

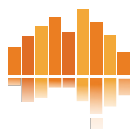
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CRA

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***The Journal of Contemporary Ministry* is published by the Christian Research Association, 90 Albion Street, Box Hill, VIC 3128. Email: admin@cra.org.au.**

The aim of the Christian Research Association is to provide up-to-date and reliable information about religious faith and church life in Australia. It is directly supported by nine denominations and theological colleges which are Senior Members and entitled to have members on the board. Many other organisations, churches, schools and individuals are Associate Members.

The Journal of Contemporary Ministry acts as a place for reporting research and discussing issues related to contemporary ministry, including related theological and biblical questions. Its goals are to:

- Stimulate informed discussion regarding issues faced by contemporary Christian churches and ministries worldwide.
- Encourage research, including empirical research, into diverse forms and contexts of contemporary ministry and the practical, theological and biblical issues that arise from ministry practice.
- Enable students and graduates in postgraduate Ministry programs to speak to a wider audience.
- Build the credibility of Ministry as a field of study and research.

The Journal of Contemporary Ministry provides a specific forum for post-graduate students in accredited colleges and universities in Australia and other countries, to publish the results of their research.

The Journal of Contemporary Ministry contains these kinds of material:

- Scholarly articles on topics related to contemporary ministry. These are subject to “double blind” peer review by two relevant scholars. Usually 4 of these will be included in any issue of the journal.
- Book reviews on recently-published books in the field of contemporary ministry. These will be subject to review by the book review editor.
- Student essays from post-graduate students in accredited colleges and universities in Australia and other countries (generally only one of these will be published in any issue, subject to the editor’s discretion).
- Pastoral reflections of a thoughtful, informed nature about issues related to contemporary ministry grounded in the pastor’s or minister’s own experience (generally only one of these will be published in any issue).
- Research notes on current research projects in the field.
- Short summaries of recent doctoral theses in the field of contemporary ministry.

Materials for *The Journal of Contemporary Ministry* may be submitted at:
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Editorial

I want to begin this editorial by noting the role that Tim Mullen played with the journal. He took on the editorship of the journal in the latter part of 2023. Through 2024 and 2025, he began the work of preparing this edition. However, at the end of 2025 he changed his employment and had to resign. Thank you, Tim, for the work that you have done and the enthusiasm and detailed care you took as editor. This journal has benefitted from your input.

Editing the journal has fallen largely to me for the moment. I have been a member of the editorial team since the early days of the journal, but have only put together one previous edition of the journal myself. The editorial team includes Prof Stephen Parker who provides the book reviews. Dr Stephen Reid, the co-ordinator of research for the Christian Research Association is involved in many ways including assisting with the editorial process and putting the final journal together. Talitha Fraser, the administrator for the Christian Research Association, assists in the final production of the journal. Thank you to all who assist in the process.

We are now looking for someone who will take on the editorship of the journal for the future. The role is important for ministry. The *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* plays a significant role in circulating thoughts, ideas and research related to ministry. At the beginning, it was designed as a vehicle which Doctor of Ministry students could use to put their thoughts and perceptions in the public domain. But the journal has proved to have a much wider reach than that with contributions from many places around the world.

Ministry is inevitably a practical activity, but one which is in constant process of reflection on theory and its roots in the faith tradition. This process of holding the ‘immediacy of life’ in conjunction with ‘reflective movement and trust in God’s presence’ is captured well by Tony Alkhoury in his article ‘Towards a Multidimensional Understanding of Practical Theology for Ministry’.

In keeping the ‘immediacy of life’ in tension with Christian tradition, it has been easy throughout Christian history for one side of the equation to become dominant. My own article on faith and meaning in life which was first delivered in a conference celebrating the 1700th anniversary of the Nicene Creed addresses exactly that issue. Perhaps in the very debate and production of the creed, tradition (and issues of authority and power) dominated the immediacy of life. There is evidence that the Emperor Constantine thought this was the case. And today, when the understanding of the world in which we live has

become so much more complex, creeds are even more 'dangerous' in the development of a faith in which pays little attention to life experience.

The article by Sandy MacDonald on children's ministry acknowledges that we live in world where life experience does not always accord with the faith that we are taught. She argues that the education of children in faith should take seriously doubts and questions, encouraging curiosity and wonder, rather than rigid conformity in order to create a more resilient faith.

Clergy culture is critical in maintaining the tension between the immediacy of life and the traditions of faith. Sermons often fall on one side of the tension or the other. I personally came to the conclusion that the liturgical calendar used by many denominations, which ensures that the Bible is 'drip-fed' to congregations on Sundays encourages a focus on the tradition rather than on people's lived experience. And it also fails to do justice to the Biblical text by parcelling it into bite-sized chunks isolated from their literary and faith contexts.

In this edition of the journal, the issue of clergy culture is addressed in a paper Trolove and Beaumont 'Professional in the Church, Amateur in Christ'. The article notes that all humans can make 'idols' of themselves. This can happen within the church when clergy seek to create a name for themselves, when their own careers become the focus of the activity and ministry actually becomes the focus of seeking one's own significance and fulfilment, rather than a humble expression of service of God and others.

Thang San Mung makes a similar argument using a different approach in his article 'The Counter-Cultural Leadership of the Servant: An Exegetical and Socio-Political Reading of Mark 10:41-45'. Arguing from the passage in Mark 10: 41-45, Mung notes how Jesus radically redefined leadership against the cultural norms of power and authority both for his day and for ours.

One further article by Katherine Thompson and David Williams looks at assessment processes for people preparing to minister overseas. Cross-cultural ministry demands not only particular skills but also the appropriate personality characteristics. Servant leadership is fundamental for this sort of ministry as in one's own context.

Another area of church life in which the tension between life experience and tradition has not been maintained has been in relation to the place of women in ministry. Jenny Cox has argued that some denominations have wrongly made the exclusion of women from

ministry a first order theological issue and touch-stone for orthodoxy. In general, I agree with Cox that it should not be an issue defining of Christian orthodoxy. At the same time, I believe it to be a major moral issue within the cultural context of the Western world. The moral evil involved in the rejection of the full equality of women and men in leadership needs to be called out ... not least today when some sectors of the Anglican Church refuse to recognise the new Archbishop of Canterbury.

I think it is true to say that over recent years we have become more aware of the fact that the 'immediacy of life' takes very different forms for different groups of people. This edition of the journal engages with some of those different groups of people. In his pastoral reflection and his article, Ben Boland draws attention to ministry with people who dementia, reminding us that while personality and ability to respond to ministry may change, these people remain people worthy of our attention and compassion.

Another group of people who often have a very different perspective on life are members of the LGBTQI+ communities. The research note on this community goes from Prof. Januarius Asongu in Cameroon. It argues that 'faithful discipleship requires moving beyond legalistic literalism toward a hermeneutic of grace and inclusion that mirrors the radical hospitality of Jesus'.

Some common themes are found in the diverse collection of articles in this edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*. All ministry and its roots in practical theology involves holding together the experience of human beings and the traditions of faith, without letting one dominate the other. This involves ministry which is humble and respectful of all people, women and men, gay and straight, people suffering dementia and those whose cognitive capacities are not impaired. This edition reminds us not just to hold fast to the pattern of servant leadership which lies at the very heart of our faith, but as we each person in ministry, we must respect their personal experience and seek to minister in ways which honour that.

Philip Hughes
Acting Editor



The Christian Research Association
invites applications
for the position of lead editor
for the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*

The *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* was founded by Assoc Prof Jon Newton to provide opportunities for the in-depth consideration of issues of contemporary ministry – both within the churches and beyond them. It contains articles which have been accessed in a full blind-review process, along with research notes and book reviews – a go-to publication for those involved in the research, teaching and practice of ministry. Previous contributions have come from internationally known scholars, college staff, ministry leaders and Doctor of Ministry students.

The Christian Research Association has recently taken responsibility for the publishing of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry* and believes it is a valuable service for churches and leaders around the world as they engage with contemporary contexts. *The Journal of Contemporary Ministry* is currently freely available on its own website: www.journalofcontemporaryministry.com.

The editor would lead a small editorial team. Approximately one edition of the Journal has been produced each year. It has meant about one hour of work per fortnight plus a few days work as the journal is prepared for publication. The position attracts a small annual honorarium.

The Editor is basically the leader of the Journal, responsible for:

1. Its direction and the content of every issue.
2. Organising and supervising the editorial team, including the journal manager.
3. Recruiting and consulting the Editorial Board.
4. Promoting the work of the Journal to universities, colleges, church leaders and other groups.
5. Attracting new content.
6. Managing the peer reviewing process for academic journal articles (finding reviewers, mediating between them and authors and editing the final drafts) and acting as reviewer for other features.
7. Writing the editorial, except when a guest editor prepares it for a special issue.

The Editor is responsible to the board of CRA.

A good editor would:

1. Have a strong vision and commitment to the journal.
2. Have good connections with ministers and academics, especially in the field of practical theology and ministry.
3. Be open-minded enough to work with a range of viewpoints in the field of contemporary ministry.
4. Have the capacity to inspire and engage potential authors.
5. Be able to evaluate written material. This would include a strong grasp of English language.
6. Have patience to work with authors who need help to get their work to a high standard.
7. Be able to lead a team of players constructively with a good focus on the goal of a quality journal.

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For more information contact Prof Philip Hughes (philip@timmycloud.net).
Please send applications to Dr Stephen Reid by 15 July 2026 (s.reid@cra.org.au).

Peer Reviewed Articles

Toward A Multidimensional Understanding of Practical Theology for Ministry

Tony Amoury Alkhoury

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Tony is a practical theologian and Field Education instructor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. He earned a PhD from Union, a ThM from Fuller Theological Seminary, and a MDiv from Harvard University. His work focuses on discernment, practical theology, and theological engagement with artificial intelligence.

Abstract

This paper argues for a multidimensional understanding of practical theology that is both academically responsible and useful for ministry formation. It begins by showing why practical theology resists a single, fixed definition, tracing its development through changing relationships among theology, lived experience, and ministerial practice. Engaging key conversations in the field, the paper proposes a working definition of practical theology as the discipline concerned with how theology is lived and how life is theologized. This account is developed through two complementary modes: a bidirectional mode, in which theology and experience mutually interpret and reshape one another, and an immersive mode, which attends to the entanglement of divine and human action within concrete practices. The paper also revisits the language of “applied theology,” arguing that it can still be useful when understood as a discerning, contextually accountable theological performance rather than a simple movement from theory to practice. In this way, practical theology emerges as a vital framework for reflective and faithful ministry.

Key words: practical theology, lived experience, bidirectional reflection, immersive praxis, ministry formation

1. Introduction

This paper is born out of the classroom. Specifically, it arises from my work teaching the field education seminar at my seminary, where students are immersed in the practice of ministry but do not always have the opportunity to take a full course in practical theology. Yet, as a practical theologian, I am convinced that students seeking ordination must at least know the basics of the discipline, and, more importantly, why it matters for their vocation.

The questions students encounter (about how theology is lived, embodied, and discerned in concrete contexts) are precisely the questions that practical theology addresses. For that reason, this paper introduces students without access to a full course in practical theology to its central contours—including a starting point for a bibliography of resources for those who wish to dig deeper—while also providing a framework that can serve as a practical “toolbox” shaping their ministries.

My aim is not to provide a single, exhaustive definition of practical theology, but to acknowledge its complexity, history, and multiple approaches while drawing out the major insights and takeaways that matter for ministry today. Practical theology has long wrestled with questions of identity: whether it is an academic discipline, a method, a clerical training ground, or a way of life. Each perspective adds important dimensions, yet seminarians and ministers often need something more immediate: a way to see how these debates translate into practices of ministry and the everyday witness of Christian life.

Thus, this paper seeks to distil insights from practical theology that help students and ministers navigate the realities of their work. By situating practical theology as both reflective and immersive, both dialogical and skill-forming, I propose a multidimensional account that equips practitioners with frameworks and practices without oversimplifying the field’s depth. This balance—between complexity and accessibility, between the academy and ministry—is what makes practical theology essential for field education and pastoral formation.

2. The Challenges of Defining Practical Theology

Defining practical theology is a challenging task for several reasons: its complex history and development, its attempt to heal the fragmentation of theological specialisations, and its multifaceted nature, which varies across academic and ecclesial contexts. Each of these factors contributes to the difficulty in arriving at a singular, comprehensive definition of the discipline.

2.1. Historical Complexity and Evolution

The historical evolution of practical theology plays a significant role in the challenge of defining it. Initially, practical theology was primarily understood as the application of biblical and theological norms to pastoral care and other ministerial tasks—a perspective that aligned it closely with what was traditionally termed “applied theology.” However, as Chang Kyoo Lee points out, practical theology has shifted its focus to investigating religious praxis itself (Lee, 2011, p. 293). This move has redefined the scope and objectives of practical theology. This evolution reflects broader changes within the field of theology, where the emphasis has moved from doctrinal application to critical engagement with lived religious practices.

Duncan B. Forrester further highlights this shift. He notes that the question of defining practical theology and whether it is a distinct academic discipline emerged only in the modern era, especially as universities began to emphasize rational principles and scientific methods (Forrester, 2000, p. 35). In pre-modern times, the study of theology was largely the domain of monastic communities, where it functioned as preparation for those entering clerical office. With the rise of the medieval university, theology assumed a privileged status, often described as the “Queen of the Sciences,” occupying a position of intellectual primacy within academic life. Forrester highlights that in both settings the discipline’s chief concern lay in shaping clergy and articulating the doctrinal foundations of the church (Forrester, 2000, p. 33).

When the University of Berlin was established in 1809, it set a new standard for higher education by grounding its work in scientific rigor and the pursuit of universal reason. Within this academic environment, theology was compelled to defend its relevance, and

Friedrich Schleiermacher emerged as a pivotal voice in articulating its role (Forrester, 2000, p. 35). Theology had to justify its place within this new framework and Friedrich Schleiermacher was a key figure in this endeavour. Schleiermacher proposed that theology was both a scientific discipline and a practical one. His structure of theological study drew on a tree metaphor in which philosophical theology formed the roots, historical theology constituted the trunk or body, and practical theology emerged as the crown. In this model, the three areas were organically connected, with practical theology representing the “crown of theological study” (Forrester, 2000, p. 35; Dole, 2024, p. 400). He emphasized that practical theology was the “technique” of church leadership in an attempt to combine a scientific spirit with ecclesial interest (Forrester, 2000, p. 36).

Forrester shows that Schleiermacher’s model was critiqued for reducing practical theology to a mere form of applied theology in which the discipline implements the theories drawn from philosophical and historical theology. Forrester argues that this perspective limits the scope and influence of practical theology and confines it to the management of church affairs (Forrester, 2000, p. 36). Instead, practical theology should engage critically with the church’s structures and the broader society. This tension remains relevant today as theologians continue to grapple with the proper place of practical theology in the modern academy and its role in addressing both the needs of the church and the broader societal context.

In summary, the evolution of practical theology from its monastic roots through the modern university’s demands for scientific rigor complicates the task of definition, as it requires accounting for a wide range of historical developments and concerns that fall under the umbrella of practical theology

2.2. Not Another Specialty

Another significant and interrelated challenge in defining practical theology is its resistance to being categorized as just another theological specialty. Terry Veling, drawing on the work of Edward Farley, notes the fragmentation within the broader field of theology, where various disciplines have become increasingly specialised. This specialization has led to the question: “So what does practical theology specialize in?”

(Veling, 2005, p. 3). The irony, as Veling suggests, is that practical theology does not seek to specialize in the conventional sense. Instead, it aims to *heal* the very fragmentation that has occurred within theological education and discourse.

Velling argues that practical theology seeks to reintegrate theology into the “weave and fabric of human living” (Veling, 2005, p. 3). This reintegration positions theology not merely as an academic endeavor and specialty but as a way of life embedded in the everyday experiences of individuals and communities. This understanding of theology challenges traditional academic boundaries and the obsession with specialisation. Velling characterizes practical theology by its commitment to bridging the gap between theological wisdom and the lived experiences of believers. The aspiration to heal fragmentation and foster a holistic approach to theology makes practical theology inherently difficult to define within the confines of conventional academic categories.

To bridge the gap between theological wisdom and the lived experiences, Veling advocates for a theology that is attentive to the “joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the people of our time” (Veling, 2005, p. 8), especially the marginalized and suffering. In order to do that, he argues that practical theology must be seen as a craft more than a how-to method, where the emphasis is on developing a “relatedness” to theology through lifetime (Veling, 2005, p. 16). This necessitates engagement that becomes a way of life rather than a detached intellectual exercise. This idea is highlighted by his reference to *phronesis*—a term borrowed from Aristotle and used by Gadamer and then by many practical theologians—the concept of practical wisdom that is acquired through years of engaging with the wisdom of a craft, practices, and disciplines until it becomes ingrained (Veling, 2005, p. 16).

2.3. Different Enterprises and Different Approaches

Another difficulty in defining practical theology is the diverse ways the term has been used across different contexts and different approaches to engage with it. Bonnie Miller-McLemore identifies four distinct enterprises within practical theology: 1) a discipline among scholars, 2) an activity of faith among believers, 3) a method for studying

theology in practice, and 4) a curricular area of subdisciplines in seminaries (Miller-McLemore, 2012a, p. 5). She notes that each of these dimensions reflects a different aspect of practical theology's identity and function. As an activity of faith, practical theology is concerned with the lived experiences and practices of believers by showing what faithful living looks like in faith communities. As a method, it provides tools in the seminary and theological schools for studying theology in practice and doing theological reflection. As a curricular area, practical theology encompasses a range of subdisciplines within seminary and theological education (preaching, worship, education, pastoral care, administration, etc.), each with its own focus and methodological approach. Finally, as a discipline among scholars, practical theology engages in rigorous academic inquiry.

To complicate the issue even further, engaging with these enterprises does not follow one approach. In her rich article, "Three Approaches to Practical Theology, Theological Education, and the Church's Ministry," Kathleen A. Cahalan argues that the revitalization of practical theology in North America, spurred by the decline of mainline Protestantism, has resulted in at least three distinct approaches (Cahalan, 2005). These approaches were developed in response to Edward Farley's critique of the "clerical paradigm," which had reduced practical theology to mere professional training for ministers, and his call to recover theology as a form of practical wisdom, or *habitus*.

To analyze these developments, Cahalan employs a typology from philosopher Paul Lakeland, who describes three responses to the crisis of modernity: the late modern, the countermodern, and the radical postmodern. Each of these philosophical stances, she contends, has a corresponding approach within contemporary practical theology, offering a unique vision for Christian life, ministry, and theological education in a post-Christendom context (Cahalan, 2005, p.63-94).

The first approach Cahalan identifies is the "late modern," which she finds best represented in Don Browning's work on a "fundamental practical theology." This model seeks to salvage the project of modernity by grounding Christian ethics and action in a form of practical reason (*phronesis*) that can be publicly articulated and defended.

Using a revised correlational method, it puts the Christian tradition in critical dialogue with contemporary culture and the social sciences to shape the common good (Cahalan, 2005, p. 67-73).

The second approach is the “countermodern” position, exemplified by the work of Dorothy Bass and Craig Dykstra on Christian practices. This approach rejects the modern project and instead looks to the past, specifically to the retrieval of traditional Christian practices like hospitality, testimony, and keeping Sabbath, to form a distinct and coherent Christian identity in a fragmented world. Crucially, these practices are not merely human endeavors but are understood as the very locus of divine action. They are defined as things Christian people do “in response to and in the light of God’s active presence for the life of the world” (Cahalan, 2005, p. 75). In this view, ordinary activities become “tangled up with the things God is doing in the world” and therefore “share in the mysterious dynamic of fall and redemption, sin and grace” (Cahalan, 2005, p. 78). It is an approach that emphasizes the cultivation of a Christian “way of life” grounded in the community’s narrative and traditions (Cahalan, 2005, p. 74-80; Volf & Bass, 2001; Bass, 2010; Bass et al., 2016).

The third and final approach corresponds to Lakeland's “radical postmodern” category, which Cahalan aligns with liberating, feminist, and contextual theologies. Using the work of feminist theologian Rebecca Chopp as a primary example, this approach critiques all “totalizing” metanarratives—both modern and premodern—for being oppressive and universalizing the perspectives of dominant groups. Instead, it prioritizes praxis, beginning with the concrete, lived experiences of marginalized communities and aiming for emancipation, justice, and the transformation of oppressive structures. For these theologians, all theology is contextual, and its task is to reconstruct Christian symbols and practices in ways that promote human flourishing for all, especially those on the margins of church and society (Cahalan, 2005, p. 80-86; Chopp, 1995; Schreiter, 1985; Schreiter, 1997; Bevans, 2002).

3. Practical Theology Between Academy and Ministry

These varied perspectives—historical, philosophical, and methodological—illustrate how practical theology has continually been contested and redefined. Yet at the heart of the debate lies an ongoing concern with how practical theology relates to ministry and to God’s action in the world in ways that bear fruit outside the academy. It is precisely this concern that Edward Farley sought to address in his influential work *Theologia*, where he argued that theological education and practical theology were captives of a clerical paradigm (The “clerical paradigm” depicts theological education as primarily professional training for ministers, reducing theology to clerical skills rather than a broader, integrative pursuit of knowledge of God. See Farley, 1983).

While his diagnosis resonated with broader attempts to rethink the discipline in light of modern academic pressures and the fragmentation of theology, I join Miller-McLemore in contending that it ultimately misidentified the core problem. As she notes, this diagnosis is a fallacy and “a poor diagnosis for all that ails theological education...[It] has become a mono-causal analysis that has led us to overlook other diagnoses” (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 13-14). Her sustained engagement with the tension between the academic and clerical paradigms has shaped much of her work across articles and books.

To address this misunderstanding, Miller-McLemore proposes two corrections. First, she suggests that the problem is not the clerical paradigm but what she calls “the academic paradigm” or the “cognitive captivity of theology.” It is not “just the ‘clericalization’ but an equally troubling ‘academization’ of theology” that practical theologians and theological educators need to tackle (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 14). Knowledge must include theories and arguments but should also encompass what is not articulated and theorised. Miller-McLemore joins Charles Taylor, who sees that some aspects of knowledge (particularly knowledge that shapes practice) are “unarticulable” (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 14).

The second correction to the clerical paradigm diagnosis is to restore faith in the role of skills and rules in theological education. Educators like Bernard Lee and Thomas Groome build on Aristotle's typology of "*theoria* (contemplative knowledge of truth), *phronesis* (knowledge of how to live well), and *techne* (knowledge of how to make things)," placing *phronesis* at the center. Miller-McLemore advocates for a holistic approach that does not dismiss the role of *techne* and still values the role of the "know-how." She summarizes her corrections saying, "Short-hand use of the clerical paradigm to capture the plight of contemporary practical theology and theological education overlooks the equally troubling problem of intellectualism that distorts how religious knowledge is learned, conveyed, and practised. Creative work on theological knowledge must grapple with how it is enacted in the world" (Miller-McLemore, 2012b, p. 15).

4. A Working Definition for Ministry

In light of these ongoing debates between academy and ministry, and the need to move beyond both clerical and academic captivity, I propose a working definition of practical theology oriented toward ministry. I define practical theology as the theological discipline concerned with how theology is lived and how life is theologised. This definition holds together two complementary ways of engagement: a reflective, bidirectional movement between lived experience and theological reflection and meaning-making, and an immersive attentiveness to those moments where divine and human realities are already entangled in practice

4.1. Bidirectional Mode of Practical Theology

As one mode of engagement—the bidirectional—practical theology unfolds through a dynamic movement in both directions: from the concrete, everyday experiences of individuals and communities toward theological reflection and meaning-making, and from theology, biblical studies, ethics—with their various disciplines, fields, and subfields—toward shaping and informing lived realities.

This bidirectional engagement applies both within and beyond ecclesial contexts. On one hand, practical theology attends to traditional ministerial practices such as preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, and counselling—contexts where theology

is deliberately embodied, enacted, and transmitted. On the other hand, it also explores how people make meaning and encounter the divine in ordinary, non-institutional spaces: in relationships, in suffering, in justice-seeking, in the mundane. It holds together the clerical and the everyday, the formal and the informal, without conflating or isolating them.

Practical theologian Pete Ward has described this integrated dynamic with clarity. He cautions against constructing practical theology as a discipline that must begin with either doctrine or experience; it should not conform to a singular starting point. Ward insists that theology and practice must be held in mutual tension: “If theology can be practical, then practice is also theological” (Ward, 2017, p. 10). For Ward, practical theology does not move in a straight line but is situated within a “web of interrelated possibilities and issues” (Ward, 2017, p. 10). Drawing on Rowan Williams, Ward reminds us that theologians always begin “in the middle of things” (Ward, 2017, p. 10; Williams, 2000, p. xiii). We do not speak from nowhere. We speak from within communities, histories, faith convictions, and practices that shape how we understand God and discern God’s call. Practical theology, therefore, is less about finding a single starting point and more about learning how to live, think, and respond faithfully from where we are.

This integrated approach also reflects the four tasks of practical theology as outlined by Richard Osmer, when these tasks are understood not as linear steps but as interwoven dimensions of a single theological process. The descriptive-empirical task attends to what is happening; the interpretive task seeks to understand why; the normative task engages Scripture, tradition, and theological reasoning to ask what ought to be; and the pragmatic task considers how communities can respond in faithful practice. Taken together, these tasks resist compartmentalization and instead illuminate the dynamic, interdependent nature of practical theology (Osmer, 2008).

Richard Osmer describes practical theological interpretation as involving four core and interrelated tasks, framed by four guiding questions: What is going on? Why is this going on? What ought to be going on? How might we respond? The descriptive–

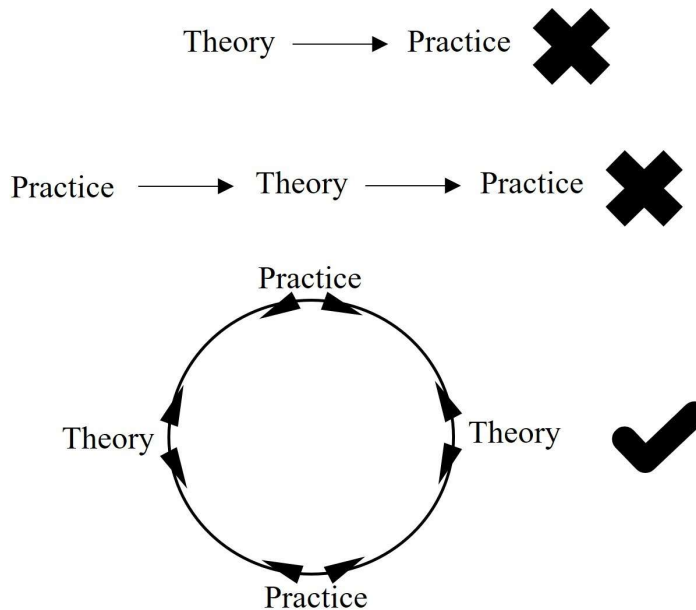
empirical task seeks to gather information—formally or informally—that reveals the patterns, dynamics, and relationships shaping a given situation or context. The interpretive task draws on theories from the arts, sciences, and other disciplines to explain these patterns, attending to cultural, social, psychological, and systemic factors that illuminate why events unfold as they do. The normative task brings theological concepts, ethical principles, and the wisdom of Christian tradition to bear in order to interpret the situation faithfully and identify “good practice” that can guide the community’s life. The pragmatic task focuses on developing and enacting strategies of action that are both faithful and effective while engaging in reflective evaluation as these strategies “talk back” in practice. Osmer emphasizes that these tasks are best understood within a hermeneutical circle, in which each task interacts with and reshapes the others, making practical theology a dynamic process that moves between empirical description, critical interpretation, theological–ethical reflection, and concrete action (Osmer, 2008).

My approach is to embrace that complexity by not following a linear method or tidy progression but by engaging in a lived theological process—rooted in tradition, attentive to lived experience, and shaped by communal wisdom. I move away from approaches that insist on a fixed starting point—whether in applied theology, which moves from theory to practice, or in fundamental practical theology, which follows a practice–theory–practice pattern—unless the latter is understood without a rigid point of departure, or with one that already holds both dimensions together. I do not seek to resolve the tension between theology and practice but to inhabit it faithfully, trusting that discernment emerges in and through the life of the church as it listens, responds, and bears witness to God’s presence in the world.

4.2. Immersive Mode of Practical Theology

Yet practical theology is not merely a bidirectional exchange governed by *rational* or *linear* processes. It resists framing experience and theology as two distinct poles. Instead, it recognizes that praxis itself—often embodied in the mundane, the broken, and

Figure 1. An Immersive Model of Practical Theology



the everyday—can be the locus of divine action, without always necessitating head-driven cognition or rational analysis. Human experience is not simply a source for theology, nor theology merely a framework applied to life; rather, they are often intertwined in ways that blur the boundaries between divine and human action, between reflection and response.

This immersive dimension of practical theology resonates especially with what Kathleen Cahalan describes as countermodern and radical postmodern approaches. In the countermodern retrieval of practices, exemplified by Bass and Dykstra, ordinary acts such as hospitality or Sabbath-keeping are not simply human activities but places where divine action is already at work. Likewise, in radical postmodern and contextual theologies, as seen in feminist and liberative perspectives, theology begins from the lived experience of marginalised communities and attends to the ways God’s presence is entangled with struggles for justice and human flourishing. Both of these approaches affirm that practical theology need not begin with abstract reflection but can trust that

the divine and human are already interwoven in the concrete, the broken, and the everyday.

In summary, practical theology can be described in two complementary modes. The first is the bidirectional or reflective approach, where movement flows back and forth between lived experience and theological reflection and meaning-making—experience generating theological insight, and theology in turn shaping life (without getting stuck on where one must begin). The second is the entangled or immersive approach, which attends to those moments where divine and human realities are already interwoven in praxis itself, without requiring rational mediation. Both modes are legitimate and necessary. No one is better than the other. Practical theology involves moments of reflective movement, but it also honours the immediacy of entangled praxis. It holds these ways of knowing and living together without reducing the discipline to one or the other.

4.3. A Word on *Applied* Theology

As shown above, recent discussion has rightly pushed back against an older, linear view of *applied theology* that treats practice as the mere implementation of abstract, universal truths. In that scheme, theology lives “up there” and practice “applies” it “down here,” reducing practical theology to an instrument for translation.

Hermeneutical and practical-theological accounts have shown, however, that understanding is always already oriented toward action, and action is theory-laden; *application* belongs to understanding itself rather than following it as a second step.

At the same time, dropping *applied* language altogether risks collapsing theology into a form of absolute relativism, where meaning becomes entirely contingent on context and theology loses what is transcendent and is rendered entirely anthropocentric. Practical theology requires a disciplined interplay between lived particularities and guiding norms.

I suggest this metaphor as a way to hold the tension: Practical theology is not like adding colours to a blank sheet. The page is never blank: it already bears textures, shapes, and colours—histories, cultures, powers, wounds, hopes. Indeed, the paper is alive and has agency: it receives, resists, and redirects the stroke. Nor does theology simply impose a finished picture from outside. Rather, the divine colouring intermingles with what is already on the page, and faithful work requires skilful discernment of both palette and paper. In this sense, there is an applied dimension, but it looks like skilled, accountable performance rather than a one-way descent of ideas:

1. Normative colours and shapes: The artist—the theologian, the worshipping community, indeed the Spirit—works with a palette that includes Scripture, tradition, doctrinal claims, and communal practices. These provide real guidance that prevents the image from dissolving into anything-goes improvisation.
2. Skills required in the applying: Drawing on a marked page calls for virtues like judgement, patience, improvisation, the capacity to hold tensions, and communal discernment that test what fits this scene.
3. A responsive, non-passive page: The paper embraces or pushes back. Its grain—the given textures of place, suffering, kinship, justice-seeking, and the everyday—reshapes the artist's hand and sometimes the palette itself. The result is a dynamic interplay of divine initiative and human response in which both vision and rendering are refined.

Rehabilitated in this way, *applied* does not name a pipeline from theory to practice but the craft of rendering a fitting image under accountable norms within a living context. It safeguards theology's normative, transcendent, and God-centered character, while also recognizing that faithful performance is always local, dialogical, and improvisational—where divine and human action are already entangled in the work of drawing.

5. So What? Why This Matters for Practitioners?

For ministers, practitioners, and students in field education, practical theology provides tools, practices, and skills that shape faithful ministry and responsive leadership in lived contexts.

1. **The Bidirectional (Reflective) Approach:** This approach equips ministers with the language and frameworks needed to engage in ongoing dialogue between life and theology, experience and doctrine, reality and tradition. On the one side, practitioners are invited to closely attend to the concrete reality of the lives entrusted to their care: their hopes, wounds, communities, and practices. On the other side, they are called to engage the resources of Scripture, tradition, and ethics. The reflective task is to put these in conversation so that each interprets and reshapes the other in ways that honour both the particularity of lived experience and the guiding wisdom of the Christian tradition. Following Osmer's framing, practitioners learn to ask: *What is going on? Why is it happening? What ought to be? And how might we respond in action?* This process is important for both the lives of those they are serving and for the minister's own life and praxis, since discernment cannot be separated from the minister's ongoing formation.
2. **The Immersive Approach:** At times, ministry calls for practices that do not rely on reflection, rational explanation, or explicit theological framing, but that trust God's presence within the embodied rhythms of life. Facilitating silence, hospitality, shared meals, lament, etc., creates space for divine action that is not mediated through immediate cognitive reflection. In the messiness of such practices—where things may not appear polished or resolved—God is at work, shaping lives and communities. For practitioners and students, this means cultivating trust in the Spirit's activity beyond what can be neatly named or analyzed.
3. **Applied Skills in Practice:** Practical theology also emphasizes the cultivation of ministerial skills as forms of theological performance (what some call *arts of ministry*). Good listening, thoughtful preaching, wise administration, and effective teaching are not “merely practical” but deeply theological acts. They demand learning good skills but also cultivating virtues such as attentiveness, patience, and discipline, which together sustain faithful practice. For students in field education, developing these skills is itself an entry point into the craft of

practical theology—where theological vision and lived performance are inseparably joined.

These dimensions should reinforce that practical theology is not any one of them in isolation, but all of them held together. It is multifaceted, involving reflective dialogue, immersive practices, and ministerial skills, each contributing to the whole. To practise theology means engaging in this full, interwoven reality where life and theology, Spirit and community, reflection and practice are never separated but always mutually entangled.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have traced how practical theology resists simple definitions, drawing on its history, its role in healing fragmentation, and its diverse approaches today. I proposed a working definition that holds together two complementary modes: the bidirectional movement between life and theology, and the immersive attentiveness to places where divine and human action are already entangled.

My contribution is to frame these two modes together as a multidimensional account of practical theology. I want to show that ministry requires both reflective movement and trust in God's presence within the immediacy of life. By holding together these ways of knowing and living, I resist the temptation to privilege one over the other, and instead affirm practical theology as a space where reflection, practice, skill, and divine encounter remain inseparably linked. For ministry, I see practical theology less as a recipe and more as a way of inhabiting the world with attentiveness, discernment, and improvisation. My aim is not to close the conversation but to join it, showing students and ministers that practical theology is a continuing dialogue where theology and life meet and unfold.

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The Christian Faith and Meaning in Life at the Council of Nicaea and Now

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Abstract

The Nicene Creed has provided a standard statement of Christian beliefs that is used in many Christian communities. It could be seen as a basis for the ‘sacred cosmos’ in which Christian believers may locate themselves and find meaning in life. Interviews with 44 Australian church attenders during 2024 and 2025, revealed that the general tone by which faith is presented is more important to them than its detail. The majority of

attenders spoke of small groups, either within or outside of their churches, being most significant in providing them with meaning in life. Meaning arose primarily in social contexts where individuals felt that they were valued and where they in turn could contribute value. Perhaps Constantine's initial assessment of the Arian controversy as being 'too abstruse' for most people is correct. St. Paul reminds us that our knowledge 'will pass', but love remains, and it is in loving and supportive relationships that most people find meaning.

Key words: Nicene Creed, meaning in life, Australia, retirees, small groups

Introduction

In 325 AD, Emperor Constantine called together Christian bishops from all over the Roman Empire and beyond to resolve some issues of Christian doctrine and practice. A significant outcome from this Council was the Nicene Creed which has been used in mainstream Catholic, Orthodox and some Protestant churches for the past 1700 years. As religious beliefs are questioned by many people in Australian society today, its value for Australian Christians needs to be evaluated. The paper will not focus on the details of the Creed, but rather on whether a creed, such as the Nicene Creed, contributes to the ways in which the Christian faith contributes to Australian church attenders' sense of meaning today.

It is acknowledged that just 10 per cent of the Australian adult population attend a Christian community monthly or more often (Hughes, 2025). For the vast majority of Australians, the significance of religion in general, and the Christian faith more specifically, has faded (Hughes, 2025:, p. 20). This paper will focus on the significance of creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, for those Australian adults who are involved in a church community today. Do creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, contribute significantly to meaning in life for Australian church attenders? The source of information on how church attenders make meaning today is a qualitative study of 44 attenders (who were retired, semi-retired or about to retire) conducted between November 2023 and March 2025.

Creeds as a Basis for the Sacred Cosmos

In 1967, sociologist, Peter Berger, wrote *The Sacred Canopy*. It was re-published as the *Social Reality of Religion* in 1969. In that book, Berger described religion as being an integral part of the ‘world-construction’ which is undertaken through the process of socialisation. He argued:

Religion is the human enterprise by which a sacred cosmos is established. ... The cosmos posited by religion thus both transcends and includes man (sic). The sacred cosmos is confronted by man as an immensely powerful reality other than himself. Yet this reality addresses itself to him and locates his life in an ultimately meaningful order (Berger, 1969, : p.34-35).

Creeds, such as the Nicene Creed, could be considered as outlining the nature of the sacred cosmos. They define its parameters. Hence, it is possible that creeds could be significant in providing the basis of the meaning people might find in religion.

As Quinn (2000) alerted us in ‘How Christianity secures life’s meanings’, the Christian faith does not simply give people a sense of meaning. One’s meaning in life in terms of having coherent direction and a sense of belonging and significance may be good or bad, depending on the nature of those directions and the belonging and their alignment with Christian teaching. The Christian faith calls us to specific directions, following Christ or finding our place in God’s story of salvation.

What is expected of us by God has been challenging from the beginning. One very early issue was whether non-Jewish followers of Jesus needed to keep all Jewish laws. A Council of church leaders was held to resolve the issue in Acts 15.

In terms of understanding the sacred cosmos, a particular conundrum was how Jesus could be both divine and human. In the early 4th century, this issue came to a head in arguments between a popular Christian teacher, Arius, and Alexander, the Bishop of Alexandria. So heated was this division that it came to the ears of Constantine, the Roman Emperor, who had just decided to make Christianity a unifying force through the Roman Empire.

In 324, Constantine wrote letters to Alexander and Arius, urging the two men to reconcile. In the letter he suggested these men should behave as philosophers of the same school, united on essentials, but differing on small points (Stevenson 1957:, p. 354). In relation to an earlier church dispute, Constantine had intervened saying 'I do not wish you to leave schism or division in any place' (Schaff and Wace:1890Edwards 1997). Constantine regarded such divisions a threat to civil order as such public divisions could lead to disturbance. He viewed the Church as a moral and stabilizing force in the way that previous Emperors had regarded the recognition of the Roman gods and such a force would be undermined by division.

The importance given to finding unity in Christian doctrine was demonstrated by the fact that Imperial funds were used to bring bishops together from all over the Roman Empire to discuss the matter. In a letter following the Council of Nicaea, Constantine referred to assembling more than 300 bishops at Nicaea to find common ground on the Arian controversy plus other issues (Stevenson, 1957,: p. 371). One output from the Council was the Nicene Creed which was agreed on by all but two bishops. The two bishops who failed to agree to the statement were excommunicated and exiled. The works of Arius were confiscated and burnt (Lietzmann, 1961: , p.12off).

With the production of the Nicene Creed, it was envisaged that the nature of the Christian doctrines was clarified and a yardstick of orthodoxy had been created. However, over the centuries, questions have arisen as to whether this clarification was important to how people have found meaning in their faith. Was the division one of great importance to the nature of the sacred cosmos, or was it, as Constantine suggested in his letter to Arius and Alexander a small and obscure point which has had little impact on the Christian faith? A historian might ask whether the division was about something which affected the daily lives of people, or was it really a struggle for power among leaders?

Throughout the last two thousand years of European history, there have been times when people have accepted different understanding of aspects of Christian faith. There have been other times when major conflicts have arisen about the nature of faith. The Protestant Reformation caused huge eruptions in the Church as the Reformers sought to establish different ways of understanding the Christian faith. It led to some people being put on trial

as heretics and executed because of their opposition to church leaders. One prominent example is the Czech reformer, Jan Hus, who was burnt at the stake in 1415 (Latourette, 1953:, p. 669). Protestant Reformers had strong disagreements among themselves which led to people being executed, such as Michael Servetus in 1553, supported by the Reformer Jean Calvin. This event sent shock waves throughout Europe (Latourette, 1953:, p. 758). Correct doctrine has, at times, been a matter of life or death, but the problem has always been what makes a doctrine 'correct'?

The Role of Religion in Meaning in Life

For much of human history, religion has been a major source of meaning in life. By drawing a picture of the universe in which we live, and locating the individual within it, it has given people a sense of identity and, very often, a sense of purpose. The British philosopher and theologian, Keith Ward, argued that, ~~fundamentally~~, 'religions are belief-systems which articulate, with different degrees of systemization, competing theories about the meaning of human life' (Ward, 2000:, p.11). He went on to argue that:

A religious community, then, may be seen as a group that defines itself in terms of a set of canonical beliefs about the ultimate powers and values that bound human existence, traced back to a founding authority, with a set of practices sustaining appropriate relations to those powers and values. For such groups, the main and most important purpose of human life is to establish such a relation. Its highest value lies in the experience of that relation. The meaning of human life lies in the way events, actions and experiences in that life aid or impede the final goal, for oneself or for others (Ward, 2000:, p. 18).

Ward acknowledged that people can find meaning without religion. People can find meaning in enjoyable and worthwhile ways, doing things which have intrinsic worth or which are satisfying and life-giving. However, he argued that religions give meaning by envisaging 'the highest possible value of human life' (Ward, 2000:, p. 19).

The Nicene Creed, then, can be seen as setting out a set of canonical beliefs. It asserts that God is the maker of heaven and earth. Jesus Christ is of one Being with the Father. He came down from heaven for our salvation and, after death, rose again and is seated at the

right hand of the Father. It asserts belief in the Holy Spirit who proceeds from the Father. There are references to the resurrection of the dead, the life of the world to come, and Jesus as judge of the living and the dead whose kingdom will have no end. People will be judged, but through baptism, people can receive the forgiveness of sins offered through the life and death of Jesus Christ, and people can be raised from death to eternal life.

At the level of lived religion, however, the scholar of religions, Ninian Smart, has suggested there are two fundamental Christian narratives. There is the narrative of salvation history: of God coming in Jesus to save human beings, as described in the Nicene Creed, and the narrative of being an imitator of Jesus Christ. This first narrative emphasises what God has done for human beings. Human beings accept what God has done through the sacraments of baptism and Holy Communion otherwise referred to as the Eucharist or the Mass, Smart suggested (Smart, 2000,: p. 65). The second narrative revolves around Jesus' teaching about how his followers should live. As an expression of the other narrative, Smart (2000:, p. 62) turned to Kierkegaard, who through his pseudonym, Anti-Climacus argues, "Christ's life here on earth is the paradigm: I and every Christian are to strive to model our lives in likeness to it" (Kierkegaard, 2015,: p. 107).

These two narratives have some similarity to two different approaches to religion and meaning identified in a large survey of Australian church attenders conducted by the Christian Research Association in 1987 (Blombery and Hughes, 1987). The first approach which was called devotionalism focussed on connection with God often expressed in acts of devotion. It emphasised what God has done and is doing for human beings. The other approach, the researchers called 'principlism', focussed on the values exemplified in the life of Jesus and his teaching about how we should treat others as we ourselves wish to be treated (Hughes and Blombery, 1990).

Hinton's recent book, *Mass Observers Making Meaning*, examined the ways in which people in Britain made meaning in late 20th century Britain. In 1937, the 'Mass Observation Project' was launched, asking everyday people throughout Britain to write responses to questions about their thoughts, feelings and experiences. Open-ended questions were sent out every few months on a wide range of subjects from politics to details of personal life. In 1981, the project was refined with people being asked to respond

to these open-ended questions three times a year. Around 2,600 people volunteered, but half of them quickly lapsed. However, around 1,100 remained for between two and ten years and a smaller group kept going for up to 20 years. In 1996, the open-ended question was: “The supernatural: what do you believe?” James Hinton analysed the writing of 279 British volunteers who responded to that question. What is of relevance here is that he saw those responses as people making meaning.

Hinton noted that a number of the respondents simply accepted the teaching of the church and simply stated, “I am a Christian and therefore the Creed expresses my beliefs” (Hinton, 2022, p. 15). On the other hand, many other respondents expressed some doubts and many wondered about how it related to other religions. He quoted one person, for example, who said she ‘always had difficulty ... in knowing why my religious beliefs were the right ones and everyone else was misguided’ (Hinton, 2022,: p. 16). Indeed, in his book, Hinton noted the flourishing of non-religious spirituality. Others saw belief in the supernatural as irrational. One person wrote ‘I am living my life REALISTICALLY and need no invented spookies ... no god/gods/priests’ (Hinton, 2022,: p. 26).

Hinton proceeded to look at the various ways in which people answer the questions about death and what happens afterwards, about religion and science, the paranormal and various forms of spirituality. He found a great variety of opinions and attitudes, beliefs and doubts. This variety raises the question as to whether people are really finding a sense of meaning through a sacred cosmos taught by their religion. Are their beliefs actually giving them a sense of meaning in a world where there is so much doubt and where so many people are aware that whatever they choose to believe is just an option?

Australian Data

Recent results from surveys have suggested that religion is only important to meaning for some members of the Australian population. The Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, a national survey of Australian adults commissioned by the ACSPRI, and used widely by government and social scientists asked a series of questions in the 2018 edition about where people find their sense of meaning in life. Of the total sample of adult Australians, just 16 per cent affirmed the statement ‘Life is meaningful only because God exists’. As

might be expected, of those who attended a church monthly or more often, 72 per cent agreed or strong agreed to the statement, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Responses to Questions on Meaning in Life among Respondents who Attended a Church Monthly or More Often (percentage responding to each statement) (n=151)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Neither / Can't choose	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
To me life is meaningful only because God exists	41	31	13	12	3	100
Life does not serve any purpose	3	0	3	30	64	100
Life is only meaningful if you provide meaning yourself	9	24	14	27	26	100
I have my own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services	10	28	18	24	20	100

Source: Australian Survey of Social Attitudes, 2018.

As Table 1 shows, while 72 per cent of Australian church attenders affirmed that life is meaningful only because God exists, 33 per cent of church attenders affirmed that life is only meaningful if you provide meaning yourself. In fact, there was an overlap with a total of 28 per cent of church attenders who said both that life was meaningful because of God *and* that life is meaningful because we provide our own meaning.

It is noteworthy that 38 per cent of Australian attenders said they had their own way of connecting with God without churches or religious services. This is the group who indicated that they did, in fact, attend, but felt that attendance was not necessary for connecting with God. Overall, even among church attenders, there seemed to be a range of opinions about the importance of church attendance for connecting with God, and how important connecting with God is for their sense of meaning in life.

Some contemporary psychologists have argued that meaning is largely found in relationships. The psychologists of ‘mattering’ in the USA such as Gordon Flett (2018) and Isaac Prilleltensky and Ora Prilleltensky (2021) have argued that much meaning is found through those relationships in which people feel that they matter to other people and where they can make a contribution to others. People find meaning in being valued and in giving value to others. Social connection is an important path to a sense of meaning. It may be, then, in contemporary Australia, meaning is not found so much in a ‘sacred cosmos’ as Berger has described, but in people’s connections with each other, in relationships where they are valued and where they can contribute value to the lives of others.

The question for our research then is how does Christianity provide a sense of meaning to Australian church attenders today? Does the Nicene Creed (or other statement of faith), or the narrative of imitating Jesus, provide meaning? Or, on the other hand, is meaning developed primarily through social relationships? Or is there a sense that all of the above provide a sense of meaning for Christians?

Methodology

In this research the data was gathered through interviews with retired or semi-retired people. The research team focussed on retired people partly because it was expected that their sense of meaning would not be as dominated either by work or by immediate family

concerns as may be true of younger people. A second reason for this focus was that there are practical policy implications for organisations and for government with this older cohort. There is good evidence that people with strong social connections and with a strong sense of meaning remain physically and mentally healthier for a longer period of time (Schnell, 2021; Flett, 2018; Pilleltensky and Prilleltensky, 2022; Handley et al., 2021). Thus, it is in the interests of society to develop ways which promote social connections and a sense of meaning among older people to keep them out of the health-care system and give them a better quality of life for as long as possible.

Between November 2023 and March 2025, a team of seven researchers interviewed 71 people. The research team drew up a range of demographic variables which may have some impact on people's meaning and social connection. These included where people lived: in a city, a regional town or rural area, their birthplace, and their religious connections. The team also ensured there were large samples of both males and females and people from a variety of social-economic backgrounds.

To ensure we had this variety of people, the researchers invited people to participate in different ways. Thus, an invitation to be involved was publicly given in four churches and in some groups which were connected with churches. This led to 44 people in the sample who attended a church frequently at the time of the interview. Of these interviewees:

- 14 were Anglicans
- 9 Uniting Church
- 8 Catholics
- 5 Pentecostals
- 5 Baptists, and
- 3 Other Protestants.

To ensure a broader sample, invitations were also made in a walking group, a U3A group, a movie-makers group, a golf group and through other personal networks such as Facebook.

As with most qualitative research, no conclusions can be drawn from a sample of 71 people about overall patterns among Australians. However, the interviews reveal a variety of patterns which exist among Australian retirees. Of particular interest was whether people

associated with different Christian denominations would approach religious faith and meaning differently, or whether we would find common patterns across the denominations.

Results

The Role of Beliefs in the Sense of Meaning

While the interviews focused on people's social connections, people were asked why certain connections gave them meaning. Interviewees were specifically invited to talk about whether the church provided them with a sense of meaning and how this occurred. There was then a general opportunity for interviewees to talk about other sources of their sense of meaning in life.

Several interviewees did talk about beliefs. One person who had moved from a church of one denomination to a church of another denomination described it this way:

[In my previous church] I used to get so tired of the same message every week that we are miserable, depraved sinners, but God loves us anyway, kind of thing. And I feel like it's quite hard to explain the difference to my son and my daughter, where they would be coming from. I think that at [my present church], it's more, we are all made in the image of God, and yet because we live in a fallen world, we do sin and God understands us as well. I'm not explaining it very well, but I think the difference is just, it's a positive focus. It's an uplifting focus that the work of Christ on the cross has been done. And I am a new creation now. So I don't have to grovel, wallow in my sin or my awareness of my sin. I do sin, I know that, but it's like I'm a new person. (Helen, Baptist, 71 to 75)

A man from the same church said:

And there are some quite radical things in the Baptist church that you don't get at an Anglican church, and it's a bit of a mind shift that's going to go on. And I embrace some of the key principles of Baptist churches. We did get a bit of it last year, or might've been the year before when there was all that stuff going on about basically excluding some people who didn't come up to speed in relation to certain theological positions. And we did explore it, but I still remember at the time thinking, wow, this is great. The priesthood of all believers and the understanding that as a church we are to discern things and to make decisions. Whereas that doesn't happen at some levels in an Anglican church. It's basically

it's the big brother up there with the bishops meeting. They determine whether we have women. (Sean, Baptist, 65 to 70).

For these two people, the nature of beliefs was important. Yet, it was the tone of belief rather than the detail doctrines which was most significant. It was the positive and uplifting tone, rather than judgement and condemnation. It was the democratic ecclesiology in which all people had a chance to contribute to decision making, and the theology which was inclusive of women.

A number of other people specifically mentioned that they believed in God and that led to particular values. For example, one man said:

Well, really my whole worldview flows out of being a Christian. ... And so you have the opportunity to build up relationships by serving and by being kind and helping. And so modelling a lot of those sorts of things that Jesus modelled really. And so a lot of the actions or the ways that I think do flow out of being Christian, that kind of underpins the way that I think. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

There were also a couple of people who talked about the importance of attending Mass or the Eucharist. For one Catholic woman, Jemma, the importance of the Mass had become very real to her through a long period of sickness when she was unable to attend. One might speculate that through the Mass she felt connected with her faith and her church. As Smart described it, through the Mass she was engaging in the narrative of salvation history.

Meaning through Community

Of the 44 people who were involved in a church, 24 people spoke of a small group or position or special relationships through which they found their sense of meaning. For these people, meaning arose not so much within the church, but through the small group or position they held within the church. It was the social connections made within the church which provided the immediate sense of meaning rather than the teaching of the church.

Fourteen of our interviewees spoke about a devotional small group or Bible study in which they were involved. They talked about the opportunities the group provided for discussion, encouraging each other, sharing their lives, or caring about each other. For example, one woman spoke about her own and her husband's decision to join a Bible study group.

So in that group we, I mean, we grow in our faith and knowledge of God and some groups are called care groups, so are our life groups. So we care for one another and sort of share life with each other. That's the meaningful thing. (Kaye, Pentecostal, under 65).

Another person was involved in a number of different communities, but when asked which contributed most to his wellbeing, he responded:

My church community most definitely gives the most to me because I think that's the community where I can be most vulnerable and where I can meet with others who are prepared to be vulnerable themselves. So there's that sense of learning. I learn about myself and my capacities, and I learn about others and their desire to offer things to those around them. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

He went on to describe where this was happening: in a group for men who were widowers and another group which he had initiated which did cryptic crosswords together.

There were others who found their sense of meaning in a charitable activity run by the church. One example is Katharine who had found her calling in the Mainly Music group for young children and their mothers. She described the relationships she formed and how she kept in touch with some of the mothers after they were no longer attending the group.

Others described their sense of meaning as arising from the positions they had within the church. For example, both Richard and Margaret had been part of a 'bereavement ministry' in a Catholic church, visiting people who had been recently bereaved. Several said they had been on a church or parish council. While this could provide a sense of meaning in that they felt they were making a contribution and people appreciated that, it could also be problematic. Andrea and Vicki spoke of the bullying they had experienced in such councils, one in a Uniting Church and another in an Anglican Church, leading them to resign.

Nineteen of the church attenders indicated that they found their primary social connections and meaning from groups which were not connected with a church. For example, Campbell spoke of how he had been raised in the Anglican Church but had drifted away from the church over the years. He was bored by almost all the sermons he heard. He felt that the churches he attended were more interested in money than people. He had found his involvement in Rotary much more fulfilling, both at local and even at international levels, and found that he could contribute more in that context. He still attended some church activities occasionally, but they were not his major source of meaning.

Sally was involved in an Anglican church and was treasurer. However, she described her church involvement was more about giving than receiving. She found her role frustrating. She found a greater social connection with her Tai Chi group, her neighbours and her family than with the church.

Gabrielle described herself as fairly peripheral to her Uniting Church. She had a history of work in aged care and described how she found meaning after retirement as a volunteer visitor. This had been brought to an end by COVID. However, she still loved to visit older people who were lonely, finding this invigorating.

A Catholic woman, Ann, described how she found her social connections and sense of meaning through political involvement, bee-keeping and a choir. Another Anglican, Greg, found it through his involvement in the world of chess. Greg put it this way:

I really, really value a lot of friendships in the chess world that transcend politics and religion and ethnicities. It's quite amazing how it seems to, we all seem to be on the same playing field as it were.

When asked about the importance of being appreciated, he said:

People do literally thank me sometimes, but I think it's just through just having that easy relationship where conversation can be fairly informal and you just kind of intuitively know that you're accepted. And also as I've got older, the need to be respected and accepted has diminished somewhat. And I'm more, if I think especially in the chess world, for instance, I

suppose my status is quite secure. I actually am a chess master as such too. So there's a title that goes with being a master. (Greg, Anglican, 76 to 80)

Christian beliefs continued to be relevant to most of these people. They provided a backdrop for living, describing some dimensions of the universe and the basic values - a sacred cosmos as Berger described it. For some, the shared study of the Bible or prayer brought them together and gave the group a common purpose. Some placed the emphasis on the values which arose out of the Christian faith in terms of caring for one another or for the vulnerable in the society. Some placed the emphasis on connecting with God either through ritual or in a very personal way. However, it was the social connections through which they felt they were able to contribute and in which they were personally recognised and valued which contributed most to meaning in life. Frequently, such social connections were found outside a church.

Discussion

The Christian faith contributes to meaning in life among most Australian church attenders we interviewed. The basic doctrines of the Christian faith provide some elements of a framework of the universe in which people can locate themselves, in particular, belief in God. Some people interviewed had a personal sense of God's involvement in their daily lives and it is that sense which gave them meaning. Many people see their faith as the source of basic values, such as the values of love and care for others, which they then seek to put into practice through their families and communities, and broader humanity. To this extent, the Christian faith provides a 'sacred cosmos' as Berger has described it, or, at least, some elements of a framework. The cosmos which most Australians inhabit is also shaped by science which gives us more detail about the nature of the universe in which we live and how the universe works.

It is possible that Creeds may be markers of belonging to a particular framework of meaning for some people. While the interviews explored people's sense of meaning, they did not explicitly explore people's attitudes to creeds. On the other hand, it may be noted that a couple of people who spoke about the significance of their beliefs to their sense of meaning had moved from Anglican churches where creeds were used to Baptist churches where creeds were not used. In general, in the interviews conducted, the details of

doctrines were not as important in the sense of meaning as the general tone: a positive tone of acceptance and respect rather than a negative tone of judgement and exclusion.

Interestingly, the references to negative tones of judgement and exclusion in these interviews were all to leaders in church congregations. Perhaps the details of doctrine are, and always have been, an issue for some leaders as a basis for their authority and a criterion they could use to exclude those who might oppose them. The issues of doctrine which led to the formation of the Nicene Creed may have been important for the bishops who met at Nicaea. Finding consensus among the church leaders was important to Constantine as part of his agenda for using Christianity to build a peaceful and unified Roman Empire. But the interviews suggest the details of doctrine are not very important for the average Australian church attender. While there is little evidence about how church attenders thought in the time of the Council of Nicaea, the details of doctrine of the divinity of Christ may not have been very important even in those days, except that it defined the group with which they aligned themselves. In his original letter to Arius and Alexander, Constantine suggested that the issues were 'so sublime and abstruse in their nature' that very few people would have the mental calibre to adequately comprehend them (Stevenson, 1957:, p. 353).

Almost all of these 44 church attenders found meaning through relationships, particularly through small groups where they found and gave support to each other. Some of them found it through their churches in small groups gathered around prayer and Bible study. Other groups arose out of a sense of mission and some particular projects or programs in which they seek to contribute to the wellbeing of others. Some found that meaning in groups where they volunteered.

Many of the attenders also found meaning in educational, sporting, advocacy, or through interest groups beyond their churches. And many of our interviewees also spoke of other areas which gave their lives meaning such as playing chess or golf. For others it was participation in a choir or involvement in Rotary. Where people felt they were learning, developing their interests or exercising and honing their skills, this added to their sense of meaning.

For most of the Australian church attenders we interviewed, meaning was created as people felt they were contributing to the lives of other people. It occurred as they felt they were accepted and appreciated as people, where there was warmth and support. Where there was explicit feedback which showed appreciation of contributions, that was good, but it did not need to be explicit. In those terms, our research generally confirms the theories which have been developed by the psychologists of meaning, while recognising that meaning is created in other ways too. In this regard, in general, the theories of ‘mattering’ have been supported by this study. People find meaning when they feel they matter to others and they can contribute to others.

Conclusion

There is evidence in this small and limited research project that church attenders generally find more meaning in relationships than in doctrines. Having some common values and some basic religious beliefs are helpful in people feeling that they have something in common and in giving some direction to life. But it is through relationships in which they experience support and in which they contribute support and encouragement to others that most church attenders we interviewed found meaning within the church.

If this finding can be generalised, it would have significant implications. It means that churches need to give much more attention to relationships among attenders and less attention to getting beliefs and doctrines aligned in a certain way. Looking back over history, church leaders have been the major users of the creeds to assert their own authority and expel those who were unwilling to conform. Detailed matters of orthodoxy have generally meant less to most attenders.

The Nicene Creed was used at the Council of Nicaea to define who should be excluded and who should be included in the ‘orthodox’ church. Today, there are still many churches which include or exclude people on the basis of doctrine. There are still power-blocks within churches which use their definitions of orthodoxy to exclude others from power.

The Gospels do not contain creeds and the statements of faith found in the Acts of the Apostles are very simple. Indeed, the various documents which make up the New

Testament provide a range of quite different statements about faith. There is certainly a plurality of descriptions and teachings about the Christian faith.

While Paul's letters provide detailed instructions to Christians, many of those instructions had to do with how people related to each other. In 1 Corinthians 13, he says 'If I speak in the tongues of men or of angels, but do not have love, I am only a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal'. He goes on to note that our knowledge will pass away, and that we currently only see 'a reflection as in a mirror'. He concludes 'And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love'. It is noteworthy that the Nicene Creed says nothing about either the love of God nor the great principle that the followers of Jesus should love one another (John 15:12). Jesus had a twofold command for his followers: to love God with all of our heart, soul and mind, and to love their neighbours as themselves. (Matthew 22:37-39).

At the heart of faithfulness to the Christian tradition is love for one another. This is the very essence of meaningful social connection. Love involves respect and valuing the other person for who they are and what they contribute in relationship. Building communities in which such relationships thrive is fundamental to the continuity of the Christian tradition. It is also fundamental to people finding meaning within the Church.

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Data

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Professional in the Church, Amateur in Christ: The Dynamics and Outcomes of Ministry Idolatry and Pathways Towards Christocentric Ministry

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Abstract

Christian scholars traditionally frame idolatry as a sin but rarely explore it as a theological-pastoral phenomenon. This paper offers a theological reflection on the cause, chaos, and consequences of ministry idolatry, defined as sourcing one's ultimate good and security from Christian ministry rather than from God, which can result in despair, pride, and spiritual deformation.

By exploring this topic, the paper attributes the causes of idolatry to social, cultural, personal, and ecclesial power dynamics. Like other manifestations of sin, ministry idolatry adversely can affect the person through feelings of emptiness and disillusionment, the community through toxic and abusive leadership, and the spirit through a heart that drifts further away from God. It is argued that ministry idolatry often leads to despair because the idol fails to deliver on the hope that the Christian has placed within it.

In response, the paper proposes that embodying Christlike attributes, such as self-denial, lowliness, servanthood, and obedience, can pave the way from idolatry to Christocentric ministry and ultimately to human flourishing. Further, leaders can avoid modelling an unhealthy works-based soteriology by confronting and resisting the adverse societal and institutional power structures that sustain ministry idolatry.

Key words: ministry idolatry, self-idolatry, pastoral leadership, ministry failure

Introduction

Any suggestion that ministry can become idolatrous may cause readers to respond with anything from apathy to intrigue, to outright cognitive dissonance regarding their own

practice. Indeed, ministry idolatry seems an oxymoron. For those still with us, we both credit the reader and ask them to reflect on why this paper deserves attention – does it resonate with lived experience? Does it confirm a conviction of existing dissonance within church ministry? Does it scratch a purely academic itch? The authors have combined their personal and professional experiences to produce this paper, hoping it will vindicate suspicions of idolatry as a factor in the spiritual deformation of ministry leaders.

What is ministry idolatry?

While scant, contemporary online and printed ministry resources that address ministry idolatry usually draw on a pastoral or biblical perspectives to provide insight and instruction on this difficulty (Geiger, 2018; Know Jesus, 2023). However, exploring perspectives outside the pastoral or biblical context may reveal other factors at play. The paper argues that consideration of other factors may produce a clearer picture of what defines ministry idolatry and therefore, assist in exploring possible pathways forward. To reach this goal, the paper draws on the existing literature on this topic, supplemented by an exploration of idolatry from an anthropological, ontological, social, and personal perspective. Throughout this paper, *idolatry* is defined as an issue concerning one's interior life, and *ministry idolatry* refers to the point of convergence between one's heart (interior life) and one's vocation in Christian ministry.

The author's aims are twofold: first, to offer a robust understanding of ministry idolatry; and second, to invite ministry leaders to investigate where ministry idolatry may develop within themselves. Ultimately, the authors do not resolve to scathingly critique or call out "bad behaviour" from Christian ministers; instead, they resolve to promote preventative and restorative practices that reflect a Christocentric model for ministry. Therefore, our final recommendations are tentative and generalised, inviting readers to contextualise the findings towards application to their ongoing spiritual and vocational formation.

Idolatry as a misplacement of ultimacy

From the Torah onwards, significant literary attention is dedicated to idolatry. This topic secured top billing within the Ten Commandments (Exod. 20:3) and captured the attention of the early Church Fathers (Augustine, ca. 426/2003, *City of God*, XIX.24), the Reformers (Luther, 2010), and prominent pastoral voices (Keller, 2010). Approaching this topic from theological, anthropological, and psychological perspectives reveals many potential causes of the rise of ministry idolatry among Christian leaders. The following

insights are drawn from both classic and contemporary literature to identify the spiritual, relational, and emotional consequences of idolatry in general and ministry idolatry in particular. The paper culminates in a contextual model that may assist in a preventative and restorative pathway mentioned above.

Theological, anthropological, and ontological perspectives on idolatry from the Christian tradition

Idolatry has engendered a rich history of debate amongst pre-Christian thinkers, where, from the conception of religion, the term idolatry has referred to false religions and religious diversity. The conversation of idolatry has “emerged at the intersection of ancient Jewish and Greek debates on religion and images, before being appropriated and put to use by early Christian authors” (Barbu, 2022, p. 389). The Apostle Paul was perhaps the first *Christian* writer in this field as he addressed issues of idolatry in his letters to the churches in Corinth and Thessalonica. Within a generation or two after, the early Church Fathers and apologists (e.g Justin Martyr and Tertullian) contributed to the discussion as they attacked polytheism and sought to shape Christian theology in the early centuries of the Church. Today, different views on idolatry have emerged from diverse theological traditions, such as Catholic/Patristic (Cavanaugh, 2024), Protestant Reformation (Luther, 2010; Calvin, 1989) and Reformed (Keller, 2010).

Amongst these varied theological approaches J. K. A. Smith's philosophical anthropology provides a constructive lens for this research. Smith (2009) recognises that humans are “desiring creatures...whose love/desire is aimed at something ultimate” (p. 40). Although Smith draws no connection between his anthropology and idolatry, this paper will treat *ultimacy* as an essential component of the scholarly conversation around idolatry. Smith (2016) presents an Augustinian model of humans as lovers, rather than simply “brains-on-a-stick” (p. 3), by “shifting the centre of gravity of human identity” (Smith, 2009, p. 47) from the mind to the heart. Smith's (2009) understanding presents human identity as dynamic rather than static, unfolding and developing over time through a process of formation (p. 47). This research agrees with Smith in viewing human desire as aimed towards something ultimate, not as *what humans do*, but instead, *who humans are*. Therefore, idolatry should not be viewed exclusively in a behavioural sense but from within the realm of identity.

If human identity is a process of *formation*, idolatry could potentially cause *deformation*, or as Powlison (1995) says, “a...heart defection” (p. 36). However, Beale proposes an alternative conclusion suggesting that “God created humans to be imaging beings who

reflect his glory” (p. 16). He continues: “at the core of our beings, we are imaging creatures. It is impossible to be neutral on this issue: we either reflect the Creator or something in Creation” (Beale, 2008, p. 16). He then launches into a Scriptural exploration of idolatry where he traces the connection between identity and idolatry and suggests that worshippers of idols become as spiritually void and lifeless as the idols, they commit themselves to (Psalm 115:4-8; 2 Kings 17:15). While Beale’s discussion on this point is modest compared to his extensive investigation of idolatry from the Old and New Testaments, his perspective on the imaging nature of man does not oppose Smith’s view, as Smith (2016) argues “you are what you love” (p. 7). Beale emphasises the reflective nature of human desires. As desiring creatures, humans will reflect and *image* what they desire as ultimate, which in idolatry’s case, results in formation away from God’s design for humanity.

Conversely, feminist theologian Mary Daly (2017) suggests that being made in God’s image “is the creative potential itself in human beings” (p. 76). However, she argues the implications of this image can “hardly be worked through under patriarchal conditions” (p. 76). Concerning idolatry, she suggests that the God’s image bearer should exercise this creativity by breaking down the idol of male superiority (Daly, 2020, p. 76). Similarly, Boss (2016) notes, “feminist theology...accuses patriarchal theology of directing the worshipping gaze outwards towards the transcendent God who in his male manifestation is a false god” (p. 105). The perception of God as male may encourage idolatry by perpetuating idols of authority, ego, and power. While this concept certainly warrants further investigation, this paper will assert that the feminist perspective espoused by Daly, Boss, and others deepens an understanding of idolatry by highlighting the correlation between a misunderstanding of God and a misunderstanding of self, which limits a holistic reflection of God in the world, including within practices of Christian ministry.

Further, Christopher Wright suggests that idolatry can be understood as *ontological duality*. Like Beale, he draws upon Genesis 1 by suggesting that “the most fundamental distinction in all reality...is the distinction between the Creator God and everything else ... [the] two orders of being” (Wright, 2020, para. 2). According to Wright, idolatry occurs when this distinction between God and creation is blurred, to the detriment of both. This view is similar to Reinhold Niebuhr, who suggests that humanity’s unwillingness to acknowledge its “creatureliness” and thus accept its finiteness and dependence results in evil and idolatry (Niebuhr, 2021). As Niebuhr (2021) explains: “Man is constantly tempted

to the sin of idolatry and constantly succumbs to it because in contemplating the power and dignity of his freedom, he forgets the degree of his limitations” (Niebuhr, 2021, chap. 6, section 2, para. 18). This again suggests that the subject of idolatry reaches beyond the scope of human behaviour and should instead be situated in the realm of human identity and spirituality; idolatry as sin is “spiritual and not carnal” (Niebuhr, 2021, chap. 1, section 3, para. 8).

The Christian view of humanity understands the human person as a sinner, where “sin” is defined by various schools of Christian theology as pride, self-love, lust, or sensuality (Niebuhr, 2021). Therefore, the concept of sin is vital for understanding idolatry in anthropological terms because it reveals the deep distortion of human desire that lies beneath idolatrous behaviour. However, as Niebuhr (2021) argues, sin is man's refusal to admit his creatureliness by pretending to be more than he is and imagining himself as the whole, making himself the centre and source of his own life rather than recognising that he is a limited individual among the whole. Schwarz (2013) offers a slight alteration to this, suggesting that humanity is aware of its finitude but attempts to overcome it by abandoning "its position as God's administrators of the world" and seeking "to rule the world in autonomy" instead (p. 129). Sin, whether as misunderstanding at best or utter rebellion at worst, thus constitutes the essence of idolatry and is located within the “very centre of human personality – in the will” (Niebuhr, 2021, chap.1, section 3, para. 7). Thus, a Christian anthropological perspective of idolatry must take seriously the way sin steers a person away from God and orients their whole life around false centres.

Defining idolatry

Turning attention now to Luther, who in his larger catechism unpacks the first commandment, "You shall have no other gods before Me" (Exod. 20:3, ESV), by first defining the term "god". He explains, "god is that in which we are to look for all good and in which we are to find refuge in all need... it is the trust and faith of the heart alone that make both God and an idol" (Luther, 2016, p. 300). While like the other definitions, Luther suggests that idolatry ultimately involves expecting *more good* and *more help* from something or someone other than God. He goes on to emphasise that the essential aspect of what people seek from idols is the greatest amount of *good* and *help*, which provides the cause of idolatry.

Contra Luther, Calvin appears to relegate idolatry to the physical realm, thereby providing a limited perspective on this pervasive sin. For Calvin (1989), an idol is a physical image, statue, or icon made to represent God and is worshipped in place of God. While this understanding may have helped argue against the corruptions of certain church practices in his time, it falls short by treating idols merely as things made by human hands rather than as things conceived in human hearts. Perhaps we can summarise Calvin's perspective on idolatry as a misplacement of God *worship* rather than a misplacement of *God*, as other scholars describe (Keller, 2010; Niebuhr, 2021).

Powlison's (1995) perspective on idolatry goes beyond the search for security, suggesting that idolatry concerns lordship. He writes, "Has something or someone besides Jesus the Christ taken title to your heart's trust, preoccupation, loyalty, service, fear and delight?...the motivation question is the lordship question. Who or what 'rules' my behavior, the Lord or a substitute?" (Powlison, 1995, p. 35). According to Powlison (1995), one's desires determine their answers to these questions; "drifting from God into desires other than God is *the* problem" (p. 36). In summary, idolatry signifies that a substitute ruler other than Christ governs one's life.

While Luther, Calvin, Beale, and Powlison aid this research by highlighting different facets of the human problem, Tim Keller offers the most comprehensive treatment of idolatry. Keller suggests that idols are good things that humans make into ultimate things. He explains: "our hearts deify them as the center of our lives, because, we think, they can give us significance and security, safety and fulfilment, if we attain them" (Keller, 2010, p. xiv). His perspective reinforces ontological duality by suggesting that idolatry deifies a created thing over the Creator, or, as Wright (2020) so eloquently states idolatry "dethrones God and enthrones creation" (Chap. 3). In summary, idolatry is the misplacement of ultimacy, in which one seeks to find one's ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance in a created thing rather than in the Creator God.

Surface vs deep idols

This paper now examines how idolatry occurs in individuals, particularly ministry leaders. Firstly, Keller distinguishes between surface idols and deep idols. Like other scholars, Keller affirms that money, sex, family, and food are among humanity's most-loved idols. However, he believes that "deep idols" such as power, comfort, approval, and control seek fulfilment through the more concrete and visible "surface idols" (Keller, 2010, pp. 64–65).

Keller's "deep idol" distinction proposes the depths of what is sought in idolatry, albeit from the wrong source.

While anything can be an idol according to Keller (2010), humans can make an idol of themselves. However, Beale addresses an aspect missing in Keller's discussion: idolatry of the self, an inversion of the Creator-creature relationship. Beale (2008) proposes that "much of the Church today, especially that part of it which is evangelical, is in captivity to this idolatry of the self" (p. 294). He believes the Church often perpetuates the idol of "self", which Brownback (1982) believes is "the antithesis of the legitimate blessedness that comes from being poor in spirit" (p. 130).

To pair his thesis with self-idolatry, Beale (2008) writes, "what we revere we resemble, and if we revere ourselves, we will attempt to expand our image egotistically, which will eventually lead to destruction—if the process is not halted" (p. 297). Self-idolatry centres the desire to appear ever more significant or to "artificially inflate" oneself (Beale, 2008, p. 297), which has also been labelled by Wright (2020, para. 7) as the "worship of the self", as "the God who should be worshipped becomes an object to be used" in order to serve individual interests.

Tragically, leaders within the Church are not exempt from this idol, as ministerial work can provide the means for ego inflation and self-worship. In this vein, Walton (2023) interprets the Tower of Babel account in Genesis 11 as a warning against using God to make a name for oneself, focusing on our glory and success rather than God's, rather than simply viewing it as a moral lesson about pride. An example of this would be using platforms, social media influence or church membership numbers.

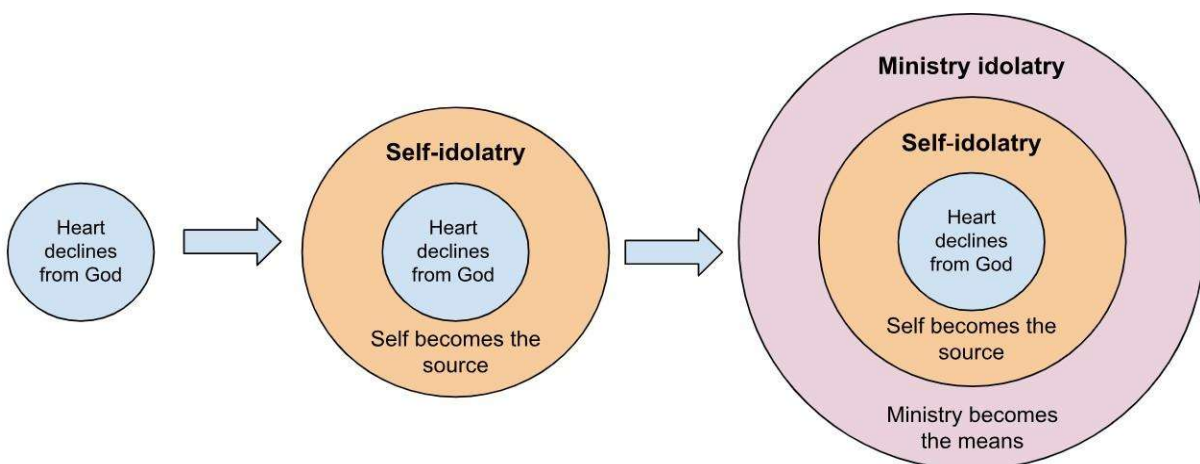
Further, Walton (2023) asserts that the people of Babel were attempting to forge their own path to flourishing instead of trusting the God-given way of covenant relationship with their Creator as the source and centre of order. God's way of covenant relationship is the true path to human flourishing, enacted as people trust him, live under his rule, and find identity and security in him, in stark contrast to self-glory or success, as in the case of Babel, where self-made structures are erected. Making a name for oneself is not the product of idolatry, but the process of idolatry, where the product or object is the *self*. By defining idolatry in this way, Walton suggests that the desire and attempt to *make a name*

for oneself arise from the individual's quest to gain ultimate good, fulfilment, and significance from the source of *self*.

While not directly discussing idolatry, Wilson devotes an entire chapter of his book to the pastor's management of *glory*. Self-glory is akin to self-idolatry as it attempts to rob the glory that is due Christ through the means of ministry success. Wilson (2013) posits that ministers can be tempted to steal the glory that arises from ministry successes because “we can be so lustful for adulation, craven consumers of personal praise” (chap.11, Your Praise is Not the Boss of Me). Pope Francis (2013) refers to this as *careerism*, writing, "we are caught up in ourselves, in careerism which thirsts for recognition, applause, rewards and status" (p. 207). As Walton suggests, this thirst is simply a longing to find the ultimate good in one's name: fame. Further, Wilson (2013) posits that the self-glorifying minister seeks justification and immediate satisfaction for their flesh. However, his assertions fail to connect the lust for glory with the sin of idolatry and the search for ultimate good.

In search of this connection, we return to Luther (2010), who connects self-glory and idolatry by highlighting King Saul as someone who “let his heart decline from God” (para. 22) and trusted his crown and power instead. Perhaps then, self-glory is trusting the *self* as the source of what only God can give, which happens when the heart drifts or declines from God (Powlison, 1995, p. 36). Therefore, we posit that ministry idolatry is a development (or manifestation) of self-idolatry. When one's heart drifts from God, the self can become the source, and ministry can become the means to seek one's ultimate good, security, significance, and fulfilment. This proposed phenomenon is illustrated in the diagram below:

Figure 1. Depths of ministry idolatry



Pastoral care and counselling

If ministry idolatry develops out of deeper patterns of self-idolatry, we must ask how these patterns take shape within particular persons and contexts. For instance, to inform effective practice in Christian counselling, Powlison (1995, pp. 38–47) addresses the heart and the social milieu as two strands of human motivations contributing to idolatry. He lists family of origin, genetics, temperament, consumer culture, Western society, life experiences, and somatic influences among the contributing factors that lead not only towards idolatry but towards a particular cluster of idols - that is, a characteristic constellation of ruling desires in a person's life (e.g. power, pleasure, religiosity, avoidance, etc).

Further, Powlison (1995) suggests that idolatry can arise from others who "model and purvey false laws or false standards, things which mis-define value and stigma, blessedness and accursedness, the way of life, and the way of death", and by doing so, he believes "they sin against us" (p. 39). Kraj (2020) also connects idolatrous misconduct with the world's influence, suggesting that sin "might be a result of false or misplaced openness to the world" (p. 144). Noting the extreme pessimism, Powlison (1995) believes that "membership in the society" ensures that individuals are bombarded with advertisements, shaped by typical forms and values, and conditioned towards defection from God, all of which result in "the confluence of disoriented heart motives and disoriented socio-cultural systems" (p. 47).

Membership in society catalyses idolatry in more ways than Powlison suggests. Drawing from Charles Taylor's work, Trueman (2020) affirms "the triumph of expressive individualism and of poiesis over mimesis" (chap. 1, para. 17). In a poietic society, the individual creates the true self for themselves by manipulating the world's raw material to serve their own purposes (Trueman, 2020). The climate of expressive individualism in the West could function as a greenhouse, fostering the flourishing of self-idolatry. Christian ministry could be viewed as a raw material that the individual uses to serve their idolatrous purposes. According to Levin, institutions serve as platforms for expressing one's individualism. Writing specifically about American culture and politics, Levin (2020) observes: "we find professors and scientists and ministers and CEOs and artists and athletes all using the legitimacy built up within professional institutions to raise their profiles in a broader public arena" (p. 35). In this way, institutions have become performative instead of formative as they are not "moulds that ought to shape their

behaviour and character but as platforms that allow them greater individual exposure and enable them to hone their brands” (Levin, 2020, p. 6). The rise of expressive individualism and poiesis, and the fall of institutions into platforms rather than moulds, invite the Christian leader to unwittingly *become* their brand, using ministry to serve their purposes and treating the Church as their platform. Hence, culture can contribute to idolatry by fuelling, sustaining, and celebrating the idol of *self*. The Christian leader should resist being conformed to this world's pattern, as it starkly contrasts with God's ultimate purpose and design for humanity as God-imagers and discerners (Rom. 12:2).

Regarding personal factors, Powlison (1995) posits that an idol can be ingrained in an individual from childhood, depending on what “drug of choice” was modelled in the family (p. 39). Life experiences can also influence the idol’s shape because “our idols both covet what we do not have and hold on for dear life to what we do have” (p. 46). Powlison (1995) even suggests that an individual's personality typologies may reflect common root idols such as pride, control, power, or pleasure (p. 45). These assertions are significant for this research, as Powlison identified many causes outside the human heart responsible for idolatry, thereby supporting the research. This way, idolatry arises from within and is insinuated from without (p. 36). While idolatry arises from within an individual's heart, many factors from one's society, culture, family, and personality can catalyse it. Idolatry is more than a theological issue. It should be viewed holistically. However, as Powlison (1995) recognises, a complete treatment of the topic would require a “psycho-social-spiritual-somatic-volitional-experiential analysis” (p. 47).

Ruination – the consequences of idolatry

Scholars agree that consequences for idolatrous action and conception are ruinous. Beale (2008) includes the element of consequence in his thesis: “what people revere, they resemble, either for *ruin or restoration*” (p. 16, emphasis added). He suggests that idolaters will become as spiritually lifeless and insensitive to God as the idols of wood, rock, or stone that they worship (Beale, 2008). However, this imagery is ineffective in addressing flesh-and-blood idols. For the ministry idolater whose deep idol is *self*, Beale's thesis would suggest that the consequence of their sin resembles them more. Perhaps Beale's thesis does not apply to self-idolatry or any other idolatry involving another living being.

According to Keller (2010), idolatrous hopes are "illusory" because the idolator does not find the ultimate good, fulfillment, security, and significance sought from an idol, resulting in despair (p. xi). He continues, "despair, however, is inconsolable because it comes from losing an ultimate thing. When you lose the ultimate source of your meaning or hope, there are no alternative sources to turn to. It breaks your spirit" (Keller, 2010, p. xi).

Powlison (1995) calls this state "a hangover of misery and accursedness" (p. 37) and makes a point that is not clear in Keller's discussion. Despair may not manifest immediately, as idolaters can continue in their folly for an entire lifetime. Perhaps this "hangover" is felt over time or is so subtle the idolator can ignore it. Hence, they may not feel despair.

Wright (2020) agrees with Keller that idolatry is "doomed to disappointment", but he provides more specificity by suggesting that "worship of the self eventually implodes in narcissism, nihilism, or sheer amoral selfishness" (ch. 3, para. 8). Despite not justifying or expanding on this point, Wright's contribution aids the research by suggesting that the consequences of idolatry are not limited to one's relationship with God but can also bleed into the areas of relationships and personality. For some, this may manifest in the prime of success. However, for others, it lies under the surface unnoticed throughout their lives without the intervention of a psycho-volitional-experiential analysis.

Regarding idolatry's consequences, Luther draws upon Deuteronomy 5:9, where God warns his people that they:

shall not bow down to them or serve them [idols]; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers on the children to the third and fourth generation of those who hate me.

Luther (2010) comments, "he is a God who will not leave it unavenged if men turn from Him and will not cease to be angry" (para. 16). He does not elaborate on what these consequences might entail, given Christ's sacrifice and the current dispensation of grace. However, he does state that idolaters "shall not succeed...they shall be wrecked, with all in which they trusted" (Luther, 2010, para. 16). This assertion echoes Beale's (2008) warning that idolaters resemble their idols, which leads to ruin. Beale and Luther's discussion of the consequences of idolatry lacks specificity, therefore limiting its application. Yes, ruin and wreckage are potential ends for idolaters, but Beale and Luther rely on others to explain what this ruin and wreckage practically result in; these other scholars suggest despair, besetting anxiety, restlessness, narcissism, nihilism, and amoral selfishness (Keller, 2010; Smith, 2016; Wright, 2020). However, Paul David Tripp's (2012) final

charge in his picture of self-glory is most haunting: “You’ll constantly confuse being an ambassador with being a king” (ch. 12, para. 1).

In summary, several scholars suggest that the consequences of idolatry – particularly idolatry of the self – include pride towards God, spiritual lifelessness, despair, besetting anxiety, restlessness, narcissism, nihilism, selfishness, unapproachability, and self-deception. These are all summed up in two words: *ruin* and *wreckage*, which sounds absolute and catastrophic. In balance, the authors of this article do not necessarily hold that damage of this gravity will automatically occur, as matters of context are not taken into consideration. However, the authors do issue a clarion call to resist ministry idolatry, due to the potential personal and moral ruination it may bring to leaders and communities.

The cure for idolatry and pathways toward Christocentric ministry

Rather than remaining with negative assertions about Christian living, we turn now to what the literature says positively about how Christians, especially those in ministry leadership, ought to live. If the heart is, as Calvin (1989) claimed, a “perpetual idol factory” (p. 97), then surely God, through His Holy Spirit, will provide a way of escape for Christians so they can flee the factory, close its doors, and dismantle its operations. This paper will briefly review the literature on the cure for idolatry and offer contemporary Christian leaders a Christocentric model for ministry as a potential way forward.

When addressing idolatry, most authors suggest the solution is to return to God through Christ, which ultimately involves a return to ontological duality: deifying God as Creator and recognising the self as a dependent creature (Beale, 2008; Keller, 2010; Kraj, 2020; Luther, 2010; Tripp, 2012). This solution is not specific to idolatry but applies to all sin, for the Christian is liberated from sin through the “Christ event” (Schwarz, 2013, p. 131) and now walks not according to their fleshly desires, but according to the Spirit (Gal. 5:16). As idolatry is drifting from God into desires other than God, by submitting to the desires of the Spirit, the Christian receives grace from God to overcome the sin of idolatry. Writing about the dangers of self-glory, Tripp (2012) suggests that pastors need to be “rescued by the very same grace we have come to proclaim and live before others” (ch. 12, para. 20). However, what this looks like in practice is left to the individual pastor to discover.

The solution to return to Christ through repentance and confession reinforces what Figure 1 illustrates: the idolatry of self and ministry are the results of a heart that has drifted, declined, or defected from God. Kraj (2020) and Walton (2023) both suggest that an essential part of returning to Christ is to give up personal desires to follow Him and thus accept Jesus' invitation to self-denial and daily cross-bearing (Luke 9:23). This self-denial would be necessary to combat the heart's perpetual idolatrous tendencies. Luther (2010) suggests the solution is to place one's entire confidence and trust in God alone, for whatever one hopes to receive from an idol, Christ would say, "Expect it all of Me, and regard Me as the one who will help you and pour out upon you richly all good things" (para. 10). Therefore, according to the literature, the solution for idolatry is to deny oneself and return to Christ by placing one's trust and confidence in Him, believing Him to be the source of ultimate good, fulfillment, security, and significance.

So, what does it look like to return to Christ to overcome idolatry? Most authors lose momentum here as they suggest purely theoretical or abstract solutions such as humbling yourself, knowing your place and God's, reconsidering what it means to be a follower of God, and seeking God's glory, not your own (Beale, 2008; Tripp, 2012; Walton, 2023; Wilson, 2013). While Keller affirms the importance of such truths, he also offers some more practical advice for the idolater seeking to turn back to Christ. He believes that idolatry cannot be remedied solely by repenting or by using willpower to live differently; instead, the Christian must learn to become secure in Christ's love. He explains:

Jesus must become more beautiful to your imagination and more attractive to your heart than your idol. That is what will replace your counterfeit gods. If you uproot the idol and fail to "plant" the love of Christ in its place, the idol will grow back. (Keller, 2010, p. 172)

Keller (2010) suggests that planting the love of Christ in the heart and replacing the love of idols requires cultivating spiritual disciplines that shape and direct the Christian's loves, desires, and actions (p. 172). Despite not directly addressing idolatry, James K. A. Smith offers the most comprehensive understanding of the power of habit to shape the heart's loves and desires. He writes, "We have seen that love is a habit. This means that our love is like second nature: it directs and propels us, often under the radar of conscious awareness, like breathing and blinking" (Smith, 2016, p. 32). However, the Christian should not think of love as an unpredictable force that moves unprovoked. As Smith (2016) explains, "our love is shaped, primed, and aimed by liturgical practices that take hold of our gut and aim our heart to certain ends" (p. 40). Therefore, Smith's theory supports Keller's (2010) practical suggestion that the spiritual disciplines will free the Christian from idolatry by

making the gospel “a life-shaping reality in our hearts and imaginations” (p. 175).

However, participation in ministry itself could also be seen by ministers as a discipline of service that helps them escape from idolatry, yet unknowingly do the very thing that is idolatry. While this does not appear to be in Keller's thinking, it is also worth reflecting on.

Christian leaders may practically address the issue of ministry-idolatry by embracing the way of descent into humble and lowly service to God and people. Keller draws upon the Christ-hymn in Philippians 2 as a model for ministers today. According to Keller (2010), "our hearts say, 'I will ascend, I will be as the Most High for my own sake,' but Jesus said, 'I will descend, I will go low, for their sakes'" (p. 124). This approach ensures that the ministry aspires to God's glory and not the leader's self-glory. Similar to Keller, Tripp (2012) advises:

Jesus says... If you are my ambassadors, called to represent my will and way, called to be tools of my redeeming grace, then you must not think that any ministry task is beneath you. You must be willing to do the lowest, most debased thing so that my work and my will be done. You must not refuse. You must not think of yourself as too good. You must be willing to be the lowest of slaves in order that my kingdom may come, and my will may be done. (ch. 12, para. 18)

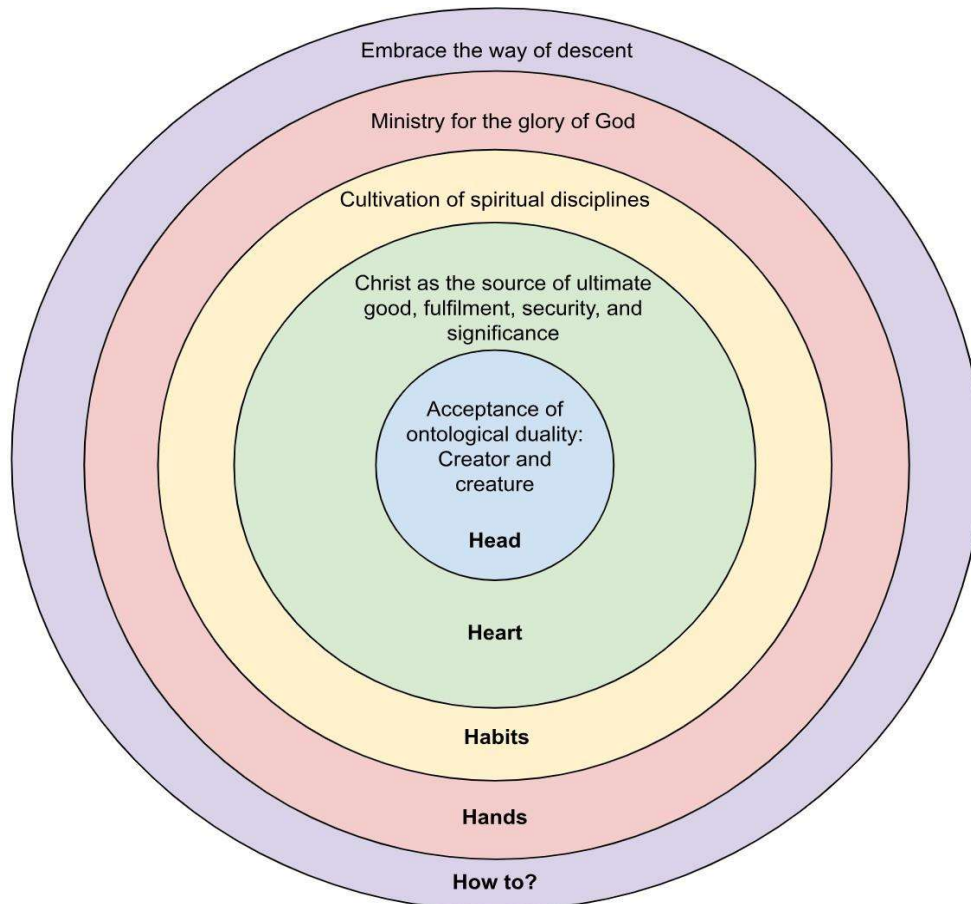
To encourage application, the findings of this paper are synthesised and illustrated in Figure 2: *A Christocentric model for ministry as an alternative to ministry idolatry*. This model begins with the leader's acceptance of ontological duality; progresses into the heart, where the power of habits shapes one's loves; is aimed at God's glory; and culminates in one's willingness to “go low” (Keller, 2010, p. 124). When the leader recognises that they have drifted (or are tempted to drift) from God, thus entering idol territory, they can begin the journey back to Christocentric ministry by first renewing their mind with the reality of their utter dependence on God as Creator (Rom. 12:2). Then, the leader would do well to recover a Christocentric approach to ministry by cultivating the spiritual disciplines of their tradition; thereby planting the love of Christ more deeply in their heart. Once the leader's head, heart, and habits align with God, the leader can model the ministry of Christ by aiming their ministry at the glory of God and embracing the way of humble descent in service to God and man.

The authors recognise that this model has limitations in its scope and application. It is intentionally simple and individual-focused, thereby not explicitly capturing the full complexity of ministerial contexts. Yet, it does provide a practical invitation for the

Christian leader to search their heart and turn “to God from idols to serve the living and true God” (1 Thess. 1:9). Turning from idols is perhaps the most critical task of any Christian leader, as John Bunyan (1678) exhorts:

...above all, look well to your own hearts, and to the lusts thereof, for they are deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked. Set your faces like a flint; you have all power in heaven and earth on your side. (p. 142)

Figure 2. A Christocentric model for ministry as an alternative to ministry idolatry



Conclusion

This reflection highlights potential causes and consequences of ministry idolatry. In a universal sense, idolatry occurs when a person places ultimacy on something created. The person then looks to this created thing to provide ultimate good, fulfilment, security, and significance to the seeker. Ministry idolatry occurs when the self becomes the idol, and the idolater uses God and/or ministry as a means of self-glory. While the human heart is an "idol-making factory" (Calvin, 1989, p. 97) and is therefore prone to sin in this way, other external factors contribute to the rise of idolatry within the heart and one's particular idol of choice. These external factors arise from culture, society, family of origin, personality,

and life experiences. The paper argues that the cause of idolatry arises from the heart's drift, decline, or defection from God, driven by sin, as well as from societal, cultural, and personal factors that powerfully impinge on the individual. The sin of idolatry – especially the idolatry of self – can bring ruinous consequences that affect one's relationship with God, others, and themselves, ultimately leading to despair and destruction (Beale, 2008, p. 297). Thankfully, the process can be halted by receiving aid from the Holy Spirit and forgiveness from the Father and by embracing the Christocentric model for ministry, as shown in Figure 2.

Finally, whilst this paper maintains a sober, analytical tone throughout, it is offered in a spirit of humility. The author's hope is for ministry leaders to use the paper for ongoing reflection on their own propensity for idolatry that so easily ensnares and to run the ministry race with endurance, following the pattern of Jesus (Heb. 12:1). Whilst many scholars surveyed in the paper present their views as unqualified and definitive, the authors remain cognizant of the complex and contextual nature of ministry idolatry. Hence, readers should exercise their own discernment in selecting the insights most relevant to their contexts.

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The Counter-Cultural Leadership of the Servant: An Exegetical and Socio-Political Reading of Mark 10:41-45¹

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Abstract

This article explores the servant-leadership paradigm in Mark 10:41-45 within the dual contexts of Jesus' historical ministry in first-century Judea and the socio-political milieu of the Markan community. Through socio-historical and literary-rhetorical analysis, the study demonstrates how Jesus' teaching represents a radical inversion of dominant Greco-Roman and Herodian power structures. The passage's vocabulary—particularly the terms *katakuriēuō*, *katexousiazō*, *diakonos*, and *doulos*²—is examined in light of Roman patronage, imperial authority, and localized power struggles within Herodian Palestine. By locating Jesus' servant-leadership ethic within Jewish prophetic traditions and counter-imperial discourse, the study reveals the text as a rhetorical-theological rebuke of hierarchical domination and an invitation to embodied servanthood. Mark 10:45, with its climactic depiction of Jesus' self-sacrifice as a ransom "for many," functions as a theological centerpiece and a call to discipleship. The article concludes that this passage is not merely ethical instruction but a subversive vision of authority centered on the cruciform mission of the Messiah.

¹ This article is a recent reworking of the author's former master's paper.

² See section 2.3 for definitions of these terms.

Key words: servant leadership, Mark 10:41–45, counter-cultural leadership, christian discipleship, ministry leadership

Introduction

With the assumption that every word has its context and story behind it, this article offers its primary proposal: a historical-exegetical study of the servant-leadership paradigm in Mark 10:41-45, interpreted through its dual socio-political contexts. The passage portrays Jesus' radical redefinition of leadership in direct contrast to prevailing cultural norms of power and authority. This study contends that Jesus' leadership ethic in this text is not merely a moral ideal but a counter-cultural, theologically grounded challenge to both Herodian and Roman models of domination.

Historical reconstruction of the passage's background poses significant challenges, particularly the socio-political structures of first-century Judea under Herodian rule and the Greco-Roman imperial world. A further complication arises from the passage's bi-literary context: it represents a later narration of an earlier statement, where the Gospel writer describes the words of Jesus to address his own community's setting.

Richard B. Hays (1996, pp.73-75) notes that every Gospel narrative functions within at least two contexts: first, the historical context in which Jesus initially spoke, and second, the context of the Gospel narrator who later rearticulates those sayings for his audience.³ Both layers are significant. This article, therefore, seeks to interpret Mark 10:41-45 by holding together the historical situation of Jesus' ministry within Judeo-Palestinian society and the literary-historical context of the Gospel of Mark as a theological document shaped in response to early Christian challenges.

Accordingly, this servant-leadership motif will be analyzed within the following framework. First, we will explore the socio-political climate of inner Judea during the

³ Hays critiques dominant Gospel methodologies for their tendency to focus either on Jesus' historical setting or on the Gospel authors' theological intentions, advocating instead for a literary-theological reading that attends to both layers. Though Hays favors the narrator's context, this article seeks balance by examining both the original and redactional settings of Mark 10:41-45.

Herodian dynasty, the immediate historical setting of Jesus' earthly ministry, and the original articulation of this leadership ethic. Second, we will turn to the broader Greco-Roman political environment, the likely cultural background of the Gospel's first readers. Though overlapping in some areas, this dual analysis is critical for understanding both the content and rhetorical function of the text. Third, we will undertake an exegetical theological reading of Mark 10:41-45 in its final literary form, emphasizing the text's rhetorical force and theological message within the Markan Gospel.

Ultimately, this study argues that Jesus' words in Mark 10:41-45 constitute a deliberate subversion of existing leadership norms, rooted in hierarchical dominance, and offer a new model of authority grounded in servanthood, humility, and the redemptive mission of the Messiah. This counter-cultural paradigm would not only challenge Roman patronage systems and Herodian ambition but also redefine leadership within the Christian community itself.

1. Herodian Politics and Judean Context

The servant-leadership ethic articulated in Mark 10:41-45 emerges within a historical environment saturated with political ambition and hierarchical dominance. Having expanded eastward by the first century BCE, the Roman Empire imposed its administrative framework upon Judea through local proxies. Within this political arrangement, the Herodian dynasty served as Rome's client kings, exercising delegated authority while reinforcing imperial values. The socio-political culture of Herod's Judea was thus characterized by competitive power structures, elite patronage systems, and constant threats to stability—all of which serve as the implicit background to Jesus' paradoxical teaching on leadership.

1.1. The Portrait of Herod the Great

Although Rome conquered Corinth in 146 BCE, granting it greater influence over eastern Mediterranean politics, it was not until Pompey annexed Jerusalem in 63 BCE that Palestine came fully under Roman rule (Boatwright, et al., 2006, pp.72-77). Rather than enforcing direct governance, Rome entrusted administrative authority to local rulers who could secure imperial interests. These "client kings," such as Herod

the Great, were given considerable freedom in taxation and internal policy, though restricted from forming external alliances (Ferguson, 2003, p.45).

Herod the Great is often viewed through a dual lens: admired for his political acumen and architectural legacy, yet condemned for his ruthless consolidation of power. Traditionally, Jewish and Christian sources depict him as a tyrannical opportunist. Even secular evaluations characterize him as “a Roman client king... known for his remarkable construction projects, fierce loyalty to his Roman masters, but also for the cruelty of his reign.” (Brenner, 2001, pp. 212-14) Some modern scholars attempt to nuance this image. For instance, Peter Richardson (1999, p.xiii) argues that Herod should not be dismissed as a “half-Jew” but understood as a third-generation Jew devoted to religious life, especially in his ambitious rebuilding of the Jerusalem Temple. Yet Richardson concedes that Herod’s marriage into the Hasmonean line strengthened his political legitimacy.

Indeed, Herod’s leadership style—marked by calculated violence and dynastic insecurity—demonstrates an insatiable hunger for power. His execution of his Hasmonean wife Mariamne and her sons (Harding, 2003, pp.169-70), his widespread construction of Graeco-Roman cities honoring pagan deities (Hanson and Oakman, 1998, pp.174-202), and his symbolic desecration of the Temple by placing an eagle at its entrance underscore his prioritization of political survival over spiritual fidelity. Herod’s loyalty to Rome was not merely diplomatic but strategic: when his alliance with Antony collapsed, he promptly transferred allegiance to Octavian to retain power (Richardson, 1999; Storkey, 2005, p.18). In sum, Herod exemplifies a leadership ethos shaped by pragmatism, self-preservation, and dominance—values starkly opposed to the servant-leadership ideal presented by Jesus.

1.2. Herodian Struggles and Internal Collapse

Herod’s ambition did not end with his reign. He secured his legacy through complex wills and succession arrangements by dividing the kingdom among his sons. Yet this tripartite division only intensified internal power struggles. Each Herodian successor sought to expand their territory and influence, often at the expense of siblings and

local stability (Hoehner, 2000, pp.485-94). Storkey (2005, p.29) observes that this fragmentation became a visible backdrop for Gospel narratives, in which Herodian politics function as a foil to Jesus' teachings.

The Gospel of Luke explicitly describes Herod Antipas as a "fox" (Luke 13:32), a characterization suggestive of cunning political opportunism and spiritual impurity. Likewise, the Synoptic Gospels often warn against the "leaven" of Herodian influence (cf. Mark 8:15), portraying their governance as politically manipulative and spiritually corrupt.

Against this backdrop, Jesus introduced a new paradigm of leadership: one not defined by ascendancy, control, or dynastic succession but by servanthood and self-giving. As Jesus later declared before Pilate, "My kingdom is not of this world... But now my kingdom is from another place" (John 18:36). This leadership vision, echoed in Mark 10:41-45, directly contrasts Herodian ambitions. In place of positional greatness, Jesus calls his followers to humility, suffering, and voluntary servitude—a counter-cultural movement within the heart of first-century Judea.

2. Roman Imperial Ideology and Overlord Leadership

While Herodian politics created an immediate cultural backdrop for Jesus' ministry, the broader framework of Roman imperial ideology shaped the socio-political reality of first-century Palestine and the rhetorical world of the Gospel of Mark. The Roman Empire, building upon the administrative innovations of the Hellenistic kingdoms, imposed a centralized, hierarchical structure reinforced by imperial cults, civic patronage, and militarized authority. Within this context, the leadership paradigm modeled by Jesus, one rooted in humility, service, and sacrificial love, was not only anomalous but subversive.

2.1. A Bicultural Political Heritage

The political ethos of the Roman world was a synthesis of two traditions: the Greek city-state with its early democratic ideals and the Roman Republic with its civic virtues and military order. Though the Greek notion of leadership once celebrated

philosophical virtue and public service, as seen in the writings of Xenophon and others, this democratic impulse eroded under Roman centralization (Seeley, 1993, pp.234-49) noting that the ideal of servant-rulership to classical Greek philosophy, especially in Xenophon's treatment of ideal kingship. Clarke (2000, p.18) notes that while city-states had once nurtured broad participation, by the time of Jesus, "political influence returned... to be largely the prerogative of an advantaged few."

The Roman Republic, which had long promoted balanced governance through senatorial debate and civic offices, eventually succumbed to civil war and oligarchic control. The rise of Julius Caesar and, later, Augustus (Octavian) marked a decisive turn from republicanism to imperial dictatorship (Harding, 2003, p.31). Caesar's appointment as pontifex maximus and his accumulation of titles reflect the centralization of religious and political power in a single figure (Clarke, 2000, pp.27-8). Octavian's designation as Augustus codified this consolidation, inaugurating a new imperial order marked by hierarchy and absolutism (Ferguson, 2003, pp.27-28).

Though centralized leadership brought political stability and administrative efficiency, it also created a culture in which dominance, patronage, and image management became the primary currencies of power. Such a historical milieu was particularly evident in provincial regions like Palestine, where local rulers, such as the Herodians, were expected to reflect Roman values while maintaining order (Boatwright, et al., 2006, pp. 77-79; Harding, 2003, p.38). The socio-political ethos of this era thus normalized overlordship and self-aggrandizement, precisely the models Jesus renounces in Mark 10:42-45.

2.2. Patronage, Power, and the Politics of Image

The Roman world was governed not only by military might but also by intricate patron-client systems. This relational structure shaped every level of society, from emperor to soldier, from noble to serf. Leaders enhanced their prestige by accumulating clients and displaying beneficence, while clients secured protection and opportunity through public loyalty. Leadership was performative, transactional, and often exploitative (Hanson and Oakman, 1998, p.71).

Religious ideology reinforced these dynamics. Emperors were worshipped as divine figures, with local populations expected to honor imperial cults as acts of civic loyalty (Clarke, 2000, pp. 19-21; Aune, 2000, pp. 917-26). The blurring of sacred and secular realms allowed emperors to project political and spiritual authority, demanding allegiance under the guise of divine favor. To resist this system was to risk marginalization or persecution.

Against this ideological backdrop, Jesus' vision of leadership—marked by servanthood, hiddenness, and self-sacrifice—was not only distinctive but deeply political. As T. S. Johnson (2000, pp. 968-74) observes, Caesar's dictatorship “restored stability... but republican freedom was lost.” In contrast, Jesus restored divine order through surrender, not subjugation; through giving, not grasping.

2.3. “The Rulers of the Gentiles”: Jesus' Explicit Contrast

The phrase “those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles” (*hoi dokountes archein tōn ethnōn*, Mark 10:42) reflects this broader critique of imperial and colonial leadership. Jesus names two dominant behaviors: *katakuriuousin* (“they lord it over”) and *katexousiazousin* (“they exercise authority over”)—both marked by the prefix *kata*, signifying coercive domination.⁴ These verbs encapsulate the ruling habits of Roman administrators and local proxies alike, who derived authority from hierarchical control rather than relational integrity.

Jesus' inversion—“But it shall not be so among you” (v. 43)—signals a radical break with the cultural norms of leadership. The juxtaposition between the Gentile and Jesus' models is not merely ethical but ontological: it represents two opposing conceptions of authority. In the Roman system, power is upwardly accumulated; in the kingdom of God, it is downwardly poured out. The use of *diakonos* (“servant”) and *doulos* (“slave”) in verses 43–44 reinforces this descent, challenging disciples to embody roles scorned by society as they follow their Servant-King.

John the Baptist once rebuked Roman soldiers for extortion and violence (Luke 3:14), signaling early resistance to oppressive authority. In Mark 10, Jesus expands

⁴ See the lexical observations in Craig (2001, pp. 118-19). The use of *kata* as a prefix intensifies the coercive nature of both verbs, connoting domination rather than cooperative governance.

that critique to include all forms of leadership rooted in self-interest. His words are not rhetorical flourish but formational instruction for a community called to lead by surrender, not supremacy.

3. Exegetical-Theological Study of Mark 10:41-45

Mark 10:41-45 occupies a pivotal place within the structure and theology of the Second Gospel. The passage functions as the rhetorical and theological summit of Jesus' discipleship teaching, both as a corrective to the disciples' misunderstanding of greatness and a narrative bridge to the Passion predictions that immediately follow. Set within a broader literary sequence (Mark 8:22-10:52), this pericope distills the paradoxical nature of leadership in the kingdom of God: servanthood is greatness, and self-sacrifice is authority. Mark's literary placement, lexical precision, and Christological focus converge to establish a counter-cultural leadership model that challenges Roman political ideology and Jewish Messianic expectations.

3.1. Literary Placement and Thematic Framing

The narrative arc from Mark 8:22 to 10:52 traces a deliberate pedagogical path in which Jesus repeatedly instructs his disciples on the meaning of his mission and their role in it. This central section includes three Passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34), each followed by misunderstandings from the disciples and corrective teachings by Jesus. The pattern reaches its fullest expression in Mark 10:35-45, where James and John request seats of honor in Jesus' glory, provoking indignation from the other ten (v. 41). This scene sets the stage for Jesus' climactic teaching on leadership, culminating in verse 45.

According to Rhoads, et al. (1999, pp.3-4), though seemingly sparse and episodic, the Markan narrative is intentionally structured to provoke reflection and response. The central placement of 10:41-45, just before the triumphal entry into Jerusalem (ch. 11), reinforces its strategic importance. Thematically, the passage serves as the culmination of Jesus' paradoxical teachings on discipleship, especially when read alongside earlier statements such as "whoever would save his life will lose it" (8:35) and "whoever wants to be first must be last" (9:35) (Santos, 2000).

Williamson (1983, p.189) observes that, unlike earlier paradoxes, this pericope contains a complete elaboration of the principle: negative critique (vv. 42-43a), positive command (vv. 43b-44), and Christological model (v. 45). It is here that Mark most clearly presents Jesus not only as the proclaimer of a new leadership ethic but also as its embodiment.

3.2. *Word Study and Rhetorical Inversion*

Verse 41 describes the disciples' reaction to James and John's request using the verb *aganaktein* ("to be indignant"). This term, used elsewhere in the Gospels to describe Jesus' emotional response to injustice (cf. Mark 10:14), reveals an underlying power dynamic among the Twelve. The indignation of the ten likely reflects not a moral objection but rivalry—a reaction born of perceived self-interest and threatened status (Buttrick, 1979, p. 816; Brooks, 1991, p. 169).

In verses 42-44, Jesus contrasts the dominant leadership model of the Gentiles with the kingdom ethic. Two verbs characterize worldly leadership: *katakurieuosin* ("they lord it over") and *katexousiazousin* ("they exercise authority over"). Both include the prefix *kata*, signaling force, dominance, and subjugation (Evans, 2001, p.1 18; Wessel, 1984, p. 42). These terms evoke the oppressive practices of Roman imperial officials and Herodian rulers, often governed by coercion and prestige.

In contrast, Jesus employs two radically different terms: *diakonos* ("servant") and *doulos* ("slave"). While some have proposed a rhetorical progression from *diakonos* to *doulos*, Gundry (1993, p. 587) rightly cautions against seeing a hierarchical descent; instead, the pairing functions to intensify the servant imagery rhetorically. In Graeco-Roman society, both terms connote social inferiority, and *doulos*—implying total submission—is particularly evocative. Jesus' command is emphatic: "Whoever wants to be first among you must be slave of all" (v. 44).

Verse 45 anchors the entire teaching in Christology: "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." The structure of this verse reinforces the reversal theme: passive negation (not to be served), active commission (to serve), and ultimate purpose (to give his life). Brooks

(1991, p.171) notes that Jesus' service here is not demeaning but dignifying, for it is marked by intentionality and divine mission.

The term "ransom" (lutron) evokes commercial and sacrificial imagery. While debates continue over whether this reflects Isaiah 53 or other conceptual roots (Witherington, 2001, pp. 288-290; Dowd and Malbon, 2006, pp. 271-297), the functional implication is clear: Jesus' death is substitutionary, offered in place of many, not merely on their behalf (Brooks, 1991, p. 171). The "many" (polloi) functions inclusively, highlighting redemption's scope and personal dimension.

3.3. Servant-Leader as Messianic Model

The phrase "the Son of Man... to serve and to give his life" presents Jesus as both the model and mediator of servant-leadership. The phrase "not to be served" redefines messianic authority: Jesus refuses regal entitlement in favor of redemptive service. In doing so, he fulfills his mission and provides a paradigm for his disciples.

Santos (2000) observes that the three passion predictions (8:31; 9:31; 10:33-34) and their accompanying paradoxical teachings collectively frame the Gospel's theological arc around the theme of messianic servanthood. Dowd and Malbon (2006, pp. 278-79) similarly argue that Mark's purpose is to challenge blindness to the unexpected nature of Jesus' mission—death before glory, servitude before reign.

This theology of reversal was not abstract. It was a formative call to a persecuted community, likely facing assimilation pressures and political hostility. Whether written in Rome or Palestine, the Gospel of Mark addresses Christians tempted to seek favor with worldly systems rather than embody the cruciform ethic of Jesus. In this context, Mark 10:41-45 emerges as a didactic and pastoral exhortation that calls its readers not to ascend but to descend, not to rule but to serve.

Conclusion

Mark 10:41-45 offers more than ethical instruction on humility; it proclaims a radical inversion of the socio-political values dominating Herodian Judea and the Roman world. Within a historical context marked by hierarchical ambition, political

consolidation, and imperial cultic authority, Jesus redefines greatness as servanthood and authority as sacrificial love. His words contrast directly with leaders like Herod the Great, whose political legacy was shaped by power hunger, dynastic violence, and public displays of dominance (Richardson, 1999, pp. 169-72; Brenner, 2001, pp. 212-214).

Jesus' challenge is sharp: "Not so among you." While "the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over" their subjects, and while Herodian dynasts manipulate status for self-preservation, Jesus calls his followers to become *doulos*, slaves of all. It is not just a metaphor for modesty but a call to embodied humility that resists the gravitational pull of worldly greatness. The cruciform shape of leadership—climaxing in the Son of Man who "gave his life as a ransom for many"—presents an alternative political ethic grounded in the kingdom of God, not the empires of men.

Such a vision continues to confront contemporary secular and ecclesial leadership cultures that measure greatness by visibility, platform, or institutional control. Like the Markan community facing cultural assimilation and persecution, today's church is tempted to adopt models of success that mirror those of Rome more than those of Christ. Mark 10:41-45 resists that temptation. It insists that the path to glory is through suffering, that the seat of honor belongs to the servant, and that authority is measured not by control but by self-offering.

This vision speaks not only to history, theology, or ecclesiology—it speaks to the heart. As the Gospel narrator recounts Jesus' words, he also speaks to readers like the writer of this article, asking quietly but unmistakably: What is your value system? What do you pursue in leadership, ministry, or life? Is your success measured by the servant of all or by the legacy of those who rule?

To follow the Son of Man is to abandon worldly metrics and embrace the downward path of servanthood. Though this path may seem weak or foolish to the world, it is, in fact, the way of life, redemption, and true greatness in the kingdom of the Servant-King.

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The New Zealand Model for Psychological Assessment for Cross-Cultural Mission

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Abstract

The Australasian Mission Assessment Project (AMAP) examined the psychological assessment of cross-cultural mission candidates across Australia and New Zealand and found practice in these two countries differed considerably. This research aimed to investigate the New Zealand Model in greater detail using a qualitative case study approach. The Assessment Coordinator, professional assessors who clinically interviewed candidates, and mission organisation staff who received written reports, were interviewed in order to document and describe the history, process and experience of this unique way of standardising assessments. The New Zealand Model represents a streamlined process, within one country, which is consistent, and centrally coordinated and disseminated. Assessors valued this team approach and wanted organisations to value and utilise the reports rather than seeing them as a necessary hurdle. Mission organisations in New Zealand described the reports as understandable and consistent. They suggested a summary paragraph or page with key recommendations could be helpful. They contained valuable recommendations to guide discernment for ministry, and feedback which fostered personal awareness and growth in candidates. The case study of the New Zealand Model provides a

template and important insights that could assist other countries to work towards a more consistent and coordinated approach that is optimal for assessors and organisations.

Key Words: mission, cross-cultural, psychological assessment, standardise, ministry candidates

Introduction

The Australasian Mission Assessment Project (AMAP) commenced with the aim of improving the efficacy of psychological assessments for cross-cultural mission candidates in Australia and New Zealand (Thompson et al., 2023a; Thompson et al., 2023b). The impetus for the project came out of a lack of consistency in method and approach in Australia, with multiple assessors and different methodologies, spread over a vast geographical region. This study unexpectedly discovered that mission organisations and assessors in New Zealand had adopted a completely different approach to psychological assessment, and already worked together in partnership to create a standardised, centrally coordinated method for screening cross-cultural workers. This paper examines the New Zealand Model, including its history, process, and method, together with feedback from key stakeholders in order to offer a prototype for the standardisation of psychological assessments in mission worldwide.

AMAP highlighted the need for more research in the area of psychological assessment for ministry and cross-cultural work (Thompson et al., 2023a; Thompson et al., 2023b). A scoping review showed that in the 20-year period 2001-2021, only five peer reviewed papers had been published regarding the use of personality tests to assess cross-cultural candidates, and two opinion pieces had been published on the topic of psychological assessment (Thompson et al., 2023a). These studies showed that cross-cultural workers had similar personality profiles to the normal population regardless of age, generation or ethnicity (Barnett et al., 2005; Cousineau et al., 2007; Dimos & Hasz, 2017; Rosik et al., 2016, 2017). Likewise, while the opinion pieces highlighted the importance of using psychological assessment to reduce attrition in cross-cultural mission, they also called attention to the need for more research in this area (Crawford & Wang, 2016; Gingrich, 2016).

Results from the AMAP research supported the observation that there were systemic problems in the way psychological assessments were being conducted in Australia (Thompson et al., 2023b). These included issues in the process of consent and adherence to Australian Privacy Law, a lack of clarity about the content, payment and cost of assessments, the choice of psychometric tests, and compliance with government recommendations for screening risk related to sexual offending (Thompson et al, 2023b; Royal Commission into Institutional Responses to Child Sexual Abuse, 2017). The research identified key areas that both mission organisations and professional assessors saw as important to screen for in candidates. These included strong interpersonal skills, physical and psychological resilience, and contentment with current relationship status (Thompson et al. 2023b). The research identified five common overarching purposes for psychological assessments: 1) screening for risk, 2) developing self-awareness and growth, 3) determining fit for role, 4) discerning call to ministry, and 5) normalising the prevention of harm (Thompson et al., 2023c). The research showed that professional assessors, who were predominantly psychologists, were an important component of the discernment process.

The results of AMAP were published and disseminated via webinars to mission organisations and assessors across Australia and New Zealand via Missions Interlink (Thompson et al., 2023a; Thompson et al., 2023b; Thompson et al., 2023c). However, the difference in practice between New Zealand and Australia remained unaddressed. Therefore, this paper aimed to describe the case study of the New Zealand Model of psychologically assessing mission and ministry candidates, and the unique learning opportunity it presents for making the assessment process more collaborative, efficient and standardised. The research question asked: how were the psychological assessments in New Zealand standardised?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of assessors and mission member care staff. They were all based in New Zealand. They had one of three roles: 1) the Assessment Coordinator, 2) assessors who conducted the interviews and wrote the reports, or 3) mission organisation staff who received reports.

A total of 10 people were interviewed. The Assessment Coordinator provided an oral history of how the process and assessment method developed over time, including the type of psychometric tests used, and the clinical interview structure. Four additional assessors were interviewed. The Assessment Coordinator and assessors all had worked in cross-cultural mission in the past.

New Zealand has a total of 29 mission organisations listed with Missions Interlink, but not all of these necessarily undertake psychological assessments, or use the process outlined in this case study, or were available for interview. As such, a total of five mission member care staff conveyed their experience from an organisational perspective.

Participants provided informed written consent. This research protocol was approved by the Human Research and Ethics Committee from the Australian University of Theology on 8 March 2023, reference number ECo0327.

Procedure

Semi-structured interviews and assessment documents were utilised to compile a comprehensive case study. All interviews were conducted in the period between September and November 2023. Individual stories from assessors and mission staff in New Zealand were collected along with documents that were provided by the Assessment Coordinator. The main researcher (KT), who prior to 2020 had been an assessor for cross-cultural mission candidates in Australia, became the interpreter and compiler of this case study. Researcher motivation stemmed from a desire to improve member care for cross-cultural mission candidates in light of an adverse personal experience, together with extensive expertise in the area of mental health prevention and assessment.

Interviews

Interviews were conducted online and audio-recorded and uploaded to Transcribeme for electronic transcription. Transcripts were checked for textual errors. The interviews followed a semi-structured format designed to collect information about

the history of how assessments were standardised in New Zealand, who designed their structure, what psychometric tests and other information was collected, how assessments were applied by organisations, whether there were positive and/or negative aspects to this approach, and what changes if any would they like to make to the process. Participants were provided with an opportunity to raise issues that the researcher had not anticipated (Braun and Clarke, 2013; p. 78).

Data analysis

The data was analysed using a conventional case study approach as outlined by Liamputtong (2020; pp. 209-227). This method contained six suggested steps (Liamputtong, 2020; p. 221):

- 1) It considered the data as a bounded system and collected comprehensive information about the case.
- 2) It identified the case or cases. This meant selecting cases that show different perspectives of the problem and process.
- 3) Data collection.
- 4) An in-depth or holistic analysis of the whole case.
- 5) A detailed account of themes within the case (e.g. within-case analysis), and thematic analysis across all cases (e.g. cross-case analysis).
- 6) A discussion of the meaning of the case or lessons learnt from it.

An in-depth, holistic description of the history, process, psychometric tests, and clinical interview format was collected from the Assessment Coordinator in multiple forms, through documents (detailed in the results section) and a qualitative interview. A detailed account of qualitative interview themes within the assessor group and the mission organisation groups was analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2013).

Results

The Assessment Coordinator

The Assessment Coordinator was a Christian psychologist with a Master of Organisational Psychology, who had worked cross-culturally for a mission organisation for a period of seven years in West Africa prior to conducting these assessments.

History

The following is a narrative summary of the information provided by the Assessment Coordinator concerning the history and development of the New Zealand Model.

Assessment Coordinator: I returned from West Africa to Auckland, New Zealand in 1995, and took up a role in my mission organisation working with new candidates. At the same time our organisation had already begun working with two psychologists from Australia who were coming over once per year to debrief and assess our missionaries. These two Australian psychologists started to train me so that I could do some of the work under their supervision. Their health needs changed and they could no longer travel to New Zealand so they put me in touch with another psychologist in Wellington who wanted to prepare people better for service based on what he experienced himself in cross-cultural mission. He developed his own assessment process and a small team of psychologists assisted him. He explained his process for assessments to me and we began collaborating together. In 2005, he decided to hand over the administrative part of his work to me, and I became the new contact person while completing further training in a Master of Organisational Psychology. After this, the process kept bringing in more people with enough understanding of the cross-cultural mission context to do the interviews and reports. In 2008, the Presbyterian Church contacted me, requesting assistance with their psychological assessments. This led onto expansion to other denominations, the Baptists, Anglicans and Salvation Army.

Process

The Assessment Coordinator provided additional information concerning the process of how assessments were conducted in New Zealand. The psychometric tests and questionnaires were sent out to candidates before the interview and are listed in Table 1 below. This was then followed by an interview.

Assessment Coordinator: The agencies and the churches who want an assessment contact me. I liaise with the client, explaining what is going to happen. I send them the psychometric tests. When the tests come back to me, my assistant scores and formats this information into an initial report of the results. Then I allocate someone to do their interview and report according to

availability. This process used to be geographic, but Zoom [online video meetings] changed this. I take the work that I can do as this is currently my sole work. If I cannot do it, I ask my colleagues if they are available to take the assessment. I also try to give some consistency in who denominations and organisations are relating to. For example, working with the same three people rather than five. The assessor then does the interview and writes up the report.

Assessment

The following information was collated based on the interview with the Assessment Coordinator, together with documents they supplied, including the Referral Form, the Brief Background Checklist, the Life History Questionnaire, and the Interview Template.

The Referral Form was sent out to organisations requesting the contact details of the receiving agency, the candidate(s) (and their family), and asked whether children required an assessment, whether the interview would be conducted online, the likely placement, role and term of service, along with any concerns that might need follow-up.

The Brief Background Checklist was a checklist (tick if present) of positive or negative experiences, behaviours, and feelings that candidates checked if they occurred in their lifetime, or within the last year, or within the last month. For example, bullying or having a friend they could confide in (lifetime), death of a family member or time to relax (past year), or feeling helpless or hopeful (past month).

The Life History Questionnaire requested further information in brief, written form concerning mental health (psychological treatment, family history of mental illness, personal medical problems), work (current occupation, work satisfaction), family of origin (divorce, adoption, parent occupation, family substance use, childhood abuse or neglect, parent absence, self-esteem, patterns of conflict and anger), sexuality (history miscarriage, abortion, sexual abuse, pornography, sexual addiction, sexual harassment, sex outside marriage, sexual misconduct – but not sexual orientation), self-description (written response asking how people would describe you, including

spouse, closest friend, someone with whom you were unable to resolve a conflict, and yourself), a list of hobbies, spiritual history (relationship with Christ, call to ministry, past involvement with the occult), other issues (substance abuse, obsessions/ compulsions, chronic pain, disordered eating, irritable bowel syndrome, premenstrual syndrome), and a written autobiography summarising childhood through to present time.

The psychometric tests have changed over time and continue to be reviewed as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1
Questionnaires and Psychometric Tests Used in New Zealand Assessments

Test or Questionnaire	Original Protocol	Current Protocol
Brief Background Checklist	X	X
Life History Questionnaire	X	X
Tennessee Self Concept Scale	X	
California Personality Inventory (CPI)	X	X (leadership only)
NEO		X
Kessler 10	X	X
Maslach Burnout Inventory		X (as needed)
DASS21		X (as needed)

The Tennessee Self Concept Scale (Marsh and Richards, 1988) measured how a person saw themselves across different areas of life and included a validity score: physical, moral, personal, family, work and social self concept. The California Personality Inventory (CPI260; Gough and Bradley, 2005) was a personality assessment specifically used for executive recruitment and leadership development. The NEO-PI-3 (McCrae and Costa, 2005) was a test of normal personality based on the Five-Factor Model, which evaluated a person across five domains: neuroticism, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness, and conscientiousness. The Kessler 10 (K10; Kessler et al., 2003) was a measure of psychological distress which asked 10 questions about emotional states. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1997) was a questionnaire used to assess three

dimensions of burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation and personal accomplishment. The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scale (DASS21; Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) was a 21-item version of a questionnaire that measured depression, anxiety and stress.

The interview followed a standard question template, and typically took 90 minutes per person, and an additional four hours to write up. It began with informed consent that explained how the assessment information was going to be used and shared. Candidates were also debriefed about the results from their questionnaires and psychometric tests. After this, a standard interview template was used by assessors to gather further detailed information (see Table 2).

Table 2
Interview Structure Used in New Zealand Assessments

Sections	Example Questions
Readiness and Motivation	What are you hoping to do? What would you do if you are turned down?
Family Background	Who are the people in your family? How have your experiences shaped you?
Current Relationships	Who are the people you are close to? What was their reaction when you told them you want to do cross-cultural work?
Stress Management	What has been the toughest situation you have had to face? What did you learn about yourself from that?
Mental Health	How often have you felt down in the past 6-months? Have you ever had counselling?
Personality	How would you describe yourself? How do you react to conflict?

Feedback from the assessors

There were five key themes that arose from the interviews with assessors: a team approach, understandability, consistency, cross-cultural awareness, and application for personal growth.

A team approach

The assessment team, the Assessment Coordinator and assessors, regularly met to discuss whether to make changes to the process, introduce any new assessors, and modify and improve questions where needed. Assessors said they found it helpful when the Assessment Coordinator highlighted pertinent follow-up questions that could be asked, based on the analysis of candidate psychometric tests and questionnaires.

Assessor: I feel like [the people] who inducted me have really supported me through engaging in the process and check with me when I am not sure about things. I can go back to them and say, “What do I do about this situation?”. And I have received very good support.

Understandability

Based on feedback, the assessors stated both candidates and mission organisations understood the reports and felt comfortable with them. They were able to ask questions for further clarification if needed. Where possible, the language used in reports was normalised for readers so that they could understand it accurately without a deep knowledge of the tools used.

Assessor: I think I could give you any report that anybody has done and you would be able to read through it and understand it.

Consistency

There was consistency in the process and the people who contributed to the assessment team. This led to a clear understanding of what was being done. Assessors were familiar with the psychometric tests and questionnaires they were using. There was capacity to change practice uniformly in consultation with one another.

Assessor: If we are asking the same questions then in theory, we are reporting on the same issues.

Cross-cultural awareness

Assessors thought a key aspect they brought to their work was their rich cross-cultural training. They were aware that assessments came from a Western perspective and there was a need for cultural awareness to establish rapport, flexibility with time, and ability to meet the needs of candidates.

Assessor: I worked with a lady from the Pasifika and I spent extra time, half an hour extra, and got a great snapshot of this person. So if [the candidate] is [a person] whose communication style is narrative, is storytelling, which most non-Western people are, then naturally those interviews take longer because they are not going to give you a succinct answer.

Application for personal growth

Assessors expressed their frustration when mission organisations used the assessments as a necessary hurdle to accepting candidates, rather than applying them as a tool for individual growth. They believed candidates needed time to learn from what was reported and to follow up recommendations to benefit from the process. They could learn and become aware of some of the patterns that enhance their ministry, but also some that could hinder them.

Assessor: I believe it is a really helpful tool for an individual's growth. But not to have done it a year before somebody is about to go on the field does not make sense to me because you cannot create growth on the field. It's just not practical. Growth areas need to be taken back to the pastoral carers.

Feedback from the mission agencies

There were five key themes which emerged from the qualitative interviews with missions agency member care staff: utility of the summary and recommendations, benefits of standardisation, importance of partnership, need for training, and the importance of multifaceted assessments.

Utility of the summary and recommendations

Mission organisations highlighted the importance of having a clear summary and recommendations in the report. They wanted a summary that was able to be read outside of the remainder of the report. They wanted comprehensive recommendations. This was because they relied on this list to inform them as they supported and prepared candidates for placement; for example, suggesting counselling, further assessment for mental health conditions, or mentoring and coaching.

Mission Representative: I would find a more simplified summary version as well as the long one helpful so that maybe I could look at that first in some detail. But you can do that anyway. You can flick to the back of the summary recommendations, the strengths and weaknesses, and then go back and look at the detail of the interpretation.

Benefits of standardisation

Mission organisation member care staff said that they mainly assessed long-term candidates, and this could be done either in person or via online video call. Reports were completed to a high standard. They were understandable, consistent and similar in format.

Mission Representative: I was really impressed with how comprehensive it was, how they listened to the candidates and got feedback... I can be confident that they are all going to be a similar standard... Different people assessed each of our candidate couples, but still the final outcome seemed very consistent.

However, one factor that was not standardised, was that organisations differed as to when in the process of screening candidates they requested a psychological assessment.

Importance of partnership

Member care staff acknowledged the long-term partnership that had been formed between assessors and mission organisations, which meant the process for assessments was relatively easy. They appreciated being able to contact assessors

when further clarification was needed to understand a report. They said that when changes were made to the process, this was clearly communicated.

Mission Representative: I recall an opportunity once with [the coordinator], where she invited a group of mission organisations to a seminar and talked through it [the assessment process]... I remember that was an opportunity to ask questions and for the process to be just communicated with everyone and give feedback for her to use with her [assessors] and the process... Other than that, I think she would be available via phone.

Need for training

Mission organisations identified the need for further training in order to enable them to understand and use the reports more effectively. They wanted to be confident that they understood the nature of the issues the assessor had highlighted so they could address them.

Mission Representative: How do we read between the lines in understanding things that perhaps we need to spend more time on with that person?

Importance of multifaceted assessments

Member care staff acknowledged that screening and onboarding candidates was multifaceted, with the psychological assessment forming only one component of the discernment process. For example, candidates often had a physical health check, reference checks, a discussion about their placement and role, and developed a relationship with mission representatives. They were looking for people who had high self-awareness and insight.

Mission Representative: The thing that worries us the most is when a person has lack of insight and just does not see in themselves what other people are seeing. Some of that only comes up when you are spending time with a person.

Discussion

The New Zealand Model for psychologically assessing cross-cultural mission candidates provided a unique insight into using a standardised approach. The model demonstrated clear benefits of working collaboratively over an extended period of time. It resulted in a process that was centrally coordinated by a highly experienced

psychologist with cross-cultural experience. The model had some features, such as a Life History Questionnaire (Schubert, 1999) and psychometric tests (Schubert and Gantner, 1996; Dimos and Hasz, 2017; Barnett et al., 2005; Rosik et al., 2016), which have been based on previous suggested practice in the missions literature (Gingrich, 2016; Donovan and Myers, 1997; Hay et al., 2007). It also mapped to the five overarching purposes for assessments that were found in the AMAP study (Thompson et al., 2023c). Feedback from both the assessors and mission member care staff who received these reports was overwhelmingly positive, suggesting that a standardised assessment is both possible and extremely efficacious.

The New Zealand Model

It is important to note that a common motivation for this research and the development of the New Zealand Model was the lived experience of cross-cultural mission workers. This reflects a desire to improve member care for candidates and staff to protect them from adverse outcomes through utilising professional knowledge and expertise. In New Zealand, this has brought about a robust, standardised model, which incorporates suggested best practice in the missions literature. Approaches to best practice include a comprehensive pre-interview questionnaire (e.g. the Life History Questionnaire; Schubert, 1999), personality based psychometric tests (Cousineau et al. 2007; Rosik et al., 2016; Dimos and Hasz, 2017; Rosik et al., 2017), measures that are commonly used in clinical practice in both Australia and New Zealand for mental health and wellbeing (e.g. DASS21 (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), distress (K10; Kessler et al., 2003), and burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory; Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1997), together with an interview framework and Brief Background Checklist which asked questions that were pertinent to enduring the high stress of cross-cultural work. One area which could have been improved slightly is the current inclusion of a new psychometric test which detected response bias. Even so, this psychological assessment model addressed the purposes identified in the AMAP, namely, 1) screening for risk, 2) improving self-awareness, 3) assessing role fit, 4) discerning call, and 5) preventing harm (Thompson et al. 2023c). It demonstrated assessments could be standardised and centrally coordinated, and offered a prototype for doing this.

Feedback by assessors and mission organisations

The feedback from both the assessors and the mission organisations was positive and supportive. Assessors appreciated working in a team with a consistent approach. They thought the reports were understandable for both the candidates and their organisation. As assessors had personal cross-cultural experience, they were able to adapt their interview to accommodate candidates who might have a different cultural background. They expressed that they would like their assessments to be utilised optimally by mission organisations rather than being seen as a hurdle in the screening process, as they represent an important opportunity for personal growth and awareness.

The mission organisation staff held a similar view, emphasising the importance of partnership between the assessment team and themselves. They appreciated the standardisation and consistency of reports and sought to utilise the recommendations provided for the benefit of candidates. They wanted to have a deeper understanding of how assessors expressed concerns and issues, and the nuance of how the reports were written so they could assume correct meaning and respond appropriately. They recognised that the assessments were an important part of a larger screening and discernment process. Perhaps more importantly, neither assessors nor mission organisations gave negative feedback. They had some suggestions for minor improvements, acknowledging there was capacity to feed this back into the review process, thereby showing that this approach was well received and utilised by everyone concerned.

Implications for cross-cultural mission

The New Zealand Model demonstrated that a consistent, standardised approach to psychological assessment is possible. It limited the number of psychometric tests administered, thereby reducing cost. It prioritised screening for issues that have arisen from the lived experience of cross-cultural mission. The model was reflexive, with built-in patterns for review that responded to changes in need and developments in psychological practice and knowledge.

The Life History Questionnaire contained a section which specifically asked candidates to write an autobiography. This personal story would reveal a candidate's

sense of identity, the integration of life events and meaning, relationship patterns and the person's ability to mentalise (i.e. be aware of their own thoughts and feelings, and the thoughts and feelings of other people). These processes provide additional information about the coherence of self and whether the candidate might have a personality disorder, empathy for other people, a healthy attachment style, and reveal issues arising from their family of origin which inevitably influence their relationship with God (McGlone and Sperry, 2020; Bateman, Fonagy and Campbell, 2018).

The psychometric test selection was focused on building self-awareness and growth through the NEO (McCrae and Costa, 2005) and CPI (Gough and Bradley, 2005). Applied well, this allowed candidates to understand their natural strengths and weaknesses rather than seeing themselves through a deficit lens. The additional DASS21 (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995), K10 (Kessler et al., 2003), and Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach, Jackson and Leiter, 1997), offered quick unlicensed measures of mental health and distress that are cost effective, widely used, and can provide a baseline measurement that could be useful for monitoring changes in health and wellbeing while working cross-culturally, and on return to the sending country. As none of these tests contain a validity scale, the addition of the Tennessee Self Concept Scale provided a way to measure whether candidates engaged in perception management. The selection of tests had the advantage of being time and cost effective, informative, practical, and useful in professional development and growth. The disadvantage was that it did not include a screen for mental health disorders (including personality disorders). This could have been addressed through the addition of the Personality Assessment Inventory which also contains a validity scale (PAI: Morey, 2004), or the MMPI (Cattell and Mead, 2008), or the SCID-5-SPQ (First et al., 2016). These questionnaires would however add to the length and cost of psychometric tests.

The New Zealand Model clinical interview was tailored to the main issues that arise in cross-cultural work, and that are possible to screen within a 90 minute session. However it did not include a systematic clinical assessment of mental health disorders, and relied on candidates to self-disclose any illness past or present, and treatment, within the question framework. Similarly, other issues of risk, for

example, family violence or sexual abuse, might be minimised or not disclosed in the Life History Questionnaire and therefore not followed up in the interview. These issues highlight an important tension between comprehensive diagnostic and risk assessment, and efficiently screening for risk within limited resources.

Clinical practice issues

This raises an important issue of how comprehensive psychological assessments need to be within the resources available, in light of significant advances in the fields of mental health in the past 20 years. Personality disorders are recognised as significant forms of mental illness which can be treated (Chanen and Thompson, 2014). Left unaddressed they have detrimental effects on social and occupational functioning, and relationships with other people (Chanen and Thompson, 2018). The perpetration of family violence and/or sexual abuse pose a risk for partners, children, and other innocent victims, often resulting in lifetime trauma and mental health issues. It is therefore important that the ministry and culture of the Church, manages this risk, and promotes models of ministry that are safe (Langberg, 2020; McKnight and Barringer, 2020). To assess all these factors comprehensively would take an excessive amount of time. One potential way forward might be to screen for these issues and then recommend a follow-up in-depth assessment if clinically indicated.

While this model of psychological assessment for mission is effective in the New Zealand context, in a relatively small geographical area and population, it is unclear if this approach would generalise to other contexts. For example, countries such as Australia have a vast area, and might find implementation of this model easier at a state-based level, or alternatively standardisation might be more feasible at an international level. These options are pertinent now that online interview tools provide greater flexibility.

The New Zealand Model could be transferable to other contexts if mission agencies and professional assessors have chosen to collaborate and not compete. This trust would be especially important in order to appoint a central coordinator or coordinating authority. The New Zealand model also assumes an adequate professional density of appropriate Christian psychologists. Future research that investigates long-term outcomes of candidates who have been assessed using this

model would be advantageous, as this would provide information about whether this model is effective.

Conclusion

The New Zealand Model offers a comprehensive, standardised approach for psychologically assessing cross-cultural mission candidates. It has streamlined the process and provided a common language and understanding across assessors and mission organisations. This approach was found to be time and cost effective and practical. It is our hope that by presenting an in-depth case study of this model, other countries might develop a similar approach to improve the overall quality and process for conducting psychological assessments.

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Is The Role of Women in Church a Gospel Issue?

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Abstract

The role of women in the church is a controversial issue. There is a division between complementarians and egalitarians. It is not unusual for Christians to disagree on doctrines that are not central to the gospel. However, this article will contend that some have elevated this issue to a gospel issue in practice, if not in theory. The article addresses this issue by considering: the concept of theological triage; where the issue of the role of women in church is situated within the theological tiers; the stated views of particular complementarians; theological reasons to disagree with complementarianism; and the absence of discussion of women's roles in the historic Creeds and Confessions of the church. Recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention will be used to illustrate the misplaced importance given to the issue of women in ministry over and above upholding the core tenets of the faith. It is vital that the church come to an agreement on the relative importance of the issue of women in ministry in order that productive discussions can take place.

Key Words: women in ministry, complementarianism, egalitarianism, Southern Baptist Convention (SBC), gospel, theological triage, first-, second- or third-tier doctrine

Introduction

The role of women in the church is a controversial issue, with a range of views held across (and sometimes within) denominations regarding women in church ministry

and leadership. There is a division between those who call themselves complementarians and those who identify as egalitarians. It is not unusual for Christians to disagree on doctrines that are not central to the gospel. Indeed, most are in agreement that not all doctrines hold the same degree of significance to the Christian faith. For some, the question of women in ministry is disputable matter.¹ However, for others, the matter is of extreme importance. Even though complementarians deny the matter is on the level of a gospel issue, some complementarian statements as well as church practice reveal that the matter has been elevated to the status of a gospel issue for several complementarians and churches.

To be clear, the core argument in this article is not a theological argument to justify women being able to use their ministry, teaching and leadership gifts in the church. Many such theological arguments exist. Rather, the core of the argument revolves around whether the question itself is on a par with the need to uphold the gospel. In other words, it is a matter of whether the issue of women's place in the church is of the highest concern or whether there can be differing viewpoints without compromising unity. Agreeing on the relative importance of the issue is a necessary step towards the various parties working through the issue without an invective posture toward one another.

To consider this matter, the concept of theological triage will be explored, and the place of the role of women situated within the theological tiers. Following this, statements of selected complementarians will be considered to demonstrate that they have elevated the question of women's roles in church to a gospel issue. Complementarian concerns are noted, as are some reasons why complementarianism may be questioned. The complementarian stance will then be compared to the historic creeds and confessions of the church. Finally, recent events in the Southern Baptist Convention will be used to illustrate the misplaced importance given to the issue of women in ministry over above upholding the core tenets of the faith.

¹ As per Rom 14:1.

Three-Tiered Theology

Doctrines are not all as central to the gospel as one another. Some are crucial to salvation. Some might be considered matters of opinion. Others are situated on a spectrum of orthodoxy. As a result, Albert Mohler has argued for what he calls “theological triage”. The concept is similar to what happens at the Emergency Department, where a triage nurse decides which cases need to be seen first and which can wait until later. Mohler divides doctrines into three levels. Level-one theological issues are those which a person cannot deny and still remain within the Christian faith. These include the doctrine of the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Bible as the word of God and justification by faith. The ecumenical councils of the early church debated these doctrines and enshrined them in Creeds. Second-level doctrines leave room for disagreement between Christians and yet these often result in church division. These include questions about baptism, church governance and the ordination of women. Third-level doctrines are of lesser importance and thus less likely to cause a break in fellowship. This level would include different versions of eschatology (Mohler, 2011, pp. 78-80).

Mohler contends that theological triage offers a way of avoiding the extremes of assuming that all doctrines are of first order importance, which often results in unnecessary division and breach of fellowship. It also forestalls the opposite error of considering first level doctrines as third level doctrines, and thereby losing the gospel altogether. Thus in Mohler’s model, the greatest debates and disagreements will be in regard to second-order doctrines (Mohler, 2011, p. 80).

All major divisions of Christianity agree that there are differing levels of doctrine: some doctrine must be believed for salvation, and some is of lesser importance. Dogma is the generally accepted term for doctrines of the highest importance for faith. These doctrines are connected to the seven ecumenical councils of the early church. Both the Eastern Orthodox Church and Protestant churches accept that the doctrinal decisions of the ecumenical councils of the early church are afforded the status of dogma. The Roman Catholic Church extends the acceptance of dogma beyond the earliest ecumenical councils to some later councils and to the decisions of popes (González, 2005, p. 47). The assumption is that the ecumenical councils were

guided in their deliberations and decisions by the Holy Spirit (Jenson, 2010, p. 68). Each of the subsequent councils accepted that the Council of Nicaea (325) (and the updates of the Council of Constantinople in 381) were directed by the Spirit and authoritative in setting out foundational doctrine of the church (Pelikan, 2005, pp. 10-16). The central dogmatic conclusion of Nicaea is that the gospel hinges on “the eternal relation between the Father and the Son in the Godhead” (Torrance, 1988, p. 3).

That it is needful to classify doctrines in the ways explored above is not in dispute among most Christians. However, the question raised here is twofold. Firstly, where should questions of women in ministry or the roles of women in church and home be placed in this three-tier system? Secondly, where do complementarians place this issue in practice? The answer to the first question is far less controversial than the answer to the second.

Gavin Ortlund considers theological triage necessary because the need is urgent, due to the present cultural confusion. He argues that the church must make deliberate decisions about doctrines to enable it to effectively proclaim the gospel. His theological triage involves four tiers. For the purposes of the argument advanced in this article, the important distinction is between first-tier doctrines – which Ortlund describes as “essential to the gospel itself” – and second-tier doctrines – which he says, “are urgent for the health and practice of the church” (Ortlund, 2020, Intr.). It can be observed that the distinction between the first and second tier is the place where the most debate seems to occur in regard to the place of women in the church.

Ortlund offers three examples of second-tier issues: baptism (paedo versus credo); spiritual gifts (cessationism versus continuationism); and women in ministry (complementarianism versus egalitarianism). Although it is indisputable in which tier to place the doctrine of the Trinity, second-tier doctrines are quite varied in theological significance. Some secondary doctrines are on the border of first rank and some on the border of third rank. In other words, not all second-rank doctrines are equally important (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5). This article contends that it is here where some complementarians demonstrate intellectual and theological inconsistency regarding the treatment of the place of women in the church.

Ortlund is himself a complementarian, and thus his observations about the connections between doctrine and the gospel are significant.

Each doctrine finds its ultimate meaning in relation to the entire gospel. Thus, some doctrines may appear to be relatively minor in themselves but utterly essential in the way they function toward other doctrines. . . . Second, the importance of any particular doctrine sometimes turns out to depend, to some extent, on context and usage. . . . Or a particular doctrine may be especially urgent for the church's public witness at one time and place, and less so at another (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

Ortlund identifies three reasons why the complementarian and egalitarian debate falls into the second rank of doctrines. Firstly, practically speaking, no church can sit in both camps because it impacts church governance and other aspects of church activity. Secondly, the secular culture of the western world is mired in a lot of confusion regarding gender. Therefore, Ortlund avers, "complementarianism versus egalitarianism is not simply about how we structure our churches and marriages but also about competing visions of faithfulness to Scripture amid the turbulence of late Western modernity" (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5). Lastly, the two have distinct biblical hermeneutics. Ortlund laments that complementarians view the egalitarian position as adopting the wrong hermeneutical course, and egalitarians consider complementarian interpretation of the Bible dangerous² (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

Statements by Complementarians

That some complementarians think that egalitarians have fallen into liberalism can be demonstrated with statements made by high profile complementarians regarding the egalitarian position. The first is a statement made by Justin Peters, a prominent Reformed Baptist who exercises a discernment ministry, particularly with regard to Word of Faith preaching (*Justin Peters*). Peters states:

Men and women are of equal value before God, have equal access to God, and are indwelt by the same Holy Spirit. But to argue as all liberal and most charismatic "theologians" do that these verses are limited to the culture of biblical days or somehow do not mean what they appear to mean is to be intentionally dishonest to the holy writ. If a church has a female pastor or has put women in positions of

² For example, some egalitarians consider complementarianism a theological shelter for domestic abusers (Jantzi, 2025).

spiritual authority over men, you can know that no matter how much fidelity they profess to the Word of God, their professions are mere lip service. Female spiritual leadership in the church is a sure sign that that church is well on its way into full blown apostasy. It is an affront to God and, ironically, it is demeaning to women for it puts them into a role for which they were not designed. (Peters)

This statement strongly implies that anyone taking an egalitarian position is either liberal or charismatic (an insult from the perspective of Justin Peters) and that they do not believe the teachings of the Bible. For Peters, the existence of female pastors within a church means an inevitable slide into false teaching. This man cannot conceive of the possibility that a woman in leadership could be equipped by God, blessed by him and could teach sound doctrine. He makes all egalitarians out to be liberals and liars. Using quotation marks around the word theologians is also extremely telling as to how Justin Peters views people who disagree with his complementarian stance. This is a marked contrast with accepting egalitarians as brothers and sisters in Christ.

A second quotation comes from The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CBMW). They warn that

As evangelical feminism continues to spread, the evangelical community needs to be aware that this debate reaches ultimately to the heart of the gospel. . . . The authority of Scripture is at stake. . . . The health of the home is at stake. . . . The health of the church is at stake. . . . Our worship is at stake. . . . Bible translations are at stake. . . . The advance of the gospel is at stake. . . . Deviation from biblical teaching on manhood and womanhood hinders the advance of the gospel
(*Mission & Vision*).

It is evident from this extract that CBMW believes that egalitarianism (evangelical feminism) compromises the gospel. It is not merely a second-tier issue. For CBMW, what women do within the church is a gospel issue.

Dr. Ben Witherington III is a renowned biblical scholar (*Dr. Ben Witherington III: Jean R. Amos Professor of New Testament for Doctoral Studies*). He writes with dismay:

I heard recently the founding leaders of the Gospel Coalition (John Piper, Don Carson, and Tim Keller) say or suggest that if one did not agree with their hermeneutics, their exegesis, and their theological approach to the issue of male

and female and, as a result of that approach, their approach to women in ministry, then you were on the slippery slope and likely to compromise the Gospel in other ways too (Witherington, 2016, Ch 5).

Witherington's reflection on the Gospel Coalition is in keeping with observations made about other complementarians, who believe that any deviation from male-only church leadership will endanger the gospel. This implies that the issue of women in church ministry has been elevated from a tier-two issue to a tier-one issue, or at least is heading that way.

The above assumptions about women in the pulpit cry out for an answer to many questions. Can women who lead or teach in church be accepted as Christian women? This is a gospel question. The complementarians cited above seem to suggest that any woman who teaches men is a liberal and therefore not a Christian at all. If these ideas are accepted as true, then egalitarians are in danger of losing their salvation because of their position on the ministry of women. The issue of women and their position in the church no longer stands in the second tier of Christian doctrine but looks very much like it is in the first tier, on a par with doctrines that define the gospel.

Concerns of Complementarians

Complementarians are concerned that allowing women to exercise teaching and leadership gifts in the church will compromise the gospel. One suggested path toward this outcome is the suggestion that if women are ordained, it will not be long before the church is accepting homosexuality. Wayne Grudem, systematic theologian and a member of the board of directors of The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (*Board of Directors*), has authored at least two books arguing against evangelical feminism. In *Evangelical Feminism? A New Path to Liberalism?*, his stated concern is that the arguments of evangelical feminists will lead the church into liberalism – that is, to a denial of biblical inerrancy – and ultimately to the acceptance of homosexuality (Grudem, 2006, Chs 1, 32). In fact, Grudem cites examples of just such a trend (Grudem, 2006, Ch. 2).

In fairness to the complementarian position, there is evidence that women in the U.S. are more accepting of homosexuality than men (Hildebrandt & Jäckle, 2023). Such studies may fuel complementarian concerns that ordaining female pastors

would lead to the ordination of homosexual pastors. However, evangelicals are not as enthusiastic to accept homosexuality as Grudem fears, despite their acceptance of changing gender roles. One study focused on the change in attitudes of Americans over time from the 1970s to 2014. It found that:

Evangelical gender attitudes regarding work and family issues are more conservative than those of all other groups, but are adaptive to broad trends, changing at a rate similar to those of other groups since 1994. Evangelical attitudes toward the morality of homosexuality and same-sex marriage are also more conservative than those of all other religious groups. Their rate of change, however, is slower than other religious groups, meaning that they are diverging over time. Separate patterns on the two issues suggest that gender and sexuality attitude change is decoupled, especially among evangelicals who are adapting more on gender while increasingly distinguishing themselves on same-sex relationships (Schnabel, 2016, p. 44).

In addition, the evangelical author of *Slaves, Women and Homosexuals* argues clearly throughout the book that there is a “fundamental difference between the women’s issue and the homosexuality issue” (Webb, 2009, Concl.). Indeed, even Grudem acknowledges that he personally knows many evangelical feminists who have not gone in the direction of liberalism or acceptance of homosexuality (Grudem, 2006, Ch. 1). In sum, a possibility is not an inevitability, but it should caution evangelical feminists to keep their arguments biblical, rather than extrabiblical.

Reasons to Question the Complementarian Position

As this article is not intended to provide an extensive critique of the complementarian theological position, it will be sufficient to provide “reasonable doubt” regarding what complementarians assume is a clear and strong biblical position regarding women and ministry. There is evidence that the central passage which is used to oppose the leadership and teaching ministry of women in the church – 1 Tim 2:11-15 – can be interpreted differently than the way complementarians do so. There is insufficient room here to provide all of the evidence. That would require many such articles, if not books. It is not necessary to prove the egalitarian position in this article, but merely to show that these doubts preclude the possibility that the question of women in Christian ministry is a gospel issue. That is to say, the issue is not a first-tier doctrinal matter.

Firstly, the occasional nature of the Pastoral epistles must be noted. The false teaching in the Ephesian church was Paul's main concern, rather than the perpetuation of male-only teaching and leadership (Grenz & Kjesbo, 1995, pp. 125-127). Craig Keener calls 1 Tim 2:12 "the only explicit prohibition in the entire Bible against women teaching" (Keener, 1992, p. 101). His thesis is that this prohibition was put in place because of a specific situation in Ephesus at that time. There is evidence in 1 Timothy that the women in Ephesus were ignorant and engaged in foolish teaching. The goal of allowing women to learn was presumably for them to eventually to teach. Keener observes that Timothy did not appear to know the rule regarding women, despite having spent years working with Paul. This contrasts with several passages in which Paul reminds his readers of traditions he has passed on to them (Keener, 1992, pp. 108, 112).

Another significant problem is the word *authentain*, which is translated as "exercise authority" (ESV) in 1 Tim 2:12. This word is hapax legomena in the New Testament, making it difficult to be precise about its meaning. The problem is further compounded by a dearth of usages of the word in extant literature of the time. Professor Emeritus of Religion and Theology/Classical Languages Al Wolters states: "Its first occurrence in surviving Greek literature is dated to the first century BC, not long before Paul used it, and for centuries after that its recorded uses are quite rare. In fact, until the official recognition of Christianity under Constantine in the year 312, the verb appears in only a handful of places, most of them in obscure nonliterary sources" (Wolters, 2016). Wolters argues for a complementarian reading of the text. However, it is sufficient here to observe that the paucity of surviving examples of the word must, at minimum, produce a humility about its meaning in 1 Tim 2:12.

Thirdly, the ministry of Priscilla calls into question the all-encompassing nature of the 1 Tim 2:12 prohibition. Priscilla taught a man (Apollos) in Ephesus (Acts 18:26), as Paul well knew and approved. Paul had himself trained Priscilla and sent her to Ephesus with her husband, Aquila (Witherington, 2016, Ch. 5). Thomas Torrance writes, "It is hardly surprising, then, that St Paul applies to her along with Aquila the term 'fellow-worker' (*synergos*) which he used to refer to people associated with him in the ministry of the gospel like Timothy (Rom 16:3, 21 – cf. also 1 Tim 3:2; 1 Cor

3:9), or Clement (1 Phil 4:3) or Mark or Luke (Philem 24)” (Torrance, 1992, p. 7). When Priscilla and Aquila are mentioned together, Priscilla is mentioned first on four out of six occasions, suggesting that hers was the dominant ministry role (Webb, 2009, Ch 4).

Creeds and Confessions

That said, it is time to return to the question of where to place the doctrine regarding the ministry of women. In order to situate this, it would make sense to see what the church has historically said about this in the Creeds and Confessions. Before looking at these, The Gospel Coalition’s “Confessional Statement” (2011) will be considered for the sake of comparison.

3. Creation of Humanity We believe that God created human beings, male and female, in his own image. Adam and Eve belonged to the created order that God himself declared to be very good, serving as God’s agents to care for, manage, and govern creation, living in holy and devoted fellowship with their Maker. Men and women, equally made in the image of God, enjoy equal access to God by faith in Christ Jesus and are both called to move beyond passive self-indulgence to significant private and public engagement in family, church, and civic life. Adam and Eve were made to complement each other in a one-flesh union that establishes the only normative pattern of sexual relations for men and women, such that marriage ultimately serves as a type of the union between Christ and his church. *In God’s wise purposes, men and women are not simply interchangeable, but rather they complement each other in mutually enriching ways. God ordains that they assume distinctive roles which reflect the loving relationship between Christ and the church, the husband exercising headship in a way that displays the caring, sacrificial love of Christ, and the wife submitting to her husband in a way that models the love of the church for her Lord. In the ministry of the church, both men and women are encouraged to serve Christ and to be developed to their full potential in the manifold ministries of the people of God. The distinctive leadership role within the church given to qualified men is grounded in creation, fall, and redemption and must not be sidelined by appeals to cultural developments.* (Confessional Statement, Italics mine)

Ortlund defends The Gospel Coalition on the inclusion of their complementarian position within their “Confessional Statement”, even though they have no statement about baptism, the millennium or spiritual gifts. He maintains that simply because a

doctrine is not integral to the gospel itself does not mean that it “has no bearing on the gospel” (Ortlund, 2020, Ch. 5).

To decide whether The Gospel Coalition are actually justified in placing this segment within their “Confessional Statement” it will be instructive to make a comparison with historical statements of faith. To this end, what follows is a brief survey of Creeds and Confessions.

The four major Creeds – Apostles’, Nicene, Chalcedonian and Athanasian – each focus on Christ and the Trinity, with some mention of the church and salvation. They contain no reference to men or women as separate sexes and nothing about roles. Some Confessions mention men and women, but not particular roles as such. The Anglican “Articles of Religion” contains an article about the call to ministry. It refers to men taking up the office of public preaching and ministering the sacraments (*Articles of Religion*). The word “man” is used throughout to refer to humans. In this article, the assumption may be that it refers to males only. However, it is never spelled out that women should not be in this office.

The “Westminster Confession of Faith³” mentions men and women in several places. Chapter 4 (“Of Creation”) mentions the creation of male and female “with reasonable and immortal souls, endued with knowledge, righteousness, and true holiness, after his own image; having the law of God written in their hearts ...” Chapter 6 (“Of the fall of man, of sin, and of the punishment thereof”) blames “our first parents” for sin. There is no division in this, that is, both are guilty. Eve is not separated out. Chapter 8 (“Of Christ the mediator”) mentions both the virgin Mary and the seed of the woman. Chapter 24 (“Of Marriage and Divorce”) gives regulations regarding marriage, including that marriage is between one man and one woman, and polygamy is not lawful.

“The New Hampshire Baptist Confession⁴” does not mention men and women. The “Heidelberg Catechism⁵” states that the disobedience of both Adam and Eve is the reason for the corruption of human nature. The only other mention of a woman in

³Westminster Assembly. (1646) *The Westminster Confession of Faith*.

⁴ Brown, John Newton. (1833) *The New Hampshire Confession of Faith*.

⁵ Christian Reformed Church. (1563) *Heidelberg Catechism*.

this catechism is a reference to Mary. “The Belgic Confession⁶” contains no mention of male and female in the doctrine of creation. It does not mention males with regard to church government or the officers of the church. “The Canons of Dort⁷” make no mention of women. The “Augsburg Confession⁸” contains a couple of articles which address the question of whether priests or monks can marry. Beyond this, there seems to be nothing about women or men and women together. The “1689 Baptist Confession⁹” says nothing about women being excluded from the pulpit. It says nothing about men being ordained. It says nothing about roles in marriage.

This list of historic Creeds and Confessions lacks references to the roles of men and women in the home or the church. The writers, then, did not find this topic central to the gospel message. This begs the question as to why The Gospel Coalition finds it so important to include such a discussion in their “Confessional Statement”.

Comparing the other articles of faith in The Gospel Coalition’s “Confessional Statement” will provide perspective on how important the question of women in ministry is to The Gospel Coalition. These are in order: The Triune God, Revelation, Creation of Humanity, The Fall, The Plan of God, The Gospel, The Redemption of Christ, The Justification of Sinners, The Power of the Holy Spirit, The Kingdom of God, God’s New People, Baptism and the Lord’s Supper, and The Restoration of All Things. With the exception of “Creation of Humanity”, each of these articles would likely find a home in either Creeds or Confessions of the past. It is only the discussion of the roles of men and women that finds no such home in historic Creeds or Confessions. This seems to suggest that the roles of men and women in church and home are considered as important to The Gospel Coalition as first-order doctrines. The Gospel Coalition may have made complementarianism a first-tier doctrine by default.

Recent Events in the Southern Baptist Convention Illustrate the Point

Doctrinal stances are difficult to separate from church praxis, although the latter tends to expose the truth or falsehood of what churches profess to believe. The

⁶ de Brès, Guido (1561) *Belgic Confession*

⁷ Christian Reformed Church. (1618-1619) *The Canons of Dort*.

⁸ Lutheran Church (1530) *The Augsburg Confession*.

⁹ The Second London Confession of Faith (1677/1689) *1689 Baptist Confession*

biblical writers make it clear that faith is not genuine without actions of an appropriate kind (1 Tim 5:8; Jas 1: 22-25; 2:14-19; 1 John 3:15; 4:19-21). Therefore, what a church professes as most important to the faith and how that church acts might not be in alignment. In order to test whether churches of a complementarian persuasion are acting in alignment with their professed beliefs of the relative significance of the question of the role of women in church, an example will be considered.

The Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) is “the largest Protestant denomination in the United States” (Flowers & Seat, 2020, p. xiii). The denomination is influential both politically and among other evangelicals (Lai, 2025, p. 35). Whether the conservatism regarding women’s ministry in the SBC is in keeping with the Bible or not, the influence of this Protestant denomination cannot be ignored. For this reason, recent events in the SBC are an appropriate test case to determine whether complementarian churches are making the question of women in ministry a gospel issue or whether they are keeping the issue within the bounds of a second-tier doctrine.

The SBC have recently formalised their position on the ordination of women. However, the polemic regarding women in ministry is not a new one in the SBC. This began in 1979, with the goal of having conservatives in control of the organisational framework of the SBC. This conflict centred on whether a woman could receive a call to a pastoral role. The first female pastor in the SBC was ordained in 1964, and the second in 1971. As more women were ordained, many in the denomination became concerned about the consequences (Andrew & Gerardo, 2022, pp. 3-4). In 1984 the SBC Convention successfully passed a resolution which effectively allowed women to minister in churches as long as they did not fill pastoral roles or become ordained. The argument was that Scripture shaped this decision (Andrew & Gerardo, 2022, p. 6)

The issue of female pastors in the SBC came to head in 2021 when the (then) largest church in the SBC – Saddleback Church – ordained three female elders, allowed a woman to preach on Mother’s Day, and then employed both a man and his wife to replace the retiring pastor, Rick Warren. This prompted some in the denomination

to draft an amendment to the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 (the confessional document of the denomination), which would exclude churches who accept women in the pastoral office. Support for this amendment was substantial. By the time of the 2024 SBC annual meeting, two churches – in addition to Saddleback – had been disfellowshipped and three churches had chosen to dissociate from the SBC (Garrote, 2024, pp. 1-2, 6).

There are some disturbing aspects to this recent decision which bear investigation. In an article on The Council for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood (CMBW) website, there is a video of Denny Burk (the current CMBW president) arguing that Saddleback should be disfellowshipped. A portion of this speech is quoted below.

What is this amendment about? It's about how to apply our doctrinal statement to our cooperation when it comes to female pastors. That's it. Article 3 of our constitution says that the churches in friendly cooperation must closely identify with the BF&M [Baptist Faith and Message] and then it gives three examples of what it would look like to not to be in friendly cooperation: churches that affirm homosexuality, racism, and sexual abuse would be opposing the specific language of the BF&M and would not be in friendly cooperation. This amendment would simply add one more example of what it looks like not to be in friendly cooperation. Churches who affirm women as pastors would not be in friendly cooperation. That's it (Damico, 2023).

In this same article “CBMW executive director Colin Smothers, who also serves in a Southern Baptist church” said, “the SBC showed once again why Baptists are know [sic] as Bible people” (Damico, 2023). Because the SBC is claiming that they disfellowshipped Saddleback due to the SBC's concern for biblical teaching, it is worth considering Denny Burk's statement in detail. This will be done by examining the SBC's lack of concern for Rick Warren's practices and use of Scripture during his time at Saddleback, the similar example of Steven Furtick at Elevation Church, and the SBC's failure to act on sexual abuse in SBC churches.

Rick Warren was the founding pastor of Saddleback Church and pastored that church for forty-three years, retiring in 2022 (Shellnutt, 2023). His book *The Purpose Driven Life* has sold over thirty-five million copies, making it “one of the bestselling books of all time” (Wenner, 2023). In 2021, Saddleback Church was the

largest church in the SBC (Wingfield, 2021), and it continued as part of the SBC until 2023.

Despite the obvious popularity of Rick Warren's books, there are serious biblical issues with Rick Warren's teaching, both his sermons and his books. In his PhD on Rick Warren and Bill Hybel's model of church, Jacob Shelley observes that, as a strong advocate of the Church Growth Movement, Rick Warren believes that fulfilling the Great Commission equates to church growth in the sense of getting more people into churches. This assumption spills over into the way Warren uses the Bible as a tool, and proof-texting, rather than faithfully preaching it. Seeker-sensitive services are the means by which people are drawn to church, according to this model. This results in salvation being dependent upon making the message pleasing to the hearer rather than dependent on the work of Christ (Shelley, 2006, pp. 11, 42-43, 52, 67).

Many have expressed concerns that Rick Warren has a shallow understanding of the gospel (Cloud) and fails to preach Christ (DeWaay). His approach to preaching is to offer a gospel that does not mention sin, God's wrath on sinners or the need for the cross of Christ. It is a gospel without offence (Malan). Warren downplays theology as a function of the church (Shelley, 2006, p. 15). Canadian Baptist Pastor Tim Challies argues, "Warren is willing to overlook critical theological differences that strike to the very heart of the gospel in order to press forward towards his goals... Warren shows that he is willing to let go of the gospel" (Challies, 2005). Furthermore, Warren regularly misuses Scripture to make his points. He takes verses out of context and uses multiple translations and paraphrases in order to find a version that backs up what he wants to say (Challies, 2005).

These serious concerns are mentioned because, although there is no indication that Rick Warren has changed his stance on these matters, the SBC did not disfellowship Saddleback Church over the watering down of the gospel. The SBC were apparently unconcerned about Rick Warren as pastor of Saddleback Church. A search of SBC.org and the Baptist Press turned up no criticisms of Rick Warren. Concern over Rick Warren appears to be solely focused on the matter of the ordination of women. For example, an article by Landon Coleman – graduate of the Southern Baptist

Theological Seminary and a lead pastor at Immanuel Church in Odessa, Texas – expresses concerns about Rick Warren’s stance on ordaining women, with no mention of watering down the gospel (Coleman, 2023). It is difficult to conclude otherwise than the SBC only disfellowshipped Saddleback because of the introduction of a female pastor. This strongly suggests that the SBC, who pride themselves on upholding the Bible, appear blind to departures from core biblical doctrine.

As with Saddleback, Elevation Church has recently left the SBC. It was not that the SBC disfellowshipped Elevation Church, but simply that, for unstated reasons, Elevation chose to leave. There has been speculation that Elevation withdrew from the SBC because of the SBC’s decision to affirm that the teaching office belongs only to qualified men and that women cannot hold the title of pastor (Staff Report, 2013). In light of the recent decision to disfellowship Saddleback, it is worth considering Elevation as well.

As with Saddleback Church, the lead pastor of Elevation Church – Steven Furtick – has problematic theology. Furtick has been charged with adhering to the “little gods” doctrine, preaching modalism, misquoting Scripture, claiming that God broke his own law out of love, stating that God is energy, and teaching that Jesus is limited by our unbelief. There is also evidence of manipulating people to be baptised by planting people to answer altar calls (*The False Teaching of Steven Furtick*). In the time since Furtick founded Elevation Church in 2006, the SBC would have had opportunity to censure or correct Furtick’s doctrine. If the SBC was concerned to uphold core biblical doctrine, this surely would have been done. But Elevation removed themselves from the SBC, not the other way around.

Furthermore, the SBC has historically taken a weak stance on sexual abuse in its churches. In 2019, The Houston Chronicle reported on the sexual abuse taking place within SBC churches and the response of the denomination towards this problem. The article describes the efforts of victims of abuse to get the SBC to enact new policies to make churches safer. In 2008, one such person petitioned the SBC to adopt prevention policies, but those reforms were nearly all rejected. According to the Houston Chronicle, many sexual abuse complaints have been ignored or hidden

from authorities, and alleged abusers were not removed from the pulpit. SBC leaders claim that, because each congregation is autonomous, reforms are impossible to enforce. However, during the decade preceding this news report, at least four churches were disfellowshipped because of their affirmation of homosexuality. Although the SBC President asserted that a church which made a habit of ignoring abuse should be disfellowshipped, the newspaper claims to have found at least ten churches with pastors or volunteers who had been charged with sexual offences. Some victims were pressured to get abortions. Others were pressured to recant their allegations (Downen et al., 2019).

A more recent article in the Houston Chronicle observes that the SBC has begun to take steps against sexual abuse in their churches (Tedesco & Downen, 2022). Even so, in late 2023, controversy still raged in the SBC as lawyers for the SBC petitioned to avoid extending the statute of limitations on law suits for sexual abuse victims (Blair, 2023). Despite a resolution to deal with the sexual abuse cover ups, by tracking pastors accused of abuse and providing training, no visible progress was evidenced on the Ministry Check website in 2024 (Garrote, 2024, p. 5).

Of interest is that fact that two of the architects of the recent conservatism in the SBC – Paige Patterson and Paul Pressler – have been implicated in sexual abuse scandals. Pressler and Patterson worked together to change the SBC and remove all liberal influence from it. Because of Pressler’s exposure to liberal theology at university, he subsequently hated liberalism and sought to root it out of the SBC (Silliman, 2024). Pressler has been accused by several men – one of whom as a teenager when the abuse began (Platoff 2017) – of sexual abuse. Some were paid off to be silent. In one instance, church leadership covered up his inappropriate behaviour with a student to protect “the cause of Christ” along with his reputation (Silliman, 2024). Patterson is accused of covering up the rape of female seminary students (Shellnutt 2018).

The Houston Chronicle exposé¹⁰, among others, implies that sexual abuse has been ineffectively dealt with by the SBC. The SBC have disfellowshipped churches affirming homosexuality or pastored by women but have not prevented sex offenders or sexual predators from being in the pulpit. On the basis of their lack of action on

¹⁰ (2019)“[Abuse of Faith: 20 years, 700 victims: Southern Baptist sexual abuse spreads as leaders resist reform.](#)”

Rick Warren and Steven Furtick, and their lack of action against sexual abuse, but their firm action against female pastors, the idea that the SBC is concerned about upholding biblical teaching and values seems questionable.

The implication is that the SBC acted to disfellowship Saddleback Church for reasons other than the identification of Baptists as “Bible people”¹¹. Certainly, Scripture is opposed to homosexual behaviour, against sexual abuse, and against racism – the three examples cited by Denny Burk.¹² However, being a woman is not a sin, and therefore cannot be compared to homosexuality, abuse or racism. Even if one were to concede that Scripture opposes female pastors – a position that is not conceded here – the failure to uphold the gospel in the case of Rick Warren and Steven Furtick, and the failure to address serious sexual misconduct in any meaningful way until recently demonstrates that the priorities of the SBC are problematic. It appears that they consider keeping women in their place of more importance than the faithful proclamation of Christ or the protection of the vulnerable.

Conclusion

Complementarians have serious concerns regarding the ordination of women to pastoral leadership in the church. This issue has been debated for decades. Given that not all theological doctrines should be considered first-tier doctrines, the question raised in this article has been where in the doctrinal hierarchy have complementarians placed the issue of women in Christian ministry. The history of the church, as documented in historic Creeds and Confessions, shows that this matter has historically not been a first-tier issue. However, the Gospel Coalition “Statement of Faith” reflects the importance of the issue in the eyes of complementarians. Pastors and theologians on the complementarian side of the issue have spoken about the ordination of women in terms implying that they perceive this issue to be a first-tier one. The practice of the Southern Baptist Convention – the largest denomination in the US – also demonstrates the enormous importance the SBC has placed on the issue, over and above safeguarding the gospel itself. All this demonstrates that the ministry of women has been elevated by particular complementarians to a gospel issue, rather than a second-tier issue on

¹¹ See Colin Smithers statement earlier in this article.

¹² As quoted earlier in this article.

which Christians can disagree without accusing one another of being liberal, feminist, pro-homosexuality or people who ignore the Scripture. Before progress can be made in any discussion about the place of women within the church, agreement must be reached regarding where the issue is situated within the theological hierarchy.

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Towards a Practical Christian Ethic of Dementia

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Abstract

A Christian ethic of dementia is a critical topic, due to the prevalence of dementia, its impact on people and the Bible's teaching regarding how the church should respond. This paper proposes a Christian ethic of dementia and dementia care built on Scripture, arguing that dementia cannot impact, let alone diminish a person's value and that Christians are called to love people living with dementia. As such, it provides an ethic of dementia, and supports the pastoral reflection *Forgotten Ministry* which outlines my experience with dementia and published in this edition of the *Journal of Contemporary Ministry*.

Key words: Alzheimer's, biblical ethic, dementia

Introduction

Today there are over 42 million people living with dementia, and by 2050 the number will be 135 million (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2014). Dementia is one of the most terrifying (Williams, 2021; Kevern, 2017) and prevalent diseases today.

Dementia is progressive, largely incurable and terminal. In fact, dementia is Australia's major cause of death (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025). Dementia impacts the brain, which popular and Christian culture often treat as the basis of our personhood (Ighofose et al. 2023; Kinghorn, 2024; Post, 2006; Swinton & MacKinlay, 2024).

This article takes a three-fold approach toward a Christian ethic of dementia. Firstly, it defines dementia, and the ethical questions dementia raises. Secondly, it explores the ethics of personhood amid dementia. Finally, it proposes an *applied Christian Ethic of Dementia through the lenses of good dementia theology, good life with dementia and good death with dementia*.

Defining Dementia?

While dementia is commonly perceived as a disease of memory, it is much more complex (Dementia Australia, 2019). For example, there are three overlapping aspects of dementia which must be wrestled with to formulate a Christian ethic of dementia: scientific, social and theological.

Medically, dementia is an umbrella term for several degenerative and terminal neurological diseases which impact the brain, affecting thinking, communication, and the ability to perform everyday tasks (Dementia Australia, 2019).

Socially, dementia is often a condition in which the suffer experiences 'relational abandonment' (Kinghorn, 2024). Ethically, this is critical as it highlights that the experience of dementia is profoundly shaped not only by internal disease but also by the isolation many people impacted by dementia experience (Bute, 2024; Bryden, 2024; Ighofose et al., 2023; Swinton, 2017). The basis of this isolation is three-fold: firstly, suffering makes us feel isolated, second, dementia can lead some people to forget visits from loved ones, increasing the sense of isolation. Critically, while these memories can fade, positive feelings often remain. Finally, and most devastating, Christians, along with others, often neglect people living with dementia, due to stigma, fear of what to say and the pain of visiting (Bolanda, 2025).

Theologically, dementia raises deep questions: What gives a person value, purpose and meaning? What makes someone a person? Does Dementia impact relationship with God? How such questions are answered radically affect how people living with dementia are treated (Boland, 2025b; Boland, 2025c; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2017; Williams, 2021; Williams, 2022).

Personhood

An ethic of personhood is critical as it defines people's value and how they should be treated. Exploring all proposals for an ethic of personhood amid dementia is beyond the scope of this article and has already been outlined (Hughes, 2023). Instead, this article summarises three prominent ethics of dementia personhood: the cognition view, the capacity view and the relationship view before contrasting them to a Biblical ethic of personhood.

The Cognition view of Personhood

Since the Enlightenment's "subjective turn" away from objective truth derived from the divine, to individual truth derived from experience, western society has prioritised the importance of the mind in understanding what makes a person (Crowther, 2017; Kinghorn, 2024). This understanding lies behind the presentation in fiction that "a brain in a bottle" could be a "whole person," capable of thought, speech and action via technology. The bottom line in this argument is that cognition is necessary for personhood and so, to the extent that cognition is lacking, so is personhood. In the scholarly context, ethicists such as Singer, argue that intelligent non-humans (e.g. apes) should be granted the rights of personhood while people living with advanced dementia should be euthanised on the basis of cognitive function (Singer, 2011).

The Capacity view of Personhood

An example of capacity as the basis of personhood is the Situational Embodied Agent model, which argues that personhood rests on a combination of body, mind and situation (Hughes, 2001; Hughes, 2023). The problem with capacity as the basis of personhood is that dementia typically leads to a decline in capacity. Like the cognition view, this can exclude people living with dementia.

The Relationship view of Personhood

In his ground-breaking work *Dementia Reconsidered*, social psychologist Kitwood argues that personhood is derived from relationships (Kitwood, 2008). The strength of this position is that Scripture, the academic literature and universal human experience emphasise that people are relational beings – we are wired to know and

be known by others. It also aligns well with the understanding of dementia as a condition of social isolation (Kinghorn, 2024). The problem remains however that many people living with dementia experience a loss of relationships.

The Biblical view of Personhood

Scripture teaches, that the basis of human personhood lies in the fact that we have been made by God, for God, and in the *Imago Dei*. Being image bearers distinguishes us from both God and the rest of creation. Humans can kill fungus, plants and animals, but not humans (Gen.9:1-6) (Calvin, 1636; Grudem, 1994; Packer, 2011), with the arguable exceptions of war (Farley, 2018; Potana, 2014), self-defence (Decker, 2014; Isuwa, 2021) and capital punishment (Charles, 1994; Clark, 2023; Orpwood, 2008).

As a Biblical understanding of personhood pivots on God and is not dependent on any internal property, such as the level of cognition, or external capacity such as the ability to relate to other people, Biblical personhood cannot be earned, lost, diminished or taken – it is immutable and indestructible. Thus, Biblically dementia cannot impact personhood as it does not affect God (Boland, 2025c; Dunlop, 2017; Mast, 2014).

An applied Christian Ethic of Dementia

Personhood as a consequence of bearing God's image determines how people are called to treat other people and themselves. While this doctrine is easy to articulate, it can be challenging to apply, particularly when it comes to the complexities of dementia. A detailed examination of a Christian Ethic of dementia with regard to ministry is provided in this edition's pastoral reflection – *Forgotten Ministry*. So, this paper will focus on a more general application of a Christian ethic of dementia using three topics: good theology with dementia, good life with dementia and good death with dementia.

Good theology with dementia

As articulated in the previous section, a Christian ethic of dementia is underpinned by a theology of personhood. Specifically, people living with dementia are **PEOPLE** -

created by God, in God's image and so loved by God He died for them. Therefore, their value is immutable and incredible.

Ethically a Christian view of personhood means living with dementia should not decrease the love a person receives. Yet, people living with dementia often receive less love (Boland, 2024a; Boland, 2025c; Epps et al., 2019; Otwell, 2007; Williams, 2021; Ysseldyk et al., 2013). Overlooking people living with dementia also risks breaking the Bible's teaching about favouritism (Lev.19:15 & Jam.2:1–13) (Boland, 2024a; Boland, 2025c). Specifically, if we treat people living with dementia as less than other people we are playing favourites. Thus, the doctrines of personhood and favouritism mean a Christian ethic of dementia emphasises the importance of loving people impacted by dementia.

A Biblical ethic of personhood also underlies the commandment to love our neighbours: people living with dementia, are our neighbours. A Christian ethic of dementia requires us to love our neighbours with dementia (Boland, 2025c; Goldsmith, 2004; Linthicum & Hicks, 2018; Thibault, & Morgan, 2009).

Personhood and love of neighbour, provide a profound foundation for Christian ethical treatment of people generally and specifically people living with dementia. Scripture, however, places additional emphasis on the importance of care for people living with dementia by prioritising care of the poor, widows and parents.

Dementia can lead to poverty (Wash, 2022) and poverty is a key risk factor in the development of dementia (Daly, 2025; Trani et al., 2024). The majority of people living with dementia today are in the global south (Alzheimer's Disease International, 2014; Alzheimer's Disease International, 2013; Naheed et al., 2023; Resende et al., 2019). Scripture's commands to care for the poor (Cuellar, De la Cruz, & Robinson, 2017; Parcell, 2023; Udom, Olusakin, & Essien, 2025) and the link between poverty and dementia, further highlight the ethical imperative for Christians to care for people living with dementia.

A Christian ethic of dementia is further underpinned by the commandments regarding older people. For example, 'Stand up in the presence of the aged, show respect for the elderly and revere your God. I am the Lord' (Lev.19:32) (Atwell et al., 2020). McCormick argues 'Wherever we turn in the Bible, we consistently see exhortations to honor the aged' (McCormick, 2015). Practically, the Lausanne Movement has identified mission to older people as a global mission priority (Lausanne, 2025). While not all older people experience dementia, being older is the primary risk factor for dementia (Alzheimer's Society, 2025). Therefore the Biblical teaching about older people, buttresses the Christian ethic of importance the important of care of people impacted by dementia.

A Christian ethic of prioritising people living with dementia is also supported by the commands about parents (Exo.20:12; Mar.7:9-13 & Eph.6:2-3). Challies argues the commandment to honour parents applies beyond childhood has often been neglected. Specifically, he notes we are all always children, so the command never ceases to apply (Challies, 2017). None of the other commandments are time limited although adultery, coveting one's neighbour's wife and murder primarily apply to adults (Boland, 2025c). Not limiting the honouring of parents to the period of childhood is also supported by Jesus' teaching on Corban (Mar.7:9-13). Finally, the command to honour parents is linked to a promise (Eph.6:2-3) and its placement as the fifth commandment gives it additional weighting (Challies, 2017). While many parents do not live with dementia, parents are more likely to live with dementia due to increasing age (Alzheimer's Society, 2025). Thus, the commandment to honour our parents, further supports a Christian ethic of prioritising people living with dementia.

The basic theological principles of respect for personhood, avoiding favouritism and loving one's neighbours and the specific Scriptural statements regarding the prioritising of care for the poor, widows and parents highlight the importance of caring for people living with dementia from a Christian ethical perspective.

Good life with Dementia

Having highlighted the Biblical ethic of dementia, it is appropriate to examine the application of this ethic with reference to helping people living with dementia live life to the full (John10:10).

For many people, the hope of a good life with dementia seems like an impossibility (Kitwood, 2008). Yet there is strong evidence that it is possible to live well with dementia (Barr, et al. 2016; Bute, 2024; Bryden, 2024; Morse, 2015). This is not to suggest life with dementia is without challenges, but that “we need to learn to see dementia properly, both its prickly vines and its beautiful fruit” (Swinton & MacKinlay, 2024). Therefore, a key application of a Christian ethic of dementia is to share a positive vision of dementia.

Sadly, Christians have been guilty of unethical engagement with people living with dementia; for example, telling people their dementia has a spiritual origin (Alemayehu et al., 2025; Brooke & Ojo, 2020; Bryden, 2024; Ighofose et al., 2023; Jacobs et al., 2024; Kantawala et al., 2023; Mfaene & Pillary, 2023). More commonly, churches have neglected ministry to people affected by dementia (Boland, 2024; Boland, 2025c; Bryden, 2024). This topic is explored, and practical suggestions made in this edition’s pastoral reflection – *Forgotten Ministry*. A Christian ethic of dementia however requires not simply ‘ministry’ but an engagement with the “prickly vines” of dementia.

What are the ethical “prickly vines” of life with dementia? Living with dementia requires engaging with the “prickly vines” of grief, dependency and mortality. As dementia is degenerative, it is typically marked by significant ongoing loss of memory, capacity and relationships (Martin, 2023). From a Christian perspective, key responses to these challenges are grief, lament and trust in God (Crowther, 2017). Too often Christians who are experiencing these losses are exhorted to ‘leap lament’ and joyously ‘trust God’. Yet this is a caricature of what Scripture teaches!

The Psalms are full of lament and Lamentations is a whole book of grief. Jesus was a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and consequently no stranger to tears (Luke19:41, John11:35 & Isaiah 53:3). When it comes to the pastoral care of those with dementia, it’s all too easy to focus on the gentle and joyous parts of specific

psalms – “Green pastures and still waters” and “as the deer pants for the water” – while neglecting the “Valley of the shadow of death” and “my bones suffer mortal agony.” Or we can skip over the “dark” psalms (e.g. Psa.22, 88 & 137), when these are precisely what is needed. A Biblical ethic of dementia, therefore, includes prioritising the “dark” parts of grief, as one of the challenges of dementia is learning to grieve before the throne of grace.

Another challenge is facing our dependency (Boland, 2025; Bute, 2024) particularly as Western culture idolises independence. A great resource that provides a Christian perspective on the importance of facing and embracing dependency is *The Final Lap* (Wyatt, 2023). Wyatt notes that while our culture places emphasis on autonomy and control, Scripture teaches we are created as limited beings who are designed to be dependent on the creation, each other and God. Learning to recognise and accept increasing dependence is a lifelong process but one that dementia brings to the fore. Thus it is both a thorn and fruit of dementia.

A particular ethical challenge relating to dependency in the midst of dementia is decision making. In moderate to advanced dementia, a common problem is loss of self-awareness and therefore diminished ability to make good decisions. Classic challenges include driving and living alone. A good resource for thinking ethically about these challenges is *Dementia and Ethics Reconsidered* (Hughes, 2023), which covers topics such as ‘Consent and capacity’, ‘Best interest’ and ‘Truth-telling’. (An explicitly Christian position regarding truth telling is outlined here: Boland, 2018a).

A key theological question asked by many people affected by dementia is: What happens if I forget God? As a chaplain, I have found it helpful to ask: Is your faith dependent on you or God? My aim is to help the person realise we all forget God and that Christianity instead relies on God’s love, power and memory (Boland, 2025c; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2017).

An examination of conversion in the midst of dementia is provided by Wormell, who shows dementia does not prevent people becoming Christians (Wormell, 2015), While Williams provides a deep exploration of the Christian’s experience of mild to moderate dementia, highlighting the opportunities and challenges of this experience

(Williams, 2021). Finally, Bute and Bryden provide powerful voices of Christians living with dementia (Bute, 2018; Bryden, 2005; Bryden, 2015). An exceptional resource for sharing the Gospel with people living with dementia is *Hymns We Love* (Cramer & Cramer, 2023).

A Christian ethic of dementia requires Christians to love amid the grief and the dependency which dementia often brings. It also requires consideration of mortality, as one of the blessed fruits of dementia is the chance to prepare for death.

Good Death with Dementia

A biblical ethic of a good death with dementia is critical as dementia is usually terminal and death is a key theme throughout Scripture from the fall to the second coming (Gen.2 and Rev.21). Indeed, Christianity is almost death centric, as it pivots on Jesus' death. There are many Christian resources on a good death (Best, 2024; Dunlop, n.d.; McDonald, 2013) as well as Christian resources which engage with death and dementia (Boland, 2025c; Bachand-Wood, 2016; Dunlop, 2017; MacKinlay, 2012) As such, I will simply summarise five key scriptural teachings about a good death.

1. While death is a consequence of the fall (Gen.3:1-24 & Rom.5:12-14), it has been conquered by Jesus' resurrection (1Cor.15:1-58 & 2Tim.1:8-12). So, for those who believe in him, death is not to be feared; it is now the gateway to life eternal (Joh.11:23-27, 14: 1-7 & 1The.4:13-18) (Calvin, 1636; Grudem, 1994; Web, 1990).
2. Pain is not innately good (Gen.3: 16-19). So, treatment focused on pain relief is ethically acceptable (Best, (2025); Lambaerts, 2025; Tyndall, 2025).
3. Christian hope is eternal (e.g. John11:23-27, 14: 1-7 & 1The.4:13-18); but life in our current bodies will end (Gen.5:3-32; Ecc.9:1-12 & Heb.9:27) (Brammall, 2008). Therefore, Biblically, it is ethical to choose not to undergo treatment to extend life (Best, 2025; Meilaender, 2020).

4. Unlike animals, people bear the *Imago Dei* (Gen.1:26, 5:1, 9:6 & Jam.3:9) so deliberately causing the death of a human being (Gen.9:6), even for reasons of compassion, is not ethical (1Sam31:4) (Erickson, 1998; Grudem, 1994; Packer, 2011). The question of killing in war (Farley, 2018; Potana, 2014), self-defence (Decker, 2014; Isuwa, 2021) and capital punishment (Charles, 1994; Clark, 2023; Orpwood, 2008) are arguably exceptions.
5. Christians are called to love people and care for them, even though we may disagree with their decisions (Mat.22:39; Mar.12:31 & Luk.6:27-36). As such, it is ethical for a Christian to offer support to a person who has chosen to undergo Voluntary Assisted Dying (Best, 2025; UnitingCare, 2022).

Conclusion

This paper has proposed a Christian ethic of dementia care founded on Scripture. It defined dementia and the ethical questions dementia raises before exploring the topic of personhood amid dementia and highlighting that a Biblical ethic of dementia is underpinned by the *Imago Dei*. Therefore dementia does not diminish a person. This foundation was then built on to propose an applied Christian Ethic of Dementia using the lens of good dementia theology, good life with dementia and good death with dementia.

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Is the problem that faith is two sizes too small?

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Abstract

This article takes a fresh perspective on the contemporary “problem” of deconstruction in evangelical settings by considering the problem before the problem, the construction of faith, in particular during childhood. What issues that may make faith precarious and vulnerable to deconstruction can be addressed during children’s faith formation to make it more resilient to the bumpiness of teenage and adult life? The kinds of characteristics that make faith precarious or “two sizes too small” are faith that is antagonistic, simplistic, or moralistic; reliant on certainty and resistant to questions; and not personally-owned. Instead characteristics of resilient faith or faith that fits are being elastic, open to questions, and allowing for mystery; formed in community; and takes children’s faith seriously and acknowledges them as active meaning-makers. By shifting the focus, this article offers a formative theological approach, rather than being anti-deconstructionist.

Keywords: faith-formation, children's spirituality, deconstruction, resilient-faith

Introduction

An issue of concern for some (evangelical) churches today, including The Salvation Army, is people deconstructing faith. People may deconstruct when they discover the faith they hold is insufficient to deal with their own or a loved one’s lived experience, the complexity of the world in general, contravenes their closely held values, or they become disillusioned with the institution of church. Deconstruction may be followed

by reconstruction, where some elements of faith are retained while others are discarded, or alternative theologies or practices embraced that better align with their expanded worldview or lived experience. Destruction or abandonment may also be the subsequent phase to deconstruction.

How might we respond to deconstruction? Do we do all in our power to prevent it? Do we double-down and shout louder against anything we might consider a risk or an adversary? Do we go back to fix the foundations; the construction of faith? Or is no response needed?

After outlining the “problem” of deconstruction, this paper will consider whether the real problem is the construction stage: since logically, deconstruction is preceded by construction¹ Children’s faith formation is the lens that will be applied. David Goodwin (2013) concluded that “Children need to be better prepared for challenges to their faith that will inevitably come” (p. 14). Thirteen years on, the need is still urgent, perhaps more so in a climate of deconstruction. What if children’s faith could be nurtured in such a way that does not inevitably lead to a devastating unravelling during the bumpiness of adult life? Could children’s faith be developed in more resilient ways, that also sees deconstruction less as a problem and more as part of a lifelong, maturing relationship with God?

What is the problem of deconstruction?

Deconstruction is a popular term to describe the process of examining, reassessing, unlearning, and dismantling Christian beliefs, practices, and identity.²

Deconstructing faith usually occurs in response to some kind of crisis but could be a slow reach of the tipping point; it may be a violent or gentle process. The language of deconstruction largely belongs to the evangelical/post-evangelical sphere with analogous processes taking place in other Christian traditions (framed using other language and typically with less drama and fear attached): the experience is not

¹ I am not fond of the bricks-and-mortar imagery implied by deconstruction as it emphasises human activity in relation to faith, sidelining the divine role. As deconstruction is the common term in evangelical circles, I will employ it and its logical counterparts here.

² The term deconstruction as used in this paper is from the evangelical/post-evangelical popular debate. Deconstruction has origins in Jacques Derrida (1983) but the context here is the Christian faith and, as such, I will not delve into the post-structuralist philosophical origins of deconstruction.

limited to evangelicals but the intensity is heightened in this setting. Much of the discussion takes place in the USA, sometimes attaching the label exvangelical to a person who has deconstructed and left the faith (Mullins, 2023). The language and conversation is increasingly infiltrating the Australian context.

Youth and young adults are the most visible cohort deconstructing, but it is not an issue isolated to this demographic.³ According to Rowan Lewis (2013), “It should be no surprise that the presence of doubt, questioning, experimentation, challenging authority and seeking independence in relation to faith should also be present during this time as these young people seek to make sense of their faith and find meaning in the context of this challenging life stage” (p. 53). Another prominent group is women during mid-life (Mathieu, 2024). Across both these groups it appears that deconstruction is more prevalent among those who were deeply invested in their faith and active in their faith community, than those who believed nominally or engaged superficially. They are often biblically or theologically literate but experience dissonance between their faith and their lived experience.

Perhaps deconstruction might be thought of like a game of Jenga (Scott, 1983). In Jenga, people take turns poking or pulling a block from the tower then adding it to the top, creating new layers of the tower. At some point, the removal of a block or its placement destabilises the whole tower bringing it crashing down. Some blocks are chosen, removed, and placed carefully while others might be hastily and recklessly moved. Imagining that each block holds within it an element of Christian belief or practice, we might say that poking or pulling at a block before placing it at a new location, is like deconstructing an element of faith. In this sense, deconstructing might simply be understood as carefully examining. Some elements are unlikely to topple the tower when removed and re-placed, other elements may be so critical to stability that simply removing them to examine them leads to demolition, for others it is the act of placing them that unbalances the tower, and for still others it is the cumulative impact of eroding foundations that cause the tower to collapse. For some people it is one thing that is just too hard to reconcile and fit back into their faith world safely while for others lots of little things compound. The people with whom

³ I typically use the word youth to depict the life stage of adolescence (13-17), occasionally substituting teen or teenager. I use young adult for the age group 18-25, although some literature prefers emerging adult. Youth and young adult are the usual nomenclature of my context, The Salvation Army.

you are playing also impact the stability of the tower; Jenga is not usually a solo game.

The critical question is, “What happens next?” If deconstruction has led to destruction or abandonment, it might be “game over.” However, the alternative is to start again and reassemble (reconstruct). Sometimes, blocks go missing! It is possible to play the game with fewer blocks, whether they have been accidentally lost or intentionally discarded.

The concern of today’s church is likely more about people abandoning faith than deconstructing it, as I understand deconstruction. Deconstructing (examining, reassessing, unlearning, and dismantling) faith may lead to apostasy but on the contrary may lead to stronger faith (reconstruction or renovation). Precarious faith (faith that is too-small, brittle, malformed, or inadequate) is more susceptible to being abandoned once a person starts deconstructing it. For some who have “grown up with” faith, perhaps they allowed their faith to remain simplistic, compliant, and behaviour-based, which quickly proves precarious in the complex, nuanced world of adulthood?

Side note: The fusion of evangelicalism with politics in the USA is less evident in places like Australia. When The Salvation Army, an international movement, declares itself “an evangelical part of the Christian church” (The Salvation Army International, n.d.), it is not making a statement of political affiliation but of missional motivation. Nevertheless, Matthew Mullins (2023) observes that the alliance between evangelical churches in the USA and conservative politics “serves as the backdrop” (p. 249), and this does influence further afield. As such, it is helpful to consider the context in which the word evangelical is being used to assess the degree of possible entanglement with politics.

While a person may come to faith at any age in life, childhood is the primary period during which people become Christian.⁴ The 12-and-under age group was identified

⁴ Barna Group found that “the spiritual allegiances of childhood are remarkably sustainable” (“Do Americans Change Faiths?,” 2010). In the same vein, in Australia, David Goodwin (2013, p. 17) discovered that 77% of adult Christians were involved in a children’s ministry as a child. He also noted that if they enjoyed their time in children’s ministry, they were more likely to remain Christian as

as a missional priority by George Barna (2003), who concluded that “if people do not embrace Jesus Christ as their Savior before they reach their teenage years, the chance of their doing so at all is slim” (p. 34). This statistical evidence has enduring impact on children’s ministry and the value ascribed to evangelism among children. If childhood is the main “entry door” to Christian faith, teenage and young adulthood are a corresponding “exit door,” as these years are a prime period during which people abandon the faith they grew up with.

Questioning, disengaging, and reconfiguring faith by teenagers and young adults is not new. The challenge of young people walking away from faith (and/or the church) is widely substantiated, and the Australian data is largely consistent with that from overseas.⁵ Sometimes disengaging from church and disengaging from faith are erroneously treated as the same thing; one may lead to the other but not necessarily so.⁶ While the language of deconstruction is not used in such research, the issue is a longstanding challenge for faith formation. This concern has prompted reconsideration of approaches to ministry with youth and young adults, and also with children.⁷ A both-and approach is helpful. We should reassess and reinvigorate faith formation at all ages to better form lifelong faith.

Deconstruction of faith during teen, young adult or later adult years provides impetus for re-evaluating the construction of faith undertaken during childhood, which is the focus of this paper. How might we form faith in children that is resilient, not precarious, and able to withstand the factors that would threaten to topple it? This takes a formative theological approach to the issue of deconstruction, rather than being anti-deconstructionist. It is not seeking to improve the production line

adults (Goodwin, 2013, p. 18).

⁵ Australian empirical research includes Bellamy & Kaldor (2002, pp. 6, 23); Goodwin (2013); Hughes (2007); Mason et al. (2007); Singleton et al., (2019), and the phenomenon is also well-documented in North America by Black (2008); Ham et al., (2009); Kinnaman & Hawkins (2011); Powell & Clark (2011); Sawler (2008); and Smith & Denton (2005).

⁶ The distinction is clear in the “nomad” and “exile” designations from Kinnaman (2011, p. 25) and the current deconstruction discourse. Darren Cronshaw (2016, pp. 18-20, 23) argues strongly against conflating disengagement or dissociation with church with disidentification or deidentification with faith. Drawing on data from the 2024 Springtide Study of Young People and Religious Life, Nabil Tueme (2025) notes that 65% of young people who leave religious institutions say they are “still moderately religious.”

⁷ Fuller Youth Institute (Powell et al., 2016; Powell & Argue, 2019; Powell & Clark, 2011) is a leader in the youth and young adult age group. Ivy Beckwith (2010) was one of the first to reimagine children’s ministry in response to malformed faith of teenagers and young adults, see (Beckwith, 2010)

between children's ministry and everything beyond but rather to restructure from an earlier point in time that improves faith resilience at every age.

Precarious faith

What kind of characteristics make children's faith precarious, leaving it vulnerable to deconstruction or destruction?⁸ Perhaps a person discovers that their faith is "two sizes too small," to adapt a concept from Dr Seuss' *The Grinch?* (Geisel, 2003). Alternatively, someone's faith may be brittle, fragile, relegated to the status belief which must be outgrown, or perhaps it was never truly theirs to begin with.

A too-small faith might be antagonistic; everything is a possible threat or enemy. It is suspicious of the next pop culture wave that arrives, especially if it contains spiritual overtones like *Harry Potter*, *Wicked*, or *Kpop Demon Hunters*. Too-small faith is also threatened by actual culture, viewing things like smoking ceremonies or Acknowledgement of Country as an affront to Christian faith. It cannot readily navigate real-world issues faced by the child (or adult) such as divorce, racism, patriarchy, violence or war, gender and sexuality diversity, for example, as the faith is too simplistic or moralistic.

Faulty or malformed faith is precarious. Moralistic faith, where everything needs to tie up with a neat moral lesson is inadequate. Ivy Beckwith (2004) warns against "[diluting] the power of the Bible to pique a child's curiosity and sense of wonder and awe about the mysteries of God" when we use it to teach political, theological, or moral lessons (p. 131). Moralistic faith may be informed more from Disney animation than the Bible. Mark Pinsky (2004) claims that Walt Disney's animated "gospel," while loosely based on Western Judeo-Christian faith and ideals, reveals a world where "good is always rewarded; evil is always punished. Faith is an essential element—faith in yourself and, even more, faith in something *greater* than yourself, some higher power. Optimism and hard work complete the basic canon" (pp. xi-xii).⁹ Pinsky (2004, p. 6-7) calls this approach "secular 'toonism": movies with apparent, if watered-down, religious moral values.¹⁰ Moralistic therapeutic deism (MTD) as

⁸ The word precarious avoids blaming children for the issue of non-resilient faith instead locating responsibility with the system of formation.

⁹ Pinsky (2004, p. 1) notes that Disney was adamant not to overtly include any religion in his movies which protected commercial interests by not excluding or offending anyone.

¹⁰ This is an adaption of the pejorative "secular humanism."

identified by Christian Smith and Melinda Denton (2005, pp. 162-163) is malformed Christianity, where faith is focused on feeling good about oneself and being socially respectable (a “good citizen”), with God relegated to a support role. MTD is ripe for deconstruction.

A too-small faith may be brittle or fragile. Brittle faith relies on certainty and resists questions, thus gripping to fundamentalist or literal ideas. On the surface this kind of faith may appear strong (loud and proud) but shatters under duress or if the “right” answer cannot be found. Mariko Clark reflected on her experience as a five-year-old being trained in a cerebral, cognitive method where the Bible was a defensive tool: “learning, agreeing, memorising was the extent of it.” Instead she wants to introduce her own children to a bigger God who is “able to grow and bend with them” to overcome a “small and brittle understanding of God” (Enns et al., 2025). It is entirely appropriate for a child’s young faith to be fragile needing protection and additional nurture. The concern is when that fragility extends beyond childhood, suggesting poor construction, structural weakness, or overprotectiveness.

Another too-small kind of faith is one that assigns Jesus the same status as childhood fabricated figures, such as Santa Claus and the Easter Bunny, belief in which we outgrow at an appropriate age.

Faith that is precarious may be implanted faith; someone else’s faith, not personally-owned. This is like a child “cosplaying” Christianity or going through the motions; they may participate in the activities of faith in nominal or superficial ways but lack personal volition. Faith that is not your own is easily rejected, discarded or put on the shelf.

Resilient faith

What instead makes children’s faith resilient and capable of theological load-bearing? What are we aiming for? What can we do better? The markers of resilient faith are not merely the opposite characteristic of every precarious one identified above, although some clearly stand in contrast. Resilient faith fits well and is elastic, open to questions and allowing for mystery. It is formed in community with parents and the faith community, peers and intergenerational relationships. I would also

argue that resilient faith is one that takes children's faith seriously and recognises them as active agents.

Faith that fits, not two sizes too small, is resilient. Recognising that development is not a linear process, psychologists and sociologists have moved away from step-wise progression (Byas, 2025). This means that developmental models of faith like James Fowler's (1995) stages of faith may still provide some insight to the way people engage in faith as long as it is viewed somewhat flexibly.¹¹ John Westerhoff's (2012, pp. 82-83) styles of faith is an expansive framework moving from experienced faith to affiliative faith, through searching faith to owned faith (which integrates all the earlier styles). He uses the analogy of the rings on a tree: "A tree in its first year is a complete and whole tree, and a tree with three rings is not a better tree but only an expanded tree" (Westerhoff, 2012, pp. 82–83). We need not expect a child to have moved beyond Fowler's mythical-literal stage or expanded into Westerhoff's searching or owned faith styles.¹² We need much more than a process of getting children to cross the line from non-believer to believer by "praying the prayer" (Beckwith, 2004, p. 62). What we can do is set them up well to keep growing and be prepared for the world they encounter, not limiting them to an early stage or style in a constrictive way.

Elastic faith is able to grow and stretch. Young people are asking critical questions earlier in life (Byas, 2025). Kara Powell proclaims: "Doubts are the ants in the pants of faith. They keep it awake and moving" (Powell, 2014). Further, Mariko Clark contends that "questioning and mystery and wrestling is actually good and productive and positive, and not a sign of some sort of shortcoming or failure or a watered down version of relationship with God" (Enns et al., 2025). Questions and doubts are not threats to be eliminated but realities to be anticipated and courageously engaged.

¹¹ Fowler's stages of faith progress from a pre-stage of undifferentiated faith (infancy) through intuitive-projective faith (early childhood), mythical-literal faith (school years), synthetic-conventional faith (adolescence), individuative-reflective faith (young adulthood), conjunctive faith (mid-life and beyond), to universalising faith (rarely achieved!) (Fowler, 1995, p. 113 Chapters on each stage follow. 117-211).

¹² Angela Patterson says it is possible Generation Z may progress through the stages faster as they are exposed to more information and experiences on a mass scale than previous generations (Byas, 2025).

Resilient faith is formed in community. Ivy Beckwith claims that “God surrounded children with adults both in the extended biological family and the community of faith ... to guide, teach, and model life for our children. ... No child can truly come to know God without the influence of caring, godly adults in her life” (Beckwith, 2004, p. 68). She also affirms that all aspects of having faith (understanding, exploring, and questioning) “are meant to be done with people older than us, the same age as us, and younger than us [and] with people who look, think, and live differently than we do (Beckwith, 2004, p.74). The importance of a connection with peers is also vital (Goodwin, 2013, p. 9; Here2Stay, 2015; MacDonald, 2020, p. 68). Faith that is supported jointly from home and church and sustained by peer and intergenerational relationships will evidence more resilience.

Children are theological meaning-makers. David Csinos (2011) headlines the argument that children are “active agents who make meaning for themselves and the world around them” (p. 12). Acknowledging the inherent spirituality of children and affirming their faith as real and valuable now, is a step towards resilience.

The foregoing discussion strengthens my previous argument that “a true inheritance of faith is passing on the seeds of faith and nurturing the soil to give young people every opportunity to grow their own personal faith, embracing Jesus for themselves” (MacDonald, 2020, pp. 88–89). The organic imagery of nurturing seeds of faith that grow is more helpful than picturing faith being constructed by blocks or bricks.

Conclusion

Deconstruction of itself need not spark fear. It can be viewed as a necessary and important part of maturation, and does not always lead to apostasy. However, it can lead us to consider what makes faith precarious or resilient, and what implications this may have for children’s faith formation.

To avoid developing faith that is two sizes too small, our children’s ministry needs:

- Less certainty, more openness, curiosity, and wonder.
- Less rigidity, brittleness, and fragility, more elasticity.
- Less answers, more questions and mystery.

- Less moralism and behaviour conformity, more transformation.
- Less cosplay and superficially going through the motions, more authenticity and honouring children's theological agency.
- Less isolation, more community with parents, the faith community, peers and intergenerational relationships.
- Less transmission/transaction of passing on faith, more offering the seeds of faith.

Let us not settle for constructing precarious faith in children that is two sizes too small. Rather let us nurture children's faith that can grow three sizes in a day if needed in order to navigate the inevitable bumpiness of days ahead.

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Pastoral Reflection

Forgotten Ministry?

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Australia's leading cause of death is not cancer, domestic abuse, or cardiovascular disease. It is progressive and largely incurable and might be the most feared diagnosis today. An estimated 411,100 Australians lived with this condition in 2023 and this number is increasing. It also challenges us theologically, as it raises questions of salvation, personhood and relationship. Australia's leading cause of death is dementia (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare [AIHW], 2025).

Dementia

Dementia is an umbrella term for over 200 progressive terminal neurological conditions, of which the most common is Alzheimer's (Alzheimer's Association, n.d.). Therefore, it is like the umbrella term 'cancer', as the location, type of both diseases impacts the symptoms, a person can have multiple cancers or dementias and dementia and cancer kill.

For example, my dad had Alzheimer's, Vascular Dementia and Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy (CTE). Alzheimer's impacts the neurons, the message pathways in the brain and symptoms include thinking, memory and behaviour (Dementia Australia, 2025a). Vascular dementia is caused by strokes and mini strokes stopping blood flow in the brain which results in death of areas which are deprived of blood. Symptoms of Vascular include hallucinations, sleep issues and issues with language. The progression of vascular dementia is directly related to the number of times there is a blood flow issue, and the symptoms relate to which part of the brain loses blood (Alzheimer's.gov, 2025). CTE, which used to be called Pugilistic Dementia, a reference to boxing, is caused by repeated head trauma. In dad's case, probably from

schoolboy rugby and soccer. CTE often impacts mood, thinking and behaviour (Dementia Australia, 2025b).

While avoiding head trauma prevents CTE, the biggest risk factor for dementia is ageing, though children can live with dementia (Dementia Australia, 2019). Dementia impacts not simply memory but everything the brain does including inhibitions, navigation and sensory processing. For example, an early sign my dad had dementia was he started getting lost, despite historically having an exceptional sense of direction.

In terms of being terminal, dementia is most commonly a contributor to death rather than the direct cause, but it can directly kill people as they forget how to swallow (Taylor, 2024). In dad's case dementia contributed to weight loss via lack of initiative, a fall due to impaired thinking, which broke ribs and led to pneumonia.

As dementia is so diverse and the research is ongoing a full introduction is beyond the scope of this article. So, I recommend engaging with Dementia Australia (www.dementia.org.au), Alzheimer's Disease International (www.alzint.org) and Australian citizens can also complete free online courses on dementia through the University of Tasmania to learn more about the biomedical side of dementia (www.mooc.utas.edu.au).

A powerful sociological understanding of dementia is provided by Kinghorn who argues that dementia is primarily a disease of social isolation, rather than of cognitive impairment (Kinghorn, 2024), as friends, family and faith communities' distance themselves from the person living with dementia. Consider how you would feel – facing a dementia diagnosis, your brain deteriorating, being socially and spiritually abandoned by the church?

The social abandonment which typifies dementia is an opportunity for Christian love to shine.

Dementia Theology

Shining Christ's light requires a robust theology of dementia; this theology applies to all people as it is all about personhood.

Our culture bestows value based on ability, impact and particularly cognition (Boland, 2025b; Carder, 2019; Swinton, 2016) Therefore, it values people who are young, beautiful and powerful. For example, the WHO reports 50% of people discriminate against older people ([World Health Organisation](#) [WHO], 2021). Another example is the attention given to youth suicide, when suicide in later life is more common (Boland, 2025b; Withall & Mantell, 2022). As Christians however we should value people based on Scripture.

Scripture clearly presents all people as immutably valuable on a threefold basis: people are created by God, bear God's image and are so loved by God he died for them. Therefore, there is nothing a person can be or do to change their value. Nor can other people or anything else impact a person's value (Boland, 2024a; Boland 2025b).

Not only are all people immutably valuable, because of God – they can only be in relationship with God, because of God. Thus, when dad asked me 'What happens if I forget God?' I replied, 'Is your faith dependent on you or God?' We all forget God! Yet, **God** never forgets His people (e.g. Jn.10, Rm.8, Eph.1) (Carder 2019; Swinton, 2017). It is on this basis, that people become and grow as Christians, and this theology explains why people who have dementia can come to and grow in faith (Boland 2024b; Boland, 2025a; Wormell, 2016).

As an older person's chaplain, I see multiple people coming to faith each year and many of these people have dementia. NOT because of me, but because God calls them and sociologically as people age, they become more interested in spirituality (Aglozo, et al., 2021; Al-Nasa'h, 2022; Putney, & Harris, 2015). For example, earlier this year a residential care chaplaincy team in Sydney, took on the challenge of learning to share the Gospel without jargon in under a minute (Boland, 2025b). They saw nine people, seven residents and two staff become Christians in a month. The

question is not can people living with dementia become Christians, but will we share Jesus' love with them?

Having briefly covered a theology of dementia, this article will explore three key reasons why ministry amid dementia is often forgotten.

Fear

Many people find engagement with people living with dementia terrifying. This is not a ministry space where we can focus on training people in exegesis. Instead, we need to think deeply about faith and share Jesus' love simply and powerfully. We can consider Jesus' ministry to the forgotten and the outcast: Jesus actively ministered to the lepers, the outcasts of his day (Mt.10, Mk.1, Lk.17). Jesus was 'deeply moved' by a man with leprosy and touched the untouchables (Mk.1, Mt.8). Are we deeply moved by people living with dementia? When did we last visit a person living with dementia? Or do we segregate the people living with dementia in their own home or a care home and never visit?¹

Training

When we wrestle with theological topics such as church, trinity and salvation we can engage with over 2000 years of scholarship. When we look for practical advice on writing and preaching sermons, or Christian parenting, there is a vast number of resources we can access. By contrast, when it comes to the theology of dementia and practice of ministry with people living with dementia, most Christian books have been published only in the last twenty-five years. Alzheimer's, the most common form of dementia, was first described in 1906 and so theological literature on the subject is new (Queensland Brain Institute, n.d.).

The "novelty" of Christian thought on dementia means there is a significant gap in terms of training on dementia ministry. We need training on matters such as how to preach in the face of dementia, how to share the gospel with someone living with

¹ Care homes can be the best place for people to live, but irrespective of where people live, they need relationships and visitors.

Alzheimer's and how to minister not only to the person living with dementia but to their loved ones as well.

Strategy

While we know God owns the cattle on a thousand hills, our experience of ministry is often of more needs than resources. One response to this is to emphasise “strategic” ministry, such as focusing on raising up the leaders of tomorrow. Biblically this understanding of strategy is problematic. Jesus clearly had a strategy, most clearly seen in his deliberate travel toward Jerusalem and Golgotha. Yet he did not simply recruit the best and brightest as his disciples. James 2:1–13 rebukes his readers for showing favouritism to the rich. Why were they prioritising the rich, probably because it seemed strategic (Boland, 2024b).

We are called to love people and make disciples, not to simply focus on future leaders. Our values underlay our focus; if we neglect people living with dementia we have lost sight of Scripture. To return to James 2, we are called to “keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbour as yourself’”. Loving our neighbours means reaching out to people including people impacted by dementia in our communities.

History teaches that it was the early church's care of abandoned infants and older people that was critical to the amazing spread of the gospel (Dickson, 2021). Today many Christians are passionately pro-life both in terms of abortion, euthanasia and voluntary assisted dying. Yet too often we fail to care for older people and people living with dementia. Those involved in youth and children's ministry often talk positively about ‘intergenerational impact’, yet often, the elderly—and especially those living with dementia—are neglected in the pursuit of this ideal.

If fear, training and strategy are inhibiting our ministry with people living with dementia: Love conquers fear! Learning provides skills and knowledge. Prayer trumps strategy.

Prayer amid Dementia

Ministry is powered by God, who typically dispenses His power through prayer. Therefore, the starting point and foundation of ministry to people impacted by dementia is prayer (Boland, 2025b). Prayer is both beyond the scope of this article and a well-covered topic, with exceptional resources including “Prayer – a perpetual exercise of faith” (Calvin, 1636/2008) “Praying with Paul – a Call to Spiritual Reformation” (Carson, 2015) and “The Valley of Vision” (Bennet, 1975)

Before moving to love, it is important to highlight that ministry is always **with** not simply **to** people irrespective of dementia. So, while learning to adapt our communication and thus prayers with people living with dementia is important (Boland, 2025b), we can also learn from the prayers of people living with dementia.

For example, early in my ministry I had the privilege of being the chaplain to a retired Baptist minister who lived in a secure dementia unit. He would spend most of the day walking the unit and only spoke occasionally, using very short sentences. One day I asked to pray with him and after his assent, I prayed a textbook dementia prayer – short and concrete. Then he started to pray, the depth and maturity of his prayer was so beyond me I was left speechless.

Love amid Dementia

Love is the centre of Christianity – God’s love for us, enables our love of Him and our neighbour. The ultimate example of love being Jesus, who became human, suffered and died for our lack of love on the cross.

Our love of people impacted by dementia will follow a similar pattern. Just as Jesus came to earth, we need to go to people impacted by dementia, to the aged care facilities, respite centres and people’s homes. We need to journey with them, amid suffering and death, and that will be painful for us.

Yet, suffering because of love is what we are called to as Christians (Eph.5, Col.1 and Jer.1).

Not only are we called to suffer, but we are also called to make disciples (Mt.28) and that includes people impacted by dementia. Note ‘people impacted by dementia’ includes not simply people with a dementia diagnosis but their family, friends and professional caregivers. When we love people living with dementia, we proclaim Jesus’ love thought visiting not only to them but those around them. We also need to share Jesus’ love with words.

The good news is that there are a growing number of resources to help us share Jesus’ love with people living with dementia. Here are three I recommend: “Hymns We Love” (Cramer & Cramer, 2023) an evangelistic series, with videos, built around classic hymns designed for older people. “Celebrating the Seasons” (Pelloquin & Keightley, 2022). which provides resources for fifty-two church services designed for care home and respite centre use. “Messy Vintage” (Norman & Phipps, 2023), part of the “Messy Church” suite, provides great ideas and resources.

Learning amid Dementia

Dementia ministry requires learning. I have outlined the basics of dementia and where to learn more in the previous section - ‘Dementia’. To learn about dementia ministry, I recommend the following: “Ministry with the forgotten” (Carder, 2019) provides a great theology of dementia. The “Spiritual Care Series” (Health Television Network, n.d.) uses video and workbook material to train people about ministry with older people. Finally, my latest book “Priceless People” covers a theology of and practice of sharing Jesus’ love with older people and people living with dementia (Boland, 2025b).

Basic Dementia Ministry

As purchasing the aforementioned resources will take time and as you have become more passionate about dementia ministry,² this paper will finish with a practical pivotal plan. The ‘Three P’s – Prayer, Presence and Pastoral Care’ (Boland, 2025b). Thankfully, the ‘Three P’s’ applies not simply to ministry with people affected by dementia but to almost all ministry.

² I hope!

Prayer, as previously expounded, ministry work is primarily about **God** and His work and power. God typically works and empowers ministry work through us via prayer. Too often I get stuck in busyness and ‘doing stuff’, as if I was the driver of ministry. I find a great self-reflection question is: how much time have I allocated to prayer, to my relationship with God?

Presence, the best way to build a relationship is to spend time with the person. It is possible to build and grow a long-distance relationship, but it’s much harder. We see God’s love most clearly in choosing to become man, to be present, without presence there could be no Calvary. In the dementia context the importance of presence is even more important, as long distance relationships are challenging for people living with dementia and because of the social isolation many people with dementia experience. Visiting a person living with dementia can be hard and scary. Visiting Dad when he could not remember my name was traumatic and I had to remind myself, I do not visit to receive love but to give it. That said, I was often greatly blessed by Dad’s love even amid advanced Alzheimer’s.

When a baby is born people flock to see, touch and love the infant. No baby calls people by name, nor does an infant recognize its visitors. Yet when a person is diagnosed with dementia people, including Christians often flee. The same year dad was diagnosed with dementia, mum was diagnosed with cancer. My parents had been a vibrant part of their community and church for almost fifty years. Mum had so many people who wanted to see her, she had to start booking group visits, dad had people who never visited him again.

This cameo not only highlights the importance of presence it also shows that dementia ministry reaches beyond the person with a diagnosis to their family and community. Mum was deeply grieved by the lack of love dad received. Equally, the care staff at the home where he lived were touched by observing the faithful visits of the few Christians who did not forget dad. Following dad’s funeral, a staff member contacted my sister to ask to find out more about Christianity. Effective dementia ministry is intergenerational and impacts not simply individuals but communities.

Dementia ministry requires ‘Pastoral Care’, which is basically loving people. There are two traps here, we can reduce pastoral care to preaching or we can exclude preaching from pastoral care. We need to constantly come back to our model – Jesus Christ, the ultimate shepherd. Jesus, who stopped to ask - ‘who touched me’ (Lk.8), loved lepers (Mt.8 & Mk.1) and outcasts (Mt.9 & Jn.4). Is the same person who preached with passion (Mt.12, Lk.4, & Jn.14).

We all have different gifts, and some find the ‘soft’ part of pastoral care, e.g. presence and listening, easier than the ‘hard’ e.g. preaching and vice versa (e.g. Rom.12 & 1Cor.12). Irrespective of our gifting, we are all called to love (e.g. Jn.13, 1Jn.4 & 1Pt.4), pastoral care is simply expressing that love, empowered by prayer and typically via presence.

Conclusion

Dementia’s impact is hard to overstate, and we have an opportunity to respond empowered by Jesus’ love. We can pray, love and learn and thus not only see people living with dementia come into and grow in relationship with Jesus, but also see our ministry impact their family, friends and professional caregivers. Our call to share Jesus’ love is clear, the harvest field is ripe, the only question is: Will we go?

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Research Notes

Toward a Novel Approach to LGBTQ+ Christians

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Abstract

This article provides a theological and biblical defense of LGBTQ+ inclusion within Christian ethics and ecclesial life. Drawing upon hermeneutical scholarship, Christocentric theology, and historical-critical interpretation, it challenges traditional readings of biblical texts often used to condemn same-sex relationships and gender diversity. The paper argues that the essence of Christian morality—rooted in agape love, justice, and the imago Dei—compels the church to embrace LGBTQ+ persons as full participants in the body of Christ. Through a re-examination of key scriptural passages (e.g., Genesis 19, Leviticus 18, Romans 1, and 1 Corinthians 6), this study demonstrates that historical context, linguistic nuance, and cultural situatedness have been overlooked in exclusionary interpretations. The article concludes that faithful discipleship requires moving beyond legalistic literalism toward a hermeneutic of grace and inclusion that mirrors the radical hospitality of Jesus.

Keywords: LGBTQ+, theology, biblical interpretation, inclusion, Christian ethics, hermeneutics, love, justice

Introduction

The relationship between Christian faith and LGBTQ+ identity remains one of the most divisive ethical issues in contemporary theology. For centuries, non-affirming interpretations of Scripture have been used to justify exclusion, discrimination, and psychological harm. Yet, many biblical scholars and theologians argue that these interpretations reflect cultural biases rather than divine intent (Brownson, 2013; Gushee, 2017).

This article offers a systematic theological defense of LGBTQ+ inclusion grounded in Christian ethics, scriptural exegesis, and Christ-centered moral reasoning. The argument proceeds from a central claim: **the gospel of Jesus Christ calls the church to unconditional love, justice, and affirmation of all persons created in the image of God.**

The discussion unfolds in four movements: (a) the *imago Dei* and the moral equality of persons; (b) re-examining the “clobber texts” used to condemn same-sex relationships; (c) the ethical authority of Jesus’s ministry of inclusion; and (d) the ecclesial implications of an affirming theology.

The Imago Dei and the Moral Equality of Persons

Humanity as Image-Bearers of God

The doctrine of the *imago Dei* (Genesis 1:26–27) affirms that every human being reflects the divine image, irrespective of sexuality, gender, or social status. This ontological dignity is not contingent upon conformity to heteronormative categories but arises from the Creator’s act of endowment.

As theologian James Cone (1984) argues, any theology that denies the full humanity of a marginalized group becomes a theology of oppression. To deny LGBTQ+ people their divine image is to deny the creative freedom of God and the moral universality of grace.

The Ethical Implication of the Imago Dei

The *imago Dei* grounds Christian ethics in the principle of inherent worth. As McFague (1993) contends, the relational nature of the image implies mutuality and diversity—attributes reflective of divine plurality. Consequently, the diversity of human love and gender identity can be viewed not as deviation but as divine creativity.

When the church excludes LGBTQ+ believers, it contradicts the Creator’s affirmation of creation as “very good.” Inclusion, therefore, is not permissive liberalism but fidelity to the ontological reality of divine love.

Re-Examining the “Clobber Texts”

Traditional condemnations of homosexuality derive primarily from a handful of biblical passages—Genesis 19, Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13, Romans 1:26–27, and 1 Corinthians 6:9–10. A contextual and linguistic re-reading reveals that these texts address issues of exploitation, idolatry, and purity codes, not consensual, loving same-sex relationships.

Genesis 19: The Sin of Sodom

Genesis 19 is frequently cited as divine condemnation of homosexuality. However, the prophetic reinterpretation of this narrative in Ezekiel 16:49 identifies the sin of Sodom as arrogance, inhospitality, and neglect of the poor—social injustices rather than sexual orientation. As Boswell (1980) demonstrated, the Sodom narrative concerns the violent breach of hospitality norms, not mutual same-sex affection. To weaponize this story against LGBTQ+ persons is a hermeneutical distortion.

Levitical Codes and Cultural Context

The Holiness Code of Leviticus (18:22; 20:13) prohibits male same-sex acts within a ritual-purity framework designed to distinguish Israel from surrounding nations. These laws were never universal moral edicts but symbolic boundary markers. As Wright (2010) notes, Christian ethics does not selectively reapply ancient purity codes—otherwise, prohibitions against mixed fabrics or dietary rules would remain binding. The New Covenant reframes holiness not as ritual separation but as inclusive righteousness rooted in love (Romans 13:10).

Romans 1: Idolatry and Exploitation

Paul’s argument in Romans 1:26–27 has been widely misinterpreted as a blanket condemnation of same-sex relationships. In context, Paul addresses Gentile idolatry and lustful excess as evidence of humanity’s fall, not as a statement on sexual orientation (Brownson, 2013). His concern is exploitative, passion-driven behavior detached from mutual fidelity. Moreover, the Greek terms *para physin* (“against nature”) refer to actions contrary to one’s own nature, not to universal moral law (Loader, 2013). Thus, same-sex love expressed with integrity is not under Pauline indictment.

1 Corinthians 6:9 and Translation Bias

The terms *malakoi* and *arsenokoitai* in 1 Corinthians 6:9 have been mistranslated as “homosexuals.” Historical linguistics suggests *malakoi* refers to moral weakness or exploitation, while *arsenokoitai* likely denotes economic or sexual coercion (Scroggs, 1983). Modern translations influenced by post-Reformation sexual ethics impose anachronistic meanings alien to the original context.

The Christocentric Ethic of Inclusion

Jesus’s Ministry as Ethical Paradigm

Jesus consistently subverted social hierarchies, extending divine fellowship to those deemed “unclean” or sinful (Luke 15; Mark 2:15–17). His interactions with Samaritans, tax collectors, and women signify a hermeneutic of mercy over exclusion. The moral trajectory of the Gospel narrative moves from boundary enforcement to radical inclusion.

As Hays (1996) observes, ethical fidelity in the New Testament is discerned not through legalism but through *the pattern of the cross*—self-giving love that restores human dignity. When applied to sexuality and gender, this ethic mandates affirmation of relationships characterized by covenantal love, faithfulness, and justice.

The Law of Love as Hermeneutical Key

Jesus summarized the law as love of God and neighbor (Matthew 22:37–40). Paul reiterated this in Galatians 5:14: “The entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: Love your neighbor as yourself.”

If a theological position perpetuates harm, shame, or exclusion, it violates the law of love and fails the test of moral coherence. Thus, any interpretation of Scripture that results in psychological or spiritual damage to LGBTQ+ individuals cannot be deemed Christian in the fullest sense (Gushee, 2017).

The Early Church and the Evolution of Moral Insight

The book of Acts demonstrates that moral understanding in the early church evolved under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Peter's vision in Acts 10 dismantled purity boundaries to include Gentiles, establishing a precedent for expanding inclusion beyond inherited taboos. Likewise, today's inclusion of LGBTQ+ believers represents the continuation of this Spirit-led moral development.

Counterarguments and Theological Responses

The "Complementarity" Argument

Some theologians assert that sexual complementarity (male–female) reflects divine design. Yet, as scholars like Rogers (1999) argue, complementarity is relational, not anatomical. What matters ethically is the mutuality and covenantal fidelity of love, not reproductive potential. Christian marriage, viewed sacramentally, symbolizes Christ's union with the church—a metaphor of covenantal devotion, not biological pairing.

The "Authority of Scripture" Objection

Affirming theology does not reject biblical authority; it seeks faithful interpretation through historical-critical methods. The infallibility of Scripture lies in its revelation of God's redemptive intent, not in literal adherence to ancient social codes. As Augustine noted¹, interpretation must aim at the promotion of love; any reading that fosters cruelty contradicts divine will.

The "Slippery Slope" Concern

Opponents warn that affirming LGBTQ+ inclusion erodes moral boundaries. However, Christian ethics is not boundaryless permissiveness but discerning love. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons does not negate moral standards—it redefines them through Christ's ethic of compassion and fidelity rather than fear and exclusion.

¹ Augustine, *Confessions*, Book 12, Chapter 30, Paragraph 41.

The Ecclesial Imperative

Inclusion as a Test of Discipleship

The authenticity of Christian witness depends on how it treats the marginalized. Jesus declared, “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (John 13:35). Exclusion of LGBTQ+ persons from full participation in sacramental and ministerial life contradicts this command.

Pastoral Responsibility and Healing

The church’s historical complicity in LGBTQ+ suffering necessitates repentance and restorative justice. Pastoral care must affirm identity as God-given, offering spaces for spiritual healing rather than conversion or suppression (Yarhouse, 2010).

A Vision of the Inclusive Kingdom

Revelation 7:9 envisions a redeemed multitude of every tribe, tongue, and people before the throne of God—a vision of radical diversity. The inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons within this eschatological picture is not optional but essential to the fullness of God’s kingdom.

Conclusion

The defense of LGBTQ+ inclusion is not a departure from Christian orthodoxy but a return to its Christological center. Scripture, when interpreted through the lens of love and justice, affirms diversity as intrinsic to creation. The moral arc of the gospel bends toward inclusion, not exclusion.

As the church seeks fidelity to Christ’s mission, it must replace condemnation with compassion and doctrinal rigidity with relational grace. To affirm LGBTQ+ believers is to affirm the Creator whose image they bear and the Savior whose love knows no exceptions.

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Book Reviews

The Freedom Trap

Jeganathan, Priyan Max. *The Freedom Trap*. Acorn Press 2025, 107 pages.

We live in a world, a culture, where freedom is king. Where ‘should’, ‘statutory’ and ‘submission’ are more offensive than four letter words. A time of historically unprecedented choices, yet happiness remains elusive and mental health issues are increasingly prevalent – are we trapped?

The Freedom Trap (TFT) by Priyan Max Jeganathan is part of the CPX (Centre for Public Christianity) ‘Re: Considering’ suite, published by Acorn Press. Books in this suite are short, written in an easy reading style and engage with a diversity of cultural and scholarly perspectives. I have now read four of the six currently available and strongly recommend the series, as they provide depth and rigor in a brief, easily digestible format. My only concern with the suite is that their balanced cognitive emphasis means they are perhaps lacking in passion and emotion.

While TFT has 20 chapters and sub-chapters it can be divided into three sections: ‘Introduction and History of Freedom’, ‘The Trap’/‘Escaping the Freedom Trap’ and ‘Reclaiming Freedom’. Each section has at least three chapters or subchapters.

TFT has four key strengths. Firstly, TFT is highly accessible, costing only \$9, 107 pages, with short chapters and very easy reading. TFT’s second strength is its wonderful use of language, as demonstrated by the pithy, powerful summary statements, which are eminently quotable; many would make great text for a poster or T-shirt. Examples include: ‘Freedom offers choices: Choices have consequences: Consequences constrain’ (p. 29). ‘The only time we find freedom in the singular form is in the dictionary. Everywhere else, it’s about balancing differing and often competing freedoms’ (p. 31). ‘Freedom never travels alone or in the abstract’ (p. 91). Thirdly I really enjoyed the nuggets of history which enriched TFT, for example: ‘No country with a truly free media has ever experienced famine since the industrial revolution’ (p.4). ‘Our global net worth has tripled since 2000’ (p. 19). Recounting Tolstoy’s parable - ‘How much land does a man need’ (p. 21). TFT’s fourth strength was the engagement with diverse sources, from ancient civilisations, philosophers modern and ancient, to popular culture reference. These added depth, flavor and nuance.

TFT has three limitations. Firstly, while Max is clearly a Christian, TFT is a gently Christian resource rather than an overtly Christian book. As such, while it refers to Scripture it also references other resources and is closer to philosophy with a Christian edge than theology. Secondly, at times TFT was a bit ‘Australian’, for example referring to the ‘Tim Tam slam. This is explained in a footnote. Australian audiences will enjoy these references, but I am not sure how they would go globally. The final, and perhaps the greatest weakness was the introduction. This was a bit slow, and the conclusion was not as tight as the body. Perhaps this reflects the strength of the body of TFT, rather than a weakness per se?

Overall, I strongly recommend buying a copy of TFT, or even a few copies to share, particularly given the low-cost point. It will be valued by thinkers and people who want to wrestle with the presuppositions of our culture for missional purposes. It is that rare resource which brings profound depth and easy digestion together.

Ben Boland, Seniors Living Chaplain (Churches of Christ in QLD)

Wise Church Planting: Twelve Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches

Steel, Dan. *Wise Church Planting: Twelve Pitfalls to Avoid in Starting New Churches*. Christian Focus Publications Ltd, 2024, 176 pages.

Dan Steel has a background in market research but currently is serving as a pastor based in Oxford, England. Dan has been involved in church planting for the past twenty-five years. He is currently the United Kingdom minister program director for The Lanier Trust, where he engages in equipping planters and pastors for ministry (back cover). As the subtitle of the book describes, he authors this book to help church plants avoid the common mistakes that sabotage their long-term success (12).

In the introduction, the author gives his impetus for this manuscript as he recounts research that says one-third of new church plants fail within four years (13). With this as motivation, he identifies twelve major pitfalls new church plants experience if not equipped to avoid them. These twelve pitfalls are divided into two major categories: internal and external.

The internal pitfalls have to do with character more than giftedness and ability. Through personal experience, Steel guides church leaders through the qualifications of a pastor in 1 Tim. 3:1-7. He points out that only one qualification has to do with ability. All the other qualifications have to do with the heart (28).

A major pitfall is allowing pride to slip in and take over which is demonstrated by trying to go alone without building a team of others around for support. This action then leads to feelings of isolation. Saying 'yes' to everything and trying to do too much can lead a pastor to burnout (35-37). The lack of humility can lead to other pitfalls. A pastor must take an honest self-evaluation and know their own giftedness and weaknesses. The body of Christ is not one member doing everything. It is many members doing what they are equipped and called to do (Rom. 12:3-8, 1 Cor. 12:12-27). Other internal pitfalls include marriage and family strain (about 25 percent of church planters) and misplaced priorities (69).

The external pitfalls begin with the culture of unrealistic expectations. Church planters can be overachievers and church senders often expect more than can be delivered which leads to frustration and discouragement. The lack of strategy and intentionality or trying to duplicate what another church plant is doing leads to other misplaced feelings (103). External pitfalls can exist in the relationship between the planting church and the parent church if the expectations are not clearly identified and communicated. Church planters are urged to be patient, humble and ready to listen to the wisdom provided by the parent church (118-119). As the book concludes, the author reminds the reader that there will always be opposition. This can come from within and certainly from the enemy. The need for a personal and healthy relationship with Christ cannot be overstated.

This book is a great tool for church planters to prayerfully consider and apply these principles before and during the church planting process. Ministry pitfalls can be like walking through a labyrinth of landmines, but Steel has provided a map to help avoid these pitfalls and navigate to areas of success. Intertwined with relevant examples and personal stories, this book is easy to read and gives basic considerations that any church ministry can apply.

James Mashburn, Professor, Liberty University

Faithful futures: Sacred tools for engaging younger generations

Packard, J. *Faithful futures: Sacred tools for engaging younger generations*.

Baker Academic, 2024, 208 pages.

As a writer and a researcher in the field of youth and youth ministry, and a sociologist, I have to be honest. It is not often that I find a book on youth ministry that resonates with me. I find so many that make big claims without support from research – which is problematic because it means such authors claim their own opinion or experiences are universal. Or, youth ministry books do not account for much in the way of the bigger issues and contexts that young people face. They do not account for sociology.

Hence, I was so refreshed to read *Faithful Futures*. In fact, from the moment I finished the introduction, I knew I was going to like this book. Packard is also a sociologist, a researcher, and passionate about the faith formation of young people. But this is not the only reason why I recommend the book. Early on, Packard says “Most of us go back to our own teenage years to try and understand today’s teenagers. ... The experiences of Gen Z and Alpha are so different from our own that our mental models and maps are essentially useless.” (P. 3). Packard highlights the challenge that I found in some of my own research: relying on our own experiences to design youth ministry is flawed – because we are not the young people we serve.

The book discusses the unique challenges that “Gen Z” and “Gen Alpha” face, and their unique contexts that have shaped the ways these groups of young people might express and experience faith and faith communities. Chapter two argues for faith as a dialogical conversation, rather than a one-way ‘banking’. Those who are familiar with Paulo Friere will instantly relate with what Packard is saying. Chapter three describes how cultures are changing as people disaffiliate because of decreasing trust in institutions generally – not just the church. Chapter four discusses how belonging must occur before belief, a fact which has been deeply impacted by a world impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and online pseudo-communities with minimal in-person communities. Packard handles all of these big issues beautifully, describing the impact of the issue without demonising young people or the things they love.

Faithful Futures is written from an American context. It makes sense then, that some of the statistics and research presented only focuses on American contexts. At times this might make readers feel like it is not relevant to a non-American context, however, the changes that Packard describes appear to be happening in many places – just with slightly different numbers. I recommend that readers not let this discourage them from reading or continuing with the book, because at the end of every chapter, Packard offers simple, but also innovative and incredibly practical tools that can be immediately implemented in any youth ministry.

To anyone involved in youth ministry – or anyone who knows someone involved in youth ministry – I would enthusiastically recommend this book to them.

Timothy A. Mullen, Lecturer (Acknowledge Education) and Editor (Journal of Contemporary Ministry)

Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did

**Comer, John Mark. *Practicing the Way: Be with Jesus; Become like him; Do as he did.*
WaterBrook, 2024, 255 pages.**

When I saw the book title, I thought that it would be an answer to the “How to” question that has lingered over my walk with Jesus for most of the fifty years that I have followed Him. And I can gratefully acknowledge that the book has given me great guidance to that end, without actually laying out a prescribed course to follow. For this I am thankful, as it allows me to find a purpose and strength in my particular walk that a more definitive answer would clutter, leaving me flat and exhausted at the tedium that could result.

The starting point for Comer is the proposition of Jesus to the first disciples to “come, follow me...” He goes on to explicate this through the Way of being with Jesus, becoming like Him, and doing as He did. An interesting stepping stone of the book is to place Jesus in the context of first century Hebrew Rabbis and how the phrase “come follow me” fitted into the cultural milieu of the time. We are also shown how the word “disciple” has a modern affinity with the notion of an apprentice and how apprenticeship with Jesus leads to a more fulfilled life, both emotionally and spiritually.

The pivotal point of the book is to determine the “how to?” question I alluded to earlier. However, the answer is more nuanced than that, and the practices of the ancients are explained via both biblical text and the example of Jesus leading His disciples. Comer suggests ways to incorporate these practices into the reader’s life without being prescriptive about how they must be done. He is rigorous in allowing the reader to apprentice to Jesus and for this I give him great credit. By both anecdote and example, Comer takes the reader into the means by which the practices can be given a new and creative life in the modern believer’s walk with Jesus.

The practices of the ancients that are central to the book are: Sabbath keeping, solitude, prayer, community, Scripture, fasting, generosity, service and witness. The author acknowledges that each apprentice/disciple will be drawn to particular practices and find some hard, so he is not dogmatic in how they are to fit into a person’s lifestyle. I found this approach encouraging as it has allowed me freedom to design a suitable personal life practice.

I believe the book is transformational. Comer shows that the apprentice/disciple must be intentional in all aspects of their lives to be more like Jesus rather than conforming to the world around them. The journey to be an apprentice of Jesus is lifelong and full of ups and downs. To this end, the greatest strength of the book is that it is best applied in community. I am engaging with the book through an online club of nine, one of whom is also studying the book with his church fellowship. It is a great help to have friends and colleagues looking on, to remove the inertia that often strikes when seeking to develop new thought and habit patterns which the book inherently encourages.

One of the special peculiarities of the book is the author’s acknowledgement that The Way is not for everyone, and indeed he refers to biblical examples of some who did not take up Jesus’ offer to follow him. As Comer says (p. 204) the point of following a master/rabbi is that they will disrupt the lives of their followers and that involves surrender to their agenda. We all follow something, and Jesus offers a better way as shown in the book.

I have also read Bonhoeffer’s “The Cost of Discipleship”, Yancey’s “What’s so Amazing about Grace”, and Brother Lawrence’s “The Practice of the Presence of God” over the past eighteen

months. I believe that “Practicing the Way” is as insightful to the life of a follower of Jesus as those others. I am thankful for Comer’s endeavour to write a story of the love of Jesus for a modern apprentice/disciple who often messes up but seeks a better and more fruitful life.

The author has taken quite a wide view of the literature on building a life of following Jesus without being theologically dense. I believe the book is worth the effort to read and will assist the reader to follow the path of apprenticing to Jesus. It would be suitable for most people who are keen on living a better life for Jesus, both individually and as a church body. Additional resources are available at practicingtheway.org free of charge. I found these particularly helpful for group study.

Practicing the Way would be useful for any church or ministry that wanted a resource to help groups of people grow as disciples of Jesus.

Lloyd Hunt C.A., B. Min, Malyon College QLD

Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling: Leadership in a Changing World

Roxburgh, Alan J and Roy Searle, *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling: Leadership in a Changing World*. Cascade Books, 2025, 310 pages.

Has the church in the West been humiliated? What shouldn't we do about it?

This confronting book is a must-read for those who care deeply about the current state of Christian churches in the West. This includes denominational leaders who may be tempted to devise new strategies, deploy resources, or manage their way out of the “Great Unravelling” that characterises our contemporary moment.

Roxburgh and Searle argue that the Western church has undergone a profound humiliation over the past 75 years. Once a visible centre of community life, the church has been displaced by the rise of radical individualism, consumerism, and the subtle but decisive shift of trust from institutions to personal preference. The result is a kind of Babylonian Exile in our own neighbourhoods. Even well-trained clergy find themselves unable to “sing the Lord’s song in a strange land.” Local churches have not experienced such disorientation in living memory. What now?

The authors take up this question not as detached commentators but as leaders formed by decades of ministry on the ground and supporting a new generation of Christian leaders. Their central conviction is clear: the usual responses—new strategies, growth techniques, managerial leadership models—are not only inadequate but often counterproductive. Attempts to attract more like-minded consumers or tightly manage congregational life risk deepening the very anxieties they aim to cure. These models can set ministers and congregations up for disappointment, burnout, and a harmful sense of failure.

Three Postures for a Different Kind of Leadership

Roxburgh and Searle believe that Jeremiah 29, Luke 10, the early Celtic Church, and the Benedictines, can inform and inspire a different approach for us today. Instead of strategic management, they commend three interwoven postures: **Dwell**, **Discern**, and **Discover**.

Dwell invites leaders to slow down, to embed themselves within the actual life of their neighbourhoods and congregations, and to resist the compulsions of urgency and control. Dwelling cultivates presence—attentive, patient, relational presence—which the authors see as the only soil in which genuine communal imagination can regrow.

Discern shifts leadership from problem-solving to prayerful attentiveness. Rather than diagnosing decline and prescribing solutions, leaders learn to listen: to Scripture, to the tradition, to the cries and hopes of their communities, and to what the Spirit might be saying through the disruptions of the age. Discernment reframes decline as a moment of invitation rather than catastrophe.

Discover names the surprising emergence of small, often fragile experiments of hope that arise when communities learn to dwell and discern together. These are rarely dramatic or programmatic. Instead, they are relational sparks: shared meals, neighbourhood partnerships, new spaces of belonging, and the quiet formation of a people learning to live faithfully in dislocated times.

A Call to Let Go... and to Begin Again

This book does not offer simple church growth style solutions, but a confronting summons. It calls readers to relinquish illusions of control, to grieve the loss of cultural privilege, and to rediscover the church not as an organisation to be managed but as a community formed by God's living presence in a changing world. It invites us to trust God's agency and to join in with what God is already doing.

Roxburgh and Searle write with pastoral compassion, but also a prophetic intensity. Their analysis of humiliation is not despairing but hopeful; it exposes the futility of managerial responses while opening the possibility of a renewed, humbler, more relational imagination for ministry.

In many ways, this book resonates with the work of Western missiologists such as Michael Frost and Lesslie Newbigin, as well as sociologist Robert Putnam—particularly in *The Upswing*. Like these writers, Roxburgh and Searle combine rigorous analysis of our cultural moment with a hopeful, if costly, vision for renewal. Written in the post-Covid context, the book recognises how many earlier missiological and sociological intuitions about the church's declining role in community life have been dramatically accelerated. Roxburgh and Searle take up this challenge with clarity and depth.

For those seeking quick strategies, this book will frustrate. For those willing to be re-formed, it may prove liberating. At a time when many leaders feel overwhelmed by expectations and anxious about decline, *Forming Communities of Hope in the Great Unraveling* offers a deeply needed invitation: to slow down, to listen, and to rediscover the God who is already at work in the neighbourhoods we too often overlook.

This is an important and timely contribution to contemporary ministry. I commend it to anyone who loves the church enough to let it be transformed.

Ash Barker, International Director of 'Seedbeds' and Minister at Lodge Road Community Church UK

Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia

Boland, Ben. *Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia*. Christian Focus Publications, 2025, 119 pages.

I'm convinced that youth ministry is the most strategic investment that our churches can make. However, in *Priceless People: Loving Older People & People Living with Dementia*, Ben Boland makes an argument for ministry to focus on people who are much older. The case is certainly strong: in the western world, the proportion of small churches populated by older people is growing strongly. Given that people are living much longer, it is crucial that appropriate care and attention is shown to those older. If we abandon these beloved people made in the image of God, we miss a massive mission field and opportunity to share God's love. If we do not engage them in God's mission too, we might lose an entire generation of potential missionaries perfectly positioned for their older context. Although Boland's downplaying of ministering to children in Scripture is not convincing, his related point about the comparative lack of investment in ministry to elderly people is well made.

Boland's focus in *Priceless People* is not just on those older, but on those suffering with dementia. He notes that although there is much overlap, not all those with dementia are old, nor do all those who are aged have dementia. However, there is much common ground between the two groups, and Boland deals with them both well. He is a passionate advocate for these groups, and his love for them comes through page after page. Overall, his approach is one of prayer, presence and pastoral care.

Although Boland writes with a warm and inviting tone, gently encouraging readers to expand their ministry to those older, much of the book is quite provocative. At times it takes on a prophetic edge, challenging our assumptions and practices. He pushes back on the lament often heard after the loss of a dementia-sufferer: "I lost mum twice: Once to dementia, once to death." Boland's correction here is that while this is understandable from the experience of the relatives, it implicitly denies the humanity and value of those still alive with dementia.

Throughout many of the chapters are two interwoven themes. Firstly is the need for ministry to older folk and those with dementia. Boland does a masterful job of addressing misconceptions as to why this is needed. In chapter four, for example, he addresses the myth of people with dementia not being able to become Christians. I enjoyed how he pushed back against the common Christian habit of seeing our relationship with God as being information about God, rather than relationship with God. Even people with dementia, he shows, are still able to have a form of trusting relationship with God.

Secondly, *Priceless People* is packed with nuggets of practical wisdom for caring. He explains that many of the elderly are desperate for visits and conversation, but these do not need to be long, and brief is often much better. He talks about real issues of safety, suicide, mental health, elder abuse, and dress codes. The suggestions for preaching to people with limited attention spans may well have usefulness far beyond the book's key target.

The book is quite short, only 119 pages of quite large font. It is easy to read and packed with thoughtful insights. The obvious target audience is chaplains, ministers and family members who engage with older people and those with dementia. However, there would be few in ministry, or few with a heart and access to older people, who would not benefit from the practical encouragement here.

**Stephen Parker, Associate Academic Dean (Coursework),
Australian College of Ministries**

The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus

Beilharz. Tim. *The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus*. Youthworks Media, 2025, 138 pages.

Children's ministry is an almost ubiquitous feature of the modern church, and there are a plethora of books about the how of children's ministry. So, is *The Child in God's Church: Faith-formative relationships that grow disciples who know, love and obey King Jesus* (TCiGC) worth reading, let alone purchasing? YES. Because it is primarily focused on the why - the theology of Children's ministry. For me at least, the why underpins the how, so TCiGC is essential reading.

Additionally, Beilharz is an Australian, has served in children's ministry for twenty-five years in the church and twelve years at Youthworks college. TCiGC clearly brings this experience and expertise to bear in building a theology of children's ministry. In a nutshell, Beilharz believes Children are a critical part of the church and that discipling them and allowing them to serve is critical for the church. This position is built through engagement with Scripture, church history and psychology. Even if Children's ministry is not your focus, I strongly recommend reading TCiGC, to facilitate thinking deeply but simply about the church, children and ministry.

Theologically, Beilharz is a Reformed Evangelical, of the Sydney Anglican tradition, however his gracious tone makes it applicable across the church. He provides clear and strong evidence for his positions, so even if at times you disagree with him, as I did, it is easy to examine the evidence and thus have one's thinking sharpened. This is one of the real strengths of TCiGC, not simply the conclusions, but the opportunity to wrestle. Such engagement is helped by the easy reading style, relatively short length and price.

Structurally, the book has two parts 'The Foundations of Children's Ministry: Theological and Theoretical Principles for Discipling Children' and 'The Structure of Children's Ministry: Spheres of Discipleship for Child Faith Formation'. Both are an accurate description of their contents with part one being more theological while part two is more application-focused. While I got more from part one, that is probably a reflection of my interest.

Specifically, I was sharpened by the theology of the church, Christian faith and faith formation (chapters two to four in part one). Beilharz's engagement with Christianity as both individual/corporate endeavour and cognitive/affective faith was profound.

In terms of weaknesses, TCiGC's engagement with psychology may shorten its lifespan as psychology evolves. Theologically, there were times where Beilharz referenced rather than wrestled with Sydney Anglican doctrine, however critiquing everything would have reduced readability in terms of additional depth and length.

If you are involved in children's ministry I would suggest TCiGC is essential reading and deserves a key place in your library. If you are leading a church, or are in ministry more generally, I strongly recommend reading it. I would also recommend it to Christians more generally as an easy way to wrestle with some key Christian doctrines.

Ben Boland, Seniors Living Chaplain (Churches of Christ in QLD)

Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission

Holdsworth, Sue M. *Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission*. Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2024, 176 pages.

Sue M. Holdsworth's *Learning to Love: Utilizing the Principles and Practices of Pastoral Care for Mission* offers a timely and theologically rich exploration of how the contemporary church might faithfully and lovingly respond to migrant communities. Writing against the backdrop of heightened racial tensions in Australia and around the globe, Holdsworth reframes mission not as institutional expansion or evangelistic strategy, but as discerning where the Spirit of God is already at work and humbly joining in (p. 14). This Spirit-led posture forms the central thesis of the book: pastoral care is not separate to mission but is itself an authentic and indispensable expression of mission (p. 81).

Drawing from her PhD research, Holdsworth presents longitudinal case studies of four churches engaged in intercultural initiatives among migrant communities in the city of Melbourne, Australia. In her study, Holdsworth intentionally explores the disciplines of pastoral care, mission, spiritual formation, and ministry supervision to ascertain the most effective evidence-informed practices. English conversation classes, a sewing club and childcare services are all offered. Three initiatives were run by volunteers, and the other, employees. Each initiative had different practices concerning the role of prayer, planning and purpose. All these aspects influenced outcomes.

Holdsworth asserts that genuine Christian mission and true welcome must be rooted in love, hospitality, and relational presence rather than performance-driven evangelism. Holdsworth states, "loving others well, through practices of pastoral care, results in emotionally nonviolent mission in which care is offered on others' terms" (p. 7). Leadership also significantly shaped outcomes. Where leaders embodied humility and intercultural openness, volunteers tended to demonstrate greater empathy and adaptability. Migrant responses likewise varied, but the research indicates that authenticity and care without hidden agendas fostered deeper trust and receptivity.

Learning to Love is well written and structured clearly. It provides helpful markers to navigate the study, resulting themes, and practical suggestions for best practice. The reflection and discussion questions included throughout the book are a notable strength. Part One delivers the mechanics of the research, describing the case study design and Holdsworth's careful engagement with qualitative methods, which includes interviews, participant observation and document searches. It provides a theologically rich undergirding of the research through the stories of The Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), The Woman at the Well (John 4:4-42) and Jesus Washing the Disciples' Feet (John 13:1-17), each exploring the link to the major emerging themes.

Part Two offers a deeper explanation of the findings. Chapter six explores the functions of pastoral care, highlighting its roles in support, advocacy, relationship-building, and spiritual accompaniment. Chapter seven further strengthens the book's contribution by applying Lartey's intercultural pastoral care framework to real case studies. Holdsworth skilfully analyses how volunteers engaged with migrants, revealing practical ways they grew in empathy, hospitality, and cultural awareness. These case studies offer concrete examples of how theory translates into lived ministry. Chapters eight to ten consider motivations for and delivery of service, along with necessary skills for intercultural relating, concluding with practical recommendations for effective practice.

One of the book's major strengths is its thoughtful engagement with intercultural connection. Through careful coding of qualitative data, Holdsworth develops an intercultural pastoral care framework that provides both theological depth and practical guidance (p. 77). *Learning to Love* sensitively challenges readers to reflect on what truly motivates Christian service, encouraging more welcoming, empathetic, and culturally aware approaches that honour dignity and mutuality.

Importantly, the book also offers a critical challenge to colonial models of evangelism, questioning their relevance and effectiveness in today's multicultural context (p. 75). The research does not idealise church efforts; instead, it critically evaluates varying attitudes toward mission, differing understandings of evangelism, and the measurable impact of these approaches within contemporary society.

Holdsworth's approach is deeply Christ-centred and grounded in the heart of the Gospel. The emphasis is not on the church fulfilling its own goals, but on genuinely loving migrants through creating safe spaces, offering authentic welcome, and providing service without an agenda of evangelism. This position reflects a theology of mission rooted in love, presence, and care rather than performance or conversion outcomes. The book carefully explores what it means to love as Christ calls His people to love, particularly in intercultural contexts where past experiences of evangelism may have caused harm or mistrust.

Overall, *Learning to Love* is a valuable resource for pastors, ministry leaders, and church communities seeking to engage migrants with wisdom, sensitivity, and faithfulness. The research offers theologically grounded and practically applicable insights to develop effective intercultural initiatives, cultivate healthy congregational attitudes towards migrants, and engage in contextually sensitive and impactful evangelism for contemporary society. In a cultural moment where fear and division often dominate public discourse, Holdsworth offers a compelling vision of mission shaped by love, presence, and the Spirit's leading.

Sarah Oliva MTS

Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered

Noland, Rory. *Transforming Worship: Planning and Leading Sunday Services as if Spiritual Formation Mattered*. InterVarsity Press, 2021, 205 pages.

Noland returns to us as a trusted voice in his fifth book on Christian worship. He does not disappoint. With a doctorate in worship studies and years of church ministry experience, the founder and director of *Heart of the Artist Ministries* writes with academic rigour and pastoral insight. Ruth Hayley Barton's opening endorsement whets our appetite for what to expect from Noland, as he "casts a vision for transforming worship as a vital spiritual discipline that can move us beyond nominal Christianity" (p. 5). And suddenly, as readers, we find ourselves facing a potentially controversial question: Is corporate worship meant to be transformative?

To answer this, Noland appeals to the modern church to retrieve its biblical framework for "gathered worship as a formative spiritual practice" (13), which, from the outset, seems a difficult goal to measure. Yet, as he demonstrates how the church throughout history has fostered spiritual formation, he justifies his petition and leaves us challenged, effectively planting seeds of practical ideas that can begin to sprout at the local church level. In this way, *Transforming Worship* is a user-friendly handbook for pastors and practical theologians, and, as Noland recommends, a "GPS for those who plan and lead worship services" (9). Be aware, though, Noland writes persuasively, and as he invites us into his enthusiasm on the subject, his book lands well with his intended audience: there is work to be done in the church. Don't be surprised if you catch his vision.

Personally, in my own research, speaking, and teaching, I have already found Noland's text a valuable resource that challenges me to think more deeply about how corporate worship shapes God's people into the image of Christ. For example, his suggestion to "cultivate a *lectio* community" has motivated me to ask my listeners in the next message to focus on a specific word or phrase from the spoken Scripture, and to "receive it as a personal message from the Lord" (124). In this way, his book is theologically rich and well-grounded in Christian traditions. Among similar contemporary worship resources (Kauflin, *Worship Matters*, 2008; Cherry, *The Worship Architect*, 2010; Hicks, *The Worship Pastor*, 2016), Noland's book uniquely links worship (not just singing) with spiritual formation and church service planning, offering both historical insight and practical application in one volume.

Noland divides his book into two main sections (Foundations and Elements of Transforming Worship) and includes four appendices and endnotes for further reading, including the Checklist for Transforming Worship Services, which would be helpful during service-planning meetings. He swiftly builds trust with his readers in the introduction by stating that he is "not advancing a new, trend-setting philosophy of worship" (13), and substantiates this in chapter one by tracing the origins of spiritually formative Christian worship practices back to Sinai (Ex. 20-24). Chapters two to five then advocate for the recovery of ancient worship patterns, drawing on the Emmaus encounter (Gathering, Word, Table, Sending, 32) and early church models for believers and unbelievers, reclaiming Sunday morning as the church's primary formative event and restoring a sense of the sacred in modern worship.

In part two, chapters six to ten provide a historical and theological overview of five routines and rituals (elements) of the church: prayer, Scripture reading, confession, the Lord's Supper, and

baptism. Drawing on ancient manuscripts (*The Didache*, *The Apostolic Tradition*) and the writings of early church apologists and patristic authors, Noland amplifies their voices with insights from contemporary scholars to argue for the retrieval of these practices for spiritual formation today. His argument is compelling, and the message is hard to ignore. As Noland laments, “In recent decades, the church has failed to make spiritual formation a priority, and the results have been devastating” (13), we are left to ponder how this book might be a gift of grace to our own churches and congregations.

Still, not everyone may share Noland’s enthusiasm when he exclaims, “I can’t believe we get to do this!” (175). As he reflects on planning worship services within a team, the book may leave those without opportunities to collaborate feeling frustrated. Strategies for fostering creativity in places resistant to change could be helpful in this regard. The limited presence of female scholarship in the book is concerning and underscores the need for more gender-balanced, inclusive perspectives. More illustrations and in-text citations would also facilitate easier referencing, though these improvements could easily be addressed in future editions.

At its core, *Transforming Worship* is an insightful and worthwhile compendium for planning worship services with a focus on spiritual formation. Therefore, Noland’s lament does not leave us stranded without hope. With realistic strategies and practical applications, from prayer to baptism and everything in between, the ancient practices of the church, from their roots, can still bear spiritually formative fruit – making this book well worth the read.

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