

**UNDERSTANDING PENTECOSTAL CONVERSION:
AN EMPIRICAL STUDY**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis argues that a Pentecostal theology of conversion can be best understood in terms of the biblical concept of *shalom*. The thesis contributes towards a holistic practical-theological model, which presents conversion in terms of the work of, and response to, God's *shalom* in three key dimensions: regeneration, identity and destiny.

This study responds to two main motivators: (1) an identified lack of an existing Pentecostal theology of conversion. This is a significant gap in the movement's theology, particularly in the UK where Pentecostalism continues to buck the trend of church decline; and (2) a recognised stereotype of Pentecostal-charismatic conversion experiences in various disciplines according to an "event" motif, despite the field of conversion studies moving towards a more process-oriented, whole-life approach.

The aim of the thesis was to identify and critically analyse the conversion experiences and theology of ordinary believers within their congregational context and in dialogue with ecclesial and academic discourse. Intra-disciplinary methods were used, with Lewis Rambo's stage-model of religious conversion providing the framework for data collection. Material was gathered and analysed from a case study of an Elim Pentecostal congregation, utilising qualitative methods: participant observation, literature analysis, and life-story interviews.

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CHAPTER ONE

AN INTRODUCTION TO PENTECOSTAL CONVERSION

1.1 Understanding Pentecostal Conversion: uneasy beginnings¹

When I was sixteen years old, my friend Sarah converted to Christianity after attending an Alpha Course at a local Pentecostal church.² I had been raised in the Baptist tradition, with little personal experience of the Holy Spirit and Sarah's stories about her church were my first introduction to Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity. It was not Christianity as I knew it. 'Pentecostal' was a word I had only heard (and used) at the time as a derogatory term to denote loud worship, emotional altar calls, and vocal responses during sermons. Sarah told me stories about the congregation speaking in tongues, healing and prophesying, as well as teaching a strictly literal interpretation of the Bible. This led me to view it as a mystical and unscholarly faith. Combined with a wider distrust of Pentecostalism from within my context I felt hostile, believing the congregation to be at best strange and at worst manipulative. At the age of sixteen and with no wider knowledge of the movement, I concluded that Pentecostalism was a strange and insignificant sect of Christianity, with a great deal of charisma but little theological substance.

I have since recognised Pentecostalism to be the fastest growing Christian movement in the world and in the UK it repeatedly bucks the trend of church decline.³ Far from a 'small sect' of Christianity, Pentecostalism can be seen to be injecting life into the church in the UK on a scale unparalleled by any other group. Of significance is that the movement's growth is

¹ It is common practice within empirical studies involving human participants for the researcher to reflect upon their relationship to the group being studied and their motivations for the research. My experiences with Pentecostalism over a decade ago provide my motivation for conducting this study and therefore I consider my personal story to be the ideal place from which to begin this thesis.

² Sarah is a pseudonym given to protect anonymity. The congregation, all respondents and non-scholarly individuals mentioned in this thesis have all been given pseudonyms and any personally identifiable information has been removed.

³ See Chapter Five for a full discussion of the impact of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity in the UK.

largely dependent on conversion rather than birth-rates. This information, particularly its seemingly global appeal and attraction to converts, deepened my interest in Pentecostalism. Global Pentecostalism is winning converts at such a rate that in the little over a century of its existence, Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is now believed to make up over a quarter of the world's Christian population.⁴ I began to see Pentecostalism, not as a strange and insignificant sect, as I had originally thought, but as the increasingly likely future of Christianity which, as such, demanded attention.

I currently belong to a charismatic Anglican church, which has highlighted for me the importance of looking past the assumptions commonly made about Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity to present 'real' Pentecostals and their reflections upon their experiences from within their context. As this study will highlight, in many studies of Pentecostal conversion, from multiple disciplines, researchers often fail to look beyond the crusades and the altar calls, as I did as a teenager.⁵ In this thesis I aim to pull back the outward appearance of the conversion experience and discover Pentecostalism as a faith, which permeates the believer's whole life beyond the initial moment of decision.

I achieved this by conducting a three-year, empirical case study of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship (LCF), an Elim Pentecostal church in Birmingham, UK: attending church services, collecting congregational literature and interviewing believers.⁶ The aims and findings of this

⁴ Stewart, A. "A Brief Introduction" in *Handbook of Pentecostal Christianity*, ed. by Stewart, A. (DeKalb, IL: Northern Illinois University Press, 2012) 3-8 (p.3). Stewart estimates that there are 500 million Pentecostals in the world today, which makes up for one in four Christians. However is extremely difficult to exactly quantify this due to the diverse nature of Pentecostal expressions of Christianity. However, the fact remains that Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity is having a huge influence on Christianity the world over.

⁵ See chapter three for examples of this within the human sciences studies of Pentecostal and Charismatic conversion, which is still viewed by some in terms of being an NRM or revivalist movement.

⁶ The Lighthouse Christian Fellowship is a pseudonym given to protect the identity of the congregation. All respondents and references to the church website have also been given pseudonyms throughout the study. I chose an Elim congregation because the movement represents an expression of Pentecostalism which has its roots in the United Kingdom (see Chapter Five, section 5.3) and Ireland and therefore its history and theology can be easily located within the UK context of the congregation being studied. Furthermore, I wanted to choose a congregation which I could relate to as a British researcher. The congregation itself is made up of over 45

thesis represent the culmination and development of my questioning more than a decade after my sixteen year old self first asked the question “why did Sarah convert to Pentecostalism?”

1.2 Starting with experience

Before I outline the aims and objectives of this study I argue that, as this study aims to contribute to a Pentecostal theology of conversion, it must necessarily begin with an understanding of the importance of experience in the development of Pentecostal theology.

Pentecostalism has been defined from its early days by its focus on experience and although this identification with experience has been seen as a weakness of the movement by some, its central role is undeniable.⁷ The two key features of Pentecostalism have been identified as: experience and the Spirit.⁸ Neumann summarises Cox’s expansion on the presence of these features in early Pentecostalism by explaining that ‘early Pentecostals always identified the Spirit as the eschatological Spirit of the biblical narrative, bringing hope for the future and liberation in the present’ and that experience of God was always understood to be encounter with this same Spirit.⁹ Neumann concludes that experience of the Spirit plays a central role in Pentecostal self-identity and, as such, ‘experience does (and should) occupy a fundamental role in Pentecostal theological construction’.¹⁰ Amos Yong supports this view of experience informing theology by arguing that for Pentecostals, ‘theology emerges out of the experiential

different nationalities and this represents multi-cultural urban England well. However, much of the development of its theology and particularly the church’s own practices and teachings are in response to the religious context of the UK historically and today.

⁷ Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012) p.6

⁸ Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience*, p.5; Neumann here is presenting Harvey Cox’s definition of Pentecostalism according to these two key features.

⁹ Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience*, p.5-6

¹⁰ Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience*, p.7

engagement with the Holy Spirit'.¹¹ Therefore, in this study, my development of a practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion necessarily engages with the two fundamental features of experience and the Spirit.

Pentecostal experience of the Spirit is interpreted to be more than just a “religious experience” and instead is very closely linked to the events recorded in the Bible, particularly in the book of Acts.¹² As such ‘Pentecostal experience’ can sometimes be confused with the first ‘experience of Pentecost’ recorded in Acts chapter 2. While Pentecostals certainly understand their experiences of the Spirit as being tied to the Holy Spirit of Scripture, and consider their experience to be a continuation of the biblical narrative, this cannot be interpreted only with regard to the typically ‘Pentecostal’ passages but to the whole of Scripture.¹³ The experiences of Pentecostals today are interpreted and shaped in light of the experiences of the early church, but the present day experience, as well as the biblical narrative, also impacts and informs the development of theology.

Stephenson aims to represent this balance in his proposed approach to Pentecostal theology, which he calls *regula spiritualitatis*, *regula doctrinae* (the rule of spirituality and the rule of doctrine). This concept represents the mutually informing movement back and forth between experience (spirituality) and the consciously formulated and systematic teaching of the community (doctrine). Rather than one predominantly informing and dictating the shape of the other, Stephenson argues that in Pentecostalism there should be a recognised balance

¹¹ Yong, A. “‘Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows...’: On Envisioning a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions, *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 7(14) (1999) 81-112 (p.93)

¹² See Chapter Four, section 4.2.1 for a discussion of the biblical narrative as a context within which Pentecostals participate and find meaning for their experience.

¹³ Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience*, p.331-2

between the two, ‘making implicit beliefs explicit and establishing coherence between beliefs and practices’.¹⁴

In this thesis I engage with the key features of experience and the Spirit in Pentecostal conversion in the following ways:

1. My findings are built on a foundation of empirical research into the lived conversion experiences of individual Pentecostals. Empirical data is crucial in a study of Pentecostal spirituality due to the ‘bodily character’ of Pentecostal experience.¹⁵
2. I pay particular attention to the perceived role of the Spirit in these experiences by specifically asking respondents for their reflections on the Spirit and identifying pneumatological emphases in the theological literature and congregational teaching.
3. I develop a practical-theological model, framing Pentecostal conversion in light of the biblical concept of *shalom*, and uniquely exploring the Spirit’s role within this construct.

Many significant steps forward in theological formation are being taken by scholars from within the movement itself. While this study is undertaken by a relative outsider to the Pentecostal tradition, this thesis continues in the same spirit as Neumann, Yong and Stephenson, believing that a theology of Pentecostal conversion should include (in the very least) engagement with Pentecostal experience and so this study is built upon Pentecostal voices and experiences.

¹⁴ Stephenson, C.A. (2013) *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.118-9.

¹⁵ Yong, A. “‘Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows’”, p.103

1.3 Statement of the problem

Despite Pentecostalism's historical and continued success in the mission field,¹⁶ there is as yet no comprehensive Pentecostal theology of conversion. Regardless, I argue that conversion is the single most discussed and debated aspect of Pentecostal theology. Conversion is seen to be that which makes someone a Christian, Spirit baptism does not occur without it,¹⁷ Jesus commanded that believers make new converts,¹⁸ it is believed to bring justification and the Spirit, and is the way in to relationship with God.¹⁹ Conversion impacts discussion within the sub-disciplines of Christology, pneumatology, eschatology, ecclesiology, soteriology and biblical studies. Unfortunately these discussions take place with very little inter-disciplinary dialogue and as a result the many ongoing discussions regarding conversion have not yet been drawn together to form a distinctly Pentecostal theology of conversion.

Furthermore, despite the movement's focus on theology resulting from personal encounter with God and experience, there are few theological studies of conversion from the perspective of ordinary believers' experiences. Such empirical research into conversion has primarily been undertaken by, and from the perspective of the human sciences.²⁰ While fascinating progress has been made, these disciplines tend to overlook the role that God is perceived to play by converts. This cannot be ignored as converts to Christianity believe that there *is* a God and that the point of their conversion is to enter into relationship with him. Also, the human sciences seem to perpetuate the image of Pentecostal conversion as a dramatic,

¹⁶ This is in terms of the numbers of conversions and the rapid numerical growth during the relatively brief lifespan of the movement.

¹⁷ Regardless of whether Pentecostals take a two- or three- stage approach to conversion, sanctification and Spirit Baptism, conversion is always seen to be the starting point.

¹⁸ Matthew 28:16-20

¹⁹ See Chapter Four for a discussion of the theology associated with conversion in Pentecostal-Charismatic scholarship.

²⁰ Taken here to mean sociology, psychology, anthropology and their respective sub-disciplines.

emotional even mystical moment or event, but this study seeks to question whether the reputation matches the reality.

Therefore this study begins from the premise that conversion and experience are central aspects of Pentecostal theology. It is through studying the experiences and theological reflections of ordinary believers that a uniquely Pentecostal theology of conversion can begin to develop. I do not claim to provide *the* Pentecostal theology of conversion but rather *a* Pentecostal theology of conversion. This study starts the conversation from the foundation of conversion experiences and theological reflection at ground level, by proposing a practical-theological model based on one congregation's theology of conversion in light of the wider academic discussion.

1.4 Research aim and objectives

The aim of this study is *to identify and critically analyse a theology of Pentecostal conversion, through an empirical study of the experiences and beliefs of an Elim Pentecostal congregation*. The desired outcome is a practical-theological model to represent and explain the conversion theology and experiences of the congregation, as a contribution to and in dialogue with the broader context of Pentecostal theology. This aim leads me to the following more specific research questions:

What is believed to happen to the individual upon conversion? Christian conversion can sometimes be associated with a narrow view of salvation as forgiveness of sins and “getting into heaven”. However, such a view of conversion does not explain why people do not wait until their deathbeds to convert. Nor does it explain why these individuals choose the Pentecostal expression of Christianity over other denominations, where salvation is also

believed to be received. This raises the question of whether conversion is always associated with the moment of justification, or whether other encounters with God which result in transformation can be viewed as conversions also. The question of what happens to the individual upon conversion refers both to their experiences, what they believe changes within them and also the role and relationship of God in the process.

How do converts interpret (and reinterpret) their experiences through testimony? Without the ability to follow an individual through their conversion, the researcher can only access the individual's story in hindsight. The researcher cannot record exactly "what happened" but rather the believer's interpretation of their experiences, in light of their current beliefs. This study allows believers to tell their own stories, analysing their interpretation of their experiences in order to understand their theology of conversion.

What role is the Holy Spirit perceived to play in conversion? The focus on experience of the Holy Spirit has been and continues to be the primary distinctive of the Pentecostal movement and subsequent Charismatic waves. Therefore within the study of conversion experiences I am keen to identify the particular role attributed to the Holy Spirit by the congregation within this process. If the Spirit is believed to be received by believers at their conversion, then this raises the questions of where else He is believed to be present and at work throughout the broader process.

The primary objective of this thesis is to explore Pentecostals' experiences and beliefs about conversion from within the congregation, to begin to inform a uniquely Pentecostal theology of conversion. **The thesis of this study is that Pentecostal conversion can be best understood according to the biblical concept of *shalom*, contributing to a holistic practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion.**

1.5 Important considerations

1.5.1 The problem of defining conversion

Problematically, there is no universally agreed definition of conversion. Conversion does not simply have to refer to a move from one religious group to another but can include more subtle changes in religious affiliation and commitment between denominations or even within the same faith community.²¹ As classical Pentecostalism teaches that every believer must be ‘born again’ by faith alone and as there is no official way of ‘proving’ this conversion, I allowed respondents of this study to share their testimonies in whatever terms they wished.²² This allowed for, and resulted in, stories being told of religious encounter and transformation beyond the initial moment of becoming a Christian. Furthermore, this allows for a distinctly Pentecostal definition of conversion to emerge from the experiences of believers.²³

1.5.2 Using a stage-model

This is a practical-theological study, using social science methods intra-disciplinarily and therefore I wanted to use a model developed from across disciplines to frame my empirical research. I approach the subject from the vantage point that in order to study conversion, one must look at the whole life of the convert. Even if conversion is believed to happen in an instant, there are undoubtedly key moments leading up to and following the event and repercussions throughout the convert’s life. Furthermore, in the field of conversion studies a stage model approach is currently the most holistic approach to conversion.

²¹ See Chapter Three for a full discussion of the breadth of definitions within conversion scholarship and suggested ways of identifying “true” conversions.

²² Different groups may have their own ways of ‘proving’ genuine conversion as will be explored in chapter two. For some the outward experience of Spirit baptism with speaking in tongues being the initial evidence can be seen to prove that they are saved. For others, the way that converts live their life and the ‘fruits’ of a saved life are evidence of genuine conversion. However, despite these individual methods, there is no formal or officially sanctioned way of verifying a conversion as there might be where conversion is based upon a period of education and a formal ritual.

²³ See Chapter Seven, section 7.2.2 for my definition of conversion for a Pentecostal context based on the experiences of respondents.

There are stage models within theology, such as the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation), however these typically focus theologically on salvation rather than on conversion as a whole. I have chosen instead to use Lewis Rambo's seven-stage model, which presents conversion as a process involving: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.²⁴ It is the most multi-disciplinary stage model to date, which takes into consideration the religious as well as sociological, psychological and anthropological aspects of conversion. Rambo is a rare example of a human sciences scholar of conversion to give respect and attention to the sacred element of conversion.²⁵ However, his concern with the religious element could be better described as religious studies than theology. Therefore, I use Rambo's model as a tool for data collection, to ensure a broad approach to conversion and consideration of the process at all levels. The resulting findings are then interpreted theologically and a practical-theological model of conversion theology produced as a result.

1.5.3 Significant contribution

This study offers the following significant and original contributions to the wider academic field of conversion studies, to Pentecostal theology as well as the individual congregation being studied:

1. The findings of this study result in a uniquely holistic, practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion developed from original empirical data.
2. This study marks an initial move forward in the discussion towards a Pentecostal theology of conversion; starting with experience, moving away from narrow

²⁴ Rambo, L. *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993)

²⁵ McKnight describes Rambo as having the ability to 'grab a sacred bag [conversion] and examine its contents sociologically with such care that its contents remain sacred'. McKnight, S. *Turning to Jesus: The Sociology of Conversion in the Gospels* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002) p.42, cited in McKnight, S. "Was Paul a Convert?" *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 110-132 (p.119)

soteriology and towards an approach, which views conversion according to the holistic concept of *shalom*.

3. This is the first study to date to use and reconstruct Rambo's seven-stage model to inform a theological study of Pentecostal conversion.
4. It is the first academic study to be conducted of the particular congregation, offering unique recommendations at an ecclesial level. Furthermore, it contributes to the growing pool of UK based congregational studies as well as the handful of global empirical studies into the Elim movement.

1.6 Organisation of the Thesis

This thesis can be separated into three distinct sections: theoretical background (chapters 2-4), empirical data analysis (chapters 5-6) and the original practical-theological contribution (chapters 7-8).

In *chapter two* I present the methodology of this study as grounded in practical theology, reflecting theologically on original qualitative data collected from a three-year congregational case study. I use intra-disciplinary methods, for a primarily theological outcome using methods and models from the human sciences, predominantly Lewis Rambo's seven-stage model of conversion to frame empirical data collection. The theology of conversion is explored at three levels of discourse; ordinary, ecclesial and academic.

Although this study is built upon the experiences and theology of the congregation, I have chosen to order this thesis in reverse by presenting the academic discourse first. This is for two reasons: firstly, because a thorough understanding of the theoretical background provides the reader with an understanding of the language I use to present and discuss the empirical data collected at ecclesial and ordinary levels. Secondly, this organisation allows me to

introduce the reader early to Rambo's stage model, upon which the data collection was framed.

I then present the first of two chapters exploring the breadth of literature on Pentecostal conversion. The disciplinary dichotomy present in the literature necessitates me to separate it into human sciences (*chapter three*) and theology (*chapter four*). While these branches of scholarship typically do not overlap, this study's intra-disciplinary approach seeks to overcome this dichotomy.

In *chapter three* I survey the human sciences literature on the study of conversion from the latter half of the twentieth century to present day. It is from these disciplines that the majority of conversion studies have emerged. During this period, the emergence of NRMs prompted western scholars to explore religious conversion from social, psychological and anthropological angles. This chapter presents an overview and discussion of Rambo's seven-stage model, which he designed to explain religious conversion from a multi-disciplinary perspective.²⁶ Even with Rambo's respect for the religious element of conversion, amidst all of the questioning in the human sciences about how conversion happens, what makes a true convert and the role of the convert, these studies repeatedly overlooked the beliefs behind the conversion and the perceived role of the divine. I go on to outline the more recent theories of the religious marketplace and conversion careers, concluding that Rambo offering the most holistic model of religious conversion to date.

In *chapter four* I present the literature from Pentecostal-charismatic scholarship on the topic of conversion. I reiterate that there is no Pentecostal theology of conversion currently but it is nonetheless the most talked about aspect of Pentecostal theology. I present the literature

²⁶ Rambo identifies that his model specifically includes studies conducted in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, anthropology and theology.

according to Rambo's stages, allowing for a more holistic approach to conversion, which presents a broad picture of the theological discussions. This chapter reveals which stages Pentecostal scholars focus on theologically and which have perhaps been overlooked. I also identify that Pentecostal theology does not typically use empirical studies and fails to take into consideration the conversion experiences of converts, which is a particular strength of the human sciences.

Chapters five and six present my analysis of the original qualitative data collected through my congregational study of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship (LCF). In *chapter five* I present the congregation at a community and ecclesial level within its UK context. I start with a discussion about the current state of Christianity in the UK today and possible explanations offered by scholars for a pattern of decline in church attendance. I then focus on the religious plurality and increased rejection of religious affiliation recorded in the city of Birmingham, where LCF is based. This leads to a brief history of the congregation within the context of the Elim Pentecostal movement in the UK, being traced along the lines of three revivals, starting with the Welsh revival in 1904. Having placed the congregation within its geographical and historical context, I move on to present my findings from participant observation of the congregation's services, as well as analysis of literature, online presence, outreach activities and sermons. These reveal the ecclesial teaching and practices relating to conversion, presented at five levels: Sunday services, life stage rituals, outreach activities, life groups and teaching. Teaching is further subcategorised according to the four main themes regarding conversion, which emerged from sermon analysis: new life, personal relationship with God, Spirit-filled Christianity and keeping the faith.

Chapter six presents my findings from analysing the ordinary conversion experiences and theological reflection of believers, from in-depth interviews with members of the

congregation. This marks the epicentre of this study, as the experiences of ordinary believers are the central point from which the resulting practical-theological model is developed. In this chapter I begin by outlining the specific methods used in the interview phase of the project, as well as the use of thematic coding and analysis to identify the ordinary theology of conversion within the wealth of transcribed interview material.

I then move on to present the main findings which emerged from my analysis from the interview data. These findings are organised according to the following categories; conversion themes, God-talk and the role of the Spirit in conversion. I conclude that the experiences of the respondents can be best understood in terms of underlying theological themes rather than conversion stages. The main theological themes, which emerged from the interviews highlighted the perceived effect of conversion in three main areas; regeneration, identity and destiny.

The thesis of this study lies in *chapter seven*, where I propose a descriptive-explanatory practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion, framed holistically according to the biblical concept of *shalom*. *Shalom* is presented in the three main areas, or dimensions, identified in *chapter six*. This model encompasses not only the work of Spirit in bringing God's *shalom* to the individual upon their initial conversion, but also the responsibility of the believer to respond to that *shalom* as an individual and within the context of community. Based on my findings, I argue for a view of conversion which distinguishes between the 'initial conversion' by which *shalom* is received, and 'subsequent conversions' by which dimensions of *shalom* are recognised and responded to by the believer. The result is a holistic, theological view of Pentecostal conversion, in terms of *shalom*.

I then expand on the perceived role of the Holy Spirit within this new model as identified from the theology of the congregation, which I explore in light of Paul's writings in Romans

chapter 8. Finally, I outline the significant contributions this model makes to the study of conversion and Pentecostal theology before anticipating and offering answers to potential objections to the model.

The *eighth* and final chapter provides a summary of the main conclusions drawn throughout the study and importantly makes recommendations for areas of further research in the disciplines of conversion studies and Pentecostal theology. This chapter suggests the wider application of my findings and their contribution to the study of conversion as a whole, while identifying areas which require further research leading to deeper understanding, in order to gather momentum towards a Pentecostal theology of conversion. Finally, I consider possible applications and expressions of a theology of conversion in light of *shalom* within a church context at ecclesial level.

CHAPTER TWO

METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

The aim of this study is to identify and critically analyse the conversion experiences and theology of ordinary Pentecostals. Conversion is a process which contains cultural, psychological, social and theological elements, to name but a few. Therefore this raises natural questions about how to go about studying such a complex process. Although this thesis has a predominantly theological aim, I suggest that a purely theoretical exploration can only identify an idealised concept of Pentecostal conversion; it cannot reveal anything about the lived experience. I have argued that Pentecostalism is defined by experience and the Spirit, therefore any development of Pentecostal theology should at the most basic level take these two factors into consideration. A Pentecostal theology of conversion should begin from the ground up; that is it should begin with the conversion experiences of Pentecostals. This chapter identifies the field of empirical theology as providing the ideal methodological tools for a study of Pentecostal conversion which begins with experience.

This chapter can be separated into three main sections. The first locates empirical theology within the broader discipline of practical theology. I address the question of whether or not theology can be studied empirically and how this can be done to a sufficient standard while retaining theological aims. I explore practical-theological tools for theological reflection and their merits for an empirical-theological study, before discussing the importance of viewing theology holistically by incorporating the levels of ordinary, ecclesial and academic discourse.

The second section considers the theory underpinning fieldwork, as adopted for this study from the field of ethnography through a congregational case study. I address in detail three

areas of challenge for any researcher conducting fieldwork within a congregation: participant observation, the insider-outsider problem and fieldwork ethics.

The third and final section explores contemporary uses of empirical methods in theology. This leads on to a brief discussion of the growing number of congregational studies in the UK and the benefits and challenges of the congregation as research field. Finally, I argue for the importance of individual experience through testimony as the primary method of data collection in this study of Pentecostal conversion.

2.2 Practical Theology

2.2.1 From application to discipline.

Over its continuously developing history, practical theology (PT) has been viewed under a multitude of guises, with pastoral theology, pastoral studies and ministerial studies having been identified as falling under the umbrella term of practical theology.²⁷ As a result, practical-theological methodology differs depending on its context and focus. According to Willows and Swinton:

For ministers it is a way of applying theology to their daily encounters; for academics, a way of looking at theology that acknowledges the significance of practice in the process of theological reflection; for the counsellor, practical theology works itself out as a critical dialogue partner within the ongoing conversation with contemporary psychological theories; for the politically aware, practical theology provides a method and a perspective within which the need for social change can be highlighted and initiated; whilst for others, practical theology has to do with telling stories that create meaningful human existence.²⁸

²⁷ Ballard, P. & Pritchard, J. *Practical Theology in Action: Christian thinking in the service of church and society* (London: SPCK, 1996) p.24-25

²⁸ Willows, D. & Swinton, J. "Introduction" in *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*. ed. by D. Willows and J. Swinton (Tyne & Wear: Athenaeum Press, 2000) 11-16 (pp. 11-12)

Although it eludes simple definition, PT typically utilises empirical methods to explore and reflect theologically upon lived experience, in order to guide faith forward in doctrine and praxis. This process attempts to bridge the gap created by post-modern schools of thought between theory and praxis in theology.²⁹ Labanow defines the practical-theological process as, ‘the theological reflection arising out of and giving guidance to a community of faith in the praxis of its mission as it engages in a mutually critical conversation with the situation of the world and the resources of Christian tradition’.³⁰ This definition locates its start and end point within a faith community.

It is this link with the faith community that has led PT to be seen by some as limited to those preparing for ministry in the form of pastoral theology,³¹ or as simply the application of theologies developed by systematic or biblical theologians.³² However, religious pluralism and secularisation theories of religion mean that PT cannot be viewed simply as application of doctrine, as no unified doctrine or application exists.³³ Therefore, PT has only relatively recently been accepted as a discipline in its own right. Immink identifies PT’s domain as studying ‘the life of faith and the communication of faith.’³⁴ This extends beyond the church building, out into broader society and into the daily lives of believers.

²⁹ Anderson, R.S. *The Shape of Practical Theology: Empowering ministry with theological praxis*. (Downers Grove III: IVP Academic, 2001) p. 18.

³⁰ Labanow, C.E. *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A congregational study of a Vineyard church*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) p.24; this definition highlights that practical theology is at present a majority Christian undertaking.

³¹ Ballard, & Pritchard, *Practical Theology in Action*, p.5.

³² Heiting, G. (Translation, Reinder Bruinsma) *Practical Theology: History, Theory, Action Domains*, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 1999) p.xv; see also van der Ven, J.A. “Practical Theology: from Applied to Empirical Theology”, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 1(1) (1988) 7-27 (p.14)

³³ See van der Ven, “Practical Theology” p.11; and Cartledge, M.J. *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003) p.17

³⁴ Immink, G. (Translation, Reinder Bruinsma) *Faith: A Practical Theological Reconstruction*, (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2005) p.180

The definition which best describes the aims and methods of this study is Cartledge's simple identification of PT as 'an empirical discipline [which] uses the tools and methods of the social sciences to map out the beliefs and values, attitudes and practices of individuals and communities'.³⁵ Although the aims and outlooks of the social sciences are vastly different to those of theology when studying religious experiences, social scientific methods are helpful to the theologian in seeking to empirically identify and analyse the lived experiences of believers today.

Having established practical theology as a distinct theological discipline, I will now move on to explore how social science methods have been integrated into the study of theology under the practice of empirical theology.

2.2.2 Empirical Theology

Empirical theology, as an approach to practical theology, typically aims 'to explore, describe and test theological ideas contained within a specific context' using (usually social-) scientific methods.³⁶ It is distinct from the study of religion in sociology, psychology or anthropology in that its aims and outlooks are rooted in theology. According to Dutch theologian and pioneer of empirical theological methodology, Johannes van der Ven, 'Practical theology is empirical theology in the strict sense of the word' rather than simply the application of systematic or biblical theology.³⁷ Van der Ven argues that a purely deductive approach to practical theology will never succeed as religion is not homogenous or uniform. Therefore, 'theology also needs the inductive study of the contemporary pluriform, heterogeneous,

³⁵ Cartledge, M.J. *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) p.15

³⁶ Cartledge, M.J. "Empirical Theology: inter- or intra-disciplinary?" *Journal of Beliefs & Values: Studies in Religion & Education*, 20(1) (1999) 98-104 (p.100)

³⁷ Van der Ven, "Practical Theology" p.14

chaotic religious field.’³⁸ This multi-faceted view of religion is shared by the various sub-disciplines of religious studies. Furthermore, questions into humanity, its origins and expressions, which are central to social science enquiry, are ‘part and parcel of theology itself’,³⁹ making empirical enquiry an ‘inherent feature’ of theology rather than a strange tool.⁴⁰

Van der Ven addresses two main issues arising from the use of empirical methods in theology. The first issue is raised by Tillich in his *Systematic Theology*. Tillich argues from the starting point that God is the direct object of theology, therefore empirical theology does not and cannot succeed because its direct object: (1) does not exist within scientific experience and (2) can only be verified by participation, not from a distance as scientific methods require.⁴¹ Van der Ven challenges Tillich on his fundamental assumption, arguing instead that the direct object is in fact *faith*, which is both observable and testable.⁴² God cannot be directly or empirically studied due to his transcendence and we are instead limited to studying the faith of people, of which God is the direct object.⁴³

Furthermore, Immink challenges the assumption that God transcends empirical study and argues instead that our concepts of faith are in fact links to an external reality. Furthermore, ‘theological concepts and reflections on faith are propositions about God’s performative

³⁸ Van der Ven, “Practical Theology”, p.11.

³⁹ Nipkow, K.E. “Empirical Research within Practical Theology: some general considerations in the context of modernity”, *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 6(1) (1993) 50-63 (p.54)

⁴⁰ Nipkow, “Empirical Research within Practical Theology” p.54

⁴¹ Tillich, P. *Systematic Theology: volume one*, (Herts: James Nisbet & Co., 1964) p.49-50.

⁴² Van der Ven, “Practical Theology”, p.15; see also Cartledge, M.J. “Affective Theological Praxis: Understanding the Direct Object of Practical Theology” *International Journal of Practical Theology*, 8 (2004) 34-52 (p.38) whereby Cartledge summarises that ‘God is the direct object of faith, while faith is the direct object of theology’.

⁴³ Brouwer, R. “Detecting God in practices: Theology in an empirical-theological research project” *HTS Theologiese Studies/Theological Studies*, 66(2) (2010) <http://www.hts.org.za/index.php/HTS/article/view/805> (accessed on 8th Jan. 2013) p.2; This view is challenged by Ganzevoort who objects to the dichotomy between God being the direct object of faith (first order) but the assumption that we can learn nothing about God through the study (second order) of that faith. He argues for interaction between the two rather than strict dichotomy (see Ganzevoort, R.R. “What You See is What You Get: Social Construction and Normativity in Practical Theology” in *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology*, ed. by van der Ven, J.A. and Scherer-Rath, M. (Leiden, NLD: Brill, 2004)17-33 (p.22))

presence' although such a view presupposes the existence of God and therefore is unlikely to persuade non-Christians.⁴⁴ Despite this, an empirical study of ordinary theology requires an honest attempt at understanding and representing the viewpoint of the believer. In this, there must be an interaction between theories of religious action and divine encounter. Empirical theology is required, if it is to be theology at all, to engage sympathetically with the beliefs which surround and underpin the practices being studied.

The second issue van der Ven raises is the question of how empirical methods should be used by theologians. There are two main ways that theologians have suggested utilising empirical methods: inter-disciplinarily or intra-disciplinarily. An inter-disciplinary approach seeks respect from scholars from both theology and the social sciences. Supporters of an inter-disciplinary approach wish for their research to engage readers from all disciplines involved and to engage in debates equally between the disciplines.⁴⁵ Francis offers two reasons in support of an inter-disciplinary approach to empirical theology:

1. If empirical theology is to employ and develop tools of the social sciences then its studies must be available for scrutiny and test by the social sciences.
2. Empirical theologians can learn from the current debates and methodologies being discussed in the social sciences.⁴⁶

However, such an approach would require the researcher to choose between the different research outlooks of theology and the social sciences. Furthermore, this approach relies too heavily on the abilities of the researcher and the desire to satisfy methodological criterion

⁴⁴ Brouwer, "Detecting God in practices", p.2

⁴⁵ Francis, L. "Personality Theory and Empirical Theology", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 15(1) (2002) 37-53 (p.40)

⁴⁶ Francis, "Personality Theory and Empirical Theology", p.40

stifles any possibility of innovation.⁴⁷ In Francis's model, empirical theology begins to look indistinguishable from religious studies.

On the other hand, van der Ven favours an intra-disciplinary model. He defines this as 'the inner-theological extension of theological methodology by using the tools of the empirical sciences, directly aiming at answering theological questions.'⁴⁸ Cartledge supports this approach over Francis's, as it allows theology to utilise and innovate empirical methods for its own purposes. This places responsibility on theologians to develop skills and knowledge in empirical methods and, if these studies are only engaged by other theologians there is the danger that a methodological laziness could creep in. In this respect, Francis' call for engagement with social sciences is beneficial. However, if theologians see empirical methods as part of their toolkit, the intra-disciplinary model allows for practical theologians to remain 'theologians', while conducting original empirical research, without relying on the findings of social scientists.

Following data collection, the challenge then is the engagement between empirical, situational data and theological context and meaning. According to van der Ven, empirical theology can be 'understood as the dialectical relation between the factual and the desirable religious praxis'.⁴⁹ This requires an understanding not only of what religious praxis currently *is* but what it is believed that it *should be*.⁵⁰ In setting PT apart from applied theology, practical theologians are not simply tasked with finding deductive applications of doctrine for churches to follow. Instead PT requires a process of reflection and interpretation, which ideally involves not only academics but also faith communities.

⁴⁷ Cartledge, "Empirical Theology" p.100.

⁴⁸ Van der Ven, "Practical Theology", p.18.

⁴⁹ Van der Ven, "Practical Theology", p.20.

⁵⁰ Heimbrock, H-G "Given Through the Senses: A Phenomenological Model of Empirical Theology" in *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology*, ed. by van der Ven and Scherer-Rath, (2004) 59-83 (p.60); Heimbrock offers a simplified, three stage empirical-theological model which 'suggests a division of labour between "ought" and "is"' in the research process.

2.2.3 Tools for theological reflection

For an empirical study of a religious group or phenomenon to be *theological*, an element of ‘theological reflection’ is required. The term was adopted in the latter half of the twentieth century to refer to a theological process, by which lived experiences are critically reflected upon in light of Christian tradition to produce a practical outcome in the Christian life.⁵¹ This process most commonly begins with experience at its starting point. Robert Kinast explains the process of theological reflection as primarily inductive; stepping beyond merely using experience to apply doctrine:

The reality of theology, which theological reflection seeks to disclose, is the presence of God in people’s experience, a presence that invites them to encounter God where they are and to participate in the divine life which is offered to them there. For this reason the form that theological reflection takes is coextensive with people’s experience. It does not treat their experience as a theological or spiritual void nor does it use their experience merely to illustrate and apply theological principles. With theological reflection, theology is in service to experience, not the other way around.⁵²

In this understanding, God can be seen through people’s experiences, allowing for, or perhaps necessitating an empirical element to theological research. Theological reflection is not a discipline or even a methodology; however a number of helpful tools have developed for the purpose of focussing such reflection. These commonly take the form of reflexive cycles or spirals.

As practical theology typically operates at three different levels (professional practice, congregational and academic), tools for theological reflection have adapted to suit different purposes. Many take the form of a reflexive cycle, guiding the congregation or researcher through a process of problem identification, data collection, analysis and evaluation before reaching a recommendation or action.

⁵¹ Kinast, R. *What are they saying about Theological Reflection?* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2000) p.1

⁵² Kinast, *What are they saying about Theological Reflection?* p.3

Lartey offers a helpful adaptation of the basic pastoral cycle model.⁵³ As with all pastoral cycles it begins with experience. Lartey then suggests a situational analysis of the experience, engaging multi-disciplinary approaches before inviting theological analysis. Finally he subjects the theology to further situational analysis before offering a response. This version requires analytical to-and-fro between empirical and theological interpretations, which does not assume theology has the final say but rather approaches theology critically.

As empirical research into any group of individuals can run the risk of becoming clouded and personal, such spirals act as a ‘distancing mechanism’ from which to find focus.⁵⁴ Therefore, the pastoral cycle can be useful to an academic engaged in theological reflection as it can help to remind the researcher that her study should have meaning and implications at the level of lived religion. That is, after all, where theological reflection finds its beginning and end. Models such as Lartey’s can therefore be useful for both distancing and grounding the researcher. However, pastoral cycles were designed initially to assist congregations in conducting theological reflection from within, in order to bridge the perceived gap between Christian tradition and present experience and to move praxis forward positively and constructively.⁵⁵ Although I am working in a congregation, I am an outsider conducting the research at an academic level, not in direct partnership with the congregation. Therefore I

⁵³ Lartey, E. “Practical Theology as a Theological Form” in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 128-134 (p.132); also in *Spiritual Dimensions of Pastoral Care: Practical Theology in a Multidisciplinary Context*, ed. by Willows, D. and Swinton, J. (London: Jessica Kingsley, 2000) 72-77

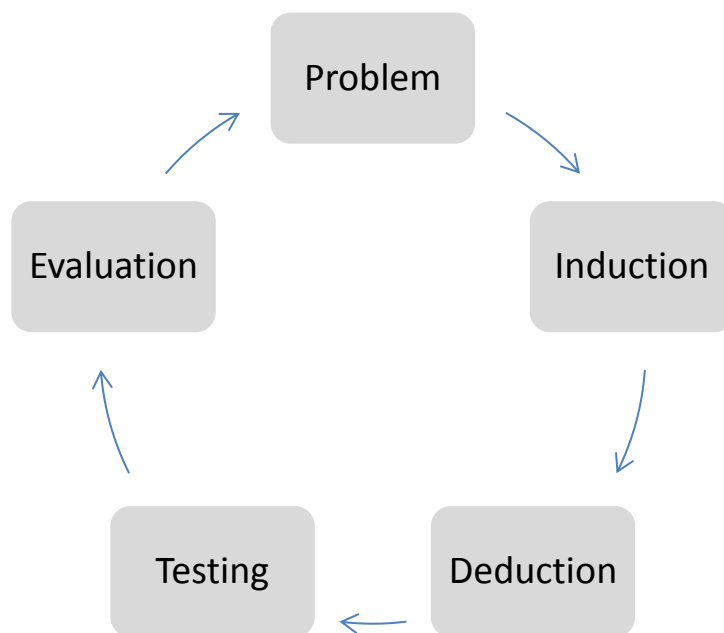
⁵⁴ Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives*, p.22

⁵⁵ For Laurie Green, theological reflection is the responsibility of all Christians, not just the leadership and/or researchers, for the purpose of ‘bridging this cultural gap and seeing connections between the Christian heritage on one side and our present experience on the other’ p.80. Green’s simple version of a pastoral cycle was developed from insights from Liberation Theology and used in a congregational setting in Birmingham, UK. (Green, L. *Let’s Do Theology: a pastoral cycle resource book*, (London: Mowbray, 1990)). He emphasises a spiral motion; presenting theological reflection is a process which should not end with one rotation but continue. Importantly for this study, the cycle begins with experience. The group begin by identifying an experience or a problem, they then explore that problem from as many angles as possible (including the social sciences and non-theological viewpoints at this stage), they then reflect theologically about what comes from the exploration and finally respond with actions which will lead the community into a new situation. This new situation will be a progression from where the process began and can act as the starting point for a new reflective process.

have adapted a reflexive cycle designed to assist the academic conducting empirical theology, which comes in the form of Johannes van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle.

I have chosen to follow a version of the empirical-theological cycle as it is designed for an academic approach, whereby the researcher decides upon the area to be studied rather than a congregation. Empirical research by its very nature requires 'a path or course to be followed and a goal or objective to be achieved' and reflective cycles provide these.⁵⁶ The empirical-theological cycle guides the researcher in choosing an area of study and developing research questions, drawing theories inductively from the empirical data gathered, then to explore those concepts deductively using secondary data, theories and literature, which can then be tested qualitatively or quantitatively before being evaluated theologically.⁵⁷

Figure 2.1: Van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle⁵⁸



⁵⁶ Scherer-Rath, M. "The Position of God Images in the Theoretical Research Model" in *Normativity and Empirical Research in Theology* ed. by van der Ven and Scherer-Rath, (2004) 199-222 (p.200)

⁵⁷ See Cartledge, M.J. *Practical Theology*, p.21 for a breakdown of each stage.

⁵⁸ This version of van der Ven's cycle is replicated from Cartledge, *Practical Theology*, p.22

Although cycles are useful tools for theological reflection and in guiding the research process, I agree with Brouwer in his critique of attempts at standardised, universal approaches to empirical theology.⁵⁹ Religious experiences and faith communities are diverse and multifaceted and no one approach will work for all studies. Therefore I have adapted van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle as a helpful tool in guiding my research, but not as a rigid framework.

Firstly, I identified the research problem through an initial survey of relevant conversion and methodological literature. Secondly, I conducted inductive, qualitative research to gather material for data from the congregation through participant observation, congregational literature, focus groups and individual interviews. I then conducted data analysis through immersion in the data and allowing themes to emerge through coding.⁶⁰ Thirdly, these themes were analysed in light of the wider literature and links were identified between themes, which led to the development of a model. Finally, this model was evaluated theologically and a practical-theological model was finalised, describing and explaining the empirical reality of conversion within the context of the theological concept of *shalom*.

It became clear that to follow a full cycle of van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle rigorously would be too difficult for this study.⁶¹ For example, there has not been time during this project to conduct the testing stage prior to evaluation.⁶² However, more important than the particular cycle used is the theory underpinning these models. As Woodward and Pattison have correctly observed 'practical theology will always be vulnerable to the criticism of

⁵⁹ Brouwer, "Detecting God in Practices", p.4

⁶⁰ See chapter six, section 6.2.2 for a detailed discussion of my data analysis methods using NVivo9.

⁶¹ Cartledge acknowledges the challenge of the empirical-theological cycle for most students and scholars of empirical-studies in Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.15

⁶² This means that this study requires a further period of testing in order for van der Ven's cycle to be completed, however there was not the scope or the time within this project to complete a significant test and I feel that a lesser testing stage would not do justice to the research findings.

impracticality or uselessness unless it can really demonstrate what it achieves and that it is not simply going around in ever complexifying methodological circles'.⁶³

The common factor underlying such cycles, although absent from the empirical-theological cycle, is the final stage offering practical applications or recommendations. As the 'improvement of the situation toward the desired praxis is the underlying interest of practical-theological research', I argue that this stage of offering recommendations at academic and ecclesial level is a necessary end to empirical-theological research, to avoid going around in 'methodological circles'.⁶⁴

Alternative approaches to theological reflection in PT have emerged which involve more to-and-fro between the theology, praxis and lived realities of faith. For example, Pattison advocates a critical conversation approach,⁶⁵ while Cartledge suggests that 'the research process be framed as an oscillation between the 'lifeworld' (concrete reality) and 'system' (theory or theological metanarrative)' of the research subject(s).⁶⁶ Despite all efforts to follow a complete reflective cycle, the research subject of Pentecostal conversion has necessitated a continued oscillation in my focus between these two realities as the link between lifeworld and system is so strong and the lines so often blurred in the Pentecostal context. My practical-theological model seeks to represent and do justice to both the lifeworld and the system of the

⁶³ Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) pp.128-9;

⁶⁴ Heitink, *Practical Theology*, p.225; while this idea of 'actions' resulting from practical-theology is often attributed to the branch of Action Research, Heitink here argues that it is the very foundation of practical theology as a whole and discusses it in his chapter on empirical-theological approaches; see also Pattison, S. *Shame: Theory, Therapy, Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000) p.10 where Pattison argues that 'Practical theology must...be a transformational activity in the arena of practice as well as in that of theory and understanding'.

⁶⁵ This involves a critical conversation between (1) one's own beliefs and interpretations, (2) the beliefs and interpretations of the Christian community and its tradition, (3) the contemporary situation under consideration, and (4) 'relevant insights, methods and findings that emerge from non-theological disciplines' Pattison, S. *Shame* p.10; this is essentially what is represented in pastoral cycles, however Pattison's approach involves more of a to-and-fro between the different dimensions in a model of conversation. See also, Pattison, S. "A Basic Introduction to Theological Reflection" in *The Blackwell Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology*, ed. by Woodward, J. and Pattison, S. (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000) 135-145

⁶⁶ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.14

research congregation. The lifeworld of the congregation is recordable through testimonies, statistical information about the geographical area and observation of rituals and practices.⁶⁷

In contrast, the system of the congregation requires observation of a different kind.

The congregation is a locus of theology generated from experience, rather than a group who are simply sold theologies from academia.⁶⁸ Put more eloquently, ‘The congregation, which lives as a community of face-to-face encounters with the God who raised Israel’s Jesus from the dead, becomes in this process the primal location within which humans gain indirect knowledge of God’.⁶⁹ This ‘indirect knowledge of God’ is the source from which theology can then be drawn. However, theology must be considered and explored at a number of different levels.

2.2.4 Pentecostal theology: three levels of discourse

The focus of this study is the ordinary theology of believers and as such the primary data comes from people’s testimonies. However, these testimonies are interpreted and discussed within much broader theological contexts; those of the congregation, within its ecclesial context, and of the academy. It is vital when studying lived religion to seek to understand as much as possible of, what Cartledge identifies as three levels of theological discourse: (1) ordinary, (2) ecclesial, and (3) academic.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ The study of a congregation’s life world will never be complete as it is made up of too many complex elements and the presentation of their lifeworld is controlled by the congregation and leadership. However it includes the aspects of faith which is most easily observed using empirical methods.

⁶⁸ Keifert, P. “The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation” in P. Keifert (ed) *Testing the Spirits: how theology informs the study of congregations* (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2009) 13-27 (pp.15-16)

⁶⁹ Keifert, “The Return of the Congregation to Theological Conversation” p.16

⁷⁰ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, pp. 18-20; The concept of different levels or ‘orders’ is common throughout practical-theological discussion, however there are those who identify two rather than three levels/orders. R.R. Ganzevoort for instance distinguishes between first order as ‘the church, the believers, and others’ and second order as academic theology, rather than differentiating between ordinary and ecclesial (Ganzevoort, “What You See is What You Get”, p.20)

Like Cartledge, this study uses ‘etic (overarching theoretical) concepts in order to rescript...emic or ordinary ideas and expressions’.⁷¹ Therefore engagement with his levels of discourse is necessary. Furthermore, it is important to note that ordinary theology itself is made up of beliefs and theories taken from the theology at ecclesial and academic levels. Each level impacts on the others to produce the overall context from which an individual interprets and even experiences their religious journey.

Each level of discourse contributes to the collection and analysis of data in this study and therefore further explanation is required. I will now unpack each level in more depth. I will begin the following discussion as my research began; with the ordinary theology of Pentecostal believers.

2.2.4.1 Ordinary “messy” theology

Theologian and clinical psychologist, Marcia Webb refers to the non-academically formulated beliefs of believers as ‘working lay theologies’ which ‘involve an implicit rubric of understanding that develops among a community of believers.’⁷² She argues that working lay theologies cannot be examined or understood comprehensively but nonetheless ‘permeates the attitudes and activities of the community’.⁷³ These beliefs are also referred to by some practical theologians as ordinary theology, grassroots theology or lived religion. Contrary to Webb, practical theologians consider ordinary theology to be observable and an attempt at understanding is encouraged.

⁷¹ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.19.

⁷² Webb, M. “Toward a Theology of Mental Illness”, *Journal of Religion, Disability & Health*, 16(1) (2012) 49-73 (p.50)

⁷³ Webb, “Toward a Theology of Mental Illness”, p.50

The term ‘ordinary theology’ was coined by practical theologian Jeff Astley.⁷⁴ He defines ordinary theology as ‘the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education.’⁷⁵ Astley’s definition is often used as an umbrella term for all lay church members. However there are often church attendees who have formal theological training but whose day-to-day beliefs would still be labelled by some researchers as ‘ordinary’.

Therefore, I find Astley’s broad definition problematic and do not agree that ordinary theology is limited to those with no formal theological training. For example there are processes of interpretation and justification which an academic would go through in her personal faith that are different to how she might think systematically when theologising for an academic article.⁷⁶ Just as a professional psychiatrist is not immune from experiencing depression or psychosis; theoretical knowledge does not always control personal or emotional experiences. Perhaps clearest in the case of theologically trained pastors, we see that one person can overlap into different levels of theological discourse.

The key importance of Astley’s work for this study is that he highlights a difference between the formal beliefs of a group, espoused by the leadership or the academy, and what the individuals within that group actually believe. Researchers cannot assume that they can predict an individual’s theology based on knowing their religious affiliation, denomination or congregation. Particularly in the UK where *denominational drifting* within the Christian

⁷⁴ See Astley, J. *Ordinary Theology: Looking, Listening and Learning in Theology*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2002)

⁷⁵ Astley, *Ordinary Theology*, p.1; God-talk in this instance must be reflective to be considered theology (Astley, J. “The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology,” in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. by Astley, J. & Francis, L.J. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 1-9 (p.1)

⁷⁶ In the opening paper given at the Ecclesiology & Ethnography Conference (Sept 2011) John Swinton challenged the walls that many Christian academic theologians build up between their personal faith and their academic work (see Swinton, J. ““Where is your church?” Moving toward a Hospitable and Sanctified Ethnography” in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Ward, P. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012) 71-92

tradition is relatively easy, ordinary theology is not as smooth or systematic as academic theology aims to be.⁷⁷ Ordinary theology is messy. It is a combination of lived experience, congregational teachings, personal history and relationships, religious literature and cultural context. These elements inform theological reflection to help the individual to make sense of their faith and experience. In this study, ordinary theology will be primarily expressed in believers' testimonies.

Importantly, the process of theological reflection for believers is both conscious and sub-conscious and does not always result in logically coherent or compatible beliefs. In this sense, Webb is correct that these beliefs and values cannot be comprehensively understood completely, although I believe that they can in part. A desire and willingness to understand and empathise is vital.⁷⁸

Astley suggests that a significant part of this understanding comes from the practical theologian actively listening to people's ordinary theology but also in *asking* people directly about their beliefs.⁷⁹ For example, in this study I employed a word game designed to engage respondents in theological reflection about the language used to describe God.⁸⁰ This was done after actively listening to their testimonies and it provided the opportunity for the respondents to consider their choice of language and its meaning for them. When studying this first level of theological discourse there will never be a complete, objective understanding

⁷⁷ This is my term for the movement of an individual from a church of one denomination to another. Lewis Rambo refers to this as 'Institutional transition', however this is in reference to all religions and is referred to by sociologists as 'denominational switching' (Rambo, L.R. *Understanding Religious Conversion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) pp.13-14), whereas 'denominational drifting' refers to the movement from one type of church to another without any conscious decision to change or even affiliate with any denomination. There is not necessarily any deep or conscious affiliation with the new denomination's unique doctrines or broader community.

⁷⁸ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.19

⁷⁹ Astley, "The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology" in *Exploring Ordinary Theology*, p.6; for further discussion on my methods for identifying and analysing ordinary theology, see Chapter Six section 6.2.2.

⁸⁰ See Chapter Six, section 6.2.2 for a discussion of this word game method and the process of identifying ordinary theology in this study.

of a convert's experience. The aim instead is to present the convert's theology in its messy form within the setting of their faith community and the broader theology of their Pentecostal context.

2.2.4.2 Ecclesial theology

Cartledge describes the second level of discourse as 'the 'official' theology of the...denomination, which seeks to offer parameters within which authentic Pentecostal expression may move.'⁸¹ Often this level acts as a bridge between ordinary and academic discourse through the formal training of the leadership or lay members expressed through teaching and also pastoral care being informed by lived experiences.

James Hopewell, a pioneer of congregational studies in the USA, identified that the interpretative outlook of individual members will usually correspond to the overall worldview of their congregation, whether; *Canonic*, *Gnostic*, *Charismatic* or *Empiric*.⁸² Individual accounts will interweave different views together but Hopewell found that one or two viewpoints are usually revealed as dominant within each congregation. Whether or not Hopewell's categorisation is accurate, the recognition that one's congregational affiliation affects one's worldview is vital. Even if a believer does not fully adhere to the doctrinal package offered by their church's tradition, the weekly teachings, language used and the views of the leadership and other believers will impact upon their experience and interpretation.

The study of congregations raises the question of how a researcher can understand a congregation's theology. This is particularly complicated in the study of Pentecostal

⁸¹ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.19.

⁸² Guest, M., Tusting, K. and Woodhead, L. in *Congregational Studies in the UK: Christianity in a Post-Christian Context* ed. by Guest, M., Tusting, K. and Woodhead, L. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004) p.1; see Hopewell, J. *Congregation: Stories and Structures*, (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), p.69.

congregations, where experience and orality are given supremacy over liturgy and written doctrine. Studying a Pentecostal congregation through the written word alone will get the researcher only so far.⁸³ Likewise, just as an individual's theology cannot be assumed based on their affiliation, placing assumptions upon an Elim congregation based on the official teachings of the Elim movement alone would be superficial. Therefore a balance is required between the study of official denominational beliefs (present and historical) and a more focussed study of the teachings and literature produced by the individual congregation being explored. More specific congregational beliefs are identifiable through the content of sermons preached, the activities run by the church during the week, outreach activities they run or support, the language used in general discussion and literature, the worship styles and songs used, scripture quoted, website content and rituals performed.⁸⁴ However, researchers must also cast their net further afield than the church building to gain information about congregational theology. Official denominational beliefs can be identified through literature produced by the movement for church distribution, the denominational website and its official 'Statement of Faith' or equivalent.

2.2.4.3 Academic theology

The academic theological background of the study is used in order to analyse the ordinary theological data in light of the collective wisdom of the wider group's formal theology and scriptural interpretation. This process helps to ground ordinary theology within its tradition

⁸³ This is not limited to Pentecostal congregations. Regardless of how much of the church's history, ritual and liturgy is recorded on paper, there will always be actions, sights and sounds which must be experienced to add further depth to the overall picture of the congregation. The people's actions in prayer, the music and even the smells all add up to provide a sensory context for the researcher which written information alone will never capture. The challenge for the researcher is to then present all of this sensory information to a reader in written form.

⁸⁴ By 'literature' here I mean the literature produced and/or sold specifically by the congregation for the congregation. This includes news sheets, study handouts, banners, posters etc. For example, the Elim movement produces an official Elim magazine monthly called *Direction*, which replaced the *Elim Evangel*, which chronicled the early years of the movement from 1919-1934. Both publications have been important in identifying the identity and beliefs of the movement over its history.

and to understand the resulting model according to broader theological themes. Furthermore, the use of non-theological sources allows the resulting theory of Pentecostal conversion to be offered and applied to the wider academic field of conversion studies.

Cartledge includes both theological and non-theological, social science discourse within the third level. Theological discourse in this study comes from the area of Pentecostal theology, specifically focussing on the work of scholars who self-identify as being from within the Pentecostal-Charismatic tradition, allowing these voices to speak into experience.⁸⁵ Balancing this I will include dialogue with social science discourse into conversion theory. Not only because this provides a more holistic picture and is encouraged by practical theology, but because the disciplines of sociology, psychology and anthropology have historically provided the majority of research into religious conversion and their voices have typically not been engaged with theology.

The following section is dedicated to delving deeper into the specific methodology of case study fieldwork used in this study. I will outline the influence of ethnographic methods in a case study approach, before highlighting three main areas of challenge for the fieldwork researcher; participant observation, the insider/outsider problem and ethics. I then focus on the combination of ethnography and theology in the field of congregational studies before finally turning to the use of testimony as a source of empirical data.

⁸⁵ The academic literature includes charismatic scholarship because the Elim Pentecostal movement's statement of Fundamental Truths is relatively mainstream and due to denominational drifting, many traditional backgrounds will be represented within the congregation but a charismatic outlook is a common thread. Furthermore, Pentecostalism and the Charismatic movement in the UK are often grouped together in terms of statistics as well as theologically.

2.3 Ethnographic methods and the case study approach

This thesis centres on an embedded case study of one Elim congregation, the key research methods for which find their roots in the field of ethnography.⁸⁶ While they have been adapted over time for use in more ‘local’ contexts and the ‘case study’ has evolved its own methodology, it is worth looking briefly by way of introduction at the development of ethnographic methodologies from a focus on non-Western contexts, toward local studies and auto-ethnographies. While the level of integration with the community under study and the intensity of time spent ‘in the field’ has diluted within the case study approach, the ethnographic spirit of enquiry and the desire to understand and uncover the meaning of the group under study, as they experience and understand it, is translated into this study.

Classically ethnography has been associated with Social Anthropology. It has its roots in the process of observing and studying a culture or group of people, in order to gain an understanding of their way of life, world view and beliefs.⁸⁷ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century these studies would usually involve a western researcher travelling to a remote community to immerse himself (for he would typically be male) in the life and culture of an ‘exotic’ group. This process of observation through immersion in the life world of the group is referred to as being ‘in the field’ or conducting fieldwork.

For the ethnographer, fieldwork involves a number of common methods, such as participant observation, semi-structured interviews, informal conversation and the collection of literature and artefacts. However, ethnography itself is considered to be more than just a set of research

⁸⁶ The term ‘embedded’ is used by Yin to describe a focus within the case study analysis of a particular topic or aspect of the case. In this study, the focus is on experiences of conversion within the case of LCF. Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, second edition (Thousand Oaks: CA: Sage, 1994) p.41-42; See discussion of Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research: Design and Method* (Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1989) , in Creswell, J.W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, p.187

⁸⁷ Stringer, M. *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2008) p.19; Stringer argues that ethnography is ‘probably the only way in which we could ever understand the reality of religion as practiced by ordinary individuals’.

tools. As Clifford Geertz explains, ‘what defines [ethnography] is the kind of intellectual effort it is: an elaborate venture in, to borrow a notion from Gilbert Ryle, “thick description.”’⁸⁸ Thick description does not necessarily mean heavy vocabulary and detail. It refers to description that uncovers and explains layers of meaning.⁸⁹ The ethnographic researcher believes that culture is made up of multiple layers of meaning, many of which can only be understood by careful observation, artefacts, participation, experience and communication. However, in this attempt at deep and focussed understanding, ethnographic methods have been criticised as not allowing for any broader significance or generalisation of findings, as research fields are often small and specific.⁹⁰

In their comprehensive book *Ethnography: principles in practice*, Atkinson and Hammersley identify five common features of most ethnographic research, many of which can be applied to case study research also:

1. Studying people in everyday contexts or ‘in the field’ rather than in synthetic conditions.
2. Data is gathered from a wide range of sources including participant observation, literature and informal conversations.
3. Relatively unstructured, inductive data collection and analysis. Theory develops from the analysis.
4. Generally focus in detail on a few small-scale cases.
5. Data analysis is typically qualitative, with any statistical analysis playing a secondary role due to the importance of interpretation of the layers of meaning behind human activity.⁹¹

These approaches were adopted by other social sciences, and studies of culture and societies in western contexts began to emerge over time. The ‘famous anthropological absorption with the (to us) exotic’ has been rightly diluted with the use and adaptation of ethnographic

⁸⁸ Geertz, C. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture” in *Readings in the Philosophy of the Social Sciences* ed. by Martin, M.J. & MacIntyre, L.C. (London: MIT Press, 1994) 213-232 (p.214)

⁸⁹ Geertz, “Thick Description”, p.118

⁹⁰ Wolcott, H.F. *The Art of Fieldwork*, (London: AltaMira Press, 1995) p.133-4. This is where a case study approach can contribute by using ethnographic methods but moving beyond the ethos of ethnography to providing generalisable theories and models based on the findings.

⁹¹ Atkinson, P. & Hammersley, M. *Ethnography: Principles in Practice*, (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2007), p.3

methods by other disciplines such as sociology, which has been more concerned with culture and community locally, with autoethnography representing the antithesis of the study of the ‘exotic’ other.⁹²

One way that ethnographic methods have been utilised is within the case study approach.⁹³ Creswell describes a case study as ‘an exploration of a “bounded system” or a case (or multiple cases) over time through detailed, in-depth data collection involving multiple sources of information rich in context’.⁹⁴ The case is ‘bounded’ by time and place.⁹⁵ Other than the differing levels of participation, this case study differs from ‘pure’ ethnography in: (1) its focus, and (2) its desired outcome. Firstly, an embedded case study, such as this, seeks to focus on one theme or process within the case being studied; in this case, conversion, rather than describing the community holistically. Secondly, Creswell suggests that for the case study researcher the final stage of their study should involve locating their findings within the broader literature.⁹⁶ While the case is bounded and therefore must be understood within its particular context, the findings contribute to wider discussion on the subject beyond the case(s) in question.

Having explored the development of ethnographic methods toward a case study model, I will now explore some typical areas of challenge within this approach.

⁹² Geertz, “Thick Description”, p.220; In autoethnography part (or all) of the focus of ethnographic research is oneself. In Carolyn Ellis’ book on autoethnography as a methodological approach, written in the form of a novel, she explains to her autoethnography class ‘we’ll view ourselves as part of the research – sometimes as our focus – rather than standing outside what we do’ in Ellis, C. *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira, 2004) p.3.

⁹³ While I identify ethnographic methods such as participant-observation and documentary evidence in case studies of social groups, it is certainly arguable that the case study approach has its own unique approach to these methods (Yin, R.K. *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, fourth edition (London: SAGE Publications, 2009) p.15) Yin here is comparing case study approach with the methods of experiment, survey, archival, analysis and history.

⁹⁴ Creswell, J.W. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1998) p.61

⁹⁵ In the case of this study it was bounded by a three-year period and within the congregation and worship events of LCF, Birmingham, UK.

⁹⁶ Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design*, p.154

2.3.1 Problematics in case study fieldwork

The study of Pentecostal experiences and theologies of conversion necessitates fieldwork, because for Pentecostals, conversion takes place and receives its meaning within a community context. The ‘field’ of conversion could of course be expanded further; it is not just the possession of the religious community but it is also strongly influenced by family, friendships, wider religious events.⁹⁷ However I have chosen to explore the theme of conversion within the boundary of the congregation’s formal activities and individual testimony.

In the following sections I look in detail at three problematical areas, which are universal considerations of anyone undertaking fieldwork: participant observation, insider-outsider and ethics.⁹⁸

2.3.1.1 Participant-Observation

In his study of religious conversion, Rambo was ‘frequently amazed at studies that display all too little careful, objective, and systematic observation, conducted with noticeable effort by the researcher to maintain a distance from personal bias, so that new perception, new vision is possible.’⁹⁹ Whilst I argue that an ‘objective’ study maintaining ‘a distance from personal bias’ is an unobtainable criterion; I nonetheless share Rambo’s passion for the importance of observation.

The assumption underpinning participant observation, in the study of religious communities, is that through careful observation and interaction the researcher is able to piece together aspects of the group which cannot be gleaned from written documents, surveys and structured

⁹⁷ Including local, national and international conferences, sermons and events at other churches etc.

⁹⁸ The literature surrounding these methods typically comes from the reflections of ethnographers and therefore the majority of the discussion is informed by that discipline. However, other social science voices are included where appropriate.

⁹⁹ Rambo, L. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.18

interviews alone. Rituals, conversations and interaction reveal unspoken and unformulated codes of conduct and beliefs, which people may not be able to express. As Malinowski found in his study of the Trobriand people, ‘There is no written or explicitly expressed code of laws, and their whole tribal tradition, the whole structure of their society, are embodied in the most elusive of all materials; the human being.’¹⁰⁰ A congregation differs from Malinowski’s tribal experience in that they do have formally written and explicitly expressed codes of law and belief to a degree. However, there still remain elements of conduct and belief which are unwritten, with more detailed observation and interpretation required to uncover them.

Participant-observation takes on a particularly important role in the study of a Pentecostal congregation due to the movement’s strong focus on experience and oral transmission of faith. I believe that we can learn the most about ordinary Pentecostal beliefs and experiences when personal testimonies are partnered with observation of worship, rituals and interaction with God. The difficulty of participant observation lies in deciding how immersed the researcher needs to become in the life of the congregation in order to gain sufficient understanding and data, as well as deciding what role to take within the group in terms of levels of participation and observation.

Level of Immersion

For Malinowski, the elementary rule of fieldwork was that the researcher ‘ought to put himself in good conditions of work, that is, in the main, to live without other white men, right among the natives.’¹⁰¹ Racial and gender based prejudices of his day aside, Malinowski argues that only by living in close and persistent contact with the tribe in question can the researcher observe everyday events and interactions, become familiar enough to be largely

¹⁰⁰ Malinowski, B. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific: An Account of Native Enterprise and Adventure in the Archipelagoes of Melanesian New Guinea*. (Originally published 1922) (Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2005) p.9

¹⁰¹ Malinowski, *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*, p.5

ignored by the tribe and allow them to continue life as normal. Part of the reason for this close interaction is to achieve understanding. More recently, Kleinman and Copp highlight the pressure placed on a fieldwork researcher to collect a vast data set, as ‘when we lack an experience of immersion, we may feel inauthentic’.¹⁰² However, I do not feel that immersion in the worldview of the group and gathering a sizeable data set necessitates a Malinowski-esque life change. Rather, the purpose of living with the group is primarily to do with the moral attitude of the discipline.

This study aligns itself closest to the moral attitude of anthropological ethnography in its attempt to present the group under study sympathetically rather than with suspicion.¹⁰³ Geertz explains that, ‘descriptions of Berbers, Jewish, or French culture must be cast in terms of the constructions we imagine Berbers, Jews, or Frenchmen to place upon what they live through, the formulas they use to define what happens to them.’¹⁰⁴ As far as possible, the understood worldview of the group rather than of the researcher should be used to describe and interpret events and experiences.¹⁰⁵ As the academic journal *Ethnography* explains in its manifesto, ethnography is about ‘respecting, recording, representing at least partly *in its own terms*, the irreducibility of human experience.’¹⁰⁶ This undoubtedly involves a level of immersion in the rituals, literature and beliefs of the group, however for a congregation there is no way to “live with the tribe”, short of moving in with one particular family. There is no set standard for a suitable level of involvement. Even among believers there are varying levels of ‘immersion’;

¹⁰² Kleinman, S. and Copp, M.A. *Emotions and Fieldwork*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1993) p.10

¹⁰³ Katz, J. & Csordas, T.J. “Phenomenological ethnography in sociology and anthropology” *Ethnography*, 4(3) (2003) 275-288 (p.275); of course the data collected is analysed critically and the resulting model is evaluated critically but the stories of believers themselves are treated from a theological angle, sympathetic to their experiences and beliefs about the divine and not looking beyond their ‘God’ experiences to the socio-psychological explanation beneath.

¹⁰⁴ Geertz, “Thick Description”, p.221

¹⁰⁵ Rambo advocates a stage of ‘understanding’ in his proposed method for researchers of conversion. He says that ‘understanding is grasping the worldview, experience, and cognitive systems of the people we are studying, utilizing *their* orientation as much as possible to view their life situation, an effort that will itself deepen the capacity for empathy’ (Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.26)

¹⁰⁶ Willis, P. and Trondmann, M. “Manifesto of Ethnography” *Ethnography*, 1(1) (2000) 5-16 (p.5)

some will only attend Sunday worship, others will belong to Life Groups and attend some weekly activities and others will participate on a leadership level.¹⁰⁷ The level to which the researcher participates in the many activities conducted by a congregation will depend on where the researcher sits on the scale between participant and observer.

Observer-as-Participant

Raymond L. Gold sets out a helpful typology for participant observation. He plays on the conceptually opposite roles of participant and observer, claiming that they create a scale of four potential positions that a researcher can hold in the field; complete participant (CP), participant-as-observer (PO), observer-as-participant (OP), and complete observer (CO). I would cast doubt on whether the CP or CO researcher exists in reality or was merely reflective of the objective benchmark for the social sciences at the time. This research is located firmly within the *observer-as-participant* group; I participated on a peripheral level, attending church services and other events open to any enquiring individuals and may have come across as an insider to some. During my observation of open worship services, bible studies and mid-week activities I participated by joining in with worship, prayer, receiving communion and offering assistance where needed. I did not form any close friendships with other congregants, attend any closed gatherings or adopt responsibilities or commitments within the church. I made no attempt to join a small group, to meet with church members socially outside of a formal worship or activity setting, or perform any ‘inner circle’ activities.¹⁰⁸

Gold is quite scathing about the OP role and the only benefit he mentions is that one ‘can leave the field almost at will’ in the eventuality of ‘threatening informants’, without

¹⁰⁷ Life Groups are small groups of people from the congregation who meet on a weekly or monthly basis during the week for fellowship, discipleship and bible study. See Chapter Five, section 5.4.4 for further discussion.

¹⁰⁸ Angrosino, M. *Doing Ethnographic and Observational Research*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2007) p.55.

disrupting friendships, bonds or facing emotional conflict in either the researcher or the respondents.¹⁰⁹ However, I feel that Gold's dichotomy between the OP and PO positions is itself too broad. The key difference appears to be in the formation of relationships with respondents (OP does not form relationships whereas PO does) and this in itself is a vague concept and difficult to define. The term 'relationship' cannot be easily quantified and therefore it could mean anything from sitting with and speaking to the same people at Sunday services, meeting with people in a social setting outside of fieldwork, to even forming romantic relationships with research participants. Furthermore, there may be cases where the researcher has feelings of dislike for or 'empathic disagreement' with the group being studied and therefore 'relationship' in the sense of friendship would be a lie.¹¹⁰ It becomes clear that there is a much broader scale of involvement between OP and PO than Gold's typology allows for.

In contrast to the insider-outsider problem, the participant-observer role is something which can be controlled by the researcher. The level to which I intended to participate and observe was decided before I entered the field. One question which arises from a predominantly observer role is the extent to which researcher status should be revealed during observation. Although my participant observation was not conducted covertly, a large congregation does allow for researcher anonymity.¹¹¹ For instance, I was able to remain unnoticed during my initial participant observation under the self-imposed rule that if someone explicitly asked me what I was studying then I would tell them. I would not reveal my identity without prompting but also would not lie to anyone in the congregation. The reason for this anonymity was to

¹⁰⁹ Gold, R.L. "Roles in Sociological Field Observations" *Social Forces*, 36(3) (1958) 217-223 (p.221)

¹¹⁰ Kleinmann, S. & Copp, M.A. "Emotions and Fieldwork", p.40. Referring to David Gordon (1987) who experienced conflict with a proselytising group he was researching. He turned this conflict into open discussion which allowed for empathy, if not agreement.

¹¹¹ See section 2.3.1.3 for a discussion and explanation of this process.

experience the church initially as a pre-convert,¹¹² to experience the stages of being noticed, welcomed and drawn into the congregation. This study views conversion as a process and so it was important to understand the experience of the church from the viewpoint of someone pre-commitment as well as that of a committed member.

2.3.1.2 Insider or outsider

A moment of reflection is required with regard my position as an insider and an outsider to the congregation being studied. As a self-identifying Christian, with a Baptist upbringing and belonging to a Charismatic Anglican church at the time of writing, the combination of these contexts allows me a great deal of understanding and sympathy with the Elim movement in terms of worship and ritual. The congregation baptises adults and distributes communion in individual ‘shot glasses’ like my childhood church but also openly encourages and practices encounter with the Holy Spirit and use of spiritual gifts in worship services, which bears similarity to my current charismatic congregation. Also the type of building, the style of worship and the songs sung were familiar to me. This allowed for a relatively common language to be used between researcher and participants. I could participate in worship and ritual freely and easily without worrying about learning a song or having to ask instructions to receive communion.

On the other hand, I am an outsider to the Pentecostal tradition and have, as I explained in *chapter one*, held hostile feelings towards the movement in the past. Significantly, I have not experienced that most central of Pentecostal *charismata*, the gift of tongues, which some might see as a sign that I do not fall under the category of Spirit-filled Christian. Also, by the very nature of being a researcher I hold the position of an ‘outsider’ looking in on the field as

¹¹² I knew that I could not remain anonymous once interviews had begun and so the initial participant-observation stage was the only time I could observe the congregation as a potential “convert”.

an object of study. Furthermore, I do not belong to that particular congregation and therefore was initially an outsider to in-jokes, references to other members and events. Individuals do make every effort to bring outsiders 'inside' however, and the choice to remain on the periphery was mine. Finally, I was an outsider to all informants on one or more individual levels; be it through my gender, race, nationality or age.¹¹³

Stringer recognised a lack of scholarly discussion concerning the insider-outsider problem in the ethnographic study of religion and so brought together works from a variety of scholars on the subject in his book *Theorizing Faith*.¹¹⁴ Stringer suggests that it is often the group, who create a construct of faith, which places some inside and some outside. There is something 'shared' which constitutes faith. At the same time there will always be elements of experience and discourse which we will share with one religious group and not another. None can accurately be located as either complete insider or complete outsider. Parker, supporting Kleinman, suggests that 'The ethnographer, no matter how successful she is in participant observation, either is or becomes an outsider – even if she begins as an indigenous member of the community she studies'.¹¹⁵ As we have seen, I stand somewhere in the middle of the scale. Rather than list the pros and cons of both the insider and the outsider perspective, I will instead explore the process of negotiating the space in the middle, as neither an insider nor an outsider.

¹¹³ Feminist ethnography in particular has drawn attention to the importance of these elements in impacting the reflection and interpretation of the researcher. As well as my personal faith and context, my research is also impacted by 'gendered reflexivity and observation' (observed by Ward, F. "The Messiness of Studying Congregations using Ethnographic Methods" in *Congregational Studies in the UK*, ed. by Guest, M., Tusting, K. and Woodhead, L. (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004) 125-137 (pp.130-131))

¹¹⁴ Stringer, M. "Introduction: Theorizing Faith" in *Theorizing Faith: The Insider/Outsider Problem in the Study of Ritual*, ed. by Arweck, E. and Stringer, M. (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2002) 1-20 (p.2); This compilation raises questions such as: what makes someone an 'insider'? Can we be a 'participant' observer if we are in any way an outsider? Who decides who is an 'insider', is it the group or the researcher?

¹¹⁵ Parker, M. "Ethnography/ethics", *Social Science & Medicine*, 65(11) (2007) 2248-2259 (p.2253)

I experienced a great deal of similarly to Breen, who found herself to be neither an insider nor an outsider in her study of grief following fatal car crashes in Western Australia. Breen found that she did not struggle to recruit informants despite her outsider status. She concludes that 'the bereaved informants were keen to 'voice' their experiences to someone who was willing to listen to them'.¹¹⁶ I feel that a similar factor motivated my participants, who were not made aware of my religious status at the time of being invited for interview. The willingness in Pentecostalism to share testimony, particularly as a means of evangelism, means that outsider status could be seen to be an advantage for the researcher. However, there was a desire by some respondents to establish my identity as a Christian when considering how to communicate certain experiences and to assess how sympathetically their stories might be treated.

I ensured that any connection as an 'insider' was communicated clearly to the church leadership and gatekeepers when seeking their permission to conduct research. The leadership asked me during our first meeting what my religious affiliation was and which church I attended. I did not feel at the time that this question would determine whether or not I was granted access, but with hindsight I acknowledge that it may have been a factor in my research being viewed positively and access being gained swiftly.

As Ochieng discovered through her ethnographic study of families of African descent as a black African mother herself, participants assumed a certain level of understanding from her as an 'insider', which she viewed as being beneficial to her research.¹¹⁷ This assumption of understanding from participants can cause problems, particularly for a researcher in the middle. As my status was not obvious to respondents, each made their own assumptions and

¹¹⁶ Breen, L.J. "The researcher 'in the middle': Negotiating the insider/outsider dichotomy", *Australian Community Psychologist*, 19(1) (2007) 163-174 (p.167)

¹¹⁷ Ochieng, B.M.N. "'You Know What I Mean': The Ethical and Methodological Dilemmas and Challenges for Black Researchers Interviewing Black Families" *Qualitative Health Research*, 20(12) (2010) 1725-1735 (p.1728)

chose their language and elaborated on terminology accordingly. The obvious solution was to adopt the role of questioning outsider, positioning the participant as ‘expert’, empowering them to explain themselves in more detail and allowing the researcher to ask ‘obvious’ questions. This idea of playing up differences was proposed by Tinker and Armstrong who suggest that, even as the research progresses and the researcher gains more understanding, she should retain the impression of being an ‘uninformed outsider’ to avoid assumptions.¹¹⁸ Particularly when discussing matters of religious experience, which can be difficult to express verbally, it is important for the researcher to attempt to draw out explanations and not settle for a “you know what I mean” response.

Therefore, for the researcher who sits in the middle of the insider-outsider spectrum, she holds a position of power whereby she can emphasise one position over the other as necessary. This must not be done to the extent of confusing the respondents or gatekeepers, but rather it involves a delicate balance between the understanding sympathy of the insider, with the uninformed curiosity of the outsider. However, any manipulation or miscommunication of researcher status and intentions raises ethical concerns, which will be explored in the following section.

2.3.1.3 Fieldwork ethics

The history of research involving human subjects, particularly for scientific purposes, is littered with examples of questionable and sometimes dangerous methods. These commonly involved experimenting on people who, in that particular time and place were considered to be on the fringes of society (e.g. orphans, prisoners, racial groups) whereby the end of

¹¹⁸ Tinker, C. & Armstrong, N. “From the Outside Looking in: How an Awareness of Difference Can Benefit the Qualitative Research Process”, *The Qualitative Report*, 13(1) (2008) 53-60 (p.57)

furthering knowledge was considered to justify any harmful means.¹¹⁹ When the call came for stricter ethical conduct in medical research, the pressure for ethical protocols in other disciplines developed alongside. Fieldwork has not been immune to the policies of ethics review boards, despite the view of some that protocols do not fit with an ethnographic model of fieldwork as it is a process of development, which cannot be predicted in advance but requires on-going *negotiation*.¹²⁰ However, there are aspects of fieldwork that can be anticipated and planned for in advance, even if the reality changes during the research. I will discuss three main ethical issues, which commonly arise in the study of congregations and in collecting life stories; (1) the impact of the research (on field and researcher), (2) power relations and (3) safeguarding.

Impact of the research

It is considered virtually impossible for the fieldwork researcher to remain a neutral, objective observer.¹²¹ Therefore, it has been suggested that the responsibility of the researcher should be, rather than to leave the field unchanged, to ‘make sure that people are not worse off for having let us study them, even if we cannot guarantee that their lives will be improved’.¹²²

Some researchers have in the past aimed at leaving the field ‘untouched’ by conducting covert observation, whereby the researcher does not reveal their researcher or outsider status. There are various reasons for conducting covert observation; from the desire to obtain information perceived to be only given to ‘insiders’, to the reporting of secret or even illegal activities.

¹¹⁹ See Loue, S. *Textbook of Research Ethics: Theory and Practice* (Hingham, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000) 1-44 for a historical survey of key examples of human experimentation and research, predominantly in the US but also globally. The review includes ‘Nazi Experiments’, ‘Cold War Experiments’ and ‘Prison Experiments’ as well as tracing the development of ‘International Codes and Guidelines’ for research ethics.

¹²⁰ Parker, “Ethnography/ethics”, pp.2252-2253

¹²¹ De Laine, M. *Fieldwork Participation and Practice: Ethics and Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2000), p.124

¹²² De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.142

One example in the field of conversion studies is Balch's covert participation in the Heaven's Gate cult.¹²³ Due to the restricted nature of the group and their practice of cutting ties with the outside world, Balch's covert methods allowed him access to a community, which otherwise would have been denied him. From his observations, Balch learned that conversion to Heaven's Gate involved rapid learning and performing of roles rather than the traditionally understood method of "Brainwashing". Balch himself gives brief mention of his 'questionable' method but concludes that his results would not have been possible without it.¹²⁴ The end, he feels, justifies the means of covert research.¹²⁵

Balch's findings undoubtedly contributed to his academic field, but the question remains, whether his infiltration of the group, befriending and deception of members was ethical. I can believe that in some way the members he interacted with may have been left in a worse position than before he arrived, in that they may have felt deceived and tricked. This may also have led to a deeper distrust of outsiders and researchers once the research findings were published.

A researcher's definition of harm will undoubtedly be skewed by their personal bias towards the group being studied. Researchers must identify their own opinion of the field, and attempt to define what may be viewed as harmful from the perspective of the research participants rather than the researcher. For instance, researchers may feel that the actions of cult leaders are harmful to cult members and therefore exposing the leadership through covert methods may be considered beneficial. However, it may not be viewed this way by the members

¹²³ Balch, R.W. "Looking behind the scenes in a religious cult: Implications for the study of conversion" *Sociological Analysis*, 41(2) (1980) 137-143

¹²⁴ Balch, "Looking behind the scenes in a religious cult", p.138.

¹²⁵ This view was supported by Oakley in her 1983 study of a secretive Gypsy community whereby she deceived them into believing she was in trouble with the police in order to gain their trust. See Levinson, M.P. "Accountability to research participants: unresolved dilemmas and unravelling ethics" *Ethnography and Education*, 5(2) (2010) 193-207 (p.195)

themselves and a sense of personal betrayal by the researcher may be considered more harmful.

One way to avoid feelings of deception and betrayal for participants is to move to the other end of the spectrum and offer full disclosure of researcher status, the aims and objectives of the research. This model of transparency and disclosure is promoted and regulated by Research Ethics Committees and typically followed in ethnographic studies today. However, as Wolcott points out, the possibility of betrayal is ‘ever present’ in fieldwork.¹²⁶ This is because, no matter how clearly we present our aims and goals and no matter how clearly respondents communicate their stories and beliefs, there is always the risk of being misunderstood.¹²⁷

Furthermore, I discovered that in the study of congregations, where attendance during church services is open, unregulated and changes weekly, the ability to obtaining ‘informed consent’ during services is limited. During a Sunday worship service there will always be new or different members of the congregation and therefore, short of announcing my presence and research aims at the beginning of every service I attended over the three-year period, there is no way to ensure that every member of the congregation is aware of my presence as a researcher.¹²⁸ The church leadership gave permission for my participant observation but this does raise the question of whether the consent of the church leadership is equivalent of the consent of the congregation. In the case of worship services where anyone is permitted to attend, those leading, performing or attending give consent to be observed by nature of the

¹²⁶ Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, p.147

¹²⁷ Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, pp.147-8

¹²⁸ I obtained permission from the lead Pastor to attend services in a research capacity and the fact that I would not be introduced to the congregation due to the impracticality (even impossibility) of obtaining consent was revealed to and accepted by the University Ethical Review Committee prior to research commencing. The decision to introduce me to the congregation was left to the discretion of the leadership.

event's 'open' status.¹²⁹ However, in the case of interviews and where personal information is shared, the consent of the leadership is not sufficient. For this reason, I have not used any informal conversations with participants as data as these could be viewed as being given without informed consent and as the result of covert methods.

In addition, Wolcott argues that fieldwork involves the 'art of self-deception in perceiving ourselves as working in service of humanity.'¹³⁰ If not humanity, then at least in service of those we are studying. He calls this self-deception because he believes that research best serves the researcher and we must not be deceived into thinking otherwise, however this does not excuse us from asking the question 'how can this research benefit the participants'? One example springing from the practical-theological model of action research is to involve the congregation in the process and/or to offer practical applications of the findings for their ecclesial context.¹³¹

Finally, it has been noted by De Laine that generally ethical concerns considers the harm researchers might, willingly or unwillingly, do to others but neglects the impact of the fieldwork on the researcher.¹³² The process of balancing commitment to the research participants, funding bodies and academic policies can have a conflicting impact on the researcher.¹³³ Furthermore, in the study of a religious community, whatever her original beliefs, the researcher stands in a position of being a potential convert and must reflect upon the challenges this status presents.

¹²⁹ This might be viewed more as observation by omission rather than covert as there is no intention to deceive, rather the covert nature comes about from the impracticality and disruption of informing all congregants.

¹³⁰ Wolcott, *The Art of Fieldwork*, p.135.

¹³¹ See Chapter Eight for suggested applications of my practical-theological model of conversion for an ecclesial context.

¹³² De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.142.

¹³³ De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.120.

Finally, when gathering testimonies, the researcher can be placed in the role of counsellor by some participants, especially if she practices the feminist methods of listening in interviews whereby personal experiences and empathy are used to extract responses.¹³⁴ The more empathetic and actively listening the researcher is, the more personal and potentially disturbing details of the respondent's life story might be revealed.¹³⁵ Although my participants did not treat their interviews as a form of counselling, I was impacted by their openness and willingness to share very personal details with me. It is the responsibility of the researcher to maintain a distance as researcher, whilst actively listening and engaging the respondent. This requires a skilled management of power relations and an aligning of researcher and participant expectations.

Power relations in the collection and use of testimony

Issues of power relations persist throughout each stage of the fieldwork process, right from the initial discussions with gatekeepers. There is not the scope in this chapter to discuss all power issues faced in a congregational study; with gatekeepers, respondents, informants and leadership. I instead focus on power relations as they relate specifically to the collection and use of people's testimonies. This includes the power between researcher and respondent during the interview itself and in the subsequent use of the testimony in research.

From the time of invitation through to the use of testimonies, the respondent holds the majority of power. Much of this is implicit but also some is given to the respondent by the researcher. Implicitly, the respondent has the power to refuse to participate in the interview and they have the power to reveal or hide whatever information they wish during interview. The researcher also gives the respondent, through the information given on a consent form,

¹³⁴ De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.134

¹³⁵ De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.135.

the power to withdraw any information as ‘off the record’ at any time during or following the interview and also the respondent has the final say on whether a direct quote can be used from their testimony in the final thesis.

Some might argue that the respondent is given too much control over their story and that, once it has been told, the researcher is the owner of the audio recording and transcripts. As long as the respondent’s confidentiality is protected, the researcher should be free to use the story as they wish. However, this view depends on the assumption that the storyteller gives up ownership of their story once it has been told. That the telling of their testimony assumes consent for it to be used for the researcher’s purposes. In contrast to this, I am in agreement with Atkinson who likens the researcher to a midwife, helping with the birth but who at no time owns the baby. He also likens the researcher’s archive to a safe deposit box in a bank. The story is something of value deposited there by the storyteller, that the researcher keeps safe but it is the storyteller who tells the researcher what to do with it, if anything.¹³⁶

It is therefore seen to be the researcher’s responsibility to protect the rights of the storyteller and not to use their testimony against the will of the one who owns it. Furthermore, as respondents’ stories are not reproduced in their entirety in this research, there is the additional responsibility to ensure that any quotes are presented in context and retain the respondents’ meanings. It is important to ensure that the respondent is in control of their story telling; being given freedom to recall and explain the most significant experiences and reflections for them, without interruption or guidance from the researcher. Following this uninterrupted narrative, the researcher may then embark on semi-structured questioning and discussion in

¹³⁶ Atkinson, R. *The Life Story Interview*, (London: SAGE Publications, 1998), p.39

order to uncover layers of meaning and explore particular avenues which are of importance to the research.¹³⁷

The researcher does, of course, hold power in that they have heard and accessed someone's personal life story. During my interviews, respondents would often tell me personal and sometimes disturbing accounts from their lives, placing trust in me as a stranger and an outsider that I will conduct my research as I have told them and that I will not abuse their trust. For this reason that I make clear from the beginning of interviews that information will be treated as confidential and before any direct quotes are used, the respondent will be contacted to obtain their permission. Many respondents viewed this as an unnecessary process as they assured me they did not have anything to hide, but the process is there to ensure that their experiences are not taken out of context during analysis and to highlight to them that they retain control of their testimonies once told.

Safeguarding

Safeguarding is viewed here in terms of ensuring the physical safety and emotional wellbeing of both participant and researcher. Once again this will be viewed in terms of the interview process of the research, as this is the time when the researcher interacted most with respondents and the possibility of harm was strongest. When conducting one-to-one interviews with members of a congregation, there can sometimes be an assumption of safety due to the faith of the group. However, I was also aware of my own personal safety and this prompted me to ensure that all interviews were conducted in a semi-public place linked to the church. I used the church offices for two reasons; firstly, it fostered a feeling of safety for both the researcher and the participant, and secondly the location's affiliation with the church suggested to the participant that the research was supported by the church leadership.

¹³⁷ See Chapter Six, section 6.2.2 for an outline and discussion of particular interview methods used.

The emotional safeguarding of participants is much more difficult to anticipate and define. Overall, the sharing of personal testimony is seen to be a positive experience in Pentecostal circles and in sociological terms it ‘brings together the diverse sources of our identity and gives them coherence’.¹³⁸ However, it can also be a source of distress for some, particularly when testimony is not just given but also questioned. I anticipated two potential areas of emotional distress, through; (1) the experience of testimony giving and (2) the aftermath of sharing testimony in a group.

In the first instance, researchers are warned that, depending on the topics discussed in interviews, emotional responses can be elicited from respondents. The researcher’s response to these emotions can lead to a misunderstanding of expectations between respondent and researcher.¹³⁹ Respondents may view a sympathetic interviewer as a counsellor figure and when this role is not fulfilled or the interview process comes to an end, there may be some emotional harm done. Furthermore, in a life-story interview the respondent may bring up issues from their past, which they have not previously discussed or dealt with and the researcher may not be suitably qualified or prepared for. Discussions surrounding personal faith can occasionally lead to a questioning of religious beliefs rather than edification, if not approached appropriately by the researcher. The researcher must ensure that questioning of incompatible or seemingly contradictory beliefs is kept to a minimum and is not perceived as aggressive. In these instances, it is vital that the purpose and aims of the interview process are clearly understood by both parties.

The second consideration for emotional safeguarding is significantly more difficult to predict and nearly impossible for the researcher to protect against. This involves the process of group

¹³⁸ Wilks, T. “Social Work and Narrative Ethics”, *British Journal of Social Work*, 35(8) (2005) 1249-1264 (p.1254)

¹³⁹ De Laine, *Fieldwork Participation and Practice*, p.134

interviews, whereby groups of people who regularly meet together for bible study were interviewed together about their conversion experiences. For the most part, the sharing of testimony is viewed positively in Pentecostalism and is seen to edify and build up the church. However, where strong views concerning authenticity of conversion are held, there is a possibility that some testimonies may be viewed by others as inadequate or unbiblical. This can cause problems between existing friendships and lead to conflict and emotional distress even after the interview is finished. This is incredibly difficult for an interviewer to anticipate and is seen to be a rare occurrence. The interviewer cannot avoid controversial questions during a study of Pentecostal conversion, as the majority of controversy in the Pentecostal movement surrounds the subject of conversion. In these cases, if participants have been informed that they are under no obligation to answer questions, then any information they share is by their own volition and the researcher cannot take responsibility.

One key way to safeguard respondents from the potential harms of sharing their life stories is for the researcher to ensure complete confidentiality, as far as they have the power to do so. Confidentiality cannot protect respondents from other people who hear their stories in a group context but it does provide assurance that the researcher will not distribute any information, audio recordings or transcripts of their testimony without their consent.¹⁴⁰

Having addressed three problematical areas of fieldwork ethics, I now move on to explore the ways that theology and empirical fieldwork methods complement one another. I start by looking at the recent work of the Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network in the UK before moving on to explore the field of congregational studies and finally, the use of testimony as data for the practical-theological study of conversion.

¹⁴⁰ See Appendix 2 for the consent forms and information given to participants. Read in conjunction with discussion in Chapter 6, section 6.2.1, (particularly footnotes 3 and 4) of the process of obtaining consent and particularly the use of different consent forms for focus group and one-to-one interviews.

2.3.2 Fieldwork and the faith community

Disciplines which utilise empirical methods to study people groups often have similarities to theology. For instance ethnography assumes that there are layers of meaning behind culture, ritual and daily life. This is mirrored in the study of theology. Ethnographic methods have been used in the anthropology of religion for decades but the anthropological interest in Christianity is still relatively new.¹⁴¹ Even rarer is the engagement between anthropologists with theologians although they have much to learn from one another.¹⁴² According to anthropologist, J. Robbins, the theologian's ability to deploy the idea of 'otherness' should make anthropologists 'feel the sting of theological mockery'¹⁴³ There is a shared awareness of and desire to express 'otherness' rooted in theology and ethnography as well as a respect for the representation of the other. The faithful observation and representation of research subjects' experiences should come quite naturally, therefore, to the theologian.

Since 2012 a network of theologians in the UK has been discussing and developing this idea of ethnography and theology combined, in a multi-disciplinary way, in the study of churches. The Ecclesiology and Ethnography Network (EEN) equates ethnography with empirical research and acknowledges, or rather laments, the lack of theologians conducting fieldwork.¹⁴⁴ In the EEN's first publication *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, Pete Ward proposes that 'to understand the church, we should view it as being simultaneously

¹⁴¹ Robbins, J. "Anthropology and Theology: An Awkward Relationship?" *Anthropology Quarterly*, 79(2) (2006) 285-294 (p.285)

¹⁴² Douglas Davies identifies the fundamental distinction between Anthropology and Theology as concerning the existence of God, while arguing that 'experience lies at the heart of each', making them suitable dialogue partners although theology has historically been more ready to engage with anthropology than anthropology to engage with theological perspectives (Davies, D.J. *Anthropology and Theology* (Oxford: Berg Publishers, 2002) pp.1-2)

¹⁴³ Robbins, "Anthropology and Theology" p.287.

¹⁴⁴ Ward, P. "Introduction" in *Perspectives on Ecclesiology and Ethnography*, ed. by Ward, P. (Cambridge: Eerdmans, 2012) 1-10 (p.2). The term 'ethnography' here refers to qualitative methods but there is certainly an element of fieldwork assumed as Pete Ward makes clear in his "Introduction" p.1-2.

theological and social/cultural'.¹⁴⁵ Therefore empirical enquiry arises from the situatedness of churches. Although the EEN's focus is ecclesial, Ward notes that the practice of theology as a whole is also situated, and therefore an ethnographic approach can make a contribution to all areas of theology.¹⁴⁶ The purpose is to overcome 'methodological laziness in ecclesiology' and to talk about social and cultural issues with credibility and rigour.¹⁴⁷

The EEN offers a valuable contribution to the world of ethnography as well as ecclesiology. These scholars take empirical theology seriously and are attempting to situate it within the location of churches. While doing so they are developing unique methodologies which will help broaden and inform the study of church. The developments and observations they make are beneficial to anyone wishing to engage in empirical theology. When viewed as a community of Christian believers, the church represents and embodies all aspects of Christian experience and practice. It is for this reason that the congregation was chosen as the ideal field from within which to conduct my empirical research into Pentecostal conversion.

2.3.2.1 Congregational studies

This research contributes to the steadily growing number of empirical and ethnographic studies of congregations in the UK.¹⁴⁸ It is one of only a handful of studies into Elim congregations and the first of any kind to be conducted within this congregation.¹⁴⁹ Founded

¹⁴⁵ Ward, "Introduction", p.2.

¹⁴⁶ Ward, "Introduction", p.3.

¹⁴⁷ Ward, "Introduction", p.4.

¹⁴⁸ Most notably: Stringer, M. *On the Perception of Worship*, (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 1999); Guest, M., Tusting, K. & Woodhead, L. *Congregational Studies in the UK*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004); Guest, M. *Evangelical Identity and Contemporary Culture: A Congregational Study in Innovation*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2007); and Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*.

¹⁴⁹ Helen Cookson's 2008 thesis presents an ethnographic study of four Elim Pentecostal churches in the North East of England. Cookson's is the first ethnographic study specifically focussed on Elim in the UK, however her focus is not theological and she recommends that further ethnography of Elim is required in the UK's larger cities, such as Birmingham. See Cookson, H. *At the Edge of Faith: An Ethnographic Study of British Pentecostalism*, (Doctoral thesis, Durham University, 2008). Available to download from Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/1340>.

in Monaghan, Northern Ireland in 1915, the Elim movement represents the development of Pentecostalism in response to British experiences and culture as well as the response of British people to the adoption and development of such a global movement and, subsequently the inclusion of people from other cultural backgrounds into the mix.¹⁵⁰ Therefore the Elim Pentecostal Church offers the ideal case study of Pentecostalism in the UK.

Christian congregations are seen to form such a strong part of the histories and social make-up of the US and the UK that congregational studies in these contexts have developed almost parallel to each other.¹⁵¹ However, Guest, Tusting and Woodhead highlight that studies in the UK are typically intrinsic, as opposed to the US where they are often extrinsic, with findings being related to broader agendas.¹⁵² Whatever its expression, the disciplined study of church groups is an important aspect of practical theology as congregations are the melting pot of Cartledge's three levels of discourse, making them a fascinating and important field for practical-theological enquiry.

A congregational study is the formal study of typically a faith-based congregation or congregations. However, the methods, motives and desired outcomes of congregational studies can vary wildly from case to case. Traditionally, congregational studies adopt social scientific or ethnographic methods (both qualitative and quantitative) as these are seen to be best suited for the study of people groups. The motives can range from an academic wanting to understand a particular aspect of the congregation's make up or beliefs typically from a sociological, psychological, anthropological or theological viewpoint, to a member of the church wanting to assess the way they do things in order to create better policies or practices.

¹⁵⁰ Robinson, J. *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005) pp.124-5. See chapter five for a more detailed history of Elim's beginnings and its move to Birmingham.

¹⁵¹ Ammerman, N.T., Carroll, J.W., Dudley, C.S. and McKinney, W. *Studying Congregations: a new handbook*, (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) p.7, comment on the importance of Christianity in the culture of the US.

¹⁵² Woodhead, L., Guest, M. & Tusting, K. "Congregational Studies: Taking Stock", in *Congregational Studies in the UK*, ed. by Guest, M., Tusting, K. and Woodhead, L., (Surrey: Ashgate, 2004) 1-24 (p.2)

The desired outcomes can range from an academic thesis, a change in policy or even doctrine, a public article or feedback to the congregation in other forms. In this study, the methods used are primarily ethnographic, the aim is to identify the congregation's theology and experiences of conversion. My motivation for this study is unavoidably extrinsic, in that the desired outcome is a unique contribution to the theological study of Pentecostal conversion in the form of a doctoral thesis, by offering practical-theological model of conversion with applications for academic and ecclesial theological discourse. However I am also motivated by an intrinsic interest in the subject of Pentecostal conversion and the desire to broaden the pool of empirical studies.¹⁵³

Having discussed the problems which can arise in the fieldwork study of congregations, I will raise one further issue in conducting a congregational study; that of the fabled 'Pentecostal congregation'. The question of who counts as a participant in a study into Pentecostal conversion arose early into my fieldwork planning. It was concluded that membership or regular attendance at a Pentecostal church and, as there are no restrictions on who can attend the church, self-identification as Pentecostal would be the criterion. However, the question 'do you consider yourself to be Pentecostal' proved to be the most difficult for respondents to answer during interviews. The question prompted the majority of respondents to offer their own definition of Pentecostalism before they would affiliate with the label.

Ammerman highlights that 'no two congregations are alike' because they are all shaped by theological tradition and their larger secular cultural context.¹⁵⁴ I would add to Ammerman's observation that, due to the Free Church ecclesiology of Pentecostalism, coupled with

¹⁵³ Ryan, R.M. and Deci, E.L. "Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivations: Classic Definitions and New Directions" *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 25(1) (2000) 54-67, p.55; in which the authors explain, '*intrinsic motivation*...refers to doing something because it is inherently interesting or enjoyable, and *extrinsic motivation*, which refers to doing something because it leads to a separable outcome'

¹⁵⁴ Ammerman, N.T. "Culture and Identity in the Congregation" in *Studying Congregations: a new handbook*, ed. by Ammerman, N.T., Carroll, J.W., Dudley, C.S. and McKinney, W., (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998) 78-104 (pp.78-9)

denominational drifting in the UK, the ordinary theology of each congregation is also made up of a mixture of other theological traditions with multiple definitions of Pentecostalism. It therefore becomes impossible to identify a 'Pentecostal congregation' in the sense of a group of people who all share identifiably Pentecostal beliefs and values. Rather the group identity of 'Pentecostal' had to come from the *ecclesial* rather than from the *ordinary* level. If I tried to gather a group of one hundred research participants who all believed specific Pentecostal doctrines and had experienced particular experiences, I suspect the resulting group would not all come from the same congregation. Therefore, the practice of congregational studies in the UK reveals more than just shared beliefs but can tell us a great deal about the nature of community and the negotiation of faith and practice among a group of people with often varied, sometimes conflicting, theologies and experiences.

2.3.2.2 Testimony as data

Finally, a word must be said about the use of testimony as the primary source of empirical data for the study of Pentecostal conversion. This is by no means a new or novel approach to conversion studies but has been found to be a rich and fascinating resource for past researchers.¹⁵⁵ In the case of Pentecostalism, individual testimony is even more important as it is seen as a commitment mechanism,¹⁵⁶ a tool for evangelism and a biblical mandate to believers.

The discipline of narrative theology identifies three distinct types of testimony: *life story*, *community stories* and *canonical stories*.¹⁵⁷ This study focuses its data collection on *life* or individual testimonies. However the *community* and *canonical* stories inevitably shape and

¹⁵⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.137

¹⁵⁶ McGuire, M.B. "Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism in Catholic Pentecostal Prayer Groups", *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 16(2) (1977) 165-168 (p.166)

¹⁵⁷ Fackre, G. "Narrative Theology: An Overview", *Interpretation*, 57(4) (1983) 340-352. (See also Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.17).

are shaped by these and so will also be explored and used in analysis. Testimonies can be given publically, semi-publically or privately. Giving testimony most frequently refers to a verbal act but can be transmitted through other means.¹⁵⁸ A variety of testimonies were encountered during my fieldwork through observation of semi-public testimony in Sunday services, group testimony shared in focus group interviews, written testimonies displayed on the church website and predominantly detailed testimonies shared in one-to-one interviews. Although not exclusively so, testimony or one's 'story' as it is called at LCF, is very closely linked with the experience of conversion.

A believer's story is at once deeply personal and also the property of the community to which they belong as it forms part of their *community* story. Furthermore, the process of scripture shaping present testimony is strongly identifiable within the theology of the Pentecostal movement.¹⁵⁹ It is believed that every individual can encounter their own Pentecost at conversion, which leads to a natural desire to frame personal testimony particularly within the biblical Acts narrative.¹⁶⁰ Pentecostal testimony witnesses that the same Spirit, whom Jesus promised would fill the disciples with power and allow them to witness "to the ends of the earth" is encountered by believers today.¹⁶¹ With each new account the biblical narrative is seen to be supported and revitalised and the community's theology reinforced.

The Greek word for testimony found in the New Testament is *marturea* or, more commonly presented as *martureo*, the act of 'bearing witness'. In the New Testament, this legal

¹⁵⁸ For example, the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship website has a section dedicated to congregants' stories. These range from life narratives reflecting on coming to faith, to one individual act of support or intervention from God in their life. Although not verbal, these would still be considered as testimonies.

¹⁵⁹ Ellington, S. "A Reciprocal Reshaping of History and Experience in the Psalms: Interactions with Pentecostal Testimony", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 16(1) (2007) 18-31 (p.24); see also Ellington, S. "'Can I get a Witness': The Myth of Pentecostal Orality and the Process of Traditioning in the Psalms", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 20(1) (2011) 54-67 (pp.56-7); Cartledge, M.J. *Encountering the Spirit: The charismatic tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006) p.83.

¹⁶⁰ Cartledge, *Encountering the Spirit*, p.83.

¹⁶¹ Acts 1:8 (NIV)

language refers primarily to the human attestation to the life, actions and identity of Jesus Christ. Personal testimony is the believer's witness to the activity of God in their life.

Perhaps the most powerful form of testimony for Pentecostals today is that of the *conversion narrative*. This marks the beginning of a believer's new life, their journey with God and attests to the continued redeeming and sanctifying work of the Holy Spirit in the modern world. A believer's witness to the saving grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit in their lives can act as a kind of sacrament to the congregation, pointing them back to the community's core beliefs about salvation. This sacrament serves to unify the congregation in that moment in much the same way that receiving communion seeks to. However, in the same way that speaking in tongues requires an interpretation, the practice of giving testimony is often treated with the same care in a public or semi-public Pentecostal setting.¹⁶²

Whilst occasionally alluded to in Pentecostal theological writings, the subject of testimony as a manifestation of the Spirit remains relatively uncharted.¹⁶³ I wish to propose that testimony should be viewed under the category of inspired speech, along with the gifts of prophesy, words of knowledge, speaking in tongues and interpretation. As has already been discussed, the practice of *martureo* is closely linked to the receiving of the Holy Spirit, particularly in Acts. At the beginning of the Acts account, Jesus' promise that the disciples will receive the Holy Spirit directly precedes a promise in the same breath, that they "will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth".¹⁶⁴ The receiving of the Holy Spirit in power and the call to *martureo* are the last recorded words of

¹⁶² I discuss testimony giving as a commitment ritual in the same category as baptism and communion in Chapter Four, section 4.7.2.

¹⁶³ Leeper, G. "The nature of the Pentecostal gift with special reference to Numbers 11 and Acts 2", *Asian Journal of Pentecostal Studies*, 6(1) (2003) 23-38 (p.37); Yong, A. *The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005) p.146; Cartledge, M.J. *Encountering the Spirit*, p.83 (testimony is included in a chapter on inspired speech but no further reference is made to its inspiration).

¹⁶⁴ Acts 1:8 (NIV)

Christ before his ascension and as such the importance placed on the connection between the spirit and testimony requires deeper enquiry.

As a means of data collection for this study testimony is invaluable because it presents a doorway into the ordinary theology of believers about their conversion experiences. Despite its common use in conversion studies, the subjectivity and changeability of people's stories at one time made testimony an increasingly questionable and suspect resource for scientific enquiry. The more studies showed the role communities play in the construction of conversion accounts and the process of re-interpreting past events based on current worldview, the less reliable testimonies seemed as an accurate account of 'what actually happened'.¹⁶⁵ According to Gooren, however, it is this re-interpretative nature of testimony, which he refers to as *biographical reconstruction* which is one of the most promising factors to show that genuine conversion has taken place.¹⁶⁶ Therefore the changes and re-interpretations of past events should, wherever possible, be noted and embraced as crucial insights into religious change.

In this respect, biblical theologian Scott Ellington argues from the Old Testament that testimony has never been intended to be a historical account of events "as they happened". Ellington instead advocates a biblical understanding of Pentecostal testimony as 'memory' as opposed to 'historiography'.¹⁶⁷ This distinction allows for a more fluid and malleable approach to testimony, not limited to recalling past events. When viewed in this way, biblical accounts can be interwoven with present experience, hope for the future and assist the believer in interpreting their current experiences in light of the past. Therefore, 'by insisting

¹⁶⁵ Snow, D.A. & Machalek, R. "The Sociology of Conversion" *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10 (1984) 167-190 (pp.175-8)

¹⁶⁶ Gooren, H. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: Tracing Patterns of Change in Faith Practice*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010) p.44; this view is also expressed by McKnight, S. "Was Paul a Convert?" *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 110-132 (p.122)

¹⁶⁷ Ellington, "A Reciprocal Reshaping of History and Experience in the Psalms", p.22.

that experiences in the present be integrated with their salvation story, Israel places their core story endlessly at risk, while at the same time making possible a fresh owning of that story by each new generation.’¹⁶⁸

The ‘risk’ Ellington refers to is the ever present danger that current experiences of God will not correspond with the biblical understanding of his character. Worse still, by advocating the biblical testimony of salvation *despite* present unanswered prayers or perceived absence of God, the believer leaves their testimony vulnerable to attacks on its validity. In a present day Christian context, many churches appear to have felt this risk too acutely and lost the confidence, and perhaps the faith, to call God to account as a covenant partner when his present actions appear to contradict his past promises.¹⁶⁹ The result, according to Ellington, is a lack of lament in Christian testimony, a lack of engagement with the past and subsequently a loss of a “fresh owning” of the biblical story. The conversion studies scholar, in using believers’ testimonies as data, has the opportunity to present not only the story of their conversion but also the multiple layers of meaning by which the believer’s experience is connected to the broader biblical narrative.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have identified theology is an appropriate field of empirical enquiry and outlined an intra-disciplinary approach utilising qualitative methods from the social sciences within an embedded case study. I locate myself in the observer-as-participant role and have

¹⁶⁸ Ellington, “A Reciprocal Reshaping of History and Experience in the Psalms”, p.27.

¹⁶⁹ McKnight refers to conversion testimonies in his childhood church being encouraged to be dramatic, and that those stories ‘gave shape to how to learned to tell our own stories’ (McKnight, S. *Finding Faith, Losing Faith: Stories of Conversion and Apostasy* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008) p.3). Similarly, if a church encourages positive or triumphalist testimony, then this may inform how others tell their stories and result in a loss of honesty in testimony giving. This must be considered when asking someone to give their story, that their natural reaction may be to give the ‘expected’ narrative and the researcher has a responsibility to uncover the lament and honest experience which might be under the surface.

explored some of the ethical challenges of performing fieldwork in a congregation. I concluded that, while an element of ‘covert’ research is unavoidable during participant observation, the only way to safeguard respondents against potential harm in interviews is to ensure that researcher and participant expectations are equal and to view the participants’ story as their own possession throughout.

I have briefly explored the practice of congregational studies and in particular the growing pool of congregational studies in the UK to which this thesis offers itself as a contribution. Finally I highlighted the importance of testimony for a practical theological study of Pentecostal conversion and repeated Ellington’s challenge to scholars to view testimony as *memory* rather than history, thus presenting conversion stories in the context of the wider biblical story, reflecting the convert entering into that narrative.

In *chapter three* I will survey the empirical literature of conversion studies from the disciplines of the human sciences and from here the concept of ‘conversion’ finds its broader meaning outside of a Christian context. While these studies neglect any theological context, I explore how these disciplines have developed our understanding of conversion from a secular perspective. Furthermore, the literature provides an interesting view of how Pentecostal-charismatic expressions of Christianity have been viewed as New Religious Movements by the wider academic community. The social sciences discussion about conversion not only informs the situational analysis of the ordinary experiences in this study, but it is from here that I identify the multi-disciplinary stage-model from Lewis Rambo’s seminal work *Understanding Religious Conversion*, as the most appropriate framework for this study’s empirical data collection.

CHAPTER THREE

CONVERSION THEORY: LESSONS FROM THE HUMAN SCIENCES

3.1 Introduction

As I read the literature...I began to believe that the published material on conversion resembled a metropolitan train yard crowded with separate tracks that ran parallel to each other, where each individual train had its own assigned track and never crossed over to another...only a few scholars of conversion were aware that the subject was traversed by more than one track, and that there could even be more than one train on each track.¹⁷⁰

This is the conclusion drawn by Lewis Rambo from the conversion literature within his field of the human sciences.¹⁷¹ The aim of this chapter is to lead the reader through this ‘train yard’ which prompted Rambo to take stock of conversion scholarship. I begin by highlighting the main trains (conversion theories) that have been driven repeatedly upon the well-worn, but typically separate tracks (academic disciplines) during the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁷² From this starting point I go on to outline Rambo’s contribution of a holistic stage model, as an attempt to reorganise and unify the train yard of conversion theory, in his seminal contribution, *Understanding Religious Conversion*. Finally, I explore the significance and weaknesses of the dominant conversion theories in the human sciences post-Rambo. Throughout this chapter I particularly highlight the presentation of Pentecostal-Charismatic conversion as it has been expressed through the lens of the human sciences.

¹⁷⁰ Rambo, L.R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press 1993) p.xiv

¹⁷¹ Human Sciences is taken here to refer to the disciplines of Sociology, Psychology and Anthropology, as well as their various sub-genres (socio-psychology etc).

¹⁷² Rambo does not define his terms here but I interpret it to mean that the train yard is conversion studies as a whole; the tracks are broader disciplines (e.g. sociology of religion, psychology of religion, theology, anthropology etc) and the trains are particular focuses or themes of conversion studies (e.g. cultural, emotional, brainwashing theory, beliefs etc). Disciplines seem to allow only certain themes without branching out or engaging with methods and concerns within other disciplines. The most notable is the ‘train’ of beliefs sticking to the theological ‘track’ and rarely being invited onto others, and theology often ignoring other tracks altogether.

I conclude that Rambo's model is not superseded in its breadth or holistic approach by any subsequent models and it therefore offers the most appropriate model through which to explore conversion empirically. However, despite Rambo's sympathetic treatment of the religious aspect and, I believe, his genuine desire to include the theological 'track' in his discussion, I argue that there remains to be introduced to conversion studies a serious and sincere exploration of the perceived role of the divine in conversion experiences, the beliefs surrounding the conversion process and those of the faith being adopted. I argue that the human sciences are concerned with how and why people convert but they do not ask what people are converting to or what they believe happens theologically through conversion. The present study aims to redress this balance.

3.2 "Classic" conversion theories

In the latter half of the twentieth century, conversion studies were experiencing renewed momentum, largely due to an increased prominence of New Religious Movements (NRM), particularly in the USA.¹⁷³ A high proportion of ground-breaking conversion studies which emerged during the 1960s to 1990s focussed on groups that were considered NRM or 'deviant'.¹⁷⁴ Studies into NRMs are of particular interest to this thesis as, during the period

¹⁷³ Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion" *Annual Review of Sociology*, 10 (1984), pp.167-8; Richardson, J.T. "The Active vs. Passive Convert: Paradigm Conflict in Conversion/Recruitment Research" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 24(2) (1985) 163-179 (p.163)

¹⁷⁴ See Lofland, J. and Stark, R. "Becoming a world saver: a theory of conversion to a deviant perspective" *American Sociological Review*, 30(6) (1965) 862-75; Balch, R.W. "Looking behind the scenes in a religious cult: Implications for the study of conversion" *Sociology of Religion*, 41(2) (1980) 137-43; Long, T.E. and Hadden, J.K. "Religious conversion and the concept of socialization: Integrating the brainwashing and drift models" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 22(1) (1983) 1-14; Beckford, J.A. and Richardson, J.T. "A Bibliography of Social Scientific Studies of New Religious Movements" *Social Compass*, 30(1) (1983) 111-135; and Snow and Machalek, "The Sociology of Conversion" pp.167-90

under examination, Pentecostalism was still considered a ‘sect’ and a number of important studies into conversion focussed on Pentecostal-charismatic groups.¹⁷⁵

The following literature is organised according to overarching explanatory concepts, or paradigms.¹⁷⁶ During the focal period, different paradigms were being continually explored, resurrected and refined over time. It is therefore the most useful way to view the literature on conversion from the human sciences. Traditionally, scholars of conversion have been preoccupied with answering two main questions: (1) *what* is conversion; whether this can be universally identified or defined and, more contentiously, (2) *why* do people convert; are converts active or passive participants? The literature concerning each question will be explored below, revealing that the studies explored serve to simultaneously limit and overcomplicate the train yard of conversion scholarship, whilst failing to present a satisfactory picture of the complex reality of religious conversion.

3.2.1 Defining conversion and identifying ‘true’ converts

When faced with the task of researching religious conversion from a sociological/psychological perspective, scholars initially look to identify their research group from within clearly defined parameters. For scholars of conversion, this act of defining the group upon which their study is focussed presents a challenging beginning as the conversion experience is often personal and one group’s view of what constitutes a *genuine* convert will commonly contradict another’s, sometimes within the same religious tradition.¹⁷⁷ This means

¹⁷⁵ See Heirich, M. “Change of heart: A test of some widely held theories about religious conversion” *American Journal of Sociology*, 83(3) (1977) 653-680; McGuire, M.B. “Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism in Catholic Pentecostal Prayer Groups” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 16(2) (1977) 165-8; and Ullman, C. “Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents of Religious Conversion” *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 43(1) (1982) 183-92

¹⁷⁶ “Paradigms” is a term favoured by Richardson in “Active vs. Passive Convert”. Within these broader themes there are ‘key, critical, orienting, defining’ “motif experiences” as explored by Lofland, J. and Skonovd, N. “Conversion Motifs” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 20(4) (1981) 373-85.

¹⁷⁷ Orthodox and Reform/Liberal Judaism is an example of conflicting opinions of conversion present within the same broad religious tradition.

that a single, all-encompassing definition of religious conversion is not and, I suggest, will never be agreed upon.

The main issues that arise when trying to identify religious converts have here been separated into two categories: (1) scale and (2) identity. The first seeks to specify the scale against which a change in one's root reality must measure to qualify as 'conversion'. Studies conducted between 1960s and 1990s which focus on NRMs predominantly centre on dramatic change, often from a conventional (or no) religious group, to an unconventional or deviant group. However, there exists a broad spectrum of religious change, anywhere along which individuals may identify, or be identified, as converts. Differentiations have been made between the concept of conversion as a 'complete disruption' or 'radical discontinuity', and supposedly lesser personal change experiences.¹⁷⁸ For example, Travisano coined the term *alternation* as a change in identity or commitment, which is commonly mistaken for conversion but he identifies as distinct from conversion in its impermanence. Likewise, Gordon distinguishes the act of *consolidation*, by which an individual makes a personal change by combining two previously held but conflicting beliefs. For Travisano and Gordon, conversion is a term reserved for the most dramatic of personal changes. However this introduction of new vocabulary to the debate results in defining what conversion is *not* rather than what it *is*. Furthermore, multiple definitions of non-conversion results in an expansion of the field rather than the desired identification of universally applicable terminology.

Snow and Machalek confidently, although vaguely, assert in their review of the existing literature that, 'the notion of radical change remains at the core of all conceptions of

¹⁷⁸ The former defined by Travisano, R.V. "Alternation and conversion as qualitatively different transformations" in *Social Psychology through Symbolic Interaction*, ed. by Stone, G.P. and Faberman, H.A. (Waltham, MA: Xerox College Publishing, 1970) 594-606; the latter by Gordon, D.F. "The Jesus People: An identity synthesis" *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 3(2) (1974) 159-178, both referenced in Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" p.169

conversion, whether theological or social scientific'.¹⁷⁹ Beyond this core assumption, scholars are undecided about where conversion lies on this complex scale. Is radical change a dramatic event or a gradual process? Is conversion a one-time occurrence or can multiple conversions take place? Is it a change in beliefs or identity; values or behaviour? The task of definition falls upon the individual scholar to decide upon their own parameters from which to identify a subject group. The study of conversion, therefore, can never be completely removed from the scholar's own personal (and disciplinary) commitments.

Secondly, in the light of a lack of a universally, or inter-disciplinary agreed scale, individual scholars face the task of accurately identifying individuals who fall under their own definition. Depending on one's focus, this task can be relatively straightforward or incredibly complicated. Identification of converts is frequently a case of: discovering the individual's self-identification as a convert (rhetorical indicators), their membership role within the group (membership status) and/or their adoption of particular rituals or events (demonstration events), when one's focus is sociological or psychological.¹⁸⁰

In their oft cited study into a small, millenarian cult (Divine Precepts or DP) in the USA, Lofland and Stark conclude that the most obvious evidence for conversion is the individual's own declaration that they have converted.¹⁸¹ These declarations of faith, 'frequently take the form of a tale of regeneration, about how terrible life was before and how wonderful it is now'.¹⁸² Problematically, personal testimonies are often influenced and moulded to a greater or lesser extent by the ideology and language of the group to which an individual has

¹⁷⁹ Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion", p.169

¹⁸⁰ Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" pp.171-174

¹⁸¹ Lofland, and Stark, "Becoming a world saver", p.863

¹⁸² Lofland, and Stark, "Becoming a world saver", p.863

affiliated him or herself.¹⁸³ Lofland and Stark recognise the ease by which verbal declarations can be made to fit an ideological mould and falsified. Within the DP, a few converts' verbal accounts were not accepted as authentic by the other core members. Core members of the DP appear to have had unwritten and intangible criteria for accepting convert's accounts as 'genuine'. Comparatively, others who also verbalised conversion with no apparent commitment *were* accepted by the group as authentic. Unfortunately, the opportunity to explore the group's own complex definitions of authentic conversion is rejected and instead Lofland and Stark choose to identify their own criteria from their observations. Two classes of conversion are identified: *verbal conversion* and *total conversion*.¹⁸⁴ The former is identified through verbal declaration alone and the latter combines words and deeds to express their transformation and commitment to the group. Lofland and Stark identify *total conversion* as the stage that *verbal converts* will reach upon completion of their six-stage accumulating conversion model.¹⁸⁵

Whilst significantly introducing the concept of conversion as a process, which follows set patterns over time, Lofland and Stark's distinction of *verbal* and *total conversion* places an unbalanced reliability on actions and deeds over verbal accounts. In contrast, McGuire's 1977 ethnographic study of Pentecostal Catholics in the US concludes that, testimony is a greater indicator of religious commitment than the previously held criteria of glossolalia (speaking in tongues).¹⁸⁶ McGuire builds upon the theory that converts to a new religious group must undergo an experience of 'bridge-burning'; consisting 'involvement' and

¹⁸³ Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" p.176; see also Stromberg, P.G. "Ideological Language in the Transformation of Identity" *American Anthropologist*, 92(1) (1990) 42-56

¹⁸⁴ Lofland, and Stark, "Becoming a world saver" p.864

¹⁸⁵ Lofland, and Stark, "Becoming a world saver" p.874

¹⁸⁶ See Hine, V. "Pentecostal Glossolalia: Toward a Functional Interpretation" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 8(2) (1969) 211-26

‘abandonment’.¹⁸⁷ In the case of Pentecostal Catholics, McGuire asserts that the practice of giving public/semi-public testimony, ‘includes both involvement (drawing the member into the prayer group) and a measure of abandonment (i.e., risking “turning off” non-believer friends)’ and therefore fulfils the criteria as the main commitment mechanism for new converts.¹⁸⁸ Contrary to Lofland and Stark, McGuire highlights the act of giving ‘witness’ as more than simply a verbal declaration, but a fundamental action of commitment in its own right for Pentecostal Catholics.¹⁸⁹

The concept of actions as reliable markers of conversion was strongly challenged by Robert Balch, through his covert participation in a UFO cult in the 1970s.¹⁹⁰ This study was motivated by the observation that the common sense view, ‘behaviour is not always consistent with values, attitudes, and beliefs’ was not being applied to sociological studies of cults or NRMs.¹⁹¹ Balch attributed this oversight primarily to a lack of knowledge by scholars about the daily routine or “behind the scenes” features of cult life. His method of infiltrating the group and befriending other members under the pretence of being a convert would be considered unethical today. However his covert status led, significantly, to his application of sociological role theory to the study of conversion to deviant groups, seriously bringing into question brainwashing and deprogramming theories in particular. The contribution of role theory to the study of conversion is the idea that converts may take on the expected roles and

¹⁸⁷ McGuire, “Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism” p.165, referring to the typology set out in Lebra, T.S. “Millenarian Movements and Resocialization” *American Behavioural Scientist*, 16(2) (1972) 195-217

¹⁸⁸ McGuire, “Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism” p.168

¹⁸⁹ In his psychological work on faith stages, J.W. Fowler identifies the ‘conscious adoption of a new set of master stories’ as a fundamental part of his definition of conversion. Fowler differentiates between stages of faith, which he sees as progressive, minor steps within the same faith, and conversion, which he identifies in terms of recentering of values and commitments, accompanied by new master stories and ‘commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action’. (Fowler, J.W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (London: Harper and Row, 1981) p.282-283

¹⁹⁰ This group became later known as Heaven’s Gate. Tragically 39 members of the group committed mass suicide in 1997 due to a belief that there was a UFO in the tail of the passing Hale-Bopp comet, which would “evacuate” believers to Heaven. Balch’s reports offer a unique and poignant insight into the social networks and daily routines of group members in the 1970’s.

¹⁹¹ Balch, “Looking Behind the Scenes in a Religious Cult” p.142

attributes of a belief system *prior* to adopting their values, beliefs or ‘ultimate grounding’, in order to test out that life-style.¹⁹²

Researchers must heed Balch’s warning not to be deceived by appearances and learn to differentiate between what converts say and do ‘on stage’ in front of non-members, and what they say and do in the security of their own group.¹⁹³ In order to achieve this, Balch advocates a deeper level of investigation than theoretical or surface level studies have provided. If converts’ layers of meaning and role play are to be successfully unearthed, studies into religious conversion require an empirical element.

The empirical indicators of religious conversion were collated by Snow and Machalek into three main categories: membership status, demonstration events and rhetorical patterns.¹⁹⁴ Each category contains inherent problems and no one category can be taken as an undeniable proof of an individual’s conversion. In terms of membership status, Balch’s study of the UFO cult shows that there is not necessarily a correlation between membership and conversion. It is also observable within many religious groups that individual members possess varying levels of commitment and that beliefs or values can alter over time between varying degrees of intensity.¹⁹⁵ Therefore, membership status alone cannot guarantee that an individual’s conversion runs deeper than group affiliation.

The second indicator, demonstration events, is considered to be just as unreliable at identifying conversion as the first, in isolation. Snow and Machalek cite examples of baptism, testimony and glossolalia as seeking to ‘provide dramatic evidence both to oneself and to

¹⁹² A view supported by Bromley, D.G. and Shupe, A.D. “Just a Few Years Seem Like a Lifetime”: A Role Theory Approach to Participation in Religious Movements” in L. Kriesberg *Research in Social Movements, Conflicts, and Change* (volume 2) ed. by Kriesberg, L. (Greenwich, CT: JAI Press, 1979) 159-85. See also Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert”.

¹⁹³ Balch, “Looking behind the scenes” p.143

¹⁹⁴ Snow and Machalek, “Sociology of Conversion” p.171

¹⁹⁵ As expressed in the Conversion Careers model advocated in Richardson, J.T. *Conversion Careers: In and Out of the New Religions*, (Beverly Hills: SAGE, 1978) and later by Henri Gooren (see section 3.4.3)

others that one is imbued with the appropriate spirit or force' as to be "authentic".¹⁹⁶ Such events have been met with some scepticism from scholars of the human sciences, particularly when they are the result of so-called revivals or crusades. Snow and Machalek cite a number of studies whereby apparent conversions at such events and the demonstrations that follow are attributed to nothing more than "public compliance without any private acceptance".¹⁹⁷ As with membership status, scholars are warned that demonstration events are not sufficient proof in and of themselves of authentic conversion.

The final empirical indicator is separated into four distinct subsections, falling under the heading of rhetorical indicators: biographical reconstruction, adoption of master attribution scheme, suspension of analogical reasoning, and embracement of the convert role.¹⁹⁸ Due to the prevailing nature of personal testimonies as the main source of data collection in empirical studies of conversion, there has been a great deal of interest in the reliability and usefulness of these accounts as a research method. The overarching conclusion in the decade leading up to *Understanding Religious Conversion* was that a convert's testimony is the result of a subtle process of dismantling one's personal biography and reconstructing it in accordance with the ideologies or ethos of the new group.¹⁹⁹ If accurate, this process invalidates any attempt to take testimonies at face value as historical accounts of events as they happened.²⁰⁰ Instead they should be viewed as insights into the current ideology and experience of the individual (and their affiliated group). This by no means negates the usefulness of testimony as a primary source of data; however, researchers are urged to read between the lines of converts'

¹⁹⁶ Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" p.172

¹⁹⁷ Moscovici, S. "Toward a theory of conversion behaviour" in *Advances in experimental social psychology*, volume 13, ed. by Berkowitz, L. (New York, NY: Academic Press, 1980) 209-239 (p.211), cited in Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" p.172

¹⁹⁸ Snow and Machalek, "Sociology of Conversion" p.173

¹⁹⁹ See Snow and Machalek's discussion in "Sociology of Conversion" and Stromberg's in "Ideological Language" for an in depth exploration of the role and validity of biographical reconstruction in conversion

²⁰⁰ I discussed a theological approach to this argument as supported by Scott Ellington in Chapter Two, section 2.3.2.2.

accounts using critical analysis. It is worth highlighting, however, that personal bias is not unique to religious converts, and researchers must also be alert to the inevitable danger of projecting their own beliefs and ideologies when deconstructing and analysing believers' accounts.

3.2.2 Causes and contributing factors

Beyond the question of definition, the literature preceding Rambo, particularly from the disciplines of sociology and psychology, reveals an almost ubiquitous preoccupation with the question of *why* people convert. This is understandable within the context of flourishing NRMs. It is easy to imagine that for the average US citizen, the reality of a seemingly 'normal', rational, well-to-do and socially aware individual rejecting their conventional world-view for that of an unknown, strange and 'deviant' group creates fear.²⁰¹ It challenges the socially constructed distinction between 'us' and 'them' and outsiders naturally look for explanations and reasons for this conversion: evidence that the convert was psychologically predetermined for conversion or that their conversion was somehow forced upon them. This motivation leads to a view of the convert as a *passive* actor in their conversion experience. This is known as the "old paradigm",²⁰² or more recently the "classic" perspective.²⁰³ Often the group to which a passive individual converts can be presented in a negative light as predatory and manipulative. Conversely, this view is challenged by studies of conversion which suggest membership of a religious group has a positive effect on the life and mental

²⁰¹ Most of the conversion studies in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly to deviant groups were conducted in the USA with a focus on western experiences.

²⁰² Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert"

²⁰³ Zinnbauer, B.J. and Pargament, K.I. "Spiritual Conversion: A Study of Religious Change Among College Students" *Journal of the Scientific Study of Religion*, 37(1) (1998) 161-180 (p.162). Zinnbauer and Pargament differentiate between the 'classic' approach to conversion, which centres on a Christian paradigm of Saul's dramatic, externally motivated conversion as compared with the 'contemporary' approach, which assumes a gradual change, actively motivated by the convert as seeker.

health of the convert in question.²⁰⁴ Furthermore it is also challenged by the “new paradigm” or “contemporary” perspective whereby the convert is seen to take an *active* role in their change in belief and/or affiliation.²⁰⁵

At a basic level, the literature concerning *why* people convert can be usefully viewed in terms of paradigm conflicts.²⁰⁶ While this term is problematic in its inference that conflicting paradigms are mutually exclusive, it nonetheless proves as a useful lens through which to view this early phase in the literature. As has been outlined above, one of the persisting paradigm conflicts is whether conversion is socially motivated or individualistic: *inter-individual* or *intra-individual*.²⁰⁷ Kilbourne and Richardson propose that the existing types of religious conversion can be organised within these four overlapping paradigms, comprising four groups under which types of conversion experiences can be categorised (Fig. 3.1).

²⁰⁴ Galanter found that membership to religious sects often had positive psychological effects on members. This is typically in contrast to the brainwashing theory, which assumes negative psychological effects are the result of membership to a deviant group. See Galanter, M. “The “relief effect”: a sociobiological model for neurotic distress and large-group therapy” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 135(5) (1978) 588-591; and “Psychological induction into the large-group: findings from a modern religious sect” *American Journal of Psychiatry*, 137(12) (1980) 1574-9.

²⁰⁵ See Heirich, “Change of Heart” 653-680; Balch, R.W. and Taylor, D. “Seekers and Saucers: the Role of the Cultic Milieu in Joining a UFO Cult” *American Behavioural Scientist*, 20(6) (1977) 839-860; Straus, R.A. “Religious Conversion as a Personal and Collective Accomplishment” *Sociology of Religion*, 40(2) (1979) 158-165; Balch, R.W. “Looking Behind the Scenes”; and Dawson, L. “Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality: Theoretically Elaborating ‘Active’ Conversions” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 29(2) (1990) 141-163

²⁰⁶ Conversion studies being viewed in terms of paradigms is primarily advocated by James Richardson in Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert” and Kilbourne, B. and Richardson, J.T. “Paradigm Conflict, Types of Conversion, and Conversion Theories” *Sociological Analysis*, 50(1) (1988) 1-21

²⁰⁷ Kilbourne and Richardson, “Paradigm Conflict” pp.2-3

Figure 3.1: Kilbourne and Richardson's conversion typologies.²⁰⁸

	Active	Passive
Intra-Individual	1 Intellectual Or Self	2 Mystical Belief Change Affectional Psychopathologic
Inter-Individual	3 Experimental Social Drift	4 Revivalist Socialization Deprivation Coercive

Lofland and Skonovd refer to these individual types as “motif experiences”, which they define as ‘those aspects of conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person “doing” or “undergoing” personal transformation’.²⁰⁹ For example, for the individual who converts as the result of a charismatic preacher and a healing experience at a Pentecostal rally, the most orienting aspect of their conversion would be revivalist. Kilbourne and Richardson’s model is perhaps the most detailed presentation of conversion motifs within their predominant paradigms. Therefore it is within this framework that I present the following discussion; I will look first at the *passive* conversion paradigm and its associated motifs, followed by a review of the *active* conversion paradigm. Finally I outline some of the main attempts by scholars towards harmonising and strengthening the two through the development of a stage-model paradigm.

²⁰⁸ Kilbourne and Richardson, “Paradigm Conflict” p.3

²⁰⁹ Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs” (1981) 20:4, (pp.373-85) p.374; Lofland and Skonovd identify six motifs, which are adopted and added to by Kilbourne and Richardson who add six other motifs in their model: Self, Belief Change, Psychopathologic, Deprivation and Coercive.

3.2.2.1 Passive converts

The concept of converts as passive is most commonly represented through the “Damascus road” image, stemming from the biblical accounts of Saul’s vision of the risen Christ on the road to Damascus and his subsequent conversion.²¹⁰ This has been identified in the literature as ‘the prototypical instance within the Christian tradition’ of conversion, particularly Pentecostal-charismatic experiences.²¹¹ The Damascus road model has also been used as a general umbrella term for a conversion experience perceived to be divinely motivated and which cannot be expressed in logical terms or reduced to socio-psychological explanations.²¹² Kilbourne and Richardson’s typology categorises these so-called *mystical* conversions as passive and intra-individual as they seemingly occur without any input from other people or influences. Conversion accounts of this kind are typically met with scepticism from socio-psychology scholars due to their apparent reliance on a direct, unmediated divine-human encounter, apart from social or psychological factors. However, I argue that Paul’s experience is erroneously presented as the prototype of a purely mystical conversion as it involves an advocate, healing and joining a community following the initial encounter with Jesus.²¹³

The second passive conversion group includes conversion types which are considered inter-individual. Conversions of this nature are those whereby the conversion is motivated by forces external to the convert, commonly orchestrated by other people. Conversions of this

²¹⁰ Acts 9:1-18; there have been debates in academic theology as to whether Saul’s experience can be rightly called a ‘conversion’ or whether it was a ‘calling’. This typically stems from the idea that he did not stop being a Jew but instead moved from one expression of Judaism to another. McKnight offers a helpful overview and contribution to this debate and I agree with his conclusion that, as conversion is not only about moving from one religion to another, then Saul’s move towards proclaiming Christ as Messiah can be understood as a conversion (McKnight, S. “Was Paul a Convert?” *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 110-132)

²¹¹ Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs” p.377; Lofland and Skonovd mention in a footnote on page 374 that they are indebted to Lewis Rambo who shared some of his ‘in-progress work’ with them in the absence of a comprehensive bibliography in publication at the time.

²¹² Jules-Rosette, B. *African Apostles: Ritual and Conversion in the Church of John Maranke*, (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1975) p.62, cited in Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs” p.377

²¹³ See Acts 9:1-22

kind received a great deal of attention particularly from psychiatrists during the 1970s due to the widely held view that cults or deviant groups use coercive or ‘brainwashing’ techniques to enforce conversions.²¹⁴ In particular, the tragic events of the Jonestown Massacre in 1978 drew media attention towards brainwashing theorists and practitioners of ‘deprogramming’.²¹⁵ Deprogramming has been defined by Robbins and Anthony as a physical process of removing cult converts from the cult and detaining them in order to systematically persuade them to relinquish their cult involvement and liberate them from programmed mental patterns.²¹⁶ This method relies heavily on the assumption that the convert is a passive player in their conversion and that their conversion can be reversed through a similar experience of external psychological force in order to return their mental state to “normal”.

Long and Hadden’s analysis of converts to the Unification Church concluded that conversion is never completed through extreme and aggressive proselytising techniques alone.²¹⁷ Rather, converts who remained with the group underwent a combination of “brainwashing” and “drift” (socialisation) techniques and this combination provided the necessary social support in order for commitment tests to become grounded in reflection and become a robust internalised worldview.²¹⁸ The brainwashing model as an all-encompassing model for conversion, has been largely refuted by studies such as Balch, and Long and Hadden, however it is arguable that the general public attitude towards cultic membership remains suspicious, and ‘brainwashing’ or ‘mind control’ are still terms which are closely affiliated with cults.

²¹⁴ see Clark, J.G. “Cults” *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, 242(3) (1979) 279-281; Enroth, R. *Youth, Brainwashing and the Extremist Cults* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1977); Conway, F. and Siegelman, J. *Snapping: America’s Epidemic of Sudden Personality Change*, (New York, NY: Lippincott, 1978); Robbins, T. and Anthony, D. “Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization of Deviant Religious Groups” *Social Problems*, 29(3) (1982) 283-297

²¹⁵ Hall, J. “The Apocalypse at Jonestown” *Society*, 16(6) (1979) 52-61 (p.52); cited in Robbins and Anthony “Deprogramming, Brainwashing” p.285

²¹⁶ Robbins and Anthony, “Deprogramming, Brainwashing” p.286

²¹⁷ Long and Hadden, “Religious conversion and the concept of socialization”, pp.1-14

²¹⁸ Long and Hadden, “Religious conversion and the concept of socialization”, pp.10-11

Also stemming from the passivist inter-individual paradigm is the view that the external force acting upon individuals to lead to conversion is not the direct result of other people, but rather a culmination of emotional experiences and crises. This view is particularly advocated from a Freudian perspective, whereby the subconscious is the key catalyst for religious change rather than God or any other individual directly.²¹⁹ Social experiences do play a significant role as relationships, particularly childhood relationships can affect the stresses and crises we experience later in life. Ullman tested this theory in 1982 by undertaking a study of religious conversion from a psychoanalytic perspective for the purpose of ascertaining whether cognitive or emotional factors were dominant.²²⁰ Ullman concludes that emotional (passive) stressors are a more accurate predictor of conversion than cognitive (active) factors. The presence of an unavailable or rejecting father is identified as a further predisposing emotional factor for religious conversion, as the data revealed this to be one of the main areas where converts and non-converts differed.²²¹

As with the activist model, no perfected and complete passivist paradigm has been presented, but rather it is repeatedly refined and repackaged. In the years preceding Rambo, the idea of religious converts being completely passive agents was becoming increasingly unacceptable to scholars of conversion, as will be discussed below.

²¹⁹ Richardson, "The Active vs. Passive Convert" p.166

²²⁰ Ullman, "Cognitive and Emotional Antecedents", p.185; Ullman tested the following hypotheses: *Cognitive*; relative to non-converts, converts (1) manifest lower tolerance to ambiguity; (2) experience greater degree of cognitive quest during adolescence; *Emotional*; relative to non-converts, converts (3) have had more significant childhood experiences of emotional turmoil, and (4) have experienced more personal stress and adjustment problems during adolescence. Cognitive factors represent an active "seeking" process and Emotional factors represent a passive process brought on predominantly by crisis or relational factors from childhood.

²²¹ As with many studies at the time, Ullman's research sample was limited by age, nationality and education, which restricts any attempts at generalising these results. Research subjects were aged 20-40, educated to high school degree or above and American citizens. Furthermore, although she used a non-convert control group, of the four religious groups studied, only Jewish and Roman Catholic non-converts could be obtained for the control, thus challenging the validity of Ullman's comparison between the groups. The religious groups represented in her study were; Orthodox Jews, Roman Catholics, Hare Krishnas and Bahai (p.185)

The most notable contribution of the passivist model is its attention to data from individuals who experience de-conversion.²²² Specifically in the case of NRMs, researchers often find that past-members are more easily accessible for interviews than current members, particularly where support groups exist for past members.²²³ Likewise, the process of de-programming is founded on the premise that de-conversion is fundamentally an identical process to conversion and can be enforced. Although these studies have not culminated in a coherent theory of de-conversion, the passivist attention to de-conversion offers a contribution to conversion scholarship, which is seriously lacking in most activist models and requires further research.

3.2.2.2 Active converts

The Active paradigm is grounded in the assertion that individuals are volitional beings, who attribute meaning to their actions and those of others.²²⁴ The focus importantly shifts from the converter to the convert as the main acting force propelling the process and conversion is seen primarily as a *process*. The concept of active choice or cognitive quest was first proposed in 1977 by Heirich who refuted claims of conversion as a dramatic event, which instantly transforms the individual from non-convert to convert. Instead, an additional seeking stage is identified, often brought on by disillusionment with an existing lifestyle or “ultimate grounding”, during which Straus argues that the seeker undergoes a process, which can be separated into five sequential stages, although Straus does not present them systematically in

²²² See Balch, “Looking behind the scenes” pp.137-43; and Robbins and Anthony, “Deprogramming, Brainwashing and the Medicalization” pp.283-97.

²²³ Coates, D.D. “Counselling former members of charismatic groups: considering pre-involvement variables, reasons for joining the group and corresponding values” *Mental Health, Religion & Culture*, 1(17) (2011) 191-207 (p.13). Coates rightly notes the limitations of identifying respondents from post-cult support groups as the sample may be tilted towards people who had negative or harmful experiences.

²²⁴ Richardson, “The Active vs. Passive Convert” p.164

this way.²²⁵ Initial Active paradigm studies are limited in that they commonly overlook the factors which lead an individual to become a ‘seeker’ in the first instance.²²⁶ A further limitation is that religious conversion is presented in very general stages, which could apply to many other forms of ‘reality reconstruction’.²²⁷ It appears that religious conversion is merely the product of whether the ‘hot lead’ identified is a religious one. Despite its limitations, the development of a religious seeker stage in the process of conversion was a significant turning point in the discussion.

In the early 1980s a postmodern approach to religion is seen to emerge in the US and European conversion literature. There is a noticeable shift in thinking from religions possessing a “truth” to which an individual signs up, to religious groups serving the perceived requirements of the individuals. Religions can be seen to offer a range of products, with each now expected to advertise itself in order to attract seeking customers. This is systematically presented in Rational Choice Theory, which argues that ‘religion...is essentially an attempt to gratify desires, or...secure rewards’.²²⁸ These rewards are weighed up by the individual against the sanctions of joining a particular group. Gartrell and Shannon list the possible benefits as *socio-emotional or individual beliefs*.²²⁹

²²⁵ Straus, “Religious conversion as a personal and collective accomplishment” pp.162-3. These stages are closely paralleled in the final five stages of Rambo’s (1993) model: [1] *Quest*, [2] *Encounter*, [3] *Interaction*, [4] *Commitment* and [5] *Consequences*, whilst unsurprisingly omitting the more passivist stages of *Context* and *Crisis*.

²²⁶ Hierich, “Change of heart” p. 673. Straus is guilty of this omission himself as his interview subjects are all already self-identified seekers (Straus, “Religious conversion as a personal and collective accomplishment” p.162) and he does not use non/pre-seeker control groups.

²²⁷ Straus, “Religious conversion as a personal and collective accomplishment” p. 165

²²⁸ See Stark, R. and Bainbridge, W.S. *A Theory of Religion* (New York: Peter Lang, 1987). Rational Choice Theory typically counters secularisation theory (see chapter five) in that it argues that where there is more religious choice, there is more religiosity (see Kay, W.K. *Pentecostalism*, (London: SCM Press, 2009) p.297)

²²⁹ Gartrell, C.D. and Shannon, Z.K. “Contacts, cognitions, and conversion: A rational choice approach” *Review of Religious Research*, 27(1) (1985) 32-48 (p.34). Gartrell & Shannon’s study was based on converts to one particular NRM, the Divine Light Mission and therefore their findings cannot be strictly applied to all religious converts.

There is an imbalance between the two types of benefits, as religious conversion can still be seen to occur where the socio-emotional and even physical dangers appear to outweigh the benefits. One contemporary example would be conversion to the house church movement in communist China; whereby discovery could result in imprisonment, labour or a loss of income for the believer.²³⁰ In these cases, the benefits attributed to the individual beliefs gained by the convert to must play a stronger part in such experiences than the socio-emotional or material risks. In other words, that which is believed to be gained spiritually must be seen to outweigh the social and physical risks. Stark and Bainbridge sought to explain this by arguing that religious groups offer promises and hope for rewards, predominantly in the afterlife, referred to as ‘compensators’.²³¹

Dawson sought to expand on the Rational Choice model further by asserting that a truly active conversion must be rationally motivated and that a truly rational choice requires a degree of reflective awareness.²³² Dawson argues that the more aware one is of one’s role-person merger, the more rational and therefore more active the conversion. She asserts that if an individual cannot rationally reflect on their conversion experience then their conversion is not active. If an individual joins a group which puts their life in danger and cannot justify this rationally, then their conversion was not an active one. Whilst the theory is logically robust, it runs the risk of reducing religious conversion to an algorithm; a systematic process, which can be completely understood and coherently reported by the converted individual. It rejects

²³⁰ Hattaway, P. *Back to Jerusalem: Three Chinese House Church Leaders Share Their Vision to Complete the Great Commission*, (Milton Keynes: Authentic Publishing, 2005). When Hattaway asked a group of house church leaders for their testimonies it emerged that ‘most had been arrested, imprisoned, beaten, and tortured because of their testimony for Jesus Christ. They had all faced extreme hardship, separation from their families, forced starvation, sleepless nights, and perils on every side’ (p.xiii).

²³¹ Hamilton, M. *The Sociology of Religion: Theoretical and Comparative Perspectives*, second edition, (London: Routledge, 2001) p.216; Hamilton says that mostly religious rewards are ‘other-worldly in the sense that they can be obtained only in a non-empirical and usually posthumous context’ (p.223). This is not the case in Pentecostalism, which offers spiritual empowerment, healing and relationship with God in this life.

²³² Dawson, L. “Self-Affirmation, Freedom, and Rationality” p.160; Dawson’s study represents a compilation of the rational choice and role theory models.

any experience of a divine-human encounter, which by its very nature is difficult to logically account for, as purely passive regardless of any activity on the part of the individual in reaching the point of revelation or decision.

3.2.2.3 A stalemate of paradigms: alternative approaches

Neither the active nor the passive paradigm has succeeded in fully encompassing the complexity and variety of religious conversion experiences evidenced anecdotally and empirically. The passivist paradigm presents the convert as a background actor in a process or experience, which is motivated by external, inter- or intra- individual forces. This view has also led to the presentation of religious groups as negative or harmful (“brainwashing” model). The activist paradigm reflects an important and progressive turning-point by attributing control of the conversion experience to the convert. However, when the activist paradigm is taken as a complete theory of conversion, the subject can be likened to a shopper in a supermarket. He or she is presented with countless options of religious groups from which to pick depending on his or her requirements. Whatever the motivation, the convert is portrayed as completely in control of their choice to convert. Religious affiliation can be reduced to a stress relief mechanism or social club.

The presence of a divine-human encounter is omitted entirely from most studies from both standpoints. Passivists refer fleetingly to a *mystical* “Damascus road”, often dismissed as reflecting an antiquated prototype of Christian conversion, which no longer applies. However, this reflects an erroneous assumption that Christian converts claim a dramatic one-time conversion experience.

Activist scholars refer even less to the possibility of a divine-human encounter due to the individualistic nature of the paradigm. Hierich noted this dichotomy in 1977 and suggested

that the inability of social scientific arguments to account for conversion stems from a refusal to combine social and sacred conceptions of the experiences.²³³ It is a central premise of this thesis that although this observation has been repeated periodically throughout the history of conversion theory, this dichotomy is still in desperate need of rectification.

In recognition of paradigmatic limitations, numerous scholars have attempted to combine active and passive elements in conversion theories with relative success.²³⁴ The strengths of one model can complement and reinforce the weaknesses of the other. The gradual move away from the concept of mutually exclusive paradigms can be seen to lead towards alternative approaches emerging. Two main alternative approaches will be discussed here: the *motif* approach, and the *stage model* approach.

Lofland and Skonovd offer the concept of conversion motifs as a conceptual alternative to paradigms. Motifs are defined as ‘those aspects of a conversion which are most memorable and orienting to the person “doing” or “undergoing” personal transformation’.²³⁵ Although similar to conversion paradigms in the attempt to label conversion experiences within specific parameters, motifs are much broader. They allow for a whole spectrum of experiences and methods of conversion and acknowledge an overlap of active and passive, interpersonal and intrapersonal elements depending on individual circumstances. Lofland and Skonovd hypothesise that different emphases in conversion accounts do not merely reflect a difference of researcher bias or personal interpretation, but rather they refer to a fundamental difference in the conversion itself.²³⁶ They identify six proposed motifs: *intellectual*, *mystical*,

²³³ Hierich, “Change of heart” p.673

²³⁴ Most notable (pre-Rambo) are Lofland and Stark’s stage model in “Becoming a world saver” and Long and Hadden’s attempt to integrate brainwashing and drift models in “Religious conversion and the concept of socialization”.

²³⁵ Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs” p.374

²³⁶ Lofland and Skonovd, “Conversion Motifs” p.374

*experimental, affectional, revivalist and coercive.*²³⁷ As Kilbourne and Richardson have evidenced, a motif approach allows for a more inclusive view of conversion, however each motif can still be identified within the confines of paradigms. A motif approach, as set out by Lofland and Skonovd, does not develop the idea of an individual potentially undergoing a combination of these motifs within one experience. The strongest approach to conversion studies, which attempts to avoid this restriction, is the stage model approach.²³⁸

Stage models approach religious conversion as a process consisting of a number of stages through which an individual may pass towards religious change. These stages are often portrayed as being sequential or cumulative in so far as one stage must be passed through before the next and so on until the process culminates in conversion. This sequential approach is in danger of limiting conversion experiences to a box ticking exercise or mould to be filled. However, if stages are seen as being independent of one another, their order and intensity can be different for different individuals. This allows for conversions to be viewed on a case-by-case basis, whilst still providing the benefit of a focussed lens through which to analyse the experience²³⁹. It is this latter approach, which Rambo advocates and with this in mind the next section will explore Rambo's own stage model in detail.

²³⁷ Rambo discusses Lofland and Skonovd's motifs in *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp.14-16

²³⁸ For detailed examples of systematic stage models see Lofland & Stark (1965) and Rambo (1993) in particular. Straus's (1979) "seeker" theory can also be viewed as a five stage process, however he does not present it formally in this way.

²³⁹ The process of viewing conversions in terms of stages is often paralleled in the giving of testimony. Conversion narratives often follow an identifiable and replicable pattern akin to "stages". This thesis argues that the structure of narratives and stages allows for complicated and often intangible experiences to be presented and assessed within a structured framework.

3.3 Lewis Rambo: *Understanding Religious Conversion*

The survey of literature outlined above presents just a narrow snapshot of the context from which Lewis Rambo's *Understanding Religious Conversion (URC)* emerged in 1993. This culmination of a career-long preoccupation with conversion has been described by his contemporaries as 'the single most comprehensive compendium of the literature on conversion',²⁴⁰ and even his critics foresaw that *URC* could become a standard text,²⁴¹ with Blanchard recommending that scholars of conversion cannot afford to overlook or ignore Rambo's work.²⁴² In recent years, Rambo has been described as 'probably the leading theorist on the topic of religious conversion' and most scholars of conversion, in the human sciences particularly, appear to heed Blanchard's recommendation.²⁴³

In order to understand the contribution and significance of Rambo's work, it is first important to identify his location within and aims concerning previous conversion theories. In the following section I highlight the gaps Rambo saw in the existing literature and his aims towards rectifying these problems. I then move on to describe his chosen methods and models before explaining his stage theory of conversion.

3.3.1 Rambo's approach to the discussion

The preface to *URC* offers the reader a reflexive account of Rambo's personal and academic motivations for the study. It is revealed that his initial research began within the discipline of the human sciences: starting with psychology, sociology and eventually branching into cultural anthropology and mission studies. Rambo was motivated to move from one

²⁴⁰ Lofland, J. "Understanding Religious Conversion – Rambo LR" *Sociology of Religion*, 55(1) (1994), 100

²⁴¹ Malony, N.H. "Understanding Religious Conversion (Book Review)" *The Journal of Religion*, 75 (1995), 169-71

²⁴² Blanchard, D.A. "Review" *American Sociological Association*, 23(5) (1994), 738

²⁴³ Cartledge, M. *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) p.63

discipline to the next as he became frustrated with the incomplete picture of conversion drawn by each on its own.²⁴⁴ In addition to his theoretical research, Rambo conducted interviews with converts to a variety of groups across the world. Furthermore, Rambo states that religious conversion has occupied much of his professional and personal life and offers an insight into his motivation from a religious perspective. Having spent most of his life belonging to the Church of Christ sect from childhood, Rambo personally defines genuine conversion as ‘a total transformation of the person by the power of God’.²⁴⁵ However, as a scholar of the human sciences, he recognises the influence that one’s religious upbringing and current affiliation has on shaping one’s definition of conversion. He therefore wishes to be transparent about his context, whilst avoiding projecting this personal definition on to his research. Instead, he allows conversion to be defined by the group or individual being studied.²⁴⁶

This move towards allowing the research group to define conversion in their own terms appears in direct opposition to previous scholars, many of whom strove to find a specific scholarly definition. Rambo identifies the increase in narrow definitions within the discipline as too specialised to be of any value to a general study of conversion.²⁴⁷ For Rambo, the key defining characteristic of conversion is *change*.²⁴⁸ His elaboration on this point uniquely allows for a wealth of possible experiences of conversion to be explored and deserves to be quoted in full:

²⁴⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.xi

²⁴⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.xi

²⁴⁶ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.xiv and p.7

²⁴⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.4

²⁴⁸ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.3

[Conversion] will mean simple change from the absence of a faith system to a faith commitment, from religious affiliation with one faith system to another, or from one orientation to another within a single faith system. It will mean a change of one's personal orientation toward life, from the haphazards of superstition to the providence of a deity; from a reliance on rote and ritual to a deeper conviction of God's presence; from belief in a threatening, punitive, judgemental deity to one that is loving, supportive, and desirous of the maximum good. It will mean a spiritual transformation of life, from seeing evil or illusion in everything connected with "this" world to seeing all creation as a manifestation of God's power and beneficence; from denial of the self in this life in order to gain a holy hereafter; from seeking personal gratification to a determination that the rule of God is what fulfils human beings; from a life geared to one's personal welfare above all else to a concern for shared and equal justice for all. It will mean a radical shifting of gears that can take the spiritually lackadaisical to a new level of intensive concern, commitment, and involvement.²⁴⁹

Rambo's rationale for opening the floodgates of what constitutes a religious conversion seems to be his disapproval at the narrow orientation and restrictive nature of the existing literature. This includes studies in Missiology and Theology, which he viewed as often leading to 'assumptions too deeply rooted in religious traditions'.²⁵⁰ Furthermore, like the metaphor of a metropolitan train yard, the complex and multifaceted nature of conversion, as Rambo saw it, had led to a multitude of studies each offering different conclusions and creating new vocabulary in an attempt to present conversion in its "pure" form. Paradigms had been created and recreated under different guises and titles from a number of disciplines, with little or no interdisciplinary dialogue. Rambo sought to change that by creating a holistic model of religious conversion, which incorporated the disciplines of psychology, sociology, anthropology and theology.²⁵¹ The limitations and failings of each discipline alone could perhaps be complimented when viewed together in order to present a more complete picture of the complexity of conversion.

²⁴⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.2

²⁵⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.4

²⁵¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.4

Most significant to this thesis, the largest gap Rambo observes in the literature is between the human sciences and theologians, or religious people.²⁵² As my review of the literature in this chapter makes clear, it is quite possible to present the human sciences literature on conversion from the three decades preceding Rambo, without referencing God, divine-human encounter or specific theological beliefs at all. This absence of theology and the reductionism inherent in the literature is seen as a flaw, which Rambo aims to overcome in the hope of expanding the religious interpretation of conversion as well as reminding the human sciences of the crucial role of religion in religious conversion.²⁵³

Despite his multi-disciplinary, holistic approach, Rambo asserts from the outset that all religious conversions are mediated through our social connections: people, institutions, communities and groups.²⁵⁴ This includes supposed “Damascus road” or “mystical” experiences.²⁵⁵ This view challenges Kilbourne and Richardson’s intrapersonal sub-paradigm and shifts so-called intrapersonal conversion types (*intellectual, mystical, affectional* etc.) into the category of interpersonal experiences. Rambo does not ignore so-called mystical experiences, but rather does not identify this experience as the climax of conversion. Instead he relocates these experiences within his conversion process model, as being a catalyst for a crisis stage.²⁵⁶ Beyond such an experience, there are potentially five stages through which a convert could pass (*quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences*), two of which specifically involve social interaction and the development of community groups (*encounter and interaction*) before conversion is considered complete.

It can be ascertained therefore, that Rambo aims to present a holistic theory of conversion, which: (1) unifies the existing scholarship from psychology, sociology, anthropology and

²⁵² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp.xiv-xv

²⁵³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.xv

²⁵⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.1

²⁵⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.1 and p.43

²⁵⁶ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.48

theology, and (2) paves the way for future studies to expand their horizons and enter into valuable cross-discipline dialogue, in order to present more complete, multifaceted accounts of religious conversion. The resulting theory is underpinned by a number of Rambo's own conclusions drawn from previous studies: that converts are primarily active participants in their own conversion,²⁵⁷ which is a process rather than an event and which is mediated through social interaction.²⁵⁸

Typology and Model

One element of Rambo's work, which has received far less attention than his influential stage model, is his five-fold typology.²⁵⁹ Conversions, which are acknowledged within Rambo's definition, are grouped according to degrees of social and cultural change: *apostasy* or *defection*, *intensification*, *affiliation*, *institutional transition* and *tradition transition*.²⁶⁰ The inclusion of inter-denominational changing, intensification of previously held beliefs and a rejection of religious beliefs reflects strongly Rambo's commitment to including the whole spectrum of religious conversion in his model. This is further evidence of his move away from the search for a narrow or "pure" definition of conversion.

Percy identifies three more dimensions of conversion in his overview of Rambo's stage model in the introduction to his edited work on conversion in Britain. Percy argues that 'Rambo considers that conversion should have three dimensions: tradition, transformation and transcendence'.²⁶¹ These dimensions are not outlined explicitly in this way in *URC*, however Percy does summarise neatly Rambo's concern for the contextual, social, personal and sacred

²⁵⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.7

²⁵⁸ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.1

²⁵⁹ Kahn, P.J. and Green, A.L. "Seeing Conversion Whole: Testing a Model of Religious Conversion" *Pastoral Psychology*, 52(3) (2004) 233-258 (pp.255-6)

²⁶⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp.12-14; see also Gillespie, V.B. *The Dynamics of Religious Conversion*, (Alabama: Religious Education Press, 1991) pp.14-15

²⁶¹ Percy, M. "Introduction" in *Previous Convictions: conversion in the present day*, ed. by Percy, M. (London: SPCK, 2000) ix-xviii (p.xii)

elements of conversion to be considered equal weighting and concern in conversion studies. Whilst this study focuses its analysis predominantly on the theological dimension, the wider tradition and personal transformation of the convert play an important role.

Rambo's systemic seven-stage model (Fig. 3.2) is meant as a process oriented adaptation of two previous models and is not intended to be a universal pattern of religious conversion.²⁶² The stages listed are to be viewed as interactive and the sequence in which they are listed must not be taken as fixed as previous stage models have.

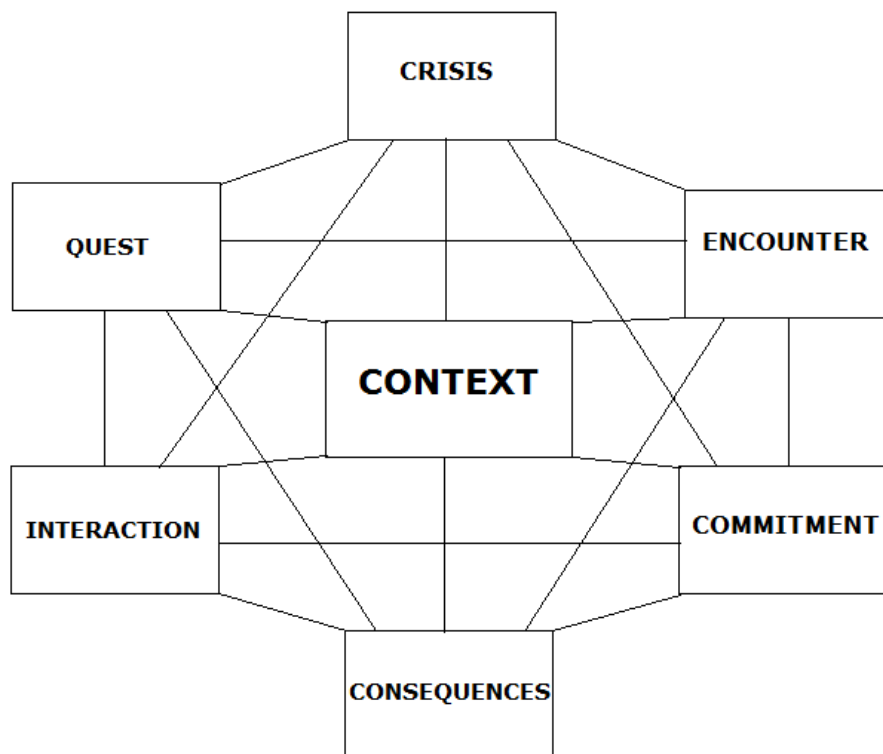
Rambo asserts religious conversion as a *process* rather than an *event*. This is made explicit within the first few paragraphs of his introduction and is reiterated throughout the exploration of his stage model. Furthermore he emphasises that this process is not experienced in the same way by everyone and not everyone will travel through all of the stages listed or in the same sequence. Rambo highlights that conversions are experienced in different ways by different individuals, in different religious groups, from different cultures and even at different stages in history,²⁶³ therefore anyone wishing to utilise his model must keep this complexity always in mind. Scholars should be wary of the temptation to mould conversion experiences to fit these stages. Rather, as this study does, the model should be used as a strategy for organizing complex data, as intended.²⁶⁴

²⁶² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.17; Rambo's model combines Lofland and Stark's sequential model and Tippet's 1977 missiological model.

²⁶³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, pp.7-10

²⁶⁴ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.17; I use Rambo's model as a strategy for collecting and organising complex data in this study.

Figure 3.2: Rambo's seven-stage model of religious conversion.²⁶⁵



3.3.2 Stage model

Rambo's artful attempt at unifying many of the conversion theories explored in section 3.2 is clearly evident in this model. He respectfully maintains the basic principles of each theory while remaining true to the fundamental assumption that none offers the complete truth. Below is a brief outline of Rambo's seven stages of religious conversion.²⁶⁶

Context: A convert's context 'is the total environment in which conversion transpires' providing the background information upon which the conversion narrative is built,

²⁶⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.18; as visually represented in Figure 3.2

²⁶⁶ These details provide the reader with an overview of each stage but cannot act as a substitute for reading Rambo's full explanations in *URC*.

encompassing both objective, external forces and subjective, internal forces.²⁶⁷ Rambo further distinguishes between one's Macro-context ('the big picture') and Micro-context ('the local setting'), and adding Meso-context (a combination of the Micro and Macro which includes local government, local religious organisations etc) in later works.²⁶⁸ Context, as a stage, is universal (everyone has a context) although specific details are completely unique to each individual. This stage can comprise one's religious background as well as the national religious environment, but it includes significantly more. According to Rambo, one's context greatly affects one's likelihood of and opportunities for conversion.

Crisis: The two important issues relating to the crisis stage are 'contextual issues' and 'the degree of activity or passivity of the convert'.²⁶⁹ These will greatly influence the shape and impact of crisis. Whilst the intensity, duration, scope, source and perceived relevance of the crisis will inevitably vary, there is traditionally some form of catalyst to initiate the conversion process. The main catalysts of crises noted by Rambo are: mystical experiences, near-death experiences, illness and healing, asking "is that all there is?", altered states of consciousness, protean selfhood, pathology, apostasy and externally stimulated crises. The order of Rambo's stages supports his view that converts play an active role in their conversion and therefore crisis typically comes before encounter with an advocate of that religion, although he acknowledges the opposite does occur.²⁷⁰ Importantly for the study of Pentecostal conversion, Rambo notes that crisis need not be a dramatic trauma, but rather can be the result of hearing a sermon, which then convicts the listener of sin.²⁷¹

²⁶⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.20

²⁶⁸ Rambo, L.R. and Farhadian, C.E. "Converting: stages of religious change" in *Religious Conversion: contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. by Lamb, C. and Bryant, M.D. (London: Cassell, 1999) 23-34 (pp.24-5)

²⁶⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.44

²⁷⁰ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.44

²⁷¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.46

Quest: Rambo asserts that ‘The notion of quest begins with the assumption that people seek to maximise meaning and purpose in life, to erase ignorance, and to resolve inconsistency’.²⁷² This natural, human desire is then intensified during times of crisis. The quest stage highlights one of Rambo’s primary assumptions, that converts are more often than not active participants in the process.²⁷³ An individual will, often over a long period of time, actively engage in a process of seeking meaning and purpose to their life through a variety of methods, not all of which will be religious or even spiritual.

Encounter: In the encounter stage, Rambo significantly turns his attention away from the convert, to what he refers to as ‘the Advocate’. An advocate in conversion terms is an individual belonging to or representing the group to which a potential convert may turn, who engages in some form of interaction with the potential convert. The encounter between convert and advocate is seen as a key turning point in the quest/seeking process. In their 2004 empirical test of Rambo’s model, Kahn and Green conclude that the encounter stage is possibly ‘not a distinct dimension in religious conversion experience’.²⁷⁴ However it is predicted that for Pentecostal converts, encounter will prove to be one of the most significant aspects of conversion, although it may not match Rambo’s original definition.

Interaction: This stage involves a decision by the potential convert to become more involved in the life and expectations of the group to which they are considering becoming a part. By following the role theory process ‘potential converts now learn more about the teachings, life-style, and expectations of the group’ before reaching a point of commitment.²⁷⁵ In more recent social sciences terminology, this period may be referred to as belonging-without-believing and in some groups this stage can continue indefinitely.

²⁷² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.56

²⁷³ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.58

²⁷⁴ Kahn, P.J. and Green, A.L. “Seeing Conversion Whole”, p.256

²⁷⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.102

Commitment: The commitment stage can be viewed as one of the most easily observable stages as, especially within Christian traditions, it is often accompanied by a ritual or public demonstration of one's decision. Rambo notes that 'commitment rituals like baptism and testimony are important, observable events that give witness to the convert's decision'.²⁷⁶ In Pentecostalism, commitment rituals are typically an external sign of an internal commitment and therefore are not seen as marking the exact moment of commitment. The initial decision to commit to becoming a Christian is made before the ritual takes place.

Consequences: If commitment is an easily observable stage in the conversion process, it is also easily replicated or forged. Therefore an act of commitment is not considered by Rambo to be the last word in religious conversion. The consequences of religious conversion are at once immediate and ongoing. Rambo ambitiously outlines the historical, sociological and individual consequences of religious conversion. This includes the "geography" of religious landscapes,²⁷⁷ the nationalism resulting from missions,²⁷⁸ the paradoxical result of secularisation,²⁷⁹ psychological and theological consequences. The consequences stage addresses the question of how long conversion lasts and its intensity.

3.4 Post-Rambo conversion theory and Pentecostalism

In the 1990s a new wave of conversion studies emerged in the West. This wave intensified following the tragic events of September 11th 2001, which began to draw scholars' attention towards conversion to and from Islam.²⁸⁰ The attention of twenty-first century conversion

²⁷⁶ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.124

²⁷⁷ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.153

²⁷⁸ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.154

²⁷⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.155

²⁸⁰ Gooren, H. *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation: tracing patterns of change in faith practices*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) p.46

scholarship, like its forbearers in the twentieth century, remains primarily concerned with fundamentalist expressions of religions. However, the field has begun to broaden from the west to a more global outlook.

The next sections look at conversion theory over the twenty years following the publication of *Understanding Religious Conversion (URC)* with focused attention on theories surrounding Pentecostalism as a movement. Rambo does not mention Pentecostalism specifically in *URC*, and just a year prior to the “Toronto Blessing” in 1994 he refers to revivalism as being ‘less prominent in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth’.²⁸¹ He could not have predicted the renewed interest in Pentecostal-charismatic revival which was to come.

3.4.1 The Toronto Blessing and renewed interest

What has come to be known as the “Toronto Blessing” is perhaps the best known example of charismatic global revival in recent decades. Sociologist Margaret Poloma describes that on January 20, 1994 members of the Toronto Airport Vineyard (now the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship (TACF)) met for a four-day revival meeting led by visiting pastor Randy Clark. Poloma explains:

Clark had experienced intense and powerful physical manifestations after attending the meeting of the former South African evangelist...Rodney Howard-Browne. Although already accustomed to charismatic manifestations found in other Vineyard congregations, those who attended the TACF revival meeting...experienced a new intense level of “Spirit blessing.” Laughter, prostration, “drunkenness,” and other physical phenomena were the initial hallmark of the renewal...²⁸²

These experiences birthed a desire for more of the outpouring of the Holy Spirit and nightly services, which ‘attracted hundreds of thousands of people from around the world’ were

²⁸¹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.15

²⁸² Poloma, M. “The “Toronto Blessing”: Charisma, Institutionalization, and Revival” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 36(2) (1997) 257-271 (p.261)

held.²⁸³ The experience then travelled around the world, with people who experienced the “blessing” in Toronto taking it back to their home churches. The “Toronto Blessing” spread across the globe and inevitably, attracted attention and scrutiny towards Pentecostal-charismatic Christianity.

Poloma writes in 1997, three years on from the start of the “blessing” at TACF, ‘there is still a discouragement of a “cult personality” that might take the focus off the message’.²⁸⁴ The leadership recognised the danger of believers attributing supernatural power to people rather than to the Spirit and thus fostering a “cult personality”. Furthermore, Poloma notes that the purpose of the blessing appeared to have shifted even within its first few years, from ‘simple spiritual refreshing’ to ‘the expectation of a supernatural evangelism of non-Christians’.²⁸⁵ Its purpose moved from the equipping and filling of Christian believers, to the conversion of non-believers.²⁸⁶

This connection between physical manifestations and conversion possibly led to an assumption of Pentecostal conversion being synonymous with revivalism; emotional and experiential but not permanent. The “Toronto Blessing” and similar experiences have been accused by some as being the product of a consumerist culture,²⁸⁷ attracting people who chase experiences and desire a quick and easy fix of spiritual manifestation without deeper faith or commitment. Although conversion theorists are leaning more towards the view of conversion

²⁸³ Poloma, “The “Toronto Blessing””, p.261

²⁸⁴ Poloma, “The “Toronto Blessing””, p.260

²⁸⁵ Poloma, “The “Toronto Blessing””, p.261

²⁸⁶ Steve Latham’s typology of revival includes an element of conversion to Christianity in all but one of his six types of revival, whether on a personal or a national scale. However, not all revivals are concerned with the conversion of non-Christians and although this became an aspect of the “Toronto Blessing”, it was not a key feature of the initial experience (Latham, S. ““God came from Teman”: Revival and Contemporary Revivalism” in *On Revival: A Critical Examination*, ed. by Walker, A. and Aune, K. (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2003) 171-186 (p.172))

²⁸⁷ Cray, G.A. “The Toronto Experience in a Consumer Society” in *Christ and Consumerism: critical reflections on the spirit of our age*, ed. by Bartholomew, C. and Moritz, T. (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000) 152-177 (p.154). Cray argues against those who would criticise the “Toronto Blessing” as consumerist.

as a process over time, the view of Pentecostal-charismatic conversion appears to retain some of the “old paradigm” of a Damascus road moment.

Furthermore, there are still those, particularly in the field of psychology, who continue to view Pentecostal-charismatic expressions of faith as NRMs, otherwise (and confusingly) known as ‘charismatic groups’. Charismatic groups are characterised by Coates as having ‘a shared belief system, social cohesiveness, behavioural norms, and the imputation of charismatic (or divine) power to the group of its leadership’.²⁸⁸ The definition seems to include Pentecostalism, particularly the final indicator of the imputation of charismatic power to the group through the receiving of Spirit baptism and spiritual gifts.²⁸⁹

Brainwashing is still a central motif for psychologists counselling former members of charismatic groups or cults,²⁹⁰ and it has been suggested that ‘the same sort of charges have been laid at the doorstep of those entering upon the paths of evangelicalism and Pentecostalism’.²⁹¹ Brainwashing theory assumes that all negative psychological impact is caused by being part of the group and that re-programming into ‘normal society’ will remove the negative impact. In a study into ex-members of charismatic groups, Coates found that people’s reasons for joining are actually more complex and active than brainwashing theory allows for. Subsequently, the personal crises which may have motivated their conversion are ignored in de-programming process and therefore these issues may arise again once the group has been left.

²⁸⁸ Coates, D.D. “Counselling former members of charismatic groups” p.1; I think that the last part of Coates’ statement is supposed to read ‘or its leadership’ as the published form does not make as much sense.

²⁸⁹ In fact, two of Coates’ research participants had belonged to groups which identified as ‘Pentecostal’ although no further details are given.

²⁹⁰ Coates, “Counselling former members of charismatic groups” p.2

²⁹¹ Flinn, F.K. “Conversion: up from evangelicalism or the pentecostal and charismatic experience” in *Religious Conversion: contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. by Lamb, C. and Bryant, M.C. (London: Cassell, 1999) 51-72 (p.51)

However, western conversion scholarship, post-Rambo, appears to have moved away from brainwashing theory and more towards the *religious marketplace* and *conversion careers* approaches. These reflect in part a response to Rambo's call for more attention to be paid to conversion in a modern global environment and a continuation of his approach to conversion as a recurring process over time.²⁹² I will discuss the strengths and weaknesses of both approaches and assess Henri Gooren's recent conversion careers model. I conclude that neither the religious marketplace nor the conversion careers model offers as holistic or broad approach as Rambo's seven-stage model and neither significantly moves conversion studies forward from *URC*.

3.4.2 Globalisation and the religious marketplace

In Rambo's words, globalisation theory 'asserts that the growth of New Religious Movements, Islamic Reform and Revitalization Movements, and Charismatic Christianity are made possible by the ease of global communication systems...and the ease of mobility via airline transportation, automobile, trains, etc'.²⁹³ Globalisation has played a large part of the growing awareness of and access to a variety of different religious viewpoints across the world, resulting in increased choice, often referred to as a religious marketplace. Religious marketplace language has recently increased globally but particularly in the UK where the variety of religions and spiritualities represented in a relatively small country is notable.

I argue that although the religious marketplace model provides an insight into the competition which derives from religious pluralism and globalisation, it can only shed light on the ways people come into contact with different religions. The model does not explain what people convert to and the beliefs associated with their conversion. Furthermore, the assumption that

²⁹² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.175 and p.165

²⁹³ Rambo, L.R. "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change" *Social Compass*, 46(3) (1999) 259-271 (p.262)

we live in a religious marketplace leads conversion scholarship further down the path of economic, social and psychological explanations for converts choosing a religious product and away from questions surrounding belief and theology. This is particularly the case with Pentecostalism, which sparks interest in its relative success in global religious marketplaces.

The religious market model traditionally supposes that converts are rational actors who, when presented with a variety of religious options will actively choose that which benefits them.²⁹⁴ Therefore, religious groups and their associated ‘truths’ are in a position of competing against each other to attract converts. Religious doctrines become products, which must be cleverly marketed and sold to religious consumers. Conversion is viewed as a weighing up of options and choosing those (or a combination of those) which benefit the convert the most. Two problems with the religious market paradigm on its own are that, firstly, like most models before it overlooks issues of belief and the perceived activity of God in the process, and secondly, that it assumes a constantly seeking population, whereas in reality the majority of people will remain with the religious tradition of their upbringing or culture.²⁹⁵

Furthermore, it is not enough to present an individualistic model of the religious market. Sherkat and Wilson highlight that individual choices are socially formed and supported. This is achieved in two ways: ‘(1) when the utility an individual derives from consuming a good is tied to the perceived effects of that consumption on others; and (2) when others reward or punish consumption (or nonconsumption)’.²⁹⁶ Despite the best efforts of scholars to explain how social factors help people decide upon a religion, the religious marketplace (and subsequently religious competition) can only ever explain how people come into contact with different religious ideas or organisations as products. It cannot reveal the reasons people

²⁹⁴ Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, pp.54-5; outlining the pros and cons of Stark and Finke’s religious market model.

²⁹⁵ Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, p.55

²⁹⁶ Sherkat, D.E. and Wilson, J. “Preferences, Constraints, and Choices in Religious Markets: An Examination of Religious Switching and Apostasy” *Social Forces*, 73(3) (1995) 993-1026 (p.999)

convert to the religious groups or denominations that they do (particularly when that group appears to offer more risks than benefits) and, importantly, what beliefs they are converting to.²⁹⁷

Increased religious pluralism has meant that Christian conversion cannot be assumed as the dominant paradigm in conversion studies. As Bryant and Lamb highlight, ‘those in Christian traditions have been forced, in recent decades, to see the phenomenon of conversion in relation to traditions other than Christianity’.²⁹⁸ Furthermore, this means that Christian groups should be prepared for an increase in converts who bring with them a variety of different beliefs and experiences from a number of past religious or spiritual explorations.

The reality of global pluralism suggests that it is now considered more acceptable to change or reject religion altogether than ever before. While this may be a natural assumption to make from the vantage point of an increasingly secular West, in reality people are influenced at a micro level by their context and are impacted more strongly by family and upbringing than the macro religious marketplace. Even in a religiously pluralistic country such as the UK, an individual with a strong Christian (or Muslim) upbringing and family structure may find it difficult or unacceptable to consider converting to another faith. Also, it must be recognised that access to information about other religions is less available in some parts of the world than others, particularly in countries where religion and state are closely linked. Furthermore, even if more religious choice could be viewed as leading to greater religious tolerance, the expanding marketplace can also be seen by religious individuals as a diluting of the ‘truth’. It

²⁹⁷ For example, in Rambo’s conclusion to *URC* (p.175) he suggests that further research is required into gay and lesbian conversions to Christianity and Judaism, which at the time of writing were on the increase despite traditional opposition in those religions to homosexuality.

²⁹⁸ Bryant, M.D and Lamb, C. “Introduction: Conversion: contours of controversy and commitment in a plural world” in *Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lamb and Bryant. (London: Cassell, 1999) 1-19 (p.6)

is perhaps for this reason that, as religious options become more available, fundamentalist expressions of religion are seen to be growing.²⁹⁹

Unfortunately, the religious market model means that questions about Pentecostal growth focus on the perceived material, social and emotional benefits of the movement and its marketing techniques, rather than the perceived work of God or the theological considerations of conversion. Also, accusations of religious consumerism have been placed on Pentecostal-charismatic conversion due to the experience of spiritual manifestations, which some see as synonymous with revivalism and sensationalism in a culture of instant gratification.³⁰⁰ Pentecostalism's appeal, from this viewpoint, can be seen to lie in the instantaneous satisfaction derived from ecstatic experiences associated with the Holy Spirit. However, these experiences should not be viewed separately from Pentecostal theology as these experiences find their meaning in the biblical narrative. The Spirit's work is understood by believers as part of an ongoing story between God and humanity. To focus on the experience without theology leaves the story only partially told.³⁰¹ Theories surrounding the appeal of the Pentecostal-charismatic movements for converts must always be viewed alongside theology. Otherwise faith becomes reduced to a social club or entertainment experience to be sold.

3.4.3 Conversion Careers

From my survey of the literature, the most significant attempt at proposing a new model to conversion studies since Rambo, has been the conversion careers model, developed and

²⁹⁹ Brown, C.G. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2009) pp.229-30

³⁰⁰ Cray, "The Toronto Experience" p.155

³⁰¹ William Kay suggests that this separation between experience and theology may be perpetuated from within Pentecostalism itself. He argues that a focus on experience-based testimony may elevate dramatic conversion experiences above others and, 'when this narrative is accompanied by accounts of conversion out of slavery to drugs or crime, theological considerations recede even further into the background' (Kay, W. "Pentecostal Perspectives on Conversion" in Christopher Partridge and Helen Reid (eds) *Finding and Losing Faith: Studies in Conversion* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2006) p.119

advocated by Dutch anthropologist of religion, Henri Gooren.³⁰² Gooren defines a conversion career as ‘the member’s passage, within his or her social and cultural context, through levels, types and phases of religious participation’.³⁰³ This definition assumes conversion as an ongoing process throughout the individual’s life consisting of moving through different levels of religious participation, either within one religious group or through a number of different organisations. Conversion is just one of a number of phases of religious intensity that people go through during their lifetime and rather than going from pre-affiliation to conversion, Gooren identifies a more gradual progression. The conversion careers approach echoes Rambo’s emphasis on conversion as a process over time involving travelling through different periods of intensity, affiliation and commitment. It is also similar to Rambo’s model in its recognition of movement between levels of affiliation in a non-linear pattern (Fig. 3.3).

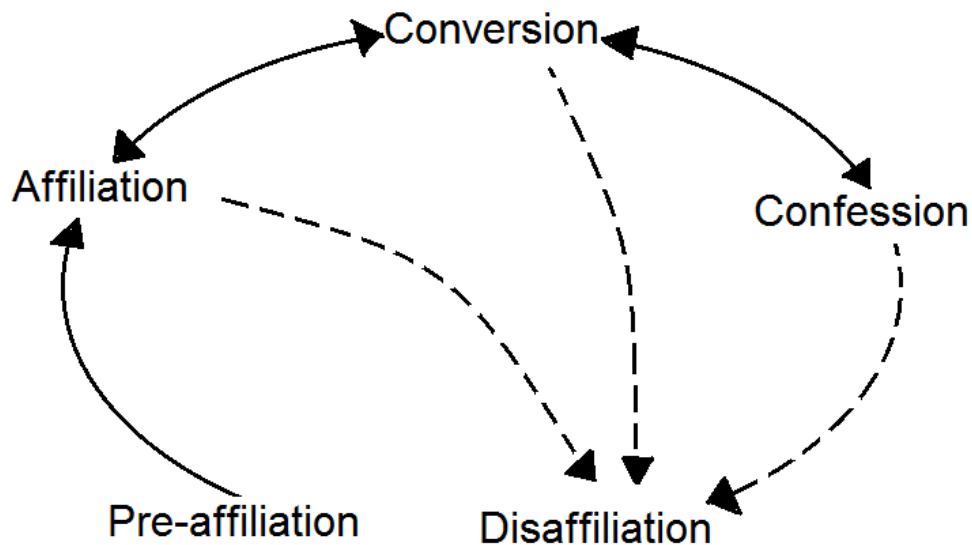
According to Gooren, his conversion careers model is the result of a synthesis of the best aspects of classic conversion theories and a rejection of their weaknesses. The result is a five-fold typology: pre-affiliation, affiliation, conversion, confession and disaffiliation. As Figure 3.3 shows that an individual can move fluidly back and forth between phases and levels of intensity, although they are only seen to move between progressive stages (in whichever direction) apart from disaffiliation, which someone can reach from any stage in the process.

³⁰² Gooren adopts the term conversion career from Richardson’s 1978 book of the same name. Gooren himself concludes that there have been no new models proposed in the field of conversion studies since Rambo in Gooren, H. “Towards a new model of religious conversion careers: The impact of social and institutional factors” in *Paradigms, poetics and politics of conversion*, ed. by Bremmer, I.N., van Bakkum, W.J. and Molendijk, A.L (Leuven: Peeters, 2006) 25-40 (p.26).

³⁰³ Droogers, A., Gooren, H. and Houtepen, A. (2003) *Conversion careers and culture politics in Pentecostalism: A comparative study in four continents*. Proposal submitted to the thematic program “The Future of the Religious Past” of the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO), p.4, cited in Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, p.48.

According to Gooren's diagram there appears to be no going back from disaffiliation to previous stages of the process.³⁰⁴

Figure 3.3: Gooren's five-fold typology of conversion



Gooren's recommendations for a life cycle approach, rather than the above typology, provides the most significant contribution to the progression of conversion studies. Whereas previous studies have focussed on conversion at a young age during adolescence or the early twenties, a conversion careers approach argues that 'it is imperative that a more systematic approach should distinguish the various levels of religious activity during the various phases of people's lives'.³⁰⁵ Gooren identifies five key life stages: childhood, adolescence, marriage, midlife, and old age. Interestingly, studies often overlook experiences of conversion during early childhood and perhaps assume that children do not possess the necessary mental

³⁰⁴ Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, p.137; the dynamic of movement between the levels is the result of Gooren's own research into conversion to Pentecostalism, Roman Catholicism and Mormonism in Latin America and it would be interesting to see whether these dynamics are supported by other groups and contexts.

³⁰⁵ Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, p. 51. It is for this reason that this study involves interview respondents covering a range of ages from 21 to 86 and traces their conversion using a life-story interview approach.

capabilities to make an informed decision about their faith.³⁰⁶ However this study reveals a number of respondents who recall making a personal commitment to Christ as young as five years of age. The conversion careers model encourages people to use a whole life approach to conversion so as not to overlook important aspects and experiences of conversion at different stages of life.

Despite Gooren's claim to be providing a new synthesis for conversion studies, I do not think that his typology seriously challenges Rambo's model or breaks new ground. In his most recent book, every criticism he makes of past conversion theories does not apply to Rambo and he uses Rambo's model to provide a framework for his own. Furthermore, although he mentions religious factors for conversion in the conclusion to his 2010 book, this is more of a passing reference to the fact that the people interviewed mentioned religious experiences or feelings of God's love for them in their interviews.³⁰⁷ These factors are unfortunately not explored or taken any further and a deeper exploration of religious factors would have been the main way in which Gooren's model of religious conversion would have exceeded previous studies. It is for these reasons that, in its current state, I do not consider the conversion careers approach as a significant enough progression from Rambo's model to supersede his seven-stage model as the most holistic and broad framework for considering religious conversion.

However, Gooren's model does highlight areas omitted from previous studies and offers requirements for moving forward into the next phase of conversion studies, three of which are addressed in this thesis. This study attempts to: consider viewpoints from a variety of

³⁰⁶ This does raise interesting questions as to the question of faith being based on decision in Pentecostalism; the acceptance that a child can decide to follow Christ but they are still typically expected to wait until they are in their teens until undergoing baptism.

³⁰⁷ Gooren, *Religious Conversion and Disaffiliation*, p.138-40

disciplines to inform the discussion,³⁰⁸ the respondents cover a wide range of ages to view conversion experiences over different life stages,³⁰⁹ and finally this study focuses on ‘what people believe in (i.e., beliefs and doctrines), why this is so important...and how they express their religious feelings in rituals, emotions, or phenomena like speaking in tongues’.³¹⁰

3.5 Conclusion

The human sciences have contributed greatly to the field of conversion studies. Findings from these disciplines offer an insight into the variety of processes, experiences and meanings attributed to conversion based often on the real life experiences and stories of converts; a method overlooked in the theology of conversion and upon which this study is built. This chapter also reveals that conversion is not simply a case of moving from one religious group to another but rather encompasses different levels of commitment, affiliation and belief, which can change throughout the convert’s life.

However, despite the fact that the general modern paradigm in conversion theory is that religious conversion is a process with the convert displaying both active and passive elements, many in the human sciences still view Pentecostal-charismatic conversion as built upon the “Damascus road” archetype. This suggests an instantaneous, passive and mystical experience, calling into question any theological depth on the part of the convert.

Furthermore, the studies explored in this chapter repeatedly ignore the element of faith in conversion and the theological changes. I suspect that this omission of the theological element might explain why Pentecostal conversion is viewed in this way. When only the

³⁰⁸ Gooren, H. “Reassessing Conventional Approaches to Conversion: Toward a New Synthesis”, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 46(3) (2007) 337-353 (p.348)

³⁰⁹ Gooren, “Reassessing Conventional Approaches”, p.348; respondents ages range from twenty to 86 years old.

³¹⁰ Gooren, “Reassessing Conventional Approaches”, p.348

external experience and manifestations are observed without the theological background behind it, then conversion can come across as based on emotion and hype, concerned only with outward ‘manifestations of the Spirit’. It is for this reason that I am using Rambo’s model as a framework for data collection only and for the data to then be analysed according to their experience and theology as well as their particular situation. The aim is to uncover the area of beliefs and theology usually overlooked by the human sciences, to then frame this within a broader theological concept. This study focuses on what Pentecostals believe happens to them when they convert, how those beliefs affect their Christian development and relationship with God and how this is expressed and transmitted through the community in testimony, ritual and evangelism.

In the next chapter I explore the literature coming from Pentecostal-Charismatic academic theology to see how scholars present conversion theologically from within. I highlight the typical Protestant theology, which often equates conversion with a narrow view of soteriology as forgiveness of sins. Therefore I am wary of arranging the literature according to a typical, chronological literature review format. The human sciences have shown that conversion is best viewed as a whole-life process and so, rather than allowing the literature to dictate a narrow view of conversion, I use the novel approach of presenting the theology of conversion at each of Rambo’s stages. In this way, I argue that conversion engages and impacts a much broader range of theological interests than perhaps commonly thought.

CHAPTER FOUR

PENTECOSTAL-CHARISMATIC THEOLOGY OF CONVERSION STAGES

4.1 Introduction

I introduced this study by highlighting that there is currently no conclusive or specific Pentecostal-charismatic (PC) theology of conversion. However, I argue that conversion is the subject with which most PC theology is concerned. The previous chapter revealed that the current paradigm in the human sciences is that conversion encompasses a process of changing religious affiliation and intensity throughout one's life. Conversely, the PC conversion experience is still considered by some to involve a combination of; (1) a stereotypical "Damascus road"/event motif, and (2) the emotional and experiential manipulation associated with NRMs.³¹¹ Some of the blame for this can perhaps be laid at the feet of PC presentations of their own conversion experiences, as well as a preoccupation, particularly at ecclesial and ordinary levels, with conversion as salvation, narrowly associated with justification.³¹² In this chapter I hope to show that Pentecostal conversion affects a broader range of theology than currently considered.

The initial moment of decision which is typically associated with 'conversion' in Pentecostal theology is represented and discussed in section 4.7.1. This decision to accept Christ as

³¹¹ Robeck, C.M. "'On Becoming a Christian': An Important Theme in the International Roman Catholic – Pentecostal Dialogue", *PentecoStudies*, 7(2) (2008) 1-28 (p.8); even this Catholic-Pentecostal dialogue repeats the assumption of the Pentecostal approach to conversion as an event in conflict with the Roman Catholic approach to conversion as a process with a series of events.

³¹² Coupled with a focus on salvation as justification, conversion can be viewed theologically by some as receiving forgiveness and "getting into heaven" (see Pinnock, C.H. *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit*, (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996) pp.149-183 for a discussion of Protestant preoccupation with justification soteriology. Pinnock suggests that this should be balanced out with a relational understanding of salvation). I suspect that the equation of conversion with salvation indicates why some might be hesitant to view conversion as a process; because salvation is seen to be received instantly. However, when conversion is viewed as more than just the initial moment of decision by faith, as I propose in this thesis, the idea of it being a process and a moment becomes less problematical. I explain in Chapter Seven, section 7.1 that the narrow view of salvation at ecclesial and ordinary level makes it difficult to view conversion in broader terms. Therefore my model offers new terminology to express the breadth of experience received with salvation.

saviour and enter into a relationship with God is seen to be that which brings about new birth and by which one is 'saved'. This moment is undoubtedly and significantly a crucial experience of conversion for believers. However, the results of this study reveal that the process of conversion begins much earlier and continues on much later than this moment and there are many more experiences beyond this point which could be considered 'conversions' of sorts. Therefore, this chapter seeks to reflect the broader definition of conversion represented in the human sciences literature.

In theological terms, I approach the literature from a combination of the Thomist and Augustinian perspective, as recommended by Frank K. Flinn. The Thomist view presents conversion as part of a process, the soul's 'turn toward the next stage in the cycle of growth';³¹³ whereas Augustine 'does what every interviewed charismatic Christian does, namely to speak from and speak about a dramatic shift in state of being from one condition to another'.³¹⁴ I do not want to deny the importance for PC Christians in acknowledging an immediate change in their being (new birth) when they decide to become a Christian. The results of this study point towards, as Flinn recommends, a both/and view of conversion being a process of development, which includes a moment of change. Even the "Damascus road" motif, so commonly associated with dramatic, unmediated change, involves Paul's progression and growth in understanding over time supported by and given meaning by advocates (Ananias) and the community.³¹⁵

³¹³ Flinn, F.K. "Conversion: up from Evangelicalism or the Pentecostal and Charismatic Experience" in *Religious Conversion: contemporary practices and controversies*, ed. by Lamb, C. and Bryant, M.D. (London: Cassell, 2000) 51-72 (p.54).

³¹⁴ Poewe, K. "Charismatic conversion in the light of Augustine's *Confessions*" in *Religious Conversion*, ed. by Lamb, C. and Bryant, M.D. (London: Cassell, 2000) 191-206 (p.193); I would challenge Poewe's generalisation but her comment does reflect the strongly held PC belief that conversion changes them and they receive a new being in the instant they decide to enter into relationship with God. This cannot be denied as an important part of a complete Pentecostal theology of conversion.

³¹⁵ Flinn, "Conversion", p.53-4.

Some might question why I have chosen a social sciences model rather than theology's own stage model, the *ordo salutis*. As this is a practical-theological study, I chose a model which considers the praxis of conversion as well as the doctrine and theory, and which is inclusive of, but not exclusively about salvation. Therefore, in this chapter I have chosen to present the theological discussions according to Rambo's stages: context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences.³¹⁶ The rationale is three-fold: (1) a holistic model ensures that I include as broad a range of theology as possible on the subject of conversion rather than seeking to focus on a 'salvific' moment, (2) this presentation will highlight which of Rambo's stages do not suit, or need reworking for, the Pentecostal experience, (3) it highlights areas where Pentecostal theology requires more attention, particularly when later compared with people's ordinary experiences. In addition, within each stage I am looking particularly for the roles that are attributed to the Holy Spirit in these discussions, as engagement with the Spirit is one of Pentecostalism's key and distinguishing features.

This chapter aims to introduce the reader to the discussions and vocabulary of wider PC theology in order to view the ordinary and ecclesial levels of LCF's conversion experiences and theology within their wider academic context. I reframe the specifics of each of Rambo's stages to represent Pentecostal considerations and highlight significant stages which require further theological attention. I conclude that Pentecostal conversion encompasses a much broader spectrum of theology and requires a more holistic explanatory theological model than has previously been considered.

³¹⁶ For a description of each stage see Chapter Three, section 3.3.2. As the theology of conversion is related to a variety of theological themes (sin, forgiveness, repentance, salvation, justification, baptism, faith, sanctification etc.) I have had to be discerning in my choice of publications, lest this chapter become a tour through the history of PC theological scholarship. Each stage could fill a whole thesis in its own right. Therefore, scholars are included at each stage where they represent foundational and/or current discussion relating to conversion at their relevant stage, from a PC standpoint. References are also made to early Elim theology as expressed through the Elim Evangel, for the purposes of highlighting changes of opinion or views which have persevered since the movement's early beginnings.

4.2 Context

There are three types of context by which Rambo argues all conversions are influenced: micro-, macro- and meso-context. These include a combination of controllable and uncontrollable factors. For example, Richter and Francis note that something as uncontrollable as birth order can affect one's likelihood to adopt and maintain the faith of their upbringing.³¹⁷ In terms of mission, the multitude of different expressions of Pentecostalism the world over is testament to the influence of context on the emphases and developments of the movement in different parts of the world.³¹⁸ However, although an individual's context is important to their exposure and understanding of the gospel, for Pentecostals it is typically believed that God breaks into one's context and overcomes it in conversion, as opposed to one's earthly context strongly helping or hindering one's chance of encountering God.³¹⁹

However, it should be acknowledged that there are some who believe that certain places and people can be restricted from accepting Christ by their context. This can be viewed in light of a community whereby the gospel is not welcomed or where there are underlying spiritual forces at work. One example from the Elim movement's magazine, *Direction*, gives an account of a mission trip to Haiti following the devastating earthquake of 2010. One of the missionaries recalls that there was believed to be a curse that had a hold on Haiti because the land had been given over to Satan and voodoo leaders 150 years previously. He recalls that some believed the earthquake was a sign that the time was right for the curse to end and as his

³¹⁷ Richter, P. and Francis, L.J. *Gone but not forgotten: Church leaving and returning*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1998), p.84; they argue that firstborns and only children are more likely to be influenced by their parents whereas subsequent children are more likely to be influenced by their peer group.

³¹⁸ Klaus, B. "The Holy Spirit and Mission in Eschatological Perspective: A Pentecostal Viewpoint" *PNEUMA*, 27(2) (2005) 322-342 (p.323)

³¹⁹ Coulter, D. "'Delivered by the Power of God': Toward a Pentecostal Understanding of Salvation", *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, 10(4) (2008) 447-467 (p.455)

team leader preached everyone present felt the curse break.³²⁰ This story suggests that within one version of the PC narrative a whole country can be cursed and under the rule of Satan, due to the sinful actions of its people, and that God will allocate a time for their liberation. This does not imply that God could not break into that context but that He chooses not to until an appointed time or circumstance.

I have separated context into two main concerns for Pentecostal theology: the Biblical meta-context and the role of God in non-Christian contexts.

4.2.1 Biblical meta-context

The world is full of meta-narratives, which Kenneth Archer refers to as ‘particularly powerful and culture-shaping narratives’.³²¹ The Elim movement’s meta-narrative, for example, includes the Welsh Revival, the transmission of Pentecostalism to the UK and the shaping of its Foursquare Gospel by its leaders and founding fathers. However, more fundamentally, it is the biblical narrative which shapes their thinking and experience. This forms the Pentecostal meta-context, the overarching context within which all other contexts are believed to be located and find their meaning.

All of creation is believed to be part of the biblical narrative spanning from the beginning of the world. This is a shared context which influences and explains humanity’s imperfect nature and God’s relationship with creation. For instance, as well as being female, white, British, a middle-child and a PhD student, according to the biblical narrative I am created in the image of God, part of a fallen world and the object of God’s love and salvific work

³²⁰ Harris, M. “Hope and healing takes place in Haiti” *Direction*, 106 (Jul. 2010), p.19

³²¹ Archer, K.J. and Hamilton, A.S. “Anabaptism-Pietism and Pentecostalism: scandalous partners in protest” *Scottish Journal of Theology*, 63(2) (2010) 185-202 (p.186)

through Christ. The convert's adoption into God's family at conversion informs their new context and identity, perhaps more than Rambo's types combined.³²²

As well as the overarching biblical story of creation and the fall, it is believed that individuals can choose to enter into the narrative of Jesus and of the Church. Pentecostal-charismatic Christians see their conversion as the beginning of their participation in the experiences and faith of the early church, particularly as recorded in Acts.³²³ Christian life is believed to be the continuation of the biblical narrative, most specifically the Luke-Acts narrative.³²⁴ Therefore, the biblical narrative can be viewed as an additional subgenre of context, which I am calling a *meta-context*. It provides, for Christians, an explanation for the creation, current state and future of the world and the activity of God in that world in relation to humanity and creation.

Likewise, the examples of conversion in the Gospels and Acts play a big part in the Pentecostal understanding of what conversion involves. For example, it is in the Acts narrative that Pentecostals gain their model of repentance, water baptism and baptism in the Spirit.³²⁵ Each gospel writer appears to present conversion in a different light; Matthew and Mark link conversion to repentance (turning from sin), Luke as turning towards God and restoration to community, and John focuses on a theology of salvation more specifically.³²⁶

³²² Galatians 3:28; see Boone, R.J. "Community and Worship: The Key Components of Pentecostal Christian Formation" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 4(8) (1996) (129-142) p.133

³²³ Cartledge, M.J. *Encountering the Spirit: The Charismatic Tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2006) p.20; see also Donald W. Dayton who identifies that 'Pentecostals read the accounts of Pentecost in Acts and insist that the general pattern of the early church's reception of the Spirit...must be replicated in the life of each individual believer' (Dayton, D.W. *Theological Roots of Pentecostalism*, sixth edition, (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press, 2007) p.23)

³²⁴ Davies, A. "What Does it Mean to Read the Bible as A Pentecostal?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 18(2) (2009) 216-229 (p.217)

³²⁵ Acts 2:38; not all Pentecostals share a theology concerning these elements, their order or importance, however for classical Pentecostals these three can be seen as key events in the Christian life.

³²⁶ See Wenk, M. "Conversion and Initiation: A Pentecostal View of Biblical and Patristic Perspectives", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 8(17) (2000) 56-80

Conversion can be seen as a response to the biblical story, acceptance of its truth and a decision to become part of that narrative. As will become apparent throughout this chapter, all theological discussion surrounding Pentecostal conversion refers back to this meta-context.

4.2.2 God outside the Church

Perhaps the most pressing questions faced by academics at the context stage, concern the perceived role of God's Spirit outside of the converted life. Although God is believed to break through individual circumstances when one is born again; does He work outside of the converted Christian life, and are those born into a Christian context more likely to experience the Spirit or hear the gospel than those born in a non-Christian context? Traditionally Pentecostals have held an exclusivist stance, denying the work of the God outside of the Church, with the exception of the Spirit working to prepare and lead people towards accepting the gospel.³²⁷ However, since the end of the last century, a handful of Pentecostal theologians have challenged this assumption and called for a uniquely Pentecostal theology of religions to be developed.

Yong criticises western Pentecostal scholarship's adoption of an Evangelical viewpoint. This stance argues that salvation and reception of the Spirit, is through faith in Christ alone. Therefore there can be no salvation and no experience of the Holy Spirit outside of Christianity. He considered that developing a uniquely Pentecostal theology of religions 'is the defining theological issue for Christianity heading into the twenty-first century'.³²⁸ Yong visualises a pneumatological approach to a theology of religions, which he believed would allow for a more inclusive attitude.

³²⁷ Kärkkäinen, V-M. "Pentecostal Pneumatology of Religions: The Contribution of Pentecostalism to Our Understanding of the Work of God's Spirit in the World" in *The Spirit in the World: Emerging Pentecostal Theologies in Global Contexts*, ed. by Kärkkäinen, V-M (Cambridge: William B. Eerdmans, 2009) 155-80 (p.170)

³²⁸ Yong, A. "'Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows...': On Envisioning a Pentecostal-Charismatic Theology of Religions" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 7(14) (1999) 81-112 (p.91)

Yong's call is reiterated by Pentecostal theologian Tony Richie who identifies the development of a Pentecostal theology of religions as 'one of the most pressing needs in our contemporary world' in response to religious pluralism.³²⁹ Like Yong, Richie sees Pentecostal theology as holding the potential for an inclusivist approach to other religions and argues, to much critique, that the early Pentecostal pioneers preached a theology consistent with inclusivism.³³⁰

As with most aspects of Pentecostal doctrine, I do not anticipate a consensus being reached, particularly considering the complexity of an inclusivist approach to religions. Nonetheless, the discussion is an important one and it is a further step forward for Pentecostal theology in challenging its adopted doctrines and approaching issues from its own unique perspective. For instance, Richie proposes a model of inter-religious dialogue, which takes Pentecostalism's tradition of testimony as its starting point.³³¹ Even if a universal conclusion is not reached, it is vital for a mission focussed movement such as Pentecostalism to have engaged seriously and theologically with the question of God's role in other religions, and for Pentecostals to understand the arguments as they relate to their own experience and narrative.

However, there is one aspect of this discussion which I feel requires more attention, particularly with regards conversion in the UK. Currently the focus of scholars like Yong and Richie is on the Spirit's work in people of other religions. I argue that, whilst the development of a Pentecostal theology of religions is necessary, it would benefit from being broadened. In Western Europe and the UK in particular, there needs to be more dialogue

³²⁹ Richie, T. "God's fairness to people of all faiths: a respectful proposal to Pentecostals for discussion regarding World Religions" *PNEUMA*, 28(1) (2006) 105-119 (p.106).

³³⁰ Richie, T. "Azusa-Era Optimism: Bishop J.H. King's Pentecostal Theology of Religions as a Possible Paradigm for Today" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 14(2) (2006) pp.247-260. This article prompted a critical response from Tony Moon and subsequently a dialogue between the two in the *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, which lasted until 2010.

³³¹ Richie, T. *Speaking by the Spirit: A Pentecostal Model for Interreligious Dialogue*, (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2011) p239

with secularism, atheism, post-Christianity and other denominations.³³² The question is not only whether God is present and working in other religions, but in those of no religion at all.³³³

4.3 Crisis

For Rambo, crisis is often a factor motivating someone to seek resolution, which is then found in a religious group. Despite its prevalence in conversion scholarship, crisis is one of the little discussed stages in Pentecostal theology in terms of its relationship to conversion. I see that what literature there is can be separated into two categories as it relates to conversion; (1) theology of suffering and (2) conviction of sin.

4.3.1 Suffering in a fallen world

If crisis prompts a search for meaning and resolution, it might be logical to assume, based on its global growth, that Pentecostalism offers people an attractive explanation for the causes of suffering in the world. Furthermore, if suffering and crisis lead people to seek meaning in other religions, the Pentecostal explanation must also serve to keep people within the faith in order that they do not seek meaning elsewhere.

The topic is growing with emerging scholarship from parts of the world, particularly areas where the Christian Church is persecuted. At the same time it has been suggested that

³³² See Chapter Five for a discussion of the religious context in the UK and the growing number of people who assert to have no religion at all. For the congregation of LCF, an understanding of the Spirit's work among atheists or post-Christians would be just as important as His work in other religions.

³³³ I suggest that studies into the ordinary theology of Pentecostal converts can contribute significantly to this discussion from a unique angle. Ordinary testimonies of conversion can reveal what the convert believes with hindsight that God was doing in his or her life prior to conversion. Their beliefs about God's role prior to conversion could therefore be discussed in relation to God's role in other pre-converted lives. The subject was raised in the majority of the testimonies recorded for this study and I feel that such ordinary beliefs can offer a way in to the discussion from ground level.

Western PC scholars overlook the topic of suffering due to its infrequency in the Western experience.³³⁴ However, for Rambo crisis need not be a major or disastrous event and I use the term ‘suffering’ in the same way. Although, as the discussion below reveals, theologically it is often associated with illness, suffering can cover a whole spectrum of events or feelings, which indicate that something is “not quite right”. The literature focuses on illness and persecution and there is perhaps a requirement for discussions to include the whole spectrum of suffering and crisis.

For Pentecostals, suffering is closely associated with Satan and the presence of sin in the world. Warrington states that the devil, although under authority, is the cause of all suffering according to classical Pentecostal theology.³³⁵ This is based on the biblical meta-narrative that we live in a fallen and sinful world because of the influence of the devil. Belief in a personal devil and demons is not only the case in African or Asian expressions of Pentecostalism, where belief in evil spirits is commonplace, but in the UK as well.³³⁶

A recent psychological study, exploring the beliefs of clergy about mental health in the UK, revealed that for Pentecostal pastors, ‘regardless of nationality, ethnicity and background experience in mental health services there is a deep, theologically based belief that mental illness is traceable to supernatural causes, most notably spirit possession’.³³⁷ This report identifies three dominant motifs in interviews conducted with ministers; (1) ‘humans are

³³⁴ Warrington, K. “A Spirit Theology of Suffering” in *The Suffering Body: Responding to the Persecution of Christians*, ed. by Robeck, C. and Hunter, H. (Peabody, MA: Paternoster Press, 2006) 24-36 (p.24)

³³⁵ Warrington, K. “Healing and Exorcism: The Path to Wholeness” in *Pentecostal Perspectives*, ed. by Warrington, K. (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998) 147-176 (p.171)

³³⁶ The precise agreement with this idea is statistically unclear in the UK; perhaps because belief in the devil can take on a number of different forms: from demonic possession within the individual to an external demonic force attempting to disrupt the believer’s relationship with God. However, Allan Anderson states that in terms of Pentecostalism globally, ‘most Pentecostals and Charismatics...believe in the biblical position of a personal devil (Satan) and his messengers known as demons or evil spirits’ (in Anderson, A. “Deliverance and Exorcism in Majority World Pentecostalism” in *Exorcism and Deliverance: Multi-Disciplinary Studies* ed. by Kay, W.K. and Parry, R. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2011) 101-119 (p.103)).

³³⁷ Leavey, G. “The Appreciation of the Spiritual in Mental Illness: A Qualitative Study of Beliefs Among Clergy in the UK” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, 47(4) (2010) 571-590 (p.581) (Professor of Mental Health and Wellbeing, University of Ulster)

inherently vulnerable to demonic possession’; (2) ‘people can only protect themselves through deliverance and salvation through Christ’; and (3) ‘possession can take on the appearance of madness’.³³⁸ I am interested in the second motif as it relates to conversion. Protection from spirit possession, seen to be linked closely with illness, comes from conversion to faith in Christ. Kay records the development in British Pentecostalism toward a consensus that Christians cannot be possessed by the devil.³³⁹ The view of suffering as the result of personal demons and the presence of sin, places suffering in opposition to God’s will. It keeps suffering and illness separate from God and links repentance and belief in God with alleviation from suffering, healing and protection from evil.

Pentecostal approaches to suffering, particularly those discussed above, have at times been accused of triumphalism and overlooking serious engagement with the biblical narrative.³⁴⁰ As Mittelstadt notes there can be a dichotomy in Pentecostal thought; ‘we often convey a dominant pragmatism that suggests any idea or act that produces good results is obviously approved by God’, and conversely that any struggle is the result of God’s displeasure or the believer’s deviation from God’s will.³⁴¹ Mittelstadt challenges this view as unbiblical and argues that the Luke-Acts narrative, central to the Pentecostal story, presents the Christian experience as a balance between power and suffering. He suggests more of an assumption that entering into the Christian life means entering into the life of Christ, which inevitably involves suffering.

³³⁸ Leavey, “The Appreciation of the Spiritual in Mental Illness” p.581

³³⁹ Kay, W.K. *Pentecostals in Britain*, (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 2000) pp.137-8; However, he also reports that over twenty percent of ministers from the Apostolic Church, Assemblies of God, Elim and the Church of God in Britain disagreed with the statement ‘I do not believe Christians can be possessed by demons’ p.49

³⁴⁰ Anderson, A. *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004) p.198; see also Scott Ellington’s works on lament in the Old Testament in Ellington, S.A. “History, Story, and Testimony: Locating Truth in a Pentecostal Hermeneutic” *PNEUMA*, 23(2) (2001) 245-263 (pp.260-1)). Ellington identifies a lack of lament or complaint to God in the testimonies of Pentecostals and calls for them to return to the Old Testament practice of prayers of lament and calling for God’s action and justice as a covenant partner.

³⁴¹ Mittelstadt, M.W. “Spirit and Suffering in Contemporary Pentecostalism: The Lukan Epic Continues” in *Defining Issues in Pentecostalism: Classical and Emergent*, ed. by Studebaker, S.M. (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008) 144-174 (p.146)

Perhaps the best known Pentecostal theologian on the subject is John C. Thomas. In his 1998 work *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance*, Thomas explores the New Testament for the origin of illness. He concludes that illness is predominantly associated with sin in the New Testament rather than by demonic forces and that the infliction of illness can be affiliated with God.³⁴² This biblical model appears in direct contrast with the assumption of suffering coming from the devil, separate from God.

Green tackles the issue of a Pentecostal approach to suffering, using Moltmann's *Theologia Crucis* in calling Pentecostals towards Christ, rather than the Spirit, as their starting point when considering the theology of suffering. He sees that it is Jesus' experience which defines the role of the Spirit in the faith community, including His work in experiences of suffering and hardship.³⁴³ Green agrees with Moltmann's argument that 'Spirit-empowerment finds its epitome in Jesus' shameful death' and therefore any church which is Spirit-led must also take on Jesus' servant life and his death.³⁴⁴ Furthermore, as the Spirit is understood by Moltmann to suffer with Christ as the *paraclete*, so too does that reflect His role in suffering alongside creation and the believer.³⁴⁵

The overarching call back to the New Testament story to inform a Pentecostal theology of suffering, whether that be the story of Christ's sufferings or those of the early Church, implies that on this issue, Pentecostalism has deviated away from its biblical meta-narrative. This raises the question for ordinary experiences as to how many people find the triumphalism comforting and how many understood upon their conversion that Christianity involved further suffering.

³⁴² Thomas, J.C. *The Devil, Disease and Deliverance: Origins of Illness in New Testament Thought*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998) p.313-7

³⁴³ Green, C.E. "The Crucified God and the Groaning Spirit: Toward a Pentecostal *Theologia Crucis* in Conversation with Jurgen Moltmann" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 19(1) (2010) 127-142 (p.129)

³⁴⁴ Green, "The Crucified God", p.134

³⁴⁵ Green, "The Crucified God", p.135

4.3.2 Conviction of sin

More closely linked with conversion is the role of the Holy Spirit in convicting people of their sin, which prompts repentance and conversion. This is mentioned by Rambo in the crisis stage as a catalyst for a life crisis. In this instance, encounter with the Holy Spirit, usually through a sermon or reading the Bible, leads someone to be convicted of their sinful nature. This is a ‘crisis’, whereby the current lifestyle or worldview is challenged and revealed as sinful or unfulfilling, which demands resolution in forgiveness of sins and accepting Christ as saviour.

The view that ‘the Spirit is the one who brings conviction of sin and conversion, leading believers to a heart knowledge of the reconciling work of Christ’,³⁴⁶ is generally upheld in PC scholarship and in Elim’s early writings. In an article for a 1920 edition of the *Elim Evangel*, Mrs G.R. Polman speaks of God’s activity in Holland a few years previous, stating ‘there was pride, self-glory, self-effort, self-will, unbrokenness and harshness, all revealed by the Holy Spirit’s convicting power’.³⁴⁷ A decade later, a preacher in China is quoted in the same publication as saying ‘We have sinned against God in not believing Jesus when He said, “When He the Spirit, is come, He will convict the world of sin”’.³⁴⁸ There can be little doubt that the belief in the Spirit’s role in bringing people to faith was upheld from the early days of the Elim movement.

³⁴⁶ Anderson, A. “The Holy Spirit, Healing and Reconciliation: Pentecostal/Charismatic Issues at Athens 2005” *International Review of Mission*, 24(375) (2005) 332-342 (p.340); see also Kärkkäinen, V-M. “Pentecostal Pneumatology of Religions” in *The Spirit in the World*, ed. by Kärkkäinen, V-M. p.170; and Dale Coulter highlights that one area of conversion that Pentecostals and Roman Catholics agree on is ‘that the Holy Spirit prepares individuals and peoples for the reception of the Gospel, despite the fallen condition of humankind’, in Coulter, “Baptism, Conversion, and Grace: Reflections on the “Underlying Realities” Between Pentecostals, Methodists, and Catholics” *PNEUMA*, (2009) 31, p.195

³⁴⁷ Polman, G.R. “What God is Doing in Holland”, *Elim Evangel*, 2(1) (Dec. 1920) 18-19 (p.18)

³⁴⁸ Anonymous, “Concise Comments and Interesting Items”, *Elim Evangel*, 11(9) (28th Feb. 1930) 140; taken from John 16:8.

According to Studebaker this belief subordinates the Spirit to ‘only an instrumental role in justification’.³⁴⁹ Whereas the primary work of salvation (justification) was achieved by Christ on the cross, the Spirit is given secondary importance by leading people to Christ and in sanctification.³⁵⁰ He argues that rather than adopting this approach to salvation, Pentecostals can more helpfully view salvation in pneumatological terms as ‘grace’.³⁵¹ In this way, the Spirit is seen to play a fundamental role throughout the whole process of salvation rather than being relegated to the role of applier. While I agree with Studebaker’s commitment to identifying the importance of the Spirit throughout the Pentecostal experience of salvation, I would raise doubts over the assumption that the role of the Spirit in leading people to faith is viewed as secondary or subordinate by Pentecostal believers.

A personal decision in response to Christ is believed to be necessary to Pentecostal conversion, as repentance and faith is a vital part of the conversion process. Typically, the conviction of sin would be followed directly by this decision to become a Christian although experience does not always follow this pattern. Conviction of sin is uniquely attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit and is one of the few allowances in Pentecostal theology for the active work of the Holy Spirit in the lives of non-Christians. His purpose is to reveal sins, convict people of those sins and lead believers to a ‘heart knowledge’ of salvation through faith in Christ.

³⁴⁹ Studebaker, S.M. “Pentecostal Soteriology and Pneumatology” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 11(2) (2003) 248-270 (p.254).

³⁵⁰ Studebaker explores the Protestant-scholastic influences on Pentecostal soteriology, which separate justification and sanctification into the roles of objective and subjective (respectively) elements of salvation and subsequently label Christ and the Spirit as achiever and applier (respectively) of salvation. Christ achieved our salvation on the cross (objective) and the Spirit applies that salvation to our lives by leading us to faith and as ‘the primary agent of sanctification’ (subjective) (Studebaker, “Pentecostal Soteriology and Pneumatology” p.254). Therefore, for Studebaker, this presents the Spirit as subordinate to Christ in salvation.

³⁵¹ Macchia also criticises the distinct separation of Christ and the Spirit in the *ordo salutis* view of salvation and argues instead for ‘the mutual working of Christ and the Spirit in salvation history’ (Macchia, F.D. *Baptized in the Spirit: a Global Pentecostal Theology*, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006) p.31)

4.4 Quest

Cartledge suggests that all Christian spirituality should reflect ‘an indication of a process of searching for God’.³⁵² As such Pentecostal-Charismatic spirituality can be defined in terms of a process of search-encounter-transformation. This involves a continued search for God, followed by encounter, which then prompts change in the life of the believer.³⁵³ Cartledge’s explanation reveals more about the ongoing Christian experience than the pre-Christian experience of seeking.³⁵⁴ This echoes the classical definition of theology as “faith seeking understanding”, whereby ‘knowledge of God not only presupposes faith, but faith also restlessly seeks deeper understanding’.³⁵⁵ In these terms, the quest stage is an expected and continuous stage in the life of a Pentecostal-Charismatic Christian, in so far as it is met with experience and subsequent transformation.

In terms of pre-Christian quest, evangelical seeker courses such as The Alpha Course and Christianity Explored have been developed and widely adopted by particularly Charismatic, but also Pentecostal churches in the UK.³⁵⁶ These courses are designed to introduce the fundamental beliefs of Christianity to people who want to find out about, or refresh their faith.³⁵⁷ As an evangelising tool, these courses hope to lead those who attend to faith in

³⁵² Cartledge, M.J. *Encountering the Spirit: the Charismatic Tradition*, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2006) p.25. Cartledge explores this model in terms of the church environment whereby seeking takes place during praise and worship, however he explains that it ‘demands constant engagement within both corporate and private spiritual devotions’ p.25.

³⁵³ Cartledge, *Encountering the Spirit*, pp.25-6.

³⁵⁴ That is not to say that non-Christians cannot enter into Christian methods of seeking God by engaging with worship or prayer. They would be encouraged to do so by Pentecostals but rather these methods of seeking are typically used more by people who are seeking the Christian God. Rambo’s quest stage does not specify that the seeker has a particular religion or god in mind when they first begin to search.

³⁵⁵ Migliore, D.L. *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, second edition, (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans, 2004) p.2

³⁵⁶ Hunt, S. “The Alpha Program: Charismatic Evangelism for the Contemporary Age” *PNEUMA*, 27(1) (2005) 65-82 (p.80); The LCF adopted Christianity Explored in 2012 to replace their previous Alpha Course. See www.christianityexplored.org and www.alpha.org

³⁵⁷ Hunt, S. “The Alpha Program” p.65

Christ.³⁵⁸ They are based on the idea that people are actively involved in seeking out meaning and faith.³⁵⁹

In July 2010, *Direction* advertised a website, which has been set up for the purpose of helping people to find God. The creators of *Looking for God* designed the site to attract those who are seeking something more in life or simply have questions about God and directing them towards the Christian faith.³⁶⁰ The goal is ‘to see one million people become believers and followers of Jesus in the UK in the next 10 years’ and to connect those new believers to church communities.³⁶¹ This website reveals a belief that people want to find out more information about the divine and that the Internet (used by eighty per cent of the UK population) is one of the ways people will conduct their search.³⁶²

Despite a lack of theological literature on seeking pre-conversion, the existence of courses and websites aimed at seekers appears to suggest that at an ecclesial level, Pentecostals in the UK accept that some people undergo an active process of quest before conversion. The continued adoption of such courses and websites in Pentecostal congregations requires theologians to engage with the questions which arise from the experience of pre-conversion quest. Such questions concern the level of God’s involvement in guiding someone’s quest, whether he can only be seen to be present in the search of those who eventually choose Christianity, and if so, the apparent favouritism present in guiding some but not others.

³⁵⁸ The author is unaware of any studies exploring the ‘drop-out’ or ‘de-conversion’ rates following conversion through an Alpha Course. Therefore, at this stage nothing can be conclusively said about the long term success of such courses.

³⁵⁹ Despite its association with active religious seeking, sociologist of religion Stephen Hunt highlights that Alpha could be considered a cult according to some definitions. He says ‘it could be argued that Alpha takes people out of their natural environment, plies them with food and personal attention, and then subjects them to systematic indoctrination over a period of weeks’ in much the same way as cults are alleged to (Hunt, S. *The Alpha Enterprise: Evangelism in a Post-Christian Era*, (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004) p.245). Although I feel that the definition of Alpha as a cult is too far, Hunt’s comment highlights the difficulty in determining whether those who convert during an Alpha course are responding rationally to the theology presented to them, or to a new positive and welcoming social environment.

³⁶⁰ www.lookingforgod.com

³⁶¹ Johnston, M. “Plan to help a million people who are ‘looking for God’”, *Direction* (July 2010) 106, p.16

³⁶² Johnston, “Plan to help a million” p.16

4.5 Encounter

Encounter with the divine is one of the key and defining aspects of Pentecostal theology. Returning to Cartledge's model for Christian spirituality, encounter sits at the centre of the process of spirituality, following the believer's search and resulting in transformation. For Pentecostals, while human evangelism is important, the aim of Pentecostal spirituality is to experience encounter with God. Although Rambo specifies the encounter stage as being an encounter between a human advocate and potential convert, I believe that given the centrality of encounter with the Spirit in Pentecostalism, the encounter stage needs to be broadened to include divine-human encounter.³⁶³ Therefore I will look first at the role of advocates and secondly to the foundational element of divine-human encounter.

4.5.1 Advocates

Pentecostalism's focus on personal encounter with God by his Spirit suggests an unmediated, purely divine-human experience. However, spiritual encounters are seen to be mediated through certain methods, such as scripture, worship and prayer. Although it is a matter of some debate as to whether there can be any unmediated encounter with God, there are few who would deny that there are ways in which spiritual encounters are mediated.³⁶⁴

The main way that conversion experiences are seen to be mediated is through missionaries and evangelists, which Rambo calls 'Advocates'. Yong highlights that 'Pentecostal identity...has been closely intertwined from its inception with a distinctive missionary

³⁶³ In his study on mediated experience in Pentecostalism, Peter D. Neumann concludes that 'Pentecostalism cannot be rightly understood without an appreciation of the weight granted to encounters with the Spirit as a resource for theological reflection, even if it is not always being done self-consciously by Pentecostals' (Neumann, P.D. *Pentecostal Experience: An Ecumenical Encounter*, (Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2012) p.331).

³⁶⁴ Neumann argues that discussion of Spiritual mediation is a sign of Pentecostal theology's maturation (Neumann, *Pentecostal Experience*, p.331)

emphasis', with mission being the call of all believers.³⁶⁵ There are of course 'official' individuals who have been chosen to be missionaries, but all believers are considered to be evangelists in their daily life according to the Great Commission.³⁶⁶ All born again believers are called to make disciples of the nations and baptise.

Although Pentecostal conversion is considered to be the work of God, he is believed to use people in this process. Andrew Lord's understanding of Pentecostal mission with regard to the Voluntary Principle places the Spirit firmly at the centre of mission activity, working through individual believers in a 'bottom up' approach separate of church organisations. He argues that 'mission arises out of an experience of God' and therefore mission is inextricable from divine-human encounter'.³⁶⁷ It is encounter with the Spirit which is vital in the ability of advocates/missionaries/evangelists to be effective. Not only is the Spirit believed to be at work in the missionaries, but also in the lives of those receiving the gospel. This is one of the ways that the Spirit convicts of sin and leads people to faith is through God's word spoken through, or the gospel shared by, others.³⁶⁸ Without encounter with the Spirit, from both sides, it is assumed that mission will not be effective.

4.5.2 Divine-human encounter

Of all Christian groups, it has been claimed that Pentecostals place the most emphasis on the fact that they have personally *experienced* the God of the Bible.³⁶⁹ Even when conversion is mediated through advocates, it is still expected that believers will have a personal encounter with God. Spirit baptism is the religious experience most discussed in the Pentecostal

³⁶⁵ Yong, "Not Knowing Where the Wind Blows..." p.88

³⁶⁶ Matthew 28:16-20

³⁶⁷ Lord, A.M. "The Voluntary Principle in Pentecostal Missiology" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 17 (2000) 81-95 (p.87)

³⁶⁸ Studebaker views the Spirit as 'drawing the person to faith in conjunction with the written and/or declared Word of God'. (Studebaker, "Pentecostal Soteriology and Pneumatology" p.254)

³⁶⁹ Cross, T.L. "The Divine-Human Encounter: Towards a Pentecostal Theology of Experience" *PNEUMA*, 31(1) (2009) 3-34 (p.6)

literature, however other encounters with the divine are recorded, such as: dreams, visions and healings, which can also accompany or instigate the conversion process. I highlighted in chapter three that encounter with the divine is an element of conversion largely ignored by scholars in the social sciences, and Rambo himself fails to mention it in any detail.

Although Spirit baptism is very much taken to be distinct and subsequent from new birth at conversion, the two historically have not been easily separated in the Pentecostal mindset. As Petts argues, ‘the baptism in the Spirit is seen as ideally taking place as soon after conversion as possible, so much so that it might well be viewed as part of the conversion process, although distinct from regeneration’.³⁷⁰ It is the experience of Spiritual encounters within Pentecostalism that makes a Pentecostal theology of conversion so complicated, as typically people experience an initial conversion followed throughout their life by transformative encounters and experiences with God which result in a further ‘turning’. In fact, Macchia refers to Spirit baptism as ‘a “second conversion”, which turns us in Christ’s love toward the world in prayer for its renewal and in our participation in God’s ministry’.³⁷¹ Spirit baptism is a promised result of the conversion process for many Pentecostals and seen as an expected stage in the process of Christian spirituality.³⁷²

Spirit baptism, and its initial evidence, is perhaps the most controversial and fiercely debated subject in Pentecostal-Charismatic theology and, given its distinction from conversion, I will not delve too far into the history of the doctrine here. In brief, the early Pentecostal pioneers

³⁷⁰ Petts, D. “The Baptism in the Holy Spirit: The Theological Distinctive” in Warrington, K. (ed) *Pentecostal Perspectives*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998) 98-119 p.100

³⁷¹ Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, p.280

³⁷² Acts 2:38; Simon Chan states that all distinct characteristics of Pentecostalism should be viewed ‘as part of a structured part of spiritual growth’, referring specifically here to the doctrine of subsequence. Chan, S. (2000) *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, p.85; the distinct stages of conversion have however been recently challenged by Yong, A. (*The Spirit Poured Out on All Flesh: Pentecostalism and the Possibility of Global Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005)), Macchia, F.D (*Baptized in the Spirit: a Global Pentecostal Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006) and Studebaker, S.M. (“Beyond Tongues: A Pentecostal Theology of Grace” in *Defining Issues in Pentecostalism: Classical and Emergent*, ed. by Studebaker, S.M. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008) 46-68)

believed generally in Spirit baptism as a second (or third) experience, distinct from and subsequent to conversion, giving power for witness, that it is evidenced by speaking in tongues (glossolalia) and that it would allow for manifestation of spiritual gifts.³⁷³

The role of Spirit baptism in comparison with regeneration was a subject for which George Jeffreys, the founder of Elim, faced opposition, even in the early years of the movement. Jeffreys held the belief that the Spirit received at the time of conversion is the *Spirit of Christ* and it is not until Spirit baptism that a believer receives the Spirit of God.³⁷⁴ This was to emphasise that one could be considered a Christian prior to Spirit baptism, in the same way that Jeffreys considered the disciples must have been regenerated prior to Pentecost in order to perform miracles, preach and receive the first communion with Christ. According to Elim historian, D.N. Hudson, Jeffreys reacted against the holiness movement's teachings on sanctification being an experience following conversion and necessary for Spirit baptism, and insisted on only three necessary experiences: regeneration, obedience in water baptism and Spirit baptism.³⁷⁵

Today, the Elim movement has retained Jeffreys's three-stage approach and has distanced itself from other Classical Pentecostal groups in its beliefs regarding initial evidence. Elim's *Statement of Fundamental Truths* asserts the belief in 'endowment of power as the gift of Christ through baptism in the Holy Spirit with signs following'.³⁷⁶ The key phrase is 'signs following', distinguishing its doctrine from that of glossolalia as the initial, inevitable

³⁷³ Dunn, J.D.G. *Baptism in the Holy Spirit: A Re-Examination of the New Testament Teaching on the Gift of the Spirit in Relation to Pentecostalism Today*, second edition (London: SCM Press, 2010) p.2

³⁷⁴ Hudson, D.N. *A Schism and its Aftermath. An historical analysis of denomination discription in the Elim Pentecostal Church, 1939-1940* (Doctoral thesis, King's College, London, 1999) p.74, British Library EThOS <http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do?sessionId=563BFA20798D55C4A351CF46B40DB9B6> (accessed on 28th Jan. 2013), this view was never mainstream and the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance holds that the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God are the same Spirit (see 4.7.1)

³⁷⁵ Hudson, *A Schism and its Aftermath*, pp.77-78; Hudson states that 'the secondary experience of the Spirit did not provide holiness, but did enable believers to live powerful Christian lives' (p.78) see also section 4.8.1

³⁷⁶ http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx (accessed online: 9th Sept 2013)

evidence of Spirit baptism.³⁷⁷ The issue of Spirit baptism with signs following has long been that which sets Elim apart from its contemporaries in Britain.

Spirit baptism has been identified by some as providing an external evidence of one's regeneration, as you cannot experience the former without the latter. It is generally accepted that spiritual gifts cannot be practiced, and manifestations of the Spirit cannot occur, until the Spirit dwells within the believer upon their regeneration.³⁷⁸ Claims of speaking in tongues or prophesying by non-Christians may instead be attributed to the work of evil spirits.

Divine-human encounter covers a broader range of experiences than just those associated with Spiritual gifts; for example feelings of God's presence, dreams, visions and audible voices are sometimes motivations for conversion. Such experiences are certainly expected and welcomed throughout the Spirit-filled Pentecostal life, however little is written about their presence in the build-up to or at the time of an initial conversion experience.

4.6 Interaction

The interaction stage, when attributed to a pre-convert, has associations with Role Theory. It is a time when one learns what it means to belong to the group, the different expectations, the rituals and the beliefs. In some faith communities, such as Orthodox Judaism, an extended period of learning about the faith is required before conversion can be formally acknowledged. However, no such expectations are expressed in Pentecostal literature and there is very little discussion surrounding the process of learning to be a Christian prior to conversion.

³⁷⁷ According to William Kay, this issue caused a possible merger between the British Assemblies of God and Elim in 1963 to dissolve, as Elim argued that some might prophesy instead of or before speaking in tongues (Kay, W.K. "The "initial evidence": implications of an empirical perspective in a British context" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 20 (2000) 25-31 (p.2))

³⁷⁸ Aker, B.C. "Charismata: Gifts, Enablements, or Ministries?" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 11(1) (2002) 53-69 (p.54)

Although Rambo considers that interaction can take place at any stage in the conversion process, I have purposefully associated it with pre-decision learning and role-playing rather than post-decision. Interaction post-conversion would be classed as Christian development through discipleship.³⁷⁹

Generally, Pentecostalism holds a Free Church ecclesiology, whereby membership requires only faith and therefore seeks to avoid a prolonged period ‘playing Christian’ without faith, which might be seen to result from the interaction stage. They discourage ‘belonging-without-believing’ as belief is the most important aspect of church attendance. Attending church without believing is more closely associated in the UK with more traditional state churches rather than the Free Churches. I suggest that a lack of conversation in the theological literature is due to a belief that conversion does not occur as a result of visiting a church and weighing up the options, but rather through encounter with Christ and it is achieved immediately through faith alone. It perhaps reflects an unwillingness of Pentecostal theology to associate the conversion process too closely with the subjective experience of church rather than an encounter with God.

4.7 Commitment

For Rambo, commitment is specifically associated with the rituals that mark it. However, in Pentecostalism the most important aspect of commitment is the personal decision of faith that a person makes to become a Christian. This is held above and beyond the rituals that follow. Therefore I have separated this stage into two; decision and commitment rituals.

³⁷⁹ See section 4.8.1

4.7.1 Decision

Commitment rituals are often associated with entrance into a community of believers, in the same way that a wedding ceremony marks a couple's entrance into marriage. However, in Pentecostal theology, entrance into the community of believers is obtained through belief in and confession of Jesus Christ as the son of God and one's personal saviour.³⁸⁰ Traditional Protestant theology holds that Christianity is not a hereditary or cultural religion.³⁸¹ It is believed that the believer becomes a new creation by faith, when a personal decision is made.

When Pentecostals think about conversion this is probably what is on their mind. This is the 'moment' of decision, which can take place in an instant. It is the person's response to God's initiation in salvation and, for many, the time that the Spirit is believed to come to dwell in the believer.³⁸² This is what happens at revival meetings and conferences or during altar calls. The focus on this moment of the process as conversion is what leads some sociologists to assume Pentecostalism represents a "Damascus road" motif, but the realities can be far from dramatic. For some, the decision to become a Christian can occur quietly and in the privacy of their own home. No matter the level of intensity or drama which accompanies it, the moment of decision to become a Christian is considered by Pentecostals to be monumental and life changing.

Pentecostal theology's belief in an individual decision, gives the convert an active role in their conversion experience. No-one can make the decision for them and no ritual performed on or

³⁸⁰ Archer, "Anabaptism-Pietism and Pentecostalism" p.197

³⁸¹ There are of course contexts where Christianity can be viewed more as a hereditary religion, even in the UK where Christianity is viewed by some as a national religion, passed down during their Christening.

³⁸² See 4.5.2. Hathaway notes that George Jeffreys, founder of Elim (see chapter five) originally held to the view that the Spirit received at initial conversion is the Spirit of Christ, and that the separate Spirit of God was received later at Spirit baptism. He derived this view from Romans 8:1-17 but it was never a mainstream view in Pentecostalism and was not supported by all of Elim. Today, the Elim statement of Fundamental Truths does not make any reference to Jeffreys distinction between the Spirit of Christ and the Spirit of God, instead holding these to be the same Spirit. Hathaway, M.R. "The Elim Pentecostal Church: Origins, Developments and Distinctives" in *Pentecostal Distinctives* ed. by Warrington, K. (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998) 1-39 (p.37)

by them will make them a Christian. Conversely, the decision made by the convert is that of submission to God. At the time of decision, the believer's first act is to receive. They receive, among other things, forgiveness of sins and new life from God. For Pentecostal theologian Dale Coulter, the two elements of salvation received at the time of conversion are; participation in God's divine life, and deliverance from sin.³⁸³ He explains 'the crisis that brings deliverance simultaneously ushers in a new phase of conscious cooperation that further propels the individual into a liberating process in which that individual is actively engaged'.³⁸⁴ Coulter suggests Pentecostal spirituality is an ongoing and active process of searching and engaging in God's divine life, which brings about liberation and transformation.³⁸⁵ There is a subtle interplay between the active engagement of the believer and the passive participation in the life and will of God through the Spirit. For this reason, I describe Pentecostal conversion as involving active-passivity.³⁸⁶

4.7.2 Commitment rituals

As Pentecostals believe in salvation by faith alone, rituals associated with conversion are not considered salvific in Pentecostal theology. They should always take place after a decision of faith has been made and are based on biblical example and/or ordinance.³⁸⁷ Pentecostals have been accused of adopting sacramental rituals without presenting or considering their own

³⁸³ Coulter, D. "Delivered By The Power of God": Toward a Pentecostal Understanding of Salvation" *International Journal of Systematic Theology*, (Oct. 2008) 10:4, pp.447-67

³⁸⁴ Coulter, "Delivered by the Power of God", p.466

³⁸⁵ This is in keeping with Cartledge's search-encounter-transformation model of Christian spirituality.

³⁸⁶ Wenk uses this term in his breakdown of conversion in the New Testament and Patristic writings. He refers to the dual focus of the passive (sheep being found, being embraced by God's goodness) and active (returning son, repentance, response to God's goodness) sinner in the writings of Luke-Acts and calls this 'active passivity' (Wenk, M. "Conversion and Initiation: A Pentecostal View of Biblical and Patristic Perspectives" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 8(17) (2000) 56-80 (p.60). Therefore active-passivity can be seen as the balance in conversion between the passive embrace and work of God and the active response (and decision) of the convert.

³⁸⁷ Sacramental ordinances (water Baptism and communion) are taken from Christ's example and his command that Christians should do the same. Testimony is not a sacramental ordinance but comes from the biblical call for believers to confess their faith.

sacramental theology.³⁸⁸ This may be due to a desire to avoid over associating salvation or faith with rituals, however some Pentecostal scholars have recently recognised the importance of, and turned their attention to developing, a Pentecostal theology of sacraments.

There are two main ordinances commonly practised in Pentecostal churches, which I would view to be ‘commitment rituals’: *believers’ baptism* and *communion*. I have identified a third, non-sacramental, Pentecostal commitment ritual as the giving of *testimony*. All three are defined as ‘commitment rituals’ because they: (1) take place after (and as a result of) conversion, (2) are an outward expression of an inward commitment to God, and (3) act to separate the believer from their past and connect them to the community and the biblical meta-narrative.

4.7.2.1 Believers Baptism

I noticed, in my reading of the theological literature, that water baptism is repeatedly overlooked in favour of Spirit baptism.³⁸⁹ Where an article title includes the phrase ‘Pentecostal baptism’, it can be assumed that the topic is Spirit baptism. However, water baptism is a central part of the conversion process in Pentecostal thought and practice. The number of baptisms a church conducts holds a direct correlation to the number of conversions and young people coming to faith in that congregation.³⁹⁰ Perhaps there is a sense that, unlike Spirit baptism, believer’s water baptism is not a uniquely Pentecostal-Charismatic event and therefore it has been discussed elsewhere.

³⁸⁸ Vondey, W. and Green, C.W. “Between This and That: Reality and Sacramentality in the Pentecostal Worldview” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 19(2) (2010) 243-264 (p.245)

³⁸⁹ I use the terms ‘water baptism’, ‘adult baptism’ and ‘believers’ baptism’ interchangeably through this thesis. They each reflect the Pentecostal practice of baptising those who have made their own decision of faith, by full immersion in water. Each term holds a different connotation and will be used to highlight its distinctiveness against other practices, i.e. water baptism as opposed to Spirit baptism; and adult and believers’ baptism as opposed to infant baptism.

³⁹⁰ Kay, *Pentecostals in Britain*, p.42

However, in line with C.A. Stephenson's call for a distinctly Pentecostal reinterpretation of communion, the same could be required for baptism. Rather than simply adopting the beliefs of other adult baptising traditions, PC Christians need to consider particularly the Spirit's role in the event and its importance for believers. Perhaps more important is its place in the charismatic movement, whereby the inheritance of adult baptism through Pentecostal influences, may clash with an existing tradition of infant baptism, e.g. in Charismatic Anglican or Roman Catholic congregations.

Despite a lack of contemporary Pentecostal research into the Anabaptist roots of Pentecostal theology, the few who have explored the subject recognise a link between Pentecostal and Anabaptist values.³⁹¹ During the sixteenth century, Anabaptists 'were constantly summoned to disputations and inquisitions to defend or explain their beliefs regarding infant baptism'.³⁹² Likewise, the *Elim Evangel* contains forceful articles explaining, and defending, the stance for believer's baptism as opposed to infant baptism in the early days of the movement.³⁹³

The first detailed mention of water baptism in the *Elim Evangel* comes in the second edition in March 1920. It is through a transcript of a sermon preached by Pastor George Jeffreys at the Elim Tabernacle Belfast. Jeffrey's sermon centres on Peter's command in Acts 2:38, for believers to repent and be baptised. Jeffreys says,

It is a going through the waters of Baptism, thus testifying before angels, before men, and before demons, that you have already gone down into a spiritual death, with the Lord Jesus Christ, and that you have been raised to walk in newness of life. If you are already saved, I command you (as Peter did in the house of Cornelius) "to be baptised." It is your privilege to let the principalities and powers in high places know that you have

³⁹¹ Clark, M.S. "Pentecostalism's Anabaptist Roots: Hermeneutical Implications" in *The Spirit and Spirituality: Essays in Honour of Russell P. Spittler*, ed. by Ma, W. And Menzies, R.P. (London: T&T Clark, 2004) 194-211 (pp.196-7)

³⁹² Byrd II, C.H. "Pentecostalism's Anabaptist Heritage: The Zofingen Disputation of 1532" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 28(1) (2008) 49-63 (p.53)

³⁹³ See Warwick, J.T. "Why I was Baptised by Immersion" *Elim Evangel*, 10(1) (Jan. 1929) 6-7; Burton Clarke, T. "The Nature and Need of Believers' Baptism" *Elim Evangel* 10(7) (June 14th, 1929), pp.100-101.

been planted together with the Lord in the likeness of His death, and that you are now raised in the likeness of His resurrection.³⁹⁴

There is no strict reference to full immersion in this text, other than Jeffrey's reference to 'going through the waters'. However, this was the preferred method of the Elim movement and was practised at their revival meetings.³⁹⁵ Jeffreys does make clear in this sermon that water baptism testifies 'that you have already' participated in spiritual death and resurrection with Jesus Christ, when you became saved, supporting baptism of believers rather than infants. Furthermore, the purpose of water baptism is to testify to the world that you are now living a new life in Jesus' likeness and separate from this world.³⁹⁶

Pentecostals perform believers' baptism because it is seen to be a command of Jesus,³⁹⁷ it follows in his example,³⁹⁸ and re-enacts the believer's participation in the death and resurrection of Jesus, the source of salvation.³⁹⁹ In this respect it expresses the participation of new converts in the continued biblical narrative and their connection to the community of faith.

³⁹⁴ Jeffreys, G. "Two Commands and a Promise to Sinners" *Elim Evangel* 1(2) (Mar. 1920) 34-36 (p.36)

³⁹⁵ The Birmingham Revival in 1930 concluded with the water baptism of over 300 people by Principal George Jeffreys (over 1,000 had been baptised previously throughout the campaign (*Elim Evangel*, (June 20 1930), p.385). The Birmingham Gazette reports 'one by one the candidates for baptism descend from the platform down the steps into the tank. Wading through the water the candidates approach the Principal. He stretches out an arm. The candidates fall backwards into the water and are totally immersed'. Author Unknown, "Revivalist Fervour: Amazing scenes at Bingley Hall (from the Birmingham Gazette)", *Elim Evangel*, 11(26) (June 27, 1930), p.402

³⁹⁶ Archer, "Anabaptism-Pietism and Pentecostalism" p.197

³⁹⁷ Matthew 28:19; K.E. Alexander says that 'water baptism is understood by all in the tradition as an ordinance' (Alexander, K.E. "Matters of Conscience, Matters of Unity, Matters of Orthodoxy: Trinity and Water Baptism in Early Pentecostal Theology and Practice" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, (2008) 17, p.69

³⁹⁸ Matthew 3:13-17

³⁹⁹ Archer, K.J. "Nourishment for our Journey: The Pentecostal *Via Salutis* and Sacramental Ordinances" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, (2004) 13:1, p.91

4.7.2.2 Communion

In his recent book *Types of Pentecostal Theology*, Stephenson describes the classical Pentecostal approach to communion as ‘no more than an act of remembrance’.⁴⁰⁰ He claims that this is part of Pentecostalism’s suspicion of ‘the excess of a sacramentally oriented soteriology’, but feels that in their attempt to avoid salvation through ritual, Pentecostals have omitted any of their own unique aspects of spirituality in the process, namely openness to the Spirit and eschatology.⁴⁰¹ Stephenson’s challenge is particularly important when we consider communion as a commitment ritual.⁴⁰² Rather than the once and for all experience of water baptism, communion is a recurring expression of commitment and faith in the life of the converted believer. Theoretically, anybody could participate in a simple act of remembrance, whereas openness to the Spirit’s presence and hope for the coming Kingdom is the reserve of believers.⁴⁰³

When viewed eschatologically, sacraments such as the Lord’s supper become more than just acts of remembrance but as opportunities for Christians to encounter the Kingdom of God.⁴⁰⁴ In relation to conversion, this view of sacramental ordinances as a combination of remembrance, openness to the Spirit and eschatological hope, can act to reconfirm for the believer all that has been achieved in their conversion; past, present and future.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰⁰ Stephenson, C.A. *Types of Pentecostal Theology*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.121

⁴⁰¹ Stephenson, *Types of Pentecostal Theology*, p.121

⁴⁰² Archer refers to ordinances such as communion as ‘acts of commitment’ practiced out of loyalty to Christ’, Archer, K.J. “Nourishment for our Journey: The Pentecostal *Via Salutis* and Sacramental Ordinances” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 13(1) (2004) 79-96 (p.84)

⁴⁰³ By this I mean that these aspects require belief in the activity of the Holy Spirit and in the future hope of God’s Kingdom, both of which are acquired upon belief in the meaning and consequences of Jesus’ death and resurrection.

⁴⁰⁴ Vondey and Green, “Between This and That”, p.259

⁴⁰⁵ This concept of the past, present and future achievements of conversion is a continuous thread developed throughout my original data (chapters five and six) and presented as a theory (chapter seven) throughout the thesis.

4.7.2.3 Testimony

Richie defines Pentecostal testimony as ‘a grateful public sharing of God’s gracious work in one’s own life to the glory of God’.⁴⁰⁶ The desire to give testimony can be viewed as an effect of encounter with and transformation by the divine. It is seen to be a commitment mechanism in Pentecostalism for two main reasons; (1) the act of testimony giving reflects, and creates, a break with the past, and (2) testimony presents the linking of one’s personal narrative with that of Jesus and the wider community through reinterpretation of events in light of the new context.⁴⁰⁷ For McGuire, the combination of public performance and meaning-giving to the new member makes testimony a primary ‘bridge-burning’ exercise between the convert’s past life and their new faith.⁴⁰⁸ As Pentecostal testimony typically includes the individual’s initial conversion narrative, it certainly can be seen as the story of moving from old to new life.

Just as all aspects of Pentecostal conversion can be seen to link back to the biblical meta-narrative, testimony represents the active weaving together of personal, biblical and community narrative through the medium of story-telling. This is achieved in a number of ways; from interpretation of personal experience in light of the biblical narrative, to the retelling of biblical narrative facilitating fresh encounter, to the ongoing Christian narrative acting as an extension of Christ’s testimony.⁴⁰⁹ Archer explains that, although Jesus’ testimony, as recorded in scripture, is unchanging ‘what does change is the extended Christian narrative as experienced over time...as the narratives of the individual and the community

⁴⁰⁶ Richie, *Speaking by the Spirit*, p.3

⁴⁰⁷ See McGuire, M.B. “Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism in Catholic Pentecostal Prayer Groups” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 16(2) (1977) pp.165-168

⁴⁰⁸ McGuire, M.B. “Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism” p.166

⁴⁰⁹ Ellington, S.A. “The Reciprocal Reshaping of History and Experience in the Psalms: Interactions with Pentecostal Testimony” *Journal of Practical Theology*, 16(1) (2007) 18-31 (pp.24; 29)

intersect'.⁴¹⁰ Therefore, Pentecostal testimony is an act of adding one's story to the extended Christian narrative, which continues from that of Christ, interpreted and inspired by the same Spirit throughout. Although not thought to be salvific, testimony-giving is treated as an important part of the conversion process and it is often included in the believer's baptismal service.⁴¹¹

4.8 Consequences

According to Rambo, consequences are the strongest indicator of a conversion's authenticity. I argue that the outcome and the fruits of the Christian life are seen to be important for Pentecostals in judging the authenticity of, particularly dramatic and sudden, conversion experiences.⁴¹² There are a number of possible consequences after conversion, but I will look at the two extreme ends of the spectrum; (1) development as a Christian in discipleship, and (2) de-conversion.

4.8.1 Discipleship

In common with many Pentecostal groups and in connection with their Foursquare Gospel theology, Elim regards sanctification 'as accomplished by the "finished work" of Christ on

⁴¹⁰ Archer, K.J. "Anabaptism-Pietism and Pentecostalism" p.187; When Archer talks about Jesus' testimony I would wish to interpret this as the testimony of Christ as the divine Logos, stretching from eternity and inclusive of the whole biblical story, Old Testament as well as New Testament.

⁴¹¹ Romans 10:9, 'if you declare with your mouth, 'Jesus is Lord,' and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved' (NIV)

⁴¹² The Elim *Fundamental Truths* identifies that salvation 'is evidenced by the Fruit of the Spirit and a holy life' and therefore the consequences or fruits of a Christian life are considered to be inextricable from conversion for Elim (http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx). Furthermore, I should highlight that, although Spirit baptism can be considered in PC theology as a consequence of conversion, its questionable status in connection with conversion or as a 'second conversion' means that it is best treated under the stage of Encounter than Consequence.

the cross and thus available to believers from the moment of initial faith in Christ'.⁴¹³

“Finished work” theology, a term coined by William Durham in 1910, views sanctification not as a distinctive work of grace secondary to conversion, but provided for in the work of Christ’s death in the same way as forgiveness.⁴¹⁴ Therefore sanctification is seen to be ‘the gradual process of appropriating the fruits of Calvary’ and believers are called to a life of growth, development and becoming more Christ-like throughout their life.⁴¹⁵ This process, associated with following Jesus and growing in Spiritual gifts and fruit, is commonly referred to as discipleship.⁴¹⁶

According to Boone, the two main components of Pentecostal Christian formation and development are community and worship. In relation to the former, he argues that conversion brings individuals into community with God’s people, and as we are influenced and formed by the communities we belong to, this ‘makes Christian formation in the community of faith an imperative’.⁴¹⁷ Therefore, Christian discipleship is not seen to be an individual undertaking but the responsibility of the whole faith community in sharing a worldview and supporting and developing one another.

Althouse highlights the habit of Pentecostal ecclesiology to focus on the practicalities of church life and ministry, rather than its mission to form a community of people who together

⁴¹³ Macchia, F.D. “Baptized in the Spirit: Towards a Global Pentecostal Theology” in *Defining Issues in Pentecostalism: Classical and Emergent* ed. by Studebaker, S.M. (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2008) 13-28 (p.16)

⁴¹⁴ Durham edited his own magazine, *Pentecostal Testimony* between 1909-1912 in which he espoused his “finished work” theology (see <https://pentecostalarchives.org/collections/Pentecostaltestimony/> (accessed on 17th December 2013). Durham’s “finished work” theology greatly influenced the American evangelist, Aimee Semple McPherson, who in turn introduced George Jeffreys to the Fourquare Gospel, which he then adopted for the Elim Movement. There is very little written about the current Elim approach to sanctification.

⁴¹⁵ Robinson, J. *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles*, (Milton Keynes: Paternoster Press, 2005) p.71

⁴¹⁶ In a report on Roman Catholic and Pentecostal dialogue on conversion and initiation, it was agreed by both parties that ‘conversion is essential to salvation in Christ, and that its ultimate purpose is a life of committed discipleship’ (Robeck, *On Becoming a Christian*, p.9).

⁴¹⁷ Boone, R.J. “Community and Worship: The Key Components of Pentecostal Christian Formation” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 4(8) (1996) 129-142 (p.130)

are learning more and moving forward ‘in its eschatological journey’ for the purpose of sending people back out into the world.⁴¹⁸ From these works alone we can see the importance attributed to the Pentecostal community in the development and discipleship of the new believer. For this reason, the individual moment of decision is not seen to be the end of an individual’s search, but the beginning of an ongoing and repeated search for and encounter with God, facilitated in the community of believers of which the convert becomes a part upon their decision of faith. Conversion and community are therefore vital partners in the process of the Pentecostal Christian life.

With regard the role of the Holy Spirit in Christian formation and discipleship, the Elim movement places a great deal of emphasis on his continued role throughout. The *Elim Statement of Fundamental Truths* states that the Holy Spirit is necessary in the work of regeneration and sanctification and that conversion ‘is evidenced by the Fruit of the Spirit and a holy life’.⁴¹⁹ Horton provides an outline for Pentecostal sanctification consistent with a Finished Work outlook, distinguishing between *positional sanctification*, achieved by the blood of Christ at conversion; and *progressive sanctification*, developed continually through ‘the blood of Christ, the Holy Spirit, and the inspired Word of God’.⁴²⁰ The progressive process of Christian development over time is attributed to the Holy Spirit and, Boone suggests, at the centre of the Pentecostal faith community should be emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit.⁴²¹ Subsequently the Spirit gives meaning to all experiences and rituals in the Pentecostal community, including the community’s work of discipleship.

⁴¹⁸ Althouse, P. “Towards a Pentecostal Ecclesiology: Participation in the Missional Life of the Triune God” *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 18(2) (2009) 230-245 (p.234)

⁴¹⁹ Elim *Fundamental Truths*, http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx (accessed 9th September 2013)

⁴²⁰ Horton, S.M. “The Pentecostal Perspective” in *Five Views on Sanctification*, ed. by Dieter, M.E., Hoekema, A.A., Horton, S.M., Robertson McQuilkin, J. and Walvoord, J.F. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987) 103-148 p.117

⁴²¹ Boone, “Community and Worship” p.130

4.8.2 De-conversion

In 2000, William Kay recorded that, of Britain's Pentecostal population, 'the Elim Pentecostal Church presents a picture of the greatest activity'.⁴²² By which he means that the Elim movement has the most churches that register decline but also the highest number of baptisms, marriages and funerals. Kay concludes that people come into Elim through conversion (baptism) and leave through death (funerals). However, not all of the decline experienced by Elim can be attributed to deaths and there are inevitably those who choose to leave the movement or Christianity as a whole.

Lynch hypothesises that one of the main reasons for de-conversion in particularly Evangelical groups is the black-and-white nature of the theology and lifestyle. When doubt is raised concerning one element, it does not take long for that doubt and eventual disenchantment to spread into other areas. He argues that Evangelical faith typically does not help people through the process of doubt, which further alienates the doubting individual.⁴²³ This suggests de-conversion as a process of gradual disenchantment and distance rather than a dramatic moment. Richter and Francis support this view in their study of church leaving and returning in the UK. They argue that those who experience a process of conversion will, if they leave church, typically experience a similar process of *de-conversion*.⁴²⁴ They record this process as involving; (1) crisis of belief, (2) review and reflection, (3) disaffection, (4) withdrawal, (5) transition, and (6) relocation.⁴²⁵ It is not surprising to consider de-conversion as involving similar stages to conversion, insofar as de-conversion from one worldview typically requires conversion to a replacement worldview.

⁴²² Kay, "Pentecostals in Britain" p.49

⁴²³ Lynch, G. *Losing My Religion: Moving on from Evangelical faith* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2003)

⁴²⁴ Richter and Francis, *Gone but not forgotten*, p.16

⁴²⁵ Richter and Francis, *Gone but not forgotten*, pp.17-25

Although studies, such as those discussed above make clear that de-conversion happens and highlight the ways that it can happen, their reports do not reveal what the faith community believes theologically about those who experience doubt and de-conversion. Unfortunately, Pentecostal-Charismatic theological literature does little to illuminate the issue. The lack of discussion in Pentecostal scholarship means that, despite the reality that people lose their faith and leave the church, questions about God's presence in their de-converted life go unanswered.⁴²⁶

Beaudoin and Hornbeck II discuss de-conversion in Catholicism as linked to the salvific quality attributed to baptism. They say that 'since the sacramental character of baptism is permanent, neither the Catechism nor the canon law code presently envisions that a person can voluntarily give up her or his membership in the church'.⁴²⁷ Hence terms such as 'non-practicing-' or 'lapse-' Catholic, which refrain from identifying an individual as outside of Catholicism.⁴²⁸ However, what does this mean for Pentecostalism, whereby salvation is attributed to faith alone and not associated with any sacraments or rituals? A sacrament cannot be undone but faith can be lost. If an individual is believed to be 'saved' at the time of their decision of faith, then their salvation can be brought into question when they lose or reject their faith.

Hollenweger highlights the confusion within Pentecostalism by saying that 'most Pentecostals believe that it is possible to fall back from the state of grace after conversion, although some

⁴²⁶ Following completion of this study my attention has been drawn to the work of Dr Alan Jamieson whose continuing work traces the faith journeys of church leavers in New Zealand (*Churchless Faith: Faith Journeys Beyond the Churches* (London:SPCK Publishing, 2002) and Jamieson, A, McIntosh, J. and Thompson, A. *Church leavers: faith journeys five years on* (London: SPCK Publishing, 2006)) from evangelical, Pentecostal and charismatic (EPC) churches. Jamieson importantly identifies continued faith journeys in his respondents and such detailed studies of church leavers, their beliefs (and those of the people "left behind" in the EPC churches) should be encouraged within a UK context.

⁴²⁷ Beaudoin, T. and Hornbeck II, J.P. "Deconversion and Ordinary Theology: A Catholic Study", in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. by Astley, J. and Francis, L.J. (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 33-44 (p.35); the authors use the term 'Catholic' rather than 'Roman Catholic' and so I am following their terminology in this discussion.

⁴²⁸ Beaudoin and Hornbeck II, "Deconversion and Ordinary Theology", p.35

believe in the “eternal security” of the converted’.⁴²⁹ There is more research required into these beliefs and their representation, but for those who believe that de-conversion marks a fall from ‘the state of grace’ this raises complex questions. For instance, if the Spirit dwells within a new believer at their conversion, then this can lead to the assumption that He leaves upon their de-conversion. If this is the case, then what becomes of their Spiritual gifts?⁴³⁰ As Lynch reveals, the topic of de-conversion inevitably raises questions concerning the place, acceptability and treatment of doubt within the Christian life. Such questions are unlikely to be asked by the individual who has de-converted, but I suggest they are of great concern to members of the faith community they leave behind.

4.9 Conclusion

When the literature concerning different aspects of Pentecostal conversion is framed according to a process model, conversion can be understood theologically as more than just a moment of faith by which salvation (narrowly considered) is received. The theological implications surrounding conversion begin before this moment and echo beyond it. Conversion is about entering into a whole life experience of relationship with God, empowered by his Spirit to grow and become more like Christ. The salvation achieved at conversion is seen to have immediate implications on earth and not just in eternity. Currently, to view conversion in this way involves a patchwork of existing theology but I suggest that more systematic theological research needs to be conducted into the whole conversion experience. I propose that an understanding of teachings and reflections of Pentecostal

⁴²⁹ Hollenweger, W.J. *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997), p.249

⁴³⁰ This question was raised during one of my interviews whereby the participant mentioned that a friend of his, who no longer went to church or believed in God, claimed that he could still speak in tongues.

congregations and individuals can contribute to shaping a more complete and holistic view of conversion.

We can see from this brief survey that the stages of: *context*, *encounter*, *commitment* and *consequences* receive prominent (or increasing) theological attention. In contrast, the more ‘seeker’ based stages of *quest* and *interaction* are all but silent in the literature. This may suggest that the active process of the convert seeking and testing out a religion for themselves is not embraced by a Pentecostal theology of conversion. However, I have highlighted that, at an ecclesial level, pre-conversion seeking is acknowledged and responded to in the UK. The practice of pre-conversion seeking therefore requires further theological attention.

The Holy Spirit’s activity is seen to permeate throughout the process of conversion, but in the literature his role received most attention in four main areas:

1. The conviction of sin (*crisis*)
2. Indwelling at the moment of decision (*commitment*)
3. Spirit baptism (*encounter*)
4. Discipleship (*consequences*)

I have highlighted in this chapter a need for more discussion surrounding the Spirit’s role outside the church, in seeking God, during *interaction*, in commitment rituals and sacraments. There is already notable progression and development in these areas by some committed scholars but there is still more to be done. This chapter shows that when conversion is expanded within the more holistic framework of a stage model, the Spirit’s role becomes more central and important than the ‘applier’ role attributed to him in a narrow Protestant soteriology of salvation as justification.

Furthermore, this chapter highlights confusion over the term ‘conversion’ when Spiritual experiences are considered, as there can be a desire to refer to the resulting transformation and ‘turning’ from these experiences as a kind of conversion also.⁴³¹ This suggests a tension of definition. Despite the theological assumption that conversion is equated with the moment of regeneration, there is also a broader understanding of the term to include other times of transformation, in response to encounter with God.

Having outlined the theoretical context of this study I move on to the first of two chapters outlining the empirical data collected through my congregational study of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship. The purpose of chapter five is to provide context for the experiences of individuals and the congregation. I begin by placing the congregation within its local context as a Christian congregation in multi-cultural Birmingham, UK. This reveals particularly the different areas of religious commitment from which potential converts are identified. Secondly I provide a brief history of the congregation, within the context of the broader Elim movement’s history and development; from the Welsh Revival in 1904, through the Birmingham Revival in 1930 and finally to the birth of LCF in the early 1980s. Finally, in the main body of the chapter, I present my analysis of data gathered during participant-observation in the five key areas of: worship and sacrament, ritual, evangelism, discipleship and teaching.

⁴³¹ Macchia, *Baptized in the Spirit*, p.280

CHAPTER FIVE

THE LIGHTHOUSE CHRISTIAN FELLOWSHIP: HISTORY AND THEOLOGY

5.1 Introduction

The Lighthouse Christian Fellowship, as with all congregations, is the product of its context as well as its theology. In addition to the practical-theological model which comes from this study, the congregation's context reveals something about the expression of Pentecostalism in heavily populated, urban areas of the UK. My findings reflect a Pentecostal response to post-Christianity and increasing atheism/agnosticism and reveal the experiences of a group of people within this context finding and expressing faith. I offer this thesis as a contribution to the growing pool of UK congregational studies, in response to Labanow's call for a plurality of different congregational studies available in order to give researchers and practitioners a wealth of resources from which to work.⁴³²

This chapter marks the first of two to present the analysis of original data and my findings from this congregational study. As conversion is interpreted and experienced within a particular context, I begin by painting a picture of LCFs geographical and sociological location as an urban congregation in twenty-first century Birmingham, UK and also its historical context as a branch of the Elim movement. I then draw from my participant-observation, analysis of congregational literature and sermons in order to describe and explain the present day congregation's theology of conversion. This involves presenting conversion theology from the ecclesial level of discourse, that is, as the congregation, as part of a wider movement, presents it both internally and externally.⁴³³ This requires not only the

⁴³² Labanow, C.E. *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church: A Congregational Study of a Vineyard Church*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) p.125

⁴³³ This includes analysis of the official Elim magazine *Direction* as it is sold and endorsed by LCF and therefore informs part of the congregation's theology and its contents are formally supported by the leadership. The

interpretation of the verbal transmission of beliefs and values through *teaching*, but also of the embodied experiences during *worship, ritual, evangelistic activities* and the process of *discipleship*. Through my analysis of material from these five areas I aim to present the theology of conversion as expressed and supported at LCF as an individual congregation and as part of the broader Elim movement.

I argue that given the congregational context, the predominant experience of LCF involves conversions from atheists, post-Christians or members of other Christian groups rather than from other religions, which has been the case throughout its history. The congregation's history is steeped in revival and as such is supportive of dramatic conversion experiences and perceived manifestations of the Spirit. They attend and advertise annual Elim conferences where such experiences are common. However, their teaching and praxis does not present this as being the most important aspect of the Christian life and it is repeatedly expressed that dramatic conversion experiences are only one of many ways that individuals come to faith. I conclude that conversion is not viewed as just a moment but an ongoing journey of faith, starting with a decision and involving multiple subsequent encounters with God and transformations by the Spirit throughout the convert's life.

In order to understand LCF and its approaches to conversion I begin by exploring Pentecostalism in the context of twenty-first century England, and Birmingham in particular. This shows where people are coming from when they decide to participate in a Pentecostal congregation and what other (non-)religious influences impact their daily lives and experiences.

precursor to *Direction* was the *Elim Evangel* and occasionally this publication will be referenced in the discussion to highlight its traditional theology and any changes in the movement's official teaching.

5.2 Britain's religious landscape: theories and context

Since 1945, discussion surrounding the religious landscape of Britain has been characterised by declining church attendance figures and a rise in the presence of other world religions.⁴³⁴ Sociologists of religion have offered numerous and conflicting theories to explain the apparent shift in British religiosity away from organised Christianity; perhaps the two most influential coming from sociologists of religion Grace Davie and Steve Bruce.

Davie interprets the pattern of church attendance decline in the UK not as a decline in Christian belief, but rather a shift in the expression of that belief away from organised congregations. She claims that 'the overall pattern of religious life is changing. For it appears that more and more people within British society want to believe but do not want to involve themselves in religious practice',⁴³⁵ a position she coined as believing-without-belonging. The desire to believe is deduced from people turning to churches during life stage events (infant baptism, weddings, funerals),⁴³⁶ the sustained popularity of religious broadcasting,⁴³⁷ and through the 'appreciable number of people...who, if prompted, will claim to have had a religious experience of one kind or another'.⁴³⁸

Similarly, in his ethnographic research into religious expression in Britain, Martin Stringer identifies an 'underlying religious sensibility' which is being revealed as Christianity retreats as the dominant religion. However, while Davie focuses on an underlying current of belief by non-churchgoers in the UK, Stringer is more concerned with beliefs held by traditional churchgoers, which might be considered as superstitious, particularly in terms of approaches

⁴³⁴ Davie and Garnett (et al) use the end of the Second World War as the key starting point for discussing Britain's changing religious landscape.

⁴³⁵ Davie, *Religion in Britain since 1945: Believing without Belonging*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994) p.107.

⁴³⁶ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p.81.

⁴³⁷ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p.112.

⁴³⁸ Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p.83.

to death.⁴³⁹ The continued (although declining) use of churches for life-stage rituals could similarly be viewed as a form of hedging/superstition for those who are not actively religious but wish to include God in these events ‘just in case’.⁴⁴⁰

In contrast to Davie’s flexible definition of Christianity, Bruce equates true Christian belief with religious practice and therefore views a decline in church attendance as a symptom of secularisation. Secularisation theory ‘in its most extreme form, predicts the eventual collapse of organized religion and the disappearance of Christianity from the public domain’.⁴⁴¹ Bruce believes that the decline in church attendance is the result of rapid social changes brought about by modernisation, particularly since 1945. He identifies a number of contributing factors, including: decline in the job for life mentality, rising divorce rates, increase in unconventional family structures, wider sexual freedom; including acceptance of homosexuality and easily available contraception, longer life, unprecedented prosperity leading to increased leisure time, travel and youth culture, as well as waves of immigration.⁴⁴² It would be impossible for Christianity to remain unchanged in such a climate.

I suggest that, for Pentecostal believers, the current state of Christianity in the UK requires transformation and reform. While I suggest Pentecostals would agree with Bruce’s insistence that Christian belief must have boundaries and there should be certain criteria for calling yourself ‘Christian’,⁴⁴³ secularisation theory denies the transformative and adaptable nature of

⁴³⁹ Stringer, M. *Contemporary Western Ethnography and the Definition of Religion*, (London: Continuum, 2008) p.iii

⁴⁴⁰ See Stringer, M. “Chatting with Gran at her Grave: Ethnography and the Definition of Religion” in *God at Ground Level*, ed. by Cruchley-Jones, P. (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2008) 23-39 (pp.31-2) for a discussion of working-class women who held the belief that everyone went to heaven because no good God would send people to hell, but they also got their babies baptised to ensure they got into heaven. Stringer refers to these commonly held contradictory beliefs as ‘situational beliefs’.

⁴⁴¹ Garnett, J., Grimley, M., Harris, A., Whyte, W. And Williams, S. (eds.) *Redefining Christian Britain: Post 1945 Perspectives*, (London: SCM Press, 2006) p.1

⁴⁴² Bruce, S. *Religion in Modern Britain*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995) pp.29-30

⁴⁴³ Smith, G. *A Short History of Secularism*, (London: IB Tauris, 2008) p.53

Christianity, which has been a repeated feature of its historical and global presence.⁴⁴⁴ Furthermore, some scholars present secularisation as the inevitable fate of the country which Christians must accept and adapt to. This view excludes the possibility of church re-growth, revival and the restoration of the country, which are key aims and themes within the Elim movement currently. In addition, Davies' believing-without-belonging theory denies the importance of community and fellowship in the Christian life, which for Pentecostals is vital. The idea of shifting Christian identity away from fellowship with the church as the body of Christ would not be considered a biblical representation of Christianity.

I suggest that in the UK, Pentecostals are aware that our culture offers a range of religious and secular options, which have left people feeling that Christianity is irrelevant to them. However, this is seen as requiring change and regeneration rather than acceptance. Kensington Temple's Colin Dye explains:

In a generation when secularists and false religionists are rampant and are using political power and social pressure to try and silence the Church, we must surely rise up and fulfil our reason for being – to make, mature and mobilise disciples for Christ.⁴⁴⁵

This sentiment of Christians rising up against an increasingly secular or atheist society is a common thread within Elim's monthly magazine *Direction*. Due to the Elim Pentecostal Churches' Superintendent Minister's passion for social action, the majority of *Direction*'s main articles address the Church's responsibility toward social justice and community outreach, as a means of restoring the nation and reaching the lost.⁴⁴⁶

In addition to a pattern of church decline, there has been a dramatic increase in religious pluralism since 1945, with immigration from commonwealth countries in particular, bringing with it new expressions of Christianity, as well as other world religions and philosophies, in

⁴⁴⁴ Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*, p.67

⁴⁴⁵ Dye, C. "When Christ becomes your passion you change forever" *Direction*, 117 (June 2011) p.36

⁴⁴⁶ Glass, J. "Serving God in our generation" *Direction*, 125 (Feb. 2012) p.5

larger numbers than ever before, creating a more diverse religious marketplace.⁴⁴⁷ With an increase in religious options, it is argued that competition between religious groups naturally develops to attract converts.⁴⁴⁸ I have already described seeker courses, produced by particularly evangelical churches as a practical example of churches' response. These courses reflect an acknowledgment that people are seeking religious truth and that they have many options of places to look for it but drawing them to find the meaning of life within the Christian faith. It can no longer be assumed that people will automatically turn to the Church for meaning.

In many ways, Birmingham stands apart in its religious make-up from the average for England and Wales. It has higher populations of people from non-Christian religions (Judaism excepted) than average, coupled with a smaller population of those claiming to have no religion at all (Table 5.1).

⁴⁴⁷ See Chapter Three, section 3.2.2.2 for a discussion of Rational Choice Theory, sections 3.4.2 and 3.4.3 for discussions of Religious Marketplace theory and Conversion Careers. See also Chapter Four, section 4.4 for reference to evangelical Christian seeker courses.

⁴⁴⁸ On the other hand, religious pluralism is not an issue faced by everyone in the country, as it tends to be geographically concentrated. The majority of non-Christian religions tend to be found in urban rather than rural areas. Davie illustrates this by recalling the 'Commission for Racial Equality's Report on racism in the Southwest of England, entitled *'Keep them in Birmingham'* (Davie, *Religion in Britain*, p.100). For some communities, religious pluralism will be something they read about but never encounter or engage with on a personal level.

Table 5.1: Comparison of population percentages for religious groups in LCF's Ward, Birmingham and the rest of England and Wales taken from 2011 Census.⁴⁴⁹

Religion	LCF's Ward⁴⁵⁰	Birmingham	England & Wales
	%	%	%
Christian	43.7	46.1	59.3
Muslim	7.4	21.9	4.8
Sikh	1.7	3.0	0.8
Hindu	3.1	2.1	1.5
Buddhist	1.0	0.5	0.4
Jewish	1.5	0.2	0.5
Other Religion	0.6	0.5	0.4
No Religion	34.7	19.3	25.1
Not stated	6.2	6.5	7.2

There does not appear to be a lack of belief in Birmingham, with 74.2 percent claiming some kind of religious identity. However, this belief is directed at a plurality of different traditions. Although those who claim 'no religion' have increased by 6.8 percent since 2001, they remain below the national average. At a glance it appears that non-Christian faiths and atheism are on the increase in Birmingham, while identification with Christianity is diminishing.

The increase in religious options readily available broadens the religious marketplace and offers a wealth of possibilities for conversion. Christianity is no longer the only choice in the UK and it is increasingly seen by some as an old-fashioned and irrelevant choice. However, the increased diversity in Britain has had a surprising impact on Christian conservatism, particularly Pentecostalism, which is bucking the trend of church decline and experiencing growth in church numbers. This has been supported most recently in a 2007 report published

⁴⁴⁹ Information collated by BRAP and data for table taken from Census 2011: Religion and Ethnicity Data Overview, p.8. The full report can be accessed via www.bvsc.org/news/key-data-birmingham-identified-brap-analysis (accessed 14th Oct. 2013) Figures rounded up or down to one decimal place.

⁴⁵⁰ Information collected from www.neighbourhood.statistics.gov.uk (accessed on 12th Sept. 2013)

by the charity, Tearfund. The Tearfund report exceeds census data in that it provides information on church attendance at denominational level and displays people's reasons for attending.⁴⁵¹ It also goes a step further by asking under what possible circumstances people might consider going (back) to church.⁴⁵² Importantly, the report questions the reasons for attending church and found that 90 percent of members of Pentecostal or new churches attend church for reasons of worship, mass or communion.⁴⁵³ This is compared to those who attend primarily for Christmas, Easter or weddings and funerals. Pentecostals also scored significantly above the UK average for the percentage who attend church on a regular basis.⁴⁵⁴

The exceptional growth of the Pentecostal-charismatic movement has been noted in terms of its global impact but is rarely discussed in relation to the trend of church decline in Britain and Europe.⁴⁵⁵ Brown briefly mentions this growth in his postscript to the second edition of *The Death of Christian Britain*, as a potential exception to his claim that Christianity in Britain will inevitably succumb to secularisation.⁴⁵⁶ Furthermore, American historian of religion Philip Jenkins identifies the charismatic movement as a potential competitor for Europe's religious future as charismatic numbers continue to exceed those of Islam across the

⁴⁵¹ Unfortunately, all available religion statistics currently only provide a snapshot in time of the religious landscape in the UK. As of 2013 there is no map charting the conversion careers of British citizens whereby they list any religious identity they have held over the course of their life. Such information would be vital for scholars of conversion studies.

⁴⁵² The report defined churchgoers under specific headings depending on their frequency of attendance; regular, fringe or occasional attendees, based on their attendance over the previous year. Those who had not been to church in the past year were categorised according to their previous affiliation; 'de-churched' for those who had been before, and 'non-churched' for those who had never attended apart from weddings and funerals etc. Their likelihood of attending in the future was defined as either 'open' or 'closed'. (Ashworth, J. And Farthing, I. *Churchgoing in the UK: A research report from Tearfund on church attendance in the UK*, (Tearfund, 2007) p.5, http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/bsp/hi/pdfs/03_04_07_tearfundchurch.pdf (accessed on 7th February 2003). This report is worth reading in its entirety, particularly for the data on people's openness or otherwise to attending church in the future. However, for this study, the data on Pentecostal church attendance is most important.

⁴⁵³ Ashworth and Farthing, *Churchgoing in the UK*, p.22.

⁴⁵⁴ UK average = 10 percent compared with Pentecostal weekly attendance = 63 percent, Pentecostal monthly attendance = 75 percent

⁴⁵⁵ William Kay identifies the current ballpark figure for Pentecostals and charismatics globally at the end of the twentieth century is usually over 520 million, which makes up 27% of organized global religion although this is of course difficult to define (Kay, W.K. (2009) *Pentecostalism*, London: SCM Press, p.12)

⁴⁵⁶ Brown, C.G. *The Death of Christian Britain: Understanding Secularisation 1800-2000*, second edition (London: Routledge, 2009) pp.229-30.

continent.⁴⁵⁷ Beyond this, there is little discussion as to the potential role of Pentecostal-charismatic churches, and their conversion methods, in the religious future of Britain. I see that Pentecostalism's anomalous growth in Britain makes its beliefs and practices surrounding conversion worthy of exploration.⁴⁵⁸

5.2.1 LCF's local area as mission field

Compared with the statistics for Birmingham, LCF's local area reveals a more even distribution of non-Christian religious populations but a higher percentage than the Birmingham and national average in the number of people claiming no religious affiliation at all. It would seem that for the congregation in its immediate area, the biggest challenges in terms of evangelism are atheism, agnosticism and post-Christianity.

Furthermore, it would be naive to ignore the Christian population in the area as a potential mission field for a Pentecostal congregation. As I have discussed, statistics of Christian identity do not equate with statistics for church attendance and therefore of the 43.7 percent of self-identified Christians in the area, there is no way of knowing how many would be considered 'saved' by the congregation's standards.

It is clear that Britain's religious landscape is incredibly complex and diverse for such a small geographical area. It has a history and nominal majority of Christianity, which influences an undercurrent of belief, but this belief is combined at ground level with aspects of imported world religions and new age spirituality, whilst expressing doubt and unbelief is an increasingly acceptable option. In LCF's local area, there are a higher percentage of people

⁴⁵⁷ Jenkins, P. *God's Continent: Christianity, Islam and Europe's Religious Crisis*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007) P.74

⁴⁵⁸ The *Church Statistics* report gives a detailed overview of church membership in the UK denomination by denomination tracking changes from 2005-2010 with a forecast to 2015. Pentecostal denominations grew by 27 percent between 2005-10, within an overall church decline of six percent during the same period. They predicted that Pentecostalism would grow by a further 22 percent between 2010-15 (Brierley, P. *UK Church Statistics, 2005-2015*, (Tonbridge: ADBC Publishers, 2011) p.2) <http://www.brierleyconsultancy.com/images/csintro.pdf>] (accessed on 6th Nov. 2013)

with no religion at all than there are people of non-Christian religions. In addition, there is the constant uncertainty in Britain as to how many people who identify as ‘Christian’ are active believers. With this in mind, I have identified the three main areas from which LCF would identify potential converts; (1) non-Christian religions, (2) no religion, and (3) Christianity.

Non-Christian religions

This group fits the more common opinion of what religious conversion means. This involves moving from one religious affiliation to another, which Rambo refers to as *tradition transition*⁴⁵⁹. Conversion of this kind would be understood by Pentecostals as making a commitment to follow Jesus, being filled with the Spirit and join a community of believers in a church, leaving behind one’s past religion. Few would question whether transition from one religious group to another constitutes conversion.

In LCF there is a strong focus on reaching atheists, agnostics, post- and nominal Christians, however there are no programmes specifically tailored toward evangelism or even dialogue with people of other religions.⁴⁶⁰ The area has a notable Jewish population, compared with the national and city-wide averages and the church is close to a prominent university, which has a number of students from multiple religious backgrounds going through every year. However, there is a lack of engagement with people of other faiths whether in outreach activities or in the formal teaching of the congregation. It can be argued that LCF’s outreach activities are open to people of all faiths and therefore do not aim at reaching people from one faith background over another. However, in reality LCF’s focus on practical assistance and social outreach means that those of other faiths are more likely to be offered this support through their own religious community and therefore are less likely to attend such events at

⁴⁵⁹ Rambo, L. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p.14

⁴⁶⁰ Inter-religious dialogue has been noted as lacking in Classical Pentecostalism as a whole (Richie, T. *Speaking by the Spirit: A Pentecostal Model for Interreligious Dialogue*, (Lexington, KY: Emeth Press, 2011) p.5)

LCF. Other than supporting missionaries in other parts of the world who will be inevitably encountering people of other faiths, there seems to be a blind spot to the reality that members of the congregation are working alongside and meeting with people of other faiths, living and working in Birmingham day-to-day.

If the majority of converts to Pentecostalism come from within the Christian tradition,⁴⁶¹ perhaps this reveals a need for more purposeful dialogue and interaction with people from other faiths. However, LCF's lack of inter-religious dialogue or evangelism is understandable considering that, although non-Christian religions are more evenly distributed in the local area than the city as a whole, there is still a higher percentage of the non-religious in LCF's local area. Therefore the congregation is more likely to encounter those of no religion in its local evangelism than those from non-Christian religions.

No religion or Post-Christian

The conversion of a professed atheist or agnostic to Christianity would also tend to be widely accepted as an example of conversion. This falls under Rambo's typology of *affiliation*, whereby someone with little or no involvement with a religious institution transitions to full involvement and commitment. However, the post-Christian is much more difficult to define according to Rambo's types. They neither fit perfectly within *affiliation* or *intensification* as one assumes no prior involvement and the other involves and revitalised commitment to a group they already belong to. Typically the post-Christian is actually experiencing a form of *re-affiliation* combined with *intensification*,⁴⁶² whereby they are identifying themselves as Christian again but this time their commitment and faith is transformed. To include this

⁴⁶¹ Cartledge, M. *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) pp.77-8

⁴⁶² Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.13. Rambo's categories are limited in this respect to affiliation as a one-time thing, which then becomes intensified over time. The UK context and the interview data from this study reveal that people can abandon the tradition they were raised within and then re-affiliate at a later date. It is for this reason that I suggest the category of re-affiliation.

experience, I propose a sixth additional category to Rambo's typology: *renewal*. This term suggests a returning to faith after an interruption but also with a sense of newness and progression from the original faith.⁴⁶³

Birmingham reflects the rest of the country in that the majority of the population still self-identify as 'Christian' and the number of people identifying as having 'no religion' increased over the last decade. Although since Bruce and Davie first noted the decline in church attendance, Christian self-identification appears to be declining as well. I suggest that this is not a loss of belief but rather a dropping away of nominal or post-Christians who reject the Christian label as it becomes more acceptable to identify as having no religion.

Those who have been brought up in the UK, even those with no religion, generally have at least a peripheral understanding of Christianity. This may be from hymns during school assembly, nativity plays or having attended weddings and funerals. However, for Pentecostal believers, a peripheral understanding is not enough to claim identity as a Christian, rather this requires repentance from sins, acceptance of Christ as your saviour and a relationship with God. It could be that an understanding of Christianity as more than a national identity or tradition is getting through to the population and that the decline is a sign that people are re-assessing their beliefs.

Whatever the case, many atheists and agnostics in the UK today have their own pre-conceptions of Christianity based on past experiences, media attention and the increased view of Christianity as an open target for humour and critique. These assumptions are not always correct and often incomplete, but if someone identifies as having no religion because they

⁴⁶³ McKnight considers this term to be another word for *intensification* but I am not using it in that way (McKnight, S. "Was Paul a Convert?" *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 110-132 (p.121))

have actively rejected Christianity, this can be seen to make for hostile dialogue, with misunderstandings and assumptions to penetrate.

Christian denominations

The third and final mission field for Pentecostals in Britain is from other Christian denominations. This generally includes those who self-identify as Christian and who belong to a place of worship. People from this category might simply move to a Pentecostal church because they are shifting denomination and prefer the style of worship or teaching. However, this study reveals that LCF differentiates between being a 'saved' Christian and being a 'Spirit-filled' Christian. Members of non-charismatic denominations with little or no emphasis on the works of the Holy Spirit may fall under the former category but not the latter. Upon learning about the spirit-filled life, Christians from other denominations may choose to convert to this expression of Christianity.

Furthermore, there is a third category of Christian in the UK's churches; that is the nominal Christian. This will be someone who has perhaps been raised in a church environment and attends services out of tradition or habit but has not made a personal commitment of faith. Classical Pentecostals would see that these people, although nominally Christian, are in need of being born again.⁴⁶⁴

These types of conversion would fit somewhere between Rambo's categories of *intensification* and *institutional transition*⁴⁶⁵. Their major tradition (Christianity) remains the same but their understanding of what it means to be a Christian and their experience of their faith has intensified and they have moved from a church of one expression to another. This is

⁴⁶⁴ This movement from 'nominal' to committed Christian is noted in a broad spread of denominations, not just Pentecostalism, by John Finney in his ecumenical survey of Christian conversion in the UK (see Finney, J. *Finding Faith Today* (Swindon: British and Foreign Bible Society, 1992) p.22)

⁴⁶⁵ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, p.13-14.

a type of conversion, which for many might not be considered to fall under the banner of conversion as the major tradition has remained the same. However, as Cartledge discovered in his congregational study of an Assemblies of God church in Birmingham, even when the initial conversion experience (deciding to become a Christian) is experienced elsewhere, Pentecostal testimony will often include reference to a kind of ‘Pentecostal conversion’, whereby renewal of the original commitment or baptism in the Spirit is experienced.⁴⁶⁶ As most converts to Pentecostalism come in from other Christian denominations, Cartledge notes that Pentecostals ‘should appreciate the fact that converts will be mainly forms of institutional transition’.⁴⁶⁷ Therefore it is expected in this study that many people at LCF will have had some previous experience of another Christian denomination prior to their movement to a Pentecostal expression of faith.

5.3 The history of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship in three revivals⁴⁶⁸

I will now look at the birth and early development of the Elim movement, how it came to Birmingham and the events which led to the founding of the LCF in the early 1980s.⁴⁶⁹ Three key times of revival, of varying scale, will be used to chart the development of the movement from the Welsh valleys to Birmingham, over the course of a century: the Welsh Revival (1904), the Birmingham Revival (1930) and a congregational revival in the 1970’s, which led to the birth of the congregation.

⁴⁶⁶ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.71.

⁴⁶⁷ Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, pp.77-78.

⁴⁶⁸ Information regarding the split from the Elim Fellowship (EF) has been taken predominantly from the testimonies of individuals who were members of the founding three families of LCF. Their accounts are of course biased towards LCF but there appears to be no animosity towards the EF congregation which still remains within the same locality as LCF. I have asked someone from EF to give me some information about their history but have not yet received a response.

⁴⁶⁹ Members of the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance see Elim as a movement rather than a denomination. It will therefore be referred to as such throughout this thesis.

The first section begins with the conversion of Elim's founder, George Jeffreys during the Welsh revival in 1904 and how his experiences shaped his understanding of conversion and that of the early movement. The second section narrows its focus onto one of the largest revivals in Elim's early history; the Birmingham revival of 1930. This was the moment that Elim came to the 'second city'. A result of this revival was the planting and growth of Elim churches in Birmingham started by converts. One such church was the Elim Fellowship (EF), the church from which LFC came. In the late 1970's a small, congregation-focussed revival broke out at EF, presenting a choice to the congregation; is this the path we want to follow or not? The third and final historical section looks at the founding and growth of LCF, following a small band of 17 people with a calling to start a new Elim church in Birmingham.

5.3.1 The Welsh Revival and the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance

In November 1904, George Jeffreys, a fifteen year old miner's son from Maesteg, South Wales was converted along with his older brother Stephen at Shiloh Independent Chapel in Nantyllon, during the Welsh Revival.⁴⁷⁰ His family belonged to the Welsh Congregational Church and he describes the nature of his conversion in 1904 as '...the blazing light of regeneration broke in upon his soul'.⁴⁷¹ Years later, a new movement was introduced in Wales which attracted some of those commonly known as "the children of the revival" who had been converted during the time.⁴⁷² This new movement promoted Pentecostal manifestations, particularly baptism in the Holy Spirit, to which George was initially opposed. However he and Stephen were forced to reconsider when Stephen's son Edward entered into

⁴⁷⁰ Robinson, J. *Pentecostal Origins: Early Pentecostalism in Ireland in the Context of the British Isles*. (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005) p.92.

⁴⁷¹ George Jeffreys writing his testimony in the third person for the Christmas edition of the *Elim Evangel*, December 25th 1929, p.259; this could be described in Rambo's terms as *intensification* or *institution transition* depending on his commitment and adherence to his Welsh Congregational Church at the time.

⁴⁷² Cartwright, Desmond "They came to Elim": Discovering the remarkable story of nine decades of Pentecostal witness" *Direction* (Jan. 2005) p.26, http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/123028/Read_history_articles.aspx (accessed on 13th February 2013)

the experience in 1909 whilst on holiday.⁴⁷³ Jeffreys' account of his own Spirit baptism,⁴⁷⁴ states that following his conversion he was baptised by immersion in the Llynvi Valley river, that he experienced healing by God and that he was 'Baptised in the Holy Ghost', which he 'received according to Acts II 4, in the old Duffryn Chapel building.'⁴⁷⁵

Jeffreys recounts a sense of calling to enter into a life of ministry, which was originally hindered from two sides; physical and financial. With regards the former, Robinson explains that 'He suffered since birth from a facial paralysis as well as a speech impediment'⁴⁷⁶, a crushing blow for someone called to preach. However, it was for this that Jeffreys received divine healing whilst praying with his brother's family one Sunday morning.⁴⁷⁷ With regards the latter, Jeffreys acknowledged that to receive any kind of financial backing for his ministry would require cutting out 'some of these controversial subjects, such as the Baptism of the Holy Ghost and Divine Healing'.⁴⁷⁸ It was these 'controversial subjects' which defined his ministry and experience as Pentecostal. Jeffreys sense of calling as a preacher combined with a period of itinerant ministry around the UK, which increased his reputation and profile among Pentecostals contributed to the eventual birth of the Elim movement.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷³ Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins*, pp.93-4; see also Cartwright, D. "They came to Elim" *Direction* (Jan. 2005) p.26 http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/123028/Read_history_articles.aspx (accessed on 13th February 2013).

⁴⁷⁴ There are at least two contrasting accounts of Jeffreys' Spirit baptism. Robinson suggests that Jeffreys' account probably took place in 1910 in Wales, however Malcolm Hathaway presents the contrasting view that it took place during a visit to Bournemouth (see Robinson, J. *Pentecostal Origins*, p.94). For the purposes of this study, the exact time and location of the event are unimportant and so I will use Jeffreys' own account.

⁴⁷⁵ Jeffreys, G. "Christmas and New Year Greetings" in the *Elim Evangel*, December 25th 1929, p.529. He does not explicitly mention receiving the gift of tongues at this time, although this is to be assumed based on the reference to the glossolalic experience of the apostles in Acts 2:4, 'All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them.'

⁴⁷⁶ Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins*, p.98. Robinson cites Jeffrey's own work *Healing Rays* (p.57) as the source for the description of his impairment and subsequent healing.

⁴⁷⁷ Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins*, p.98

⁴⁷⁸ Jeffreys, G. "Christmas and New Year Greetings", *Elim Evangel*, 10(34) (25 Dec. 1929) 529-530 (p.529)

⁴⁷⁹ Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins*, p.123-5

The Elim Evangelistic Band, as they were initially known, was founded in 1915 in Monaghan, Ireland by George Jeffreys.⁴⁸⁰ The name ‘Elim’ is taken from the Old Testament as one of the places where the Israelites camped after their flight from Egypt. It is described in Exodus as an idyllic place of rest where ‘there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees, and they camped there near the water’.⁴⁸¹ The imagery of peace, refreshment and freedom following slavery no doubt appealed to Jeffrey and the band’s vision for their movement.

Jeffreys was particularly influenced by the Foursquare Gospel and the Elim Evangelistic Band adopted this approach to the ‘full gospel’ of Jesus as Saviour, Healer, Baptiser (in the Spirit) and Coming King.⁴⁸² The Band changed its name officially in 1929 to the Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance.⁴⁸³ The Fourfold Gospel marks the foundation of the Elim movement’s Christology and the gospel they sought to share.

The movement saw rapid growth in the UK and Ireland between 1919 and 1935, due in large part to Jeffrey and the band’s national campaigns. Jeffreys is recorded as ‘giving priority to evangelism reaching a mass audience’, which led to large scale missions characterised by multiple conversions, Spirit baptisms and healings.⁴⁸⁴ Naturally considering the presence of large-scale conversions, the movement’s theology of these conversion experiences needed to be established.

⁴⁸⁰ Hudson, D.N. *A Schism and its Aftermath. An historical analysis of denominational discription in the Elim Pentecostal Church, 1939-1940*. (Doctoral Thesis submitted to Kings College, London, 1999) British Library EThOS <http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do?jsessionid=563BFA20798D55C4A351CF46B40DB9B6> p.18 (Accessed on 28th January 2013).

⁴⁸¹ Exodus 15:27 and Numbers 33:9 (NIV)

⁴⁸² Jeffreys adopted the name Elim Foursquare Gospel Alliance (which remains the movement’s official title to date) after meeting with Aimee Semple McPherson in Los Angeles in 1924 although Jeffreys claimed ‘direct, biblical inspiration for the motto’ (Hathaway, M.R. “The Elim Pentecostal Church: Origins, Development and Distinctives” in *Pentecostal Perspectives*, ed. by Warrington, K. (Cumbria: Paternoster Press, 1998) 1-39 (p.6))

⁴⁸³ Hudson, *A Schism and its Aftermath*. p.18. The titles of the foursquare gospel adorned the four corners of the *Elim Evangel*’s front page from 1st January 1925.

⁴⁸⁴ Robinson, *Pentecostal Origins*, p.105; This growth was marked by and recorded in the movement’s official publication, the *Elim Evangel (EE)*. Printed from 1919 until 1934 and later replaced by *Direction* magazine.

Jeffreys preached at the Elim Tabernacle, Belfast in 1920 on Acts 2:38, outlining Peter's call for converts to repent, be baptised and then they will receive the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸⁵ He takes this threefold process as the model for all Christian believers. He defines repentance as meaning turning from sin and being willing to accept salvation through Christ. This definition of 'to turn around' is the same meaning commonly attributed to conversion and therefore repentance can be seen as the moment of decision made by the believer, by which they become a Christian. Jeffreys emphasises that this is not linked to emotions but that for the convert, 'God appeals to his will, not to his emotions. He is asked to 'repent,' not to feel repentance'.⁴⁸⁶ Repentance is followed by baptism, which the Elim movement was keen to emphasise as adult baptism rather than infant baptism.⁴⁸⁷ Articles in the *EE* argued that 'sprinkling an infant, even if it is with Jordan water, does not fulfil the condition. We read of no such baptism in the Word of God'.⁴⁸⁸ Finally, the 'promise' following these two commands is seen to be Spirit baptism; which Jeffreys teaches to be the gift of the same Spirit that was given to the disciples at Pentecost given to believers today.⁴⁸⁹

⁴⁸⁵ Jeffreys, G. "Two Commands and a Promise to Sinners" *Elim Evangel*, 1(2) (March 1920), p.34-6. For more in-depth discussions of Elim's historical and theological development, and in particular the theology of George Jeffreys see Hathaway, M. "The Elim Pentecostal Church: Origins, Development and Distinctives" in Warrington, K. (ed.) *Pentecostal Perspectives*, (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1998) 1-39; Hudson, D.N. (1999) *A Schism and its Aftermath*; and Robinson, J. (2005) *Pentecostal Origins*; as well as the *Elim Evangel* 1919-1934.

⁴⁸⁶ Jeffreys, "Two Commands and a Promise to Sinners" p.36

⁴⁸⁷ This practice would have caused conflict for some who came to the movement from an Anglican or Roman Catholic background whereby baptism cannot be repeated. A prime example is Alexander Boddy, an influential pioneer of Pentecostalism in the UK and also an Anglican minister. Wakefield notes that Boddy retained his Anglican stance on the practice of infant baptism, which caused conflict and tension within the Pentecostal movement (Wakefield, G. *Alexander Boddy: Pentecostal Anglican Pioneer*, (Milton Keynes: Authentic Media, 2007) p.185)

⁴⁸⁸ Warwick, J.T. "Why I was Baptised by Immersion" 10(1) (Jan. 1929) p.7; see 5.4.2 for a full discussion of Elim's approach to dedication and adult baptism by full immersion

⁴⁸⁹ Jeffreys, "Two Commands and a Promise to Sinners", p.36; Jeffreys does not refer to the signs which he believed would follow Spirit baptism in this sermon, rather he is emphasising the gift of the Spirit being promised to believers today following the commands of repentance and water baptism.

5.3.2 The Birmingham Revival and the Elim Fellowship

Preliminary advertising began in the *Elim Evangel* on 31st January 1930 for a mission in Birmingham led by Jeffreys and his Elim Evangelistic Band or ‘Revival Band’ as they began to be called. The meetings began in the Ebenezer Congregational Church, but after only five days over 600 people had been converted.⁴⁹⁰ This number rose a week later to almost 2,000 and the meeting had to be moved to a larger location.⁴⁹¹ It became clear that something remarkable was happening in the ‘second city’. In total the Birmingham Revival lasted from March until June,⁴⁹² had moved to four different locations, and ‘it is estimated that 10,000 souls have been saved, over 1,000 have been immersed in water, and there have been hundreds of most astonishing cases of miracles of healing’.⁴⁹³

Reports in the *EE* describe the events in Birmingham as ‘another Pentecost’ and some writers comment on the practical impact the campaign was having outside of the meetings.⁴⁹⁴ One writes:

‘oh the joy I have experienced in the last few weeks in seeing homes transformed, and in some instances houses that were untidy and even dirty changed into neatness and cleanliness. Surely our God meets every need’.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁹⁰ Very little information about the Birmingham Revival of 1930 exists outside of the Elim Evangel’s records therefore the *EE* has been my primary source of information about the events of the campaign.

⁴⁹¹ Anonymous, “Principal George Jeffreys at Birmingham: Over 600 Converts and Many Healings” *EE*, 11(15) (11 April 1930), p.227 and a week later the headline of the *EE* read “Nearly 2,000 Conversions in Birmingham (18 April 1930), with an announcement that ‘owing to the great revival in the city of Birmingham, Principal George Jeffreys and his party have decided to carry on, and the largest halls in the city have been taken’ p.193

⁴⁹² The visit was originally intended to last from 26th March until 13th April.

⁴⁹³ Jones, Rev. R.J. “The Great Bingley Hall Besieged: Climax to a Colossal Campaign” *EE*, 11(25) (20 June 1930) p.385. It has been claimed that many people attended such campaigns for ‘free healing’ but thousands left having experienced spiritual transformation. The late Pastor George Canty, who joined Elim in 1923 and witnessed the growth of the movement, writes that in the 1920s and 1930s ‘many people came to the big campaigns just to keep warm and for free healing’ and that there was a low tide of religious fervour at the time, which made the spiritual responses to Jeffreys’ campaigns all the more remarkable. Canty, George “Witnessing the growth of this wonderful Movement”, *Direction* (2010) p.20-21 www.elim.org.uk/Publisher/File.aspx?id=5054 (accessed on 14th July 2010). While healings are recorded to have taken place in every meeting, the number of ‘souls saved’ far outweighed those healed. Emphasis was placed on the salvation of the soul over miraculous healings alone.

⁴⁹⁴ Anonymous, “Another Pentecost” *Elim Evangel*, 11(22) (30 May 1930) 344

A number of Elim churches were founded in Birmingham by local people following the campaign. One such church, which was founded in 1936, was the Elim Fellowship.

5.3.3 A congregational revival and birth of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship

Eye witness interview respondents recalled that by the late 1970s the Elim Fellowship had lost some of its initial Spiritual fervour. During this time the church hosted a visiting pastor who came to tell them about revival in his home church in Argentina.⁴⁹⁶ At the end of his sermon he asked if they wanted to see the Holy Spirit move in the same way for them. The overwhelming response was “yes” and there followed a fortnight of nightly meetings involving Spirit baptisms, healings etc. People entered into a new experience of Christian life. This was a period of Spiritual encounter and empowerment previously unprecedented in the congregation. People received Spirit baptisms, healings and even the most reserved members were experiencing new expressions of worship.

Although witnesses from the time recall that the whole congregation was engaged with this time of the Spirit’s moving, after the event some people wanted the church to go back to the way it had been before and there was divided opinion regarding the impact of this revival in the future of the church. Finally, the arrival of a new pastor, who supported a more traditional style of worship, determined in which direction the congregation would go.

Therefore, in the early 1980s a group of three families who wanted to remain in the revival spirit left the Elim Fellowship. Although forming a new church was not necessarily their

⁴⁹⁵ Jordan, J.H. “The Birmingham Revival: the effect upon lives and homes” *EE*, 11(22) (30 May 1930), p.341; the author of this article was a representative of an estate agency and regularly visited thousands of working class homes in the city.

⁴⁹⁶ The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements says that ‘the 1970s saw the development of a more radical pentecostal revivalism that again changed public perceptions of pentecostal and charismatic life in Argentina’ (Bundy, D.D. “Argentina” in *The New International Dictionary of Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements*, ed. by Burgess, S.M. and van der Maas, E.M. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001) 23-25 (p.24)). It is not clear whether the visitor was involved in this new pentecostal revivalism although the revival in his church appears to co-incide with a general period of Pentecostal and charismatic revival in Argentina.

intention for leaving, after persistent prayer they believed that was what God wanted them to do. Hannah described their very earliest meetings during her interview:

We met there as a group of I think seventeen people for several weeks and just began to really pray the things of God, really sense that the Lord gave us some very, very specific words about his heart forming a church and just said that “you will be a light on a hill”, and that remains to be something we cherish as what was a prophetic word for us.⁴⁹⁷

Motivated by the prophetic words they felt God was giving them they formed a church. The congregation experienced growth from its earliest days and was characterised by ‘fervent praise and worship, excellent teaching and a zeal for reaching lost people’.⁴⁹⁸ When their numbers outgrew the home they were meeting in they moved to larger, rented premises not far from their original location.

Since then ‘the church has grown significantly’ and in 1994, following a long standing desire for the congregation to have their own church building, they felt that God opened a door to begin negotiations with Birmingham city council to purchase a plot of land.⁴⁹⁹ After persistent prayer and hard work, the congregation opened its own purpose built worship space and today they also own separate offices and a function hall across the road.

5.4 The Congregation Today

It has been over thirty years since its birth and, as of 2013, the LCF regularly welcomes between 500-600 attendees through its doors on an average Sunday. They have chosen five labels to identify themselves as a church and I will use the same ones in my brief introduction in the order they appear on the church website.

⁴⁹⁷ Hannah – interview transcript

⁴⁹⁸ Information taken from the history of the church found in the LCF welcome booklet, which was e-mailed to me by the Pastor’s PA on 9th January 2012.

⁴⁹⁹ Taken from the Senior Pastor’s staff page on the church’s website www.lighthousechristiancentre.com/#/welcome/our-staff-team (accessed on 3rd Sept.2013)

LCF is, above all, an *international church*. A recent count during International Sunday, in July 2013, revealed that there are 45 different nationalities and 47 different languages represented in the congregation. The local area is in close contact with universities, colleges and in particular bible colleges, which attract a number of overseas students and their families to LCF. The leadership view their multi-cultural identity as a gift from God, as in 2005 there was a prophecy given to the congregation that LCF ‘will become a gathering place for the nations’⁵⁰⁰.

They are a *Pentecostal church*, obtaining full Elim status in October 2012. The Pastor holds a position within the wider organisation of the Elim Pentecostal Churches (EPC) and did so prior to the church’s official membership. The congregation’s founding members originated from another Elim church and therefore the church’s roots have always been in Elim and judging by its recent commitment, its future looks to remain so.

They are a *family church*. By this they do not only mean that they have a broad demographic of ages and life stages represented in their congregation (although they do) but that they aim to *be* family to all who come to the church. The 2005 prophesy continues that ‘the atmosphere [at LCF] will be that of a Kingdom family and because of the family spirit that permeates the atmosphere, no-one living in it will be regarded as a foreigner’.⁵⁰¹

They are an *evangelistic church*. LCF’s active evangelistic programme confirms a commitment to spreading the Gospel throughout their community through relationships, meeting practical needs and being part of the community. The church recently employed a new Pastor in charge of Missional Communities as a further sign of their commitment to evangelism.

⁵⁰⁰ Sermon, *A multi-cultural church in a multi-cultural city*, 14th July 2013.

⁵⁰¹ Sermon, *A multi-cultural church*, 14th July 2013.

They are a *teaching church*. Teaching and preaching through Sunday services and small groups forms a central part of the congregation's time together. They conform to Elim's statement of Fundamental Truths, which asserts the bible as 'the fully inspired and infallible Word of God and the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct'.⁵⁰² As a result, the church's teaching is firmly rooted in scripture.

I would add that they are also a growing church that is looking to expand further. This numerical success is significant in an environment of church decline and secularism. Undoubtedly the church's approach to evangelism and attracting new members will reveal important insights into their theology of conversion but similarly their theology of conversion can reveal something of the attraction that people are finding in Pentecostal-charismatic congregations in the UK today.

The ecclesial level of conversion theology at LCF will be explored over five main areas; worship, ritual, evangelism, discipleship and teaching, with teaching being discussed separately and in detail. The first four will be explored through the lens of the congregation's Sunday worship, lift stage services, outreach activities and small groups respectively. The significance at each stage for LCF's conversion theology was unpacked by coding and analysing field notes taken during observation of church services, online sermons, congregational literature on particular topics, official Elim publications, information provided on the church's website and by the senior pastor's PA through e-mail contact.⁵⁰³ Following a description of each activity, there is a brief discussion of the conversion theology revealed by each activity and its place within Rambo's framework. Exploring the practices of the

⁵⁰² Elim *Fundamental Truths*, article one: The Bible, http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx (accessed online 24th July 2013) and also published on LCF's website.

⁵⁰³ The congregation has very close links with the wider Elim movement and as such I feel that it is particularly important and appropriate to include wider Elim literature (which is sold on a Sunday by LCF) in the discussion at the ecclesial level.

congregation as well as its teaching allows us to see not only what is being said but what is being done.

5.4.1 Sunday services

Sunday services at LCF take place in the main worship space of the church building. The Sunday services are a time for the congregation to gather together for worship. Worship here does not just mean sung worship but also dancing, prayer and sacraments; anything that acts as an offering of praise and devotion to God. The Sunday service is also a place where non-Christians might encounter Christian worship for the first time. Although services are attended predominantly by regular attendees or visiting Christians, the congregation is also expectant of non-believers being present. The majority of services begin with a welcome and an invitation for anyone who is new to speak with a member of the leadership team at the end of the service and to receive a free gift. Most services finish with a call for people to respond to the sermon and to give/recommit their lives to God if they wish to. One third of this study's interview respondents made a commitment or responded to God's prompting as a result of a sermon and subsequent altar call, although not necessarily at LCF.

Services are seen as a place where people can meet with God, praise him and pray to him, where healings and manifestations of the Spirit take place and where the Gospel is preached. In Pentecostalism there are no inherently holy or sacred places but rather it is believed that God 'manifests his presence when his people collude in preparatory prayer in anticipation of a created space that is made sacred by an encounter with him'⁵⁰⁴. For this reason, the Holy Spirit is welcomed into the worship space during an opening prayer and invited to speak into the hearts of those present and prompt a response in them during the service.

⁵⁰⁴ Glass, J. "Sacred spaces", *Direction*, 117 (June 2011) p.5.

These services are open to everyone who wishes to attend, regardless of faith or affiliation. However, there is no watering down of the message in case it might offend any non-Christians present. The service is the place where the church family meets together and is taught as well as introducing potential converts to the Christian message and experience. It is seen to be the choice of the non-Christian to enter into that environment and therefore no restrictions are placed upon the preacher's message.

The one aspect of the service which is reserved for Christians is the receiving of communion. There are no formal checks as to the faith of those who receive it, but it is often made clear before communion is served (there is no formal liturgy) that communion is for those who love Jesus as a way of remembering his death. Sometimes 1 Corinthians chapter 11 is read, which states that 'anyone who eats and drinks without recognising the body of the Lord eats and drinks judgement on himself'.⁵⁰⁵ Furthermore, the process of receiving communion, which involves individual glasses of fruit juice and plates of bread passed among the congregation and taken individually, is not clearly explained. This would confirm for non-believers or those not familiar with the system that it is not a ritual for them to participate in. Although it is made clear from the leadership that this is a sacred moment, communion is not treated in a rigidly formal or clinical fashion and can incorporate a time of free corporate prayer and healing during and after the receiving of the bread and 'wine'.

The final and closing element of almost every Sunday service at LCF is the call for response. This is a clear opportunity for people to respond to the Gospel they have heard and become a Christian. Typically this involves the Pastor asking the congregation to close their eyes. From the stage he will then recite a typical 'sinners prayer'; confessing sins, repenting and accepting Christ as one's personal saviour. This is said slowly, with gaps between the

⁵⁰⁵ 1 Corinthians 11:29 (NIV)

sentences to allow for people to repeat it in their heads if they want to make a commitment. When the prayer is over, with everyone's eyes still closed for privacy, the Pastor asks anyone who has prayed the prayer to raise their hands.

The Pastor acknowledges aloud that he has seen each person's hand, which allows for the rest of the congregation to know how many people have made a commitment. He will then pray aloud for those who have raised their hands and invite the congregation to do so in their heads also. Whenever this was done at a service I attended at LCF at least one person, often more, would raise their hand.

The purpose of asking people to raise their hands is so that the new Christians can be approached after the service by a member of the leadership team for a discussion to affirm their commitment, for prayer and to obtain the new convert's contact address. They are then sent a follow-up 'new Christian' pack with information about the commitment they have made, what it means to be a Christian and what to do next. This pack involves a response card which the new Christian returns so that they can be followed up further and placed within a Life Group for new Christians should they wish to be.⁵⁰⁶

Discussion

For Rambo the Sunday service encompasses the categories of *crisis*, *quest*, *encounter*, *interaction* and *commitment* for a potential convert. It can be the place where they experience a questioning of their current situation and beliefs, it could be somewhere they come to seek meaning, it could be where they encounter God and almost certainly where they will encounter Christians, they have the freedom to interact and test the waters and they also have

⁵⁰⁶ See section 5.4.4.

the opportunity to make a commitment. In fact, all stages could take place within a relatively short space of time.

I consider that the Sunday service provides three things to a potential convert: (1) the opportunity to test the water, to see what Christian worship and praise looks and feels like, to experience being in a community of believers and to find out what people believe about God, (2) for Pentecostals, it is also an opportunity for non-Christians to participate in experiencing God for themselves, to speak to him, to hear from him and to be touched or convicted by the Holy Spirit through his word, and (3) most importantly, it provides a clear opportunity for people to make a commitment or re-commitment to enter into a relationship with God.

Above all, those who attend a Sunday service cannot escape reference to the Gospel, the Holy Spirit, to his role in the lives of believers and an outline of what it means to be a follower of Jesus. Every sermon contains an element of the Gospel as foundational to its teaching for a believing congregation to move them forward in their faith and discipleship. This means that the Sunday service is a place where, if a non-believer is present, they are guaranteed to hear the Gospel which, accompanied by the presence of the Holy Spirit to convict, is considered vital for people to repent and turn to God.

The sacrament of communion, although not intended to be participated in by non-believers, reveals something of the individual and personal nature of Jesus' death within the communal. It also reveals something of the 'priesthood of all believers' in Pentecostalism whereby everyone serves communion to themselves rather than it being administered by an ordained minister. The process of communion at LCF shows a non-Christian that rituals require belief and a personal relationship with God in order for them to have meaning. Authentic belief and relationship with Jesus is placed higher than the ritual, which is treated as an act of

remembrance rather than as salvific. To convert to this expression of Christianity requires relationship with God and authentic faith above attending services and performing rituals.

The closing call for response and ‘sinners prayer’ outlines the process of repentance, submission and acceptance of Jesus as saviour, so that there is no doubt as to what is required to make the decision of. The prayer is not seen to be special or liturgical but rather it offers a framework for people to make a commitment to God. Some interview respondents, upon experiencing a similar service but not making a commitment at the time, went home and repeated the prayer to themselves privately once they had decided to become a Christian.

5.4.2 Dedication and baptism

Dedication and adult baptism are the Pentecostal equivalent of infant baptism and confirmation in Roman Catholic or Anglican churches. While in the UK infant baptism can be requested by non-Christian parents as an expression of tradition or even superstition; dedication and adult baptism on the other hand are not viewed in the same way and therefore only tend to be performed by committed Christians.

A dedication at LCF involves an interlude in a normal church service whereby an infant or child is taken to the front of the congregation, the parents thank God for the child in front of the congregation and commit to raising their child to walk with God. Dedication is not seen as providing the infant with membership to the church. The church’s dedication application form clearly states that ‘Babies are not turned into little Christians merely by being “christened” or “dedicated”’.⁵⁰⁷ Rather it recognises Christian faith as a choice which will be made by the individual later in life. In the meantime, the parents commit to do their best to raise them with Christian values and to know God. This ritual is more for the parents than for

⁵⁰⁷ ‘Dedication of Children’ application form provided by LCF.

the child; they make a commitment in front of the church family and in turn the congregation commit to help and support those parents however they can.

Dedication is recorded in the *Elim Evangel* as being practiced as early as 1930 in the Elim movement.⁵⁰⁸ Most articles tend to focus on the biblical example of adult baptism by full immersion instead of infant baptism, rather than discussing the importance of dedication in its own right. At LCF, when parents wish to have their child dedicated they are provided with some information about the importance of dedication and the biblical background to the practice.

According to this information, dedication involves:

1. Saying “thank you” to God. The baby is considered to have been a gift from the Lord (Psalm 127:3) as all life comes from God (Acts 17:25).
2. Making a promise to God. Every baby is seen as important to God and made in his image (Genesis 1:26-27) and the parents promise to raise them to reflect the image of God in their lives and train them to walk with him (Proverbs 22:6). It is emphasised that without their own faith, the parents cannot pass faith onto their children (Hebrews 11:6) and therefore their own walk with God is equally important.
3. Asking God for his blessing. People brought children to Jesus and he welcomed and blessed them (Mark 10:14). In the same way parents are encouraged to bring their baby to God and ask for his blessing.⁵⁰⁹

Adult baptism (or baptism by full immersion) is seen to be the natural progression from dedication, whereby ideally the child has grown up in a Christian home, accepted Christ into their life, come to develop their own relationship with God and wish to publically

⁵⁰⁸ The earliest mention of dedication is in an announcement made in 1930 (*Elim Evangel*, 11(47) (21 November 1930) p.749).

⁵⁰⁹ Information paraphrased from LCF’s ‘Dedication of Children’ application form.

acknowledge their faith through the ritual of adult baptism by full immersion.⁵¹⁰ The act of being immersed under the water and then brought back up at baptism, represents the death and resurrection of the new believer, dying and being raised to new life as Christ was.

When a member of LCF wishes to be baptised they are required to complete an application form, which outlines the practicalities of the event as well as the biblical reasons for baptism. Application is then followed by two classes prior to the service during which time the biblical and practical elements will be explored in more depth.

LCF does not treat baptism lightly and encourages no less than the following to apply:

- a) Only those who sincerely believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. (Acts 8:36-37)
- b) Only those who have truly repented of their sin and turned in faith to Jesus Christ, receiving Him as their personal Saviour. (Acts 2:38)
- c) Only those who are sincerely willing to become disciples of Christ – that is willing to obey His commandments and acknowledge that He is Lord of their lives (Matthew 28:19-20).⁵¹¹

The ideal Pentecostal formula follows that as set out by Peter in Acts 2:38, ‘Repent and be baptised, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit’.⁵¹² It does not always work in this way in the UK as many people who come to Pentecostalism come from another denomination, and even those from non-Christian backgrounds may have been baptised as infants. There is a belief, as revealed by Stringer, that infant baptism secures their salvation and their entrance into heaven. Therefore, there are a number of people who believe themselves to be Christian because they were baptised as babies. Therefore LCF’s insistence that baptism is for those, not only who have been saved, but who are sincerely willing to be a disciple of Christ,

⁵¹⁰ The word ‘adult’ does not mean that baptismal candidates must be aged 18 years or over (when someone is considered legally an adult in the UK) but rather it is to differentiate itself from infant baptism.

⁵¹¹ Quoted directly from the Water Baptism application pack (October 2012 edition), which is given to all baptismal candidates prior to their application for baptism.

⁵¹² NIV.

emphasises the importance not only on securing salvation from sin and judgement, but also on relationship with God in this life.

There are articles published in the early days of the Elim movement arguing for and supporting the practice of adult baptism by full immersion over the “sprinkling” of infant baptism. One such writer was ‘asked by his vicar to resign, the reason given was that he had denied the efficacy of his infant baptism’ but Elim converts were adamant that adult baptism was the only biblical model available.⁵¹³ This was because converts in the book of Acts were always baptised by full immersion and more importantly they saw that ‘it preceded our Lord’s earthly ministry’.⁵¹⁴ Jesus himself was baptised by full immersion and ‘to follow Jesus should always be the Christian’s desire’.⁵¹⁵

Discussion

For Rambo baptism fits firmly in the *commitment* stage. The ritual provides an outward symbol of the internal experience of conversion and acts as a form of bridge burning in metaphorically dying to the past life and being resurrected into a new life.

The life stage rituals of dedication and adult baptism for Pentecostals offer a clear alternative to the initiation ritual of infant baptism, which in the UK is still undertaken by many non-churchgoing families. Both rituals emphasise the decision to become a Christian as a choice made by the individual, not by his or her family. Pentecostal Christianity is not hereditary, for everyone must be born again. However, while baptism is considered to be a command for those who are born again, those who have not been baptised are not seen to be any less saved. It is a ritual to outwardly express an internal transformation which has already taken place.

⁵¹³ Warwick, J.T. “Why I was Baptised by Immersion” *Elim Evangel*, 10(1) (Jan. 1929), p.7.

⁵¹⁴ Burton Clark, Pastor T. “The Nature and Need of Believer’s Baptism”, *Elim Evangel*, 10(7) (14th June 1929), p.100.

⁵¹⁵ Burton Clark, “The Nature and Need”, p.100

Neither dedication nor baptism are seen to be salvific in their own right; the former expresses hope for future salvation and the latter is a ritual expression of salvation already received.

Baptism by full immersion is a symbolic expression of the baptismal candidate's conversion. The candidate is encouraged to invite people along to witness their baptism and as it takes place during a normal church service it can be considered a semi-public act. Therefore the process of testimony giving and the act of baptism itself are seen as an outward expression to the world of the believer's inner commitment to God and their breaking with the past.⁵¹⁶ Baptism also has an eschatological element to it in that it not only represents the symbolic death and resurrection to new life of the believer, but it is a foretaste of the future resurrection they are promised when Jesus returns. This symbolises therefore, not only what they have left behind and their new life on earth but also their future hope and destiny.

5.4.3 Outreach Activities

Out of the eleven main outreach activities listed on the LCF website, seven involve direct support for practical needs in the community; including physical healing, practical assistance in the community, food and clothing packages and job advice. A further four reach out to people requiring less immediate but perhaps more emotional support; including prison ministry, a coffee shop for the elderly and a mother and toddler group. The final two offer prayer and support for broader organisations fighting human trafficking and conducting missions across the world. There is a strong desire to reach out to and meet very practical and social needs of the community predominantly in Birmingham but also overseas. Even in the most practical of outreach activities, the link between meeting people's practical needs and meeting their spiritual needs is always visible at LCF.

⁵¹⁶ McGuire, M.B. "Testimony as a Commitment Mechanism in Catholic Pentecostal Prayer Groups" *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 16(2) (1977) 165-168

The church's regular drop-in lounge provides a good example of this connection. This provides a time for people in financial difficulty to come, socialise with others, have refreshments and lunch, receive advice about housing and jobs and apply for food or clothes parcels if required. This very practical service has Christian undertones so that those who attend are not preached at but are left in no doubt that they are in a Christian-led environment. The lounge takes place within one of the church buildings, Christian leaflets are available alongside leaflets about other services available for housing, addiction and finances, a prayer box and paper is available for anyone who wishes to 'post' a prayer, a Christmas party is held annually for the guests at the church, volunteers occasionally pray with people or talk to them about Jesus if appropriate. It is foremost about creating relationships and building trust.

There is no consensus among the volunteers as to how overtly Christian the lounge should be. One volunteer told me that she would like it to be more overtly evangelistic, involving some teaching on the Gospel whereas another sees it as showing God's love through actions rather than preaching and feels that this is the best way to spread the Gospel to these people. Although there are difference of opinion concerning how to meet people's spiritual needs in this context, the consensus is that they do need to be met.

In Rambo's language, the church is reaching out to people during their periods of *crisis* rather than waiting for them to turn to the church during their *quest*. In a country where Christianity is one of many options, this would appear to be a very sensible approach. However, for the church, outreach is about more than the practicality of reaching people earlier on in their journey, rather it is about showing God's love in a practical way.

Discussion

For Rambo this would cover the *crisis, quest, encounter* and *consequences* stages as it meets people before and while they are searching, it facilitates encounter and according to the advocate, evangelism is considered a natural consequence of being a Spirit-filled Christian and a command from Jesus.⁵¹⁷ Practical needs met through evangelism show potential converts that God cares about their physical needs as well as their spiritual needs, and that part of being a Christian is helping others. Furthermore, there is a strong focus on the individual and on building relationships through outreach, which communicates to the non-believer that God sees them as an individual and cares specifically for them.

From early in the Elim movement, the universal spiritual need for Jesus has been met alongside physical and social needs,⁵¹⁸ but it is often the latter which will draw people towards the church before they can learn about the former. However, if the physical and social is seen as a doorway to meeting spiritual needs, what becomes of those in the community who do not feel they have any physical or spiritual needs to be met? This demographic is currently primarily being encountered by members of the congregation in their places of work, their friendships and in chance meetings. There is no formal outreach for this group but Pentecostals view evangelism as being more than just activities organised by the church. It is a part of their daily life. Neil Hudson refers to this as the ‘scattered Church’; the average 110 hours per week a Christian spends on non-Church activities (and not sleeping). He argues that ‘if the gathered Church...is the arena in which we are encouraged to

⁵¹⁷ Matthew 28:19

⁵¹⁸ The Birmingham Revival of 1930 alone was recorded as not only saving 10,000 souls but thousands were healed and there was a transformation in the lives and homes of the people in the city. One witness observed ‘Surely our God meets every need. Homes where there were quarrellings and even drunkenness now altered to homes of peace – places where the Master is the Head of all things. Joy instead of sadness, beauty for ashes, and instead of the curses I used to hear...from the same lips I can hear praises to our Lord’ Jordon, “The Birmingham Revival: the effect upon lives and homes” p.341

live differently, the 110 zone is where we have most chance to put it all into action'.⁵¹⁹

Whether members of the congregation are as zealous in their sharing of the Gospel outside organised outreach activities has not been quantified, but it is certainly the teaching of the wider movement that they should be.

5.4.4 Life Groups

A disciple is simply a follower of Jesus but the term has come to be synonymous in Pentecostal-charismatic circles with spiritual development and growth. The idea is not for the believer to convert and remain 'like infants' but to grow and mature in faith throughout their life.⁵²⁰ In LCF, conversion is a moment of decision but becoming a Christian is a lifelong journey. Dye argues that the Church's success depends on its ability to disciple people.⁵²¹ *Direction* magazine regularly publishes stories of people making a commitment to Christ before backsliding due to a lack of engagement with their church community and spiritual growth, before finally making a re-commitment later on. Pentecostalism's growth is surely dependent not only on converting large numbers, but on keeping them in church.

In 1925, Pastor E.C. Boulton wrote for the *EE* that 'the new birth is absolutely fundamental and vital to Christian discipleship. We cannot learn of Him until we first of all come to Him. Conversion must precede consecration'.⁵²² He goes on, in a series of articles, to argue that the biblical model for Christian discipleship requires firstly, detachment from the old life,⁵²³ and secondly discipline towards temptation and tribulation.⁵²⁴ This stance is supported by evangelist James Salter, who wrote that 'Christian discipleship demands denial, surrender of

⁵¹⁹ Hudson, N. "Church goes further than just a set time and place!" *Direction*, 113 (Feb. 2011) p.45.

⁵²⁰ 1 Corinthians 14:20; Ephesians 4:13-15 (NIV)

⁵²¹ Dye, "When Christ becomes your passion" p.36; Dye is the leader of the UK's largest church (which is an Elim church), Kensington Temple.

⁵²² Boulton, Pastor E.C. "Discipleship", *Elim Evangel*, 6(23) (1 Dec. 1925), p.271

⁵²³ Boulton, "Discipleship" (1st Dec. 1925), p.271.

⁵²⁴ Boulton, Pastor E.C. "Discipleship", *Elim Evangel*, 7(9) (1st May 1926) 97-99

self, abandonment of all. He is to ensure hardness as a good soldier'.⁵²⁵ These early Elim writers present an approach to Christian discipleship which takes being a follower of Jesus to mean following in his actions and sufferings as well as his teachings.

The Great Commission in Matthew 28:19 speaks of the true purpose of conversion; making disciples. This forms part of the belief that conversion is not just a moment but part of a journey. Although converts are justified and born again the instant they repent and accept Jesus as their saviour, none are made perfect in an instant but instead the Christian life is a process of becoming more like Christ. This is seen to be the journey of the individual in relationship with God but it is not seen as a solitary undertaking. Believers are called to make disciples and to disciple each other within the family of God.

The main way that this is done at LCF is through Life Groups. Described on the church website as the 'heartbeat of our Church', Life Groups are typically weekly gatherings of people, usually in a member's home or in the one of the church buildings. These groups are led by one or two members, although they are not required to have any particular or advanced qualifications in theology or teaching. Individuals can be approached by the church leadership and asked to lead a group or else they might be chosen internally by the group to lead. Life Groups traditionally revolve around studying and discussing the bible in small groups on a weekly basis, however in more recent years there have developed a number of groups focussed on a shared vocation, nationality, or even hobby which may meet on a less regular basis. Whatever the format of the group, the emphasis is on forming relationships and growing in discipleship together.

In June 2013, LCF used its contacts with people who convert during Sunday services to create an ongoing database of people who convert through the church. The packs sent to new

⁵²⁵ Salter, J. "Good News according to Matthew", *Elim Evangel*, 7(10) (15th May 1926) p.116.

Christians includes a response card where they can tick whether they are: (1) making a first time commitment, (2) making a re-commitment or (3) still discovering their faith. This is then used to place new Christians into a specially structured Life Group designed for new Christians, 'to share in your journey and help you discover more about God and getting to know Him as your Saviour, Father and Friend'.⁵²⁶ This is purposefully separate from existing Life Groups so as to allow new Christians to gain a basic understanding of their new faith and ask their questions without the intimidation and jargon often accompanied by discussing faith with more mature believers.

Discussion

For Rambo, this process could encapsulate both the *interaction* and the *consequences* stages as people in many churches can participate in a small group or serve in church activities before making a commitment to be a Christian. However, for Pentecostals, discipleship follows conversion as it is the process of growth and maturity of their faith in becoming more like Christ. This cannot happen until a decision has been made to become a disciple. This does not mean that people do not join Life Groups prior to becoming a Christian at LCF, but that their spiritual development in that setting would be considered part of their being led to faith rather than growing as a disciple.

The church's emphasis on Life Groups highlights their belief in the importance of spiritual growth in new believers and throughout the Christian life. This is individually cultivated through personal time spent with God in prayer or bible study but also must be developed in community with other believers. It is this emphasis on discipleship which negates the possibility of Christians believing-without-belonging from a Pentecostal perspective.

⁵²⁶ Information quoted from the invitation to the Life Group for new Christians, which is found in the new Christian pack.

The Elim approach to being a Christian disciple as involving suffering and persecution, however, reflects the reality that the decision to follow Jesus does not guarantee the believer an easy life. LCF's leadership teach firmly against a prosperity gospel whereby faith in Christ is believed to ensure health and wealth.⁵²⁷ It is perhaps for this reason that the teaching at LCF involves regular assurance of God's presence and love during times of difficulty and doubt, which are seen to inevitably follow true discipleship.

However, underlying discipleship is the belief that there is a purpose to the believer's life, that God has a plan and a destiny for the believer and that the closer they follow him and the more they develop their relationship with him, the closer they are walking along the path he designed for them. Furthermore, belief in Spiritual gifts and fruits to be cultivated and used during the Christian life further emphasise the belief in God as having a purpose for the believer's life and that he equips them spiritually for that purpose. Becoming a Christian is seen at LCF as an ongoing journey, but entering into a relationship with God means entering into a destiny and living the life you were designed by him to live.

5.5 Teaching

It is through the church's formal teachings that we see the clearest the transmission of ecclesial discourse towards ordinary believers. Sermons show us what the leadership/preacher wants to convey to the congregation, the message they wish to pass on and to be understood and the theology they believe is true and important to their lives. It is here that the bible is interpreted and taught to the congregation formally, laid out in words they understand, taught in modern parables and its practical application considered. For many,

⁵²⁷ Sermon, *God always finishes what he starts*, 24th June 2012.

a sermon will offer their first encounter with the bible's message in a formal setting and there is clearly an understanding at LCF that every service there could be non-Christians in the congregation.

Sermons at LCF, regardless of who is preaching, are presented in a clear and understandable way. Teaching is Bible based, usually focusing on one passage of scripture from the New Testament and turning to different parts of the bible to make supporting points throughout. The preacher will often use stories and modern parables, often from his or her own life in order to illustrate their message. Every sermon contains an element of practical application which the congregation are encouraged to apply to their own relationship with God. There is also typically a call to respond at the end and a prayer of encouragement over the congregation. Messages are designed to challenge the congregation about their relationship with God but predominantly to build them up and encourage them, reassuring them of God's love and authority over their lives. As we will see below, the main conversion themes of sermons focus on the believer's regeneration into new life, identity as a child of God and their destiny in the Holy Spirit.

According to Jenkins and Kavan, 'Pentecostals view the 'born again' experience as the heart of Christianity, and Pentecostal leaders are more concerned with winning people to Christ than with welfare provision'.⁵²⁸ They are specifically referring to the content of sermons in Elim churches and found that Pentecostals, considerably more than Anglicans, desire a 'presentation of the Gospel, followed by an alter call' in their teaching.⁵²⁹ The focus on conversion as central to the faith and also the desire for the Gospel to be preached confirms

⁵²⁸ Jenkins, W.V. and Kavan, H. "Sermon Responses and Preferences in Pentecostal and Mainline Churches", *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 22(2) (2009) 142-161 (p.145). Their study compared sermon responses and expectations between 2 Elim and 2 Anglican churches in New Zealand, which has a very similar religious landscape to the UK with a high population of nominal Christians compared with low numbers of church attendance.

⁵²⁹ Jenkins and Kavan, "Sermon Responses and Preferences", p.155

that sermons are the ideal place from which to gather the church leadership's theology of conversion as these topics will be repeatedly raised and explored. I certainly found this to be the case during my observation and examination of the teaching at LCF.

Through coding and analysing notes from 50 LCF sermons; taken during services, bible study meetings and online, I have identified four main themes of conversion which commonly recur in LCF's teaching;

1. New Life
2. Personal Relationship with God
3. Spirit-filled Christianity
4. Keeping the Faith

I will explore each theme in turn according to LCF's teaching and their meanings for the church's conversion theology. Bible verses referred to in the below sections are only included if they have been used in sermons.

5.5.1 New life

The theme of new life is most commonly expressed through the term 'born again', used to refer to Christians who have made a decision for themselves to accept Jesus into their lives. It originates from Jesus' discussion with Nicodemus where he tells him the Pharisee 'no-one can see the kingdom of God unless he is born again'.⁵³⁰ Nicodemus mistakes this to mean a literal rebirth but Jesus corrects him by explaining that 'flesh gives birth to flesh, but the

⁵³⁰ John 3:3 (NIV)

Spirit gives birth to spirit'.⁵³¹ Thereby at LCF the term is also referred to as having a spiritual birth.⁵³²

At the moment of conversion the believer is saved and justified, meaning that they are viewed as sinless and 'right' by God,⁵³³ and a transformation toward perfection begins in them.⁵³⁴ This perfection will not be completed in this lifetime but remains an eschatological hope.⁵³⁵ Therefore the new life a believer enters into can be seen as the start of the journey towards their future perfection when Christ returns. This part of the process is typically seen as Christological in nature as it is made possible by the work done by Christ in taking the world's sins upon himself, dying on the cross and rising again. However, LCF places emphasis on the Holy Spirit's role in regeneration and bringing about this new life as evidenced through Jesus' discourse with Nicodemus. In a bible study sermon entitled 'The Holy Spirit and the Believer' the preacher explains John 3:3-8 in this way:

In this 'process' whereby someone becomes 'born again' it is obvious that the active agent is the Holy Spirit. When you become a believer, you receive Christ and also the Spirit (John 14:17). Conversion is about a change of direction, a transformation that includes the forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family. However, it is also about the commencement of a relationship with the Spirit. We are granted, through the Spirit, a never-ending opportunity to share in the life of God.⁵³⁶

The process of new birth is directly attributed to the Spirit. The 'transformation that includes the forgiveness of sins' refers to the justification and regeneration of the believer, forgiven of their sins and made into a new creation. This spiritual birth is considered absolutely

⁵³¹ John 3:6 (NIV); These verses are discussed in the Sermon, *Born Again*, 23rd June 2013.

⁵³² Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit (part one)*, 25th April 2010, 11:00am.

⁵³³ Sermon, *The Favour of God*, 16th January 2011, 11:00am.

⁵³⁴ Sermon, *The Fruits of the Holy Spirit*, 5th June 2011, 6:30pm.

⁵³⁵ Sermon, *God always finishes what he starts*, 24th June 2012.

⁵³⁶ Sermon, *The Holy Spirit and the Believer*, 1st May 2011, 6:30pm (quote taken from study handout)

necessary in order to be a Christian;⁵³⁷ it is achieved by faith in Christ alone,⁵³⁸ and not by good works or a religious attitude. This new life is explained as participation in God's divine life through relationship with the Holy Spirit.

A metaphor used to describe this participation is that of being grafted onto a vine. In one sermon the Pastor describes the new believer being grafted onto the vine (Jesus) and so they have God's life flowing within them through that attachment.⁵³⁹ The new life a believer receives is not considered individualistic or separate from God but it is about becoming one of many branches participating in a life which is powered by God and is designed to bear fruit.

The concept of birth into a new life is inevitably tied with the death of the old life. We have already seen this metaphor used in the practice of baptism by full immersion. The death of the old life happens at the moment of regeneration at conversion, however the process of letting go of old sins and participating in God's life can take a lot longer. This process is attributed to the Holy Spirit, whereby 'he takes our old, dead nature and infuses us with the very nature of God making us a spiritually alive being'.⁵⁴⁰ This is partly based on Paul's letter to the Romans which states, 'And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ. But if Christ is in you, your body is dead because of sin, yet your spirit is alive because of righteousness'.⁵⁴¹ The congregation often has to be reminded of the death of their old life and death to sin because the effects of sin (shame, guilt, doubt) can still affect and impact the new life.⁵⁴² The point that is often reiterated in sermons is one of optimism and hope, that a Christian is a new creation who has access to God's divine life, which allows them to be renewed every day.

⁵³⁷ Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit (part one)*, 25th April 2010, 11:00am

⁵³⁸ Sermon, *The Favour of God*, 16th January 2011, 11:00am

⁵³⁹ Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit (part one)*, 25th April 2010, 11:00am, based on John 15:1-8

⁵⁴⁰ Ephesians 2:5; Sermon, *The Holy Spirit and the Believer*, 1st May 2011, 6:30.

⁵⁴¹ Romans 8:10 (NIV)

⁵⁴² Sermon, *Born Again*, 23rd June 2013.

5.5.2 Personal relationship with God

The moment of conversion is also referred to as entering into a personal relationship with God, although this relationship is not necessarily always maintained by the new Christian. Entering a ‘personal relationship with God’ is not mentioned in the bible although the term comes up a lot in sermons. It comes from metaphors used in the bible of believers being children of God and Him being their Father.⁵⁴³ This is the predominant metaphor used throughout the New Testament to refer to God’s relationship with believers, particular through Jesus example of referring to God as Father.⁵⁴⁴ It encapsulates the believer’s identity as a child of God, a relationship which cannot be ended and implies inheritance and security.

This relationship begins at the time of conversion and is taught as being more important than anything else in the Christian life. It is this relationship that determines the believer’s identity as a Christian. Although the metaphor for being a Child of God and the concept of new birth appear to go together rather neatly, the biblical metaphor most strongly used in LCF’s teaching is that of adoption into God’s family, rather than re-birth into God’s family.

5.5.3 Spirit-Filled Christianity

This is not specifically a reference to the subsequent experience of Spirit baptism but rather to the idea that when someone invites Jesus into their life they also receive the Holy Spirit who comes to dwell within them. For this reason, the belief in a subsequent manifestation of the Spirit during Spirit baptism cannot be easily removed from theology of conversion in some Pentecostal minds.⁵⁴⁵ Particularly considering the way to confirm whether someone is Spirit-

⁵⁴³ John 1:12; Romans 8:14 (NIV)

⁵⁴⁴ Matthew 18:14; 20:23; Luke 6:36; 11:2 (NIV)

⁵⁴⁵ Cartledge found with some of his Assemblies of God respondents that they considered Spirit baptism and glossolalia to be signs of their conversion (Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit*, p.71).

filled, having received the Spirit at conversion; is to see the Spirit working in them through spiritual gifts or fruits.

There is a definite distinction in LCF's teaching between just being saved and living a Christian life. This is a particularly Pentecostal-charismatic element of conversion theology, in which they differentiate between Spirit-filled and non-Spirit-filled Christians and churches. The doctrine of salvation by faith means that nominal and post-Christians can be considered to be saved if they had once accepted Jesus as their saviour. However, to emphasise the importance of salvation for this life as well as the next, LCF teaches that unless they are living a Spirit-filled life in relationship with God they are not considered to be living a true and full Christian life. Although they teach that all believers are given the Spirit to dwell in them at the time of initial conversion (decision), the Spirit must be allowed to work in the believer's life otherwise they are not living the life God intended for them. Being saved and living as a Christian, are treated as two separate states.

The emphasis on the Holy Spirit's activity in the converted life is perhaps a response to Britain's development of nominal and post-Christianity. No mistake can be made from the teaching that being a Christian means developing spiritual gifts and bearing spiritual fruit through relationship with God. It should be noted, however, that Pentecostal and charismatic churches run a similar risk to more traditional denominations, in that their outward manifestations of the Spirit and expressions of worship are as easily acted out by those without faith, as rituals and liturgy are in other traditions.

The teaching about being Spirit-filled is usually strongly linked with the Holy Spirit's role in the believer's destiny. The only way to live a full Christian life that God has planned is to

surrender to and work with the Holy Spirit towards God's will.⁵⁴⁶ The Spirit-filled life is linked to having a destiny and living a full life in line with that destiny.⁵⁴⁷

The emphasis on Spirit-filled Christianity as being a 'fuller' expression of the Christian life does not express itself in LCF's teaching as a sense of superiority of Pentecostalism over other denominations. On the contrary, any church which is seen to be Spirit-filled is supported and encouraged. To return to the grafting metaphor, LCF teaches that a new Christian is not grafted into membership of a movement or a particular church but into relationship with Jesus therefore denominational labels are not considered as important as relationship and spiritual life.⁵⁴⁸

5.5.4 Keeping the faith

An undercurrent to a number of sermons is acknowledging the possibility of backsliding and those who might have made a commitment many years ago but have not lived a Christian life and addressing the issue of recommitting your life to Christ. Such individuals are not seen to have lost salvation but are in need of becoming 'alive in Christ' and therefore recommitment can be viewed as another form of conversion from a life of nominalism or hedonism back to a life with Christ. The word for conversion means to 'turn' but also to 'return',⁵⁴⁹ therefore a re-commitment or *intensification* to use Rambo's term, is also seen as a type of conversion.

There appears to be a desire to steer away from people becoming disillusioned with their faith and an acknowledgement that sometimes doubts and difficult times enter into the believer's life. Many sermons focus on difficulties faced by being a Christian, pitfalls believers can fall into, temptations they may succumb to and ways to keep their faith when times get difficult.

⁵⁴⁶ Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit (part four)*, 23rd May 2010, 11:00am.

⁵⁴⁷ Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit (part one)*, 25th April 2010, 11:00am.

⁵⁴⁸ Sermon, *Fruit Filled Life (part one)*, 24th October 2010.

⁵⁴⁹ Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p.3

The predominant cause attributed to such a loss of faith is a loss of personal relationship with God and time spent in his presence. This is deemed more important than performing religious rituals and attending church out of habit or duty. This undercurrent in LCF's teaching is perhaps a defence against the nominal or post-Christian trend in the UK.

5.6 Conclusion

I have found that LCF's espoused theology of conversion is in keeping with that of the wider Elim movement with which it is affiliated. Within its Birmingham context, the congregation seeks to firmly identify what it means to be a Christian in a city of increasing religious plurality as well as unbelief. Conversion is recognised to occur according to each of Rambo's five types (as well as my additional category; *renewal*) rather than simply as a change from one religion to another. In fact, evangelism toward and dialogue with people from other religions is the area most lacking in LCF's outreach, teaching and discipleship.

Conversion is taught to be more than a moment of justification, but importantly as entering into an on-going relationship with God and sharing in the divine life through the Spirit. This seeks to dissolve the idea that Christian conversion is about getting into heaven but that it has ongoing significance in daily life. LCF teach that conversion must be the result of a *personal* decision to receive forgiveness for sins and enter into relationship with God. This counteracts more nominal attitudes in the UK, which attribute Christian identity to ritual (infant baptism) or church attendance. This decision can be made at any time, with others or alone but it typically involves self-identification as a sinner and recognition of the need for salvation through Christ.

The main theological themes identified from LCF's teaching reveal the belief that new birth, adoption as a child of God and the indwelling Spirit are all received immediately as a gift from God by faith. These gifts cannot be earned but it is taught that they require active participation by the believer in order to live a Christian life. The Spirit is identified as the thread which runs through the whole process. There is no aspect of conversion or the Christian life where the Spirit is not present, predominantly because he is believed to guide the convert towards faith and dwell within the believer from the moment of decision. The clear teaching from the ecclesial level is that without encounter and engagement with the Spirit, the Christian life is incomplete.

These findings reveal what the leadership teach, or rather what 'should be' the experience of conversion but this does not necessarily represent the beliefs and experiences of the congregation, or what 'is'. For that I now turn to chapter six to present my findings from analysing the ordinary conversion experiences of believers in the congregation. In particular I present their experiences in their own words, their theological reflections and identify the main themes which emerge from their stories. This allows me to present a practical-theological model in chapter seven which encompasses both what is believed to happen normatively at conversion, and the experiences and effects of these beliefs in the lives of ordinary converts.

CHAPTER SIX

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS OF ORDINARY CONVERSION

6.1 Introduction

Having explored the practice and teaching surrounding conversion within the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship, in this chapter I present the findings of 30 in-depth testimony interviews, conducted with members of the congregation. These testimonies are the foundation upon which a practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion is built and as such chapter six marks the epicentre of this study. In addition, the findings presented here also offer insights into the following research questions:

1. How do ordinary Pentecostals tell and interpret their conversion experiences?
2. What is believed to happen to, and what is gained by the convert when they become a Christian?

I begin this chapter by introducing the specific data collection and analysis methods used during the interview stage of the research project. I explain how participants were identified, their backgrounds, the structure of the interviews and the thematic analysis of the extensive interview data collected. Findings are then separated into three stages; firstly, the main themes which arose from the interviews, secondly, the respondents' reflection upon their language about God and finally the role attributed to the Holy Spirit in the lives of the respondents.

Verbatim quotations are provided throughout each stage to connect my analysis with the experiences and reflections of respondents. I aim to present their experiences and beliefs in their own words as far as possible and according to the themes which arose from my analysis of the interview data.

These interviews reveal a broader understanding of conversion at ground level as more than just the initial decision to become a Christian, although this decision is allocated a distinct significance. The findings from this chapter also highlight the limitation of viewing Pentecostal conversion purely in terms of stages and the importance instead of identifying overarching theological themes which run throughout their testimonies. It is these themes which identify the beliefs about God and theological experience surrounding Pentecostal conversion. I highlight these overarching themes as; regeneration, identity and destiny.

6.2 Interview methods

Prior to in-depth interviews I conducted four focus group interviews with different Life Groups at LCF. These groups were made up of between four and ten people and took place in the group's usual meeting place.⁵⁵⁰ Focus groups consisted of seven open questions, which were designed to encourage discussion between the group members.⁵⁵¹ I facilitated discussion by asking additional questions where necessary to engage other members of the group but the main seven questions remained the same for all groups. The purpose of these interviews was to engage respondents in discussion about conversion at each of Rambo's different levels in order to gauge their language and understand more about the congregation's means of attracting and nurturing new believers. The results of these discussions then informed my approach to the in-depth interviews.

For the in-depth interviews I used a semi-structured life story approach as I wanted to hear people's testimonies first hand and allow them space to describe their walk with God. This

⁵⁵⁰ Typically these were members' homes or church buildings.

⁵⁵¹ See Appendix 1 for the focus group interview questions and structure. The questions were not asked in the order presented by Rambo. Rather I chose an order which best followed a typical narrative structure and would be less likely to interrupt the flow of the discussion.

gives them the chance to place their conversion experiences within their whole life context and allows for discussion of backsliding and their continued Christian journey rather than focussing on the moment of decision. It is the transcripts of these in-depth interviews which were analysed to identify the ordinary theology of Pentecostal conversion for this study.

6.2.1 Participants

In-depth interview participants were recruited and interviewed between September 2012 and February 2013 using a variation of “snowball” sampling.⁵⁵² All participants had to be over the age of eighteen and the criteria for participation were; self-identification as born-again Christians and regular attendance at, or identity as a part of LCF. Potential participants were contacted directly via e-mail or telephone in order to explain the research, ask if they wished to be interviewed and to arrange an interview time, date and location. At the time of the interview, participants were given a consent form to sign explaining their rights as a research participant as well as the recording, potential use and confidentiality of data.⁵⁵³ The research project was explained again verbally before the interview began, with the same information explained to each participant, a copy of which was later e-mailed to all participants for their

⁵⁵² Snowball or “chain” sampling identifies respondents based on the recommendations of people (see Miles, M.B. and Huberman, A.M. *Qualitative Data Analysis: A New Sourcebook*, second edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1994) p.28; cited in Creswell, J. *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing Among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 1998) p.119. The first round of respondents was recruited from people who had consented to be contacted from the focus group interviews. I did not feel that these respondents were at any advantage or disadvantage to those who had not attended focus groups as they people had referenced their stories in the group sessions but had not gone into any detail or depth and all respondents were given the same information. The first group were then asked to recommend others from the congregation for interview (snowball sampling). This method initially led to a homogenous sample of respondents, which I felt did not reflect the multiple cultures, ages and balance of genders represented in the congregation. I then employed a more selective version of snowball sampling whereby I requested recommendations from people to meet specific criteria in order to broaden out the representative group.

⁵⁵³ See Appendix 2 for consent forms. The form used for group interviews proved to be too long for respondents to want to read through it all, therefore it was condensed for the one-to-one interviews to explain the respondents’ rights, the recording of the interview and the use of their testimonies, while the details of the project were explained verbally over the telephone at initial contact and again in person prior to the interview.

records.⁵⁵⁴ All participants and others referenced in their stories have been given pseudonyms and identifiable personal information removed or altered to ensure respondent confidentiality.

The 30 one-to-one interviews consisted of 40 percent male and 60 percent female respondents, representing a range of ages between twenty and 86 years. Twenty of the respondents were born in Britain. Other nationalities represented were; the Republic of Ireland, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, China, New Zealand, South Korea, South Africa and the Philippines.⁵⁵⁵

Levels of participation in church life included; attending Sunday services, membership in a Life Group, volunteering at and attending mid-week activities, participating in mission and outreach activities and holding leadership roles in the church. Time at the church ranged from one year to individuals who had been part of the church's original founding group.

Respondents recalled varying levels of religious affiliation during their upbringing and prior to their conversion. I recorded the religious affiliation of participants' parents, their contact with religion and any experiences of losing or rejecting faith throughout their testimony. Of eleven respondents who recorded that their parents held no religious faith at all, four of those were sent to or regularly attended a church during their upbringing. No respondents had a background in another world religion or spiritual group and eight of those who attended church as children left at some point before re-affiliating or returning to Christianity via

⁵⁵⁴ The project was explained to respondents via e-mail or over the telephone when they were first contacted to participate. Before each interview I explained again that I am a PhD theology student from the University of Birmingham, conducting research at LCF for a doctoral thesis on Pentecostal conversion experiences. I explained that my approach to conversion was to begin with understanding the experiences and testimony of believers. I explained that they would be given the majority of the interview to tell their story, followed by some prompting questions as necessary and finally a ten minute word game. I informed them that the interview would be recorded (this was also on their consent form) and that this was for my own personal use and would not be transcribed or accessed by any other parties. Respondents were told that they could withdraw from the project at any time and the consent form explained that their written permission would be requested if I wished to directly quote them in my thesis and/or other publications. They were asked if they understood and whether they had any questions prior to the interview and again at the end. All in-depth interview participants who had not previously participated in focus groups were e-mailed a copy of the detailed consent form (which had been verbally explained) after their interview for their information. Those who had participated in focus groups already had a copy.

⁵⁵⁵ Numbers representing each nationality were; 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 1, 2 and 2 respectively.

another church. Identifying respondents' religious upbringing proved complicated as, due to their current faith and with hindsight, some identified their parents as being nominal Christians although they regularly attended church. A decision had to be made on a case by case basis as to how influential the religious affiliation of the parents was on their upbringing.⁵⁵⁶ A 'nominal' Christian who took her children to an Anglican church every Sunday was listed as Anglican.

It is clear that the results of this study cannot reveal information regarding the conversion of people from other religions to Pentecostalism.⁵⁵⁷ However it speaks into the UK situation of post-Christianity, nominal Christianity and atheism.

6.2.2 Interview structure

Unstructured narratives

Respondents were allowed up to 40 minutes to tell their story, prompted by the initial statement, 'tell me about your walk with God'. The choice of 'walk with God' rather than 'tell me about your conversion' was purposefully open. It encouraged a whole life approach and specified only that their story focussed on their personal faith and experiences of God. I expected that this would inevitably involve a retelling of the beginning of that process, their 'conversion narrative'. I avoided using the word 'conversion' as during participant observation and initial focus group interviews with members of the congregation, it became clear that the word 'conversion' was not the best word to describe their experiences. It led to

⁵⁵⁶ For example, a 'nominal' Anglican mother who attended church every Sunday and took her children to Sunday school every week was considered to be Anglican. Whereas a father with a Methodist childhood who no longer attends church or considers himself Christian was considered to be Non-Christian.

⁵⁵⁷ LCF does have members who have become Christian from other world religions and I did attempt to recruit some people from the middle-east who had come to the UK and converted to Christianity. Unfortunately there was too strong a language barrier and so I was unable to hear their stories. This is a deep loss to this study and more research needs to be done into conversions which take place in the UK by people for whom English is not their main language. These voices are currently going unheard and yet they represent part of the make-up of religious conversion in the UK.

questions about *my* understanding of the word, with people qualifying their experience by saying that they haven't had a major "conversion experience" implying that they assume by 'conversion' I mean a dramatic, crisis event. Preferred terms, such as 'coming to faith', starting a 'relationship with God' or 'walk with God' suggested progression and movement in the process.

The benefit of a life-story testimony is that, while it includes the conversion narrative, it will also cover the events leading up to and following that experience. The usefulness of this is that it provides insight into the events which have led them to their current beliefs, their religious influences, their levels of commitment and intensity in their faith before and after their conversion. It offers a holistic approach to the experience of conversion rather than a focus on one narrowly defined aspect. Most importantly, we can see what respondents believe happened to them, and was gained, in the act of becoming a Christian.

Structured questions

As well as the open time of testimony giving, there were two additional questions which were asked of all respondents:

What does being a Pentecostal mean to you? The purpose of this question was to uncover the levels of affiliation with the Pentecostal movement. The reason for this was to identify whether respondents viewed their conversion as being to a movement, or to Christianity as a whole. Furthermore, this revealed respondents' levels of understanding of the movement.

What is the role of the Spirit in your life? I specifically wanted to know about the role of the Spirit attributed to respondents' experiences but there is no guarantee that they would naturally look at their story from this angle. I asked this question after they had freely given their testimony, whether or not they had already answered it in the telling of their story. I

wanted there to be no confusion in this matter and to allow the opportunity for them to reflect theologically on their experiences of the Spirit.

Word Game

The final part of the interview involved a ten minute word-based activity or *word game*, which involved respondents choosing, from a selection of words, those which they felt best described God in their experience. This section took place following the unstructured testimony giving so that respondents' choices came as a natural extension of the stories they had just told, rather than their choices influencing their language, which is a risk if the game had been played before their testimony. Games or tools such as these are more frequently used in focus group interviews in the field of market research, usually for the purposes of focusing respondents' discussions, providing the opportunity for team work and in some instances the physical results of such games (sticky notes put in a particular order or diagrams drawn) can be photographed or saved as physical data.⁵⁵⁸ I used an adapted and simplified version of these tools for my interviews as a way of allowing respondents to reflect theologically on the language used to talk about God. It also acted as a break from the intensity of their narrative and my questions.

Participants were presented with 22 sticky notes laid out on the table in front of them. Of these, 21 had a title or characteristic of God written on them and one was left blank. The words were chosen based on biblical representations of God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit ranging

⁵⁵⁸ Having worked as an audio transcriber and listening to market research interviews, I observed that interviewers often used flip charts and sticky notes to focus conversation in the group and provide data. I wanted to incorporate a similar activity in my own interviews as a helpful tool for focusing respondents' theological reflection. There is very little academic literature or discussion on the use of this particular interview tool, although it is acknowledged particularly in the discipline of psychology that, in interviews conducted with children, games and visual aids are a beneficial way to communicate and engage responses when language and concentration may perhaps be a barrier (see Salmon, K. and Pipe, M-E. "Recalling an Event One Year Later: the Impact of Props, Drawing and a Prior Interview" *Applied Cognitive Psychology*, 14(2) (2000) 99-120 for an example of the benefit of using props to assist children in recalling past events during interview)

from those commonly expressed during sermons at LCF (Saviour, Shepherd, Father) to those which were never or rarely found in the teaching and literature of the church (Mother, Brother, Jealous). Participants were then given five minutes to choose four words which they felt best described their relationship with and experiences of God.⁵⁵⁹ The blank sticky note provided an opportunity for respondents to add their own word if they felt that I had missed something important to them. Participants were then given five minutes to explain their choices in their own words. It was important for the respondents to explain what they meant for them personally to ensure that that no assumptions were made regarding their meaning and significance.

The significance of their God-language for the study of ordinary theology of conversion is that their understanding and experience of God's character, will inform and be informed by their understanding of what it means to be (and to become) a Christian. A relationship with God is something which is believed to be entered into at conversion and therefore their beliefs about that relationship reveal something of their beliefs about that which was gained by their conversion.

6.2.3 Qualitative data analysis

The sheer volume of qualitative data presented the researcher with a challenge when the time came for analysis. Interview data alone consisted of over 300,000 words worth of transcripts. The process of analysis began during the interviews themselves as I mentally connected the words of my respondents to the findings and language I had already gained through participant observation. This continued after the interview as I made notes and memos about my initial thoughts and findings and gained greater depth as I transcribed the interview recordings. I transcribed all interview recordings personally, which consisted of between 35

⁵⁵⁹ See Appendix 5 for the full list of words and the frequency each word was chosen.

to 40 hours of audio.⁵⁶⁰ This allowed for confidentiality of information to remain intact and the process of transcribing acted as a preliminary stage of immersion in the interviews and interpreting the data.

Once all interviews were transcribed, they were then coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software.⁵⁶¹ I employed a system of thematic analysis, which involved identifying and analysing thematic links, which were then explored in more detail and analysed theologically.

Coding and Thematic Links

Auerback and Silverstein say that ‘the central idea of coding is to move raw text to research concerns in small steps, each step building on the previous one’.⁵⁶² As this study seeks to develop a theoretical description and explanation of Pentecostal conversion theology based on experience, the aim of my analysis was to identify recurring and overarching themes which ran throughout respondents testimonies. The first step involved coding the raw text according to recurring categories. These categories were not decided upon in advance and were allowed to grow organically out of the process of analysis and reflection. This meant attributing words, sentences or sections of text to a one or two word title or code, which identified its content in relation to an event or belief which related to a respondent’s Christian life, its formation or development.⁵⁶³ The resulting codes were then grouped and organised at three

⁵⁶⁰ In his 2011 thesis on ordinary beliefs about life after death, Michael Armstrong estimated that ‘to transcribe approximately 30 hours of taped interviews would take between 180 and 240 hours of work’ (Armstrong, M.R. (2011) *Lay Christian Views of Life After Death: A Qualitative Study and Theological Appraisal of the Ordinary Eschatology of Some Congregational Christians*. (Doctoral thesis submitted to, Durham University, 2011) Durham E-Theses Online: <http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/3274> (accessed 11th Sept. 2013)

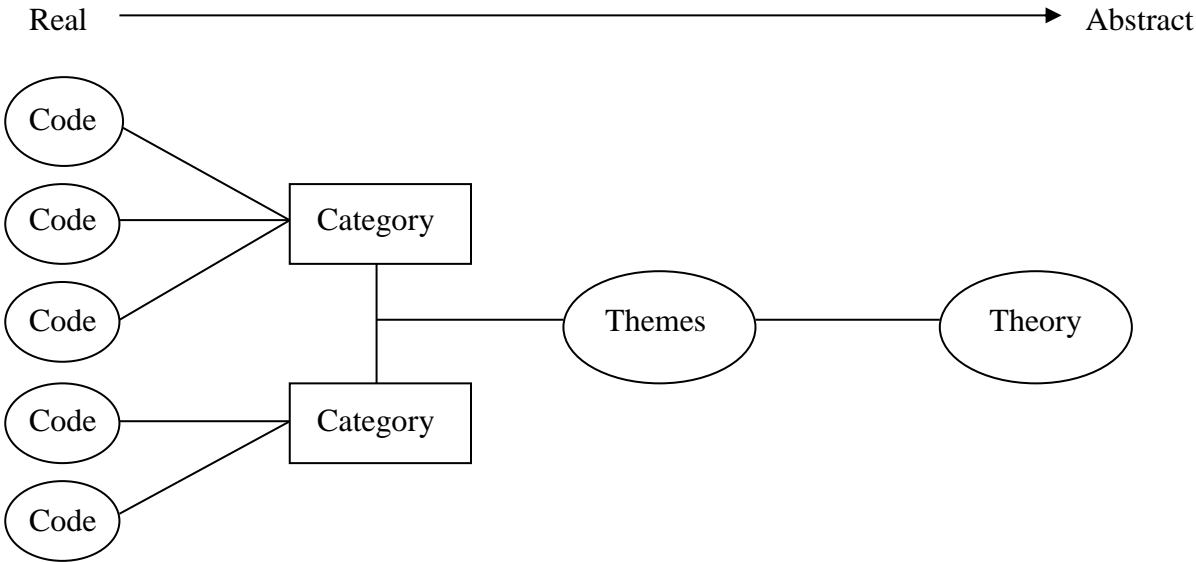
⁵⁶¹ NVivo 9 (2010)

⁵⁶² Auerbach, C.F. and Silverstein, L.B. *Qualitative Data: An Introduction to Coding and Analysis*, (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2003) p.35

⁵⁶³ Some researchers will codes in short phrases, but I limited myself to identifying one or two word titles to represent the general aspect of the experience included in the text. For example, when someone refers to an experience of praying for something which does not happen, this is coded as ‘unanswered prayer’, allowing all examples of unanswered prayer to be explored in more detail to identify the theology surrounding those experiences.

levels; codes, categories and themes.⁵⁶⁴ This follows a basic process of coding moving the raw text forward into theory (Fig. 6.1).

Figure 6.1 Basic codes-to-theory model for qualitative analysis⁵⁶⁵



There were occasions of co-occurring codes within one section of transcript, known as Simultaneous Coding.⁵⁶⁶ As a simplified example, the sentence ‘I was praying one night and suddenly started speaking what seemed to be another language’ could be coded as prayer and glossolalia, as the discussion reveals something of the participants’ experience of both. As conversion is a complex process involving multiple dimensions of an individual’s life, I did not wish to restrict sections of text to one code as they often informed multiple codes at once. Furthermore, Pentecostal theology often reflects a unity between the natural and the

⁵⁶⁴ Richards and Morse explain that “categorizing is how we get ‘up’ from the diversity of data to the shapes of the data, the sorts of things represented”, it takes the codes from the raw text and builds them towards themes and more abstract theory (Richards, L. and Morse, J. *Readme First for a User’s Guide to Qualitative Methods*, (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2007) p.157; cited in Saldaña, J. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, (London: SAGE Publications, 2009) p.11). As I created codes organically, one transcript at a time, there was the risk that some would only relate to one respondent. However, of all 48 codes each was present in no less than four respondents’ testimonies.

⁵⁶⁵ Diagram used and adapted from Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, p.12

⁵⁶⁶ Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, p.5

supernatural and therefore it was perhaps inevitable that there would be some overlap between categories.

Where two or more codes shared a common link, they were then grouped under *categories*. For instance, the codes, ‘answered prayer’ and ‘unanswered prayer’ were grouped under the category of ‘Prayer’.⁵⁶⁷ Codes which could not be connected to any others or which acted as suitable categories for other codes were considered of unique significance and promoted to categories.

Finally, categories were then grouped into a third level of *themes*. There were nine themes in total, seven of which reflected Rambo’s stages and two, which ran throughout the testimonies and all of the other themes, which required their own separate consideration. These were *Identity* and *Destiny*. I use the term ‘themes’ rather than ‘stages’ as the two additional overarching themes cannot be considered as active stages of conversion but rather elements which are believed to be acquired and transformed upon becoming a Christian.

After categorising and identifying themes, all codes and categories were then ordered according to the number of testimonies in which they were included. Those represented in twenty or more were considered to reveal a significant aspect of conversion worth investigating further.⁵⁶⁸ These were then analysed in more detail in order to identify specific details of the experiences and the ordinary theology expressed within.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁶⁷ See Appendix 4 for a diagrammatic representation of codes, categories and themes. The nine themes were: Background, Crisis, Seeking, Encounter, Formation/“Trying it Out”, Commitment, Consequences, Identity and Destiny.

⁵⁶⁸ Qualitative studies are typically concerned more with individual interpretation and subtle details than with quantities of data. However it was considered that, when looking for a model of Pentecostal conversion theology, commonality and repetition was important even though interpretation and experience would differ from respondent to respondent.

⁵⁶⁹ This process required a great deal of moving to and fro between individual sections of text from interviews, sermons, field-notes and congregational literature in order to understand the differences and similarities in experiences and theology within each theme and category. There was no definitive point at which analysis was

Identification and presentation of ordinary theology

Extracting ordinary theology from life stories is complicated because a life story narrative, even one specifically about God, involves the respondent's sociological, emotional and psychological interpretation as well as theological. Furthermore, it became apparent throughout the interview process that respondents rarely compartmentalised their experiences into spiritual and non-spiritual. Their understanding of their 'walk with God' covered their entire life to date and included events from intense religious experience, to their family life, education and choice of career. This placed an added complication of deciphering the beliefs and spiritual connections attributed to otherwise seemingly ordinary events.

My identification of ordinary theology in the texts was informed by my participant observation at the church. This increased my knowledge of the congregational language and hermeneutics, which provided me with added insight into the theology of respondents. It particularly helped in identifying and understanding some of the more symbolic language used by the respondents. In her thesis on representations of evil in Christianity, Warren identifies a symbol as 'an image that represents something; it can be non-linguistic, has no conventional function and points to reality beyond itself'.⁵⁷⁰ For example, the cross is one of the many examples of 'ubiquitous and well known' symbols in Christianity.⁵⁷¹ The prevalence of symbolic language in the Christian tradition and scriptures means that believers will often use symbols on the assumption that the other person understands the reality they point toward. Furthermore, symbols can also be associated with broader metaphors and Pentecostal testimony narratives often contain analogies and metaphors. It is important to

completed and writing began, but rather the analytical and interpretive process continued and evolved throughout the writing process in much the same way that the analysis began while data collection was still in progress.

⁵⁷⁰ Warren, E.J. *Cleansing the Cosmos: a biblical model for conceptualizing and counteracting evil*, (Thesis submitted to University of Birmingham, 2011), p.40, ethesis.bham.ac.uk/3550/2/Warren12PhD.pdf (accessed online on 4th December 2013)

⁵⁷¹ Warren, *Cleansing the Cosmos*, p.40

understand the meaning behind metaphors and symbols as they are understood by the respondents, as:

Linguistic metaphors in discourse can tell us something about how people are thinking, can indicate socio-cultural conventions that people are tied into or that they may be rejecting, and can reveal something of the speakers' emotions, attitudes and values.⁵⁷²

Identification and understanding of metaphors is vital when analysing particular themes as they can add depth to concepts and reveal something of the ordinary theology of the respondent which cannot be expressed in plain terms. Where possible, during the interviews, respondents were asked to explain their metaphorical language in more detail and expand on analogies further.⁵⁷³

Unsurprisingly much of the metaphorical language present in the respondents' testimonies has its origins in Christian scripture. The Bible is the first item listed on Elim's *Fundamental Truths* posted on LCF's website, which states that Elim believes the Bible to be 'the supreme and final authority in all matters of faith and conduct'.⁵⁷⁴ Furthermore, the congregation identifies the Bible as 'God's word to our generation', which reveals who God is, humanity's identity and God's plans and purposes for the lives of his children.⁵⁷⁵ Therefore the Bible plays a significant role for the movement and the congregation in guiding believers in their Christian development and revealing God to them in their lives today.⁵⁷⁶ As Pentecostals

⁵⁷² Cameron, L. "What is metaphor and why does it matter?" in *Metaphor Analysis: Research Practice in Applied Linguistics, Social Sciences and the Humanities*, ed. by Cameron, L. and Maslen, R. (London: Equinox, 2010) 3-25 (p.6)

⁵⁷³ Astley, J. "The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology" in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis, *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013) 1-9 (p.6)

⁵⁷⁴ Elim *Fundamental Truths* from www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx (accessed online on 4th December 2013)

⁵⁷⁵ "We are..." section of LCF's church website (www.lighthousechristianfellowship.com/#/home/we-are)

⁵⁷⁶ Andrew Rogers identified an understanding of biblical interpretation at congregational level as being predominantly formative/informative. He says 'one broad understanding is of scripture ideally acting to draw the congregation into the Christian story, in order that the congregation, in Christ, might faithfully improvise that story in their contemporary context' (Rogers, A. "Congregational Hermeneutics: Towards Virtuous Apprenticeship" in *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church*, ed. by Astley, J. and Francis, L.J. (Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Group, 2013) 117-26 (p.122)).

traditionally consider their testimony to be an on-going part of the biblical narrative, this can affect the uses and interpretations of biblical texts.⁵⁷⁷ Therefore, references to biblical events and experiences to interpret their own experiences were expected and looked for during my interpretation of the main themes. Furthermore, as well as experiences, respondents used biblical references to support expressed beliefs, perhaps to confirm that their belief is biblical. In terms of conversion, the bible verses people choose to frame their own experiences can reveal a lot about how they interpret the process of becoming a Christian. For example, someone saying ‘the scales fell from my eyes’ is probably connecting their experience to that of Paul.⁵⁷⁸ Someone saying ‘I knew I had to step out of the boat’ would be referring to an act of faith in Jesus, based on the experience of Peter walking on the water.⁵⁷⁹ Therefore, cross referencing stories with biblical references was an important part of the analytical process. This added another layer of theological understanding as to how respondents interpreted their experiences.

During the analytical and interpretive process, I was aware of Astley’s warning that reading or listening to ordinary theology is ‘always partly dependent on the listener’s own theological presuppositions, if only because we won’t hear another person’s God-talk *as* theology unless we have some idea about what sort of thing a theology is’.⁵⁸⁰ Therefore, it was important for me to (1) refer back to sermons and other field notes from participant observation to identify the theology of the congregation, and (2) present the respondents’ understanding of their conversion to Christianity, and its meaning for them, in their own words alongside my interpretation.⁵⁸¹

⁵⁷⁷ See Chapter Four, section 4.2.1 for a discussion of the importance of the biblical narrative for Pentecostal identity.

⁵⁷⁸ Acts 9:18 (NIV)

⁵⁷⁹ Matthew 14:22-33 (NIV)

⁵⁸⁰ Astley, “The Analysis, Investigation and Application”, p.3

⁵⁸¹ Astley, “The Analysis, Investigation and Application” p.3

Unfortunately, due to the specific aims of this study, there is no scope for presenting testimonies in their entirety. Therefore, where a quote is given I have provided some context from the rest of their story. Presenting the respondents' own words also allows the reader to conduct their own hermeneutical process and assess the accuracy of my interpretation. Throughout the process of analysis I was careful to ensure that, as far as possible, the participants' stories remained their own, and so all quotes used in this thesis were emailed to the original participant to obtain their consent. At this stage, they had the right to identify anything which may have been taken out of context or that they feel would misrepresent their beliefs.

6.3 Findings: Ordinary Theology of Conversion

6.3.1 Conversion themes

In this section, the main recurring interview themes have been consolidated under broader headings and explored in more detail.⁵⁸² The findings presented in this section come from information gathered and analysed from respondents' entire interview transcripts.

6.3.1.1 Decision

Twenty-four respondents recalled making a personal and conscious decision to become a Christian. Of those, ten were in response to a call for a response to a sermon. Others took place in private, on their own or with one or two other people. These testimonies reflect a range of ages and religious backgrounds at the time of making their decision, as well as their reasons and methods.

⁵⁸² Those mentioned by twenty or more respondents.

Respondents use a variety of different terms to describe the moment of decision: ‘asking Jesus into their life’, ‘getting serious with God’, ‘getting saved’, ‘giving their life to God’, ‘starting their journey’, ‘making a commitment to follow Jesus’, ‘giving their heart to the Lord’, ‘making a commitment’, and ‘knowing Jesus as saviour’. The chosen expression can say a lot about what the believer understands to happen when they make this decision. From their stories and discussions throughout the interviews, I have identified four main motivations for the initial decision to become a Christian among the sample; (1) reality of an afterlife, (2) forgiveness/rescue from sin, (3) surrendering of life to God, and (4) becoming a new person. These motivations reveal something of what respondents believe happened at the moment of decision to become a Christian.

Heaven and Hell

For three respondents the primary motivation for their decision was their ultimate fate after death. Anna was raised in a charismatic Baptist home and recalls that, she gave her life to God at the age of eleven in her living room with the help of her parents. Her reason was, as she told her parents at the time ‘I want to go to heaven’.⁵⁸³ Similarly for Hannah, who made a decision at the age of just five years old, she did so with her father in their living room where she ‘prayed a sinner’s prayer’. She recalls her reason; ‘I recognised that I couldn’t get into heaven on the basis of his [her father’s] relationship and that I needed to know Jesus as a saviour’.⁵⁸⁴ Perhaps the simplicity of wanting to get to heaven, rather than the related, more specific concepts of forgiveness of sins and relationship with God is a reflection of their young age at the time.

⁵⁸³ Anna, 24th September 2012

⁵⁸⁴ Hannah, 18th October 2012

Likewise, for Gareth, the idea of heaven and hell was ever present in his mind after his family was excluded from a religious group. He describes the event as being ‘like the gates of heaven being closed to me’ and around the time of his initial conversion to Christianity he had been having vivid dreams about hell.⁵⁸⁵ At the age of fourteen he was asked by a teacher “are you sure where you would go if you died today?” Doubting his answer, Gareth entered into conversations with him and eventually said a ‘sinner’s prayer of forgiveness’ and asked God into his life on his own.⁵⁸⁶ Each story involves advocates leading relatively young people into commitment to God and all are motivated to do so by a belief in the reality of heaven and hell.

Forgiveness and salvation

Six respondents specifically mentioned the desire for forgiveness of or rescue from sin being a key factor in their decision.⁵⁸⁷ However, as well as these individuals, many other testimonies discuss the fundamental importance of ‘salvation’, expressed in terms of salvation from sin and judgement, even though it was not a reason for their initial decision. I use the terms forgiveness and salvation here because the testimonies reveal a dual understanding of past, individual sins being forgiven on the one hand and also being saved from a more general and ongoing state of sinfulness on the other. For most respondents who chose the word ‘Saviour’ to describe their relationship with and experience of God, the term is deeply personal. Luke explains just how personally he views his salvation from sin:

He gave the Lord Jesus to save me of my sins and that was pretty amazing and the most amazing thing of all is, I’ve realised, I’ve come to realise over the years, really in the last few years that even if I was the only sinful person on the planet, if everybody else

⁵⁸⁵ Gareth, 27th November 2012

⁵⁸⁶ Gareth, 27th November 2012

⁵⁸⁷ This number increases to eight when added to those who said a ‘sinner’s prayer’ as part of their conversion. As this is a familiar evangelical tool for conversion, rather than a reason for converting, I have not included these in the section on forgiveness of sin.

was perfect and in tune and in a relationship with God, Jesus would still have died just for me and that's truly amazing.⁵⁸⁸

Although this final idea is not expressed in the Bible, Luke's profession of its truth reveals the depth of his belief in the atonement as a personal act of love for him. Of the eighteen respondents who identified 'Saviour' as a key word, thirteen explained the concept in personal terms. There is a dualism reflected through the testimonies of salvation, and the associated forgiveness of sin, as being a global and an individual act, as well as a past and an on-going act.

Although forgiveness of sin was not Gareth's primary reason for becoming a Christian as an adolescent, his understanding about his experience has refined from a fear of Hell to a need for the forgiveness of sin as his Christian faith has developed. In reference his choice of Saviour as a key word to explain his relationship with God, he explains:

I think that kind of defines my personal need for conversion, need for personal sin being dealt with and stuff. I kind of see that on a cosmic level as well, where actually here we have a world that needs putting right and I'm responsible for that.⁵⁸⁹

He does not unpack this sense of responsibility for putting the world right, but it is clear that he views the need for sin being dealt with on a personal and a global level. Naomi's decision at the age of ten was underpinned by a similar recognition of sinfulness on both ends of the spectrum. She recalls the sermon message which prompted her decision:

The message that we'd heard about your sin being taken away, although I was only young I knew that that was true; that we were all sinners and we'd all done things wrong and things we were ashamed of.⁵⁹⁰

Similarly, Ellen, who was raised in a Pentecostal family, made her decision at the age of five after an evangelist came to her church to preach to the children. The evangelist told a story

⁵⁸⁸ Luke, 18th February 2013

⁵⁸⁹ Gareth, 27th November 2012

⁵⁹⁰ Naomi, 15th February 2013

about someone being saved from a burning building, using the fire as a metaphor for sin and the fireman represented Jesus rescuing people. She recalls that she didn't have much to repent of:

Not that the Lord doesn't measure big crimes or little crimes but the Lord didn't save me from a lot of dramatically sinful state. Although being cheeky, if you lie it's as bad as if you steal cars or whatever. So I never had much to repent of in that sense, as far as the Lord's concerned, but I knew the Lord Jesus came to save me when the house was on fire and I knew it was only you that could do this because he spilled his precious blood.⁵⁹¹

Ellen explains that she interpreted the story about the house being on fire as a metaphor for all of the evil in the world and that Jesus could rescue her from it if she asked. Again, salvation is presented as not only being from individual sins committed by the individual, but from future sins and the sinful state of the world. Significantly, none of the testimonies suggested that becoming a Christian stopped them from being sinful and being tempted to sin. Rather, the need for forgiveness is recognised as ongoing even after conversion.

More in-depth discussion about salvation took place during the discussions about key word choices rather than in describing the moment of decision itself.⁵⁹² Even where respondents used the expression 'I was saved' to describe their initial conversion, it was not until the question of salvation was prompted further that they explained what they meant by this. It could be interpreted that although being 'saved' is commonly used vocabulary, the *understanding* of salvation is only developed properly during Christian formation and discipleship rather than fully formed at the moment of decision.⁵⁹³

⁵⁹¹ Ellen, 10th October 2012

⁵⁹² See 6.3.2.2 for a discussion about the choice of the word 'Saviour' to describe the respondents' experience of God.

⁵⁹³ This 'fully formed' understanding of salvation appears to follow a narrow soteriology at congregational and individual level, associating salvation closely with forgiveness of sins (justification). This is common in Protestant soteriology although a broader view of salvation is recommended at academic level (Pinnock, C.H. *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996) 149-150)

Surrender of life

The image used to describe the moment of decision more than any other is that of surrendering or giving your life over to God. This image was used by eleven of the 24 respondents in direct relation to their decision and was presented in two main ways; (1) as a reason for conversion and (2) as a method of conversion. The former is described by Beth:

I actually started my journey officially because [a local Baptist church] did its own Alpha course. We had - there's a gorgeous painting of, the one with the lantern and the door and there's a copy of it in the church and we sat after we'd had the meal and the small group.⁵⁹⁴ When we had the talk after by the minister it was over there [*points to the wall directly in front of her*] and so every week - and we were given a little copy and every week there he was, waiting at the door. Every week John, the minister...he was stood and he was talking to me. On the final day I sort of metaphorically "okay I give in. You've been patient, I give in" and I opened the door and started on my journey officially.⁵⁹⁵

Beth internalised the common metaphor presented at Alpha of Jesus standing at the door of her life, knocking and it being her responsibility to open the door and let him in. She then uses this metaphor to frame her own experience. For Beth, knowing that Jesus wanted to be let into her life was her initial motivation for making the decision to become a Christian and this decision marked the beginning of a journey.

Others referred to surrendering their life to God as their method of conversion. Naomi decided after a sermon on sin being taken away, that she wanted 'to become a Christian and have a completely new life'. Receiving a new life was her motivation for conversion and so she says 'I gave my heart to the Lord' as her means of gaining that new life and becoming a

⁵⁹⁴ The painting she describes is *Light of the World* by William Holman Hunt. This is a commonly used painting in the Alpha course to illustrate Revelation 3:20 which says 'Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with that person, and they with me' (NIV). During the course, these words are attributed to Jesus and used as a metaphor for his desire to be welcomed into the life of the non-believer.

⁵⁹⁵ Beth, 27th September 2012

Christian.⁵⁹⁶ Giving over control of one's life or deciding to follow Jesus is viewed as the beginning of a journey rather than as a conclusion to seeking.

New start

The language of beginning and newness is common throughout discussions about decision. Whether conversion is seen as the start of a journey with God or as the start of new life as a new creation, it is believed that the moment of decision is the start of something new. This has close connotations in the Pentecostal understanding that being a Christian involves being born again. This means a break with the past and a clear cut off point for believers. Naomi was only young when she decided that she wanted to become a Christian and a new person:

Yes there was an altar call but that wasn't the significant thing really, it was just that I was saying "yes" to God, that I did want him in my life and I wanted to be this new person.⁵⁹⁷

Despite the promise of new life and its appeal, it is not always experienced immediately, as Grace recalls:

When I was about seven...there was a man with two vases and he said, "this one's cracked, you know. I wonder if your life's a bit like that. If it's not quite perfect and there's things wrong with it. But this one is a perfect one and you can change the imperfect for a perfect if you give your life to the Lord Jesus". So I went home and prayed about that but I didn't magically change. Therefore as I got older I used to think, "I don't know the Lord like that person" so therefore I grew gradually into more and more understanding, going to Christian meetings I learnt more the bible teaches you. So all of those things were the beginning of life shall I say.⁵⁹⁸

Despite not becoming a new person in the literal sense, Grace still views that event as the 'beginning of life' and as something new. Others who do not use the language of new life describe their moment of decision as the start of a journey with God. The view of conversion

⁵⁹⁶ Naomi, 15th February 2013

⁵⁹⁷ Naomi, 15th February 2013

⁵⁹⁸ Grace, 18th October 2012

as starting a journey or going in a new direction echoes the classical Judeo-Christian definition of conversion as *turning*.⁵⁹⁹

6.3.1.2 Advocates

In total, 27 respondents recalled the influence of another person in their coming to faith, mainly: family, friends and through preachers. The involvement of advocates is mentioned in relation to conversion more than encounter with God. A strong focus of people's testimonies is their relationship with others, particularly other Christians. For some respondents, these people are mentioned in passing, particularly when these influential people are parents, whereas others attribute their eventual conversion to encounters with Christians. For Laura, her mother and sister's conversions to Christianity subtly influenced her decision to become a Christian. She decided to become serious about God when she entered a church looking for her mother and heard a sermon, which she felt spoke directly to her:

How come he knew what I had in my heart? I hadn't told anyone. If I'd told my mum or my sister I would think maybe they told him, they told the preacher, but you know because my mum and my sister are Christian, so I had that kind of influence I didn't realise maybe...but at that time I was thinking "maybe there is a God. If there is truly a God I should be serious and think about it".⁶⁰⁰

At the time she felt that it was only by God that the preacher could have spoken directly to her heart, but in hindsight she recognises that the subtle Christian influence of her mother and sister may have made her more open to the possibility of God speaking through the preacher. However, Laura's recognition of her family's influence on her reception of the message does not diminish her belief that God spoke to her through the sermon.

⁵⁹⁹ Rambo, L.R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1993) p.3; the experience of Saul on the road to Damascus could also inform 'journey' language for converts as his conversion took place on, and transformed the purpose of, his journey.

⁶⁰⁰ Laura, 10th January 2013

Doreen identifies the main influence in her conversion experience as her daughter, Fiona who had just left home for university. Doreen had attended church her whole life and raised her daughter to attend church, however in Fiona's words, Doreen 'wasn't a Christian although she always believed. She brought up in church and she believed but she became a Christian after'.⁶⁰¹ Fiona's own conversion prompted Doreen to recognise that there was more to Christian identity than nationality and attending church:

She [Fiona] soon realised then from the teaching that she had there that you really need to have a relationship with Jesus to be a Christian and she came home one weekend and told me she was now a Christian. I remember saying "of course you are, we live in a Christian country, we go to a Christian church" and so on. She said "yes but it isn't the same, Mum". She told me what had happened to her. The grass was greener and everything was so different now that she really knew Jesus.⁶⁰²

Doreen and Fiona's experiences highlight the influence of other people, particularly from a Pentecostal/Charismatic background, in introducing the convert to a different, more "real" definition of being a Christian. In many cases, respondents made their decision to become a Christian separate of their being introduced to Spirit-filled Christianity.

Regardless of the emphasis placed on the role of the advocate it is clear that the influence of people is secondary to, yet inextricable from the work of God in influencing their faith. Christopher's story highlights his belief in God's presence in his encounter with an advocate. Believing he had been told by God to go to church, he was greeted by an elder of LCF when, not realising that services were on a Sunday, he showed up on a Wednesday:

Thank God that Tom the church elder was there. I spoke to Tom about my situation and my problem and what's been going on inside me and he says "we are closed but due to your concern and your situation I'm feeling it on my heart that we should pray and you pray as well". I said "okay that's fine". So he opened up and we spent 15 minutes in

⁶⁰¹ Fiona, 11th October 2012

⁶⁰² Doreen, 3rd October 2012

prayer or in praying and I felt good. I felt like somebody was listening to me, even though I couldn't see them I felt somebody was listening to me.⁶⁰³

In meeting Tom at the church and in praying together, Chris felt that God was present in their encounter and it prompted him to return to church and continue to pray. It became apparent through the testimonies that other Christians not only played a strong role in bringing people to faith but were considered to be a continual source of influence and discernment of God's will throughout the Christian journey.

6.3.1.3 Divine-human encounter

All 30 respondents recorded some kind of divine-human encounter during their Christian life and the range of experiences is broad and diverse (Table 6.2).

Table 6.2 Number of respondents claiming divine encounters in relation to their initial decision to become a Christian

Means of Divine-Human Encounter	Relation to conversion (number /30)	
	After	Before / Associated
Angels and Demons	14	5
Art and Media	7	3
Audible voice	8	1
Scripture	15	2
Dreams and Visions	10	2
Healing	13	0
Preaching	10	1
Presence of God	19	2
Prophecy and Knowledge	15	2
Spirit Baptism	29	2
Worship	8	0

⁶⁰³ Christopher, 22nd October 2012

Encounter with God is a universal and persistent theme in the testimonies collected, although predominantly after rather than before or directly linked with their conversion decision. The experience that stands out as common for almost all respondents is, unsurprisingly, Spirit baptism.⁶⁰⁴ Testimonies also reflected a wide range of possible modes by which respondents experience God. Other than Spirit baptism, a general sense of God's presence was recorded by the highest number of people, perhaps because this can accompany all of the other experiences.

However, few of these experiences are recorded prior to or at the time of their decision to become a Christian. This could suggest that experiences of God are increased at the turning point of conversion. This may be because a believer is more likely to put themselves in the position to experience God post-conversion. Anna notes that 'when I just sit and soak is when the Holy Spirit has something to say to me'.⁶⁰⁵ To 'soak' is to spend time in prayer and worship and in the presence of God. Anna's comment suggests that experience of the Spirit occurs when the believer takes the time to receive it. Others suggested that they could experience and develop their spiritual gifts by practicing them and seeking God, which someone who does not believe in God or encounter with him is unlikely to do.

The overarching message regarding encounter with God from these interviews is that encounter with God predominantly comes from relationship with him. That it is something to be cultivated by the Christian but it also develops the Christian. Julie says 'I think God especially reveals himself to me when I pray, when I read the bible, when I pray with other people, when I worship at church'.⁶⁰⁶ This encounter requires activity on the part of Julie in

⁶⁰⁴ This includes experiences described in terms of being 'filled' with the Spirit.

⁶⁰⁵ Anna, 24th September 2012

⁶⁰⁶ Julie, 7th November 2012

the first instance in order to receive. Of course this is not always the case, but for the most part respondents connect divine-human encounter with their divine-human relationship.

6.3.1.4 Water baptism and Spirit baptism⁶⁰⁷

Adult water baptism is recorded by 22 respondents although of those, eleven had to be prompted to mention it in their testimony and a further eight only mentioned it in passing and required further questioning to expand on their comments. From the interviews I concluded that water baptism, while an important and expected act of commitment, was not regarded as a personally significant part of their walk with God. Alternatively, its omission from testimonies could also be attributed to a feeling that it is so common in Pentecostal churches that it can be assumed.

It was seen as an act of obedience to Christ, but this resulted in varying degrees of enthusiasm. Only two respondents recalled, unprompted, an eagerness to be baptised. For Paula the idea to be baptised came from a voice speaking to her through a worship song:

I was listening to a song one day. I've always loved singing, always loved singing in choirs, singing is a very big part of me and God and there was a song on one of the Hillsong CDs called By Your Side and it was "into the water I will wade, my sins are washed away". I heard a voice saying "be baptised".

She followed this call by turning to the bible to explore the idea of baptism:

Really looked into the word, really started talking to God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus and although I was baptised as a baby - christened as a baby I then started looking at the whole concept of baptism.⁶⁰⁸

Paula here mentions her infant baptism and corrects herself, referring to it as christening instead. She purposefully separates her experience as an infant from baptism by changing its

⁶⁰⁷ The distinction between the two is made in Classical Pentecostalism. However, other groups expect both to occur simultaneously and some of my respondents expressed either, an expectation that they would speak in tongues at their water baptism or that it actually happened this way in their experience.

⁶⁰⁸ Paula, 20th February 2013

title. Also, in contrast to other testimonies in this study, she describes a period of searching the Bible and including ‘God and the Holy Spirit and Jesus’ in the decision. From her exploration of scripture, she reached the conclusion that she must be baptised by immersion as a believer. Similarly, Kathleen witnessed baptismal services at church and faced a difficult time persuading her parents that she should be baptised. She recalls, ‘they basically said “no. We had you christened as a child, you don’t need to be baptised”’.⁶⁰⁹ Although she does not explain her reasons, her desire to be baptised as ‘the next stage’ was so strong that she eventually persuaded her parents to have her baby brother dedicated at her church so that she could be baptised at the same time.

Olivia had to be prompted to discuss her water baptism and she revealed that it was her parents’ encouragement and the opportunity offered by moving to the UK, which motivated her. Having been baptised as an infant in South Korea she explains that her parents also wanted her to be baptised as an adult once they moved to England where the practice was more available:

In Korea if you are baptised as a child you usually just confirming what you believe and you’re not really usually baptised but as we came here and within the baptism, it was like the full baptism with the water and everything here. My parents said “it is a really good experience to having the real baptising” because when they had been experiencing it, it was – they really felt okay it is you really dying and it is renewing love to God.⁶¹⁰

For others, theological meaning did not play a part in their decision to be baptised. Gareth’s baptism at the age of 21 was described as an entirely practical event which marked his membership to the church and his breaking away from his parental religion:

It was just I needed to be baptised to be a church member. There was no great kind of call or sense of this is a real thing of obedience. It was utterly practical. Yes it was just

⁶⁰⁹ Kathleen, 20th December 2013

⁶¹⁰ Olivia, 15th February 2013

a way of saying “I’m committed to this church therefore I’ll become a church member”. Yes, therefore I’ll get baptised.⁶¹¹

Those respondents who attributed most theological meaning to their baptisms were typically those who came to knowledge of adult baptism later on in their journey. Paula and Olivia’s examples reveal a more reflected upon understanding of baptism, perhaps because it was a decision they made as a result of theological arguments, rather than expectation or their upbringing. This is not to say that those raised in traditions which practice adult baptism have not thought through its theological significance. For some respondents, their motivation was that baptism is a command of Jesus,⁶¹² for others it is something to be ticked off a list,⁶¹³ or a public declaration and a reconfirmation of the initial decision made to follow Jesus. However, the overwhelming silence from respondents the subject reveals that it is, for many, an expected and assumed ritual and therefore not considered to be a stage worth describing in their walk with God.

Spirit baptism was recorded by 29 respondents, although surprisingly, much was omitted from their accounts and had to be uncovered through further questioning. Of those who talked about Spirit baptism, nineteen did so only after being prompted. For some, they mentioned a time when they had a spiritual experience but I had to ask whether they would identify that time as their Spirit baptism. This came as a surprise to me. It felt as though I was placing a label on their experience that they would not commonly use. While they understood what I meant and all identified their experiences as Spirit baptism in one way or another when asked, it was not a label that they naturally placed upon their experience when giving their testimonies freely.

⁶¹¹ Gareth, 27th November 2012

⁶¹² Hugh, 27th November 2012; referring to Matthew 28:19 where Jesus tells his disciples to ‘make disciples of all nations, baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’ (NIV).

⁶¹³ Ian, 27th November 2012

Only one participant suggested that he may have experienced Spirit baptism at the same time as their conversion. For all others it was a subsequent and separate experienced. Ian describes his Spirit baptism as being the main turning point in his conversion where, in his words, ‘God found me’.⁶¹⁴ He had been raised in a Pentecostal family but it was not until he was filled with the Spirit during an Alpha weekend away that he considers himself to have experienced God for himself through the Spirit. His openness to being prayed for was, in itself a moment of faith and decision and, unusually, it was the desire to be filled with the Spirit that prompted him to become serious about God, rather than being a result of getting serious with God.

For most respondents, their Spirit baptism occurred instantaneously after they prayed (or someone else prayed) for it. Only two reported a delay between praying for the Spirit and receiving, although neither delay lasted longer than a day. For others, they record that they received the Spirit unexpectedly with no associated prayer or request for it. Five respondents discussed their feelings and experiences of being filled with the Spirit but did not recount the method used to receive it or one specific experience and only one respondent failed to experience Spirit baptism after praying for it. This respondent, Grace, described her situation after being prompted on the subject:

Well I can’t say I’ve had any spiritual – Spirit-filled occasion. I’ve prayed about being, when I was in the [previous] church I prayed about being filled with the Spirit but I didn’t have any great experience. But I think it’s a kind of maintenance. I didn’t need a dramatic experience in one sense, no dramatic change. Like my husband had a dramatic change when he decided yes he would believe. You know? So I don’t think it was anything sort of – but I obviously rely on God’s strength and God’s insights rather than my own.⁶¹⁵

⁶¹⁴ Ian, 27th November 2012

⁶¹⁵ Grace, 18th October 2012

Grace describes her experience of the Spirit as ‘a kind of maintenance’ rather than a dramatic experience. Although her testimony appears unusual when compared with the rest of this research sample, her belief in the Spirit’s on-going ‘maintenance’ of the believer is actually supported by many other respondents. While the table above appears to reflect a range of fairly conventional Pentecostal experiences of Spirit baptism, the respondents’ beliefs were more varied.

For some respondents, my request that they identify one experience as their Spirit baptism was regarded as short-sighted. For Doreen, after her initial experience with the Spirit she recalls that she has had further filling experiences since then:

I know once or twice it’s happened to me in bed and I haven’t even been praying or thinking about it but I’ve been thinking something very mundane and suddenly I’m filled with the Holy Spirit and I think “oh that was wonderful. Why? What was that for God?” It’s like charging your battery up again in a way isn’t it.⁶¹⁶

Similarly, although Ian records his first experience with the Holy Spirit on the Alpha weekend away, when I asked whether this was his Spirit baptism or whether it was another time, he replied:

Yes I would say it was every time I guess. I know people say you’re filled with the Holy Spirit - that was the time when I really felt that, that was where I felt a real sense of passion, a real sense of this isn’t just meek and quiet, it’s alive and it’s loud. That’s just part of who I am really now but at the time I was like “wow, I wasn’t expecting that”.⁶¹⁷

He goes on to describe a period of time where every experience he felt he had with the Spirit was different and produced a different manifestation. This is why he described every time as being a baptism in the Spirit, although the first was undeniably special to him and changed his character, each experience is important in shaping his understanding of the Spirit and developing his spiritual gifts.

⁶¹⁶ Doreen, 3rd October 2012

⁶¹⁷ Ian, 27th November 2012

For others, Spirit baptism is closely linked with the gifts and signs which follow. When asked to describe her Spirit baptism, Irene instead discussed her spiritual gifts, the ones she wanted and the ones she did not want. The spiritual gifts associated with Spirit baptism has always been a controversial and much debated topic in the history of Pentecostalism. Since 1934 the Elim movement has held that Spirit baptism is accompanied by signs following, which can include glossolalia (tongues speech) but it is not considered to be the only evidence.⁶¹⁸ Although the majority of respondents recorded that they experienced glossolalia during their Spirit baptism, most of those who expressed a belief on the subject of initial evidence believed that glossolalia is only one of many possible manifestations experienced during Spirit baptism. Although this belief is in keeping with Elim's current *Fundamental Truths*, I was surprised at the number of respondents who implied that they felt their view on the subject was in some way heretical.

For others, their own experience appeared to be in direct conflict with other people's experiences. Luke's first wife did not speak in tongues and while he is clearly appreciative of his own gift he would hesitate to judge someone as not Spirit-filled on the basis of glossolalia:

I don't find any evidence in my reading of the New Testament, particularly of the scriptures that says "if you don't speak in tongues that's evidence that you haven't been filled with the Spirit" or whatever. It says this is something that can happen and if you want it it can happen to you and you can be released into doing that. But there are far more gifts and manifestations of the Spirit that show that you are Spirit-filled and a Spirit-filled Christian. So I don't think it's the be all and end all but it's something I enjoy doing and I'm quite good at and I'm grateful to Father for giving me that gift.⁶¹⁹

Despite a general hesitation to identify glossolalia as the necessary evidence of Spirit baptism, many respondents freely associated their Spirit baptism with speaking in tongues. One respondent when asked to describe her Spirit baptism, spoke in terms of receiving a 'new

⁶¹⁸ Kay, W.K. "The "Initial Evidence": Implications for an Empirical Perspective in a British Context" *Journal of the European Pentecostal Theological Association*, 20 (2000) 25-31 (p.25)

⁶¹⁹ Luke, 18th February 2013

experience of worship’ and ‘a new level of praise’, assuming that as we were talking about Spirit baptism I would understand this to mean glossolalia.

Rather than it being important when and how their first experience of Spirit baptism occurred, what seems to be more important is the fact that they identify as being Spirit-filled and that the Spirit is working in and through them. There is a belief that the Spirit comes to dwell in the believer at their decision of faith and therefore, as long as he can be seen to be working and moving in their life, that is evidence of their Christianity. Their testimonies did not reveal a need for this to be defined in terms of a specific moment or language of Spirit baptism.

6.3.1.5 Christian formation

This is made up of a combination of references to bible study, church attendance and discipleship. These come from the overall themes of Consequences and Formation/“Trying it Out” but can be viewed collectively as Christian formation. It is through them that respondents record a growth and deeper understanding in their faith.

For Christopher, coming from a non-Christian background he finds that the Bible provides him with perspective and is a way that God speaks to him:

I’m studying the word, I’m always in the word and it’s given me a completely different way of life. I see things that I’d never seen before and day by day God reveals more and more to me.⁶²⁰

For Julie, it was the guidance laid out in the Bible that excited her and drew her to Christianity in the first place; ‘I got excited about the fact there was a bible and there were directions for life in there from God himself’.⁶²¹ Respondents believe that God speaks to them through the Bible today; it is believed that ‘the Holy Spirit opens up the scriptures to you’ and a great deal of what respondents learn about God and being a Christian comes from

⁶²⁰ Christopher, 22nd October 2012

⁶²¹ Julie, 7th November 2012

their reading or teaching of scripture.⁶²² It was through reading scripture that Paula discovered 'that it's not just the thing that I'm saved but coming under God's lordship and living that life'.⁶²³

For some respondents, their previous experience of church has been negative or harmful. Therefore the desire to attend church was an indication for many that they were serious about their faith or had found something new. It was through her church attendance that Julie learned that the Bible could be a blueprint for her life. She recalls the support she felt in starting to attend church:

So we started going to church and I made friends with a few people who live locally. Between, I suppose meeting people – because I was at a particularly lonely stage in my life so between meeting people that had this common factor of being Christians and going to church, I felt I was on a journey and I had no idea what it was all about.⁶²⁴

It is also through church that new believers can receive discipleship and mentoring in small groups and by individuals. This is another way that Christians learn and develop their faith. Anna believes that if she had had a mentor in her youth, like the mentoring programme which runs at LCF, she may not have neglected her relationship with God.⁶²⁵ When Adam became a Christian at school he learned that discipleship had already been prepared for them; 'they'd already put in place a place for us to go and worship and a place for us to have our conversion experience explained to us and nurtured and matured and grown'.⁶²⁶

We have already seen that respondents' understanding of faith and reasons for converting were often simplistic at the time of their decision. The plan for conversion is for the

⁶²² Rebekah, 25th February 2013

⁶²³ Paula, 20th February 2013

⁶²⁴ Julie, 7th November 2012

⁶²⁵ Anna, 24th September 2012

⁶²⁶ Adam, 2nd October 2012

experience to then be framed within the broader context of the gospel and supported through a community of believers.

6.3.1.6 Identity

One of the underlying themes throughout all interviews was identity. The subject arose in the very first interview and was a continual thread throughout the process.

The initial interview plan included the mandatory question ‘What does being a Pentecostal mean to you’. However, my first respondent, Anna, revealed that she had been brought up in a Baptist family, prompting me to ask a preliminary question; ‘Do you consider yourself to be Pentecostal?’ Anna’s response led to this preliminary question being included in all other interviews.

I don’t consider myself anything. I consider myself a Christian; I don’t take on any title. I grew up in a Baptist church but I’m not a Baptist, I’m just a Christian. I don’t, to be honest I don’t really understand the different denominations, I don’t see why it’s necessary. I understand that people worship in different ways and have different rituals and such but I wouldn’t place myself in any box. I follow Christ, I believe in the Trinity, I believe I’m saved, I believe I’m born again and I believe in the message of salvation. I don’t see why I should put myself in another box.⁶²⁷

Anna’s disapproval of labels would prove to be a common theme among the respondents when asked to define their relationship to Pentecostalism. Her response and those that followed prompted me to look for themes concerning Christian and Pentecostal identity when analysing the interview data.

In terms of their identification as a Christian this was formed largely by their participation in a community and in relation to their relationship with God, e.g. if God is my Father then I am his child. Respondents distinguished between three different types of Christian; nominal, non-Spirit-filled and Spirit-filled. Many of those who were raised in a Christian family identified

⁶²⁷ Anna, 24th September 2012

their pre-conversion religion as nominal. Nominal Christians are not considered to have made a decision to enter into a relationship with God, are not considered to be ‘saved’ and are seen to be ‘just religious’ or attend church on a Sunday but not live a Christian life during the week. Anna defined herself in these terms as a ‘Sunday Christian, not really a seven-day a week Christian’.⁶²⁸

A persistent message coming through from respondents’ testimonies was that they did not distinguish between Pentecostal congregations and non-Pentecostal congregations, as long as they were seen to be Spirit-filled or charismatic. This is the dividing line for those who have chosen a Pentecostal expression of Christianity; between being Spirit-filled and non-Spirit-filled. For some, the presence of the Holy Spirit is the signature of a ‘real Christian’. Olivia recalls her surprise upon moving to the UK at the number of nominal Christians and non-Spirit-filled churches she encountered:

There are so many denominations of church as well. The one thing they believe in, nothing changes if they believe in God, if they believe in Jesus but some of the denominations they’re trying to deny and ignoring about the Holy Spirit part as well. But what I really believe is if you are a real Christian and if you believe in God and if you really believe that Jesus is the son of God and God himself, and if you really believe that God is still alive and He is still the same; He is the same yesterday, today and forever, they should believe there is a Holy Spirit working even now.⁶²⁹

For Olivia, real Christianity means believing in the present-day activity of the Holy Spirit. However, Paula insists that a lack of experience of the Holy Spirit does not mean a lack of salvation; rather that something is missing in their Christian life and is being withheld from God:

I’ve got a very good friend who is a saved Christian but he’s never really experienced the Holy Spirit. He doesn’t have that daily – he prays every night, says thank you for everything and he asks a list of things but that’s kind of where it stops and that saddens

⁶²⁸ Anna, 24th September 2012

⁶²⁹ Olivia, 15th February 2013

me. There's so much more but I think it's that think of allowing God more and more and the more you allow the more it happens.⁶³⁰

As well as being Spirit-filled, there was a more general aspect of identity which respondents felt was gained upon becoming a Christian. In an attempt to define what being a Christian means, 'Child of God' appeared to be a preferred term. For Luke, the Pentecostal label does not define his identity:

It doesn't mean anything really. This important thing is I'm a child of God and I'm in a family of other believers...I think that's all it is really. If somebody said to me "you can't come here anymore unless you say you're a Pentecostal" then okay I'm a Pentecostal, but at the end of the day it's just a name. The important thing is I'm a child of God.⁶³¹

Similarly for Jack, his identity as a child of God far outweighs any affiliation with the label of Pentecostalism:

I would rather be called a child of God than be called a Pentecostal or a Baptist. I mean, let's be real for once, let's be real. We are children of God. There is so much division in church, so much division, so much schism you know and so much controversy and this shouldn't go on and on and on forever. Christ desires that we be one so that's why I'm a bit reluctant to use a label to describe myself. I would prefer to be called a Christian; a child of God.⁶³²

Although he aligns himself with and has respect for the Pentecostal tradition, Jack makes it clear that relationship with God, rather than denominational labels, should form Christian identity.

The overwhelming response to my question was hesitation, followed by the respondent defining what Pentecostalism means in relation to their overall identity as a Christian. Some attempted to define Pentecostalism as a movement in historical or doctrinal terms, rather than as an aspect of their identity. It became clear that none of my respondents felt that they had

⁶³⁰ Paula, 20th February 2013

⁶³¹ Luke, 18th February 2013

⁶³² Jack, 5th December 2012

converted to a movement, a denomination or to a church. For most, ‘Pentecostal’ is a label which is secondary to their identity as a Spirit-filled, child of God.

6.3.1.7 Destiny

All respondents recorded some form of difficulty in their life, ranging from dealing with temptations to bereavement. These events fall under the heading of what Rambo would call crisis. For some it was a crisis that played a part in their coming to faith. Adam recalls:

I think many of us come to faith through a crisis. I think I did come to faith through a crisis and that doesn’t mean that my faith is any less true. In some ways it’s probably more true. I don’t think it’s necessary for anyone to know what that crisis is but I came to faith through crisis and without God that crisis would be worse than it is.⁶³³

He has faith that the presence of God and his relationship with God means that his particular crisis is not as bad as it could be. However respondents’ testimonies do not suggest that conversion removes crisis entirely. All but three respondents recorded difficult situations, crises or moments of doubt following their conversion. Their testimonies reflected honestly the difficulties in their lives and that being a Christian does not alleviate suffering. However, alongside there is an overwhelming belief that God has a destiny for all believers and it is this that carries them through difficult times.

Destiny was a theme that ran through all areas of respondents’ testimonies. It was most prominent during discussions surrounding crisis, doubt and relationship with God. As Christians, they believe that they have a destiny and a purpose ordained by God and that they can participate in God’s will for their life. On the subject of doubting her faith, Paula admitted that she questioned God’s actions and his purposes, but never doubted that he *had* purposes:

⁶³³ Adam, 2nd October 2012

I know some people go through doubts in their faith but I've never doubted God and his realness. I've sometimes not been sure what he was doing and where he was going with something – waver a little bit I suppose in my trust, not trust in God but struggling a little bit, you know.⁶³⁴

This was a common sentiment expressed by respondents when asked whether they ever experienced doubt. Most responded that they did not doubt God's existence but that they occasionally questioned his purposes. With regard to God's plans for her life, Anna believes that 'he doesn't reveal everything to us all at once because if he did we'd probably run a mile at how scary the plan is'. For Brendan, seeing ahead to God's plan is difficult but his faith in God's guidance is prompted by looking at the past:

You can see when you look back and you can see why things happened and you can see a path through your life experiences. I'm not very good at seeing what the future's going to be but you can look back and you can see how God has actually led you. That gives you confidence not to worry too much about the future and still trust the Lord.⁶³⁵

For some, their destiny is revealed by a very clear sense of calling and others have received words of knowledge or prophecy, which they believe provide an insight into God's plan for them. Others see God working in the timings and events of their life towards a purpose.

Destiny can come in many forms; whether it is a short term event or interaction orchestrated by God or a long term calling. For all believers, the 'ultimate destiny' is eternal life. Eric explains this eschatological destiny as beginning with his conversion:

My salvation made me part of that, that I had a destiny and a purpose outside of this life. I could see beyond this life in many ways and understand eternity was something I couldn't quite grasp in this life but was my ultimate destiny. That was the reality that circled everything else and made everything else genuine and I think it completely blew me away, utterly blew me away.⁶³⁶

⁶³⁴ Paula, 20th February 2013

⁶³⁵ Brendan, 19th October 2012

⁶³⁶ Eric, 21st November 2012

The Christian life is presented as participation in a wider destiny as purposed by God; as an individual and as a community, to be outworked in this life and the next.

6.3.2 God-talk

We have already seen that a relationship with God is considered to be an important part of being a Christian for Pentecostal believers. However, I wanted to uncover more about this commonly used phrase by finding out exactly what kind of relationship believers considered themselves to have with God. To aid in their reflection on the subject, respondents were asked to choose four words (from a choice of 21) to best describe their relationship with God. All respondents chose unique combinations and the four most frequently chosen words were; Father, Saviour, Faithful and Lord.⁶³⁷ Respondents were then asked to explain their choices in more detail.

6.3.2.1 Father

The metaphor of God as Father is explained by respondents in reference to three main biblical sources: Luke 15:11-32, 1 John 3:1, and Matthew 7:7-11.⁶³⁸ The first is the parable of the lost or prodigal son. Darren uses this story as a metaphor for his relationship with God:

The son kind of goes away, does loads of different bad things and uses up all his wealth, his inheritance. He comes back and the father sees him from a long way off. He was out there. He must have been out there looking for him regularly to see – and he runs to him and he throws a big celebration for his son, gives him a ring, puts him in a nice robe and everything. He's restored to what he had before without any strings attached. So that's why I see him as a father because I've had that kind of relationship with him.

⁶³⁷ See Appendix 4 for a list of all respondents and their chosen word combinations. All 30 respondents chose at least one of these four words.

⁶³⁸ Respondents referred to these passages in their language although did not always quote the chapter and verse, therefore I had to identify where in the Bible their references were from. Although not specifically mentioned by respondents, the title of Father is also recorded in the gospels as being used by Jesus to refer to God and is given in the example of the Lord's Prayer. Therefore it is a common and recurrent name for God in Christianity as a whole, not just Pentecostalism.

Now I see that I messed up, did a lot of bad things I'm not proud of but still God took me back.⁶³⁹

Darren sees the parable as representative of God's relationship to his children as a forgiving, merciful and constant father, ready to welcome them back into their rightful family when they repent of their sins and return to him. Darren interprets from the story that the father must have regularly been out looking for his son and that represents a God who cares about His children individually and that his love is unconditional despite their sins.

The beginning of 1 John 3:1 says 'See what great love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God'. This verse is paraphrased by Gareth but its sentiment is best expressed by Julie. For Julie, the whole purpose of her salvation is reconciliation with the Father and adoption as a child of God:

I'm most grateful to the saviour, to Jesus for reconciling me to the Father. That is amazing when you think of how holy God is, that we can come to him and we can be accepted into the Father's presence. We are adopted as his children and that he wants us to call him Abba. This very deep and personal Father that wants to give us – he gives us his kingdom.⁶⁴⁰

She identifies becoming a Christian as allowing her to 'be accepted into the Father's presence'. Julie pictures God as a father who wishes to have relationship with her on a personal level and to give an inheritance of his Kingdom to her.

The third biblical reference compares God as a heavenly Father to earthly fathers. Many respondents who chose Father reflected on their own experiences of an earthly father and presented God's fatherhood as the ideal against which no earthly father could compete. For Ian, his positive experience of an earthly father 'is very symbolic of the one God has with me and I have with him, that it's not a kind of ritual and it's not regulated but it's just kind of

⁶³⁹ Darren, 23rd October 2012

⁶⁴⁰ Julie, 7th November 2012

father-son'.⁶⁴¹ For others, their negative experience of their earthly father meant that, as Kathleen recalls, 'I've had to learn not to compare him to my earthly father but to look at what scripture says about him'.⁶⁴² Jesus' words in Matthew 7:7-11 are recalled by Laura when she explains about God's desire to give his children good things:

I just think it's more about relationship and he is the one like in the Bible it says the father on earth they want to give all the best to their children. How about our heavenly Father? But the father on earth, even though they want to give the best to their children sometimes they do not have the ability or they don't know what the best is for their children. You know the world keeps changing. But for heavenly Father we think he is willing to give us what the best is and he is able to give and he knows what is best.⁶⁴³

Therefore God as Father is seen to be the perfect archetype of a good earthly father. His relationship with His children is personal, loving, unconditional and generous. For the believer, their identity as God's child means that they have access to and are accepted by God and will be given an inheritance of gifts and his Kingdom. Adoption into God's family and a renewed identity as his child, is received by faith at initial conversion.

6.3.2.2 Saviour

From the respondents' descriptions, the role of Saviour is typically attributed to Jesus' death on the cross. As Julie has already suggested, Jesus' role as Saviour made possible her relationship with God, the Father. Naomi explains:

Well first and foremost he is our saviour because that's what makes our relationship possible with him, because he forgives our sin and we can enter into a personal relationship.⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴¹ Ian, 27th November 2012

⁶⁴² Kathleen, 20th December 2012

⁶⁴³ Laura, 10th January 2013

⁶⁴⁴ Naomi, 15th February 2013

Christopher describes this process further by exploring the reason why he believes sin gets in the way of relationship with God and the role of Jesus' death on the cross in the salvation process:

Jesus has really opened my eyes to the way of the world and the worldly pleasures do not satisfy, they don't fulfil. They're just trying to hinder me from his love and everything that he has for me. He wants to prosper me but the enemy was placing such things in the way to block me but you know when he died, that power of his blood ransomed me. That's what set me free and that's what brought about salvation. When I think of Saviour, I think of the crucifixion and the spilling of his blood.⁶⁴⁵

Christopher became a Christian as an adult and describes his situation prior to his initial conversion by saying, 'I was lost in sin, dead in sin, I was broken and I had nothing'.⁶⁴⁶ His relationship with God is closely attributed to the freedom from sin he believes he experienced when he became a Christian. However, those who became Christians as children do not appear to be any less thankful for their relationship to their Saviour, despite a lack of a 'sinful' life prior to conversion. Eric, who was raised in a Pentecostal home and made a personal decision at the age of nine, describes the ongoing necessity for a Saviour in the Christian life, not just forgiveness of sins prior to conversion:

I think I also understand that he's not just the saviour because at a point he was my saviour, I got saved from my sin but he's constantly saving me...He's saving me from engaging with sin that will damage me as well as saving me from the effects of sin.⁶⁴⁷

There is an emphasis here on the belief that salvation is not just a once and for all event at conversion but that it is something that is necessary for the whole life of the believer.

6.3.2.3 Faithful

The word Faithful was described by most respondents in terms of the secure knowledge of God's constant presence, help and guidance. For some, God's faithfulness began prior to

⁶⁴⁵ Christopher, 22nd October 2012

⁶⁴⁶ Christopher, 22nd October 2012

⁶⁴⁷ Eric, 21st November 2012

their conversion and for others it was a result of their decision to follow Jesus. A constant theme for those who chose this word is the comfort of this knowledge in difficult times.

Gareth explains:

‘Faithful’ maybe I probably chose that word I think, thinking of the ups and downs and the dark moments and thinking actually God is faithful, has been faithful in all of that. Faithful in the sense of consistent, faithful to his word, to himself, something about constancy, the consistency, reliable image of God.⁶⁴⁸

This belief in the faithfulness of God is a source of trust for many respondents when they feel distant from God or are going through difficult times. It is their belief in his consistency which allows them to trust in his promises and trust that he is with them even when they cannot feel his presence. Laura explains:

He is faithful so we can trust him, we can trust that he loves us, we can trust that he knows what is best for us, we know he is willing to give the best to us and we know even when we are in the darkness we cannot see him but we know he is faithful and he will fulfil what he promised – what he said. So I think that is also the important thing we can hold onto and we can cling to, especially in a difficult situation.⁶⁴⁹

This faithfulness seems to manifest itself through; kept promises, guidance, answered questions, healings, protection, unconditional love and presence. Furthermore, there is a sense that faithfulness is a two-way expectation of the believer’s relationship with God.

Adam finds that God’s faithfulness challenges him to be faithful and obedient to God:

The interesting thing is that because He knows me and because He’s in a relationship with me, whilst I know he won’t mess up, he doesn’t mind if I do. He knows I’m going to mess up, he knows before I do that I’m going to mess up but he’s still faithful, there for me always and he does want me to respond faithfully to Him and I will try to respond always faithfully to Him. Even if he knows I’m trying to do it he’ll love me.⁶⁵⁰

The connection between faithfulness and conversion is that, even when it is believed that God may have been exercising his faithfulness prior to the decision of faith, it is only through

⁶⁴⁸ Gareth, 27th November 2012

⁶⁴⁹ Laura, 10th January 2013

⁶⁵⁰ Adam, 2nd October 2012

being a Christian and having a relationship with Him that respondents believe they can truly understand and appreciate it, draw hope from it and can respond faithfully to God. Belief in God's faithfulness appears to be a kind of security which is acquired along with the Christian life. It sees believers through difficult times and good times, particularly when the experiential side of faith may be lacking.

6.3.2.4 Lord

Of the thirteen respondents who chose the word Lord or King,⁶⁵¹ nine also chose Father and the juxtaposition between the two was commented upon by those who chose them.

'Lord', I think that goes back to reverence. That's almost juxtaposing Father. So it's majesty, all powerful but still relational as a father. He cares about you; he's not an angry man in the sky. So, ruler and father. I was torn between that one and King, sort of interchangeable really.⁶⁵²

The appeal of God as Father was not the same without the knowledge that he is also Lord of the universe. This not only defines God but gives an identity to the believer in relation to him and gives their life and destiny a more universal context. Eric explains that a knowledge of God's Lordship helps to keep his relationship with God as Father and Friend in focus:

To me, amid all of that relational stuff, there's a sense of otherness about God or a sense of authority about God in my world and my life. I realise I'm under his governance, his rule, none of those things conflict with me because he's a tender Lord, he's a comforting, strengthening Lord but to me I recognise that he has the right over my life. I surrendered the rights of my life to him and my greatest battles and struggles. When somehow I want to retain rights and the greatest freedom I have is in recognising he has utter control over me, he can do with me what he wills because what he wills is always good for me.⁶⁵³

⁶⁵¹ I include King here because most respondents who chose Lord commented that they chose that over King because 'King' is encompassed in the word 'Lord'. Therefore there is a very close connection for respondents. Only one individual chose King who did not choose Lord.

⁶⁵² Frank, 21st November 2012

⁶⁵³ Eric, 21st November 2012

Being a Christian, then, involves more than just entering into a personal relationship with God but also recognising his authority and, as Eric put it, surrendering the rights of one's life to him. Paula identifies God's Lordship as an aspect of his character she is most challenged by in her relationship with Him:

Something I'm striving to have more of is to come under his Lordship. You know when you read the bible and you read it again and you get like a revelation and there's a verse in John that says, "if you love me you will obey my commands" and I thought it's so easy to say "we love Lord, we love God" but do I obey his commands? So it's something I really want God – I prayed at one point to pinpoint things in my life that really need addressing, so his Lordship.⁶⁵⁴

Lord can also be viewed in connection with Faithful in the sense that it is by his Lordship that God's faithfulness and his promises mean something. If God were not Lord over everything, then believers could not be confident in his consistency, his unfailing faithfulness and that he will keep his promises. As Jack puts it, only the Lord of the universe has the power to quiet the waters of life.⁶⁵⁵ Furthermore, the word 'master' is linked closely with Lord and some respondents recognised themselves as servants in relation to God as Lord. This means obedience to his commands, respect and reverence to him but also that he will protect and provide for his servants.

6.3.3 The role of the Holy Spirit and conversion

It's something which you – can't necessarily be defined in that way because the Spirit is a person. He's someone that has a heart, that can be grieved, he's jealous – that brings joy and comfort.⁶⁵⁶

The Holy Spirit is presented by respondents as a person rather than an entity or force. He is mentioned throughout their life stories; prior to, during and after conversion. As I have

⁶⁵⁴ Paula, 20th February 2013. She is referring to John 14:15 during Jesus' farewell discourse to his disciples before promising the Holy Spirit. He says "If you love me, keep my commands. And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever – the Spirit of truth." (v. 15-17a (NIV))

⁶⁵⁵ Jack, 5th December 2012

⁶⁵⁶ Hannah, 18th October 2012

explained, the Spirit is considered by many to be a vital part of ‘real’ Christianity and as Jack stated, ‘without the Holy Spirit, my Christian life is incomplete’.⁶⁵⁷ This raises the question of the role that the Spirit was perceived by respondents to play in the conversion process and their Christian formation.

After respondents had given their testimonies and we had discussed their experiences in more depth, I asked ‘what role has the Holy Spirit played in your life’, encouraging them to reflect specifically on the Spirit’s role in their personal experiences. In this section I outline the responses to this question and also compare them with their references to the Spirit from other parts of their testimonies. In particular I wish to discover what relevance the Spirit has for them in the process of conversion.

When discussing their testimonies, respondents language concerning the role of the Holy Spirit was relatively unspecific, referring to the Spirit moving, ministering and working in people’s lives with little explanation as to what that means or looks like in practice. The majority of references to the Spirit’s work focussed on spiritual encounters and people being filled with the Spirit, using terms such as ‘encounter’ and ‘filling’ more regularly. However, when they were actively encouraged to reflect on their own experiences of the Spirit, their responses became much more specific and reflected a more developmental and gentle role, with a greater range of terms such as ‘encouraging’, ‘guidance’, ‘giving wisdom’, ‘helping to know Jesus/God/Scripture’ and ‘indwelling’ being more prominent.

When prompted to reflect on their own personal experience, the language used by respondents became more diverse and unique to each person. The main difference between respondents’ references to the Spirit in their testimonies, and their prompted reflections on his role, is that the attention in the latter moves away from the focus on spiritual experience and

⁶⁵⁷ Jack, 5th December 2012

manifestations reflected in the former, to guidance and wisdom. The former reflects a more general discussion of what the Holy Spirit is believed to do generally and the latter reflects the particular role he has played personally.

Respondents' testimonies reiterated the Pentecostal belief that the Spirit lives in the believer when they become a Christian and there are believed to be subsequent experiences of his power and outworking throughout their Christian life. However, the respondents' reflected-upon theology of the Spirit's continued work in their life reveals the importance for them of his overall guidance, wisdom, connection with God and protective presence rather than outward manifestations and dramatic encounters.

For a couple of respondents, the presence of the Spirit in their life is a proof of their salvation and their relationship with God. Eric, who is theologically trained, presented a biblical reflection on the role of the Spirit in his life:

He indwells me, he has done since the moment I surrendered my life to salvation. He is the one who is the seal of the deposit, guaranteeing my eternal salvation.⁶⁵⁸

Although in less formal theological language, Doreen referred to the Spirit as being 'this wonderful confirmation that you belong to Him'.⁶⁵⁹ Both of these sentiments are echoes of Ephesians 1:13-14, which reads:

And you also were included in Christ when you heard the message of truth, the gospel of your salvation. When you believed, you were marked in him with a seal, the promised Holy Spirit, who is a deposit guaranteeing our inheritance until the redemption of those who are God's possession – to the praise of his glory.⁶⁶⁰

This presents the Spirit's role in conversion not only as evidence of salvation and of the believer's belonging to God but also as an eschatological promise.

⁶⁵⁸ Eric, 21st November 2012

⁶⁵⁹ Doreen, 3rd October 2012

⁶⁶⁰ NIV

While some identified the Spirit's protection and guidance, prior to their conversion, it is only through the hindsight brought about by their current faith that they can see his activity. What comes from respondents' answers is that being a Christian invites the Spirit of God into their life, makes them aware of and open to the Spirit's guidance, his revelation of God and scripture to them, and to actively participate in his work in their Christian development. Finally, the Spirit's indwelling at the initial moment of faith is believed to be a promise for the future, that the believer will receive an inheritance at the end of time.

6.4 Conclusion

In this chapter I have presented my analysis of 30 interviews conducted with members of LCF regarding their experiences of God. The findings have raised a number of issues regarding their ordinary beliefs and experiences of conversion from a whole life perspective. These findings not only provide the basis for a practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion, but also offer insights into how respondents retell their conversion stories, and what they believe happens to them, or is gained, when they come to faith.

Firstly, I observed that while Rambo's stages could be clearly identified from the testimonies given, this was primarily because his stages match a typical narrative life story structure. If someone were telling the story of how they met their spouse, I suggest that the same stages would be present. Furthermore, while certain stages were mentioned by respondents, it did not mean that they were considered important or theologically significant.

For example, rituals and progressive stages are not presented as personally significant to the respondents. Rather the fact of salvation (encompassing new birth and forgiveness of sins), identity and relationship with God are important. The fact that respondents identify as Spirit-

filled, and how that plays out in their life, is more important than the questions surrounding Spirit baptism, when and whether it has occurred. Their identity as children of God is more important than denominational labels. The fact that they recognise themselves as saved, new creations is more important than the events leading up to that salvation. Initial conversion is seen to impact their whole life and it is acknowledged that it can take a lifetime to fully comprehend what God achieves in the individual at this moment. For many, their initial decision of faith marked the beginning of a series of subsequent ‘conversions’ involving turning towards God, encountering him and being transformed as a result. For those who became a Christian as a child, left the church and subsequently returned, their second experience of turning to God was a life changing experience of conversion, even though they were already saved.

Secondly, the common themes running throughout the interviews tend to be associated with what is believed to be achieved at the moment of conversion and which continues into the Christian life. God is seen by some to work in the pre-converted life through the Spirit, leading them to conversion, as a protector, in guidance and in orchestrating events for their good. At initial conversion, relationship with God is made possible through the forgiveness of sins and they are free to participate in God’s divine life and the destiny God has in store for them. A new identity is formed by relationship with God, which is confirmed and empowered by the Holy Spirit. The main role of the Holy Spirit in their stories is his indwelling presence; received in the initial moment of faith and providing guidance, connection with God and development through their Christian life.

In the next chapter, these themes will be evaluated within the context of ecclesial theology of conversion and wider academic discourse and I reach the thesis of this study. I propose that Pentecostal conversion can be best understood theologically in terms of the biblical concept of

shalom and offer a practical-theological model of Pentecostal conversion from within this framework.

CHAPTER SEVEN

***SHALOM*, THE SPIRIT AND PENTECOSTAL CONVERSION:**

A PROPOSED PRACTICAL-THEOLOGICAL MODEL

7.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I propose a practical-theological model which frames my empirical findings within the biblical concept of *shalom*, to describe and explain LCF's theology of conversion. This is based on the main themes identified from the empirical data, in dialogue at all three levels of discourse; ordinary, ecclesial and academic. It seeks to restore the balance between theology and praxis missing from existing models of conversion. This model is practical-theological in that it encompasses both the congregational beliefs about conversion and also the practical implications for the life of the believer, framed within the broader theological construct of *shalom*.

The aim of this study has been to identify and critically analyse a Pentecostal theology of conversion from empirical data gathered from LCF. I have approached this aim from the starting point of the theological reflection of ordinary Pentecostal believers about their own experiences of conversion as well as their beliefs about what it means to be and become a Christian, within their ecclesial context. In this chapter, I expound an understanding of Pentecostal conversion in terms of the biblical concept *shalom*, arguing this is the most helpful model for understanding Pentecostal experiences and theology of conversion.

In the pages that follow, I will explore in detail the different dimensions of *shalom* expressed within LCF's theology of conversion, and the connection between *shalom*, conversion and the Holy Spirit. However beforehand, it is necessary for me to clearly introduce the term *shalom* as a concept chosen by me as the researcher, as an appropriate overarching theological term to

best describe and explain the conversion theology uncovered at LCF. I wish to make clear that it is not a term that has been uttered by any of the respondents to this study, nor has it been used in any of the sermons preached over the research period. Despite the congregation's silence regarding the word itself, to my mind the meanings encapsulated within this Hebrew concept have clearly permeated the language and experiences of the congregation.

Chapter Six displays the wealth of experiences and beliefs from individuals who each profess to be a follower of Jesus. However, among the variety of histories and life experiences, there emerge common themes: restoration of relationship with God, Spiritual awakening, freedom from sin, adoption into a family, receiving a new identity and becoming part of a wider destiny ordained by God.⁶⁶¹ These themes speak of conversion bringing about a state of being to the individual, which God originally intended for humanity. The language of restoration, liberation and a sense of being made whole brought to my mind an Old Testament term, which is often translated as 'peace' but I had also heard referred to as 'wholeness'; *shalom*. The further I looked into the rich meaning of the word, and in particular its application in Christian theological texts, the more it enveloped and connected the words that the congregation at LCF had been using.

Although the congregation of LCF does not explicitly use the Hebrew word *shalom* to define its experiences, it is clear to me that the concept is interwoven throughout their experiences, their testimonies and their teaching. It is for this reason that I use *shalom* as the term through which to describe and explain my model of Pentecostal conversion.

At this stage I must also define my uses of 'salvation' and 'shalom' as distinct terms, although they will appear similar or even synonymous to some. I am attempting to present the concept

⁶⁶¹ See section 7.2.1 on page 255 for more detailed definitions of *shalom*.

of *shalom* and conversion in language that will resonate with ordinary believers. I use the term ‘salvation’ as it is used by the congregation and in Classical Pentecostalism traditionally, in terms of salvation from and forgiveness of sin. I have referred throughout this thesis to the call in academic theology away from this narrow view of salvation and towards a more relational definition. However, for many ordinary believers, ‘salvation’ is a reference to God’s forgiveness of their sins and their new life. Therefore, although many of the elements found within *shalom* would be recognised by some academics as elements of salvation, I am using the term ‘salvation’ as it is understood at an ecclesial and ordinary level, with *shalom* encompassing this view of salvation as well as the wider elements, such as right relationship with God, which some academics might label under salvation.⁶⁶² This offers ecclesial and ordinary levels the opportunity to view the work of God in conversion holistically and broadly, without undergoing the process of re-defining words which are commonly used in a more narrow sense.⁶⁶³

As the findings from this study are engaged in dialogue at all three levels of discourse, the proposed model of conversion speaks to a much broader situation than just the congregation it comes from. With this in mind, in this chapter I contribute an understanding of conversion as *shalom*, as a result of exploring Pentecostal conversion from an empirical-theological standpoint and built upon a foundation of experiences and theological reflection at ground level.

⁶⁶² Hollenweger, W.J. *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) p.256 talks about Miroslav Volf’s three dimensions of salvation, viewed as: personal-spiritual, individual-physical and socioeconomic, calling for soteriology to more accurately represent Pentecostal experience of ‘being freed from fear...and the experience of liberation and becoming a human person’; see also Pinnock’s challenge for salvation to move beyond a narrow soteriology of justification and to include loving relationship with God and participation in the divine life (Pinnock, C.H. *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1996) pp.149-183)

⁶⁶³ Redefinition may come later but for the purposes of this thesis I wish to use language which I feel will resonate with ecclesial and ordinary discourse from the outset.

7.1.1 Summary and discussion of findings

I begin in this section by summarising the conclusions made from the literature and theory discussed in *chapters two, three and four*. Then I draw the empirical findings, outlined in *chapters five and six*, into dialogue with one another for comparison and the identification of common themes. It is these theological themes and their practical application in the lives of respondents, in dialogue with Pentecostal theological scholarship where necessary, that inform the practical-theological model of conversion.

Summary of theory and theology

In *chapter two* I outlined the significance and usefulness of using an inductive version of van der Ven's empirical-theological cycle for a study of Pentecostal conversion theology. As such, it began with inductive collection of qualitative data, which I then subjected to situational and theological analysis in order to develop theory and finally offer recommendations at an academic and ecclesial level. I used ethnographic research methods within an embedded case study of an Elim Pentecostal congregation (the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship or LCF) in order to collect empirical data at each of Cartledge's three levels of theological discourse. From the analysis of this data I aimed to build a practical-theological model of LCF's conversion theology, starting from the practical experiences and ordinary reflections of the research population.

I conducted an initial literature review in order to locate the subject of Pentecostal conversion within the empirical and the theological literature. From this I identified Rambo's seven-stage model as the most appropriate framework to ensure that this study covered the respondents' experiences and theology of conversion across their whole life. I then collected material from the congregation through participant observation, in-depth interviews, and

ecclesial literature before analysing the interview transcripts to reveal themes. These themes were then used to build a theoretical model in light of the congregational literature and finally in light of a second, more in depth review of the empirical and theological conversion literature.

From the social sciences literature surveyed in *chapter three*, I concluded that empirical conversion studies typically overlook the theological aspect of conversion, with social, mental and other external influences taking precedence over what people believe happens to them in converting and the perceived role of God in the process. It became clear to me that the current, prominent paradigm for conversion is a stage-model or whole life approach, which presents conversion as an on-going process throughout the course of one's life. Despite this, I noted that Pentecostal conversion has been, and continues to be viewed in human sciences as linked with a stereotypical "Damascus road" motif, which assumes conversion as an experiential or mystical *event*. Studies from these disciplines, which focus on Pentecostal or Charismatic groups, appear to overlook the modern paradigm for conversion as a *process*.

In *chapter four* I explored the Pentecostal-charismatic theological literature on the topic of conversion, organised according to Rambo's stages. This revealed that Pentecostal theology overlooks the gradual seeking side of the process pre-conversion and appears to support the human sciences' view of Pentecostal conversion as an event. However there is a recognition of seeking and development throughout the Christian life post-conversion. This chapter highlighted a need for a Pentecostal theology of conversion to contribute to understanding not only for the time of conversion and Christian formation, but also pre-conversion, in the development of a Pentecostal inter-religious dialogue and dialogue with atheists, agnostics and post-Christians, as well as de-conversion, by understanding the perceived role of God in the lives of those who have lost their faith. The literature surveyed attributes the Holy Spirit's

role predominantly to guidance towards faith, indwelling at regeneration, Spirit baptism and discipleship.

Discussion of findings

In *chapter five* I lay the ground work for my congregational case study by placing LCF in its local community and its broader national context. I found that potential converts can come from a range of sources, namely: other religions, atheism, agnosticism, post-Christianity, nominal Christianity and other Christian denominations. LCF's beliefs about what makes someone live a full Christian life is that one must be born again and Spirit-filled. I then explored the practices of LCF in relation to conversion and discovered that they place a great emphasis on: adult baptism as a public declaration of faith, the opportunity for people to make a decision to follow Christ during services, meeting practical needs in their local community as a means of sharing the gospel, and developing believers' understanding and faith through discipleship in small groups. The method of conversion as advocated during their sermons is a simple prayer of repentance and acceptance of Jesus as saviour. This is believed to bring about forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family but, as the follow up 'new Christian' packs attest, this is not considered to be the finish point of conversion. The process of Christian formation involves an individual relationship with God but it is closely associated with and finds its meaning in the community of believers.

Through my analysis of LCF's teaching, I identified their use of four main themes to explain and describe conversion: new life, entering a personal relationship with God, being a Spirit-filled Christian and maintaining or reconfirming faith during difficult times. They emphasise being a Christian as a whole life process rather than just the result of a one-time salvific event. Their teaching places importance not only on how to become a Christian but also how to maintain faith and to recommit to God when faith is lacking. This reveals an

acknowledgement at congregational level that a Christian's intensity of faith and affiliation can change over the course of their life.

My findings from the ordinary theology presented in *chapter six* largely support the findings from participant observation and ecclesial literature. Respondents' interpretation and retelling of their conversion stories were not focussed on stages and rituals so much as the underlying realities and changes to their life. New birth was the main motivation for some people's conversions and it is clearly an image used by most to understand their experiences, however it is not the only dominant aspect of their theology. The present study supports Pinnock's view that salvation, and conversion as a whole, is experienced as relational and concerned with union with God primarily, not just about forgiveness of sins.⁶⁶⁴

Three main things are believed to happen objectively in the life of the believer at this time, they are: (1) born again and forgiven from their past sins (regeneration),⁶⁶⁵ (2) adopted into God's family and the Holy Spirit came to dwell in them (identity), and (3) called toward a future inheritance and to fulfil God's purposes for their life (destiny). All three were found within the teaching at LCF and, although all were present themes throughout the interviews, most respondents tended to focus on one or two rather than all three in their personal experience. It is fair to say that at the time of conversion, no respondent had a full and complete understanding of the gospel, the theological implications of their beliefs or a doctrinal statement to sign. They were often responding to a simple desire to know God

⁶⁶⁴ Pinnock, *Flame of Love*, p.150. Pinnock highlights the common association between salvation and justification, as forgiveness of sins. Due to the similar association between conversion and salvation, conversion is also often referred to in terms of justification.

⁶⁶⁵ Although forgiveness of sins is more commonly referred to at LCF as 'salvation', I have included it under the heading of 'regeneration' here because the moment of new birth is believed to happen simultaneously to justification and therefore the two terms are closely linked in the congregation's language. I do not mean to deny the distinction between salvation and regeneration, but for the purposes of simplicity I have included them under the umbrella dimension of regeneration.

better and let him into their life. A more complete appreciation of doctrines, theology and rituals would develop later, although never fully in this life.

In this chapter I reach the crux of the study by proposing a practical-theological model of conversion developed from and combining the major themes underlying the ordinary and ecclesial theology of LCF and their experiences of conversion, in dialogue with academic theology. I then outline the particular roles placed on the Holy Spirit within the model of LCF's theology of conversion, before outlining the significance of this model to conversion studies in general and Pentecostal theology specifically, and addressing possible critiques. First, I will assess the usefulness of Rambo's model as a framework for studying Pentecostal conversion.

7.1.2 Compatibility with Rambo's model

While this study does not aim to test Rambo's stage model in light of Pentecostal conversion, it would be an oversight not to reflect on its usefulness having employed it as a framework. I found the following positive and negative outcomes from using Rambo's seven stage model in the study of Pentecostal conversion at the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship.

Firstly, as a framework, Rambo's model proved to be a valuable way to explore and present Pentecostal theology of conversion through a broad lens. If I had explored conversion as Pentecostal theologians might define it, then my definition would have been forced into a narrow soteriological view. Instead, a long term stage-model framework allowed for not only the decision of faith to be explored but also the moments leading up to the decision, the immediate and long term results and the affect that the believer's theology of conversion has on their Christian life.

Secondly, exploring theological scholarship in light of a predominantly social sciences model shed light on the priorities and focus of current Pentecostal-Charismatic scholarship. Using the seven-stage model to frame the literature highlighted that most current Pentecostal scholarship overlooks particularly the seeker stages of *quest* and *interaction*, and focuses more attention on religious encounter and advocacy through mission activities. Perhaps more Pentecostal theological areas should be viewed through a relevant framework from the human science disciplines occasionally in order to take stock and highlight any aspects of the human element, which may have historically been overlooked in the quest for theoretical theological rigour.

Finally, Rambo's stage model was beneficial in framing interview data collection for this study of conversion as it helped to trace what happened during someone's conversion process; the steps they went through, the linear pattern and development of their change in faith. However, I concluded from the data analysis that presenting conversion solely in stages does not contribute towards revealing what is believed theologically about the process as a whole.⁶⁶⁶ Therefore a deeper level of enquiry is required in order to see beyond the practical stages of the conversion narrative to identify the convert's underlying beliefs. Rambo's model, treated as a loose framework for empirical-theological enquiry, was vital to ensuring that the entirety of the conversion process was recorded in order to then look deeper to identify the ordinary theology contained within.

Adaptations of Rambo for the UK Pentecostal context

This study has allowed for the particular situation of Pentecostalism in the UK to inform and adapt Rambo's model in three main ways. Firstly, in chapter five I adapted Rambo's five-fold

⁶⁶⁶ All seven of Rambo's stages were represented in the testimonies of interview respondents. However, I do not consider this to be remarkable as the stages represent a typical narrative structure, and I would expect them to be present in most narratives detailing change, e.g. acquiring a new job or new relationship.

typology for conversion by adding a sixth category of *renewal*. Secondly, I highlighted in chapter four that it is crucial in a Pentecostal approach to conversion for the *encounter* stage to include divine-human encounter as well as advocates. Thirdly, I expanded Rambo's categories of context to include *meta-context*, which primarily involves, for Pentecostals, the overarching biblical story into which believers are seen to enter by their faith. Further studies using Rambo as a data collection framework will undoubtedly adapt and shape his typology further. This does suggest that a universal stage model, broad and inclusive as Rambo's stage model is, will always be changed by the particularity of different conversion contexts.

7.2 A proposed practical theological model for Pentecostal conversion theology

Having summarised and discussed the initial findings of this study, as well as assessing the usefulness of Rambo's stage-model, I now propose a practical-theological model to explain LCF's conversion theology and related praxis.⁶⁶⁷ A model is defined broadly by Barbour as 'a symbolic representation of selected aspects of the behaviour or a complex system for particular purposes'.⁶⁶⁸ He specifies that it is an *imaginative*, rather than *descriptive* tool. Barbour is correct in highlighting the imaginative element; as a model is a simplification of a real-world system, it cannot describe the reality in full and therefore imagination is required. However, I argue that my model acts to describe and explain Pentecostal conversion, particularly through its imaginative aspects. As the use of models is familiar in theology as well as the social sciences, a model is an appropriate means of expressing the conversion theology of LCF. While the data collection method was loosely framed on Rambo's model,

⁶⁶⁷ See Fig. 7.1, page 274

⁶⁶⁸ Barbour, I.G. *Myths, Models and Paradigms: Nature of Scientific and Religious Language*, (London: SCM Press, 1974) p.3

the resulting theory is centred on themes and beliefs rather than stages and therefore offers a theological reconstruction of Rambo's model.⁶⁶⁹

The model emerged from the empirical data presented in chapters five and six. It presents a simplification of the complex levels of beliefs and praxis in order to better understand the congregation's practical theology of conversion. This model answers the question of what is believed to happen normatively at conversion and the affect of these beliefs on the Christian life after conversion. It moves beyond what happens: the stages, causes and effects; to what the believer sees changes in them and their relationship with God. This study has also raised the following important distinctions about conversion from LCF's perspective: (1) initial conversion can be seen in holistic terms as bringing wholeness in different dimensions of life, (2) response to this wholeness informs and motivates the rest of one's Christian life, (3) conversion is seen to be more than a moment of salvation, and (4) individual conversion has ecclesial and eschatological implications. It is from these criteria, derived from the empirical data collected from LCF, that my exposition of the below model is based.

Respondents' testimonies revealed beliefs about what was received through their initial conversion and, although different people focussed on different areas and the focus appeared to change throughout their faith journey, I identified three main themes, of which one or more were raised repeatedly and in some form, within each testimony. These three themes were then viewed in light of the sermon and participant observation data and the same themes could be found being taught and reinforced at ecclesial level, although presented in a more idealised and normative way. The new believer is seen to receive wholeness from God in three main dimensions at the time of this decision: regeneration, identity and destiny. For many

⁶⁶⁹ These themes and beliefs would not have emerged without the use of Rambo's stage model as a framework for data collection. Therefore a practical-theological model by no means negates the importance of a stage model, but rather places the stage model as an initial step on the road to understanding the beliefs surrounding conversion.

respondents, their confidence in their regeneration, identity and destiny had to develop over time following initial conversion, particularly if the moment of decision was not accompanied by a dramatically observable transformation or crisis moment. In the section that follows I explain my use of the Old Testament concept *shalom* as a helpful, overarching image for understanding Pentecostal conversion, before unpacking the three particular dimensions where this *shalom* is seen to be brought according to the findings of this study.⁶⁷⁰

7.2.1 *Shalom* and the Spirit

Throughout the Pentecostal movement, God's work in conversion has often been explained within the language of healing and liberation from sin. These themes are global aspects of the Pentecostal movement and I would suggest that Pentecostal spirituality as a whole has been caught up in these two concepts; both as a present reality and as an eschatological hope. I found that this idea of conversion as a restoring of something to a state which God originally intended is in keeping with the experiences and theology of LCF. However, healing and liberation alone do not encompass the relational element expressed throughout this study.⁶⁷¹

In order to find a more holistic metaphor I turn to Schreiter's explanation that 'healing, as a return to wholeness, is one of the most visible practices of the Pentecostal faith, and can be seen as a quest for wholeness'.⁶⁷² I propose that this idea of wholeness, or *shalom*, is a more appropriate concept and a suitably holistic lens through which to frame a Pentecostal understanding of conversion, while encompassing these other terms, which are perhaps more familiar to Pentecostal readers. As a Hebrew word, *shalom* does not have a direct translation

⁶⁷⁰ It is more common now to refer to the Hebrew Bible rather than the Old Testament, but I use the more Christian name to distinguish from the New Testament and also because this view of Shalom is framed within the Christian context.

⁶⁷¹ Relationship with God is crucial to the conversion experiences of Pentecostals and therefore a metaphor to explain their experience must be relational.

⁶⁷² Schreiter, R.J. "The Debate on Globalization and its Effects on Religion and Theology" in *Reshaping Protestantism in a Global Context*, ed. by Küster, V. (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2009) 21-34 (p.33)

in English. It is commonly translated as “peace” when in fact it encompasses a much broader range of meanings:

‘Shalom in the Hebrew Bible connotes fullness, wholeness of well-being, the vital flourishing of all things in right relationships – with God, humanity, and nature at large. Shalom describes God’s intention for creation and God’s promise for the new creation’.⁶⁷³

This gives shalom its meaning through the whole of time, starting with creation and reaching completion in the ‘new creation’. It is also defined as ‘wholeness, completeness, well-being, peace, justice, salvation and even prosperity’,⁶⁷⁴ or ‘the peace resulting from God sharing with humankind God’s own justice, mercy, brotherly/sisterly love, and creative freedom’.⁶⁷⁵ From these definitions I particularly draw attention to the idea of *shalom* as God’s original plan for creation and his promise for the new creation as this has particular implications for conversion.

In a Christian context, it has been said that it was Christ’s work ‘in restoring *shalom*, the “peace” or wholeness and well-being of creation, which has become chaotic and violent through the power of sin’.⁶⁷⁶ Therefore *shalom* is inextricable from sin (in Hebrew thought chaos and disorder) and, for Christians, the work of the cross. Walter Brueggeman argues that *shalom* was the foundation of Christ’s actions on earth also. Through Christ’s life, death and resurrection, *shalom* was restored and made available to those who are ‘in Christ’, expressed predominantly through freedom and unity. Brueggeman argues that the Church is called to live out *shalom* as a balance between freedom and unity in the same way Christ did. As Brueggeman’s book *Peace* presents one of the few explorations of *shalom* for a Christian

⁶⁷³ Plantinga, R.J., Thompson, T.R. and Lundberg, M.D. *Introduction to Christian Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) p.599

⁶⁷⁴ Swartley, W.M. “The Relation of Justice/Righteousness to *Shalom/Eirene*” *Ex Auditu*, 22 (2006) 29-53 (p.29)

⁶⁷⁵ Barbour, C.M. “Seeking Justice and Shalom in the City” *International Review of Mission*, 73(291) (1984) 303-309 (p.303)

⁶⁷⁶ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, p.264

context, it is with this work that I will critically engage and adapt in light of my own interpretation of *shalom* for Pentecostal conversion.⁶⁷⁷

If *shalom* is God's promise for the new creation (in eschatological terms), then it is also a promise for the 'new creation' of the converted believer. In Pentecostal thought new birth is inextricable from the act of being 'born of the Spirit' and the indwelling of the Spirit and so *shalom* and the Spirit should be viewed as deeply connected terms. The moment *shalom* is restored in the individual, at the time of initial faith, is concurrent with the reception of the Spirit. Yong describes a community whereby *shalom* is realised as a 'Spirit-inspired people of God':

Herein will the sick find their healing, perhaps not necessarily in bodily cures but certainly in and through their integration in reconciling, caring and welcoming communities. Herein also will the gospel of prosperity find its penultimate fulfilment, perhaps not necessarily in affluence and material wealth but certainly in and through the sufficiency of mutual, sharing, and generous communities of faith.⁶⁷⁸

If Christ's life was marked by *shalom*, then so too is the life of the believer who is filled with the same Spirit.⁶⁷⁹ The Spirit is connected to *shalom* from the first act of *shalom* in Genesis, when the Spirit of God hovered over the dark and formless waters before the chaos was brought into order.⁶⁸⁰

I propose then that we view initial conversion as the impartation of *shalom* in the life of the believer through the Spirit. This impartation removes the chaos and disorder of sin and brings

⁶⁷⁷ See also Swartley, "The Relation of Justice/Righteousness" 29-53 for a comparison between *shalom* in the Old and New Testament and its connection to Justice/Righteousness; and Swinton, J. *From Bedlam to Shalom: Towards a Practical Theology of Human Nature, Interpersonal Relationships, and Mental Health Care* (New York, NY: Lang, 1999) for a picture of mental health care within a church community setting as an outworking of *shalom* for a Christian context.

⁶⁷⁸ Yong, A. *In the Days of Caesar: Pentecostalism and Political Theology*, (Michigan: W.B. Eerdmann, 2010) p.310-1

⁶⁷⁹ See Brueggeman, W. *Peace* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001); while Brueggeman does not mention the Spirit at length in his work, he does focus a great deal on Jesus' life as being an outworking of *shalom* and a model for the Christian Church today.

⁶⁸⁰ Genesis 1:2 (NIV); see Brueggeman, *Peace*, pp.15-16

wholeness, well-being and right relationship with God to the believer. With this, comes the potential in the believer to extend God's *shalom*, in relation to other people and to creation, 'enabling the harmonious quality of that shalom to characterize the lives of those who work for Christ's kingdom in anticipation of its full eschatological realization'.⁶⁸¹

Although conversion is predominantly considered in individualistic terms in the literature, two key elements of *shalom* must be understood in relation to conversion:

1. *Shalom* is, at its heart, relational.⁶⁸² *Shalom* received at initial conversion is believed to restore the believer to right relationship with God and to community. Therefore *shalom* must be considered in ecclesiological terms.
2. *Shalom* is an expression of hope, as it is always awaiting its full realisation in the eschatological Kingdom of God.

I argue that for Pentecostals, conversion is predominantly a restoration to and outworking of *shalom*. It is not limited to a "classical" Pentecostal view of salvation, although this is a large part of its meaning, and it calls for response and participation of the believer as a covenant partner in relationship with God. *Shalom* is primarily God's purpose for creation; it is his justice, peace and mercy and it is God who determines and defines what *shalom* is, not culture or society. Therefore relationship and engagement with him are crucial in responding to and communicating *shalom*.⁶⁸³

⁶⁸¹ Plantinga, Thompson, and Lundberg, *Introduction to Christian Theology*, p.265

⁶⁸² Brueggemann refers to the relationship between God and Israel as a covenant of *shalom*. In Hebrew thought the word has always been associated with community.

⁶⁸³ To use destiny as an example, Droogers argues that for Pentecostals 'real human destiny...does not depend on society's norms and views' in Droogers, A. "The Normalization of Religious Experience: Healing, Prophecy, Dreams and Visions" in *Playful Religion: Challenges for the Study of Religion*, ed. by van Harskamp, A. (Delft, Netherlands: Eburon Academic Publishers, 2006) 9-26 (p.22)

From my interviews I have identified three main dimensions where *shalom* is seen to be brought to the converted life. These are: regeneration, identity and destiny.⁶⁸⁴ In the sections that follow I firstly present each of the three dimensions in detail, bringing their presentation and understanding at LCF in dialogue with academic theology. These descriptions should be viewed as ideals; they represent the normative theology pieced together from the worship, preaching and beliefs at different levels in LCF and then informed by academic theology. Throughout these descriptions I will provide examples of the ways that LCF communicate *shalom* at each dimension to those outside and inside the church. Secondly, I explain the potential ways that understanding of and response to *shalom* in different dimensions can impact on the life and faith of the believer. The understanding of and response to *shalom* at each dimension will vary from individual to individual and differ throughout one's lifetime. While I have presented the dimensions as they are understood expressed at LCF, the specific beliefs concerning *shalom* at each dimension may differ from community to community.⁶⁸⁵

LCF teaches that conversion is a personal and individual process between the believer and God, which deeply impacts their life. However in using the concept of *shalom*, God's work in the individual is also inextricable from community and eschatology. Typically, individual testimonies did not reflect in detail on the role of conversion on a community or eschatological level, however, this is a big part of the ecclesial teaching on the subject of conversion and it is evident that part of the responsibility perceived by the leadership is to

⁶⁸⁴ All dimensions are believed to be restored to *shalom* simultaneously at the time of initial faith. The order I present them in is for ease of description based on their connection to each other, rather than referring to any perceived hierarchy or timeline. Also, there is no formulaic order for when each dimension will be recognised and responded to by the believer.

⁶⁸⁵ The most obvious example would be the focus on identity as a child of God. There are other metaphors to describe believer's relationship with God gained at conversion and another congregation may define their identity in a different way.

help individuals understand their own experiences within these much broader contexts.⁶⁸⁶ Therefore, *shalom* at each dimension will also be explored according to its ecclesiological and eschatological implications. I engage theologically with Brueggemann's writings on *shalom* and the Church to inform my findings and also to allow the particular Pentecostal experience to reinterpret Brueggemann with regards the Spirit's role in *shalom* and conversion.

7.2.2 Defining conversion: initial and subsequent conversions

It may have been noted that I have been using the word 'initial' to differentiate between the occasion when someone makes a decision to become a Christian for the first time and any subsequent experiences of transformation. It is worth defining at this point what I mean by the terms 'initial conversion' and 'subsequent conversions'. My findings have revealed that respondents reacted against the word 'conversion' because of an assumed association between the word 'conversion' and a dramatic, one-time event bringing salvation. In reality, their experiences reflected the range of possible conversion types presented by Rambo and the human sciences. Therefore, the narrow understanding of conversion probably comes from within Pentecostalism specifically, and Christianity more broadly, particularly at the academic level although it permeates all three.⁶⁸⁷

If the word 'conversion' is to be used in Pentecostal theology, then it cannot be restricted to the salvation experience alone, as this limits the term to only a Christian context. If conversion means salvation then this causes problems for Christians talking about conversion to another religion, as they do not believe that this will bring salvation. However, the initial

⁶⁸⁶ This belief is presented by Simon Chan, who says the 'new creation is also an eschatological community in that the Spirit who indwells the community is only a 'downpayment' (2 Cor. 1.22; 5.5; Eph. 1.14)' (Chan, S. *Pentecostal Theology and the Christian Spiritual Tradition*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000) p.48-9.

⁶⁸⁷ See McKnight, S. "Was Paul a Convert?" *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 110-132 for a discussion of academic debate over the definition of conversion with relation to Paul's experience on the road to Damascus. McKnight argues that this debate highlights an assumption in academic theology that conversion means a simple and clear movement from one religion to another and critiques this assumption using Rambo's typology.

decision to become a Christian must necessarily be considered as special and distinguished from other conversion experiences within Christianity because this is how salvation, adoption and the Spirit is believed to be received in the first instance, and identification as a saved, Spirit-filled, child of God is of crucial importance for Pentecostal believers.

The human sciences literature has highlighted that conversion can include intensification of already held beliefs as well as movement from one religion to another and therefore an understanding of conversion as *shalom* must take into consideration the reality of ‘conversion’ experiences which are not considered salvific in the “classical” sense. By which I mean that the ‘convert’ has previously been born again, by which they are understood to be ‘saved’ from sin and adopted as God’s child, but that they then have another experience which transforms them, (re)turning them towards God and resulting in new response to *shalom*.

Perhaps this takes us back to the classical Judeo-Christian translation of conversion as ‘turning’ as a helpful working definition for a Pentecostal theology of conversion, in keeping with the metaphor of a faith journey.⁶⁸⁸ The initial conversion experience is a key and crucial turning point of many possible turning points in the Christian life.⁶⁸⁹ For a saved Christian who does not understand their identity as a child of God, the realisation of and response to this for the first time can be a transformative conversion experience.⁶⁹⁰ McKnight highlights

⁶⁸⁸ This idea of conversion as transformation can be seen in Fowler’s definition of conversion in relation to his stages of faith. He defines conversion as ‘a significant recentering of one’s previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one’s life in a new community of interpretation and action’ (Fowler, J.W. *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (London: Harper and Row, 1981) 281-283) Conversion does not always involve physically moving to a new community, however any biographical reconstruction will involve realigning oneself with a ‘new community of interpretation and action’. Fowler argues that when viewed in this way, conversion can take place during any of his stages of faith.

⁶⁸⁹ Gavin Wakefield talks about conversion being a ‘punctuated process’; including moments or events over time, ‘at some times, the punctuation may be a comma indicating a relatively small change, and at others an exclamation mark for a dramatic change’ (Wakefield, G. and Cartledge, M.J. “Ministers Finding Faith” *Journal of Empirical Theology*, 15(2) (2002) 43-60 (p.53))

⁶⁹⁰ McKnight argues similarly that ‘if you listen carefully to those who go through such an experience, they talk like converts even though all they did was integrate the master story much more completely into their own identity and consciousness’ in McKnight, “Was Paul a Convert?” p.121

that testimony is the ‘tell-tale sign of conversion’ and, having heard testimonies involving conversion experiences *after* their initial experience, I conclude that subsequent conversions must be included in a Pentecostal theology of conversion and understood in terms of *shalom*.⁶⁹¹

With this in mind, I will now outline the three main dimensions of my model in turn, bringing LCF’s theology concerning what is believed to be received at initial conversion (and responded to in subsequent conversions) interpreted in light of *shalom* at each dimension, as an individual, community and eschatological gift.

7.2.3 Regeneration

One dimension of the *shalom* received at initial conversion, as perceived by LCF, is that the believer is ‘pardoned and accepted as righteous in God’s sight’ and considered to be born again at the time they accept Christ, the son of God, as their saviour by faith.⁶⁹² It is this new birth and forgiveness of sins (justification) that is theologically most commonly associated with conversion. The concept of new birth is particularly built upon the conversation between Jesus and Nicodemus, recorded in John 3:1-21, where Jesus tells the Pharisee that ‘no-one can enter the kingdom of God unless they are born of water and the Spirit’.⁶⁹³ For my respondents, the start of something new is an inextricable motif from their conversion experience.

Regeneration can perhaps be best summarised by the first of Brueggemann’s two models for Shalom: freedom. For some this freedom is recognised in forgiveness of sins,⁶⁹⁴ for others it is

⁶⁹¹ McKnight, “Was Paul a Convert?” p.122

⁶⁹² Elim *Fundamental Truths*, accessed online on 26th September 2013, http://www.elim.org.uk/Groups/112249/What_we_believe.aspx

⁶⁹³ John 3:5 (NIV)

⁶⁹⁴ Acts 26:18

a break with the past,⁶⁹⁵ and for most it means a spiritual awakening and the beginning of a relationship with God. Brueggemann identifies the theme of freedom throughout the biblical story as part of God's covenant of *Shalom* with Israel, which finds its expression in the person of Jesus Christ. He says that 'the gospel stories may indeed be seen as a new exodus recital, for time after time Jesus led people out of old, secure oppressions into new wildernesses of freedom'.⁶⁹⁶

Regeneration is so closely associated with conversion in Pentecostal theology that the terms are often used synonymously. Hollenweger perpetuates this merging of terms by saying that 'for the Pentecostal believer, the fundamental experience necessary to salvation is conversion, or regeneration'.⁶⁹⁷ However, I feel that Hollenweger's statement could be more accurately rephrased in the context of this study as 'the fundamental experience necessary to conversion is regeneration' for it is from this rebirth that a new identity and destiny are gained. It is this bedrock of new birth that initial conversion and all subsequent conversions find their meaning. All other consequences and external manifestations should be built on a foundation of internal transformation.⁶⁹⁸

In terms of *shalom*, this new birth restores the believer to *shalom* as a new creation; bringing liberation to the believer from the bonds of sin and restores right relationship with God.⁶⁹⁹ While regeneration is believed to be received once, forgiveness is seen to be an ongoing and repeated practice throughout the Christian life. The sermons which focussed on withstanding temptation and striving forward in faith reveal that is considered important for the convert to believe that, if (and when) they sin again, they can be forgiven. This belief is thought to help

⁶⁹⁵ 2 Corinthians 5:17

⁶⁹⁶ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.42

⁶⁹⁷ Hollenweger, W.J. *Pentecostalism: Origins and Developments Worldwide*, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publishers, 1997) p.247

⁶⁹⁸ Sermon, *Life Through the Spirit* (part 1) 25th April 2010

⁶⁹⁹ Galatians 5:1-13

people not to get trapped by sinful habits and past failings. Importantly, although the believer is seen to be forgiven of their sins, it is not believed that regeneration removes the sinful nature or achieves perfection. Instead regeneration will reach its fulfilment in the eschatological kingdom of God. In one LCF sermon the preacher talked about looking back over diaries and realising the slow change over time in her personality and actions since her initial conversion. Although you are only born again once, she emphasised the ongoing process of development and the need for repeated repentance and forgiveness throughout the Christian life.

Regeneration and the community

Although the community aspect of regeneration was not often present in the testimonies of individuals, it is certainly represented in the teaching of the church leadership. If individual believers are regenerated, forgiven and new creations, then the congregation is a community made up of the same attributes. In the same way that the individual believer is not seen to be perfect, the congregation must also be viewed as a work in progress, a forgiven and forgiving community striving together in hope toward the perfection of their new birth in heaven. Part of the responsibility of the congregation is in reminding believers about their regenerated state, their subsequent relationship with God, encouraging them forward and helping those who struggle to move beyond past sins and temptations. As one preacher put it, although the congregation of believers are an unfinished work in progress, ‘God is doing something in the church and in every life in the church’.⁷⁰⁰ There is a clear hope that accompanies regeneration; the past has gone and God is at work in the present towards a new future.

The congregation has a responsibility to present the possibility of *Shalom* in regeneration to those who are not yet believers. This is reflected in LCF’s mission focus on practical

⁷⁰⁰ Sermon, *God always finishes what he starts*, 24th June 2012

assistance: helping people get jobs, accommodation, giving them food and clothes parcels, showing God's love to them and praying for healing. Part of the rationale behind this is in helping people in very practical ways to break with the past and move on to a new life, free from issues such as addictions and poverty. Volunteers aim to show those they reach out to that the life God desires for them is a life free from coercion and oppression in its many forms.⁷⁰¹

Eschatology of Regeneration

Although believers are viewed as regenerated and made righteous upon their conversion, as I mentioned above, it is not believed that complete perfection is possible in this life. Therefore regeneration at conversion, and ongoing forgiveness throughout the Christian life, is a gift from God which allows for a relationship between humanity and God, but it is just a foretaste of the perfection expected and hoped for eschatologically.⁷⁰²

This could be interpreted to mean that the aim of Christian development and freedom from sin is futile if it cannot reach fulfilment in this life. However it is clear through LCF's teaching that they wish to guide believers away from this thinking. In a sermon about the fruits of the Holy Spirit, the preacher taught that although believers will not reach the stage of perfection 'as we live in the flesh' there is always room for striving and improvement, which requires the Holy Spirit.⁷⁰³ This is presented as an opportunity available to the believer who has the Spirit dwelling within him/her, and it is presented more in terms of the personal relationship with the almighty God and the believer participating in their destiny as designed by him. Without understanding *shalom* in these other two dimensions, it is difficult to present conversion as more than forgiveness and a hope for the future. When combined with identity and destiny,

⁷⁰¹ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.43

⁷⁰² 1 Corinthians 13:12

⁷⁰³ Sermon, *The Fruits of the Holy Spirit*, 5th June 2011

conversion presents a reason for developing a close relationship with God and growing in spiritual gifts, values and character.

7.2.4 Identity

A second dimension of the *shalom* received at initial conversion is a restored and new identity that comes from being a new creation. If regeneration could be understood as freedom, then identity can be seen according to Brueggemann's second model of *shalom*: unity. The believer is immediately adopted into God's family and receives the Spirit in their life at the moment of their decision; both are the work of *shalom* in bringing restored relationship between God and the believer. These are the two main aspects of the *shalom* identity taught and experienced at LCF; being a *child of God* and being a *Spirit-filled* Christian.

Child of God

Conversion is viewed as entering into a relationship with God, which is made possible through *shalom* in regeneration, and invites participation in his life and purposes. This echoes Pinnock's view that conversion is primarily about union with God rather than just justification.⁷⁰⁴ Studebaker explains this union in LCF's terms when he says, 'Grace involves receiving the Father's love, which constitutes one a child of God, and then participating in the return of love to the Father whereby believers become, along with the Son, children of God who love the Father'.⁷⁰⁵ At LCF 'Child of God' is a common term used to describe this relationship, and in addition respondents chose 'Father' as the most popular term to describe their relationship with God. This is viewed as an adoptive childhood, implying a sense of being chosen and new beginning on the part of the convert. This was reflected in one sermon where the preacher, teaching from 1 John 3:1, referred to the Christians' past life as an

⁷⁰⁴ Pinnock, C.H. *Flame of Love: a theology of the Holy Spirit*, (Illinois: InterVarsity Press, 1996) p.150

⁷⁰⁵ Studebaker, S.M. "Beyond Tongues: A Pentecostal Theology of Grace" in *Defining Issues in Pentecostalism: Classical and Emergent*, ed. by Studebaker, S.M. (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008) 46-68 (p.60)

‘orphanage’ from which they were removed. The connotations of this orphanage are negativity, a lack of love, and a lack of security, which is juxtaposed with the positive and lovingly secure identity found in relationship with God the Father.

Respondents emphasised that one’s identity as a child of God must involve a balance of understanding between God’s power and His love and relationship. This leads me on to the second main aspect of identity referred to at LCF, that of living a Spirit-empowered life.

Spirit-filled

For LCF, being a child of God means being filled with the same Spirit that filled Christ, the Son of God. Believers therefore need to cooperate with this Spirit in order to be living the Christian life to its full potential and become more like Christ. This is expressed through a kind of Spirit Christology, which connects Jesus’ earthly ministry with the same Spirit available to believers today. When projected on to the convert, these themes identify them as vessels of potential, authority and power through the Spirit.

The teaching and ordinary beliefs of LCF do not suggest one normative experience or ‘evidence’ of Spirit baptism. More important than proving whether someone has experienced Spirit baptism in a particular way, they believe primarily that the Spirit is received upon conversion. A wide range of manifestations and gifts of the Spirit are recognised in the lives of believers as evidence of the Spirit working within them. Being Spirit-filled is a seal of the believer’s identity as an adopted child of God, as Westfall highlights in relation to Paul’s writings, ‘if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ (Rom 8:9)’.⁷⁰⁶ As long as the Spirit can be seen at work in the life of the believer, and the congregation, then that is confirmation they belong to Christ. The work and role of the Spirit

⁷⁰⁶ Westfall, C.L. “Paul’s Experience and a Pauline Theology of the Spirit” in Studebaker, S.M. (ed.) *Defining Issues in Pentecostalism: Classical and Emergent*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2008) 123-143 (p.135)

in *shalom* is as yet an underdeveloped area of *shalom* in the Christian life, however I argue through this thesis that the Spirit is connected to *shalom* in such a way as to be inextricable. Where the Spirit is, there *shalom* is also.

Identity and the community

As well as a restored relationship with God, *shalom* is inextricable from unity, order and harmony, between people and the created world. Brueggemann states that ‘God is against estrangement and fragmentation’ and the call of the Christian is to be part of community and to extend *shalom* to other people and creation.⁷⁰⁷ He refers to Jesus’ works on earth as all being works of *shalom*, in restoring community between the excluded and those who excluded them. This was done throughout his ministry through healing the sick and possessed, forgiving sins and feeding the hungry.⁷⁰⁸

The term ‘child of God’ immediately brings to mind human relationships in the form of family. A child is meant to be, and flourishes as part of a family; as a child to parents, and a sister or brother to siblings. A large part of recognising and responding to one’s identity as God’s child is to be surrounded by the family of God. LCF explicitly identify as being a family. The ecclesial literature describes the church that way and ‘family’ was a common word used in the interviews to describe the church, particularly its appeal. Brueggemann argues that *shalom*, more than the call of the individual, is the call of the Church family in living out the difficult balance between freedom and unity as a people of *shalom*.

The LCF aims to transmit *shalom* as the family of God to non-believers. This is evidenced in their focus on practical assistance and outreach activities in the local community. Estrangement and disunity can take many forms, particularly in a large city like Birmingham,

⁷⁰⁷ Brueggemann, Peace, p.44

⁷⁰⁸ Brueggemann, Peace, p.18

where loneliness and exclusion can be a common problem. In its ideal form, the purpose of these activities to welcome non-Christians and the marginalised into the community environment and treat them as part of a family, presenting the love of God to them. This focus echoes an element of conversion expressed in the Lukan writings, as reinstatement into society, community and a family.⁷⁰⁹

One aspect of the Church's identity is as the body of Christ in the world.⁷¹⁰ When this is filtered down to the individual, if the community is called to be Christ in this world and continue his work, then individuals should also reflect this identity. For one respondent, it was her recognition that she was not reflecting a Christ-like character through her lifestyle and attitude that prompted her to return to church. She understood for the first time that part of the Christian identity, in being part of God's family is to reflect his likeness. She saw that the church was a place which could support her in her desire to fulfil her identity as a daughter of God, guided and empowered by the same Spirit that filled and raised Christ.

The identity of being Spirit-filled was commonly linked by respondents between their individual testimony and its manifestation in the community of believers. LCF associates a 'living' congregation with the presence of the Spirit. This is unsurprising as Pentecostal theology finds its roots in the belief that the Christian Church began with a Spirit-filling in Acts 2. This aspect of LCF's identity is not only expected from Pentecostal churches but also projected onto the wider Church. Many respondents acknowledged that they would attend any non-Pentecostal Christian church as long as they could see that it was Spirit-filled. Brueggemann's exposition on *shalom* and the Church does not refer to the Spirit in any depth, but it is crucial in a Pentecostal theology of conversion. The community of believers receives

⁷⁰⁹ Wenk. M. "Conversion and Initiation: A Pentecostal View of Biblical and Patristic Perspectives" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 8(17) (2000) 56-80 (p.65)

⁷¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 12:27

shalom, is empowered to live out *shalom* and is maintained in relationship with God through the Spirit.

Eschatology of Identity

The conclusion and fulfilment of adoption as God's children is inheritance and participation in the Kingdom of God. The promise of this inheritance is believed to be sealed by the presence of the Spirit in the believer's life. Although there is believed to be a foretaste of the kingdom of God in this life, it will only be fully received at the consummation. However, this future inheritance and perfect relationship with God in the afterlife is not to be viewed independently of the relationship with God in this life which brings it about. A disconnect between the eternal rewards of faith and the relationship which brings that about is what leads to the concept of death-bed confessions and a pre-occupation with heaven and hell. Rather, the eschatological element should affect the way that believers live and view themselves in relation to God during their life time. The focus in LCF's teachings on the importance for the believer to maintain and build on their relationship with God throughout their life, places emphasis on their desire for conversion not to be viewed as purely eschatological.

7.2.5 Destiny

A third and final dimension of *shalom* is destiny: bringing the new believer into a broader narrative and, through relationship with God and participation with the Spirit they have the potential to receive God's guidance and participate in his purposes. Central to the believer's engagement and participation in their destiny is cooperation with and empowerment by the Holy Spirit. The importance of this understanding of *shalom* particularly comes out in times of crisis and doubt. In fact, a believer may not fully grasp their confidence in God's plan and control until they are faced with a crisis.

For those who convert as a result of hearing about Christian destiny, the presence and guidance of God in their future is an attractive prospect. For example, one respondent decided that he needed to go back to church when he turned randomly to Jeremiah 29:11 in the bible. It reads, “‘For I know the plans I have for you,’ declares the Lord, ‘plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you a hope and a future’” (NIV). The immediate desire to participate in God’s plans for his future initiated this conversion, according to his testimony. Despite his upbringing in a Christian family, it was the internalisation of *shalom* as hope and destiny that led him back to church and to renewed relationship with God.

Respondents’ testimonies revealed a delicate balance held between believing that ‘in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose’ (Rom 8:28) on the one hand, and the reality of life’s hardships and difficulties on the other. *Shalom* does not ensure an easy life, but provides the believer with freedom in their response to hardships.⁷¹¹

Destiny and the community

The Church is both the community where individual destiny and growth is nurtured and supported, and the locus for the ultimate destiny and *shalom* awaited by creation.⁷¹² While the idea of a God-designed purpose for individuals was a key theme in interviews, it was not expressed regularly in terms of a community destiny. However, interview participants did associate their walk with God, their growth and their discipleship within the context of the church community. Conversion ‘brings us into community with the people of God’ and the Pentecostal congregation (and the wider Church) can then be seen as the locus of discerning

⁷¹¹ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.43

⁷¹² Romans 8:20-21

God's will through individual Christian formation.⁷¹³ It is within the community of believers that the individual finds support; it is through worshipping with the community that the individual encounters God and through the spiritual gifts of others that the individual can hear from God.

There is a consensus within classic Pentecostal theology that part of the destiny of the church is mission and that this is the primary purpose of disciples being Spirit-filled. Klaus traces this destiny back to the events recorded in Acts and explains that 'the Spirit's empowerment signalled a call and empowerment to be part of Jesus Christ's ongoing ministry' and to contribute to the biblical "story" as their destiny.⁷¹⁴ LCF certainly does engage with this call to make disciples but from within its local area predominantly and particularly through the method of reaching out practically to meet the needs of local people. If the mission of the Church is to continue Christ's ministry, then this means that the Church has a responsibility to perform *shalom* (well-being, wholeness, unity, freedom, justice, mercy), beyond the usual model of sin and forgiveness, as a foundational aspect of its mission and destiny.⁷¹⁵

Eschatology of Destiny

Destiny and eschatology go hand-in-hand in so far as the anticipated eschaton is that which the collective Christian destiny is ultimately working towards. In Cartledge's study of an Assemblies of God congregation in Birmingham, UK, he identifies that one main aspect of the church's ecclesiology is that they see themselves as being 'pilgrims of hope' on a journey together. He suggests that Pentecostals should identify as pilgrims of hope as they journey

⁷¹³ Boone, R.J. "Community and Worship: The Key Components of Pentecostal Christian Formation", *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 4(8) (1996), (pp.129-42) p.130. Boone identifies community and worship as the two main components of the Pentecostal movement through which Christian life is transmitted. If these are the modes of Christian development, then they are also the modes by which individuals develop Spiritual gifts and learn about their Christian destiny.

⁷¹⁴ Klaus, B. "The Holy Spirit and Mission in Eschatological Perspective: A Pentecostal Viewpoint" *Pneuma* 27(2) (2005), p.327

⁷¹⁵ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.88

towards ‘the consummation of the eschaton’.⁷¹⁶ This is a commonly held destiny for the community as well as for the individual believer. The destiny and inheritance of the believer is the kingdom of God but LCF teach that it begins with conversion in this life rather than in the afterlife.

7.2.6 Interaction and impact of beliefs on the Christian life

It is important to highlight that the multifaceted complexity of *shalom* will naturally be understood and responded to differently by various people, as individuals are impacted by their circumstances and context. Brueggemann highlights a dual approach to *shalom* in the Old Testament between its meaning for the ‘haves’ compared with the ‘have-nots’. Those who are in a situation of injustice and difficulty view *shalom* in terms of salvation, whereas those in a position of power and safety view *shalom* in terms of blessing. Even though *shalom* itself is determined by God and does not change, human responses to and understanding of *shalom* do, particularly when not guided by close relationship with God through the Spirit.

For my respondents it was often an attraction to the idea of wholeness in one particular dimension which prompted their initial conversion. It might be realisation of their need for forgiveness and new life, a desire to be identified and accepted as a child of God and part of God’s family, or the attraction of being part of a more significant destiny. However, it is important that the dimension which motivated the initial conversion is then combined with recognition of the others in order to bring security and maturity to that initial decision of faith. One example of LCF respondents identifying a lack of belief in one dimension of *Shalom* is in their discussion of ‘saved’ but non-Spirit filled Christians. It does not appear to be the case

⁷¹⁶Cartledge, M.J. *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2010) pp.187-188; also discussed in Cartledge, M.J. “Renewal Ecclesiology in Empirical Perspective” *Pneuma* [Forthcoming], 30 (2014) 1-20 (p.19)

that they do not have the Spirit in them, because they are seen to be regenerated Christians, but rather, through their lack of belief in their identity as Spirit-filled, they could be seen as not living out the potential placed within them at their conversion.

The findings of this study support Rambo's claim that conversion 'is created totally by the action of God, and it is created totally by the action of humans'.⁷¹⁷ To put this in more theological terms, God's *shalom* offers believers the possibility and responsibility to respond as free and unified people. As Brueggemann says of *shalom* as freedom:

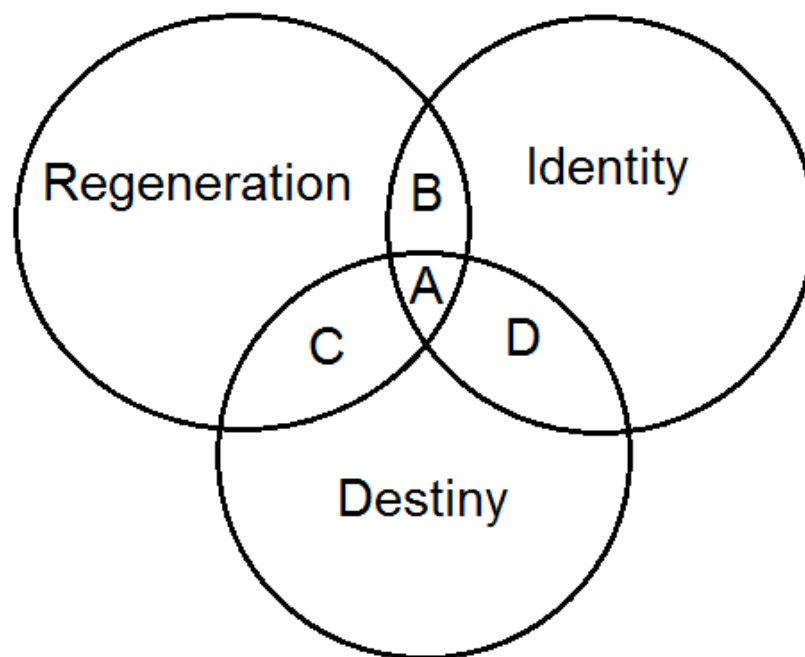
The freedom Paul discovered in the gospel was not an invitation to irresponsibility, nor was it a promise that there would be no more burdens or hardships. But now they are the responsibilities, burdens and hardships of a free person, not one driven, but one facing options and having the power to choose the good news against all the bad forms of news that make promises but that can never be kept.⁷¹⁸

Furthermore, some who convert may not be aware of the fullness of the *shalom* they have received and therefore may respond to some dimensions of *shalom* but not others. It is this interaction between God's activity and the human response, which my model seeks to represent. I will now explore four combinations of the believer's understanding and responses to *shalom* and identify the strengths and possible weaknesses, of each combination in the Christian life (Fig. 7.1). Through these brief descriptions, it becomes clear how the fresh understanding and response to a previously unrecognised dimension of *shalom* can result in a radical transformation in the life of the believer secondary to the initial receiving of God's *shalom*.

⁷¹⁷ Rambo, L.R. *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993) p.176; it also supports Markham's identification that 'the conversion process should be viewed as the co-operant result of Divine grace and human participation' in Markham, P.N. *Conversion Converted: A New Model of Christian Conversion in Light of Wesleyan Theology and Nonreductive Physicalism*, (Doctoral Thesis submitted to St John's College, University of Durham, 2006) British Library EThOS <http://ethos.bl.uk/Home.do?sessionId=563BFA20798D55C4A351CF46B40DB9B6> (accessed online 4th January 2013)

⁷¹⁸ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.43

Figure 7.1: A practical-theological model illustrating the interaction between dimensions of *shalom* received at initial conversion and the human response.⁷¹⁹



Position A can be seen as the ideal and strongest position for living in response to *shalom* received at conversion, as a Spirit-filled Christian and keeping a strong faith. The believer has a complete recognition of all three dimensions of God's *shalom* and understands the potential bestowed on them at their time of conversion. They cooperate with the Spirit in working these out in their Christian life. This is considered to be the ideal position, although it is acknowledge through LCF's teaching and the experiences of my respondents, that this is a rare and often fleeting position to be in. All three dimensions of *shalom* need to be regularly reinforced and believers need to be reminded of them.

Believers in *Position B* recognise that they are forgiven, new creations and their identity may then be fed by the understanding that they have been adopted into God's family. This person generally knows that they are Christian and feels safe and secure in their salvation. However,

⁷¹⁹ The size of the overlapping sections is incidental and does not aim to represent the relative number of people who represent each combination. This diagram is conceptual in order to help readers to visualise LCF's theology of conversion and the variety of different beliefs in the Christian life.

they lack an understanding of their participation in God's future plans and that God has a destiny in store for them. This can mean that they do not participate in their spiritual development or move forward, actively participating in seeking God's will and encountering the Spirit to develop their gifts. Due to the close association between conversion and salvation, believers in position B may believe in their destiny in eternity, but this does not extend to a destiny in this life or an active role in the destiny of the Church.

The perceived risk with this type of Christian life is that it can be viewed as stagnant and that the believer does not fulfil the plans and destiny that God has designed for them. Furthermore, without the deep held belief that God has a plan for their life, the believer may then struggle with doubt or times of hardship. Such an outlook places the believer's conversion as eschatological with no impact on this life. I anticipate that it is this form of Christianity, which the early expressions of Pentecostalism were reacting against. It can be seen to be Christianity without a strong engagement with the Spirit's empowerment toward a sense of calling in this life.

For those in *Position C* they know that they are forgiven and made new, they know that this gives them a God-given purpose and a destiny but their sense of identity is not founded either on their relationship to God or as Spirit-filled Christians. Their sense of calling may lead them to strive to achieve their destiny and gain identity from their achievements. Without a clear understanding of their restored relationship to God and his Spirit, this person runs the risk of burning out or otherwise not feeling as though they have as close a relationship with God as others around them seem to. Just as Jesus' ministry was predicated upon an affirmation of his identity in relation to his Father and reception of the Spirit at his baptism, these individuals require the same affirmation in order to fulfil God's purposes.⁷²⁰ Those in

⁷²⁰ Matthew 3:17 (NIV)

Position C may be seen to run the risk of lacking in security and engagement in their relationship with God as a freely received gift.

Finally, believers in *Position D* may understand their relationship with God and their future calling and hope, but their lack of acceptance of their regeneration may lead them to cling to guilt and slip back into old habits and temptations. The concepts of regeneration and the associated forgiveness of sins are closely linked, in LCF's language, with freedom. Therefore those who do not believe that they are a 'new creation' run the risk of not living life as a free person. This is expressed in Galatians 5:1, which reads, 'it is for freedom that Christ has set us free. Stand firm, then, and do not let yourselves be burdened again by a yoke of slavery' (NIV). The call to 'stand firm' and not to 'let yourselves be burdened' places choice and power on the believer, who is seen to be given the potential to move forward, resisting sin and receiving forgiveness upon repentance, by the regeneration received at conversion.⁷²¹

7.3 The perceived role of the Holy Spirit in conversion

Through this study it was important to gain an understanding of the role the Holy Spirit is seen to play in conversion at LCF. This is because belief in and engagement with the Spirit in the Christian life has always been a distinctive of Pentecostal-charismatic faith. During a congregational bible study, the speaker made the following statement about conversion:

⁷²¹ Respondents spoke freely of the Enemy (referring to Satan) trying to get in the way of the relationship between God and the believer. Doubt and temptation to sin are often attributed to the actions of the Enemy and the practice of inner healing suggests that Christians who cannot internalise their forgiveness and accept freedom from their past sins are in some way require freedom from the Enemy's lies. The work of the Enemy covered a range of activities and experiences with respondents interpreting the enemy placing doubt in their minds about God's plans for them, their usefulness in God's kingdom and telling them that they were worthless and 'not a very good Christian'. Therefore, it was acknowledged in the interviews that a lack of belief in one's forgiveness, their new birth, their identity and their role in God's future plans is in direct opposition to God's will and is an internalisation of the Enemy's lies rather than God's grace. I suggest that the belief in a devil who opposes believers responding to God's grace, helps to maintain a balanced logic behind the importance of the Holy Spirit, in opposition to the devil, in helping the believer to remain in relationship with God and participate in his will.

Conversion is about a change of direction, a transformation that includes the forgiveness of sins and adoption into God's family. However, it is also about the commencement of a relationship with the Spirit. We are granted, through the Spirit, a never-ending opportunity to share in the life of God.⁷²²

It is clear through LCF's theology that the Spirit permeates and is a constant thread through *shalom* in each of the dimensions listed above. They teach and believe that the Spirit comes to dwell in the life of the believer when they become a Christian and that the idea of being 'born again' is described as being born of the Spirit (or as one respondent called it, her 'Spirit man' was made alive). Therefore the Spirit is directly linked to the process of being born again and regeneration. Although forgiveness of sins is ultimately attributed to the work of Christ on the cross, the teaching of LCF is echoed by Green, who states 'everything depends on the Spirit, for God's Spirit is the effector, so to speak, of the Father's promises, revealed and accomplished in Christ'.⁷²³ The Spirit is then seen to empower the believer in their Christian life and ministry. This study reveals that being Spirit-filled is considered to be a central aspect of Pentecostal identity. The particulars of Spirit baptism are not as important as the believer's knowledge that they have the Spirit dwelling and working within them. It is the Spirit of God who empowers believer to fulfil their calling and be guided through their destiny. They believe that, without the Spirit, the Christian life cannot reach its full potential.

Paul's writing about the Spirit of adoption in Romans chapter 8 most closely reflects LCF's approach to the Spirit with regards conversion and can provide a biblical context to the model discussed above.⁷²⁴ Brueggeman refers to these passages as an example of *Shalom* in the Christian life, but his focus throughout is Christological and he omits any mention of the

⁷²² Life Study, *The Holy Spirit and the Believer*, 1st May 2011 (Handout)

⁷²³ Green, C.E.W. "'Then Their Eyes Were Opened': Pentecostal Reflections on the Church's Scripture and the Lord's Supper", *Pneuma* 35(2) (2013) 220-34 (p.230)

⁷²⁴ Chapters 7 and 8 have been seen by some as Paul's expressions of the individual's state before and after initial conversion. Chester argues that while Romans 7 represents a sinner's conviction of sin, Romans 8 can be understood to then represent the newness of life to which they are delivered in conversion (Chester, S.J. "Romans 7 and Conversion in the Protestant Tradition" *Ex Auditu*, 25 (2009) 135-171 (p.159))

Spirit, which I see as a crucial oversight.⁷²⁵ I see these verses in Romans chapter 8 as speaking about the regeneration, identity and destiny received through *shalom*, and the central role of the Spirit in these dimensions.

In these passages, the dimensions of *shalom* in conversion; that is newness and freedom in life, identity as children of God and a subsequent inheritance and destiny are all framed within the central concept of life by the Spirit. Paul writes that those who are ‘in Christ Jesus’ live according to the law of the Spirit, which brings life and freedom.⁷²⁶ Those who are ‘in Christ’ are said to no longer live in the realm of the flesh but the realm of the Spirit.⁷²⁷ If the Spirit lives in you, which Paul argues must be the case for someone to belong to Christ, then you have been restored to life in the realm of the Spirit.⁷²⁸ Pentecostals typically do not wish to dichotomise between supernatural and natural, and it is clear that believers still inhabit physical bodies (the flesh) and so this idea of two realms could be better viewed as bringing wholeness to the believer whose spirit is made alive and therefore they are no longer ruled by ‘the flesh’.⁷²⁹

Following the Spirit’s guidance and leadership is seen to be a mark of the children of God and this brings about freedom from fear and adoption as sons and daughters.⁷³⁰ It is the Spirit who ‘testifies with our spirit that we are God’s children’ and subsequently heirs of God’s

⁷²⁵ Brueggemann, *Peace*, p.136

⁷²⁶ Romans 8:1-2 (NIV)

⁷²⁷ In his 246 commentary on Romans, Origen states that Paul is speaking to those ‘who no longer are partly in the flesh and partly in the Spirit, but who are completely in Christ’ (Origen, Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans (trans. Thomas P. Scheck) cited in Chester, “Romans 7 and Conversion in the Protestant Tradition” p.136, which overcomes the dichotomy between natural (flesh) and supernatural (Spirit) but argues that Christian life is life in Christ completely and wholly.

⁷²⁸ Romans 8:9 (NIV)

⁷²⁹ James Dunn identifies this important balance by saying that ‘certainly conversion-initiation marked the breaking of the old conditioning and opening to the new power source (Spirit)...the decisive factor is no longer the flesh, but the flesh is still a factor’ (Dunn, J.D.G. *Romans 1-8* (Milton Keynes: Word Publishing, 1991) p.428. Dunn’s constant reminder of ‘the continuing two-sidedness of the believer’s existence’ (p.431) must be at the forefront of any consideration of *shalom*, as it is a now and not-yet reality.

⁷³⁰ Romans 8:14 (NIV)

kingdom.⁷³¹ *Shalom* in relationship with God as adopted children brings about a destiny of *shalom*, which is testified by the Spirit. Paul makes clear that this destiny mingles sufferings and eventual glory.⁷³²

The individual's identity as a child of God is then associated with the global 'children of God' whom the creation waits 'in eager expectation' to be revealed at which time creation 'will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God'.⁷³³ Paul refers to this adoption as something which believers have already achieved but also something which is awaited: it is now and not yet.⁷³⁴ The Spirit is identified as helping in weakness, interceding for believers when they pray and makes possible a connection between God and humanity by searching the believer's heart and aligning it with the will of God.⁷³⁵ The confidence that these works of *shalom* brings is confirmed in verses 37-39 whereby Paul refers to believers as 'more than conquerors through him who loved us' (NIV) and affirms that nothing can separate those who have the Spirit within them from the love of God. In this one chapter of Romans, Paul encompasses *shalom* in regeneration, identity and destiny, placing the indwelling Spirit at the centre.

In practice, the Spirit is mostly attributed by believers to guidance and wisdom. This is an interesting finding that, despite a perception of Pentecostal-charismatic spirituality as loud, energetic and physical, the every-day experience of the Spirit appears to be gentle, reflective and steady.⁷³⁶ LCF's conversion theology attributes the Spirit to all areas of their conversion

⁷³¹ Romans 8:15-17 (NIV)

⁷³² Romans 8:17 (NIV)

⁷³³ Romans 8:21 (NIV)

⁷³⁴ Romans 8:23; Droogers also draws attention to this paradox in the Pentecostal sense of wholeness, as 'it is and it is also yet to be' in Droogers, "The Normalization of Religious Experience" p.10

⁷³⁵ Romans 8:27 (NIV)

⁷³⁶ Pentecostal-Charismatic worship can be characterised by enthusiastic physical participation (clapping, dancing etc.), modern styles of music, vocal responses to sermons and the manifestation of Spiritual gifts (see Cartledge, M.J. *Encountering the Spirit: the Charismatic Tradition*, (Darton, Longman and Todd: London, 2006) p.58). These expressions of worship can lead to assumptions that Pentecostal spirituality is typically loud and

and ongoing experience. The ordinary theology expressed through testimony strongly suggests that the Spirit is, as Studebaker says, ‘the point of entry’ into the divine life and redemption.⁷³⁷ He is the means by which believers are led toward faith, receive the grace of conversion, and are guided through the Christian life, as participation in the divine life. He is a seal, upon their identity as spirit-filled children of God and their destiny as inheritors of God’s Kingdom. With hindsight, believers can see the Spirit’s fingerprint in every stage of the process.

7.4 Outline of significance and responses to potential objections

Having outlined in its basic form my practical-theological model of LCF’s theology of conversion as framed by the concept of *shalom*, I will now outline its significance for conversion and Pentecostal scholarship, and anticipate and answer some potential objections to the model.

7.4.1 Significant contributions

The model outlined above offers a number of significant contributions to the study of Pentecostal conversion theology as well as the broader discipline of conversion studies. I suggest five in this section. Firstly, it is the first model to outline a theology of conversion experiences and beliefs, based on empirical data from the ground up. Having combined the strengths of social science and theological conversion studies, it encompasses both the human and the divine aspect of Pentecostal conversion; therefore it can contribute constructively to discussions across the broader disciplines of conversion studies and Pentecostal theology.

expressive. These assumptions overlook the reflective and relational aspect of Pentecostal spirituality as expressed through the ordinary theology data in this study.

⁷³⁷ Studebaker, “Beyond Tongues: A Pentecostal Theology of Grace” p.63

Secondly, my use of the theological concept *shalom* to understand Pentecostal conversion is a significant step forward, both for a theology of Pentecostal conversion and also a theology of *shalom*, which has already begun to emerge in academic scholarship. The concept helps to uncover the beliefs surrounding conversion with reference to biblical material, which presents conversion holistically as including wholeness, well-being, right relationship with God, justice, peace etc. I have revealed the usefulness of treating the study of Pentecostal conversion holistically and from a whole life viewpoint and suggest that Pentecostal-charismatic scholarship needs to focus more on the theology of conversion as a process and pay more attention to seeker stages.⁷³⁸

Shalom, particularly as it relates to the Spirit, presents a wealth of opportunity for a developing Pentecostal theology of conversion and Pentecostal spirituality in general in both doctrine and praxis. It is a term to which I believe Pentecostals at all levels of discourse can relate and be inspired by, as well as being familiar particularly to Abrahamic faiths and thus opening a door for potential inter-religious dialogue. Finally it involves universal concepts such as justice, mercy and freedom beyond the usual focus on sin and forgiveness, which I feel can engage the growing atheist, agnostic and post-Christian population in the UK in fresh dialogue with Christianity.

Thirdly, I suggest that for Pentecostals, the basic Judeo-Christian understanding of conversion as ‘turning’ would be helpful in understanding the multifaceted conversion experiences of believer. I argue that initial commitment, traditionally taken to be the conversion moment, can be seen by Pentecostals as the first, although distinct, of many conversions on a journey. Transformation takes place, not only during the initial decision of faith where God’s *shalom* is received by the Spirit, but whenever a believer recognises and responds to a dimension of

⁷³⁸ Specific suggestions and recommendations for areas which require further theological attention will be proposed in chapter eight.

shalom received at their initial conversion, resulting in a transformation or ‘turning’. This will be evidenced by the believer’s own biographical reconstruction through testimony.

Pentecostal conversion cannot be treated as a simple case of moving from disbelief to belief. Furthermore, just as Saul’s conversion did not end on the Damascus road, even the most experiential and mystical conversion experience must be followed by an encounter with a significant other and interpreted in light of a community of believers, similar to Ananias’ ministry with Paul. As has been explored, typically conversion does not happen as a result of understanding everything about the Christian faith. Some respondents did record a process of seeking prior to their decision through which they attended seeker courses. However, typically it was the idea of wholeness in one particular dimension which attracted them and then the other dimensions needed to be discovered and internalised more gradually. A Pentecostal can be seen to move between all of the possible positions described in section 7.2.6 throughout their life, in no particular order. Others may remain in one position without ever fully realising the wholeness in all dimensions that is thought to be given by God upon their initial conversion.⁷³⁹

Fourthly, this model supports the convert as an *active* participant in their own faith development, without diminishing the importance of co-operation and relationship with God. It places emphasis on the believer’s recognition and response to *shalom*, which can be seen to be guided and prompted by the Holy Spirit. I propose that it also has potential to reveal something about the reasons people might fall away from their faith. De-conversion, when viewed in light of the LCF model, could be seen to begin with the lack of a full realisation of one or more dimensions of *Shalom* in the life of the believer and the impact this has on their

⁷³⁹ A lack of internalisation does not mean that they do not know that these dimensions are made whole at conversion. Rather it means that they have not experienced or understood this wholeness for themselves and therefore it does not affect their Christian formation and life.

engagement with God and their expectations of faith. Although this study does not reveal as much as I would have hoped about de-conversion, some respondents did report times in their life when they abandoned their faith and explained their reasons for returning. These stories can perhaps uncover some element of the connection between internalisation of *shalom* and the retention of faith. For instance a believer who leaves the church but returns because they accept for the first time that God has a plan and a calling for their future, may have left the church originally because they had never quite internalised their *shalom* destiny gained by their initial conversion. Subsequently their lack of engagement with guidance or purpose in their faith may have led them to doubt God's interest in their life and to seek a future elsewhere.⁷⁴⁰ It was the internalisation of their destiny that led to this further experience of conversion (or recommitment).

Finally, this model has significant implications for ecclesiology and, in particular, the theology and praxis concerning sacraments. Although the congregation is made up of the combined spirituality of individuals, I believe it is the congregation which presents its expectations of being and becoming a Christian to the individual. Boone explains that 'as the community's expectations are internalized, the self reflects the community. The community's concept of reality becomes the participant's worldview as well. Consequently, all the rituals in the community's liturgy must contribute to the concept of reality in part or in whole'.⁷⁴¹ In practice, the reality and expression of God's *shalom* should be central to community life: (1) in evangelism: teaching and showing practically these dimensions to potential converts, and (2) in ritual: constantly reminding the congregation of their *shalom* identity and the responsibility and blessing it brings in practice. The community, as well as individuals, needs to have a clear internalisation of its own whole state, as a regenerated community with an

⁷⁴⁰ This is a hypothetical example based on examples from respondents' testimonies. Far more research is needed into de-conversion and the part that engagement with *shalom* plays in doubts or rejection of faith.

⁷⁴¹ Boone, "Community and Worship" p.130

identity in relationship with God and a Spirit-empowered destiny. Although various congregations may have different understandings of the particulars of each dimension, part of the church's responsibility is to introduce, remind and affirm believers of their graced existence, not least through sacraments.

Pentecostalism has been accused of not being a sacramental movement.⁷⁴² However, if the purpose of a sacrament is to point the believer toward God's presence, then they play an important role in pointing believers directly toward the gift of *Shalom* given by God at conversion.⁷⁴³ While Green argues that the Lord's supper, for example, 'opens our eyes to Jesus', this model suggest that in doing so it should also open the believer's eyes to the *shalom* modelled and given to them by Jesus.⁷⁴⁴ This model highlights to me the importance of, and repeated need for believers to personally assess their recognition of and response to *shalom* throughout their life. The sacraments of communion and water baptism can play a key role in such reflections, as regular, community based events which point directly towards the gift of *shalom* received at initial conversion; baptism through being a ritual to affirm publically one's conversion and communion through reminding believers of the work achieved through Christ's death, through which living in God's *shalom* is made possible. This gives sacraments a past, present and future outlook through their focus on the Christ-achieved regeneration, Spirit-filled identity and God-given destiny of believers and the Church.⁷⁴⁵

⁷⁴² As discussed in chapter four, scholars such as Green, Vondey and Stephenson are encouraging important discussion toward a specifically Pentecostal theology of sacraments.

⁷⁴³ Stephenson, C.A. *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) p.128; Stephenson discusses John Calvin's understanding that sacraments 'visibly display the truths that one might be too slow to grasp through preaching alone, and preaching explains the importance of the sacraments as visible signs of God's promises.'

⁷⁴⁴ Green, "“Then Their Eyes Were Opened”", p.223

⁷⁴⁵ Green suggests that the Lord's supper must be more than simple remembrance of Jesus or even looking forward to his second coming, but that it must point to his immediate presence (see Green, C.E. "“The Body of Christ, the Spirit of Communion”: Re-Visioning Pentecostal Ecclesiology in Conversation with Robert Jenson" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 20(1) (2011) 15-26 (p.24)). The model presented in this study encourages

7.4.2 Potential objections and responses

As a model is a simplified presentation of a real-world phenomenon or system, I acknowledge that it will never present the complete picture. This coupled with the heterogeneity of Pentecostal experience and the difficulty in presenting any aspect of Pentecostal theology or praxis definitively, it, quite rightly, leaves any attempt at a practical-theological model open to critique. In this section I address and seek to answer four possible objections to the model outlined in this thesis.

Firstly, due to its basis in practical theology using empirical methods, some may consider this model as placing too much emphasis on the anthropological, rather than the divine element of conversion. It is worth reiterating my support of van der Ven's response discussed in chapter two, that practical theology necessarily has religious praxis as its direct object.⁷⁴⁶ With this in mind, as far as possible I have aimed to present the work of God (as mediated through the experience of LCF) as well as the human response to that work. This will always have an anthropological focus because it is the human who experiences conversion. Of course, further theoretical and systematic reflection will need to be paid to the theology of *Shalom* at different dimensions presented in this model in order to build upon the foundation of ordinary theology.

A second critique draws from a question often aimed at case study research: how much can a model based on the beliefs and experiences of one congregation be applied to the wider Pentecostal (or Elim) context? Although this study was not undertaken in search of a positivist outcome, practical theology by its very nature seeks to reveal findings which are useful not only for the direct context under study, but also for a broader context and for

believers to maintain a past (regeneration), present (identity) and future (destiny) view of God's *shalom* and may contribute to a more holistic approach to sacraments.

⁷⁴⁶ Van der Ven, J.A. "Practical Theology: from Applied to Empirical Theology" *Journal of Empirical Theology*, (1988) 1:1, (pp.7-27), p.15

beneficial change.⁷⁴⁷ I have already outlined the significance of this study for Pentecostal and conversion scholarship and will offer specific recommendations in the following chapter. As for how this model represents the theologies of other Pentecostal congregations, this cannot be known without further, deductive study. However, the teaching and literature produced by the congregation has been found to be in line with the broader teaching and ethos of the Elim movement as well as the leadership of LCF being closely affiliated with the national organisation. Therefore I would predict that this model will prove to be at least partly representative of other Elim congregations in Britain.

Furthermore, case studies are generally recognised to hold broader importance when they challenge commonly held assumptions or directly challenge exclusive claims by providing one exception. Due to the diverse nature of Pentecostal spirituality, there are few, if any, exclusive claims about Pentecostal conversion to be falsified. However, with reference to the contributions outlined in section 7.4.1, this case study can be seen to uncover elements of Pentecostal conversion, which challenge common assumptions and misconceptions. As a result the findings point towards further research and attention in as yet underexplored areas of scholarship. Furthermore, my presentation of a practical-theological model offers a more widely testable theory of conversion theology, which takes the specific experiences and teachings of LCF, in dialogue with the wider ecclesial and academic discussion and conceptualises them within a broader theory of Pentecostal conversion. Therefore the specific findings from LCF reach beyond themselves to speak to a much wider context.

Thirdly, some might note a similarity between the dimensions of *shalom* in this model and those listed in a traditional form of the *ordo salutis*. Studebaker defines the *ordo salutis* (order of salvation) as ‘a method of explaining the logical, and to some extent, the temporal

⁷⁴⁷ Labanow, C.E *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) p.103

sequence of the various biblical facets of human redemption, such as election, calling, regeneration, faith, justification, adoption, sanctification, perseverance and glorification'.⁷⁴⁸ He identifies justification and adoption as objective aspects and all others as subjective. All elements in this form of the *ordo salutis* can be grouped under the dimensions of *shalom* and, as such, some might question whether this model is simply a condensed form of the *ordo salutis*. I would respond first by emphasising this model's movement away from language of 'salvation', with which the *ordo salutis* is primarily concerned. Secondly, my model avoids a linear approach to conversion in the same way that Rambo's model strove to avoid the linear stage models which preceded him. Thirdly, by using the language of *shalom*, my model presents a holistic view of conversion, which avoids the distinction between objective and subjective stages and the subordination of the Spirit identified in many forms of the *ordo salutis*.⁷⁴⁹

The final critique is that the model does not bring the discussion any closer to understanding what is believed to happen to *shalom* in those who lose or reject their faith. There is a pressing need for specific empirical-theological research into de-conversion. I believe that this study can be useful to the congregation in understanding something of the reasons that individuals might lose faith or become disillusioned. Unfortunately, despite passing references in one or two sermons against the idea that one can lose their 'salvation', not enough information was included in the interviews or the teachings and rituals of the church to propose a theory of de-conversion for LCF.⁷⁵⁰ The subject did not come up organically in any detail from people's testimonies, which focussed on their thankfulness for their own born

⁷⁴⁸ Stuebaker, "Beyond Tongues: A Pentecostal Theology of Grace" p.51; although this can be a definition for an *ordo salutis*, when I say 'the' *ordo salutis* I should highlight that there are many versions presented by different traditions. The version presented by Stuebaker is a Reformed version.

⁷⁴⁹ Stuebaker, "Beyond Tongues: A Pentecostal Theology of Grace" p.51

⁷⁵⁰ Specific definition or exploration of what is meant by 'losing salvation' is not given by the church leadership. Typically questions concerning the de-converted revolve around whether or not they will still "get into heaven".

again state and relationship with God. However, those who left the church or lost their faith at some stage generally acknowledged that God did not leave them during this time and stayed with them to draw them back to faith. Perhaps the same belief in divine protection is projected onto those who are currently away from the church, accompanied by a hopeful expectation of one final and lasting conversion.

7.5 Conclusion

I have proposed and expounded a practical-theological model which describes and explains LCF's experiences and reflections of conversion in light of the holistic biblical concept *shalom*. Understood as God's purpose for creation and his promise for the new creation, *shalom* has many aspects but can be simply condensed to freedom and unity in relationships; between people, with God and humanity and within the whole of creation. *Shalom* is inextricable from relationships (with God and as community) and hope for the future (eschatology).

I explained the congregation's theology of conversion by identifying that which is believed to be received at initial conversion as *shalom*, which is brought to the believer by the Spirit, and can be seen to work in three inter-connected dimensions: regeneration, identity and destiny. The model suggests that as well as *shalom* being received in these dimensions immediately upon conversion, it is the believer's response to *shalom* which impacts the practical outworking of their conversion in their life. Therefore, in order to understand someone's conversion, you must understand their internalisation about and response to the dimensions of *shalom*. I have identified that, although all believers receive *shalom* in all dimensions as a gift from God at the time of initial conversion, some believers will recognise and respond to

some dimensions more than others and that this will impact their beliefs and practice. It does not have to be a loss in belief in God that will make someone leave the church but rather a loss of recognition of God's *shalom* in one or more dimensions.

I have concluded that Pentecostal conversion is experienced and interpreted in at least two different ways, which I have defined as: (1) *initial conversion* (initial faith by which the Spirit is received, bringing God's *shalom* into the life of the believer),⁷⁵¹ and (2) *subsequent conversions* (times of transformation as a result of encounter with God usually associated with a response to the *shalom* received at initial conversion). The loss of belief in one or more of these concepts leaves the convert in a position of potential disillusionment or de-conversion. The community of believers has a responsibility to be a people of *shalom*; supporting each other in the ongoing and repeated transmission, understanding and acceptance of God's restoration and calling to *shalom* in each different dimension. Each concept can be viewed as happening on an individual and communal level, as well as on an earthly and an eschatological level.

The Holy Spirit is seen to not only be active at each dimension but he is identified as the foundation of *shalom* and the point of entry to eternal life. The Spirit is believed to come to live within the believer at the moment of initial conversion, at the same time as *shalom* is received and as such, in light of Romans chapter 8, the *shalom* received in all dimensions is inextricably linked from the indwelling presence of the Spirit. I argue that *shalom* is brought to the believer through the Spirit and that developing a pneumatology of *shalom* is an area of great significant for a Pentecostal theology of conversion.

⁷⁵¹ This could also be referred to in terms of bringing the life of the believer into *shalom*, however the image of the Spirit coming to dwell in the believer makes the former phrasing more familiar for a Pentecostal context.

CHAPTER EIGHT

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

8.1 The road to understanding Pentecostal conversion

I began this thesis by describing my sixteen year old self wondering why my best friend had converted to a strange and unfamiliar Christian group called Pentecostalism. Over a decade later, this study has helped me to understand something of Pentecostalism's appeal, within its key features of experience and the Spirit. Through conversion, Pentecostals are promised the Spirit of God to bring *shalom* in all areas of their life. Having spent time with believers and having heard their testimonies, it is clear that their realisation of this *shalom* prompts a response of gratitude and praise to God. In practice it impacts the way that they can live out their lives, seeking God's will and desiring to live as God originally intended, and it motivates their desire for others to experience God's *shalom* in the same way. It is seen as a gift for this life as much as for the next.

However, their stories reveal an ever present awareness of the disunity and disorder present in the world. Their testimonies, at least in the privacy of the interview room, do not ignore or dismiss difficulty, conflict and pain in their Christian lives. In spite of this, underneath the questioning and the uncertainty brought about by these experiences lies a notable confidence in God. Their stories reveal that this confidence does not come overnight, but through repeated encounters with God and experience of his Spirit, they learn more about what God has done in bringing *shalom* to their lives; their regeneration, their identity and their destiny. Through realising more about God's work of grace in these dimensions, with the help and power of the Holy Spirit believers learn how to work this wholeness out in their lives and theology.

The reflexive cycles explored in *chapter two* highlight a commitment in practical theology to offer recommendations and actions which can enable positive change.⁷⁵² Therefore, in this final chapter I briefly summarise the study's main conclusions, before making recommendations to the wider academic disciplines of congregational studies and Pentecostal theology, and finally suggest possible applications of conversion as *shalom* at the ecclesial level.

8.2 Summary of main conclusions

This study raises the following important distinctions about conversion from LCF's perspective: (1) initial conversion can be seen in holistic terms as bringing wholeness in different dimensions of life, (2) response to this wholeness informs and motivates the rest of one's Christian life, (3) conversion is seen to include significant transformation as a result of encounter with God, in addition to the initial moment of salvation, and (4) individual conversion has ecclesial and eschatological implications.

I conclude from this study that conversion is experienced and interpreted, within a congregational context at LCF, in terms of the Holy Spirit bringing God's *shalom* in three main dimensions; regeneration, identity and destiny. *Shalom* as an approach to conversion allows for a more holistic view, which avoids a dichotomy between the natural and the supernatural, but rather engages with the dual realities of sin and *shalom* present in the biblical narrative. The practical outworking of this wholeness in the life of the believer is an on-going process, involving close relationship and co-operation with the guidance of God's Holy Spirit.

⁷⁵² Labanow, C.E. *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2009) p.103; 'practical theology looks for ways to make its insights useful for other contexts and ones which ultimately enable transformation'.

The testimonies of Pentecostals have highlighted a need to re-evaluate the use of the word ‘conversion’ in Pentecostal theology. I have separated the term into two distinct categories: (1) *initial conversion*, when wholeness is received in all dimensions (typically salvation), and (2) *subsequent conversions*, encounters and experiences which prompt transformation and closer relationship with God based on response to the wholeness received at initial conversion. These distinctions are simply to differentiate between the different types of conversion expressed through this study, however more attention will need to be paid to the details of each type and more appropriate terms will need to be identified for common use.

The Holy Spirit is believed to be present at all stages of the conversion process, including leading up to initial conversion, he comes to dwell in their life at initial conversion, from which point he plays a guiding, an empowering and a revelatory role throughout the believer’s life. The resulting model suggests that the Spirit comes to dwell in the life of the believer at the same time that *shalom* is restored in the believer. Therefore I suggest that *shalom* is inextricable from the presence of God, through His Spirit in the new life of the believer.

8.2.1 Original contribution

I will briefly outline the original contribution this study makes to the wider field of Pentecostal studies.⁷⁵³ My original contribution to knowledge toward a Pentecostal theology of conversion is predominantly a practical-theological model based on original empirical research, which explains conversion experience and theology in the holistic framework of *shalom*.

Secondly, this study contributes to the growing pool of congregational studies in the UK a congregational case-study based solely on the subject of conversion. Furthermore, it adds to the handful of existing empirical studies of the Elim movement globally.

⁷⁵³ See Chapter Seven for an outline of the significance of the practical-theological model of conversion.

Thirdly, I have broadened the view of conversion in Pentecostalism to a holistic and life-long approach; centred firstly on encounter with God, reception of his presence through the indwelling Spirit and the Spirit's work in bringing *Shalom*, and secondly on the response and engagement of the convert as a new creation. As such this model significantly combines the theological with the practical experience of conversion.

Fourthly and finally this study highlights areas where academic, ecclesial and ordinary discourses conflict with one another on the subject of conversion. For example, my use of a multi-disciplinary model reveals a disconnect between definitions of conversion according to a narrow soteriology, and the practical use of the term based on believers experiences, which covers a much broader range of transformations based on encounter with God. This necessitates an exciting opportunity for further dialogue and development between all levels of discourse to identify a common definition as well as a unified theology. Recognising such disconnections is of vital importance for Pentecostalism to ensure that the mutually informing interplay between experience and doctrine, a defining characteristic, is maintained.

8.3 Recommendations for further study

The significance of any empirical study lies not only in its findings and conclusions but in the implications and potential it provides for further research and progression. These implications are often not limited to the specific situation or discipline being studied but also for other situations.⁷⁵⁴ In the final sections I identify areas which require further research, as well as practical recommendations for an ecclesial application of conversion as *shalom*. Recommendations for further research are aimed first at the broader discipline of conversion studies and secondly for the purposes of developing a Pentecostal theology of conversion.

⁷⁵⁴ Labanow, *Evangelicalism and the Emerging Church*, p.125

8.3.1 Conversion scholarship

It cannot be denied that conversion scholarship from the human sciences has brought a wealth of insight over the last half century and I suspect it will continue to be at the forefront of conversion scholarship for many years to come. The first recommendation that this study can make to the continued research of the human sciences is that the practical stages of conversion be combined with enquiry into the beliefs and values underlying the process. The subjects of character, values and morality are not unfamiliar to the human sciences; however, the importance of beliefs does not seem to have adequately penetrated the study of conversion. I hope that this study has demonstrated the importance of understanding such underlying beliefs as foundational to understanding human action and interaction in conversion and throughout their conversion careers.

Secondly, it is important that further empirical studies be conducted to engage Rambo's model theologically in different religious settings. From this study alone, Rambo's typology has been added to and his model reconstructed by exploring the theological context of the group, therefore more studies would contribute further to adapting and reframing Rambo for their particular situations. In particular, the same methods could be used to explore conversion empirically not only from a Pentecostal perspective but also from the perspective of other religious groups in the UK. This would contribute considerably to our understanding of different experiences and theologies of conversion among different groups in the UK as the nation experiences increased religious pluralism and potentially increased conversion between religious groups. A multi-disciplinary understanding of different conversion experiences, taking seriously social and theological factors, would also provide a wealth of information to encourage inter-religious dialogue on the subject of conversion. This is a dialogue which is currently lacking.

Finally, in this study I was faced with the restriction of being a mono-linguist and therefore some conversion experiences went unheard due to a language barrier. I felt that the omission of these stories was a loss to my research. I recommend that more studies in the UK need to be conducted with people for whom English is not their first or strongest language. A significant number of stories are going unheard in the UK and I believe that it is vital for their experiences and beliefs to be counted, particularly as many of their conversion careers will be informed by a non-Western perspective while being lived-out in the UK. This may not be an easy undertaking as it will require interpreters or for a generation of bilingual scholars to commit to studying conversion in non-English speaking groups who share a language with them. However, just as conversion studies has had to move on from a preoccupation with Christianity and NRMS, the insight the human sciences have brought to conversion studies can only be strengthened and deepened by allowing these voices to be heard.

8.3.2 Pentecostal theology of conversion

The main objective of this thesis is to offer a step forward in the discussion towards a Pentecostal theology of conversion. I have proposed a model of conversion based on the experiences of ordinary Pentecostals and from here further research is required to develop a theologically rigorous and experientially recognisable theology of Pentecostal conversion. Further to the model itself, this study has raised secondary issues, which I suggest necessitate require further enquiry from the field of theology.

In *chapter two* I acknowledge that this study represents only part of the empirical-theological cycle due to limited time and resources. Therefore the resulting practical-theological model requires a stage of testing for this cycle to be completed.

Chapter four highlights that, despite recognition at congregational level of the process of seeking undertaken by many converts, there is little or no theological insight into this process. Therefore I suggest that more attention is required into the stages of conversion overlooked by theology; predominantly the seeker stages of quest and interaction, as well as the process of de-conversion. It is clear that all three aspects of conversion are recognised in the experiences of Pentecostals. However Pentecostal theology remains silent on the role of God in these experiences.

Another area of discrepancy between Pentecostal experience and theology is in the understanding of the term ‘conversion’. As this is not a uniquely theological term the confusion is understandable. The experience of conversion as involving transformation in encounter with God *in addition to* the initial moment of salvation would indicate that any Pentecostal theology of conversion requires very close consideration and specific definition of ‘conversion’ to fully represent the Pentecostal experience.

In chapter seven I briefly outlined my model of Pentecostal conversion in terms of *shalom* in three main dimensions in the believer’s life. The limitation of space prohibits me from developing these concepts further and so more specific study is needed, in all sub-disciplines of theology, into each of the dimensions identified in this study separately and how the concept of *shalom* plays out in these dimensions. The model raises questions for soteriology, ecclesiology, social justice and biblical studies:

1. What does a view of conversion in terms of *shalom* mean for an emerging Pentecostal theology of religions?
2. How might different congregations identify themselves as communities of *shalom*?
3. What does a destiny defined by *shalom* look like for Pentecostals within different contexts, both at an individual and a social level?

4. What is a Pentecostal biblical hermeneutic of *shalom* in each dimension?

As conversion impacts all areas of Pentecostal theology, the development and critical evaluation of this model will naturally require attention in all areas. Specifically the overarching relationship between *shalom* and the Spirit in conversion requires further multi-disciplinary research engaging empirical and theoretical methods from a definitively Pentecostal standpoint. Deeper enquiry into the role and work of the Spirit within a holistic understanding of Pentecostal conversion is of crucial importance. I have identified in this study that the Spirit plays an on-going and vital role in the conversion experiences and theologies of Pentecostals, however studies dedicated specifically to the ways that this manifests itself experientially as well as how it is defined biblically are required.

8.4 Application at an ecclesial level

As my study has been built upon empirical data from LCF, I am compelled at this stage to ask ‘so, what?’ How can these findings have a positive impact and application at an ecclesial level?⁷⁵⁵ If conversion is viewed as bringing *shalom* in three interconnected dimensions, then conversion is relational at its very centre, both between God and humanity and between communities and the church has a responsibility to teach and practice *shalom* in all dimensions.

It is clear that a period of ‘seeking’ is sometimes undertaken by potential converts and that seeking God is an aspect of conversion which then continues throughout the life of the believer. Courses are provided by churches to help guide those who are in this process and I suggest that these offer an ideal environment to articulate and communicate the concept of

⁷⁵⁵ Cartledge, M.J. *Testimony in the Spirit: rescripting ordinary pentecostal theology*, (Surrey: Ashgate, 2010) p.179

God's Spirit bringing *shalom* and to elaborate particularly on the different dimensions of *shalom* in accessible and biblical terms. I believe that it is important to articulate this to those who are seeking, as my findings reveal that it is typically the appeal of God's work in one of the three dimensions that is the reason for people becoming a Christian.

This study highlights a potential need to develop ways of transmitting the concept of God's *shalom* in all dimensions of life (practically and theoretically) to people of other faiths at ground level. In one sense, the language of *shalom* offers a familiar concept particularly to the Jewish (*shalom*) and Muslim (*salām*) traditions and therefore could provide a doorway into dialogue between congregations and Abrahamic traditions. However, the challenge for evangelism and dialogue with committed members of other faiths is that they often have a sense of identity and destiny already provided by their own faith. Therefore congregations, at leadership and lay level, need to consider different approaches than those used in outreach to those of little or no religious belief.

The model reveals that the level of engagement with and response by the believer toward *shalom* can increase or decrease throughout their life; leading to a change in the, understanding of and practical outworking of this *shalom* in their life and possibly even de-conversion. Furthermore, believers may not fully understand or respond to *shalom* in some areas immediately and it may take time and change throughout their life. Therefore they should be a part not only of evangelism but of Christian formation and development as well.

One way would be in answer to Stephenson and Green's call for Pentecostal sacraments to contain more meaning than simple remembrance.⁷⁵⁶ I suggest that a view of conversion in terms of *shalom* can be expressed and responded to by the community of believers through

⁷⁵⁶ See Stephenson, C.A. *Types of Pentecostal Theology: Method, System, Spirit*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) and Green, C.E.W. *Toward a Pentecostal Theology of the Lord's Supper: Foretasting the Kingdom*, (Cleveland: CPT Press, 2012); "Between This and That: Reality and Sacramentality in the Pentecostal Worldview" *Journal of Pentecostal Theology* 19:2 (2010) 243-264.

the sacraments of baptism and the Lord's supper. I will use the Lord's supper as an example by turning to Brueggeman's work on *shalom* and the Church. Brueggemann points to Jesus' farewell discourse at 'the table' in the gospel of John as an indication of *shalom* ("peace") he promised his disciples before his death and resurrection. Jesus is recorded in John 14:25-26 as saying to his disciples:

²⁵"But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you all things and will remind you of everything I have said to you. ²⁶*Peace* I leave with you; my *peace* I give you. I do not give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled and do not be afraid".⁷⁵⁷

Brueggemann sees verse 26 as central to the role of *shalom* in the church and as such 'the table' becomes the place where 'we have always found his reassuring presence' and where the church finds its call to *shalom*.⁷⁵⁸ Furthermore I include verse 25 because it identifies the Spirit with the role of teaching and reminding believers of Christ's words, particularly those that follow. As he is believed to dwell in the believer, accompanying and facilitating the work of grace, he is present in the Lord's supper with the believer and the community, teaching and reminding the congregation of Jesus words of peace, transforming the bread and the wine into indicators and signs of God's *shalom* received at conversion. The act of sharing a meal together is in itself an expression of *shalom*, in that it reflects peace, unity and total inclusion within the community of believers.

Secondly, this study highlights the continued importance of testimony giving within the faith community after baptism. A number of participants in my focus group interviews expressed their pleasure and encouragement at hearing others' testimonies, many of which they had never heard before despite belonging to the same discipleship small groups together. I therefore recommend that the practice of testimony giving be encouraged and facilitated,

⁷⁵⁷ John 14:26-27 (NIV); italics mine for emphasis.

⁷⁵⁸ Brueggemann, W. *Peace*, (Missouri: Chalice Press, 2001) p.153

whether this take the form of a full life story or a focus on one experience of God, particularly within small group settings where discipleship and mutual support in faith is the goal.⁷⁵⁹ As my research has shown, a simple testimony can reveal the areas where people are living out their wholeness and areas where perhaps they are struggling either in its application or in accepting the work of grace in their life at all. Honest and open testimony of ongoing experience and even lament should be encouraged rather than only triumphalistic or resolved experiences. The Pentecostal church as a whole needs to foster a culture of engaging with lament and experiences of ‘chaos’ in life, as well as how to respond to these realities as a community, in order for their theology of *shalom* to reach maturity.

This leads me to my final recommendation, not only for Pentecostal congregations but to the wider Christian Church and to the academic theological community. Open engagement with the experience of disorder, chaos and suffering in the world will inevitably lead to a discussion about de-conversion. No matter the confidence that an individual has in the *shalom* they have received and their on-going relationship with the Spirit, the reality is that for many in the congregation their parents, children, brothers, sisters and friends have walked away from living a life of *shalom*. The unanswered (and indeed unspoken) question in churches across the country is “what does this mean for them?” This question predominantly refers to their salvation but with a holistic view of conversion it spreads beyond soteriology to the more general question, “can all that has been gained be lost and, if so, what does it take to lose it?”

This is the main area missing from my data and is subsequently absent from my model.

However, I believe that alongside a developing Pentecostal theology of conversion is a

⁷⁵⁹ Cartledge makes a similar point in his contribution on Testimony for the Grove Renewal series. He suggests that ‘testimony should be introduced in the small group setting initially. In the house group or mid-week prayer meeting, the role of testimony can be explained and people encouraged to share their stories very naturally with one another’ in Cartledge, M.J. *Testimony: its Importance, Place and Potential*, (Cambridge: Grove Books Ltd, 2002) p.17

necessary engagement with these questions at all three levels of discourse. Pastorally, churches need to address these questions as honestly and lovingly as possible, walking alongside people in their questioning; academically, scholars need to move beyond the statistics and evidence that de-conversion happens to look at the beliefs and experiences behind the experience. De-conversion is just conversion to something else and as such I believe that a developed theology of conversion, must necessarily involve a theology of de-conversion also.

APPENDIX 1: Structured questions for focus group interviews

1. Have you ever actively researched religion, faith groups or looked into other religions?
2. Do you feel that you have had any encounters with God? If so, please explain.
3. If somebody was new to the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship, how would you recommend that they go about making friends or feeling like part of the community?
4. Can you think of any crisis points in your life that were pivotal to your faith journey? Without needing to go into detail, please explain the impact this had.
5. Have you undergone any kind of commitment ritual? If so, please explain.
6. How much do you think your context (upbringing, gender, country, ethnicity etc) influences your faith journey?
7. If someone who has just become a Christian came up to you and wanted to know what they do next, how do they best grow as a Christian, what would be your advice?

APPENDIX 2a: Consent form for focus group interviews and information given to in-depth interview respondents

Pentecostal Conversion: An Ethnographic Study

Interview Consent Form

Researcher Contact Details

[Information Removed]

The Research Project

The congregational study of the Lighthouse Christian Fellowship will provide essential data for a doctoral thesis due for completion in 2015. The research project aims to test an academic theory of religious conversion in light of the lived realities of this Elim congregation. More specifically, the research aims to hear first-hand accounts of conversion experiences and discuss your understanding of the role of God in conversion. The researcher believes that academic theology must engage with and relate directly to 'grass roots' religion in order to meaningfully impact on contemporary religion. The experiences you disclose and the discussions undertaken during these interviews are vital in understanding and contributing towards Pentecostal theology.

Participant Guarantees

1. You should be aware that you are free to withdraw from this study at any time.
2. All information collected during these interviews will be treated as confidential and no identifiable information will be disclosed to any third-parties.*
3. Further consent will be obtained from you in the event of direct quotations being used in the final thesis or related publications prior to completion.

*In the unlikely event that, during the course of an interview it becomes apparent that a participant is in significant or immediate danger, then the researcher will be obliged to disclose information to an appropriate third party.

Results

The primary use of the data collected during these interviews will be towards completion of the researcher's doctoral thesis. A secondary use of the data will be towards possible publications relating to the thesis such as journal articles and potentially the eventual publication of the thesis itself.

Risks and Benefits

There are very low, if any, risks associated with participation in this research. The research project has undergone a Research Ethics Review through the University of Birmingham.

It is anticipated that you will benefit from the opportunity to discuss and listen to the testimonies and experiences of other members of your congregation, some of whom you perhaps will not have discussed these issues with before. The researcher expects that you will be encouraged by this opportunity to unpack these testimonies together and gain a deeper understanding of experiences of God in the life of your congregation.

Recording

Audio recordings of all interviews will be taken. This is to assist the researcher in accurately representing the information given and freeing her to engage fully with the discussion. All recordings will be transcribed by the researcher personally. No audio or written records will be distributed to any other third parties without written permission of the relevant participant. Full written transcriptions of the interview will be available to participants on request.

Any Questions?

Should you have any questions about the research project please feel free to contact the researcher directly on the e-mail address provided above. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your information.

.....

Consent

I confirm that I have read and understood the nature of the research project and my role as a participant. With this understanding, I give my consent to participate in the interview process.

Name: _____ Life Group: _____

Signature: _____ Date: _____

I would/would not be willing to be considered for a one-to-one interview later in the year.

Email: _____ Tel: _____

APPENDIX 2b: Example consent form for in-depth interviews

Name:.....Signature:

I consent to be interviewed by Grace Milton for the purpose of her research into Pentecostal Conversion.

I understand that this interview will be recorded for transcription purposes. I understand that no-one other than the researcher will transcribe the interview or have access to its transcript.

I understand that should the researcher wish to directly quote this interview in her thesis or other published material, she will seek my written consent.

APPENDIX 3: Sample interview transcript. Interview with Carole on 2nd October 2012. Carole had participated in a focus group interview before being recruited for this in-depth interview. Some details have been changed to protect her identity.

Interviewer: Tell me about your walk with God.

Carole: I always kind of split up my conversion story because I became a Christian I would say when I was about 4 or 5 and I only knew about Pentecostalism when I was 15.

So I was brought up in an Anglican church, [information removed] but I would consider the church I was brought up in was quite nominal so people would, I suppose it had become very religious so people would just go to church and maybe say the prayers and stand up, sit down whenever they were told to. But it wasn't very personal to them. Even my parents wouldn't have understood the concept of really committing your life and I suppose a full on personal relationship with God, they wouldn't have understood that. But my mum would always have read bible stories to us going to bed and she was very conscious of I suppose living a good life and for us to know about God. So she'd had a lot of input from that point of view but there were neighbours of ours that were full on evangelical Christians and they invited us to some children's activities.

So Saturdays I would go to like a bible club and they would tell us stories from the bible, we would do a craft and things like that. I remember one particular day, now I was very very young, I couldn't tell you what age but it must have been only 4 or 5, on particular day this missionary was there. Well they called her a missionary but she was from Northern Ireland so I don't know how much of a missionary she was coming to us. Whoa. But anyway she said, I just remember distinctly, even as a kid I remember her saying if you want to go to heaven you need to ask Jesus into your heart and ask him to forgive your sin. So just as a small kid I closed my eyes and I prayed. I said "dear Jesus please come into my heart" and that was it really. The other kids were kind of giggling at me because they could see that I was responding straight away. When I got home my brother and sisters were kind of laughing and saying "oh Carole got saved" as a derogatory kind of thing. "Got saved" because it was, I suppose at home I suppose some people in the mainline denominations used to criticise people from evangelical backgrounds. So that was it really.

I mean I just grew up hearing bible stories at night from my mum but would still have a hunger for God. There was a young girl in my class at school and she was from a very strong Christian home and later she became Pentecostal and introduced me to Pentecostalism and she's still a very good friend of mine. She would have encouraged me to go to children's camps and things like that. So going to children's camps I suppose learnt again more about my walk with God and this was more or less during the summer but I was always very conscious of God and she would have loaned me books and things like that that would have helped me along the way. Then I moved house so I completely moved away from her and when I was about 15 then I met up with her again and she told me about people being healed

and her brother and herself were very much involved in mission work. They'd heard stories I suppose of people being healed and they had since then joined a Pentecostal church so I could see a big difference in her. She told me about people speaking in tongues and I suppose how alive our faith can be and how relevant if we want it to be. I envied her and I could see something different in her. She invited me to her home then and when I went there I asked her could she speak a little bit in tongues for me and I think I've told you this story before...

Please tell it again.

C: She spoke a little bit in tongues and I really liked it. There was something in my heart that really I suppose yearned for that because it just seemed so real to me and it wasn't...I suppose at times I'd had doubts about my own commitment and my own faith because I hadn't the follow up or the discipleship. So I suppose there were periods of my time when I doubted my salvation. I had made that commitment and that prayer several times actually over the years. Yes so there was one night anyway where I had come back and I had said...I had made this agreement with God that I wanted the language that my friend had. In my very basic terms, I didn't know any theology about it or anything. So I went to bed and brought a book with me and rather than sleeping I said to God, "I'm not going to sleep until I get it". That's my funny story. So I read all the verses about the Holy Spirit. I suppose a lot of verses in the New Testament and then yes I just felt a heat in my chest, I felt a fire and then this strange language started coming out of my mouth. Then the next morning I just checked again to make sure it was still there, and it was.

So that's it. So I don't know what else...

So what has happened since then? You said before you did not feel like you had been disciplined properly. What has changed? Has anything changed?

C: Oh yes I think so. I suppose there was a huge factor in my growth with God was my friend, Mary is her name. Even still today she would give me advice and different things but over the years I have grown to love the bible and have concentrated a lot on reading that and I went to study Theology. Another huge impact for me was doing mission trips. My friend, as I mentioned they were very much involved in mission trips, going into Hong Kong and different things and I started going on mission trips as well. I think that really boosted my faith because I really had to pray hard, I had to work with a team and different things like that, so it was really a stretch of my faith and then being a regular member of a church was a big help as well. When I moved away from home, I trained as a healthcare professional, I moved to another city when I was 18 and I joined a Pentecostal church there and that church, I suppose it had a big emphasis on prayer and intercession and at the time as well around 1995, 1996 those years there was quite an outpouring around the time of the Toronto blessing and later on Pensacola. Even though obviously this was not those places there were people who would have travelled over there and come back and would have brought some of the enthusiasm and fire of that. I remember going up for prayer and people speaking into my life, people giving words of knowledge, prophecies and things like that. That really boosted me as well because obviously it's like God...having an encounter with God where God really seems

to speak into my life and obviously that person had heard from God and knew what was going on. So that was a big encouragement and then obviously studying the bible as well and through the years going through difficult times, going through crises and really feeling God's presence and hearing our...yes just hearing from God and having answered prayer. All those kind of things have helped me to grow.

Do you have, or can you think of any examples of answered prayer? They do not have to be really personal.

C: Yes. Several times. I had a very, I suppose a very close, there's been times in my life when God has been really really close and I remember one instance really stands out which was when I went to Nepal on a missions trip. Reinhard Bonnke, you may know he's a famous evangelist, a German evangelist who goes to Africa and places but I joined his intercession team to pray for the crusade that...well crusade is an awful word but the campaign, the evangelistic campaign but I remember praying for sick people and really seeing God move on them. Not necessarily that they were healed, but at times people were seeing the Spirit and things like that but through prayer. That was a big answer and a big boost to me. [Information removed] I suppose I've had so many, do you know, through the years there have been so many answered prayers it's hard to think of one in particular really, one instance. Yes different things like exams and things.

I remember for my exams praying that God would really help me to pass the exams and I studied 5 topics and the five came up. Then the next night I prayed the same and 5 more came up, just what I had studied. So it was, for me it was more than a co-incidence, that was God answering prayer. So yes...

Just a couple of probing questions then unless you've got anything else you'd like to say?

C: Yes well it's just answered prayer, I mean every day, do you know, we get up and we feel the grace of God and yes asking God for faith. I remember recently working in the hospital and I was looking after a patient who was extremely ill, I was unwell myself at the time so I just wasn't...didn't feel in the right frame of mind for looking after the patient. Didn't feel able to and I just kept on praying for God's help and I could so much feel God's presence and God enabling me to be able to look after him. The patient actually improved even though he had been dying and just going into the store cupboard and saying "God help me I can't find what I'm looking for" and just finding it. So just really feeling that God walks with us. It isn't just I suppose having lost something and finding it. Not something as specific as that always but just feeling his presence at all times.

So in big things and little things.

C: Yes and especially the times I've heard God it'll be the times I've really been praying for direction from him. You know, where should I go for my studies? And things like that and then I'll feel he's really indicating this one particular place I should go and then to have gone

there and have got the interview or whatever or have gone well there. So it's looking to him for direction really.

Just clarifying, how did you then end up at the Lighthouse Christian Centre?

C: [Information Removed] I felt that God was telling me to do postgraduate study so there was...one of our professors had just finished at Birmingham and he recommended coming to Birmingham to study and so that's why I applied to Birmingham. Well at the time the colleges were just up past Lighthouse Christian Fellowship so I used to walk past it and I thought it just looked like a nice friendly place. So I went in once and loved it so I started going there.

What was it about the church that you liked?

C: Well I just think it's such a well rounded church really because I've been in churches where the worship has been good and the preaching has been terrible or visa versa but I really really enjoyed the worship and then the preaching was really good quality as well. Pastor Eric, I think he's a really good communicator and dives into the word of God and then makes it entertaining as well. I thought there's a real sense of community there as well; people are very friendly and warm to one another and at the time as well I was involved in the missions committee there where they were also reaching out to other people and they still have that heart to reach out to others. I found during my time as well when, you know, things have gone wrong, the church has been really there for me so it's been a really good sense of family.

You go to a life group.

C: Yes.

How did you get involved in that?

C: Well I was always interested in intercession so when I heard about prayer group I wanted to join that. So I didn't necessarily go to a specific care group if you like, it was more the prayer team I wanted to be part of because that was what I had done before. So that's the one I joined. I did go to some of the other prayer groups but just was one thing enough really.

Was it intercession specifically that you were looking for in a care group?

C: Yes.

Was there anything else?

C: No it was just the intercession really. I go to other groups to...I don't know to, like I do to the international cafe to help, just doing the more evangelistic kind of work. So it was the intercession that I was interested in because...I enjoyed that care group because people seemed to be really interested in prayer. Well obviously. Whereas the other care groups were more social and I was more interested in I suppose going deeper in learning how to pray and then when we did discuss spiritual matters they seemed very mature and very, they were able

to talk in great depth and stuff like that. I enjoyed that so I got a lot out of the prayer group really. That was a real source of, I suppose discipleship again if you like. I really, I've grown a lot since I've been a part of that.

Going back over some of the other questions I've got then, when you said you made your decision and became saved when you were 4 or 5 years old, between that time and when you were then 15 and were introduced to a more Pentecostal side of things, what was your faith like? Were you nominal like your parents were or was there more of a deeper understanding?

C: I think there was, I had always remembered that time so I always remember back to that time and I was very conscious to please God and that. I had an awareness that God loved me and God was present but I would wax and wane I think because I didn't have that follow-up until I was much older. Even though I did read the bible a bit I would have periods where I wouldn't and it was hard not being part of a lively group. But I think God was at work just gradually in me and also he has been at work in my family as well. I'm not saying that they're heathen or anything. I suppose at the time Pentecostalism was very lively and very relevant whereas now when I look back I would be less harsh in my judgement of the so-called nominal churches because I think, especially for older people, that's the style of worship they enjoy. That's not to say they don't have a faith in God just because they're not jumping up and down. I suppose at the time that's what it seemed like.

How did your family and friends at the time react when you became more Pentecostal in your worship?

C: Well at the time I was very careful how I communicated it to my family and I would go to church occasionally with my friend but not all the time because I didn't want to annoy them. I felt when I was 18 I could go wherever I wanted to but at first my Mum thought it was a cult and she was not impressed at all. The friends that she knew were influencing me she had questions about them as well. She thought that they were very overpowering and they were just trying to drag her innocent daughter along. But I think over time when she realised that my faith was real and that I was just interested in pleasing God, I wasn't interested in dragging anyone else along. You know, I was more interested in people's relationship with God rather than which church they went to, then she calmed down a bit.

You've kind of answered this one a little bit but I kind of wanted to go a bit deeper into how do you know now, and how did you first know that God is real? It's a deep question so you can take some time to think about it.

C: How do I know God is real? For me it would be very much, obviously answered prayer because that points to God being real but I suppose as Pentecostals we'd be more like this than other people in that we would sense his presence, I suppose would be the easiest way I can describe it. That when we're worshipping we can feel...how do you describe it...you can feel his presence, you can feel that warmth, you can feel the spirit moving in our heart...you know, the spirit moves our hearts and we have a sense of joy. At really heightened moments,

like the initial time when I was baptised in the Holy Spirit, yes just an excitement and at times laughing with joy because of the holy spirit. I suppose those experiences really...it wasn't an argument that convinced me, it was more experiences; as a typical Pentecostal.

When you just said back when you were 'baptised in the holy spirit', were you referring to when you were asking for tongues?

C: When I was 15 yes.

Just to clarify. I don't want to assume. You touched on this a bit when you said that after your initial salvation when you were little you kind of doubted your salvation and said the prayer many times and all that. Do you ever now or since your more Pentecostal days, as it were, do you ever doubt your faith?

C: There was one period of time when I did. I went through a very dark period really where I had a terrible experience in Nepal and I think some of it was very oppressive and when I came back I was just hurting so much. God didn't seem close to me and I think I kept pushing him away as well and I just felt so much pain I thought God can't be here and I did doubt at that time and I said "God are you real?" But the way I rationalised it was a bit odd really because I thought, I knew I was called to do missions and I said "God you have to be real" but I did at that time doubt my salvation because I was going through a very dark period for a year or two. Occasionally at times I would have passing doubts but then it would be a time when I hadn't spent much time in prayer or reading the word and then when I go back to that it just seems like bananas again, I'm fine again but I think everyone if they're honest, has these flashes that go through our mind, "I wonder is this all real?"

So do you think then that praying and reading the bible then is the way to cope with that?

C: Yes fellowship with other people and I think as well even though people joke about Pentecostals being anti-intellectual I think sometimes just reading a good book with a good argument about the reason to believe is also profitable. But I've more and more over the past few years I've really seen the power in the word of God so I really think, as it says itself it's alive, it's like a double edged sword so I think reading that really is the best thing to spur on our faith. I mean, you know, when we talk to non-Christians and they doubt us I suppose we do get...our faith does get questioned when we're out in the...just in the secular world really or workplace. But we're very much aware that what we believe is almost foolishness, we believe in someone who rose from the dead and died on a cross but yes I just think that the word of God is one of the most powerful things.

So you were brought up Anglican and you have, since you were about 18 been going to Pentecostal churches. Do you consider yourself to be Pentecostal?

C: Yes.

What does being Pentecostal mean to you?

C: Pentecostal. I don't think it's just going to a Pentecostal church. I think, no I don't really know where my theology stands anymore because I've begun to question I suppose what I was taught because I was trained in a Pentecostal seminary. We were taught there that you needed to be baptised with the Holy Spirit and because I was brought...I suppose the college I went to was Assemblies of God their stance would be the evidence of that would be speaking in tongues. But I've begun to question that a bit because I've begun to see people move in other gifts and not necessarily speaking in tongues and some very close friends of mine would consider themselves Pentecostal because they enjoy that form of worship but even though they've really prayed for the gift of tongues they've never got it. So I don't really...my answer is a bit vague because for me in my heart of hearts I still think it's some experience of being baptised in the Holy Spirit but I couldn't really define what that is anymore because I suppose I've met really genuine people who haven't shared that. But I suppose my experience was so dramatic there's part of me thinks everyone should experience that but I suppose everybody's walk is different. The older you get the less black and white you get.

So would you align yourself more with the Elim branch of Pentecostalism?

C: Well to be honest I never...the speaking in tongues bit I was never fully convinced by because it doesn't say it in the bible that you have to speak in tongues. It was more what they pointed out to us in seminary was that there were so many examples of that in Acts that they were praying for baptism in the Holy Spirit and then they spoke in tongues. So it was more an example from silence really and they'd admit that themselves. I think they're questioning it as a movement. Elim, I've never really looked at their statement of faith to be honest but it just seems to...in practice everything seemed to fit the same way so I never really examined it but I'd be quite happy to think that people are Pentecostal...I think there has to be something about the gifts. I think that's our distinctive. There must be something about the spiritual gifts. That's where I'd stand.

It's not an easy question.

C: No because I'd love to say maybe experiencing God in worship as well as part of that. I don't know if we can write it in stone though because obviously we base everything on the bible and it's not black and white in the bible.

Just the last of my questions, what role specifically has the Holy Spirit played in your life? You've mentioned lots of examples.

C: A massive role. I suppose of all the...of the three members of the trinity the Holy Spirit would be the one I would relate to the most, being a Pentecostal. In prayer I'd often invite the Holy Spirit to come. When I pray for other people I often pray for the infilling of the Holy Spirit, even if I know as I see it that they're baptised in the Holy Spirit I would invite the Holy Spirit to come and fill them. I would try in my life to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit, to what he's saying because the way I see it is Father God and Jesus are in heaven but the Holy Spirit is with us and living in us. So I would be extremely conscious of the Holy Spirit, probably more so than the other members of the trinity. I would thank Jesus for my salvation, I would

look to Father God probably for requests of help or whatever but it would be the Holy Spirit I would relate to personally.

Do you think he was working in your life before you were baptised in the Spirit?

C: Yes. Yes definitely. I believe for anybody even to...you know like my initial conversion I was very young, I think the Holy Spirit had to be involved in that and then all through the years even though there was probably, as I was saying I was hot and cold and I was on and off with my faith, I believe the Holy Spirit was moving gently but gradually and steadily. I was at a place of real hunger in my life as a teenager searching and feeling insecure when my friend told me about Pentecostalism. So I don't think it was a co-incidence that I was prepared and eagerly looking for some kind of reality when I met up with my friends and they introduced me to Pentecostalism. So I think that's how the Holy Spirit works with the timing of things and preparing our hearts.

I have a task for you now, unless there is anything else that you would like to say specifically.

C: No there's not.

I have got 21 post-it notes. One is blank so 20. I'm going to put them out in front of you and each one has a different word relating to God or a name of God. Some of them are very obvious, like these ones, others are a bit more abstract. They are all biblical, some are just a bit more obscure than you would expect.

What I would like you to do is, I'll give you 5 minutes maximum and I would like you to pick 4 of these words that you think best describe or relate to your experience of God in your life. The blank one is if you think there is a word that is very important but I have not included. So if you think there is something that is missing you can add an extra word. So you have 5 minutes. You can take less than that if you want. I will then ask you to explain why you have picked the ones you have.

C: Okay.

Okay let me see which are your 4?

C: If I were to choose another word I would put Spirit there.

Okay, that is fine. Which are your four?

C: Saviour, Friend, Love and Father.

Could you explain your choices?

C: Saviour, well obviously I believe that Jesus saved us from our sin and gave us eternal life and even throughout life when there's problems he can save us.

Is that personal? You said that Jesus saved "us" but is that personal as well?

C: Personal yes. I believe he saved me. Friend, as I've explained through my testimony I feel like God is my friend and I feel like I can talk to him about anything and all through life he never leaves me and is close to me. My best companion, doesn't judge me, if something goes wrong he helps me to get over it and my best friend sticks closer than a brother. Love, well basically this stands out because God is love and I believe the biggest need we have as human beings is to need love and I think that's the biggest problem in the world I suppose that where the relationship with God had broken down if people don't feel love then there's all sorts of problems. So I believe that for me, you want it to be personal to me though, I feel God does love me and his love I suppose goes back to salvation again; he sent Jesus to die for us. I'm very conscious that God loves me. Father, there were times when I found this difficult to relate to, even though I knew it in the English language the word Father but I suppose like everyone would say our own relationship with our father person...our earthly father can influence that sometimes. I feel very much now that God is my father and he's the best father ever looking out for me and wanting the best for me.

What changed then?

C: Actually I went through a very difficult spell where I...I have a very good earthly father first of all but I suppose he can be very bad tempered. That really affected me as a kid so I went through a time of healing from that and now my relationship with my earthly father is good and I can also relate to my heavenly father in a loving way now.

Excellent. The missing one you said was Spirit. Why do you think that should be there?

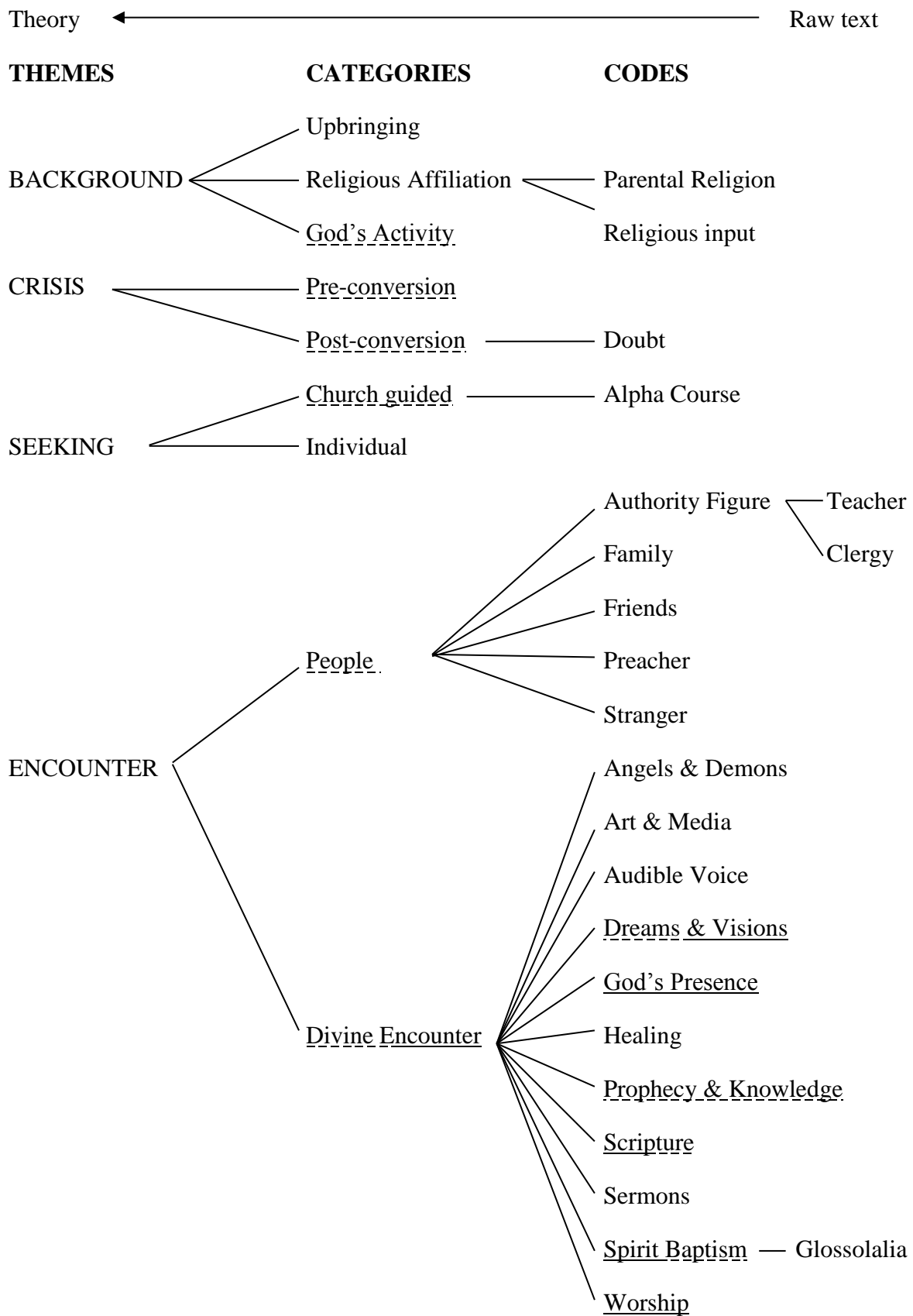
C: I think that should be there because I suppose everything that I've said to you, that it's the Holy Spirit that I really relate to. I suppose when I say the word Spirit I don't think of something far away, I think of the Holy Spirit living in us, living in me and you know I often pray that God would minister Spirit to spirit so I'm very conscious that we have a spirit and his Spirit ministers through our spirits. It's not a spooky word for me, it's a nice word.

No that is fair enough. Excellent that is it.

C: Finished?

You are done, fantastic. Thank you.

APPENDIX 4: Representation of movement from raw text to themes in data coding

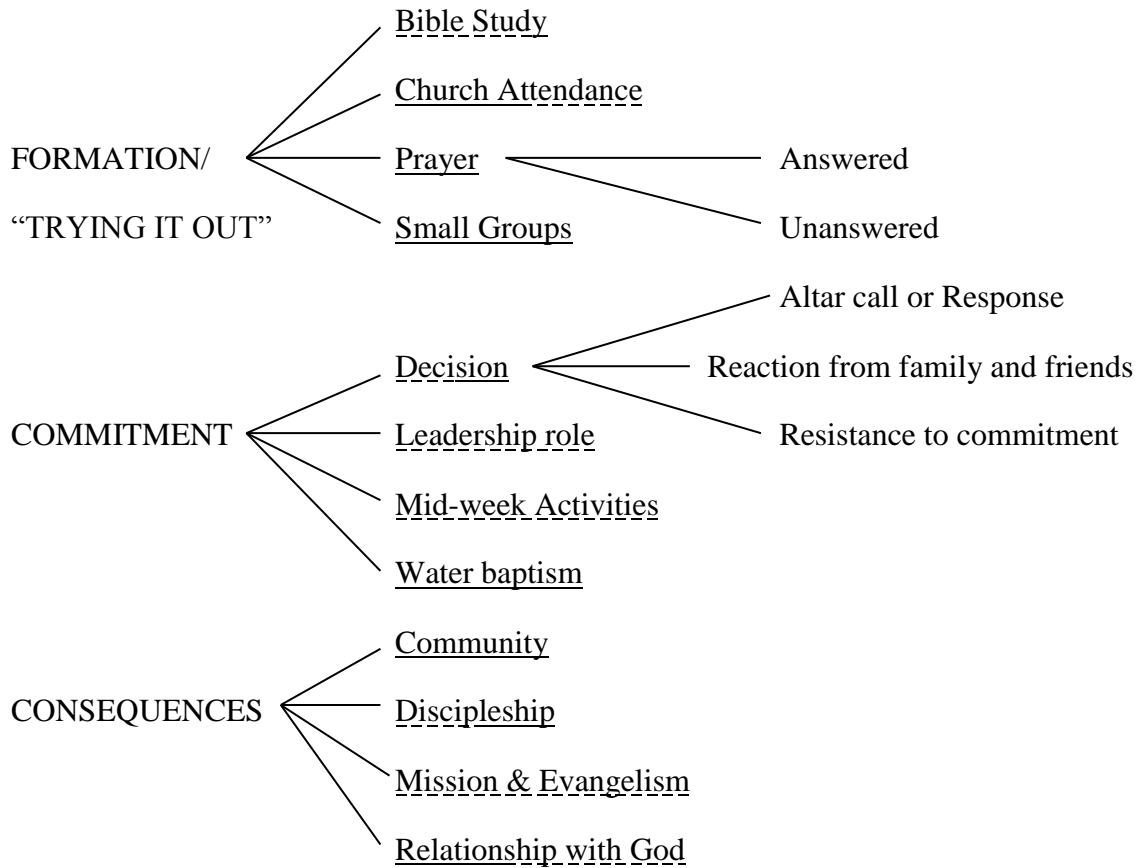


Theory ← _____ Raw text

THEMES

CATEGORIES

CODES



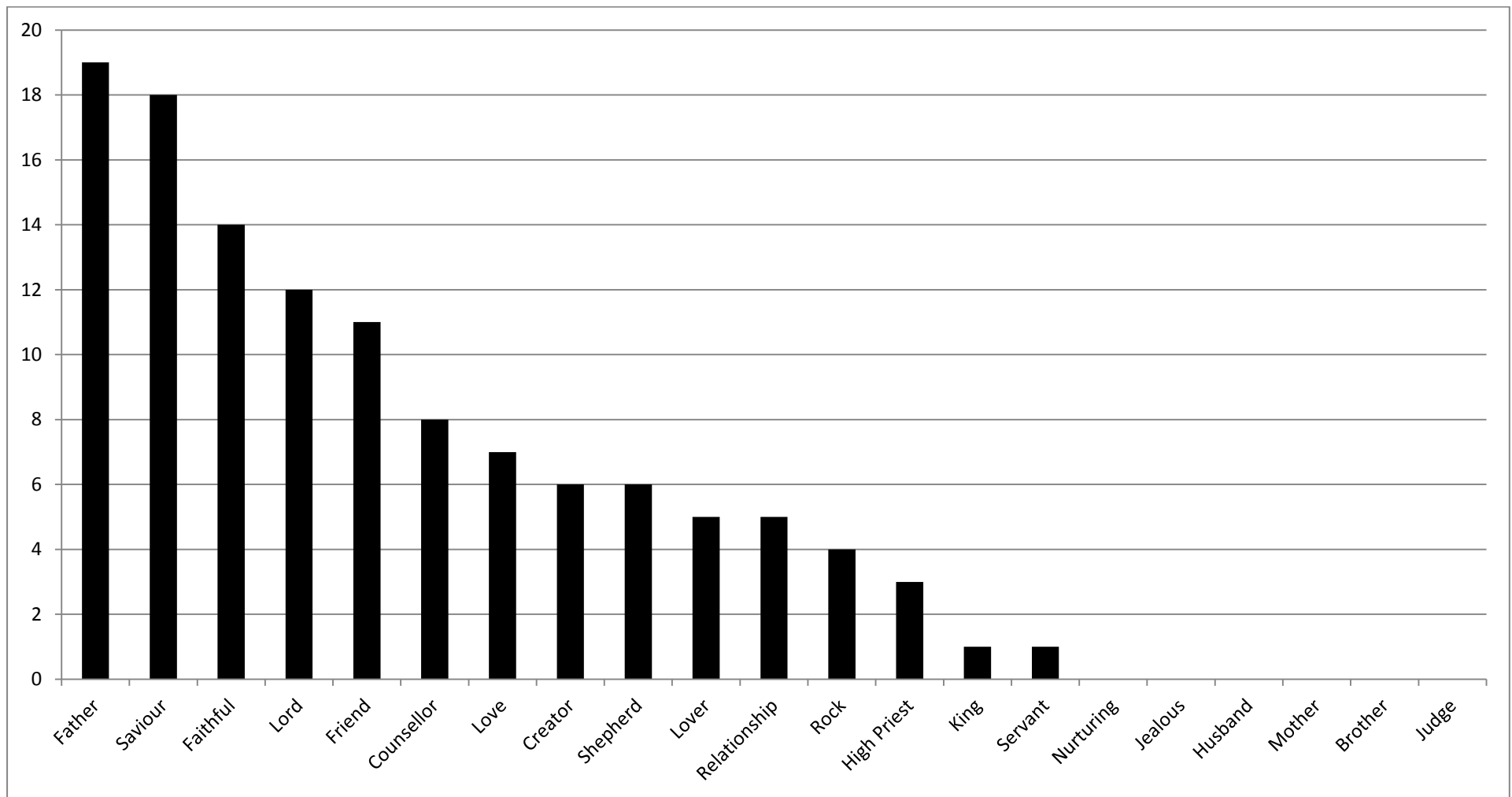
IDENTITY = _____

DESTINY = _____*

All codes and categories could be attributed to Rambo's stages. In addition, the two overarching themes of identity and destiny run throughout these themes.

*Categories which are underlined by a combination of a bold and broken line, include both identity and destiny in interviews.

APPENDIX 5: Frequency of words chosen to describe God during in-depth interviews with members of LCF. Results based on 30 respondents each choosing four words (from a choice of 21) which they felt best described their experience of and relationship with God.



APPENDIX 6: Combination of words chosen by 30 in-depth interview participants

Name	M/F	Word Choices			
Anna	F	Saviour	Counsellor	Shepherd	Relationship
Beth	F	Saviour	Father	Lord	Creator
Carole	F	Saviour	Father	Friend	Love
Adam	M	Counsellor	Friend	Relationship	Faithful
Doreen	F	Saviour	Counsellor	Lord	Shepherd
Ellen	F	Friend	Relationship	Love	Faithful
Fiona	F	Saviour	Lord	Creator	Faithful
Grace	F	Saviour	Father	Lord	Love
Hannah	F	Saviour	Lover	Relationship	High Priest
Brendan	M	Saviour	Counsellor	Father	High Priest
Christopher	M	Saviour	Counsellor	Lover	Faithful
Darren	M	Father	Lover	Relationship	Faithful
Irene	F	Father	Lord	Love	Creator
Julie	F	Saviour	Father	Friend	High Priest
Eric	M	Saviour	Father	Friend	Lord
Frank	M	Father	Lord	Faithful	Rock
Gareth	M	Saviour	Father	Lord	Faithful
Hugh	M	Saviour	Friend	Lord	Creator
Ian	M	Saviour	Father	Shepherd	Love
Jack	M	Father	Friend	Lord	Shepherd
Kathleen	F	Father	Friend	Faithful	Servant
Laura	F	Counsellor	Father	Lover	Faithful
Maddy	F	Father	Lover	Faithful	Rock
Kenneth	M	Friend	Shepherd	Creator	Faithful
Naomi	F	Saviour	Friend	Faithful	Rock
Olivia	F	Father	Shepherd	King	Love
Luke	M	Saviour	Counsellor	Father	Lord
Paula	F	Friend	Lord	Love	Faithful
Rebekah	F	Saviour	Father	Creator	Rock
Sarah	F	Saviour	Counsellor	Father	Faithful

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