutics. This does not happen automatically, and links with personal interest and raising motivation to read. It will be helpful to illustrate this by recounting a process in which many of the participants gained confidence they lacked as readers, or at least, as readers of the Bible.

This became evident to me at the outset, as I had not initially accounted for the impact on some participants of what I considered to be a simple invitation to participate in a reading group in which my purpose was to hear the readers' own views. This, in itself, was significant for many participants as a means of encouragement and spiritual validation. However, the emphatically positive feedback about being invited to share personal responses to an initial reading of the text betrayed that there was more to

understand on this point. In contrast with my view that this was a routine detail of group Bible engagement, particularly striking was the repeated way participants indicated that it was both surprising and hugely significant to be asked to share what was important to them about a passage.

It was clear, however, that this strongly contrasts with more passive learning experiences associated with the Bible by group members; for instance, where "the priests [tells] you something so you *just believe,*" or in small groups where the purpose of fixed questions was finding "the right answers," which agree with a Bible study leader.[3] A few participants were confident and intentional about the way they sought to understand the Bible; one with a knowledge of Hebrew language, another with an interest in biblical history. Overall, however, there was a general expectation that reading the Bible in a group would ultimately be a matter of learning what a text means from someone who 'knows.'

One factor for this came from the impact of school educational systems in various cultures where pedagogies are (or have been) based on a style of rote learning and discourage experimental or critical approaches. This was not restricted to women from Africa or the Middle East, it also applied to British women from older generations. Various ecclesial traditions had further reinforced a strongly defined distinction between teacher and learner in model of Priests or Pastors explaining the Scriptures. For some participants, this was compounded by the fact that many women in the group had often experienced their opinions being disregarded in various patriarchal cultures, leading some to become accustomed to devaluing their own views, or losing confidence (or having no occasion) to articulate their ideas or thoughts in public situations.[4]

[3] These comments mirror other examples of 'closed' culture in church teaching. See, for example, Pieter G. R. de Villiers, 'Spirituality, Theology and the Critical Mind', *Acta Theologica Supplementum*, 8 (2006), 99-121, p. 99.

[4] Rogers also indicated that in a UK context female readers were susceptible of being unconfident to express their opinions about the Bible outside of the safety of small groups, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 153.

6.2.1 The self-involved nature of understanding

The key point I will come to, however, is that the kind of passive approach to reading described above is incompatible, not only with a hermeneutical, but also a theological view of authentic understanding.[5] More specifically, spiritual understanding is shown in John's Gospel to result from personal and transformational encounter with Jesus; being the self-revelation of God. A narrative reading highlights Jesus' (and later his witnesses') repeated answer to those who want to know *about* him being an invitation to a personal encounter; "come and see."[6] This corresponds with the warning Jesus gives against focusing on knowledge of Scripture that avoids a self-interest in coming to know himself, the Word in person; which is a transformational knowing.[7] This kind of distinction is something that participants benefited by becoming aware of it. The following examples illustrate some of the causes that relate to patterns of passivity in adult (especially religious) learning.[8]

Mischa recalled having been discouraged from questioning at school; but, importantly, the point she was making was that this passive style of acquiring knowledge was inadequate, and had not actually been "going in as *proper understanding.*" Being widely read, Mischa's preferred learning style was academic and she was eager to learn more 'solid knowledge' about the Bible in a similar way that she might learn, as she said, from a "reference book," to help set "jigsaw pieces" of the Christian faith in position. Without replacing this need to expand her knowledge, however, Mischa came to a different kind of personal understanding, which made her see how she had been limited by her impression of religious learning at Sunday school; "here is the lesson, pass the exam, don't ask questions." Despite being a memory from decades earlier, this had something to do with the way she might still anticipate, and therefore approach, Bible reading today.

---

[5] Thiselton, *New Horizons in Hermeneutics*, p. 568.
[6] John 1:39, 46; 4:29. This kind of engagement with the Fourth Gospel exemplified here may be justified in relation to Walter Moberly's exploration of interpretive approaches in, 'How Can We Know the Truth?: A Study of John 7:14-18', in Davis & Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*, 239-57.
[7] John 20: 31.
[8] John M. Hull, *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press, 1991), pp. 141-2.

Whilst in a group context, however, Mischa described coming to a different, first-hand immediacy of the Bible in a way that brought about more personal connections, including with Jesus and the reality of his presence. Reading the Resurrection narratives in weeks 7 and 8 now had particular poignancy. It caused a "shift" or a "click" into place, so that what she read "solidified" something more personally; including a new realisation of the Risen Jesus leading to an affective response and an unexpected instinct to worship. In Mischa's words;

> Here, reading thoughtfully passages from the Bible, in terms of the "aha! moment" it's like "Ah, now I understand what people *mean* when they talk about these things."

This illustrates the way one individual experienced the process of existential understanding, that resembles, in hermeneutical language, the reader's own horizon engaging with that of the text, resulting in a new expansion of vision. Rather than accessing some knowledge about something from the facts, or from someone else's theological explanation, this entrance into understanding opened up more direct access to "what other people talk about" in a movement from an outsider perspective looking in at something, to being more personally appropriated. This is also consistent with Schneiders' employment of Gadamer's 'ontological' view of understanding, which views this as being tied up in the very nature of a person. It also is fundamental to what it means to be a 'good listener' of Scripture, as this requires taking oneself seriously as one to whom Scripture may be directly addressed; which is a central principle in the Fourth Gospel.[9]

6.2.2 A bridge towards spiritual reading

A practical aspects of the reading format that helped develop a more active reading stance was the use of the *Lectio Divina* model. This was not only 'spiritually,' but also 'practically' beneficial.[10] The importance of modelling slow and attentive reading cannot be overstated.[11] Most participants commented on a distinction they found between the

[9] John 20: 31, and *Written*, p. 10.
[10] Although useful for the purpose of exposition here, I will come to argue that this kind of distinction can, in the end, be unhelpful.
[11] Richard S. Briggs, 'Juniper Trees and Pistachio Nuts: Trust and Suspicion as Modes of Scriptural Imagination', *Theology*, 112 (2009), 353-63.

group approach and their own habits of reading at home; although some only occasionally read books; and a few never. Most usually described their reading as having been much more hurried; looking primarily to take something from the content; some information about Jesus or God, or some instructions to help with how to live or behave.[12] Practically speaking, attentive reading did not come naturally for everyone in the group. Some members mentioned that feelings of "stress," personal concerns, or irritations from a difficult day would affect the way they came to the text.[13] Given the significance of personal disposition upon reading outcomes, it is significant to note what was found to be helpful to this.

The mealtime, as discussed above, transpired to serve as an invaluable space of preparation, along with the pattern of beginning with prayer and a silent pause. These helped facilitate the kind of settling and focusing the mind that is essential for meaningful engagement with any book, but all the more with spiritual practices of attentiveness to God.[14] I realised, from reflecting on my own temptation to underplay the attention warranted from this practical detail, that I share with writers an ability to switch into deep focus 'on demand,' as it were, which comes with years of fitting academic study and writing into a busy life. Being aware that this is not the kind of privileged skill everyone has had the opportunity to develop is therefore a small, but important point for facilitating others to the kind of reading conducive to authentic understanding.

Reading slowly was like a point of entry into a more meaningful experience of reading. It meant taking time to internalise questions such as; "why is this word repeated so much?" "what are the key themes or ideas in this passage?" As participants connected with various approaches to group questions, these became a model for personal reflections as a reader, taking on a "back and forth" interaction like a conversation between reader and text, which depends on the reader pushing back and responding to

[12] Paul J. Griffiths, 'Reading as a Spiritual Discipline', in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. by L. Gregory Johnes and Stephanie Paulsell (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002), 32-47.
[13] This agrees with Ford's findings that temperament or present preoccupation are *significant* factors to the outcome of reading; *Reading the Bible Outside,* p. 94.
[14] This may include what Schneiders calls 'aesthetic surrender' to the text, or more generally a spiritually sensitive approach to Scripture, see Davis & Hays, *The Art of Reading Scripture*.

the passage and its emerging possibilities of meaning. Hermeneutical insights into this thinking process, and the significance of various literary approaches and reader awareness will be discussed below. Their significance follows the present point; a need to recognise that Christians may not be accustomed to the kind of reader confidence that is taken as given in hermeneutical approaches. Although such assumptions are appropriate to an intended, academic audience of Pastors and theologians,[15] it means it leaves some work to be done by the group leader of lay Christian readers.

6.3 Dialogue as locus of learning

6.3.1 Multi-directional dialogue and openness

Having established some important factors about the nature of understanding, my second finding in the question of facilitating spiritual understanding is seeing the significance of authentic dialogue. Unlike professional dialogue about the meaning of a textual contract for the purpose of a business or organisation, dialogue between members of a community also has interpersonal implications. Dialogue is more than the expression of understanding; it is the key locus of disclosure, which Gadamer describes as 'an inner dialogue of the soul seeking understanding.'[16] Spiritual understanding may result from an initial reading of a biblical passage, but more usually it resulted from a longer process of reflection that occurred in subsequent dialogue; that is a conversational exchange of questioning and *being* questioned.[17] This means finding a voice to do this, and having the courage and vulnerability that honesty calls for; and developing quality listening.

Importantly, this activity occurs in three dimensions or relationships; reader with text, with one another, and with God (in believing that he is at work in the process of revealing himself through Scripture, and in prayer.) The first of these has been

[15] Exemplified in Schneiders' writing, for instance, *Revelatory,* p. 13.
[16] *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 181; Anthony C. Thiselton, *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), p. 222.
[17] This agrees with an insightful point made by Sheldrake, in supporting Rowan Williams' caution of a possible oversight, when emphasising the revelatory nature of a text underplays the 'revelatory character of the *process* of interpretation.' Sheldrake, *Explorations of Spirituality*, p. 44, (my italics).

introduced above, where it is possible to see a dialogue with the text developing as readers gained confidence to voice their responses to a text, which led to processes of back and forth dialogue as new questions formed in their minds. It is important, however, to understand a distinctive quality in all three dimensions of the kind of dialogue I am describing. It is characterised by a particular quality of openness.[18]

The term 'openness' was used by the group as a significant concept in various senses: It refers to an attitude that was seen as something we "need to have" to understand the Bible, also sometimes called "open-mindedness." It is characterised by humility that there is more to be learned, and by questions that invite new possibilities. Openness was felt to be cultivated by spaces of reflective and prayerful reading; it meant patience to allow meaning to develop rather than closing it down too quickly with a premature conclusion. Similarly, openness is an attitude towards the different views and experience of others, an ability or willingness to expand from what has been learned from one's own knowledge and experience. This quality is also consistent with examples of the way Jesus conversed with Johannine characters such as Nicodemus, the Samaritan woman, and Martha; in posing questions that helped them look from a new angle of view. The spiritual outcome for these characters had a lot to do with the openness and receptivity (or lack) in their response to his self-disclosure. This is befitting with Gordon Oliver's discussion of the kind of openness characterised by a biblical view of offering hospitality to strangers. Here,

> openness is about having emotional, psychological and spiritual space within oneself so that there is room for the stranger to come near and rest and be refreshed and offer the gifts of wisdom, encouragement and challenge that they bring.[19]

'Openness' is also a description of the kind of space in which the group took place, in a sense of permission to speak freely. The discussion was felt to be unrestricted by rules about certain subjects; rules that might judge certain views as inappropriate or unwelcome. The group became accustomed to being surprised by various questions that, to some, seemed at first to be obvious or banal, and to others an intriguingly

[18] Others have drawn similar conclusions; see for instance Vanhoozer, *Is there a Meaning*?, Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, and Briggs, *The Virtuous Reader*.
[19] Oliver, *Holy Bible,* p. 125.

different way of thinking. This happened in the question about what Jesus meant in telling Nicodemus he must be 'born again,' and other ideas of having been physically born already as Christians. In the Middle East, one's religious status is legally determined at birth, corresponding to that of the father. It is marked on the child's legal identity card.

For this reason, one participant sympathised with the difficulty the Jews must have had in trying to comprehend the new idea of Jesus originating from God, whereas "we are *born* Christians, so we understand easily." But this made it difficult to see why others hold the view that Christians (identified as such at birth, and baptised) also need to be "born again." This gave important reasons to look more carefully at the context Nicodemus was in, historically, culturally, and religiously. In this way different perspectives gave the opportunity to explore profound questions behind meaning in the text that might be glossed-over as simple or obvious, due to an openness that came from very different perspectives.

In the example above it is evident that the opportunity for deeper reflection came from interest in other religious traditions as well as cultures; and gave rise to a certain freedom to question (or re-question.) In a discussion about God's relationship with men and women, one person asked whether Jesus might theoretically have been incarnated as a woman; and this was received as intriguing, slightly shocking, or entirely reasonable to different participants. A realisation that these kinds of subjects were 'left hanging' without a decisive majority consensus, or defined in terms of an authoritative norm in the context of this group was both fascinating and, for some, slightly destabilising. These exemplify the way true dialogue is not predictable, but leads to a new place that is not tightly determined by one conversant (including, as I will discuss, myself, as the group leader.)

Having recorded these observations, further clarity about the function of openness is revealed by meanings in a formal definition of the English term, which all correspond, in various ways, with my data. Two of these will be discussed in relation to the leader's role; being qualities of a space which is metaphorically 'open,' and the idea of removing

obstacles. The present use of the term, however, corresponds to the disposition of learners to both new ideas and to one another. In this sense openness is:

> Allowing access or passage, or exposed to view; not closed, covered: Not concealing one's thoughts or feelings; frank, communicative and confiding, to open up meaning; being likely to suffer from or be affected by something; or vulnerable. Not finally settled; still admitting of debate. Accessible to new ideas.[20]

6.3.2 Diversity and difference

The obvious diversity (such as culture and age) within the group was one of the factors that gave rise not only to opportunities for participants to consider different interpretive views, but also to the inclination to take them seriously. A starting point for the authentic kind of dialogue in the group was a capacity for participants to be honest with one another. This is illustrated by the response to a seemingly unimportant comment made by Rita in the first week, who stated that, despite having attended churches for many years (in the Middle East), she had never read the Bible until her recent preparation for the present course. More telling than the perceptible gasp of surprise from a handful of people was the spontaneous (and friendly) response, "she's so honest!" The surprise was most apparent from some participants from Evangelical backgrounds, who indicated that their instinct would be to reject as inadequate Christian traditions, like Rita's, which do not call for regular devotional Bible reading. The implication of their reaction was that it must have taken her some courage to share (or 'admit') what was perceived as a substantial shortcoming of what it meant to be a Christian.

However, although, in Mischa's admission, this kind of judgement towards a fellow, local attendee may have been a typical unconscious attitude among a homogeneous Bible group, Rita received a much more gracious response. This was evident in the way her subsequent response showed a respectful interest in Rita's 'cultural' church experience. Consciousness of the cultural differences may have served to refigure categories so that this, and various other theological differences, were perceived in cultural, rather than in

[20] Taken from *The Oxford University Dictionary*, (Oxford, 2015).

theological terms. In this way, cultural diversity was a profound, visible symbol of difference, but (although these overlap) the theological/ecclesial differences were equally–perhaps more–significant to the process of understanding Scripture. A cross-cultural context, thus, provided an effective environment for cultivating open-mindedness to different theological views and spiritual experiences; and self-awareness of one's own presuppositions.[21]

Having argued for the need for openness, however, it is helpful to qualify that this was balanced by the critical phases, where certain ideas were discerned to be invalid; and rejected, or *un*learned. Recognising this is important, in light of Jeff Astley's caution that, from an educational perspective, the problem of 'a completely open openness'[22] may be illustrated by considering that a window stuck open is potentially worse than if it were stuck shut. A criticism that I have over-emphasised this point may also be justified in light of Kevin Vanhoozer's contention that honesty must be balanced with conviction.[23] There are logical restrictions to openness in Christian learning, and, as Astley cautions, over-emphasising openness as a virtue may unintentionally imply a liberal theological approach, or one that gives in to 'every influence, idea or whim.'[24] Given the importance of critical and spiritual approaches to reading in this project it may be fitting to adapt this expression to what might be better described using Astley's term; 'critical openness,' which involves 'the necessary limitations of judgement.'[25]

Further engagement with theories of hermeneutical virtues may bring to the fore a more balanced picture of other important dispositions that had a positive impact on my reading group.[26] For instance, it is worth underlining that patience, humility, deep listening, and curiosity have all been shown to be implicit in the quality I have called openness. Participants also showed courage to struggle with uncomfortable questions;

[21] This concurs with others who have appealed for the benefits of reading the Bible in diverse groups; see Oliver, *Holy Bible,* p. 7; Darrell Guder, 'Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Vocation of the Congregation and How Scripture Shapes That Calling', *Mission Focus Annual Review*, 15 (2007), 125-42, p. 136, Lyon, 'Mind the Gap!', p. 463.
[22] Jeff Astley, 'Formative Education and Critical Education', *The Philosophy of Christian Education*, (Birmingham, Ala: Religious Education Press, 1994), 78-107, p. 99.
[23] Vanhoozer, *Is There a Meaning*, p. 463. See also Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 168.
[24] Astley, 'Formative Education and Critical Education', p. 96-7.
[25] Ibid, p. 96-7.
[26] Rogers gives a helpful overview of theories in *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 176.

and perseverance. This agrees with the importance of what De Villiers calls 'the critical mind' in a Christian quest for truth, which (following Socrates) takes place through 'analytical, dialectical discussion.'

> The Socratic approach asks for dialogue, for comparing different perspectives, so that one then has the freedom to change one's mind about such issues in the light of this explorative approach.[27]

The reason for my focus on (critical) openness, nevertheless, was that it emerged as being the most significant factor facilitating authentic dialogue. Further ways that this may be significant to theological breadth that is distinctive to the Anglican Tradition may be a point for further exploration.

6.3.3 Relational spirituality and learning

This leads to a more reflective kind of discussion recounting an expansion in my own thinking about the relationship between Scripture and spirituality, and my priorities for this project. To avoid the trap of imposing my own assumptions about what spirituality means, it was essential for me to maintain an intentional openness to what emerged as being most important to the group. For instance, in the first focus group discussion I was tempted to overlook the enthusiasm with which significance was given to the time spent together over meals, with a slightly frustrated feeling, "but that's not really what I'm asking you!" I came to understand, however, that something in the being together; sharing, discussing and becoming closer as part of the church community, was not, for many in the group, a *facilitator towards*, but part of the *essence of* Christian spirituality, which is enriched by reading the Bible together.

From the outset I have used Schneiders' language of integral hermeneutics to talk about a kind of spiritual understanding that is not simply intellectual, but is existential and crucially encompasses all dimensions of life. My depiction of 'relational spirituality' may be criticised for being a reduction of this, being more focused on the immediate community than on missional dimensions of spirituality that extend outside of the church. However, I would argue that this is not necessarily a limitation in the reading approach, but primarily due to the spiritual priority of this particular group reading the

[27] De Villiers, 'Spirituality, Theology and the Critical Mind', p. 100.

Bible together exclusively as women for the first time.[28] The important thing is seeing that commonality can serve as a catalyst for motivation and transformational understanding, when this is (as discussed above) balanced by other kinds of diversity.

The importance of personal connections within the group expanded my understanding of what might also constitute an 'integral approach' to Bible engagement. For instance, Luna found that a key result of understanding the impact of Jesus' inclusion of women who had been otherwise excluded gave her a new empathy for a family member from a different culture, with whom she had a difficult relationship. The fact that Luna qualified this detail in saying she was not sure if it would be relevant to me, alerted me to the kinds of priorities I may have unconsciously communicated. Seeing patterns in the outcomes of understanding that were most important to participants challenged this tendency to prioritise examples in my data that illustrate cognitive views of understanding as a 'higher' concern of changed thinking. This, however, would be a limited, or skewed, account of the way many in the group experienced spirituality; exemplified by the profound experience of an increased sense of belonging to the church.

> We were very close and the others now when I see them at church we have something between us, I feel we are more together, and this is very good, we need this.

In reporting the significance of patterns emerging from empirical data, there is a danger in making simplistic generalisations, and while discussing an important pattern, I am aware that this is not a fitting view for at least a few group members. I am also respectful of critiques of the relationalist view of women's spirituality and learning styles, which recognise the important risk of reinforcing values that may be socially imposed expectations.[29] However, it is nevertheless important to recognise what is still a generally relational nature of the group's spirituality. This is important because the most insightful experiences of understanding seemed to have been facilitated not only

[28] De Villiers, in his argument for contextual and critical approaches to spirituality, has shown the importance for women in Asian cultures developing a distinctive spirituality that is equal but different to men. 'Spirituality, Theology and the Critical Mind', p. 2006.
[29] *The Faith lives of Women and Girls,* ed. by Nicola Slee et al. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013); Patricia Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2016), p. 87.

by appropriation of meaning from the text but by consistency with something of the goodness of God in the Gospel that could be encountered within the group. The same idea is illustrated in seeing that showing 'grace,' (seen as a sense of graciousness; making allowances and showing patience rather than expressing irritation of others) was recognised as having been a much appreciated quality of the group, and something that enabled the whole thing to "work well." Perhaps these are faint echoes of the grace shown by Jesus upon his return to his disciples, and exemplifies the small but real ways that understanding comes to be as it is 'performed.'[30]

An entry in my research diary may also underline the importance of respecting the relational dimensions of spiritual understanding.[31]

> I was deeply moved in the meal before the Bible study on Tuesday, as the lady next to me had just had a (*really* terrible) journey of 18 hours from visiting her two young children in her home country where they're at boarding school; and then had had to say goodbye again. She was trying to find strength for this emotional pain on top of feeling really unwell–and she *still* came. I've kept in touch to support her this week. It just reinforces that reading the Bible and trying to understand it together doesn't make sense without real time together as a community. I wonder how this week's Bible study–even if it is partly for research purposes–would have felt for her if she had not first had the time to at least share briefly with someone over a meal what she was going through.

The importance of the quality of openness may be further enlightened by a theological view of revelation in John's Gospel, which sees the proper response to Jesus' self-gift as a reciprocal giving of oneself. Understanding, knowing and *believing* in Jesus[32] are necessarily relational, and furthermore, link with the key theme of encountering the Risen Jesus amidst his followers today, which was the focus in the final weeks of the course. It is possible to understand what was experienced as consistent with a Johannine view of the way the Risen Jesus' presence is experienced as a reality among the people who are now his 'body' on earth. By this I am drawing attention to the link which took place between coming to know Jesus through understanding the text, and coming to know him through the reality of his presence 'in the midst' of his followers

[30] See Chapter 2.2.3 and 2.3.2, above.
[31] This is reinforced by an educational view of the benefit of an 'authentic' learning space, Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, (2016), p. 88.
[32] *Written*, pp. 51-4.

today.[33] This is shown when realisations such as the dignifying and liberating dimension to God's love were echoed with similar language expressing what was happening in the group. In contrast with religious or social experiences of exclusion and marginalisation a clear rhetoric of "freedom" expressed the importance of finding "permission" to speak honestly; and with it a sense of being valued and "really *heard*."[34]

Seeing dialogue as locus of understanding recognises the way openness to one another's views, and an openness and trust in God's ultimate goodness, have a capacity to 'rub off,' transfer to, or merge with, a similar openness towards the text.[35] Equally, this openness to the spirituality of the text also may be seen to have been imbibed by the readers, and the 'culture' of the group as a whole. This study, therefore, indicated a link between learning skills and associated virtues. As a result of learning to read slowly and attentively (as activities), participants seemed to develop more patience and tolerance toward one another. Likewise, listening patiently and openly to the different views of others seemed to foster more open-mindedness to new insights from the text. While additional virtues have been shown to be important to Christian engagement with Scripture,[36] an important insight arising from this study is that attending to interpersonal dimensions of small groups can be linked with the development of hermeneutical virtues that enable understanding.

The focus in this section has been on a reader's relationship with text and others, but the acknowledgement of the third dimension between reader and God is also crucial. Most significantly, awareness of their assumptions about the nature of God had the capacity to transform meaning readers had otherwise inferred from the text. For this reason, this dimension of dialogue with God will be returned to in a discussion of presuppositions. In summary, relational dimensions of spiritual understanding of the

[33] Schneiders, *Jesus Risen*, 2013, pp. 29-31.
[34] See discussion of CBS above in Chapter 2.1. Rogers also found that women in particular benefit from the context of small groups, where they felt more free to voice their opinions. See *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 153.
[35] Jesuit founders and experienced directors of the Center for Religious Development in Cambridge, Massachusetts, William A. Barry and William J. Connolly expand psychological reasons for the importance of trust in God as a necessary foundation to spiritual formation. See 'Development of Relationship and Resistance', in *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd edn. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 85-106.
[36] See my discussion in Chapter 2.2.3, above.

Bible must not be overlooked. They are part of the product and process of understanding, which is necessarily communal as well as personally self-involving.

6.4 The role of facilitator

Thus far, the discussion of how biblical hermeneutics can facilitate spiritually enriching understanding has focused on the way participants experienced understanding. An emerging factor in this has been recognising ways that philosophical perspectives need to be expanded; for example, to learn from sociological insights about contemporary reading habits. Most important is recognising ways in which the context of group reading complexifies a hermeneutical discussion; respecting that a significant proportion of findings about understanding relate to the significance of interpersonal dynamics and of my role as facilitator. One function of this section is to evaluate what I did in light of resources that provide frameworks for seeing the link between a leader's actions upon group learning, so that this may be addressed to the particular challenges for facilitating a group reading with a hermeneutical approach. Seeing understanding as emerging from dialogue between readers, text, and God, is a revealing means of considering how my own role facilitated this. Another function of this section is adding further transparency to my conclusions, given the particular power in my role as facilitator; not only in the selection of themes but also to directly and indirectly influence the group and the dialogue.[37]

6.4.1 Safety and risk: Between reader and text

Given my identification of the significance of openness, it is appropriate that a key part of the role was creating a sense of safety, even a "safe haven," offering sufficient security to enable participants to speak honestly. A difference between the way this was experienced and Schneiders' account of transformational understanding is that she does not account for the philosophical dimension of struggling or wrestling with a new idea, which can be an important part of the process. Given evidence that shows strong links between attitude and personal disposition and interpretive outcomes,[38] these aspects of

[37] This respects Andrew Rogers' helpful critique of CBS models, see Chapter 1.2. above.
[38] See a discussion of empirical reader-response studies, chapter 1.

group facilitation should not be overlooked as irrelevant to facilitating spirituality. I found that risk and vulnerability were indeed significant to the readers' relationship with the text[39] and with the other two levels of dialogue. Learning from the experience of this group leads me to identify affirmation, authenticity, and a demonstration of personal faith were key factors relating to my role that were most helpful to the group.

The significance of 'safe space' for enabling all kinds of learning is supported by educational theory,[40] which also shows that it is largely dependent on the group facilitator.[41] Research fellow and sociologist, George Lakey's work on group learning provides a helpful framework here, and in particular, his ideas about how a 'safe container' is constructed.[42] Lakey's key point about safe space is that it is different from feeling comfortable. It is possible–and necessary–to venture away from what is (intellectually or socially) comfortable to take the kind of risks that genuine learning calls for. Moreover, '[p]articipants' decisions to behave authentically in a learning group are strongly influenced by their perception of safety–not comfort. If participants feel safe enough, they will go very far out of their comfort zones.'[43] This is a crucial point for Christian readers who are shown to prefer remaining in a comfortable place with regard to Scripture, and ministers seeking to protect them.[44]

Agreeing that the character of a leader directly affects the culture of a group, and having emphasised the need for readers to be open, it is relevant to observe ways it was important that I was, likewise, open and perceived as such. Perhaps the most important thing that facilitated confidence to risk openness was my own. I was the first

[39] As Michael A. Cowan and Bernard J. Lee remind us we have learned from Gadamer, 'true conversation always puts conversants at risk, because you cannot truly converse without risk of conversion,' *Conversation, Risk & Conversion: The Inner & Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (Orbis Books: New York, 1997), pp. 2-4. See also Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 298-9, 357; and Thiselton's discussion of Gadamer's point that 'No one knows in advance what will "come out" of a conversation. The more the conversation partner is "other," the more creative will be the points that emerge.' *New Horizons*, p. 222.

[40] *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice*, ed. by Edward W. Taylor and Patricia Cranton (San Francisco: Wiley, 2012), pp. 45, 413-4. Gerard Egan, *Face to Face: The Small-Group Experience and Interpersonal Growth*, Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1973), pp. 38, 59.

[41] See also West, *The Academy of the Poor,* p 129.

[42] George Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners*, (San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), pp. 14-16.

[43] Ibid*,* p. 84.

[44] See my discussion in Chapter 1, above.

in the group to directly express that there have been lots of things in the Bible I have "really struggled with." Although the resources I brought were clearly beneficial and the depth of study in my preparation was important, freedom to speak was reinforced by my honesty about my own imperfect journey of understanding the Bible. This contributed to a turning point from conversations that smoothed over challenges with entirely positive remarks about the wholly comforting and supporting nature of Scripture. On one hand these findings agree with the way Contextual Bible Studies commend a 'round table' approach[45] that recognises the facilitator's voice is not the most important of the group. However, I am underlining the need to acknowledge the inevitable influence or power a facilitator has to develop the group's culture and norms, and how this should be done in positive ways.

6.4.1a) Authenticity

Safety constructed by a leader enables participants in a learning group to behave authentically, which means avoiding a possible instinct to play certain 'roles' in a group, such as the caretaker, or know-it-all etc., that are barriers to honesty.[46] However, authenticity is also cultivated when the leader models the same, and avoids a similar trap of hiding behind their own role as leader, or 'expert' of the group.[47] This point came to my attention when participants answered questions about the way I facilitated the group; what was helpful or unhelpful. A repeated criticism was that I did not give enough direction to move on from irrelevant questions or discussion with stronger direction; which I agreed was a fair observation. A different point that I anticipated as being a weakness, however, was not seen as such. When linguistic questions arose, I was frank about things I could not address on the spot, but eager to follow them up later. This was perceived, however, in positive terms; that I was not an "answer man."

[45] 'Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual', The Ujamaa Centre for Community Development & Research, 2015, p. 14, Available online at, http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/RESOURCES_OF_UJAMAA/MANUAL_STUDIES.aspx [accessed 30 January 2020].

[46] Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning*, pp. 83, 87.

[47] Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning*, 2016, pp. 87-9, 98; see also Simon P. Walker, *Leading out of Who You Are: Discovering the Secret of Undefended Leadership* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2007).

This contrasted with certain learning cultures sometimes experienced where the pedagogical assumptions were that the leader or teacher have the monopoly of judgement about what counts as 'wrong' or 'right,' against which contributions are judged accordingly.[48] Instead of this, the group was affirmed as participating in learning that was not contrived; the knowledge others contributed was honoured, and this helped stimulate a genuine learning environment, where questions were valued as real questions, meriting fresh exploration. In this, a parallel with the role of spiritual director may be drawn, where facilitating spiritual understanding accepts that presenting the answers is not always as important as giving language for the questions.

In terms of building trust among the group, an advantage was that I already was known to the women and may have been one reason that some participants volunteered. This meant that participants knew I was being authentic, the welcome and interest I showed in the women for the purpose of the Bible course was consistent with the way they already knew me.[49] As the concept of belonging transpired to be important, it is worth noting the importance of welcoming, learning names, and making initial introductions, so that no one came to the discussion feeling like a stranger to the group. Humour was also important, and part of what it meant to be authentic, and potentially, as Susanna Brouard has demonstrated, may in fact be intrinsic to holistic learning.[50] In contrast with the unappealing thought of discussing matters of personal significance with strangers; food, laughter and informal conversation over a meal helped build a sense of belonging and friendship. My existing pastoral role in the congregation gave participants opportunities to speak to me between the meetings about particular

[48] Christopher Rowland, 'Reflection: The Challenge to Theology', in *Gospel from the City,* ed. by Christopher Rowland and John Vincent (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1997), p. 131.
[49] Carl R. Rogers gives further demonstration that this quality, which he calls 'realness' or 'genuineness,' is essential to adult learning. See 'The Interpersonal Relationship in the Process of Learning', in *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Thorpe et al. (London: Routledge in association with the Open University, 1993), 228-42, pp. 230-1.
[50] 'Using Theological Action Research to Embed Catholic Social Teaching in a Catholic Development Agency: Abseiling on the Road to Emmaus' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2015), pp. 95, 101.
See also Leslie Frances, 'Laughter, the Best Mediation: Humour as Emotion Management in interaction', *Symbolic Interaction*, 17 (1994), 147-63. This may be particularly important in British culture, see Richard D. Lewis, *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures* (Boston: Nicolas Brearley Publishing, 2006), p. 197.

questions or comment on things relating to the group. Being available between meetings resulted from being already in communication with participants due to my insider role. A result of some of these additional conversations was reassurance on matters that it may not have been possible to cover in the group time, which Lakey would identify as a further means of building safety by affirming the value of individuals' questions and ideas and thus giving participants further courage to then voice their thoughts in subsequent group discussions.[51]

6.4.1b) Affirmation

Authenticity was also encouraged in the way I honoured honesty, shown in good eye contact, in responsive comments, such as "thank you for sharing that," and making effort to mention later comments that had been made earlier, or return to questions as their significance sometimes arose later.[52] One of the most important actions was my own affirmative responses to participants,[53] In particular, if a respondent was inhibited so that their comment was brief, hesitant, or unclear in meaning, I often encouraged them by adding a comment, such as, "I'm interested in what you mean by that, can you tell us more?" This ensured participants would not be judged as foolish for failing to produce a specific 'correct' answer.[54] The impact of my affirming responses to give a sense of safety to speak honestly was shown in some positive feedback about my "patience" and "gracious" listening, but was further reinforced by the broader culture of listening that was a striking characteristic of the group, evident when moments of vulnerability were honoured with a tangible stillness.

The benefits of affirmation to learning are well-known, including evidence from psychology that demonstrates the positive relationship between, 'positive

[51] Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning,* p. 15.
[52] Ibid, Lakey highlights the benefits of enabling gradual processing of ideas by 'weaving together threads' rather than presenting material in 'indigestible chunks,' p. 101.
[53] This resonates with Westmoreland's findings for the importance of what she calls 'validation,' in 'Can Spiritual Maturity Be Nurtured', p. 152-4.
[54] Margaret Cooling suggests this negative kind of educational experience is one of several key factors that can inhibit adults from learning, *How to Engage with the Bible in Small Groups* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010), p. 4. Knud Illeris, 'Barriers to learning', in *Learning and Non-learning in School and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2007), 157-75.

reinforcement […] and growth.'[55] However, this leads to the problem of a possible tension between cultivating honesty and validity of interpretation. On the whole, I was careful to find the balance of guiding discussion while allowing readers to develop their own views, but at one point I got the balance wrong and imposed my own view. In an early discussion about the Samaritan woman, one participant responded that she was using tactics to distract Jesus. My response in this moment was to suggest another, more positive view, having in mind the need to question what Schneiders calls *mis*interpretations arising from androcentric presuppositions.[56] However, this had the effect of influencing the discussion towards agreement with my opinion; which was not appropriate to the research purpose.[57] Despite this mistake, the overall direction of critical questions usually progressed as a result of a fair balance between the group's interests and input from my prepared materials.

6.4.2 Safety and risk: Between readers and text

A further example of the benefit of balancing critical questions intended to protect both the group and the text is illustrated in the flexible use of feminist resources. Seeing women as insiders in the world of the text will be shown to have been a valuable reading strategy; but I also included two other feminist approaches that were less effective; challenging interpretive theories that rest on what Schneiders calls 'sexist' assumptions,[58] and highlighting the presence of feminine imagery about God. The response to my attempts to highlight feminine imagery of God (probing the imagery of motherhood implicit in the image of the 'God who gave you birth')[59] was that the question seemed to be of little importance; against evidence to suggest this might be crucial to women's relationship with Scripture.[60] My own group agreed that *of course* God is both 'Mother' as well as 'Father,' but as he is of another order, being Spirit. To try to analyse these questions, as one participant said, is as unfruitful as Nicodemus' literalising the metaphor of being born again.

---

[55] Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning,* pp. 14-15, 165.
[56] *Revelatory*, pp. 184-6.
[57] In chapter 3, I discussed the tension in an insider role that relates to a need to be cautious of this kind of reaction.
[58] Ibid, pp. 184-6.
[59] *Written*, p. 123.
[60] Bennett and Rowland, 'Contextual and Advocacy Readings', in *BPP*, p. 186.

Much more lively debate centred around androcentric influence on the communication of the Bible. As discussed above, having a range of resources prepared and using them in response to the interest of the group was crucial to balancing the tension between the need to engage with sufficient critical methods appropriate to the text and stimulating authentic reader engagement with the questions.

Affirming readers' views is especially important when the hermeneutical significance of affective responses to the text are recognised.[61] For Grace, clarity came from putting into words a "gut feeling" about a strong disconnection between the Bible and her experience.[62] This was also exemplified by other participants, such as Gheeta's reflections on the affective impact of Jesus' gracious response; realising this contrasted with her memories of the affective impact of the church's austere response to sin. A fortunate outcome of my tendency to allow participants to say what was important to them (sometimes at cost of the interpretive task) was a discovery I later made regarding the significance of memories to learning. For Yora, it was also key that she articulated the problem that arose when trying to read the Bible, for herself or her daughters; which is how she also saw it transpired to relate to their cultural presuppositions relating to the roles women have in society, and the impact of these roles changing.

The sense of safety established between participants bears directly on the quality of their hermeneutical engagement because reflections emerged as they were free to be verbalised, and because it also seemed to be translatable to that which they had with the text. Establishing safety with the text will relate to one of my findings that bears on a key question in pastoral contexts of biblical hermeneutics; that is how readers can be encouraged to allow the text to jeopardise what they already 'know.'[63] Meyer and Land's

[61] See John A. Berntsen's robust argument that religious experience is part of Christian formation, and that '[n]o logical or theological wedge should be driven between emotion and belief, or between experience and doctrine' in 'Christian Affections and the Catechumenate', in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education*, ed. by Jeff Astley et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 229-41, pp. 229-30.

[62] The reason for this is reinforced by theories of learning that have shown the combined roles of intellect and emotions, which correspond with memories that are immediately retrieved. For example, see Illeris, *Learning and Non-learning*, pp. 13-14.

[63] This is reinforced by a study that showed readers' reluctance to reconsider a subject they considered to be already 'settled,' in Lyon, 'Mind the Gap!', p. 460. John Hull gives further insight to

work within educational theory has led to them addressing the same kind of problem in terms of what they have called 'threshold concepts.'[64] These are questions arising that set learners in a liminal space as they negotiate the way forward encountering potentially troublesome but transformative new knowledge.

Another sense of risk was in the vulnerability required to be open, not only to others, but to the text itself, and even more, to God as divine author. The ultimate sense of safety to probe deeply into the Bible was undergirded by confidence in a belief that God is good, and therefore his word is good and not harmful for us. This was most important when, for instance, disjuncture between Jesus' attitude and personal experiences in church were recalled. Because learning involves revision of conceptual frameworks, risk is involved and therefore people need to feel safe.[65] Crucial to facilitating such honesty was a demonstration of my own trust in God, as group leader; which was affirmed in prayers I led in the first two weeks.[66] My own belief contributed to the prayers inspiring confidence in the ultimate goodness of God's word in Scripture,[67] which was probably more valuable given that I also demonstrated personal identification with the disturbing impact Scripture can also have.[68]

---

this in his chapter, 'The Need to Be Right and the Pain of Learning' in *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning*, especially pp. 89-102, 131-45.

[64] *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge,* ed. by Jan H. F. Meyer, and Ray Land (Abingdon: Routledge: 2006) and of the same authors: 'Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge (2): Epistemological considerations and a conceptual framework for Teaching and Learning', *Higher Education*, 49, 3 (2005), 373-88. More pertinent to biblical engagement, Quentin Chandler, demonstrates specific ways this bears on religious learning in 'Cognition or Spiritual Disposition? Threshold Concepts in Theological Reflection', *JATE*, 13, 2 (2016), 90-102.

[65] It may be argued that this was compounded by the group's gender: Dawn Llewellyn contends from her sociological findings that women in particular prefer 'safe' and non-disruptive reading materials. See 'Safe and Risky Readings: Women's Spiritual Reading Practices', in *Religion and Knowledge: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. by Elizabeth Arweck and Mathew Guest (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 166-77. Although David Allen found a mixed Anglican group of UK readers also avoided troublesome subjects, 'Gathering Together to Read', *Deep Engagement*, 20-1, p. 21.

[66] This is in a similar vein to Walter Wink's call for 'bidding statements,' or prayers, *Transforming Bible Study*, 1980, pp. 68-9.

[67] Charry, *By the Renewing of your Minds*, p. 29.

[68] David Allen, 'Gathering Together to Read the Bible Matters!', p. 21.

6.4.3 ...And between text and reader

The question about safety and risk in a pastoral view has focused on my own role in enabling the readers to bring questions pertinent to their own experience to the text. However, balance is essential here. Facilitating engagement between reader and text also involves a hermeneutical responsibility not only to protect the reader from the text (its hidden ideologies etc.) but also to protect the text from the reader, which risks being prematurely assimilated at the cost of integrity to its meaning. In order to facilitate this, it was necessary to be prepared with a variety of resources to support discussion and share knowledge and ideas from Johannine scholarship. But the challenge was how to stimulate interest beyond the world in front of the text to other kinds of questions that the text was concerned with.

A challenge was that, given freedom to engage with the text, the tendency of the group was to continually compare and contrast what we read with personal experience. This concurs with other findings that ordinary Christians are mostly interested in questions 'in front of the text.'[69] Despite the importance of this, discussed already, a key challenge in my role as group facilitator, which was how to expand the interest of the group towards a wider variety of questions that the text is concerned with.[70] Having discussed the importance of readers' self-involvement in the reading process, the need to engage authentic interest and own the questions, rather merely being asked to discuss *my* materials, is significant to the task of facilitating "proper understanding." In practical terms this came to a compromise between my prepared materials and the interest of the group. For instance, a general fascination with the culture, language, and literary style of John meant that more time was spent on these areas, while other material I reduced or even abandoned.

This happened in the case of an early strategy to highlight John's qualities as text, which I found did not strike a chord with the group. My idea had been that a discussion of Marmion's painting of St Luke painting the Virgin[71] would help illustrate that each

[69] Mark Powell, *Chasing the Eastern Star*, 2001, p. 28; De Wit, *Through the Eyes of Another,* pp. 8-9; Thiselton, *New Horizons*, 1992, p. 79, Village, *Bible and Lay People*, p. 85.
[70] Schneiders, *Revelatory,* p. 142.
[71] From Bockmuehl's, *Seeing the Word*, and see my discussion in chapter 4, above.

Gospel writer had a perspective and a style which enriches their historical account with theological and spiritual views of Jesus. I thought this may help answer questions I anticipated about 'factual' events that differ in John from the Synoptics. My attempt to generate discussion from this painting, however, fell rather flat. This may have been due in part to a weakness in my planning, as I realised I had overloaded the materials that evening leaving insufficient time to process the ideas I was presenting. Nonetheless, my instinct was that there was little appetite to pursue this idea, and so I left it. Despite this, on a few subsequent occasions when Lara was struggling to make sense of apparent contradictions between John and the Synoptics, recalling the image was a poignant way to help her think in a fresh way about the gospel's relationship with historical and religious truth. For one person, at least, who may have become stuck on this question, this image turned out to be helpful at later points.

Walter Wink has addressed this practical concern of balancing prepared materials with an openness to readers' concerns. He suggests that a facilitator's questions lead in a certain direction, but the important thing is not to use these in a manipulative way, or to set up readers to contrived results.[72] This agrees with my emphasis on the need for authenticity and respects participants' objections to spaces for learning that were designed to reproduce that which the leader had preconceived. This was described as a kind of "back and forth," when ideas were left aside then later revisited in light of fresh insights; **t**hemes such as exclusion and inclusion, and encountering difference. There was also a back and forth approach to methods, notably textual and spiritual approaches; looking at the text again but from another angle. In practice this felt quite chaotic, but with hindsight reveal a spiralling sense of movement that lead towards meaning. This may be seen as a more roundabout version of what Gadamer intends, in Schneiders' words:

> The attempt to interpret a text also involves a process of questioning, receiving an answer, and questioning further. The better one understands the subject matter of the text, the more adroit can be one's questioning of the text to elicit further understanding.[73]

[72] Wink, *Transforming Bible Study*, p. 66.
[73] *Revelatory,* p. 142.

In terms of learning, this might be viewed as allowing ideas to 'simmer on the back-burner,'[74] rather than force too much information in large 'chunks,' with the benefit of helping learners to thoroughly process ideas. The back-burner approach mirrors what was experienced as a 'back and forth' approach to engaging with John's Gospel, returning several times, for instance to certain themes and images, and the central theological idea in John 20:30-31, and is befitting to a Lectio Divina approach that might be said to allow time to 'chew over' and 'digest' the word of God, and this helped understanding progress in layers, or, as Lakey says, allow material to 'simmer on the back burner' and then be brought to the fore again later rather than present it in isolated modules.[75] A further benefit, however, for subjects that were felt to be difficult or risky was that allowing these to be put aside (even when I thought it might be a key matter) further reinforced the sense of safety; because the group had some control of sensitive subjects.

My approach to stimulating questions that the text is concerned with may be likened here to what it means to host. In preparation for the meal, I spent time preparing several dishes, making sure there was a wholesome variety, and not forgetting certain individual dietary needs. At the table, people eat according to taste, and there might be left-overs from over-preparing; but they were more likely to try things they might otherwise not, and with an open mind; to honour the effort I (or others in the group) had made, because they knew me, and because they had found others things I had made to be good. In terms of the risky, spicy new dishes, sometimes these are best introduced by allowing people a small taste on several occasions; and give time for the new taste to become 'acquired.'

Similarly, my role in Bible engagement was to prepare a variety of materials that I believed could orientate readers to questions the text is concerned with. To follow my line of thinking would be convenient for me, but would limit the interpretive outcome, rather than allow it to emerge dynamically according to the particularities of the group. The same materials ought to lead to different places in conversation with another group. The practice of facilitating understanding is therefore better represented by the

[74] Lakey, *Facilitating Group Learning,* p. 101.
[75] Ibid, p. 201.

metaphor of sitting and eating together, which allows for the natural way that others also bring dishes to the table, which enrich the feast. Facilitating understanding was about constructing a reciprocal safety between readers, with the text and its authors; and when safety means a capacity to trust and critique, to be authentic and likewise open to one's assumptions being critiqued; by one another and by the text.

6.5 The significance of recognising presuppositions

In the above, I have demonstrated the importance of self-involved learning and authentic dialogue to the process of understanding from encounter with the Bible, but they are linked with a third crucial factor; that is readers becoming aware of various kinds of presuppositions that impact the way the text's meaning is perceived. There is, of course, a danger that focusing on presuppositions will lead to obvious outcomes as they are at the heart of hermeneutics and the subject of lengthy recent discussions. In giving the matter attention here, however, I am adding to the conversation new details arising from a fresh empirical perspective.

At the outset, it is helpful to clarify my intended use of the term 'presupposition.' In a previous discussion, I critiqued Schneiders' use of this term to denote an intellectual position that informs one's approach to interpretation. Participants did not come to the Bible, however, as Schneiders suggests is good interpretive practice, with awareness of their presuppositions.[76] Awareness gradually emerged in the process of reflecting on the text in light of critical questions and personal experience. Moreover, in contrast with Schneiders, my use of the term accounts for a mixture of affective and intuitive as well as cognitive factors contributing to conscious and unconscious impacts upon perceived meaning.

In many ways, these ideas fit better with Thiselton's idea of a reader's horizon, that is their view of the way the world is known and experienced, both intellectually, personally, and communally. This highlights the challenge of what it means to be self-

[76] *Revelatory*, p. 157; Grant R. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1991), p. 371; and see my discussion of presuppositions in chapter 2.

aware as a reader, when this regards something so complex and multi-levelled as horizons. They include,

> not only what we can draw on in conscious reflection, but also the pre-cognitive dispositions or competences which are made possible by our participation in the shared practices of a social and historical world. The meaning of biblical texts, however, can be transformed when a serious mis-match of horizons occurs.[77]

This underlines the significance of findings that demonstrate ways that, although presuppositions may not be initially known, there are things to be done to help towards their being realised, reflected upon, changed, expanded, or overturned and "*un*learned." Illustrating this requires observing specific examples from my study, which I present within four categories. While agreeing that the horizon speaks well about the whole picture of what is happening when understanding expands, I fall back on the term 'presupposition' in this discussion, as it allows me to pinpoint certain aspects of the wider horizon in a closer view of what actually happened.

Changes in presuppositions occurred as connections were made between the text and lived experience, which may be seen as evidencing examples of 'deep' or 'transformational' learning.[78] This is apparent in language used to express the significance of new ideas, insights, or beliefs arising from readings. For instance, many participants referred to being "surprised" when they "realised" something, or that it came as a "(new) revelation," "fresh insight," an "eye-opener," "aha!-moment," or "learning curve;" causing "a shift in thinking;" something that was tentative being consolidated, like "clicking into place," or conversely something that which was believed to be the case was overturned; and "flipped in mind." The most striking expressions correspond with participants who had more familiarity with the texts, or with more general knowledge of the Gospel, and so are a particular focus in this section.

The questions of presuppositions did not begin as a separate section of findings in my writing but was embedded throughout early drafts of my analysis; tied up with reflections about becoming self-aware readers, about authentic dialogue, and at

[77] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 46.
[78] Margaret Cooling, *How to Engage with the Bible,* p. 3.

multiple points in discussions of my analysis of the way Schneiders' reading approach was experienced. However, I saw that this did not give appropriate weight to the importance of the matter. This was evident from looking at experiences from the perspective of the group as a whole and also from grids I used to compare the progression of experience and language used by individuals. Striking to me was how what was revealed differed from other studies that answer questions about the way certain groups interpret Scripture. My own data would not allow for me to try to answer this in the same way. It was evident that individual experiences changed in relation to perceived meaning derived from John, and also in the way this meaning was arrived at. Consequentially, my argument is that recognising presuppositions is at the heart of the matter, and that this was a key outcome of a specifically hermeneutical approach. Bringing presuppositions to light enabled their possibility of being expanded or revised and so was of crucial significance to the process of coming to understanding as a result of engagement with the meaning of the text.

Within my findings, I identify four interrelated categories of presuppositions, which I have untangled for the purpose of clarity; but it was crucial to keep intact the interconnected way that aspects of the reading approach brought presuppositions to light. In doing so, I will also offer some direction for the important question that is often absent in biblical hermeneutics; that is *how* self-awareness might be enabled. For this reason, I have appealed to particular examples from my data that show connections between a certain kind of presupposition with a certain particularity of the reading approach, as these specific representations are authentic demonstrations of broader patterns I found happening within the group.

6.5.1 Presuppositions about the Bible: Starting at "the beginning"

Although presuppositions were revealed in gradual and untidy way, open questions sparked important initial reflections. Hannah's experience illustrates the significance of recognising theological assumptions about the Bible. Hannah was from an Anglican tradition and had regularly read the Bible for years. In the first week, she found it helpful to articulate the vagueness and ambiguity with which she had associated the concept of 'the Word with God;' realising, with slight embarrassment, her confusion about the

meaning of her own belief that 'the Bible is the Word of God.' Trying to put her view into words was difficult because it was at the same time about an enormously important truth but also nebulous and did not really make sense in her own mind. The image of 'The Word with God…in the beginning,' in the first chapter of John connected with a notion of some kind of "eternal scroll" or book in heaven, pre-existing its coming to being in a physical form on earth. Verbalising her high view of Scripture, however, also brought to light its tension with what she confessed as being her rather "casual" attitude to reading.

A change in her thinking came from putting into words reflections about her own confusion which happened as she paused over words in the text, which were so familiar she had assumed she understood their meaning. Reflecting with the use of a variety of new and well-known metaphors gave space to 'play' with theological ways that the Bible relates to God's word. This reflection gave Hannah firmer footing to navigate towards a view that brought clarity, and this re-enthused her reading. Perhaps ironically, the firmer ground from which Hannah moved forward was acknowledging not what she knew, but what she did not know. This made space to engage with a real question that she was asking in her own mind about the way her experience related to her beliefs and to the text we were reading. For Hannah, some kind of 'penny dropped', and "a whole new weight" of meaning resulted from thinking about this passage in light of the new image of Scripture as sacrament. This complexified the simplistic assumption that she was not comfortable with, and it gave space to embrace the mystery of Scripture being at the time God-breathed and Holy, while also sometimes being experienced as ordinary–to the point of mundane. For several readers along with Hannah, this added "a whole new weight" to what Scripture is. Articulating the new meaning this revealed about John 1 also brought to light a disparity between her espoused theology (where Scripture was already powerful and Holy) from her operant practice, which included an unintentionally way she sometimes treated the Bible "flippantly."

6.5.1a) Theological reflection about the Bible

The matter was not simplified or resolved, but opening up theological questions about the Bible gave space to discuss and provided an essential foundation for subsequent

textual and other critical questions that followed. This mirrored Schneiders' commitment to the principle that an appreciation of the nature of the object under investigation must precede the method. Space to reflect was crucial to subsequent points in the course, as an expansion of thinking about the 'human' role of authorship contributed to a sense of theological 'permission' to probe and push back at the text. The prologue of John was an extremely helpful focus for reflections about the mysterious relationship between Jesus and the Word of God, although Schneiders, in fact, give little attention to this as a theological resource.[79] However, using this implicitly set questions about the Bible within a more narrow focus about the Fourth Gospel's role as part of Scripture. It was unnecessary to bring in different kinds of hermeneutical questions about the role, for instance, of the Jewish Scriptures in Christian Spirituality; and about particularly problematic texts.

Within the time, I did not even manage to make full use of planned questions about the authorship of the Fourth Gospel and only gave brief details about the Johannine community. Some participants disagreed with a need to question that the writer was John, or the beloved disciple (or both). Despite this, the questions that were discussed lead to the acknowledgement of some kind of mental picture of "John" developing– whoever he may have been. It added to the enjoyment, confidence, and fun of getting to understand the book in terms of becoming familiar with "John;" evident in playful comments about "John and I coming to an understanding;" about getting into John's "psyche" and foreseeing the "tricks" he played on the reader with double meanings and irony, and his intended invitation for the reader to participate in his own experience of Jesus.[80]

This reinforces my point above about the need for me to maintain flexibility to offer resources without dominating the interpretive outcome. For example, given some Evangelical tendencies to understate the human role in authorship; and a general puzzlement resulting from a lack of reflection about inspiration in other denominations, it was found that the writer called 'John' became an accessible kind of presence in the

[79] In Schneiders' *Revelatory,* the prologue of John is only briefly mentioned to demonstrate the symbolic, divine self-gift of God. (p. 37)

[80] My use of the male pronoun is not intended to disregard the pertinence of Schneiders' theory about possible female authorship; it follows the emerging interpretive understanding of the group.

interpretive project. Having moved towards taking more seriously the human role in authorship of Scripture, this made sense of my encouragement to attend to literary techniques, as it allowed these to be attached to the intentions of a certain author. Acknowledging and "getting to know" a specific, human writer, was an important stage in coming to realise the need for Scripture to be interpreted. It led to clarity about further complexities; such as perceiving where nuances result from subsequent translations, questions of ideology and power agendas, and pastoral uses of the text.

6.5.2 Presuppositions about the act of reading

As evident from Hannah's experience, presuppositions about the Bible were linked with assumptions about the way it can and should be read, and in particular a sense of interpretation being theologically *permissible.* For more participants, however,[81] it was more important to come to see that interpretation was *necessary*. Both these ideas are illustrated in the way Grace's presuppositions changed. Essential to her spirituality was sensing the immediate "Rhema" word of God mediated through Scripture. This required a receptive and obedient posture in reading. Early in the course, this was tied up in a mistrust of analytical stances towards Scripture. Grace commented on the warning she discerned in the tendency of Nicodemus and other Pharisees to focus on intellectual concerns, in the same way that methodical study of the Bible can amount to "putting Jesus in a test tube," which she saw as inconsistent with a more faithful example of the disciples in the first chapter of John, who "got up and followed without question."

In her final interview, however, Grace expressed a different view about the kind of process of Bible reading that might best help her ultimate goal of faithfully living as a Christian. Asking provision to be made for future sessions to include help with giving tools for good reading practice her pressing question was *how* to discern God speaking through the Bible from another voice that she now saw could get in the way; that is the reader's own "voice." Despite having always found spiritual nourishment from Scripture, she saw difficulties resulting from her approach, in that it did not address a disjunction between the spiritual world of the Bible and her lived experience that she also saw as being problematic in the lives of other Christians.

[81] For example Grace, Yora, Mischa, and Gheeta; see chapter 5, above.

> When I get to the office I completely forget about God. And I want to learn how to blend it more. There are many churches in Africa, they grew up reading the Bible and things, but that does not dictate living a Christian life […This is] another area I struggle; the Spirit speaking to you and revelation. Because he *can* reveal to you something. So it's *how* do read, how do you *hear*, how do you separate *your* voice from God's?

Unlike for Hannah, the progression of Grace's changed thinking about the Bible spanned many weeks, and partly as a result of further realisations she came to concerning her cultural presuppositions. For now, the point I am making is that some key interpretive questions that led to important disclosures were dependent upon maintaining theological integrity about the way we were engaging with the Bible. Also, that metaphors opened up a creative space in which participants became aware of their theological assumptions. Rather than attempt to describe theological positions in propositional language, playing with metaphors and images revealed more instinctively and intuitively what kind of thing the Bible is in their belief and experience: and the same may be said about the fruitfulness of pausing to muse and imagine possibilities of meaning arising from other images in the Johannine text itself.

This bears on problems that can result from Christians being unaware that the Bible is always read with certain interpretative processes; or views that efforts to make these processes more intentional indicate a manipulation of Scripture or denial of the work of the Holy Spirit to enlighten meaning.[82] For some readers, to reflect on this question in theoretical terms may be helpful, and this was seen to be an important aspect of reflection for my group. But alongside this were self-reflective discussions, the space to clarify confusion, and a more practical exercise of learning to read in the presence of the writer (and translators) that consolidated expanded ways of thinking that resulted from reflecting on metaphors about (and within) the Bible.

6.5.3 Presuppositions from experience: church and culture

Recognising the need to interpret the Bible also resulted from recognising two different ways that culture impacted, and sometimes skewed meaning, like a lens. This is seen in

[82] See my discussion of research in chapter 2, above, and also Fee, *'Exegesis and Spirituality'*.

the way that Grace's recognition of her own "voice" included seeing a dual impact of culture upon her own reading. Firstly, the fact that women were habitually marginalised in her African context had implications for herself as a reader of Scripture. Secondly, this was also something that seemed to require disentangling from the message in the Bible itself. Although different from Mischa's childhood experience of being confined to passive learning as a "good girl" at Sunday school, Grace had in common with Mischa that her culture had taught her that you "did not question." Despite an inner sense of wrongfulness about the reduction of women's personhood, spiritual values such as obedience and humility made it harder to question, even when her church's interpretation of 'biblical' headship resulted in double moral standards and oppression.[83] Focusing on Jesus' response to women, Grace recognised that her own view of the Bible had been influenced by cultural assumptions imbibed by her church. This limited *what* she saw in the Bible (to that which fit within what she expected to see about the role of women) and also the *way* she saw it, which would be to accept what she saw. Particularly helpful in the course, for Grace, had been exploring the strongly counter-cultural implications of Jesus' actions in his own context. Failing to be clear about this previously had meant that cultural marginalisation of women evident in Gospel stories appeared to endorse a similarly androcentric culture in her tradition as befitting to a 'biblical' way of life.

Yora's view about how the Bible should be read changed in relation to problems relating its meaning to her experience of being a Christian woman in the church. Along with others, Yora found a new "level" of understanding about God's views of women as a result of reading together, but she was aware this could not have happened from a brief, superficial reading of the Bible. As she said, in "a quick swipe you don't see it." This unusual turn of phrase may have indicated the instant result that follows the use of a bank card for quick payment, or the function of a touchscreen to activate a function or access information on a computerised device. It echoes consumer-orientated

[83] This accepting reaction corresponds with Letty Russell's insights that when maleness is habitually portrayed as normative humanity, this does not only 'erase women's presence in the past history of the community, but silence even the questions about their absence. One is not even able to remark upon or notice women's absence, since women's silence and absence is the norm.' 'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation', in Letty M. Russell (ed.) *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1985), 111-24, p. 113.

approaches to reading as quickly as possible for what is needed,[84] although I think the speed of reading was more what Yora had in mind. Either way, she saw that such inadequate reading was a key reason that her daughters did not even "see" that women were represented in the Bible (at least in any kind of meaningful way.) But having now experienced a new horizon of view on this, like discovering "gems" that were there all along but not visible, like for Grace, Yora's pressing concern had become how to overcome the problem of superficial reading through a cultural "lens."

It is important to qualify the weight of significance I am giving to the Bible course regarding changed theological assumptions when many of the participants in question had moved countries (and continents), sometimes, in recent years. This is not intended to ignore that these circumstances of new cultures and church contexts also may have contributed to their learning experience and self-awareness. A difficultly qualifying this evidence is that only two participants had lived all their lives in Lebanon (some Lebanese people had moved away during the war.) As well as cultural diversity**,** self-awareness was helped by the ecumenical diversity of this group. It was a remarkable situation to be in a group where none of the participants had only ever attended the church of our present context–in fact only three members had always been Anglican had two of whom had belonged to churches in more than one culture. For this reason, discussions about former traditions was made possible because each person had experienced different traditions. Despite this, there are sufficient grounds to accept that dialogue with the Bible and its relationship to personal experience has been shown to be significant to the acknowledgement and articulation of presuppositions, which resulted from transformational Bible engagement.

Most of the discussions about culture overlap with the idea of "church culture" and theological traditions. This meant that the related subjects of the role of Tradition in interpretation, and questions about authority and power were all significant. Some participants came to acknowledge how these impacted additional presuppositions. This indicates that there is significant scope to further develop the ambivalent role of power

[84] Paul J. Griffiths objects to the common propensity in what he sees as a consumerist approach to trying to 'use' texts for their own purposes, in *Religious Reading: The Place of Reading in the Practice of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999). See also Oliver, *Holy Bible, Human Bible,* p. 7; Tidball, 'The Bible in Evangelical Spirituality', in *BPP*, pp. 258-74.

and Tradition in future studies of ordinary readers,[85] but a need to focus calls for me to prioritise themes from my data. Undeniably important to the whole process of recognising presuppositions was the impact of an imaginative approach to the more self-involved kind of confidence as a reader. However, another kind of problem was not simply about an approach to reading from 'outside' of the Bible, but from a sense of identity; of feeling like an *outsider* to the Bible itself. This feeling was linked with a perception that the Bible was mostly concerned with men, and that the Gospel narratives. As a result of being "in" the story along with the characters, readers caught a glimpse of meanings that called into question personal experiences, and brought to light presuppositions. More will follow below about the role imaginative engagement played in the acknowledgement of presuppositions. Before this, it is necessary to observe that an obstruction to this kind of engagement required attention through feminist reading approaches.

6.5.3a) Feminist and liberation approaches

Making connections with the characters was poignant because of a sense in which the starting point of reading the Bible for some in the group was felt primarily like an outside perspective. Part of this has been shown to have been addressed in facilitating a accounts were primarily accounts of Jesus' actions alongside his male disciples. For this reason, the question "where am I in the story?" was one that resonated deeply with members of the group. Imaginative engagement with characters may be seen as a kind of 'doorway' to the world of the Bible, but enabling identification with characters (and especially characters who may be perceived to belong to their own excluded group) served as a means to unblock an obstruction to this access.[86]

[85] Andrew Rogers gives a helpful analysis of Tradition in the context of evangelical congregations, in Congregational Hermeneutics, pp. 67-94; which my findings suggest could be expanded this towards more critical questions about the dynamics of power upon interpretation and small groups.
[86] Margaret Cooling highlights key barriers to learning in relation to the Bible, discussed below in relation to the leader's role; which are all the more helpful in relation to more complex insights into the role of resistance in relationships that shed light on barriers to God, and, I argue, barriers to knowing him through understanding the biblical text. See Barry and Connolly, 'Development of Relationship and Resistance', 2009, 85-106.

In this course I incorporated three of Schneiders' five main strategies in her approach to feminist interpretation.[87] The most important for the group was 'raising women to visibility.'[88] A reason this was important to this particular group was that many who were regular church attendees (across all of the countries) did not recall hearing the passages about the women characters in John (or in the Bible more generally) either read or preached about in church. However, even for women who had more knowledge of the Bible from their own reading and study, the inclusion of narratives featuring women provided an important opportunity to explore ways in which reading the Bible as women came with particular experiences and presuppositions that had important implications for the way its meaning was perceived. This came from seeing the wider textual significance they had when viewed in light of their significance to questions about Christian spirituality and gender. Particularly helpful was discerning contemporary historic/cultural implications of the narratives. This had the effect of unlocking insights about the significance of the characters and of Jesus' actions towards them, where meaning comes from recognising Jesus' intention at times when his behaviour is radically counter-cultural.

Consistent with the principle of raising women to visibility, including narratives about Jesus' encounters with women recognised occasions where the text is honouring the dignity and value of women and their activity within the Christian story. Schneiders rightfully warns, however, that a danger of using this strategy in isolation is that focusing on 'woman material' may unconsciously support the presupposition that the rest of the Bible (the majority) is therefore not about women but about men.[89] This problem was observable in patterns in the dialogue, where realisations about Jesus' endorsing actions towards women were followed (three times) with the recurring objection; "but the *disciples* are all *men*," suggesting that to celebrate roles played by women leads back to the question of why these are still by far the minor roles. This subject was among some of the major questions that were felt to be 'left hanging' at the end of the course.

[87] *Revelatory*, pp. 184-6.
[88] I selected narratives about women for the principal passage in three of the eight weeks.
[89] *Revelatory*, p. 184.

More than the problem of inadequate interpretations was a more fundamental question about the Bible itself. God's own view of women was at stake. Crucial for grasping the meaning of the text was seeing the extent to which cultural and theological experiences had coloured the way readers viewed the person of God, to whom the text referred and by whom it was, in some way, authored or authorised. This shows the importance of removing barriers that might prevent readers from making personal identifications with characters in the biblical narrative; as these are, in effect, barriers to God. It also reinforces my findings that a hermeneutical course intended for spiritual growth ought not be a generic model, but requires a facilitator to adapt the materials as well as the methods of study in response to the experience and identity of the readers. As discussed, in the case of my group, a dislocation arose from cultural experiences of the religious exclusion of women. However, the pastoral implications are broader than feminist concerns for groups of women readers.

The same attention is called for with regard to other reasons that Christians experience difficulty identifying with key characters in the Bible, and in particular in light of sociological evidence to show the formational impact of personal and cultural 'heroes.'[90] It would be justifiable to critique the limitation to western feminist perspectives that I did not expand, for instance to include resources from womanist theology. However my findings draw attention to the importance of discerning other groups who may also experience similar kinds of exclusion from the biblical text,[91] while also indicating the need for a broader call for the inclusion of resources from liberation hermeneutics in pastoral concerns more generally.

Despite the significance of the finding about self-awareness of presuppositions, it is important to note exceptions within the group; not everyone raised critical questions or articulated significant disclosures about their own assumptions. As my primary concern

[90] Perrin, *Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals*.

[91] Overlapping concerns of feminist and liberation theologies in the contexts of race, colour, and sexuality are explored in Gay L. Bryon and Vanessa Lovelace's introduction, 'Methods and the Making of Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics', in their edited book, *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016), 1-18. John Hull's discussion of the alienating effect of being aware of the perspective of sighted authors when engaging with the Bible after becoming blind; *In the Beginning There was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible,* (London: SCM, 2001), p. 3.

in this study is to see whether and how critical approaches can contribute to flourishing, a major focus of my analysis has been on the general flow of data where this happened. However, Luna "got the most out of" hearing the discussions, and in particular when different views were expressed, which was similar for Farah. This brings a degree of balance to what I am saying about the importance of critical questions and self-awareness. Jeff Astley raises important questions about balance between dogmatic and critical modes of theological learning from an educational perspective.

> For those who need to think in order to be themselves, and to think about their religion in particular, indoctrination puts chains on self-realization and their religious self-realization. Their beliefs are not truly theirs unless they think about them critically. [However…] Some people can be fully themselves and fully value themselves without self-evaluation or critical reflection.

Having found this to be true, the important outcome was that evidence showed that those who did not engage directly with critical questions were not discouraged when difficult questions raised by others. In fact, the freedom to speak honesty was valued.

6.5.4 Presuppositions about the nature of God

The categories above relate to issues that are broadly acknowledged in hermeneutical theory; which might be expressed in terms of presuppositions regarding the doctrine of Scripture and a reader's social location.[92] A difference is that I am adding to the conversation evidence of ways these presuppositions may be less powerful interpretive predictors as a result of understanding that emerges from open dialogue. Unlike these categories, however, little (or nothing) is usually said about my final category emerging from the data, which is readers' assumptions about the nature of God,[93] despite this being a foundational matter in the field of Spirituality and Christian formation.[94] It is related to the subject of a Christian's own sense of identity, which, by contrast, has been

[92] Discussed in Chapter 1, above.
[93] Thiselton briefly uses by way of example that a reader's background experience of being parented impacts their idea about God as Father to illustrate his use of the term horizon over pre-understanding, but does not take this exploration much further. *New Horizons*, p. 46.
[94] Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2009, pp. 91-4; Robert P. Meye, 'The Imitation of Christ: The Means and End of Spiritual Formation', in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (Michigan: Baker, 1994), 99-212.

explored in empirical studies of ordinary theology, [95] but its impact has not been corresponded with the perceived meaning of Scripture. In my data, readers' images of God relate to some of the most striking language that show not only the pervasiveness of assumptions about God's nature, but about the impact of changes resulting from engagement with the text.

Notably, this was seen in Gheeta's concern (echoed by others) about the way certain views of Jesus, himself, need to be "unlearned," with the stark point that an inaccurate picture of "*that* Jesus" can result from invalid interpretations of the Bible that we have been taught. This was seen in Gheeta's emerging awareness of the difference between a fresh understanding of the nature of Jesus in the Resurrection narratives and her habitual view of God that was characterised by heavy feelings of "shame" and "guilt." As described above, even from childhood, this was exemplified in the way participating in Holy Communion felt like some kind of legal trap, of trying to discern barely knowable sins; a need to "beat the system," which seemed to have set you up to fail. Gheeta saw the spiritual significance of these longstanding presuppositions about God through paying attention to feelings provoked by imaginative identification with the disciples as they encountered the Risen Jesus.[96] A sense of wonder at Jesus' astounding graciousness contrasted with the shame that she realised she anticipated on behalf of the disciples; and that it was stirred by Gheeta's own memories. The fact they came to mind signified that something they represented lingered in her image of God.

Identifying where her presuppositions had come from enabled Gheeta, and others, to critique what had been an inauthentic representation of Jesus. This happened at the same time she noticed that she was moved by Jesus' surprising response, "peace be with you," which was conveyed in strategically repeated language that by now had become a recognisable Johannine technique. Due to her own sense of surprise about this greeting that she had previously overlooked, Gheeta saw that Jesus' own attention was not upon the disciples' failings, despite their seriousness, but a desire in spite of these to continue

[95] See, for instance, Antoine Vergote and Alvaro Tamayo, *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God: A Psychological and cross-Cultural Study,* (The Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1980); and Leslie J. Francis and Jeff Astley, 'The Quest for the Psychological Jesus: Influences of Personality on Images of Jesus', *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 16, 3 (1997), 247-59, p. 248; which shows correspondence between the respondents' personalities and their concepts of Jesus.
[96] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, pp. 566-7.

bringing healing and peace; and more broadly, to "connect" with people because of his "mercy and compassion." More than that, she took Jesus' words as also being intentionally addressed to herself by God in that moment.

It is also significant to notice a striking parallel between the change in her view of God with her approach to the Bible. Her perception of God's focus on the sin of individuals moved to seeing Jesus' priority and motivation being firstly restorative of relationship, acting in order to "connect" his contemporaries and with us– making the link that "that is who God is." This was reflected in a pertinent move from the purpose of Bible study being about correct knowledge to perceive that "the answer to the question is not an answer, it's a *person*." Two important points arise from this. It further demonstrates the mutual spiritual implications of bringing to light presuppositions about the Bible and about who God is, as author, as foundational for understanding the texts. Secondly, given the powerful impact of the different approaches taken by group leaders in the two contrasting Bible groups in Gheeta's experience here, it underlines the profound theological implications of attending to pedagogy in group reading.

Similar attention to Cyla's experience reveals the significance of her presuppositions about God being brought to light in an affective way, as reading several narratives about women brought her to realise a sense in which she had been missing an existential understanding of God's love. As for Gheeta, this understanding did not arise uniquely from the cognitive processes of analysing literary features or from considering theories about feminist hermeneutics; although these played an implicit role. Understanding also arose from the process of an empathetic reading in which Cyla 'shared' experiences in which women in the text felt "valued" and dignified by Jesus. It was important to acknowledge where this contrasted with a different, albeit uncomfortable, feeling that was brought to mind, resulting from experiences of implicit (operant) theologies in which men are more important than women; and most importantly, in God's eyes.

The field of Spiritualty has shown that presuppositions or unconscious perceptions of God have a major impact upon a believer's experience of prayer and, consequentially, their lived faith in general. Sheldrake, for instance, argues in agreement with the Ignatian Tradition that 'inadequate theologies of God inevitably result in ineffective and

disembodied spiritualities;'[97] but as yet have not been given serious consideration in terms of their impact on biblical interpretation. Sandra Schneiders, in her later work, acknowledges that widespread misconceptions about Jesus' Resurrection and the reality of the immediate presence of the Risen Jesus among his people have significant implications upon spiritual experience. [98] Viewing the Risen Jesus as the proper subject of the gospels, she is right to contend that coming to existential knowledge of Jesus is the central hermeneutical question, in particular, when reading John. Despite this, however, the question of how images of God impact interpretation is not directly addressed in her literature. I found this question, however, to be highly significant to the process of expanding spiritually significant understanding. "Seeing Jesus" more clearly, or knowing (in an experiential way) God more, emerged as a key outcome. Participants' images of God also link to all the other categories of presuppositions. It impacted upon what was most significant in the experiences and self-identity as Christian readers of Scripture; and impacted upon their assumptions about task of reading and how reading it relates to hearing God's word.

Resounding agreement from the group about the importance of discerning a true image of Jesus indicates the need to critique presupposed images of God that are deeply entrenched in personal experience as well as Tradition. Being formed from inferred knowledge and experience as well as through information and intellectual knowledge (evident in the interchangeable use of "feel" and "see" with "know" or "think"); images of God are a particularly difficult category of presuppositions when it comes to the question of how they might be revised or expanded. This raises an important area of interdisciplinary work between biblical hermeneutics and adult education, which has developed from psychological theories ways to understand what is happening on unconscious levels in the process of learning.[99]

[97] Sheldrake is referring in particular here to the way prayer manifests deep attitudes 'about God, self and the world,' stressing that, although all images of God are insufficient, particularly negative images block us from honest prayer. Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness,* p. 63. This is reinforced with Barry and Connolly's more psychological perspective of perceptions of God that hinder self-honesty and thus, spiritual formation; *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, pp. 91-4.
[98] In Schneiders, *Jesus Risen,* 2013.
[99] See for instance 'Unconscious Learning and Tacit Knowledge', in Knud Illeris, *How We Learn,* pp. 17-18.

Having argued for the importance of bringing presuppositions about God to light, it is significant to note that literary and imaginative approaches were, again, crucial to this, as they had the effect of leading participants to share a literary character's experience of encounter with Jesus in the world of the text. But more than imagination, this integrated through dialogue with one's own life and experience in the 'real' world.[100] Awareness of presuppositions about God also resulted from imaginative empathy with Jesus as a character. This enabled the reality of his nature as a human being to come to light in a way that sometimes led to changed ideas or beliefs about God's nature.[101] Through imaginative identification, Jesus was discovered and known; his personhood more intimately revealed, and belief was strengthened as a result of encounter with his intentional and personal presence. This approach to reading accesses a seamlessness between past and present; between a theopoetic text and lived experience. As expressed in Gheeta's insight about Jesus' actions being done not only for the people at the time "he did it for us too;" meaning their significance is more than a record intended for future readers of past events. They are also a point of access to the same kind of encounter with him now.[102]

This study indicates the need to inquire further about the way presuppositions about God bear on transformational readings of Scripture. The critical implications for Christian spirituality more generally has been acknowledged. In agreement with this, my study shows the need to further explore the extent to which 'inadequate theologies of God' lead not only to 'ineffective spiritualities' but also unhelpful interpretation and may serve as indications for those which are invalid.[103]

---

[100] In fact, this is a better way to understand Schneiders' view of the function of the human imagination as the way Christians grasp theological truth, see Chapter 2.4.5, above. Likewise, Craig Dykstra describes it as a means of 'seeing in depth,' being the foundation of human perception from both reason and the emotions; 'head and heart.' See 'Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination', in *For Life Abundant: Practical Theology, Theological Education and Christian Ministry*, ed. by Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 41-61, p. 48.

[101] Thiselton demonstrates that stories identify the personhood of persons in ways impossible for abstract, generalizing, thought or for scientific treaties or philosophical essays.'

[102] As explained above, this is consistent with the self-declared purpose of the Johannine text (John 20:31). It is also the ultimate purpose of Biblical Spirituality, whereby the spirituality produced by the text is linked with that which produced the text.

[103] See my discussion above with the same reference to Philip Sheldrake, *Images of Holiness,* p. 63.

6.6 Summary: Learning from Schneiders' reading approach

In this chapter I have demonstrated that it was possible to facilitate Bible engagement with an integral hermeneutical approach where the critical questions were not counterproductive, but beneficial, to the spiritual flourishing of the group. Acknowledging presuppositions was significant and resulted from allowing reflection of experiences that emerged instinctively as being connected with questions about the text. The quality of (critical) openness in discussion was inevitably enriched by the groups' cultural, social, and theological diversity, but other factors that facilitated self-awareness were linked with the variety of reading approaches which were used in correspondence with the interest of the group. Of particular benefit was a literary approach, which equipped readers to make their own discoveries; and imaginative engagement, which raised awareness of their own presupposed beliefs that were sometimes challenged by the text. It was key to avoid imposing difficult questions onto the group. Framing Bible engagement within spaces of prayer secured critical questions within the ultimate security of God's goodness, and of the ultimate safety of listening with receptivity to his word in Scripture.

A criticism of this study may come from seeing how problematic issues had a tendency to be regarded as anomalies to be resolved–or at least made palatable.[104] Did an expectation and desire for the Bible to "support," and "agree with" the interests of the readers lead to an unconscious tailoring of Scripture's perceived meaning? This may be argued from recalling the way, for instance, things that were taken as offensive came to be perceived as primarily the work of translators, emphasis on male heroes (at least in part) linked with sexism in culture, and Jesus' unsettling words about judgement were wrestled with until the group found a way to remove the initially perceived sense of threat. Similarly, it may be possible to view the general sense of encouragement from stories about Jesus and women as a predictable or obvious outcome of the focus I gave. However, this process was neither simple nor straightforward.

[104] Exemplified above in 5.4.3. See Bielo, *Words Upon the Word;* Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*; Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*; and Andrew J. Todd, 'The Interaction of Talk and Text: Re-Contextualising Biblical Interpretation', *Practical Theology*, 6, 1 (2013), 69-85.

Recognising presuppositions was crucial to the possibility of renegotiating something formerly believed or assumed as understanding in dialogue with the text, rather than meaning necessarily fitting within these assumptions. Explicit questions at the beginning of the course sought to bring to light unconscious assumptions about the Bible and discussion about these matters served to reveal some unconscious assumptions and started to give a range of language and images to allow faith expectations to be articulated, and/or expanded. Time spent discussing personal experiences triggered by texts was not merely side-tracking, but an essential aspect of engaging with texts. This is different to the kinds of long discussions Wuthnow observed in American small groups 'Bible studies' that did not relate at all to the text, but which he found served the purpose of building community.[105] Furthermore, the point I am making differs from Roger's distinction between dialogue that builds community as distinct from 'arriving at a particular understanding of Scripture.'[106] Rather, I am showing the two things are interdependent. The recognition of presuppositions was accompanied by feelings and memories, which helped identification of their source. These often related to experiences of church and culture, and personal images of God and Jesus that might not be immediately clear, as well more cognitive beliefs that were easier to articulate. The presuppositions described above include assumptions, attitudes and affective ways of knowing, such as a nebulous sense of shame coming from experience of church 'culture' as well as that which was verbalised.

The fruitful benefits of deeper spiritual understanding followed facing a degree of suspicion about the Bible, about God, and about increasing realisations of problematic tensions between Scripture and experience; in particular experiences of church traditions. Patient listening and giving space to reflect between the text and all manner of experiences, transpired to be important to understanding and a further benefit of a diverse group was that the act of explaining to others the assumptions behind a position was often also enlightening to the speaker. Consistent with a spiritual reading of John, the ultimate purpose of reading was not enhanced understanding in itself, but to see Jesus more clearly, experience him more authentically, with implications for how this leads to fuller participation in the Church as his body on earth.

[105] Wuthnow, *Sharing the Journey*.
[106] Rogers, *Congregational Hermeneutics*, p. 123.

CHAPTER 7: Conclusion

7.1 Recalling the journey of this thesis question

The aim of this thesis was to discover how resources from biblical hermeneutics might be employed in order to deepen understanding of the Bible. This led to consolidating some key principles from hermeneutical theory to see whether and how these might suggest practical ways forward for pastoral practice, in light of the challenge of navigating a gap between the academy and pew. I began this with a detailed exploration of the work of Sandra Schneiders and her approach to integral hermeneutics that sees the matter of transformational understanding as belonging ultimately in the realm of Christian spirituality. Having engaged with relevant literature, my project sought to distill potentially helpful theory into a practical course, which included the following features of Schneiders' work:

- Spiritual approaches complementing historical, literary and theological approaches
- Critical and ideological questions
- Theological reflection about the relationship between Scripture and the Word of God
- Focus on encounters and Resurrection narratives
- Developing self-aware reading
- Prayerful engagement in a Lectio Divina approach to encourage 'receptivity'
- Inquiries behind, of, and in front of the text, with priority for the latter
- Plurality of interpretations

Participant observation, focus groups, and interviews allowed mixed methods of data analysis to understand how this course was experienced by a particular group. A key benefit for spiritual understanding was that a hermeneutical approach gives space for changed thinking and movement from the reader's initial starting point. A range of different questions helped respect the 'otherness' of the text that prevented premature assimilation with the world of the readers. This also came from becoming aware of four categories of presuppositions. Most fundamentally, one's image of God was a pervasive interpretive lens. Seeing existential understanding as the goal of

interpretation meant taking seriously conversations that related the text with experience. Honest dialogue, including critical questions led readers to recognise and articulate gaps between one's experience and the Bible. This entailed expanding the comfortable role that readers often sought in Bible engagement; at which point educational theory and pastoral theology were shown to offer essential resources for responsible facilitation of potentially unsettling issues.

This has been a departure from more descriptive investigations that which have revealed causal relationships between the nature of certain readers or groups, and their interpretations of texts.[398] In terms of Christian spirituality, the question is, *how* can transformation result from engagement with the Bible? As a result of setting a specific theory into practice, I have contributed to a wider quest to facilitate those involved in the pastoral task of helping lay Christians develop a more mature understanding of the Bible. [399] A number of benefits emerged from setting the question in contexts of group reading, but analysis of the data entailed expanding the key issues beyond questions about the reading approach and materials, accepting that issues relating to understanding go beyond a philosophical perspective.

As far as I am aware of other studies I have been able to find, my research is thus original in three ways, relating to its focus, methodology, and method. Firstly, within the broad area that might be called transformative hermeneutics[400] I have pinpointed the intersection between spirituality and interpretation. This sharpens the dialogue between the theory and observed practice; as both concern the impact of reading upon 'lived faith.' An original feature of this project is therefore an interest in the experience of understanding as both product and process.[401] In seeing understanding as a *product* I am looking to identify insights and understanding that may be experienced (ontologically) in being personally significant to a reader's life or faith experience. Moreover, exploring participants' understanding as a *process* (being an epistemological question) meant I am interested not simply in the way meaning or spiritually significant insights are described, but in questions about *how*

[398] See Chapter 1.2 for a fuller discussion of other studies.
[399] See Chapter 1, above.
[400] See chapter 1 for my intended use of this term.
[401] See my discussion of Schneiders' use of this distinction, in Chapter 2.4.5.

these were arrived at. This means looking closely at the questions and discussions, and other factors in the process leading to significant disclosures.

Secondly, my intention to test a specific, prescriptive approach with an original methodology (in this area of research) required me to formulate my own materials from scholarship in order to answer the question of how scholarship may be made both understandable and spiritually enriching to Christians in the pew. In shifting the question from the way Christians read the Bible to look at what will then happen if readers try a certain (hermeneutical) approach, the investigation became deductive as well as inductive.

Thirdly, with transformational understanding of Christianity's sacred text being fundamentally a spiritual process (or event), this required a unique research environment that had the possibility of authentic spiritual growth. This meant the activity was not only a discussion about what the text meant, but authentic faith engagement with the text as Holy Scripture. For these reasons, my existing insider, pastoral role transpired to be of greater significance to the research question than I had anticipated. It meant that my reflections on my own role in the process became, not only a useful means of validation as a researcher, but also as a source of data regarding the role of group facilitator. This caused me a considerable challenge as I grappled with how to understand and articulate these merging roles. Despite this, however, attention to findings about the role of group leader provide an important resource for conclusions orientated towards an intended audience that includes pastoral practitioners.

A challenge of investigating a hermeneutical approach is that it is elusive. It does not lend itself to tidy analysis, and its findings cannot easily be presented in neat headings. Pattison puts this well in saying:

> Transformational knowledge is messy. It amounts to informal knowledge, personal knowledge and that elusive thing 'wisdom' – the kind of knowledge which is very difficult to evaluate and assess by any kind of examination process.[402]

[402] Pattison, *In Search of Words,* p. 12.

There are also limitations to the claims I can make regarding the generalisability of my findings, due to the narrow nature of my project. Only one group was observed. However, depth is offered, which gives light to individual experiences throughout the course of time, as well as that of the group viewed as a whole. With this in mind, the following is an overview of conclusions that relate to my starting questions.

7.2 Responding to pressing questions

7.2.1 Is an integral approach (spiritual and critical) possible?

Firstly, I found that it is possible to use critical approaches as part of hermeneutical Bible engagement with a group in a way that resulted in spiritually beneficial growth of understanding. Giving priority to prayer and discussions that relate experience to the text meant that there was no risk of inferring the task was objective reading, or one that left readers stranded on the author's horizon.[403] Nevertheless, caution is necessary to put in place safeguards to balance critical approaches with faith, so that they do not disrupt important ways that Christians make instinctive connections with God's word in the Bible. In view of declining biblical literacy, [404] it is key to cultivate faith expectation that participants might find personal, meaningful connections with the Bible as this was confirmed to be a crucial motivation in scriptural engagement.[405] An essential conclusion is that critical questions are not necessarily harmful to this. In fact, they can help bring to light that beneath apparently simple connections with the Bible may be some fundamental gaps or contradictions between the text and lived experience. Articulating this can be liberating, and lead to deeper faith.[406] However, these questions can be disruptive and must be facilitated with pastoral sensitivity that does not separate Christian spirituality from study of the Bible.

In doing so, critical engagement with the text, and the world 'behind' the text has the potential to serve the overall priority and desire of a group to connect with the Bible

[403] See my discussion of previous research, in particular, Village, *Bible and Lay People*, in Chapter 1.2, above.
[404] See Chapter 1, above.
[405] See Chapter 5, expressed in terms of "God speaking," or "prodding" people, or "wow!" moments of disclosure, etc.
[406] Oliver, *Holy Bible*, p 13

'in front of' the text.[407] Questions that related to the world of the readers were most successfully balanced with those with which the text was concerned ('behind' or 'of' the text) as it became clear that the latter were crucial to discovering fresh insights and spiritually significant meaning in the text.

Honest dialogue between readers was linked with openness to the text, but the creation of safe space was essential to this. It was crucial not to impose troublesome questions on the group but allow them to arise from readers, respecting their personal and spiritual implications in relation to possible meanings of the text. Beyond the reading approach, a high motivation to engage with the Bible was linked with the atmosphere of the group itself. An important result from honesty was that it brought to light the significance of attending to ambiguities and even confusion that might most helpfully be recognised as inconsistencies between espoused, operative, and normative theologies.[408] Most importantly, however, it was not merely myself as researcher that recognised such inconsistencies, but that participants themselves came to awareness of these. Other factors helping overcome a perceived division between head and heart approaches include the following:

- Attention to the way questions opened up in dialogue. These may appear to be about a reader's experience, but can be shown to be relevant as critical questions interrogating the meaning of the text.
- Metaphoric and symbolic language, and space for imaginative reading both facilitate integration between cognitive and affective modes of thinking and processing knowledge.
- The framework of critical study within prayerful reading is crucial; ultimate trust in God's goodness is the 'safe container'[409] that can support risky questions.
- An advantage of a combined approach of spirituality with bible engagement is that it finds a place to take seriously the hermeneutical issue of reader 'virtue' that corresponds with transformative process in both disciplines.[410]

[407] See *Written*, p. 20, and Chapter 1.2, above.
[408] Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010). I refer to three voices, as most of the participants did not engage directly with the fourth category of formal theology.
[409] See Chapter 6.4.1, above.
[410] See my discussion in chapter 2.

7.2.2 How Scripture may 'speak' in its own voice'?

The beneficial result of paying attention to the way a hermeneutical approach is experienced by ordinary readers is that it offers further insights for ways that pastoral ministry can facilitate deeper understanding. A simple but crucial factor here was incorporating prayer as part of critical Bible engagement. This supports Gordon Fee's suggestions about how exegesis and spirituality 'must interface in order for us to be interpreting Scripture properly *on its own terms.*'[411] A Lectio Divina approach was helpful in this case, taking seriously a theology of inspiration in giving space for God to be, as it were, 'participating in the conversation,' and not simply addressed as a listener, for example, in words of thanks for what has been learned, at the end of the evening.

The question of how Scripture was 'allowed to speak', however, is further illuminated by complementing models that conceptualise understanding as either the effect of a performance on an audience, or of the assimilation of two horizons of view, with a model that conceptualises multiple levels of dialogue. Although this also has limitations, it gives a more accurate view of what happened in this study, and offers some helpful insights. Understanding came from learning to listen to, and importantly, learning to distinguish, a number of (metaphoric) 'voices' that featured in the space of a literal group conversation. Importantly, however, not everyone who can read has yet developed their own voice as a dialogue partner with the text that is assumed in various ways across hermeneutical models. Affirmation and a sense of 'freedom to speak' in the group was essential, but this was linked with the facilitation of self-involved engagement with the text as part of a process of finding one's voice as a reader.

This enabled participation in dialogue that led to identification of other (conflicting) influences (or 'voices') that impacted the reading, including one's tradition and culture, as well as the literal voices in the room including with different perspectives on these. The voice of the human author, who we came to refer to simply as 'John,'

[411] Fee, 'Exegesis and Spirituality', p. 29. (Author's italics)

became distinguishable from that of God. The metaphor of distinguishing voices also accounts for the way interpreting the Bible is not merely a cognitive exercise, but is also about discernment. It relates to that fact that an audible voice is recognised not primarily by what is being said, but by a more personal recognition of its tone. This was seen in the way participants paid attention to a sense of 'gut feeling' arising from texts, from memories they evoked, and from different views offered by others. A case arises here for further research into the place discernment has in a hermeneutical approach to biblical understanding; and possible links with between a group facilitator and spiritual director, who enables others to discern.[412]

The visual metaphor also resonates well with ordinary readers and includes the helpful (albeit over worn) concept of multiple viewpoints. For instance, the task of hearing God was alongside that of "seeing Jesus" more clearly, as a result of recognising distorting 'lenses' we bring as readers. The benefit, however, of the more complexified view of what was experienced as a process of coming to perceive 'voices'[413] is the way these were seen to be competing influences. The metaphor of dialogue conveys the sense of trying to identify and recognise God among other voices; and discern their source. It can express the task of trying to distinguish, for instance:

1. One's inner voice from God's voice
2. One's inner voice as distinct from what is imposed and unconsciously absorbed from upbringing and culture
3. Jesus' views from those of church leaders and preachers
4. Jesus' views from the pervasive cultural values
5. God's word in the "core," "true" meaning of the Bible[414] from bias in translated expressions

The range and depth of the questions arising from the group was, for myself as researcher, a surprising finding. It is possible that I underestimated the complexity of

[412] Barry and Connolly, *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, p. 67-8.
[413] Although I am suggesting something different, Cameron's insightful theory of the four voices of theology has been helpful in thinking about this, in *Talking about God in Practice*, p. 13.
[414] These come from participants' words, which I am using here to link with the broader hermeneutical idea of valid interpretations, see Chapter 2.4.5, above.

thinking that would come from a diverse group of women, many of whom were using a second language. However, evidence has clearly shown the personal meaningfulness of these questions. They added a weight of importance to the need to interpret the text and dig deeper for multiple levels of meaning beyond its face value, as a "surface" reading cannot help but bring to mind unconscious associations with pervasive thinking in culture and church teaching etc. The significance, therefore, is that these critical questions were not only significant to spiritual understanding but were *acknowledged* as being so. Participants saw this as the questions arose in the interface between experience and the Bible.

This made persisting with difficult or uncomfortable questions worthwhile, including a perseverance to consider additional interpretive questions concerning the text that may not be otherwise engaging or interesting. As the group facilitator, it was slightly overwhelming to lead a group asking questions that I cannot answer, and it was helpful to spend another year continuing meeting after this course. But it was perceived as a positive factor that I did not regard myself as having all the answers, and was not the source of answers, but was able to facilitate interest and confidence in the Bible as a source of encounter with God. This is a significant finding given reports of the weight of concern felt by pastoral practitioners that harming faith of parishioners may be an inevitable result of giving space for critical questions, as well as further possible concerns about a need to resolve complex problems.

7.3 What has been learned, and suggestions for ways forward

My attempt to present my findings authentically as possible may have come at the price of neat categories that are helpful to the reader. It also meant that respecting some of the most important emerging findings about facilitating understanding led me beyond my starting interest in hermeneutical theory, as questions about the group context and facilitating learning emerged as being equally critical. Despite this, it has been possible to discern a number of aspects from Schneiders' approach that provide a helpful foundation for facilitating integral hermeneutical Bible engagement. Having reported this above, my conclusions may now be tidied up to show how they relate to the theory I began with. For each case, some questions meriting further research and practical suggestions are offered for facilitating groups, within Schneiders' threefold

categories that featured earlier in this study: The nature of the text (course content), the nature of the reading (approach), and the nature of the readers (pastoral and spiritual concerns.) As previously discussed, this is then extended to include conclusions about the facilitator's own role in the process of understanding.

7.3.1 The nature of the text

A benefit of Schneiders' approach is the opportunity it invites to clarify the theological implications of reading the Bible as both 'text' and as Holy Scripture. Inviting discussion along these lines early in the course had several advantages. It provides an opening for participants to recognise their theological presuppositions and establish common language in the group to articulate spiritual concepts that they might not be accustomed to discussing, such as whether we perceive or 'hear' God 'speak,' and what we mean by this. An early discussion of what the Bible is and how it relates to God's Word stimulated faith and expectation. Furthermore, recognising the dual sense of authorship that is both divine and human gave a sense of permission to question and probe the text.

Given that Schneiders' hermeneutical work is strongly linked to and focused within her expertise in Johannine scholarship, this has limited the scope of my own findings about hermeneutical questions. Despite this, however, a strong outcome has been that setting the boundary around a certain book was instrumental in making the materials accessible. Designed as an introductory course, the priority is not an unrealistic attempt to cover every key hermeneutical question, but to whet the appetite of Christians so that they are motivated to further exploration.

A weakness in the content of this course is that it was not complemented with an overview of the biblical metanarrative.[415] This may compound the challenge of facilitating a wide range of preunderstanding in requiring time to explain some essential background points for the benefit of one or two participants. In agreement with others, hermeneutical engagement with a single biblical text would be improved if it follows some time spent introducing a coherent view of the biblical story.

[415] Hunt is right to argue that this lays an important foundation, and all the more in light of decreasing biblical literacy today, 'Promoting Biblical Engagement', p. 98-9.

However, this hermeneutical engagement has been shown to provide important ways to overcome some educational and theological barriers that arose as being susceptible of impeding Christians from finding 'their place within the Scripture.'[416]

Within the book of John, giving a priority to passages about stories of encounter was also beneficial for the reason that narratives are perhaps the most inclusive and accessible form of biblical text, making fruitful reading possible even for those with less theological pre-knowledge. My findings also found benefits of the enjoyment of stories being the way they stimulate intrigue, or curiosity, that extended to future explorations of other parts of the Bible. Focusing on John was therefore both helpful and limiting. It provides a helpful starting place for its valuable resource for crucial theological reflection about Scripture and 'The Word of God.' It also leaves some key questions unanswered. It did not continue beyond the relative safety of John to fully face some more troubling questions elsewhere, such as violence and other questions about God associated with the Old Testament.

A helpful pointer arising from this study, however, is seeing a number of ways that resources from adult education may hold much undiscovered relevance to pastoral contexts of Bible reading, and may provide crucial resources for pastoral and hermeneutical challenges encountered today. This observation arose from seeing indications of strong parallels between ways that participants came to face and grapple with troublesome questions (such as sexism in the Bible and the judgement of God) with threshold concept negotiation in adult education.[417] Seeing knowledge as transformational and integrative, this theory may shed further light on how to facilitate a group through 'troublesome' phases. A need for further research is indicated here on the matter of how readers facing 'counterintuitive knowledge' face a potentially 'liminal phase' where learners can become 'stuck.'[418] Resources for facilitating learners from an educational perspective may be directly relevant to both hermeneutical and pastoral challenges.

[416] Bartholomew and Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture*.
[417] See Chapter 6.4.2, above.
[418] Chandler, 'Cognition or Spiritual Disposition', p. 91.

This study also points to the need for more work to be done to discover what kind of adaptations are required from this course to apply to other genres, such as Old Testament prophecy and narrative history. A benefit, however, of the Lectio Divina approach is that it is not specific to the Gospels (in contrast with, for example, imaginative prayer based on an Ignatius approach), and may still enable integration between a prayerful and critical approach. Despite the limitations, starting with a spiritually engaging book resulted in high motivations to then explore other biblical books. This is significant when motivating readers has been shown to be a simple but pervasive challenge. Furthermore, in light of my findings about the significance of establishing safety and of the spiritual impact of a reader's image of God,[419] it is appropriate to start the hermeneutical project with a focus on Jesus, as God's ultimate self-revelation, and work outwards from there.

7.3.2 The nature of the reading

A focus on literary methods also has the potential to inspire exploration of new levels of meaning and lead to fresh insights. Being focused on a single genre allows a manageable range of materials to became familiar and enable participants to make their own connections and discoveries, which was found to be hugely rewarding, and importantly, this was especially the case for those who were familiar with the texts. A literary approach that was new can bring new 'life' to familiar passages, without needing to try to cover complex theories.

Knowledge about historical and cultural context, and also theological connections was appreciated as having been interesting, relevant, and sometimes essential, but I did not explore learning approaches beyond discussions supported by information on handouts that I had prepared. A limitation in my findings comes from the limited engagement that was possible with historical questions in this format. However, it has been shown more generally that a gospel text, including resources to help understand the factual basis of Jesus' Resurrection, serves as a secure foundation from which other biblical genres, including more historical and critical perspectives, could be safely explored. By contrast, a literary approach gave the capacity for readers to make

[419] See my discussion in Chapter 6.5.4, above.

their own discoveries as they recognised patterns of textual features of the text, and so was a means of facilitating the kind of curiosity and exploration that led to some key moments of disclosure. More than passing on information or knowledge about the text, this complemented a priority to facilitate reader's self-involved understanding that emerges from their interaction with the text.

Acknowledging the presence of the writer was a helpful way to take seriously the gospel's dimension as a human text. This helped facilitate questions arising in the course of honest discussions including about language, translation, and power imbalances. In this way, a further benefit of literary questions, was the way they contributed to a realisation of the need to interpret the Bible, as complexities in the language and issues of translation led to other critical questions. Creating space to articulate questions was invaluable to the process. Even when this left questions open-ended and unresolved it did not have a primarily negative impact on the group's relationship with the Bible.

Imaginative readings of narrative texts may also stimulate motivation and the patience required to engage with a variety of historical, cultural, and theological questions concerning the text. Questions about these things were felt to matter especially because they enriched understanding about what was happening in the story, why it was happening, and insights about the characters that might otherwise be missed. In this way narratives invite attention to plot and text but engage readers at a 'deeper-than-intellectual level,'[420] rather like the way knowledge of a former historical period enriches engagement with a historical novel.

In focusing on the *process* of understanding, this study has brought to light ways in which disclosures about meaning in the texts corresponded with acknowledgement of related presuppositions. As far as I have found, the nature of this finding is original, as the crucial factor is not that the researcher can link the readers' presuppositions to outcome; but that something happens when a reader identifies their own presuppositions. In light of this, I have shown three interrelated categories of presuppositions that were key areas of emerging self-awareness. These are:

[420] Thiselton, *New Horizons*, p. 567.

1. Theological assumptions about the Bible and how it is read
2. Cultural and religious experience
3. One's perception of God (as primarily judging, or nurturing, or befriending etc.)

Recognising these may help a group facilitator to avoid closing down certain 'digressions' involving memories or experiences that may be essential to this process of awareness. Significant to the question of transformational understanding, here, is that these kinds of presuppositions are difficult to *un*learn because they do not result from something that can easily be recalled having been articulated in words. As it is hard to rationalise it cannot easily be countered through means of argument or counter-knowledge. For this reason, the employment of imaginative empathy should be taken seriously as a means of transformative engagement with the Bible narratives. Importantly, this incorporates cognitive and affective levels in a discovery of meaning,[421] and has the possibility of uncovering unconscious assumptions.

7.3.3 The nature of the Readers

Attending solely to matters about the content and reading methods in a course would not have given a complete view; and questions about hermeneutics had to be complemented with theories of education that consider processes of adult learning in groups. Facilitating spiritual understanding is not only about the Bible, it is about the reader and group.

My findings draw attention to the need to help a group develop a fruitful approach to spiritual reading. All the more in a consumerist culture, this may include the need to nurture skills of reading, such as developing confidence in one's own response to a text, and in particular, skills and dispositions associated with the 'art' of spiritual reading; such as unhurriedness and attentiveness. Hermeneutical theories about virtue therefore complement Schneiders' focus on the spiritual task of interpretation. Virtues or dispositions such as patience, honesty, and earnest listening may be cultivated in connection with qualities demonstrated by the group and leader to one

[421] Craig Dykstra, 'Pastoral and Ecclesial Imagination', in *For Life Abundant,* 41-61, p. 48.

another. It is helpful to perceive this in a multi-directional dialogue that is the space of interaction between readers, God, and the text. In view of this, the outcome of sharing a meal together as well as Scripture is the opportunity it offers to form relationships and trust, that can result in a greater openness to different interpretive viewpoints.

The significance of interpersonal factors upon learning result not only from the way trust facilitates safe space to speak, but also that openness to different ideas was strongly related to openness to the person who expressed such a view. This gives a key opportunity for Christians with established views about the Bible to consider new perspectives beyond matters that might be considered to be "settled."[422] More than the strength of argument that might validate the view itself, openness to such views came primarily from a respect for the person expressing the different perspective. For some groups, this may be more readily fostered when different theological views are perceived as relating to a certain cultural perspective,[423] providing a way forward to break open unconscious barriers that prevent Christians from being able to see meaning beyond interpretive views embedded in their own, particular tradition.

There is support in educational theory regarding my focus on dialogue as a locus for understanding.[424] Like the imagination, dialogue has the benefit of involving a mixture of multiple levels of 'beliefs, feelings, and values.'[425] This underlines the need for group facilitation to include attention to relationship-building, and indicates the potential fruitfulness of including resources from educational theory in possible training for group facilitators. A potential problem with the model of dialogue/discourse, however, is highlighted in Patricia Cranton's warning about the potential implications for those who are disempowered and may not be able to join in the discourse, if it is the discourse itself that is 'central to empowerment.'[426]

[422] See Chapter 6.4.2, above.
[423] This finding reflects a wider argument for the need to diversify reading groups see chapter 6.3.2, above.
[424] Cranton, *Understanding and Promoting*, p. 97; Jane Kathryn Vella, 'The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning', *Reflective Practice*, 36 (2016), 95–101.
[425] Ibid, p. 59.
[426] Ibid, pp. 97-98.

This indicates a need for further reflection of ways in which a reading group may be inaccessible to certain people or groups, and is still limited in its breadth of learning styles. For instance, how might similar questions for critical Bible engagement be facilitated to an audience whose preference is oral? How might a parallel course be constructed for non-readers that might complement a text-based course; perhaps concluding with dialogue between the two groups to expand what has been learned? Resources might include, for instance, films about Jesus, and Gospel art, as well as engaging with readings from John.

A particularity of this case study was the diversity of theological backgrounds and cultures, including a majority of participants having lived in another country. As this was found to link with a crucial open-minded dispositions, it would be helpful to press the question in further studies of more homogeneous groups, typical to many other UK contexts, to see how open-mindedness may be cultivated. A second particularity was that the study focused on one gender. Implications of this, such as the relevance of theories of women's faith development, spirituality, and practices of reading have been explored. However, my primary interest has been primarily on the participants' experience as Christian readers, rather than as women readers.

An important conclusion has been the need to avoid imposing prepared, critical questions, but allow these to arise from participants as they interact with the text. This requires navigating responsible guidance towards questions that are appropriate and necessary to bring to the text, in tension with the way conversation moves in unexpected directions when there is a sense of freedom to speak. When safety is established from confidence that risky questions will not be imposed on a group, there is a chance for critical questions to be engaged with without harming the faith of participants. Such a balance can only be discerned in particular contexts, but a key principle has been found to be sensitivity to the hidden levels of spiritual significance relating, for instance to one's image of God, that can underpin seemingly safe or familiar passages.

7.3.4 The nature of the facilitator

Educational theory provides crucial resources to complement a hermeneutical view of understanding, when this takes place in a reading group. It affirms my finding that authenticity is more important than expertise; as it facilitates open dialogue. A challenge here is balancing the importance of affirming participants with a commitment to promoting the questions the text is concerned with, and how to make secure boundaries of valid interpretation.[427] Part of the task of facilitating transformational understanding is recognising the significance of helping readers to bring questions pertinent to their own experience to the text, as it led to self-awareness. Concurring with other research showing that ordinary Christians are mostly interested in questions 'in front of the text,'[428] a tendency of the group in my study was to continually compare and contrast passages with personal experience. While this was important, balance was essential here. A key challenge for the group leader is how to capture the interest of the group in a wider variety of questions.

Having discussed the importance of readers' self-involvement in the reading process, the significance of genuine interest and engagement with questions has been established. This question concerns observations of human responses to the Bible where a problem has been shown that Christians often continue to reread their own assumptions into the text.[429] It is expressed well in the idea of a need to learn "how to separate my voice from God's voice." Allowing Scripture to "speak" also means that a group needs to engage with the kinds of questions that the text itself was concerned with, including a range of critical questions that give appropriate distanciation between reader and text.[430] In this way, the text is not simply transformed by the reader but its own message is given space to 'speak' in a way that has power to transform or expand–not only a readers' knowledge–but their spiritual understanding. In agreement with Schneiders and others, critical questions are key to enabling the text to be a conversation partner that is strange and 'other' as well as familiar and comforting.

[427] See my discussion above in Chapter 6.3.2, of the need to balance 'honesty' with 'conviction' in relation to Vanhoozer's work.
[428] See Chapter 1.2, above.
[429] See Chapter 1.1 and 1.2.
[430] See my references in chapter 2 to discussion about critical questions.

The impact of engaging in the company of other readers proved to be more significant to the question of facilitating hermeneutical engagement than I had anticipated. Group reading significantly complexifies what might be viewed as an expansion of two reader-text horizons. In referring specifically to Anthony Thiselton's excellent development of this analogy, I am not ignoring that factors discussed here are also incorporated within his vision of a reader's horizon, being their 'world' that includes tradition and community, experienced through effective history. My point is simply to propose that a shift from this visual metaphor to one of conversation is fruitful to the task of facilitating understanding in a group context. It is helpful to see the role of facilitator here in light of a biblical idea of host; facilitating a safe space for the kind of 'critically open' dialogue in which no one party is controlling the outcome, or even knows what will result from it.[431]

This research has provided unique insights regarding ways a critical, hermeneutical approach impacts spiritual understanding in practice. It offers encouragement for the question of whether resources from scholarship can be translated into something that enables both understanding and spiritual enrichment; that does not harm but encourages faith expectations that God might be encountered through engagement with the Bible.

[431] This reflects Thiselton's discussion of Gadamer's discussion of conversation with an 'other.' *New Horizons*, p. 222.

Appendix 1: Overview of the 8 weeks

The following notes give a brief overview of the key content, themes, and approach used each week. Weeks 7 and 8 are treated together as they both cover the same chapter in John, and so share similar aims and approach.

Week 1: The Bible, God's Word and the reader

Bible passage
John 1:1-18, Prologue: Jesus, the Word, coming to reveal God

Jesus revealed as: The Word of God

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
The importance of revelation, Jesus as the self-revelation of God

Hermeneutical tools
Thinking about the Bible as Scripture, considering the impact of a reader's context, bias, and attitude (or qualities/virtues) in reading, and the possibility of a plurality of valid interpretations.

Key Resources: *Written That You May Believe*, Introduction, and Chapter 1, 'The Fourth Gospel as Sacred Scripture.'

Main teaching input: Bible as sacrament: Holy Scripture and human writers

Additional handout: Metaphors for thinking about what the Bible means to us.

Aims:

- Reflect on the way we assume, understand, and experience the relationship between the Bible and the Word of God
- Think about how different ways of engaging with the Bible relate to our spirituality
- Encourage a general expectation and faith in God's desire to reveal himself, and encourage open-minded attitudes to new insights; and receptivity through prayers and opportunities to share and listen to what is personally meaningful to one another.
- Consider how a readers' context (culture, social status, upbringing, church background etc.) impacts interpretation.
- Start to be aware of the intentional use of language and literary techniques (symbolism, repetition, etc.) and how this may 'open up' meaning.

Practical/pastoral considerations

- Start with participants briefly introducing themselves

- Explain the purpose of materials: Booklets as an invitation to brief note-making/journaling to help collect thoughts, and the gospel text printed on A4 sheets to allow underlining, notations etc.
- Explain the way questions will initially invite voluntary responses without pressure for everyone to answer everything
- Encourage the importance of earnest listening; making space for those who are quiet; and respecting different views and confidentiality

Week 2: John's Gospel as Text

Bible passages
John 1:35-51 Jesus calls the disciples
John 20:30-31 '… written that you may believe'

Hermeneutical tool
Discovering meaning from the text: structure, repetition and symbolism

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
The process of 'believing into Jesus,' in Schneiders', Written, pp. 51-52 (which I rephrase to say 'stages of increasingly believing in Jesus.')

Jesus revealed in many different ways:
Lamb of God (v. 29), The one who baptises with the Holy Spirit (v. 33), Son of God (v. 34), Lamb of God (v. 36), The Messiah (v. 41), Son of Joseph (v. 45), Rabbi (v. 49), Son of God (v. 49), King of Israel (v. 49), Son of Man (v. 51).

Key Resources
- *Written*, Chapter 2; 'The Fourth Gospel as Text,' especially pp. 26-28, 41-47, 87, 270-6, 273, and 278 (and Chapter 4, 'Symbolism in the Fourth Gospel' (pp. 63-65; 76-77).
- A4 copies of 'Luke Painting the Virgin and Child' by Simon Marmion.

Main teaching input: Bible as text: Work of Art, surplus meanings, using Marmion's painting of 'St Luke painting the Virgin and Child' to illustrate the theological role of the Evangelist, and extending that to suggest the tools of paint etc. are like literary techniques.

Aims of this study

- Consider the part that human writer(s) play in presenting witness accounts of Jesus
- Recognising textual features and strategies, and see how these might enhance understanding, and preparing ideas to build on in future weeks. In particular:

- A basic awareness of an intentional Structure in the Gospel, recalling last week's prologue that will be followed by the body of events (within which our focus is personal encounters), then epilogue
- Noticing imagery and the use of 'simple' rich words (see, come, believe, follow, dwell/abide; light, life, love)
- Noticing different names used for Jesus and how they show the possibility people have different aspects of knowing Jesus, that might be expanded and deepened

Practical/pastoral considerations

Some participants may be uncomfortable or uneasy discussing the concept of Jesus as 'King of Israel.' Not only are many Christians in Lebanon Palestinian, Lebanon and Israel are still formally at war. For pastoral reasons, hymns and Christmas carols are usually adapted in Lebanon to change expression such as 'King of Israel' for 'Lord Emmanuel'. In case a discussion this week to clarify the theological meaning of 'Israel' is not appropriate, another opportunity this will arise in week 4, when the group will have developed more trust.

Week 3: Revelation and New Birth

Bible passage
John 3:1-15: Nicodemus comes to Jesus

Hermeneutical tool: The importance of the spirituality within the text, the implied reader

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
Revelation and Jesus' self-gift: believing, life-light-love, discipleship. (*Written*, pp. 48-55)

Jesus revealing: The God who gave you birth, Schneiders' discussion of feminine imagery of God is also referred to on the handouts. (*Written*, pp. 123-4)

Key Resources
Written, Chapter 3, 'The Spirituality of the Fourth Gospel.'

Main teaching input: Spirituality of John: Revelation and new birth, believing, discipleship etc., some significant Old Testament references.

Aims of this study

- To 'get a feel' for main features of Johannine Spirituality, by linking some key themes with the metaphor of new birth in the narrative.

- Exploring different ways to understand 'revelation' (e.g. knowing something/knowing someone).
- Starting to see the significance of narratives of personal encounters with Jesus as an invitation for us to respond (i.e. believing, receiving, following, abiding)
- Noticing how confusing things in John (such as the way Jesus seems to deliberately confuse Nicodemus) can also related to literary strategies (such as destabilising techniques of irony and paradox) to subvert readers' own assumptions for fresh understanding.
- Encourage participants to be aware of ways that that they might perceive God is revealing himself to them through his Word.

Practical/pastoral considerations

Aiming to encourage curiosity about the literary style without overwhelming participants with technical ideas.

Week 4: Inclusive Discipleship

Bible passage
John 4:1-42, Jesus meets a Samaritan Woman at the Well

Jesus revealed as: Messiah, and Saviour of the world

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
The importance of Jesus' self-revelation, believing, life-light-love, and discipleship.

Hermeneutical tools:
Historical context, Old Testament/theological symbols (water, and the water jar) theological interpretation, and feminist theology.

Key Resources: *Written That You May Believe,* Chapter 8, 'Inclusive Discipleship.'

Main teaching input: Representative characters (*Written*, pp. 32-6) (or 'characters with symbolic significance,') imagery, symbolism, narrative structure, irony and metaphors.

Aims of this study

- Understand some background information about Samaritans, their theology, and reasons for the animosity with the Jews

- Explore how certain Old Testament references and symbols enriches the meaning of the narrative
- Consider how Jesus reveals himself to the woman
- Reflect on our experience of the Bible's portrayal of women
- Consider a feminist theological view that highlights the significance of the woman's role

Week 5: Believing and Commitment in the Fourth Gospel

Bible passage
John 9:1-41, The Man born blind

Jesus revealed as: Light of the World

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
The importance of Jesus' self-revelation, believing, life-light-love, The relationship between believing and commitment, and seeing the danger of seeking one's own glory in John as the 'major impediment' to commitment to God. (Written, p. 85, 286)

Hermeneutical tools
The significance of Old Testament theology, historical context of the Johannine Community; (*Written*, pp. 80-5); meaning conveyed by irony, a literary 'wink,' and meaning arising from imaginative engagement with characters.

Key Resources
- *Written That You May Believe*, Chapter 5, 'Commitment in the Fourth Gospel'
- Citations chosen from familiar and accessible sources; Anglican Resources website, [1] www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf and Henri Nouwen, with Michael J. Christensen, and Rebecca J. Laird, and Henri Nouwen, *Spiritual Formation: Following the Movements of the Spirit* (New York: HarperColins, 2010), p. xxiii.

Main teaching input: Johannine community; persecuted at time of writing, Roman oppression and Samaritan/Jewish conflicts.

Aims of the Study

- The importance of identifying the key question(s) in the text (for instance the challenges and cost of commitment to Jesus; and other themes?)
- Understanding something about the historical context in which and from which the text was written, such as contemporary ideas about sin and disability, and possible challenges for the Johannine community at the time of writing. (*Written*, pp. 41-46).

- Recognising how meaning may arise from irony and double meaning. (*Written*, pp. 155-6)
- Engaging imaginatively with the characters
- Reflect on whether there are other groups of people who might experience a similar sense of exclusion from the Christian community as the blind man

Practical/pastoral considerations

- Consider the contextual challenges and opportunities of the calling to be witnesses of Jesus to others in a society which does not allow proselytisation.
- For those who have not previously engaged with the Bible in a personal way, it is helpful to briefly explain the tradition of 'Lectio Divina' as a model in Christian history and its presence in the Anglican Tradition today.

Week 6: Jesus revealed as the Resurrection and the Life

Bible passage

John 11:1-44, Martha and Mary at the raising of Lazarus,

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality

The importance of Jesus' self-revelation, believing, life-light-love.

Hermeneutical tool:

Acknowledging presuppositions, exploring the theology and spirituality in the text, with particular emphasis on the spirituality the text produces, and insights from feminist theology.

Key Resources:

- *Written*, Chapter 6, 'Women in the Fourth Gospel,' and chapter 10, 'The Community of Eternal Life.' Notes on the handouts are based on *Written*, pp. 113-4, 183, 113-4, 288; and Tom Wright, *For Everyone Bible Study Guides: John* (London: SPCK, 2010) p. 83.

Main teaching input: Seeing the significance of women in the Fourth Gospel.

Aims of the Study

- Seeing how meaning of this passage relates to its wider context in the unfolding narrative.
- Encouraging thinking about what is the question(s) that this passage is concerned with?
- Acknowledging presuppositions about the significance of women in the Christian faith
- Highlighting interpretations that show Jesus' approval of women who show initiative in their expression of faith

- Exploring the theological concept of presence and absence, and tension between experience of death and belief in eternal life. (Written, pp. 175-83)
- Engaging imaginatively with the characters to enable participants to become "caught up" in the text

Practical/pastoral considerations

In previous discussions the problem of a perceived invisibility of women in the Gospels has shown to be an important stumbling block to a number of participants. For this reason, feminist hermeneutical priority to highlight biblical resources that honour women are used. (Revelatory, pp. 175-83)

Week 7 and 8: "I am going away, and I am coming to you." (John 14:28)

Bible passages
John 20:1-18, Mary Magdalene: Encountering the Risen Jesus
John 20:19-30, Jesus risen in the midst of the disciples

Jesus revealed as: Risen Lord, our brother returning to the Father and dwelling among his people

Features of Fourth Gospel Spirituality
Discipleship (signified in Mary's exclamation of "Rabbouni") and the mysterious way in which relationship with Jesus continues after the Easter event (*Written*, pp. 54-56), and understanding the bodily Resurrection as Jesus' return to his own, and Jesus 'abiding' or 'indwelling' his people through the Holy Spirit/Paraclete. (*Written*, pp. 56-62),

Hermeneutical tools:
Priority for imaginative engagement with the text is an appropriate response to respecting their particular genre as what Schneiders calls 'theopoetic texts.' ('The Bible and Spirituality', 2013, p. 144).

Key Resources:
'Encountering and Proclaiming the Risen Jesus', Chapter 13, and *Jesus Risen in Our Midst*, Chapter 2, 'Touching the Risen Jesus: Mary Magdalene and Thomas the twin in John 20,' and Chapter 4, 'The Raising of the New Temple.' I use the expression 'extraordinary time' (*Jesus Risen*, p. 54) on the handout to discuss the text as a narrative theologising, or using story-telling techniques to convey spiritual reality, about the time Jesus was both present and absent.

Main teaching input:

Johannine spirituality concerning the presence of Jesus and the idea of 'Jesus' return to the Father and to his own.'

Aims of the Study

- Jesus' bodily resurrection, and 'how he is present to his disciples throughout time.' (Jesus Risen, xvii) (i.e.)
- Clarify confusion about the Mary's in the Fourth Gospel
- Invite a conversation about Jesus' bodily Resurrection to encourage any theological concerns, confusion, or difficulty to be shared.
- Reflect on the way the body 'grounds and manifests *identity through change*' to help understand the Johannine depiction of 'how he is present to his disciples throughout time.' (*Jesus Risen*, p. xvii)
- Consider how our reading of these passages relates to our experience of Holy Communion, as a potential way we might recognise and encounter Jesus in the midst of the ecclesial community. (*Jesus Risen*, p. 60)

Practical/pastoral considerations

My choice of a brief passage from Luke on the handout therefore has two purposes: While helping to clarify the identities of Mary of Mary Magdalene and Mary of Bethany, this passage also gives additional visibility to the women were present with the twelve, supporting Jesus, and 'following' him.

Engaging imaginatively is key to Schneiders approach in particular to theopoetic Resurrection narratives hermeneutical. Hoping to facilitate different learning styles in this way, I used candles on a table in the middle of the group, and following the final re-reading of the passage, dimmed the lights with an invitation to silent reflection about the reality of Jesus' presence in the story and among us.

Appendix 2: Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet for Research Participants in the Course, *Engaging with the Fourth Gospel*

Purpose of the Study

As part of the requirements for Doctorate of Theology and Ministry at Durham University I am carrying out a research project. The purpose is to understand to what extent learning from certain aspects of hermeneutics might be helpful or unhelpful to spiritually motivated readings of John's Gospel for a particular group of Christians.

What will the study involve?

The study will involve an 8-week Bible study course for women from All Saints International Congregation. I will record the Bible studies so that I can spend the time during the meeting focusing on the religious and spiritual significance of the materials, and will give the option to share your own (named or un-named) written reflection and feedback which you will be invited to make might make after the final Bible study.
I will journal my own thoughts and observations about what seems to be helpful or effective for the participants and after the 4th and 8th meeting study, I will present my thoughts and observations to the group regarding to invite their comments and feedback regarding my understanding of what is helpful or not helpful to their religious encounter with the Bible from the course. This will enable me to adjust my approach after week 4, if necessary.

Do you have to take part?

Of course the answer to this is no! Participation in this study is voluntary, and will depend on whether you would like to attend, which is why you have been given written information have chance to think about. If you decide to participate and subsequently change your mind, you are free to withdraw from any involvement in the research at any point, in which case written materials regarding your involvement will be deleted.

How will your participation in the study be kept confidential?

The recorded data will be kept strictly confidential for the duration of the study and on completion of the thesis they will be retained for a further six months and then destroyed. All participants will be protected by anonymity, which means I will ensure that no real names or clues to your identity appear in the essay. If you are happy to allow me to quote some of your words in my writing (this is an additional option in the consent form below), these extracts will be presented entirely anonymously.

What will happen to the results?

The results of the research will be written up as part of my Doctoral thesis. This will be seen by my supervisor and external examiners. Some of my work from this thesis may be later published in a research journal.

Any further queries?

If you need any further information, you can email me (amy_roche@hotmail.com), or call me (78832510), or you can speak with me at church. If you agree to take part in the study, I will give you a consent form to sign.

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Consent Form

I, …….. agree to participate in Amy Roche's research study.

- The purpose and nature of the study has been explained to me in writing.
- I am participating voluntarily.
- I understand that the Bible studies and discussions will be recorded.
- I understand that anonymity will be ensured in the write-up by disguising my identity.
- I understand that permission below includes for possible future publications.
- I understand that I can withdraw from the study at any time, whether before it starts or while I am participating. In this case written materials referring to my participation will be deleted.

(*Please tick one box*:)
I agree to anonymous quotation/publication of comments I make in the Bible Study Group ☐
I do *not* agree to any quotation/publication of comments I make in the Bible Study Group ☐

Signed……..

Date……..

Appendix 4: Bible Course Handouts

Reading John's Gospel

Week 1: The Bible and God's Word, and the Reader

Opening Question: Thinking about how we might relate to the Bible
Look at the words on the handout. What kind of image or expression makes most sense to the way you think about the Bible?
Circle one or more with which h you identify, or note another expression that comes to mind.

Bible passage: John 1:1-18
Notice which words/phrase in this passage most strikes you, and any questions or feelings arising from it.

Considering the Bible as:

- **Sacrament**

An example of a sacrament is Holy Communion. A sacrament means 'the visible signs of God's inward and invisible grace.' The visible sign or symbol (such as bread or wine) is an ordinary thing that takes on sacred significance in a mysterious way that is linked with important ways we receive God's grace.

- **A 'Tent of Meeting'**

In the Old Testament, the Tent of Meeting (also called 'Tabernacle') was the place God would meet his people, usually represented by Moses, whom he
often spoke with. In the New Testament, (Hebrews 9), Jesus is shown to offer, through his own body, a greater and more perfect 'Tent of Meeting.'

Questions about the passage

- Why might Jesus be called the Word of God here?
- Discuss what different things this might imply in different languages: (NT Greek, Hebrew, our own spoken languages?)
- What does the very start of this Gospel make you think of?

Suggested key words: Word, come, born, children, son, life, light, darkness.

Thinking about ourselves as readers
Discuss an example from Mark Powell's research about students from different countries reading the story of the Prodigal Son.

- Do you think factors such as personal background, gender, social status, or culture impact the way we read the Bible? If so, in what ways?
- Do you think our attitude impacts our reading? (For instance what impact might trust, curiosity, perseverance, openness, suspicion, humility etc.?)

Return to the passage: John 1:1-18

What strikes you now as we return to the first passage - is the same thing that you first noticed? Has what you understood been enriched or changed in any way?

Journal or share
Reflect on this evening, and note in your journal about something you will take away with you from this evening. It might be something you have leant, a feeling or question (about the text, God, or yourself), a decision, or prayer.

Summary

Jesus came like a 'witness' that we might know God, (John 1:18) and John's Gospel was written as a 'witness' so that through reading it today we might increasingly know and believe in him.

Reading John's Gospel

Week 2: John's Gospel as Text

John: A distinctive Gospel

Opening Question John's Gospel has been said to be like an impressionist portrait. In what ways might painted portraits sometimes be even more revealing than the actual physical face itself? What do you think about this way of thinking of the writer of John?

Bible passage: John 20:30-31
Thinking about the discussion about 'Word of God' last week, discuss the relationship between *word, witness/testimony*, and *Jesus*.

Bible passage: John 1:29-51, Jesus calls the disciples
Which words/phrase from this passage most strikes you? Or note a particular question/feeling.

Questions:

- How would you sum up what the whole of chapter 1 is about?
- What might the significance be of seeing an echo of the creation here?
- What other names are used for Jesus in chapter 1?
- What do you think these meant to the hearers at the time?

Think about some of the different views of Jesus:
As well as the 'Lamb of God' (v. 29), discover the different names or views of Jesus are expressed in this passage? (For more about the expression 'Son of Man': See Daniel 7:13-14, and Romans 5:14, 5:18-19.)

- Which of these descriptions are most/least important to you. Why?
- Do you think it is problematic or helpful to the church that each of the four Gospels is different, and gives a distinct perspective of Jesus?

Noticing the importance of language:
What do you think is the reason that John always uses the verb 'believe' (used 99 times in this English translation) rather than the nouns 'faith' or 'belief'? What does it mean to 'believe in' someone?

Explore in groups:
Look at the verbs in the passage: Which seem most important and why?
How might these show spiritual stages or processes of 'believing into' Jesus?

Special use of 'simple' (or not so simple!) vocabulary in John
Life, death, love, hate, light, dark, see, hear, speak, know, seek, truth, one, in, dwell, believe, sign, work, word, glory, kill, rise, son, father, born, child, come, go, send, eat, drink, bread, water, world, where, name, joy, sin, hour, I am, peace.

Return to the passage: John 1:29-51
What strikes you now as we return to the first passage - is the same thing that you first noticed? Has what you understood been enriched or changed in any way?

Journal or reflect
Jesus asks the first disciples "What are you looking for"/what do you seek? Do you identify with any of the first disciples in this passage? How do you respond to Jesus' question?

Reading John's
Gospel

Week 3: Revelation and New Birth

Jesus' great self-gift: The Word came as a witness of God, to be born of 'flesh' so that, by believing in him, through the witness of these words, we might be born of the Spirit and have eternal life in him. Jesus invites us, like the first disciples, to an ever-deepening and life-changing relationship with God.

Opening Question:

- What does the word 'revelation' mean to you?
- If revelation is somehow linked with understanding that results from hearing God's Word; which of these do you think describe the way that works: Static or dynamic? Informative or relational?

Bible passage: John 17:20-23, Before Jesus died he prayed that his disciples would be 'sanctified in the truth; which is God's word', and adds "I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one… so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me." (p. 20)

Bible passage: John 3:1-21, Nicodemus
This passage follows the story of Jesus driving out the money changers from the Temple, and prophesying to the Jews that the Temple would be destroyed and after three days he would raise it up. The Jews were confused about this. (p. 2-3)

Questions to explore in the passage:

- Who was Nicodemus?
- What do you think is significant about the detail that he came to Jesus 'at night'?
- What would the symbolic language of water and spirit have meant to him? (See Ezekiel 36:25-27)
- The image of being 'born of God' relates to Old Testament pictures of God that include feminine images, see: Genesis 1:27, 'So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them'; Deuteronomy 32:18, 'The Rock that begot you… and the God who gave you birth.' What questions does this raise for you?
- Read Numbers 21:4-9. How might the story of Moses lifting up the snake in the desert make sense to what Jesus is saying to Nicodemus?
- What do you think about Nicodemus' response? (Also see John 7:50, and 19:39.)

Suggested key words: life, death, light, love, hate, dark, world, judgement, save, see, new, hear, know, truth, believe, above, ascend, descend, rise, born, child, water, Spirit.

New Birth

- Brainstorm the idea of 'new birth'

- Thinking about the key steps in the disciples' journey of belief we looked at last week:
  how do these relate to the idea of new birth?

See (light)	Call (name)	Love, joy
Know	Belong to	Grow, follow
Believe in	New life	Sisters and brothers

Adoption
The metaphor of new birth is also complemented by the idea of adoption in the other Gospels. Unlike a new born baby, we might have preconceived ideas about who God is that we might need to *un*learn. How might things that seem contradictory or confusing in John be helpful to our journey of knowing God?

Journal or reflect
What most lingers in your mind from the passages this evening? How might God be speaking/revealing himself to you now?

Reading John's Gospel

Week 4: Inclusive Discipleship

Pray
'Jesus said, "Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them."' (John 7:37-38)

Opening Questions:
- Has there ever been a time you have felt excluded in church or by something you have read in the Bible?

Bible Passage: John 4:1-42, The Samaritan Woman at the Well

Summary
This is a story of complete transformation of one life, leading to radical mission that brought a whole town to know Jesus. Here was a woman who was rejected by other people, but through personal encounter with Jesus she comes to understand and believe who he is and her calling to serve him. This is a story of an extravagant invitation and radical inclusion into God's Kingdom (the 'New Israel') and God's mission to reach all people with the Good News.

Questions to explore in the passage:

- How do you imagine the woman felt along her familiar walk to the well?
- How does Jesus respond to the Samaritan woman?
- What comparisons might be drawn with the story of Nicodemus?
- How is Jesus' identity progressively revealed to the woman?
- What do you think is important about believing in Jesus as 'the Messiah'? (See John
- What do you think is significant about the symbolism of a) The Well and b) living water?
- What might indicate the woman becomes 'filled to overflowing'?
- How many instances of can you find of the contemporary role of women being subverted in this passage? What do you think is significant about this?
- What is striking about Jesus' conversation with the disciples?

Understanding the Text:

Characters with symbolic significance in John's Gospel
There is a theory about why certain important characters in John are nameless; that they are intended to be given symbolic significance in addition to their significance as real individuals: For example, 'the man born blind' and 'the Beloved Disciple.' Similarly, 'the Jews' is a term that becomes equated with 'the world,' and it is important to see that is not meant to signify all Jewish people, but certain Jewish leaders who heard the message but chose to reject Jesus. The Samaritan woman may be 'representative' in two ways; of the Samaritan community's full acceptance and participation into the Kingdom of God, and the 'New Israel' who is given to Jesus, the Bridegroom 'from above.'

Samaritans
Many Jews hated the Samaritans. Following the return from Assyrian captivity of the Northern tribes of Israel, the people of Samaria broke the covenant of Moses by worshipping false gods of 5 foreign tribes (2 Kings 17:13-34). Jews saw them as unclean, unfaithful, disqualified from the true faith and would be excluded from the Kingdom when the Messiah came.

Samaritan Theology
Unlike Jewish understanding, the Messiah was not anticipated to be a descendent of David, but a prophet like Moses who, upon his return, would reveal all things and restore true worship; not in the temple of Jerusalem but in the Northern Kingdom of Israel, represented by Mount Gerizim.

Read the passage again (John 4:3-41)

What has been most significant or poignant to you in the reading this evening?

Reading John's Gospel

Week 5: Being filled to overflowing: Telling and dwelling

Opening question: What is a witness?

Bible passage: John 9:1-41, The Man born blind

"Telling"

- Why were the man's parents so afraid of saying Jesus healed him?
- What risk did the man born blind take in talking about his belief in Jesus?
- What do you think gave them this level of courage and conviction?
- What do you notice about what the Samaritan woman and the blind man say to others about Jesus? (see 4:29, and 9:25)
- Thinking about the exclusion we imagine the Samaritan woman and the blind man felt,

  who might be the groups of people who feel like 'outsiders' in our own society today?
- What can we learn from this in the challenges we discussed last week about talking about our faith?

Dwelling:
Like the Samaritan woman, the 'man born blind' was changed by his encounter with Jesus What are some of the ways we 'draw near to God' to be (re)filled by his living water?

'***Lectio Divina':*** is a contemplative way of reading the Bible. It dates back to the early centuries of the Christian Church and was established as a monastic practice by Benedict in the 6th century. It is a way of praying the scriptures that leads us deeper into God's word. We slow down. We read a short passage more than once. We chew it over slowly and carefully. We savour it. Scripture begins to speak to us in a new way. It speaks to us personally, and aids that union we have with God through Christ who is himself the Living Word.'[1]

Reflection
Have you ever shared something about your personal faith with someone else? Was it easy/difficult?

Suggested key words: Abide/stay/rest/dwell, tell, witness, testimony, words, love, joy, save, see, know, water, Spirit, thirst, hunger, bread, harvest, fruit, friend, full/fullness.

Journal/ share in pairs: Something that is significant to you in this passage?

Summary

In these personal encounters, Jesus reveals himself to each person in a way that "meets them where they're at," but also enlarges their understanding.
To the spiritually thirsty woman at the well, Jesus reveals himself as the source of living water, and challenges her previous religious assumptions. The blind man receives both physical and spiritual sight, his newfound belonging to Jesus is both precious and costly.

[1]See www.anglicancommunion.org/media/253799/1-What-is-Lectio-Divina.pdf

Reading John's Gospel

Week 6: Jesus revealed as the Resurrection and Life

Opening Questions:

- In your experience of the Church in your home culture, are women portrayed as being equal disciples of Jesus with men?
- What impact does this have on your personal experience of the Christian faith?

Bible passage: John 11:1-44, **Martha and Mary at the raising of Lazarus**

Which words/phrase from this passage most strikes you? Or note a particular question/feeling.

Question to discuss

- What do you feel about Jesus' decision to stay two more days 'after he heard' Lazarus

was ill? *The Greek makes this point more emphatic with the word 'therefore': to mean: 'When therefore [hōs oun] he heard that Lazarus was ill, he stayed two days longer in the place where he was.' (11:5-6)*

- (11:6) (see also Jesus' response to his mother, the royal official and his brothers; John

2:4, 4:47-50, 7:2-6).

- Has there ever been a time you have felt a similar frustration/pain expressed by both

Martha and Mary? (11:21,32)

What do you think is significant

about:

- The timing of this final sign (on the eve of Jesus' passion)?
- Jesus' response to the death of his friend? (11:33-35)

- Martha's statement of faith? (11:27)

Summary of John 11

When John's Gospel was being written the Christian community was suffering persecution. This passage explores the meaning of death/life and absence/presence and draws the reader to identify with Martha and Mary into a new understanding of death, without denying the experience of pain or a feeling that God is absent; neither of which undermine the depth of Jesus' love (11:3,5) and compassion. (33-35) Martha believes in a concept of future resurrection (Isaiah 65-66) but at the moment this is not very comforting to her. (11:24) Jesus' response brings the future hope into the present reality: Resurrection is not just a concept but a person. And he is standing right in front of Martha. Eternal life is
unquenched by death, and the absence felt is Jesus' way of being present during the time of waiting. We are not asked not to weep but only not to despair, for the one in whom we believe is our resurrection because he is our life.[2]

Women in John's Gospel

In John's Gospel, women are not contrasted with men in a negative or subordinate, or inferior light, but in a starkly positive light: None of the Johannine women are shown to fail to believe, to hide, or betray Jesus.
Several narratives show women who take the initiative to respond to Jesus in discipleship and ministry, in ways that do not conform to cultural expectations. In fact Jesus approves and defends them against those who object or grumble.
Women are two of the most important witnesses to Jesus, and have the privilege of receiving three of Jesus' most important self-revelations: his identity as the great "I am", as Messiah (the Samaritan woman), that he is the Resurrection and the Life (Martha), and that his is risen and glorified (Mary Magdalene).3

Journal or share

Reflect on this evening, and note or share something you will take away with you from this evening. It might be something you have leant, a feeling or question (about the text, God, or yourself), a decision, or prayer.

[2]These notes are based on Tom Wright's book, *John for Everyone*, p. 83
[3]See Sandra Schneiders' book, *Written That You May Believe*, pp. 113-4, 288.

Reading John's Gospel

Week 7: "I am going away, and I am coming to you." (John 14:28)

Opening Question: What does it mean for us to know the presence of Jesus today?

John 14:16-20 "And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever. This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it neither sees him nor knows him. You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you. In a little while the world will no longer see me, but you will see me; because I live, you also will live. On that day you will know that I
am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.

Bible passage: John 20:1-18, Mary Magdalene: Encountering the Risen Jesus
Last week we saw in Martha and Mary's story the difficult experience of feeling God/Jesus as absent or not answering in times of need. John's Gospel helps us come to a new understanding of Jesus' presence to believers of all time through the narratives of personal encounters with Jesus in the 'extraordinary time' as they adjust to experiencing the post- Easter Jesus in a different way than they had known him before his death.

Clarify: This story is the first time we meet Mary Magdalene in John's Gospel. She has often been linked with the woman who anointed Jesus' feet (who was anonymous in 3 Gospels), but this is not evident in the Gospels, only that she followed and served Jesus.

Luke 8:1-3
Soon afterwards he went on through cities and villages, proclaiming and bringing the good news of the kingdom of God. The twelve were with him, as well as some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities: Mary, called Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, and Joanna, the wife of Herod's steward Chuza, and Susanna, and many others, who provided for them out of their resources.

Reflect: Look back at Mary's encounter with Jesus, 20:11-18. Consider/highlight some of the following important words in the text (or add others you notice). Reflect quietly or discuss what you notice in pairs.

Suggested key words:
Look/looking, see/saw, believe, turn, return,
weep, know, ascend, go, announce,
dark, brothers, Father, teacher.

Questions for discussion

- What is significant about the detail that it was dark?
- Why do you think Mary did not recognise Jesus at first?
- What is significant about the way she *does* recognise him? (See 10:3-4)
- Why do you think Jesus tells Mary "Do not hold on to me"? (20:17)
- Why do you think Jesus gives the message to Mary?

- What do you notice about her message in light of:

John the Baptist's first announcement? (1:29-34)
Jesus' power to make people children of God? (John 1:12)

Final reflection: Read again John 20:11-16
How is Jesus revealing himself more to you through this passage?

Food for thought: Knowing Jesus, in John's Gospel
To know where Jesus comes from is to know who he is.
To know where he dwells is to be with him.
To know where he is going is to follow him.'

Reading John's Gospel

Week 8: "I am going away, and I am coming to you." (John 14:28)

Opening Question
What does it mean that the church is called 'the body of Christ'?

Bible passage: John 20:19-30 Jesus risen in the midst of his disciples

Overview
This passage shows that the Church now becoming the body of the Risen Lord who is in its midst. The church is filled with his Spirit and commissioned to now be the presence Jesus, just as Jesus had been the presence of God in the world.

Questions for discussion
- Who does Jesus appear to in the room, and who do you think this group represents today?
- What is the reason for the change in their state of fear (v. 19) to rejoicing (v. 20)?
- What do you find significant in the story about Thomas' experience?
- Why do you think there is no record in John of Jesus departing from the community of believers?
- How does this passage relate to the way you think about sharing 'the body of Christ' during Holy Communion?
- Why does Jesus breathe on the disciples?

- What do you think Jesus means when he says "As the Father has sent me, so I send you"? (20:21)

Encountering the Risen Jesus today:
1.) By the presence of the Holy Spirit and
2.) In the midst of the Church (his body)

1. By the Holy Spirit
John baptises with water; Jesus baptises with the Holy Spirit (John 1:33)
"You know him, because he abides with you, and he will be in you. "I will not leave you orphaned; I am coming to you." (John 14:17)

2. In the midst of the Church
Mary Magdalene must move from engaging with Jesus through his physical being to experiencing his living presence in the community of his followers. Likewise, Thomas must move from fixation with the physical dimension to faith that the Risen Jesus is now present in a new way; his body is physically present on earth as he abides in his disciples.[5]

Reflect:
How does our understanding of this passage relate to our experience of the body of Christ, in terms of:

- The way we treat our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ?
- The way we witness to the world the nature and presence of Jesus?

Read again John 20:18-23

Prayer
"As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love […] This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you." (John 15: 1, 9-12)

[5]See Sandra Schneiders' book, *Jesus Risen in our Midst*, p. xix.

Appendix 5: Focus group questions, weeks 4 and 9

Focus Group, Week 4 (following the Bible Study)

Questions for discussion:

- What have you found most helpful in the Bible course so far?
- Is there anything you in these meetings that we are not doing/talking about that would be helpful to you?
- Is there anything you have found *un*helpful in the approach we have used so far?

Focus Group, Week 9

Questions for discussion:

- In thinking about the last eight weeks, is there a moment, discussion or passage that stands out to you, and why?
- Has anything been significant to your personal faith or helped your relationship with God? What do you think was most helpful?

Taking these one by one, which of the following kinds of questions have been more or less important to you, and why?

- the history/culture of the writer
- the way the text is written, clues like images and repetition of language
- linking things with other parts of the Bible
- thinking about how things in the passage effect our experience of God (like the different names used for Jesus)
- thinking about the significance of women in the gospel, and its significance/challenge to us as women.

- Were any of the questions about the Bible ever unhelpful to you and your faith? (If so why?)

- If you were going to do this course again, what do you think could be improved?

Appendix 6: Handout for group discussion of my proposed findings

What were the most important things for our personal faith in reading together in the Bible Course: (*what* happened, and *how* did it happen?)

Most significant moments

1. Being given space to reflect on and express our own view.
2. Relating to characters in the stories enabling a greater sense of closeness to God through Jesus' closeness with the characters,
3. Seeing and recognising former "lenses" for reading the Bible, often associated with church experience.
4. Unlearning some of the guilt and shame associated with the Lord's table and his death and Resurrection. His own words repeated "peace be with you" even though they had let him down. Seeing instead how he longs to connect with us personally (hearing him say our name)
5. Seeing Jesus more clearly: Refining and sharpening our vision of God through Jesus (reaching outsiders, concern for people on margins not just the religious people)
6. Seeing that we really have a place in the story, seeing female role models (Martha, Mary Magdalene meeting the Risen Jesus). This helps us see we belong in the place where God is.
7. Seeing others being inspired, hearing different perspectives (culturally and socially), and seeing others grow in God.
8. A sense of belonging and community as women who belong in the story and are significant to God as part of his church.
9. Need the leader to give firmer boundaries to help keep the group on track with questions about the passage, some more general questions to be put aside for another time.

Things that were most helpful

1) Slow, attentive reading, hearing different voices for characters read.
2) Imaginative engagement and empathy with characters: to be really *in* the story.
3) Realising different "lenses" by hearing multiple perspectives and sharing experiences, especially comparing Jesus' attitudes in John with churches regarding:
    - The role of women
    - Sin and shame
4) Getting to understand John's style, language, symbols and metaphors, repetition, signals, and irony. Freedom to explore more "deeply."
5) Seeing "new things" in familiar passages from learning about background and culture of the time and/or theological links with the Old Testament; "digging, back and forth."

6) Being allowed to ask question about the way the Bible is translated and preached about; especially talking about why we sometimes feel there is less priority to women than men in the Christian faith.
7) Atmosphere of trust, openness, patience, freedom to ask things we might not elsewhere in a "safe haven" where we support each other.

Bibliography

Adam, Peter, *Hearing God's Word: Exploring Biblical Spirituality* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2004).

Adam, A. K. M. 'The New Testament and the people of God' *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 56, 1 (1994), 164-6.

---- *Faithful Interpretation: Reading the Bible in a Postmodern World* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2006).

----, et al, *Reading Scripture with the Church: Toward a Hermeneutic for Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

Adler, P. A., & Adler, P. 'Observational Techniques' in *Handbook of Qualitative Research,* ed. by N. K. Denzin and Y. S. Lincoln (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1987), 377-92.

Agee, Jane, 'Developing qualitative research questions: a reflective process', *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 22, 4 (2009), 431-47.

Anderson, Sherry R., and Patricia Hopkins, *The Feminine Face of God: The Unfolding of the Sacred Women*, New York: Bantam, 1992).

Anglican Communion, *Deep Engagement; Fresh Discovery: The Bible in the Life of the Anglican Communion* (2012), Available online at: http://www.anglicancommunion.org/ministry/theological/bible/docs/pdf/FULL.pdf [accessed 7 January 2016].

Anglican Consultative Council, *Bible in the Life of the Church*, ACC, 15, 14, 1 (2012) available online at: https://www.anglicancommunion.org/media/39714/bible-project-acc-15.pdf [accessed 7 January 2016].

Arweck, Elizabeth, and Mathew Guest (eds.), *Religion and Knowledge: Sociological Perspectives* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012).

Ashton, John, *Understanding the Fourth Gospel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

---- , (ed.), *The interpretation of John* (London: SPCK, 1986).

Astley, Jeff, *Ordinary Theology; Looking Listening and Learning in Theology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002).

---- , Leslie J. Francis, and Colin Crowder (eds.), *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996).

---- 'Formative Education and Critical Education', *The Philosophy of Christian Education* (Birmingham, Ala: Religious Education Press, 1994), 78-107.

Bailey, Kenneth, E., *Jesus through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies in the Gospels* (London: SPCK, 2008).

Baird, William, 'The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture', *Encounter*, 54,1 (1993), 92-4.

Ballard, Paul, 'The Use of Scripture', in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Practical Theology*, ed. By Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 163-72.

---- and Stephen R. Holmes (eds.), *The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Readings in the Place and Function of Scripture in the Church* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005).

Barram, Michael, 'The Bible, Mission, and Social Location: Toward a Missional Hermeneutic', *Interpretation*, 61, 1 (2007), 42-58.

Barry, William A., and William J. Connolly (eds.), *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*, 2nd edn. (New York: HarperCollins, 2009), 85-106.

Barta, Karen A. 'The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture', *Theological Studies*, 54, 1 (1993), 165-6.

Barth, Karl, *Church Dogmatics I.2: The Doctrine of the Word of God*, ed. by Geoffrey W. Bromiley and Thomas F. Torrance, trans. by G.T. Thomson and Harold Knight (London: T&T Clark, 2004).

Bartholomew, Craig G. and Michel Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture: Finding Our Place in the Biblical Story* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).

---- et al., (eds.) *Out of Egypt: Biblical Theology and Biblical Interpretation* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2004).

Barton, Stephen C. 'New Testament Interpretation as Performance', *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 52, 2 (1999), 179–208.

---- *The spirituality of the Gospels*, (London: SPCK, 1992).

Bauckham, Richard *(ed.), The Gospels for All Christians: Rethinking the Gospel Audiences* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1998).

---- *The Testimony of the Beloved Disciple: Narrative, History, and Theology in the Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2007).

---- and Carl Mosser (eds.), *The Gospel of John and Christian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Beirne, Margaret M., *Women and Men in the Fourth Gospel: A Genuine Discipleship of Equals* (London: T&T Clark International, 2003).

Berg, Bruce L., *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 8th edn. (Boston: Pearson, 2014).

Bernard, H. Russell, *Social Research Methods: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*, (London: SAGE, 2000).

Berthoud, Pierre, 'Discerning Spirituality: Biblical and Reformed Perspectives', *European Journal of Theology,* 19, 1 (2010), 50-62.

Bielo, James S., *Words Upon the Word: An Ethnography of Evangelical Group Bible Study* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

Billings, Todd J., *The Word of God for the People of God: An Entryway into the Theological Interpretation of Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Bloesch, Donald G., *A Theology of Word and Spirit: Authority and Method in Theology* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1992).

Blomberg, Craig L., 'Where Should Twenty-First-Century Evangelical Biblical Scholarship be Heading?', *Bulletin For Biblical Research*, 11, 2 (2001), 161-72.

Bockmuehl, Markus, *Seeing the Word: Refocusing New Testament Study, Studies in Theological Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006).

---- and Alan J. Torrance, eds., *Scripture's Doctrine and Theology's Bible: How the New Testament Shapes Christian Dogmatics* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich, *Reflections on the Bible: Human Word and Word of God*, ed. by Manfred Weber, trans. by M. Eugene Boring (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2004).

Bowald, Mark, A., *Rendering the Word in Theological Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2013).

Braaten Carl and Robert Jenson (eds), *Reclaiming the Bible for the Church,* (Edinburgh: Eerdmans, 1995).

Brenner Athalya and Carole Fontaine (eds), *A Feminist Companion to Reading the Bible: Approaches, Methods and Strategies*, 2nd edn., (London: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 2001).

Berntsen, John A., 'Christian Affections and the Catechumenate', in *Theological Perspectives on Christian Formation: A Reader on Theology and Christian Education*, ed. by Jeff Astley et al. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996), 229-41.

Briggs, Richard, S., 'Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Method and Truth in Context', *Anglican Theological Review*, 97, 2 (2015), 201-17.

----'Biblical Hermeneutics and Practical Theology: Method and Truth in Context', *Anglican Theological Review*, 97, 2 (2015), 201-17.

---- '"These are the days of Elijah?": The Hermeneutical Move from 'Applying the Text' to 'Living in its World'', *JTI,* 8, 2 (2014), 157-74.

---- *The Virtuous Reader: Old Testament Narrative and Interpretive Virtue* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2010).

---- 'Juniper Trees and Pistachio Nuts: Trust and Suspicion as Modes of Scriptural Imagination', *Theology*, 112 (2009), 353-63.

----'The Role of the Bible in Formation and Transformation: A Hermeneutical and Theological Analysis', *Anvil*, 24, 3 (2007).

----*Light to Live by: How to Interpret the Bible*, (Bletchley: Scripture Union, 2005).

Briggs, Melody R., *How Children Read Biblical Narrative: An Investigation of Children's Readings of the Gospel of Luke* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2017).

Brouard, Susanna, 'Using Theological Action Research to Embed Catholic Social Teaching in a Catholic Development Agency: Abseiling on the Road to Emmaus' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Anglia Ruskin University, 2015).

Brueggemann, Walter, *The Book that Breathes New Life: Scriptural Authority and Biblical Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 2005)

---- *Interpretation and Obedience: From Faithful Reading to Faithful Living* (Minneapolis: Augsburg,1991).

Bryon, Gay L., and Vanessa Lovelace's introduction (eds.), 'Methods and the Making of Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics', *Womanist Interpretations of the Bible: Expanding the Discourse* (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2016).

Buker, Bill, 'Spiritual Development and the Epistemology of Systems Theory', *Journal of Psychology and Theology,* 31, 2 (2003), 143-53.

Bultmann, Rudolf, **'**Is Exegesis without Presuppositions Possible?', *Existence and Faith: Shorter Writings of Rudolf Bultmann* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1961) 194-200.

---- *Jesus Christ and Mythology,* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1958).

Cady, Linnell E., 'Hermeneutics and Tradition: The Role of the Past in Jurisprudence and Theology'*, Harvard Theological Review*, 79 (1986), 439-63.

Cameron, Helen, and Catherine Duce, *Researching Practice in Ministry and Mission: A Companion* (London: SCM, 2013).

---- , et al., *Talking About God in Practice: Theological Action Research and Practical Theology* (London: SCM, 2010).

Chandler, Quentin, 'Cognition or Spiritual Disposition? Threshold Concepts in Theological Reflection', *JATE*, 13, 2 (2016), 90-102.

Charry, Ellen T., 'Christian Spirituality: Definition, Methods and Types', in *The New SCM Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Philip Sheldrake (London: SCM, 2005).

---- *By the Renewing of your Minds: The Pastoral Function of Christian Doctrine* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

---- 'Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, Hope', *Journal of Ecumenical Studies*, 25.2 (1988), 276-78.

CODEC (Communication in the Digital Environment), at St John's College, Durham University, https://www.dur.ac.uk/news/newsitem/?itemno=8234. [accessed 3 May, 2016].

Collins, Kenneth J. (ed.) *Exploring Christian Spirituality: An Ecumenical Reader* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 2000).

Conn, Joann Wolski. *Spirituality and Personal Maturity* (Lanham: University Press of America, 1994).

Cooling, Margaret, *How to Engage with the Bible in Small Groups* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2010).

Countryman, L. William, *The Poetic Imagination: An Anglican Spiritual Tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1999).

Cowan, Michael A., and Bernard J. Lee, *Conversation, Risk & Conversion: The Inner and Public Life of Small Christian Communities* (Orbis Books: New York, 1997).

Crain, Margaret Ann, and Jack L. Seymour, 'The Ethnographer as Minister: Ethnographic Research in Ministry', *Religious Education*, 91, 3 (1996), 299-315.

Cranton, Patricia, *Understanding and Promoting Transformative Learning* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus, 2016).

Creswell, John W., *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches*, 2nd edn. (London: Sage, 2007).

Crossley, James G., *Reading the New Testament: Contemporary Approaches* (Abingdon; New York: Routledge, 2010).

Crossley, Michael et al, (eds.), *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9, 4 (2014), 412-25.

Davis, Ellen F., and Richard B. Hays (eds.), *The Art of Reading Scripture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003).

De Villiers, Pieter G. R., 'Peace in Luke and Acts: A Perspective on Biblical Spirituality', *Acta Patristica et Byzantina* 19, (2008) 110-34.

---- 'Spirituality, Theology and the Critical Mind', *Acta Theologica Supplementum*, 8 (2006), 99-121.

Dickson, Ian J., 'The Bible in Pastoral Ministry: The Quest for Best Practice', *JATE*, 4, 1 (2007), 103-21.

Downey, Michael, *Understanding Christian Spirituality* (Mahwah: Paulist, 1996).

----'Evangelical Equality: Religious Consecration, Mission and Witness', *Spirituality Today*, 38 (1986), 293-302.

Dreher, Carlos A., *The Walk to Emmaus*, trans. by Paulo Ueti Barasioli (São Leopoldo: Centro de Estudos Biblicos, 2004).

Dunn, James D. G., 'The Bible and Scholarship: On Bridging the Gap between the Academy and the Church'. *Anvil,* 19,2 (2002).

Dwyer, Corbin, 'The Space Between: On Being an Insider-Outsider in Qualitative Research', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 8,1 (2009), 54-63.

Dyck, Elmer (ed.), *The Act of Bible Reading: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Biblical Interpretation* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1996).

Egan, Gerard, *Face to Face: The Small-Group Experience and Interpersonal Growth*, Belmont CA: Wadsworth, 1973).

Fee, Gordon D., *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2002).

---- 'Exegesis and Spirituality: Reflections on Completing the Exegetical Circle', *Crux*, 31, 4 (1995), 29-35.

Finucane, Daniel J., *Sensus Fidelium: The Use of a Concept in the Post-Vatican II Era* (San Francisco: International Scholars, 1996).

Fiorenza, Elisabeth Schüssler, *Bread not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984).

Ford, David G., *Reading the Bible Outside the Church: A Case Study* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2018).

Foster, Richard with Kathryn A. Helmers, *Life with God: A Life-Transforming New Approach to Bible Reading* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 2008).

Fowl, Stephen E., (ed.), *The Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997).

---- *Engaging Scripture: A Model for Theological Interpretation* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998).

France, Richard T., 'A Tale of Two Mountains: Mountains in Biblical Spirituality', *Rural Theology*, 6 (2008), 117-25.

Frances, Leslie, 'Laughter, the Best Mediation: Humour as Emotion Management in interaction', *Symbolic Interaction*, 17 (1994), 147-63.

---- and Jeff Astley, 'The Quest for the Psychological Jesus: Influences of Personality on Images of Jesus', *Journal of Psychology and Christianity*, 16, 3 (1997), 247-59,

Gadamer, Hans-Georg, *Truth and Method*, 2nd edn., translation revised by Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (London: Continuum, 2004).

Goldingay, John, *How to Read the Bible* (London: Triangle, 1997).

Gooder, Paula, *Body: Biblical Spirituality for the Whole Person* (London: SPCK, 2016).

Graham, Helen R., 'Biblical Foundations of Spirituality: Touching the Finger to the Flame', *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, 67, 4 (2005), 708-9.

Green, Joel B. (ed.), *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation*, 2nd edn., (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2010).

Greene, Colin J. D. and Martin Robinson, *Metavista: Bible, Church and Mission in an Age of Imagination* (Milton Keynes: Authentic, 2008).

Griffiss, James E., 'Tradition and Innovation in Anglicanism: Hermeneutics in a Global Communion', *Anglican Theological Review*, 82, 4 (2000), 647-788.

Griffiths, Paul J. 'Reading as a Spiritual Discipline' in *The Scope of Our Art: The Vocation of the Theological Teacher*, ed. by L. Gregory Johnes and Stephanie Paulsell (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2002).

Grizzle, Anne F. 'Group Spiritual Direction: Offering Spiritual Depth and Community Building in Diverse Settings', *Journal of Spiritual Formation & Soul Care*, 11, 2 (2018), 218–27.

Guder, Darrell, 'Missional Hermeneutics: The Missional Vocation of the Congregation and How Scripture Shapes That Calling', *Mission Focus*, 15, 1 (2007), 125-42.

Hauser, Richard Joseph., 'Living Strings: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality', *Horizons*, 23, 2 (1996), 361-2.

Hays, Richard B., 'A Hermeneutic of Trust', in *The Conversion of the Imagination.*

----'Hearing God's Words: Exploring Biblical Spirituality', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 41,1 (2006), 172-73.

Heikki, Räisänen, (ed.), *Reading the Bible in the Global Village*, (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2000).

Holmes, Augustine. *A life Pleasing to God: The Spirituality of the Rules of St. Basil*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2000).

----'How Can the Bible be Authoritative?' *Vox Evangelic*, 21 (1991).

Huffard, Evertt, W., 'When Scholarship Goes South: Biblical Scholarship and Global Trends', *Restoration Quarterly*, 48, 2 (2006), 65-72.

Hull, John, M., *In the Beginning There was Darkness: A Blind Person's Conversations with the Bible,* (London: SCM, 2001).

---- *What Prevents Christian Adults from Learning?* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

Hunt, Cherryl, 'Promoting Biblical Engagement among Ordinary Christians in English Churches: Reflections on the Pathfinder Project' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Exeter, 2016).

Hunter, Rodney, J., 'The Bible in Pastoral Practice: Themes and Challenges', *Contact*, 150 (2006), 4-7.

Hurn, Brian and Barry Tomalin, *Cross-Cultural Communication: Theory and Practice* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013).

Illeris, Knud, *How We Learn: Learning and non-learning in School and Beyond* (London: Routledge, 2007).

Jacobs, Alan, *A Theology of Reading: The Hermeneutics of Love* (Cambridge: Westview, 2001).

Jensen, Eric A., and Charles Laurie, *Doing Real Research: A Practical Guide to Social Research* (London: Sage, 2016).

Jesuit School of Theology, online at; https://www.scu.edu/jst/about/people-of-jst/faculty/sandra-m-schneiders-ihm-std/ [accessed 20 June 2019].

John of the Cross, Saint, *St. John of the Cross, The Collected works of Saint John of the Cross*, trans. by Kieran Kavanaugh and Otilio Rodriguez; with Kieran Kavanaugh, (Washington, D.C.: ICS Publications, 1991)

Johnson, Luke Timothy, *The Real Jesus: The Misguided Quest for The Historical Jesus and The Truth of the Traditional Gospels* (San Francisco: Harper, 1996).

Kelsey, Catherine L., *Schleiermacher's Preaching, Dogmatics, and Biblical Criticism: The Interpretation of Jesus Christ in the Gospel of John*, (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2007).

Kim, Micah Eun-Kyu, 'A New Approach to Biblical Criticism: Spiritual Interpretation', *The Asia Journal of Theology*, 19, 2 (2005), 241-55.

Lakey, George, *Facilitating Group Learning: Strategies for Success with Diverse Adult Learners*, (San Fransisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).

Lash, Nicholas, 'Performing the Scriptures', in *Theology on the Way to Emmaus* (London: SCM, 1986), 37-46.

Lawrence, Louise J., *The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts* (London: SPCK, 2009).

Lescher, Bruce H. and Elizabeth Liebert, eds., *Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Sandra M. Schneiders IHM*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

Lewis, Richard D., *When Cultures Collide: Leading Across Cultures* (Boston: Nicolas Brearley Publishing, 2006).

Llewellyn, Dawn, 'Safe and Risky Readings: Women's Spiritual Reading Practices', in *Religion and Knowledge: Sociological Perspectives*, ed. by Elizabeth Arweck and Mathew Guest (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 166-77.

Lombaard, Christo, 'Biblical Spirituality and Interdisciplinarity: The Discipline at Cross-Methodological Intersection', *Religion and Theology*, 18 (2011), 211–25.

Longman, Tremper, *Introduction to Old Testament Commentary Survey*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999).

Lyon, Stephen P., 'Mind the Gap! Reflections on the "Bible in the Life of the Church" Project', *Anglican Theological Review*, 93, 3 (2011).

MacDonald, Fergus, 'The Psalms and Spirituality: A Study of Meditative Engagement with Selected Psalms Among Edinburgh Students' (unpublished doctoral thesis, Edinburgh University, 2007),

Magolda, Peter, and Lisa Weems, 'Doing Harm: An Unintended Consequence of Qualitative Inquiry?', *Journal of College Student Development,* 43, 4 (2002), 496-9.

Malley, Brian, *How the Bible Works: An Anthropological Study of Evangelical Biblicism* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2004).

Martin, Francis, *Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word* (Naples: FL, Sapientia Press, 2006).

Martyn, J. Louis, *History and Theology in the Fourth Gospel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003).

McGrath, Alistair E., *Christian Theology: An Introduction*, 5th edn. (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

McKnight, Edgar, V., and Elizabeth Struthers Malbon (eds.), *The New Literary Criticism and the New Testament* (Valley Forge, PA: Trinity Press International, 1994).

Mercer, Justine, 'The Challenges of insider Research in Educational Institutions: Wielding a Double-edged Sword and Resolving Delicate Dilemmas', *Oxford Review of Education*, 33 (2007), 1-17.

Meye, Robert P., 'The Imitation of Christ: The Means and End of Spiritual Formation', in *The Christian Educator's Handbook on Spiritual Formation* (Michigan: Baker, 1994), 99-212.

Meyer, Jan H. F., and Ray Land (eds.), *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

Moberly, Walter, 'What is Theological Interpretation of Scripture?', *Journal of Theological Interpretation*, 3, 2 (2009), 161-78.

---- *The Bible, Theology, and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

Niebuhr, Richard H., *Christ and Culture* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

Nickoloff, James B., (ed.) *Gutiérrez, Gustavo: Essential Writings* (London: SCM, 1996).

O'Leary, Zina, *Researching Real-World Problems: A Guide to Methods of Inquiry* (London: Sage, 2005).

Oliver, Gordon, *Holy Bible, Human Bible: Questions Pastoral Practice Must Ask (*London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006).

Osborne, Grant R., *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove IL: InterVarsity, 1991).

Osmer, Richard R., *Practical Theology: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008).

Pattison, Stephen, Trevor Cooling, and Margaret Cooling, *Using the Bible in Christian Ministry: A Workbook* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007).

Peden, Alison, 'Contextual Bible Study at Corton Vale Women's Prison, Stirling', *Expository Times*, 117, 1 (2005) 15-18.

Perrin, Ruth H., *The Bible Reading of Young Evangelicals: An Exploration of the Ordinary Hermeneutics and Faith of Generation Y* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2016).

Perrin, David B., 'Exploring Christian Spirituality: Essays in Honor of Sandra M. Schneiders, IHM', *Horizons*, 35, 1 (2008), 174-6.

Pilli, Einike, 'Longing for a Better World: Towards a Critical Approach in Adult Christian Education', *Journal of European Baptist Studies,* 5, 1 (2004), 18–39.

Porter, Stanley E., and Matthew R. Malcolm, (eds.), *The Future of Biblical Interpretation: Responsible Plurality in Biblical Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2013).

Powell, Mark A., *What Do They Hear? Bridging the Gap Between Pulpit and Pew* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2001).

---- *Chasing the Eastern Star: Adventures in Biblical Reader-Response Criticism* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2001).

Proctor, John, *John's Jesus: The Message and Meaning of John's Gospel* (Cambridge: Grove, 2007).

Riches, John, (ed.), *What is Contextual Bible Study?: A Practical Guide with Group Studies for Advent and Lent* (London: SPCK, 2010).

Ricoeur, Paul, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

Ringe, Sharon H., *Wisdom's Friends: Community and Christology in the Fourth Gospel*, (Westminster: John Knox, 1999).

Rogers, Andrew P., *Congregational Hermeneutics: How do We Read?* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2015).

---- 'Review of The Word in Place: Reading the New Testament in Contemporary Contexts', *Journal Practical Theology* (2011), 4, 1, 132-4.

Rogers, Carl R., 'The Interpersonal Relationship in the Process of Learning', in *Culture and Processes of Adult Learning: A Reader*, ed. by Mary Thorpe, Richard Edwards and Ann Hanson (London: Routledge in association with the Open University, 1993), 228-42.

Rowland, Christopher and Zoë Bennett, 'Action is the Life of All: The Bible and Practical Theology', *Contact, The Bible as Pastor*, 150, (2006), 8-17.

---- , and John Vincent (ed.), *Gospel from the City,* (Sheffield: Urban Theology Unit, 1997).

Ruether, Rosemary R., 'Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Correlation', *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, ed. by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1985), 111-24.

Nicola Savvides et al, 'Journeys into Inner/Outer Space: Reflections on the Methodological Challenges of Negotiating Insider/Outsider Status in

International Educational Research', *Research in Comparative and International Education*, 9, 4 (2014), 412-25.

Scalise, Charles J., 'Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method', *Review & Expositor*, 91, 2 (1994), 272-4.

Schneiders, Sandra M., 'Biblical Spirituality: Text and Transformation', in *The Bible and Spirituality: Exploratory Essays in Reading Scripture Spiritually*, ed. by Andrew T. Lincoln et al. (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2013), 128-50.

---- *Jesus Risen in our Midst: Essays on the Resurrection of Jesus in the Fourth Gospel*, (Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2013).

---- 'A Hermeneutical Approach to the Study of Christian Spirituality', in *Minding the Spirit: The Study of Christian Spirituality*, ed. by Elizabeth A. Dreyer and Mark S. Burrows (London: John Hopkins, 2005), 49-60.

---- *Written that You May Believe: Encountering Jesus in the Fourth Gospel* (New York: Herder & Herder, 2003).

---- 'Biblical Spirituality', *Interpretation,* 70, 4 (2002), 133-42.

---- 'Biblical Spirituality: The Real Connection between the Bible and Life', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 37, 1 (2002) 184-5.

---- *The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture, 2nd edn. (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1999),*

---- 'The Study of Christian Spirituality: Contours and Dynamics of a Discipline', *Studies in Spirituality,* 8 (1998), 38-57.

---- 'The Bible and Feminism: Biblical Theology', in *Freeing Theology: The Essentials of Theology in Feminist Perspective* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), 31-57.

---- 'Spirituality in the Academy', *Theological Studies,* 50, 4 (1989), 676–97.

---- 'Theology and Spirituality: Strangers, Rivals, or Partners?', *Horizons*, 13, 2 (1986), 253-74.

----'The Paschal Imagination: Objectivity and Subjectivity in New Testament Interpretation' *Theological Studies*, 46 (1982), 52-68.

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth, 'Women-Church: The Hermeneutical Center of Feminist Biblical Interpretation', in *Bread, Not Stone: The Challenge of Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Boston: Beacon, 1995), 1-22.

---- (ed.), with the assistance of Shelly Mat, *Searching the Scriptures: A Feminist Introduction* (London: SCM, 1993).

Schwanda, Tom, 'Living Strings: An Introduction to Biblical Spirituality', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 311 (1996), 269-70.

Segov, Fernando, (ed.), *'What is John?' Literary and Social Readings of the Fourth Gospel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1996).

Sensing, Tim, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Thesis* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

Sheldrake, Philip F., *Explorations in Spirituality: History, Theology, and Social Practice* (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2010).

---- ed., *The way of Ignatius Loyola: Contemporary Approaches to the Spiritual Exercises* (London: SPCK, 1991).

---- *Spirituality and History: Questions of Interpretation and Method* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1998).

---- *Spirituality and Theology: Christian Living and the Doctrine of God* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd 1998), 55-64.

---- *Images of Holiness: Explorations in Contemporary Spirituality* (Notre Dame, Ind.: Ave Maria Press, 1987).

Slee, Nicola, Fran Porter, and Anne Phillips, (eds.), *The Faith Lives of Women and Girls,* ed. by (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013).

Smith Moody D., *The Theology of the Gospel of John*, (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Sonek, Krzysztof, 'Sacred Scripture: The Disclosure of the Word', *Journal of Theological Studies*, 59,1 (2008), 191-3.

Sotirios Sanrantakos, *Social Research*, 3rd edn. (Hampshire, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2005).

Sparks, Kenton L., *Sacred Word, Broken Word: Biblical Authority and the Dark Side of Scripture* (Michigan: Eerdmans, 2012).

Spearing, A. C., (trans.) *The Cloud of Unknowing and Other Works* (London: Penguin, 2001).

Swinton, John, and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research* (London: SCM, 2006).

Taylor, Edward W., and Patricia Cranton, *The Handbook of Transformative Learning: Theory, Research, and Practice* (San Francisco: Wiley, 2012).

Thiselton, Anthony C., *New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992).

Thompson, Judith, Stephen Pattison, and Ross Thompson, *SCM Studyguide to Theological Reflection* (London, SCM Press, 2008).

Todd, Andrew J., 'The Interaction of Talk and Text: Re-Contextualising Biblical Interpretation', *Practical Theology*, 6, 1 (2013), 69-85.

Treier, Daniel J. *Introducing Theological Interpretation of Scripture: Recovering a Christian Practice* (Nottingham, Inter-Varsity Press, 2008); and Stephen E. Fowl, 'Theological Interpretation of Scripture and Its Future', *Anglican Theological Review,* 99, 4 (2017), 671–90.

Trible Phyllis, *Texts of Terror: Literary-Feminist Readings of Biblical Narratives* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984).

---- *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (London: SCM Press, 1978).

Turner, Denys, *The Darkness of God: Negativity in Christian Mysticism* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1995).

Ujamaa Centre for Community Development & Research, 'Doing Contextual Bible Study: A Resource Manual', (2015) available online at http://ujamaa.ukzn.ac.za/RESOURCES_OF_UJAMAA/MANUAL_STUDIES.aspx [accessed 2 February 2018].

Vanden Berg, M.L., 'Bonhoeffer's Discipleship: Theology for the Purpose of Christian Formation', *Calvin Theological Journal*, 44, (2009), 333-50.

Vanhoozer, Kevin J., *Biblical Narrative in the Philosophy of Paul Ricoeur: A Study in Hermeneutics and Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

---- , Daniel J. Trier, and N.T. Wright (eds.), *Introduction to Theological Interpretation of the New Testament: A Book-by-Book Survey*, (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008).

---- , *Is There a Meaning in This Text?: The Bible, the Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).

Vella, Jane Kathryn, 'The Power of Dialogue in Adult Learning', *Reflective Practice*, 36 (2016), 95–101.

Vergote, Antoine, and Alvaro Tamayo, *The Parental Figures and the Representation of God: A Psychological and cross-Cultural Study,* (The Hague, Mouton Publishers, 1980).

Village, Andrew, *The Bible and Lay People: An Empirical Approach to Ordinary Hermeneutics* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2007).

Wakefield, Gordon S., *Groundwork of Christian Spirituality* (London: Epworth, 2001).

Walker, Simon P., *Leading out of Who You Are: Discovering the Secret of Undefended Leadership* (Carlisle: Piquant, 2007).

Waltke, Bruce K., 'Evangelical Spirituality: A Biblical Scholar's Perspective', *Journal of The Evangelical Theological Society*, 31, 1 (1988), 9-24.

Walton, Roger, 'Using the Bible and Christian Tradition in Theological Reflection', *British Journal of Theological Education,* 13, 2 (2003), 133-51.

Webster, John, *Holy Scripture: A Dogmatic Sketch,* 3rd edn. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

West, Gerald O., and Musa W. Dube, with Phyllis A. Bird, *'"Reading With": An Exploration of the Interface between Critical and Ordinary Readings of the Bible: African Overtures', Semeia,* 73 (1996), 1-284.

West, Gerald O., *The Academy of the Poor: Towards a Dialogical Reading of the Bible* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2003);

Westmoreland, Diane, 'Can Spiritual Maturity Be Nurtured in Northern English Anglican Congregations? An Exploration of Whether Parishioners Can Grow Spiritually through an Experiential Course on Prayer Using Methods Based in Ignition Practice', (unpublished doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2011).

Willard, Dallas, *Spirit of the Disciplines: Understanding How God Changes Lives* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).

Williams, Rowan, *Christ on Trial: How the Gospel Unsettles our Judgement* (London: Fount, 2000).

---- *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

---- 'The literal Sense of Scripture', *Modem Theology,* 7,2 (1991), 121-33.

Williamson, Peter S., 'Catholic Principles for Interpreting Scripture: A Study of the Pontifical Biblical Commission's The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church', *Subsidia Biblica*, 22 (Rome: E.P.I.B., 2001).

Wimberley, Edward, 'An African-American Perspective' *Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care*, 150 (2006), 8-17.

Wink, Walter, *Unmasking the Powers: The Invisible Forces that Determine Human Existence* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1973).

Woodward, James, and Stephen Pattison (eds), *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000).

Wright, Chris, J.H., *Truth with a Mission: Reading Scripture Missiologically* (Cambridge: Grove Books, 2005).

Wright, Chris, *The Mission of God: Unlocking the Bible's Grand Narrative* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2006).

Wright, N.T., *Scripture and the Authority of God* (London: SPCK, 2005).

---- *Evangelical Anglican Identity: The Connection between Bible, Gospel & Church* (Oxford: Latimer House, 1980).

Wuthnow, Robert, *Sharing the Journey: Support Groups and America's New Quest for Community*, (New York: Free Press, 1996).

Young, Frances, 'Beyond Story: Letting the Bible Speak', *Contact: Practical Theology and Pastoral Care*, 150 (2006), 31-36.

Zimmermann, Jens, *Recovering Theological Hermeneutics: An International-Trinitarian Theory of Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2004).