The talk, dynamics and theological practice

of Bible-study groups:

A qualitative empirical investigation

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Presented for the degree of PhD

School of Religious and Theological Studies

Cardiff University

June 2009

UMI Number: U585245

UMI
Dissertation Publishing

ProQuest

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Summary

This thesis maps a qualitative empirical investigation of the talk, dynamics and theological practice of Bible-study groups. Chapter 2 locates this in the field of practical theology, demonstrating only a rather tenuous link between practical theological reflection on biblical interpretation and the practice of churches. This clarifies the aim of the thesis: to investigate the practice of Bible-study groups, as a contribution to the practical theology of biblical interpretation.

Chapters 3 and 4 consider the methodology of the investigation (including in operation), bringing together interests from ethnography and discourse analysis, in relation to a wider frame of action research. Chapters 5 to 7 of the thesis account for the field work of the research, carried out through meetings with the three Bible-study groups, recording of data, transcription, coding and further analysis. Analytical concerns include the speech-exchange patterns of group meetings and the linguistic resources employed, in order to investigate how interpretative activity is achieved in the interaction between group participants. A particular interest is in the way different voices interrupt each other, and re-contextualise the conversation; but also contribute to dialogue, especially between authoritative interpretations and critical questions from participants' experience. Comparisons are drawn with discourse in medical contexts and of scientists.

Chapters 8 and 9 offer a comparative study of the three groups: of group dynamics; and of the dynamics of interpretative dialogue. They also provide a rich picture of the practice of Bible-study, which includes sensual, ritual, relational and theological dimensions, key to which is the critical recruitment of texts and other voices, in order to interpret the relationship between God, group participants and others. God is experienced as incarnate in this interaction; but also transcends the dialogue. Chapter 10 concludes the thesis, identifying questions for further research and offering suggestions designed to enhance Bible-study practice.

University Declarations

DECLARATION

This work has not previously been accepted in substance for any degree and is not concurrently submitted in candidature for any degree.

Signed ....(candidate)

Date ....

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of PhD

Signed ....(candidate)

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STATEMENT 2

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references.

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STATEMENT 3

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available for photocopying and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

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Acknowledgements

Notation for transcriptions of conversations

Adapted from (Antaki, 2004)

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(1s)	Longer pause with length in seconds
↑↓	Start of rise, or fall in pitch
[	Start of overlapping speech (used in turns of both speakers)
.hh hh	In-breath (with .), or out-breath
heh	Conventional indication of restrained laughter
hahh	Indication of less restrained laughter
wo(h)rd	(h) indicates laughter bubbling up within a word
wor-	- indicates sharp cut-off of word
wo:rd	: indicates the elongation of the preceding sound
( )	Unclear speech, sometimes with a guess at the word(s)
word=	= indicates that there is no discernible gap between words
=word	(used at the end of the first word and the beginning of the next)
word WORD	Underlining indicates louder speech; capitals louder still
°word°	° indicates quieter speech between the degree signs
>< <>	Inward arrows enclose faster speech; outward arrows, slower speech
→	Indicates significant line of speech
(( ))	Double brackets provide information that is difficult to record otherwise

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The nature of the research

This research is a qualitative empirical investigation of the talk, dynamics and theological practice of Bible-study groups. The investigation involved field work with three groups in rural Suffolk, with whom I met five or six times in each case, participating in their activities and seeking their perspectives on Bible-study. This introduction offers an initial rationale for the research, locates it within relevant fields of study and identifies its distinct contribution to knowledge.

1.2 Why study Bible-study groups?

Bible-study groups appear widespread within the Christian churches. Existing research discussed in chapter 2, will provide examples of Bible-study groups in the United Kingdom, North America, Scandinavia, Southern Africa and Latin America. In North America the practice is numerically strong. Wuthnow estimates that between 15 and 20 million people in the United States are involved in such groups, or one adult in ten (Wuthnow, 1994a, 68). Statistical information about such groups in the United Kingdom is not so well established. But one survey sent to 1004 ministers and church leaders with a 43% response rate, is at least indicative of the prevalence of the practice. 88% of respondents reported that their church ran study groups nearly all of which used the Bible (Georgiou, 2000).

Despite this prevalence there appears to be no history of Bible-study groups[1]. There is also no straightforward definition of the practice. Working from the literature considered in chapter 2, and the field work of the research, the common factors would seem to include the following. These are small groups (although in America that might mean up to 25 people), usually associated with larger churches or congregations. They offer a less formal way for members of churches to meet, discuss their faith and other matters and support each other, than is provided by

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[1] This conclusion is based on numerous searches, using a range of keywords via a number of relevant databases, throughout the duration of the research project.

gathering for worship[2]. Reading, understanding and interpreting the Bible is central to the group identity, but they may also study other religious books, or subjects. There is usually an expectation that reading the Bible together will offer members insight into their lives and their faith. Other aspects of such groups appear to be much more varied. Venues often include people's homes, but also churches and workplaces. Leadership can be exercised by ordained or lay people. Frequency of meeting could be weekly, fortnightly, monthly, or occasional; but they are commonly regarded as a regular part of the lives of members. Approaches to the interpretation of the Bible can range from a 'scripturalist' approach (prevalent in North America according to (Bielo, 2007a)), to a liberationist or contextual approach (West, 2003, 2006). And the variety of approaches has generated a wealth of resources: commentaries, study guides and versions of the Bible, as well as books that offer a programmatic approach to Bible-study[3].

What makes this practice interesting is that Bible-study groups appear to represent meeting places for more than just their members: for the activities of informal learning and mutual support; for discussion of what the Bible says and issues from both church life and wider society; for expert and lay points of view, ways of reasoning and reflecting; for insights from academic, confessional and practical perspectives on biblical interpretation; for people and their sacred text.

1.3 The research as an exercise in practical theology

That such interests and perspectives coincide in Bible-study groups, indicates that their investigation is located within the field of practical theology. Partly this is because the groups are an aspect of the practice of the churches. Partly it is because they themselves constitute an exercise in practical theology, that is hermeneutical and reflective[4]. The initial working understanding of this project is that, group members participate in a dialogue involving: the Bible, existing interpretations, experience and different interpretative approaches; and further that this may generate an understanding of the interpretation(s) of the text that in some way illuminates

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[2] (Wuthnow, 1994a) argues that support, in particular, is a vital aspect of these groups. This is borne out by this research.
[3] Three of the best known programmatic guides are (Fee & Stuart, 2003; Weber, 1981; Wink, 1990)
[4] This will be explored further in section 2.3.1 (pp.19-22)

members' lives, their faith and their relationship with God – their wider Christian practice.

It might be expected, therefore, that practical theology would already offer investigations of Bible-study groups. With rare exceptions, this is not the case[5]. Chapter 2 will consider the context for this lack. It will show that, although there is reflection within the field of practical theology on the use of the Bible, this is driven largely by rather abstract approaches, derived from biblical studies and hermeneutics. Further, there is only a rather tenuous link between such reflection and the lived practice of churches. The chapter will demonstrate, therefore, a marked lack of understanding about how biblical interpretation is contextualised within the living practice called Bible-study.

Accordingly, the aim of this research project (further clarified in 2.3.2, pp.22-23) will be to address this lacuna: to investigate the practice of Bible-study groups and how it is facilitated, as a contribution to the practical theology of biblical interpretation.

1.4 The research as an empirical investigation

The decision that this investigation should start from lived practice, demands an empirical approach. And in search of an in-depth description of practice, it will be a qualitative approach[6].

Given, in addition, that I approached this project as a practitioner in biblical studies, and in facilitating biblical interpretation and Bible-study groups, one dimension of the methodology identified for this research is action research, understood to be 'self-reflective enquiry' by practitioners (Kemmis, 1993, 177). During the research an initial action research approach involving a significant degree of intervention from me in group process, was modified, resulting in one which focused more on shared practice in groups. Action research continued to offer questions about my role as practitioner-researcher, and about the management of Bible-study groups. Further,

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[5] See, for example, in the United Kingdom, (Hall, 2003)
[6] This will be justified in relation to the limitations of relevant quantitative approaches to provide an effective picture of group practice. See the discussion of (Village, 2007) in 2.4.2, pp.32-36

the conclusion to the thesis will offer suggestions about enhancing their future practice.

A further methodological dimension, chosen to enable analysis of data is a linguistic ethnography rooted in discourse analysis. This was chosen firstly because it views linguistic interaction as the site where social reality is constructed[7] - very much in keeping with groups who are negotiating an interpretative social activity. Secondly, it was selected because the practice of transcription allows for the 'entextualisation' and 'recontextualisation' of different voices (Bucholtz, 2001, 179), making practice visible (Silverman, 1997a, 212), and allowing for continued observation and reflexive analysis of the roles and contributions of participants, including me. It will be argued that this assists the practitioner-researcher, by rendering a familiar practice sufficiently 'strange' to be the focus of research[8].

The discourse analytical approach was realised through meetings with the three groups, observational notes, recording of data (including audio-recording), transcription, coding of transcriptions and further analysis (including comparative analysis of the different groups). Particular analytical concerns were with how transcripts reveal the way in which conversation in the groups is 'orchestrated' (Dingwall, 1980). This kind of attention to patterns of conversation, or 'speech-exchange' patterns (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997) will reveal ways in which Bible-study talk is different from mundane conversation, and a distinct 'activity type' (Levinson, 1992; Sarangi, 2000).

In its focus on how Bible-study talk happens, this research roots an understanding of practice in the detail of social interaction. This is in keeping with a small body of research into Bible-study that is concerned with discourse, especially (Bielo, 2007a, 2007b; Forstorp, 1990, 1991; Lehtinen, 2005). What is original to this research is the work done on linguistic resources employed by group members. In particular, the concept of 'voices' drawn from the study of social interaction in the medical context (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004), elucidates the interaction of different interpretative approaches in the conversation of Bible-study groups; and

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[7] See further, section 3.3.3, pp.58-61.
[8] See further, sections 9.2, pp.256-262, and 10.3, pp.289-292.

how the different 'voices' of Bible-study interrupt each other, or participate in dialogue, offering alternative contextualisations of the biblical text and its interpretations. The voices are further located in 'cultural domains'(Atkinson, 1995, 18), including a modern domain which attributes authority to the text (in different ways) and a contemporary domain, from which are drawn the concerns of wider society (about such matters as 'inclusivity'). The 'empiricist' and 'contingent' strands of the discourse of scientists (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984) generate a characterisation of two key voices in Bible-study talk: a 'canonical' voice and, again, a 'contingent' voice, which supply alternative, and sometimes competing, 'warrants' for 'claims' about the text (Toulmin, 1958). The 'canonical' voice tends to offer inherited interpretations; the 'contingent' voice tends to offer questions drawn from participants' experience.

1.5 The distinctive practical theology contribution of the research

The other distinctive and original contribution made by this research is to develop from empirical study a practical theology of Bible-study groups. This theology is, therefore, both practice-driven and inter-disciplinary.

The theological reflection is rooted in a rich picture of the practice of Bible-study, which includes sensual, ritual, relational and theological dimensions[9]. This leads to key conclusions. One of these is that the Bible-study is indeed a practical theological practice in its own right, driven in the groups studied by a hermeneutic which recruits biblical texts and other voices of God, in order to interpret the relationship between God, group participants and others. As part of this hermeneutic, all sources of God's word are open to critical appraisal, including biblical passages, although the Bible remains the senior participant in the group, shaping but not limiting the conversation.

A second finding is that God is to some extent incarnate in the interaction between text, inherited interpretations and participants' experience; but also transcends the dialogue, offering a 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) for their interpretative work. However, the incarnate dimension of God is experienced more tangibly as different voices are spoken and heard, than the transcendent aspect, perceived as the more

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[9] See section 9.4.1-9.4.4, pp.265-281, for a description of these dimensions of practice.

elusive 'insight'. Particular evidence for the transcendence of God lies in the fact that God is not the object of group critique. Critique of the sources of God's word is predicated on their humanity.

The thesis concludes by identifying questions for further research into Bible-study, and by offering reflections about the development of its practice. These are constructed round musical metaphors. Consideration is given to the orchestration of Bible-study, developing its repertoire and enhancing its performance by cultivating an ear for its polyphony.

Chapter 2
Origins, location and direction of the research

2.1 Introduction

This chapter begins to establish how the approach and parameters of the empirical investigation of Bible-study groups were developed. The next section of the chapter identifies a number of research interests that contribute to the aim of this project. These are rooted in two reflections on my practice as priest and educator (appendix 1).

The chapter then locates the research within practical theology. This is not only because Bible-study is a faith practice (an appropriate focus for practical theology), but also because arguably it is itself an exercise in practical theology – involving the interpretation of faith traditions within a contemporary context. Locating the project in this way allows for clarification of its aim, which is to investigate the practice of Bible-study groups, both in its own right, and so that the practice can be better facilitated.

Consideration is given to the extent to which biblical hermeneutics and exploration of hermeneutical questions within pastoral and practical theology support this investigation. These sections establish the need for a proper empirical understanding of how the Bible is interpreted in practice, and the potential for this project to make a distinctive contribution in this area.

Finally, the chapter considers critically a range of existing research which might contribute to a practice-based understanding of the interpretation of the Bible in church communities. This gives rise to a number of methodological starting points for this project. The chapter that follows (chapter 3) builds on this, considering specific dimensions of the development of the investigation's methodology; thus continuing to establish the approach and parameters of the research.

2.2 Research interests

Much of my working life has been lived in overlapping contexts of theology. For over twenty years I have been an ordained minister within the Church of England or

the Church in Wales, involved as a practitioner in pastoral ministry. For the majority of that time I have also been employed as an educator to offer theological resources to lay and ordained people, to support their ministry. Central to both practices has been the interpretation of the Bible within theologically reflective practice, and consideration of how this hermeneutical reflection might be characterised (see Todd, 2000). Within this wider interest in how texts, especially the Bible, are involved in meaning-making, which involves faith, experience and context, is a second, specific interest in the interpretative practice of Bible-study groups.

Appendix 1 offers reflection on the significance of my background for this research. Those reflections identify a number of research interests that arise from my past practice. Reflection 1 gives rise to the following interests. First, my background in biblical studies and hermeneutics made me curious about how biblical criticism might shape the interpretation of the Bible in local churches. How does this Bible-study involve different approaches to the text (including those of biblical studies)? How aware of using particular approaches are group members? How do they make choices about which approach(es) enable them to interpret the text? In what way is their practice 'critical'?

Secondly, the experience of working with the leaders of particular Bible-study groups gave rise to an interest in how people relate their 'study' to their wider experience – What is it that enables people to read the Bible contextually? Thirdly, my involvement in the organisation of Bible-study groups in which lay people took responsibility for their own interpretation, but without the opportunity for me to evaluate that, generated the question – What enables people to take responsibility for the interpretation of the Bible?

Reflection 2, in considering different reading strategies in educational settings, identified further interests. One is in how the biblical text and/or readers' experience is privileged in their practice, and in how that privilege is constructed through particular interpretative approaches. A further interest is in whether and how reading strategies which act in these different ways can be complementary to each other - Is my assumption of the reality and value of a plurality of ways of reading justified by the practice of Bible-study groups?

2.3 Locating the research in practical theology

This section aims to locate the proposed research within practical and pastoral theology. This will facilitate an account of how specific research questions for this project have been developed from wider research interests identified above. Further, the section will look at how the research relates to existing published material in Biblical hermeneutics and on the use of the Bible in pastoral theology. This enables evaluation of how much support for this research project is to be found within such literature, and identification of the potential contribution of this research.

2.3.1 The research project as an exercise in practical theology

The case for this research project being located within practical theology can be argued at a number of levels. In keeping with the first part of the chapter, it could be argued that the research is a reflection on my practice of stimulating theological, and especially practical hermeneutical, reflection. A study of my participation in Bible-study groups might offer the kind of evaluation of practice that I felt was missing in relation to my previous involvement in Bible-study groups.

However, while retaining the objective of expanding understanding of how Bible-study can be facilitated and developed, this focus seems somewhat narrow and individualistic. Further, it is doubtful whether it could be developed effectively without a more collaborative exploration. And to understand how it is facilitated, this investigation must pay attention to understanding the practice of Bible-study itself. To say this is of course to acknowledge the likelihood of a tension between the investigation of a practice and the simultaneous consideration of how that practice is best facilitated. The interaction of these two objectives will need careful consideration (not least in relation to methodology). But investigating the practice of Bible-study groups is again a perfectly proper objective for practical theology, which is often concerned with the practice of faith communities.

Indeed it could be argued that such an investigation would be particularly appropriate because Bible-study groups are not only a faith practice, but are also themselves an exercise in practical theology – a practical theological hermeneutical activity. This receives *prima facie* confirmation in Woodward and Pattison's 'An Introduction to pastoral and practical theology' (2000, 1-19).

One of their characterisations of practical theology is that it, 'is *dialectical and disciplined*. Proceeding by way of a kind of critical conversation, many contemporary practical theologies hold in tension a number of polarities...' (Woodward & Pattison, 2000, 15f). Even on the basis of the most cursory description of Bible-study groups, it is clear that they exhibit a number of the polarities identified by Pattison and Woodward, including:

- ...The religious tradition emanating from the past and contemporary religious experience
- Particular situational realities and general theoretical principles
- What is (reality) and what might be (ideal)
- Description (what is) and prescription (what ought to be)
- Written texts and the 'texts' of present experience...
- ...The religious community and society outside the religious community

(Woodward & Pattison, 2000, 16)

A key objective of this project will, therefore, be to elucidate the dynamic tensions within the discussion of Bible-study groups, and the extent to which that is a disciplined activity. In carrying out this objective, attention will be given to whether the exploration of different polarities in groups is practical theology; whether 'dialectic' is an appropriate description; and what contribution the investigation makes to the wider understanding of practical theology.

A particular focus for this latter conversation might be the relationship between theory and practice in practical theology (another polarity that may characterise contemporary practical theologies (Woodward & Pattison, 2000, 16)). Understanding the dynamics at work in the exploration of this polarity by practical theologians is key to understanding the current identity of the discipline.

It is usual to argue that practical theology has its origins in applied theory. Often Schleiermacher is identified as the source of this approach (see e.g. Ballard & Pritchard, 1996; Graham, 1996; Lartey, 2006). However, it is also usual to identify key weaknesses of this deductive approach to theory and practice; particularly that the one-way, deductive nature of the conversation is an over-simplification of a more

complex relationship (Ballard & Pritchard, 1996; Hiltner, 2000; Lartey, 2006). Contemporary practical theologians often argue rather that experience and practice are prior to theory[10].

The result is a conversation between approaches to defining theory and practice, which mirrors theologians' experience of the complex conversation between theory and practice themselves. Definitions are commonly located in a plurality of models for relating theory and practice. Lartey, for example, discusses a wide range of approaches to practical theology each of which construes this relationship differently, including: 'applied theology'; 'applied social/human science'; 'critical conversation'; 'cycles of reflection and action'; 'practical moral reasoning'; 'liberating intercultural praxis' (2006, 74-91)[11].

The consensus amongst practical theologians is, therefore, that theory and practice are inextricably linked, and that their interrelationship is core to practical theology. The tendency is to see practice as primary and theory as serving practice, rather than driving it. Browning illustrates this, as he argues for a practice-driven theology which moves, from 'present theory-laden practice to a retrieval of normative theory-laden practice to the creation of more critically held theory-laden practices' (1991, 7). Implicit in seeing practice as primary is an understanding that practical theology must involve 'lay', as well as 'expert' perspectives and their interaction

Despite this tendency to hold practice as primary, a key question remains. This lies in the tension not so much between practice and theory, but within the concept of theory itself. Forrester (2000, 23-25) explores the origins of understandings of theory in Greek thought. He identifies a tension between Plato's understanding of theory, as pure thought arrived at through contemplation, and Aristotle's interest in *phronesis*, practical wisdom – theory related more to action and virtue. But he also reminds the reader that the tension is present <u>within</u> Aristotle, who both valued practical wisdom, and still asserted the primacy of contemplation over action (2000, 24). It would be worth considering whether a similar tension to that between 'pure' and 'practical'

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[10] Thus Lartey argues: 'Theory emerges out of disciplined reflection on observed experience. Theory is the result of, and therefore dependent upon, experience and practice.' (2006, 79)
[11] Such models are also often seen as part of an historical progression (cf. Graham, 1996, 92-96).

theory persists within practical theologies, and within the practice of Bible-study groups. Forrester points to a key epistemological feature of practical theology which might focus such consideration. Citing Guttiérrez, he points to the contemporary need for truth to be 'verified' in practice. The extent to which Bible-study involves such verification is a useful question.

Contextual theology supplies questions which broaden this investigation, through its interest in the relationship between church tradition and its cultural context (Schreiter, 1985). Bevans (1992; 2002) supplies a range of models of the interaction between the Bible/Christian tradition and culture; from the 'counter-cultural' to the 'anthropological'. This exploration of culture and tradition, facilitated by the subtlety of six interlocking models, provides an axis for investigation of Bible-study which parallels, at least to some extent, that between theory and practice, providing a cultural dimension essential to the understanding of contemporary practice and experience. Bevans offers a window through which to view the different ways in which the Christian tradition is contextualised, and perceived as normative and/or contingent.

2.3.2 The aim of the research

Locating this research project within practical theology, and in relation to contextual theology clarifies the key aim of the research. First and foremost, this thesis is concerned with an investigation of the practice of Bible-study groups, with the aim of understanding it as a practice in its own right, and how it is facilitated. A central question is: how is theory developed, expressed and regarded, as part of this practice[12]? This incorporates interests in how people bring together text, experience, interpretative approaches and resources, and how they take responsibility for interpretation. The working model, which acts as the starting point for this project, is that Bible-study groups participate in a dialogue involving: the text, its existing interpretations, experience and different interpretative approaches, expert and lay perspectives; and that this generates interpretations of the text that work for members of the group. The process of reaching the interpretations is, therefore, the theoretical work done in and by the group.

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[12] See section 2.3.1 for a discussion of how theory and practice are understood in practical theology.

This research project does not depend on a particular assumption about the outcome of the dialogue, nor about its character; but rather retains a commitment to observe the dynamics at work in Bible-study groups. This incorporates the interest identified above[13], in what is privileged in the practice of interpretation (especially in the relative weight given to the text and participants' experience). To use the language of Fowl (1998, ch.2), the research should enable the following questions to be approached: do people in Bible-study groups work with 'determinate' readings, which assume a stability to the interpretation of a particular text; or do they seek the contingent fluidity of 'anti-determinative' readings; or do they seek the balance of Fowl's 'underdetermined' readings, which hold different interpretative concerns in tension?

This latter dimension of the research will be further nuanced by incorporating the interest, central to contextual theology, in the dynamic between the Christian tradition and contemporary culture; and in how people locate themselves in relation to the cumulative weight of their faith tradition (including the history of interpretation of the Bible) and their membership of contemporary society.

Characterisation of the dynamic process at work in Bible-study groups should then provide an understanding of the extent to which Bible-study groups are engaged in practical theology, and what kind of a theology, or theologies, might be present. To what extent do members of Bible-study groups engage with what might be described as 'foundationalist' understandings of their faith, on the one hand, or more 'pragmatic' approaches to understanding their experience, on the other[14]. This might enable consideration of whether, or to what extent, Bible-study groups conform to the model of practical theology, in which 'the disclosive imperatives of transformatory practice determine the self-understanding of the community of faith and not the other way around' (Graham, 1996, 206).

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[13] See appendix 1, reflection 2.

[14] The articulation of this question is supplied by Richard Rorty (1999). This is, of course, to use Rorty's designations, while at the same time maintaining a critical distance from his critique of 'foundationalism', in the interests of an empirical approach to understanding the relationship between these two ways of thinking in Bible-study groups.

2.3.3 The contribution from biblical hermeneutics

It should be clear from the last section that this research project has a strong empirical direction. It grows, in part, out of a frustration with hermeneutical approaches, including my own, that are rooted in a 'sense' of what works, but lack a detailed engagement with practice. Within the existing literature, however, the latter kind of approach is much more common than the empirical one. This section looks at why biblical hermeneutics, in particular, eschews direct engagement with contemporary readers.

Most, if not all, writing about biblical hermeneutics works with ideal, rather than real, readers[15]. This would seem to be true even for those who seek to apply hermeneutical thinking to a perceived gap between biblical criticism and the church's interpretation of the Bible; who seek a rapprochement between these two, because they believe that the church remains the primary interpretative community for the Bible; and who continue to work theologically with the critical interpretation of the Bible (e.g. Braaten & Jenson, 1996; Childs, 1993; Fowl, 1998; Fretheim & Froehlich, 1998; Watson, 1994). Such books characteristically work from a generalised understanding of how Christians interpret the text[16]. But this is not earthed in study of specific examples, so that the conclusions drawn about the church as interpretative community remain untested by detailed engagement with that community.

Thiselton perhaps best exemplifies both the huge potential of hermeneutics to inform an understanding of biblical interpretation in the churches, and the significant drawbacks of its suspicion of more practically oriented philosophical approaches. In *New Horizons in Hermeneutics* (1992), Thiselton devotes the final two chapters to the hermeneutics of pastoral theology. He offers ten models from the range of hermeneutical approaches considered elsewhere in the book, in order, '*to propose paradigmatic or optimal reader-situations in relation to which their most distinctive hermeneutical functions most readily become apparent*' (1992, 558, italics in original).

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[15] Or, as narrative criticism would suggest (see, e.g. Culpepper, 1983, chs.1 & 7), hermeneutics works with the 'implied' reader – the reader projected by a particular interpretative approach to a text.

[16] Thus Fowl writes, 'Christians' relationship with scripture is not only multi-faceted in that they are called to engage scripture in a variety of ways and contexts; it is also ongoing' (1998, 7).

The models are rich in insight, with the potential for elucidating what is going on when people interpret the Bible. Thus, for example, model seven, 'socio-pragmatic theory', provides a way of approaching how particular interests shape and constrain reading (1992, 587f). But the impact of Thistleton's offering to pastoral theology is limited by his suspicion of the discipline, and especially of pastoral theology's concern with 'the present situation', supported, in his view, by the use of 'the more functional approaches in social sciences' (1992, 606). Thiselton sees this emphasis on the present as responsible for fragmenting the hermeneutical process, as is apparent in his critique of Thomas Groome. He accuses Groome of focusing on Rorty's pragmatic understanding of Gadamer, rather than the wider historical understanding of Gadamer himself, concluding:

> His work has a positive place as a warning against a theology which is objectivist, disengaged, over-cereberal, or antiquarian. But any emphasis on 'the present situation' must very clearly seek an understanding of the present which allows it to be perceived within the broadest possible horizons from the very outset of the hermeneutical process of identifying what *counts* as 'present experience' of a relevant nature. (1992, 611)

In this, Thiselton seems to rule out the possibility that, in the concern for the present situation, understood through engagement with the practice of interpretation, practical theology is undertaking just such a hermeneutical process. This appears to be because he works from a false premise: that practical theologians' work within the horizon of the present isolates them from an understanding of the historical horizon of the biblical text (1992, 556f). It almost appears as if biblical specialists' need to face up to their objectivism is projected onto pastoral theology, so that it must be mirrored by pastoral theologians' need to address the historical dimension of text-interpretation.

Rather, it should be argued that this dimension is already integral to practical theology. What practical theology can do is contribute another hermeneutical model to the interpretation of a faith tradition, namely the practical hermeneutic which brings together present experience and historical tradition. Not only does this test the practical relevance of more abstract models, but it also welcomes into the arena of hermeneutical discussion the voices of members of the faith community who interpret the Bible as part of their faith practice. Furthermore, as will be shown in the next chapter, this contribution can be supported by judicious use of more interactive and/or interpretative models from the social sciences.

2.3.4 The Bible in pastoral and practical theology

A key question arising from the last section, however, is whether practical theology already offers such a hermeneutic. It might be argued that the answer to the question is, only to a very limited extent, as this section seeks to show.

Pattison argues that there, 'is an almost absolute and embarrassing silence about the Bible in pastoral care theory' (2000, 106). Although this conclusion is altered to a degree by recent publications discussed below, Pattison's discussion (2000, 106-133) is crucial to understanding the Bible in pastoral and practical theology.

The survey makes clear that the particular area of practice considered, with the exception of the wider focus of Alistair Campbell, is pastoral counselling. It also becomes clear that the reflection on practice is of a particular kind[17]. In each approach, and not only the fundamentalist, or biblicist one, the key question is how the Bible may resource the pastoral carer in his/her understanding of their work. This feels very much like an applied model, in which critical study of the Bible has priority over reflection on practice, and is not subject to a critique rooted in practice.

This would seem to be confirmed by the lacuna which Pattison identifies. He points to the real absence in the writers considered of reflection on, 'the status, authority, inspiration and usage of the text' (2000, 114f). He himself, in contrast, provides a critique of the use of the Bible that is rooted in the practice of pastoral care and a critical understanding of the Bible. On this basis, he points to the unwarranted assumption that the Bible is necessarily amenable to use in the personal setting of pastoral care. He rightly argues that historically the Bible is a communal book, not designed to bring comfort to individuals, but rather to motivate the faith community. What becomes clear is that in the interpretation of the Bible in relation to pastoral care, there needs to be a real engagement with the history of the tradition, and with the contemporary reality of practice, and with what kind of dialogue between the two might be possible.

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[17]Pattison offers the following typology of approaches: 'the fundamentalist or biblicist approach; the tokenist approach; the imagist or suggestive approach; the informative approach; the thematic approach' (2000, 115).

Further, Pattison widens the practical horizon of this discussion of the place of the Bible in practical theology. On the role of the Bible in pastoral care he concludes:

> The main role it performs is to shape and form the consciousness and character of the Christian community and the individuals who comprise it. Pastors and those in their care are in constant dialogue with the text of scripture, particularly liturgically. This crucially affects who they are and what they do. (2000, 130)

Pattison's chapter offers the practical theologian a significant challenge as s/he reflects on their use of the Bible. First, the challenge is to move beyond an applied model of interpretation (which prioritises critical study of the text), to seek a mutual critique between understanding of the Bible and of pastoral practice. Secondly, the challenge is to broaden the practical horizon at work in this dialectic, to stop squeezing the dialogue into the narrow frame of pastoral care, and to relocate it in the wider practice of the churches. This in turn carries implications about moving from an individual, clerical/professional model of reflection, to a corporate or communal one.

All this is in keeping with the direction of practical theology discussed earlier. Indeed Heitink (1999, ch.10) explicitly includes a hermeneutical perspective as one of the three key angles of his development of a 'practical-theological theory of action'[18]. Were this agenda to be fulfilled it would provide a hermeneutical understanding that would match other contemporary dimensions of the discipline. Certainly there are now a number of voices speaking into Pattison's 'silence'. These include, but are not limited to, those associated with 'The Use of the Bible in Pastoral Practice' project sponsored jointly by the Bible Society and Cardiff University (Ballard & Holmes, 2005; Dickson, 2003; Oliver, 2006; Pattison, Cooling, & Cooling, 2007).

The project provides an example of empirical research into the use of the Bible in pastoral ministry (Dickson, 2003). This is further discussed below in relation to its significance for Bible reading in groups. Within the wider debate about the Bible in pastoral theology, however, this report projects a number of voices into the discussion. In particular, the research gathered reports from a range of practitioners (predominantly local church leaders), on their own use of the Bible, individually and with groups. While providing 'snapshots' of current practice, the report remains,

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[18] The other two perspectives are the 'strategic', or 'regulative', and the 'empirical'

therefore, within a clerical paradigm, albeit with the inclusion of lay people with leadership responsibility. The report concludes (Dickson, 2003, 84-89) that use of the Bible amongst respondents is pragmatic, concerned with 'what works', and to a significant degree unreflective. Perhaps not surprisingly, therefore, the conclusion is that approaches taken, although varied and increasingly participative, are not noticeably marked by creativity. In particular, it should be noted that 'narrative' is an important aspect of practice; this will be discussed below.

The other notably practical outcome of the Cardiff University/Bible Society project is a workbook designed to stimulate work on the use of the Bible in pastoral practice (Pattison et al., 2007). The workbook aims to broaden both the perceived scope of the use of the Bible in pastoral care and participation in that enterprise. While rooted broadly in the empirical research just discussed, it is prospective rather than retrospective, designed to generate reflection, rather than report it.

Both the other two outcomes of the project (Ballard & Holmes, 2005; Oliver, 2006) are at a greater remove from practice. This is partly because they have no direct connection with the empirical dimension of the overall project, but also because of the nature of the reflection found in them. Oliver certainly provides an exploration of the dimensions of the issue of what it means to use the Bible in pastoral practice, and of what kind of dialogue might result (see, in particular, 2006, 84-102). But this reflection of an authoritative figure, based on a lifetime's experience, has little reference to specific examples of the use of the Bible in practice. The closest we get are six brief stories of 'ordinary Christians' (2006, 2-5), which Oliver draws on a little, later in the book. But, apart from their brevity, it is unclear whether the stories come from particular people, or are constructed as typifications.

With Ballard and Holmes (2005) the structure of the book is an aspect of the style of reflection. The first 190 pages of the book are not only by people who are mostly not pastoral theologians, but they are also not pastoral theology. They concern the history of interpretation of the Bible within the church (part I) and insights from the world of biblical studies (part II). Only in part III do we come to pastoral theology itself, and only one chapter, (Anderson, 2005), is concerned directly with the Bible in pastoral care. Further, the editors admit that the third section is 'somewhat more disparate'

than the first two (Ballard & Holmes, 2005, 191). Though one might want some confirmation of this, the outline of the book suggests an applied model of pastoral theology, in which history and (hermeneutical) philosophy have priority over the practical.

That confirmation is provided in the two books just highlighted, and elsewhere, by focusing on their emphasis on 'narrative'. As Dickson concluded from his research:

> The rise in the importance of storytelling, reflecting '*the narrative turn in theology*', by conservative, radical and liberal theologians alike, and moving the emphasis of use from the historical and literary to the imaginative and practical, was evident everywhere. (2003, 86)

This same rise is evident in the more theoretical works within the same project. Oliver concludes that the use of stories has potential for those who wish to be 'both biblical and human in a post-modern world' (2006, 155f). Writing from a hermeneutical perspective, Bartholomew (2005) points to the narrative approach used by pastoral theologians, and raises pertinent questions, discussed shortly. Anderson writes extensively in his chapter about the significance of narrative for pastoral care, including the place of the Bible in it, drawing on his work with Foley (Anderson & Foley, 1998).

A number of comments ought to be made on this shift in pastoral theology. The first is that the focus on narrative is derivative, from discussion in the world of biblical studies and more widely from hermeneutics – in keeping with the structure of Ballard and Holmes' book (2005)[19]. The second is that the central image of pastoral stories meeting stories from the Bible gives rise to some key questions. The first of these is the extent to which the use of a narrative approach has been subject to critical reflection by pastoral theologians as it takes root in that discipline. It can be said that there are certainly writers who provide an effective critique of the telling of stories in pastoral practice (Anderson & Foley, 1998; Graham et al., 2005, 47-77; Lyall, 2001). Here there appears to be real congruence between the interpretation of pastoral encounters and a narrative hermeneutic.

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[19] Two routes of derivation are common. One (e.g. Bartholomew, 2005) is the work of the pastoral theologian Charles Gerkin (1984; 1986), who in turn derives his thinking from Gadamer. The other (e.g. Lyall, 2001) is via the work of pastoral theologian Donald Capps (1984), whose inspiration is derived from Ricoeur. Ricoeur is also referred to as an immediate source (e.g. Graham, Walton, & Ward, 2005).

The critical use of the Bible as story or stories is less evident. A particular tendency is to seek to reinstate the 'story' of the Bible as a grand narrative, providing a framework for individuals' stories. As discussed by Graham, Walton and Ward (2005, 78-107), this is notably located within a post-liberal, or radical orthodox position. But the tendency pervades much pastoral theology writing about narrative, including those who would not locate themselves within a post-liberal frame. In such writers the practical outcome is typically a series of biblical 'themes'. These may be found in the work both of Oliver (2006, 144-151) and of Lyall (2001, 89-107). Bartholomew (2005, 141f) asks whether it is possible to treat Scripture as a whole as narrative. The thematic approach illustrates two key difficulties: one, that such an approach requires a high degree of selectivity; two, that the result is a half-way house somewhere between narrative and more propositional approaches to the meaning of the Bible.

A further critical question lies in the relationship between stories in a pastoral context and in the Bible. Bartholomew (2005, 144-147) identifies 'correlation' as a key designation of the relationship amongst pastoral theologians, but also points to a crucial question, 'of whether or not a modern/postmodern perspective on the world in which human autonomy is central, and God non-existent, can be fused with the Christian/biblical story' (2005, 145).

To begin to answer that question, arguably pastoral theologians need two things. The first is a clearer understanding of the domain in which the correlation might take place. This means greater clarity about what is a contemporary understanding of narrative, in order for links to be made between biblical and pastoral stories. If, for example, Ricoeur's use implies that, 'narratives project *possible* worlds which engage the imagination by providing strategies of projection for *future* action' (Thiselton, 1992, 569, italics in original), then this raises questions both about whether either seeing Scripture as an inherited grand story (a single world), or as being understood through themes, does full justice to this understanding.

The second thing that pastoral theologians need is an understanding of whether correlation works in practice. That can only be provided by detailed reflection on particular encounters between stories from the pastoral context and stories from the

Bible, and on what kind of formational process might be taking place (Pattison, 2000). This is notably absent from the literature, but may be provided in part by this research.

The literature discussed here suggests, therefore, that pastoral theology has yet to make the hermeneutical approaches it has appropriated fully its own. Despite a more thorough engagement with the issues associated with the use of the Bible in the pastoral context, further critical and practical work remains to be done. This research project speaks, in part, into this lack, as it explores the practical hermeneutics of Bible-study groups.

2.4 Existing research into Bible-study groups

Research into Bible-study groups is scarce and emerges from quite a narrow range of approaches. One particular absence that emerged from numerous on-line searches is of any history of such groups. Such research findings as are available focus almost exclusively on Bible-study groups as a contemporary phenomenon.

This section considers examples of such research which do offer insight into the practice of biblical interpretation in church communities and Bible-study groups in particular. This consideration takes place against the background of the questions raised above about the Bible and pastoral practice. The section considers the extent to which particular research contributes to an empirical understanding of how members of Bible-study groups interpret the Bible; and any starting points that they suggest for this project.

2.4.1 Liberationist Bible readings

One established area of Bible reading, which provides significant examples of the interaction between particular human situations and specific texts, comes under the heading of liberationist exegesis. Here a hermeneutic which privileges the oppressed is lived out by groups in which the voice of the 'expert' in biblical studies is but one amongst those of all community members. In the history of liberationist approaches, the practice of Bible-study groups and their engagement with the particularity of their situation, has been the site of the development of the tradition. Two examples illustrate this. One is the Bible studies led by Ernesto Cardenale, which took place in

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the 1960s in the Nicaraguan context, on the island of Solentiname, which were published as *The Gospel in Solentiname* (Cardenale, 1977-84).

The other is that which continues to the present in South Africa and is known as 'Contextual Bible Study'[20]. This practice, written about extensively by West (see, e.g. , 2003), is a community-based, collaborative approach to biblical interpretation, which begins and ends by locating that interpretation within the local context of the group, but which also brings critical tools to the reading of the text (West, 2006).

Two facets of these approaches reduce their impact on this research. One is that they prioritise a particular ideological position – that Bible study should involve and contribute to the liberation of the oppressed. This means that the published accounts of Bible study contribute evidence of how this particular approach was realised. While such an approach clearly influences some aspects of Bible-study in the UK[21], its singularity limits the insight it provides into how Bible-study groups negotiate a rather more plural interpretative context.

The second facet, which flows from the first, is that the approaches, and the publication of particular studies, are seen as part of participants' 'ongoing action-reflection praxis' (West, 2006, 148). As West indicates, this means that the method of interpretation does not constitute a research tool, or at least not one that could operate outside its ideological context. So while it raises sharp questions about the extent to which UK groups might effectively interrogate their own situation, it does not offer a methodology for this project.

2.4.2 Empirical surveys of the use and interpretation of the Bible

We have already noted that the 'Use of the Bible in Pastoral Practice' project included an empirical piece of research (Dickson, 2003). Through survey and qualitative fieldwork, this project did provide specific examples of the use of the Bible in the faith community. The main body of the research lists sixteen examples, of which nine were of the use of the Bible in groups of one kind or another. The examples, as the

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[20] This is currently facilitated by the Ujamaa Centre for Biblical and Theological Community Development and Research, Pietermaritzburg (http://www.ukzn.ac.za/sorat/ujamaa/).
[21] See appendix 1, reflection 2, and (Dickson, 2003, 104-108).

report itself suggests, provide interesting snapshots. They clearly demonstrate a diversity of settings and approaches for the use of the Bible in local churches. However, the value is limited by the size of the sample. The examples are too numerous to provide in-depth study of how the use of the Bible works in practice, although one appendix offers a hermeneutical analysis of a UK-based contextual Bible study group (Dickson, 2003, 104-108). At the same time the examples are too few and disparate to establish patterns within church practice in the UK. Further, the report sticks with a clerical/professional model, in that practice is almost entirely reported by those with leadership responsibility (ordained or lay). The study underlines the need for in-depth examination of how the practices it identifies are managed and achieved.

The research also provides a key question, as to whether the use of the Bible is as predictable as it concludes. The report concluded that there were four 'predictable' categories of use of the Bible, each of which responded to it primarily as verbal structures for: 'the rational and analytical mind'; 'the imagination...'; 'the emotions and feeling'; and 'the instruction of the human will and alteration of life' (Dickson, 2003, 87). It further suggested that these approaches determined the use made of the text. This research may cast further light on these conclusions.

The last mentioned research has a precursor, in a larger quantitative study carried out by the Bible Society (Georgiou, 2000), as part of their 'Open Book' project. This was sent to 1004 ministers and church leaders with a 43% response rate. This research did establish some information about the extent of the use of the Bible. For example 88% of respondents reported that their church ran study groups nearly all of which used the Bible. Its insights into use of the Bible in practice, however, are severely constrained by its approach, which was to get respondents to react to possible answers to that question which betray a strong set of assumptions. For example, question 11 of the survey reads: 'To what extent does your church follow the guidelines laid down in Scripture in each of the following areas?' (Georgiou, 2000, exhibit one) Further limitations, recognised by the report itself (Georgiou, 2000, 6), were that the reporting was done almost exclusively by ministers or leaders and that the use of particular databases biased the research slightly towards evangelical churches.

A more fruitful quantitative research project is that published as *The Bible and Lay People* (Village, 2007). The key research instrument was a questionnaire circulated to eleven different Anglican congregations in England, which generated 404 responses. The questionnaire sought from respondents: their response to a particular passage of Scripture; information about their beliefs about the Bible; their experience of and response to miraculous healing; some general background information (including church tradition, gender, educational experience and Bible-reading practice); and their psychological type (Village, 2007, 13f).

Village's book is in the field of ordinary theology[22]. Village is interested in discovering something about the use of the Bible by 'ordinary readers', in other words lay people, rather than church leaders or ministers. Furthermore, he is concerned to establish what kind of practical theology can be worked in relation to this investigation. Village's work succeeds in providing a new picture of Bible use, hitherto largely ignored by the academy.

Perhaps of greatest interest is his work on lay people's awareness of, and response to, different 'horizons' at work in Bible reading, those of 'Author', 'Text' and 'Reader' (Village, 2007, ch.5). Through analysis of responses to a test passage from the Bible, he investigates not only horizon preference, but also horizon separation (how distant the text appears from the world of the reader) and horizon applicability (how relevant the text is). The overall picture, as Village indicates, is not entirely surprising:

> Lay people tended to avoid the author horizon and were likely to apply the story to their own life or society. Those that did show interest in the author horizon were often people who had some theological education and who may not, therefore, have been strictly 'lay' interpreters. (2007, 89)

Nonetheless, he reveals a greater complexity at work than this conclusion suggests, confirming that lay people have a degree of hermeneutical sophistication of interest to practical theology. On the one hand this argues strongly for a qualitative approach which would complement Village's work, by investigating lay people engaged together in Bible-study. On the other hand, that proposal underlines one of the false assumptions on which ordinary theology is based. For a qualitative study of Bible-study groups will inevitably need to look at the interaction between 'lay' participants

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[22] As defined by Astley (2002).

and views, and leaders and ministers and their perspectives, whether they are on- or off-stage in the particular group[23]. This project is certainly also concerned with theology outside the academy, but it is directed more at 'ordinary' churches, than at 'ordinary' people, who are more difficult to isolate within a practice of biblical interpretation which involves lay and expert together.

For similar reasons, this thesis also explores a different understanding of empirical theology than does Village. From the establishment of this approach, underpinned by the work of Van der Ven, the possibility of using qualitative as well as quantitative methods for the investigation of practice has at least been admitted (van der Ven, 1988). However, the tendency has been for those who choose to place their work under this label tend to opt for the quantitative rather than the qualitative (For a discussion of this see Astley, 2002, 97-100, 105-107).

The test of an approach to research lies in the insight it provides into practice, given that both Village's work and this thesis are located in the field of practical theology. I would argue that a key drawback of his approach is precisely that, while offering insight into the perspectives of individuals, it fails to make significant inroads into the shared practice of biblical interpretation, despite addressing this area. A whole chapter is dedicated to 'Interpretative communities and Scripture' (Village, 2007, ch.7). This offers an empirical response to the hermeneutical thinking of Stanley Fish. Village approaches the question of what his data and analysis reveal about whether particular congregations, and wider traditions, can be described as 'interpretative communities' in the only way possible for a quantitative study – via correlation of the different perspectives and other variables relating to individual respondents. The results of this exercise are thin. The only significant correlation between beliefs and social location is between the prevalence of a literalistic approach to the Bible and membership of congregations belonging to different traditions (2007, 131-134)[24]. Village provides only starting points for an investigation of the complexity of interpretative practice and its communal dimension. Once again this

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[23] For example, in contrast with Village's work, this study would hope to show not how theological education has shaped the views of individuals, but how it might pervade the practice of biblical interpretation in which the lay and the not-so lay are involved together.
[24] Village further identifies some correlation between marginalization in interpretation and a sense of marginalization within a congregation (2007, 134-137).

strongly suggests that a qualitative approach which allows for the analysis of interaction in interpretative communities is required to advance understanding of their practice.

An empirical research project which carries something of this qualitative approach is reported in volume 78:3 (2001) of the journal *Scriptura*. This is an investigation of Bible-study groups, originating in a number of Southern African Universities. The journal offers 'thick descriptions' of six different Bible-study groups in local churches in Southern Africa. There are a number of unresolved tensions in the research. One is between investigating how groups work and testing the significance of insights from the academic study of hermeneutics. This is seen in the dynamic between the following aspects of the research: that between open-ended mapping of text-interpretation in the pilot phase of the project and the use of highly developed hypotheses (derived from the pilot) about what constituted 'adequate' interpretation, in the main phase[25]; the tension between the use of existing Bible-study groups and the requirement that they study specified biblical texts (also studied by the other groups); the methodological tension between the decision not to engage in participant-observation but to use particular interventions in each group studied[26]. On balance the project appears to be constructed as something of an experiment in Bible-study. At the same time, see (Conradie, 2001b, 336), the empirical work generates few new theoretical insights in the articles in the journal which reflect on the implications for hermeneutics (Conradie, 2001c; Jonker, 2001; Lawrie, 2001). This thesis will address related questions about the degree of intervention that is appropriate in investigating Bible-study groups (in the next chapter). A key difference between the work in Southern Africa and that detailed here, however, is that the assumption in the former, that the academy is the best judge of the 'adequacy' of Bible study, is not present here. Rather, if there is an interest in whether Bible-study is adequate in this research project, it is in how groups would themselves approach such a question.

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[25] See (Conradie, 2001a; Conradie, Bosman, & Jonker, 2001). The hypotheses concern the roles in interpretation of: 'doctrinal keys'; interpretative strategies geared to 'application'; the text; historical context; contemporary context; ideological distortions; group interaction (Conradie, 2001a, 381-392).
[26] Each group was given a different 'input' relating to the text studied, which was designed to test a particular hypothesis (Conradie, 2001a, 396-398). This approach was connected with an unfulfilled aim of the project: to develop a 'pedagogical instrument' that would assist groups in developing 'adequate Bible study' (Conradie, 2001a, 395f).

2.4.3 Congregational studies and related projects

Given both the aim of this research, directed towards understanding the interpretation of the Bible in local churches, and the argument for a qualitative direction to the methodology, it might be thought that 'congregational studies' research might provide clues for this project. This is a diverse field of study of the life of particular church congregations. Prominent in the USA, it also exists in a less high-profile way in the UK (for a comparison, see Guest, Tusting, & Woodhead, 2004, 1-38). The methodology for study of congregational life is usually derived from the social sciences, commonly involving ethnographic approaches (Ammerman, Carroll, Dudley, & McKinney, 1998; Cameron, Richter, Davies, & Ward, 2005).

Typically, studies focus on the life of one particular congregation, or on closely related ones (e.g. in the UK Guest, 2002; Tusting, 2000; Ward, 2000). But there are larger studies which focus on congregational life in a particular place such as Swansea and South Wales (Chambers, 2005), or Kendal (Heelas & Woodhead, 2004). Frequently observation of a variety of aspects of congregational life, recorded in fieldnotes, is further explored by interviews with congregational members and/or a questionnaire. Some studies focus on the interpretation of Scripture by congregations as a whole, especially in evangelical or fundamentalist settings (Ammerman, 1987; Guest, 2002). Such studies will include comment on the role of small groups in the life of a church. But rarely do congregational studies pay in-depth attention to such groups.

There is, however, a small set of studies which do pay such attention. Two key books are the work of Wuthnow (1994a; 1994b). These are closely related to congregational studies, although not often mentioned in core texts[27]. The project to which they relate considers small groups within congregations, but also related kinds of groups which come under the general heading of 'support groups'[28].

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[27] The research project to which both Wuthnow's books relate was funded by the Lilly Endowment, a key funder of congregational studies in the USA. One of the books makes it into the Hartford Institute's 'Bibliography of scholarly writings in Congregational Studies' (Hartford Institute for Religion Research, 2008), but neither are referred to in either (Cameron et al., 2005) or (Guest et al., 2004).

[28] While not gaining a high-profile within congregational studies, it appears that Wuthnow's work has been followed by a number of studies which correlate participation in American Bible-study groups and other aspects of members' lives. See, for example, (Maton & Salem, 1995) which considers links with community empowerment; (Maxwell, 1996) which examines correlation with 'life satisfaction';

The research project, co-ordinated by Wuthnow, combined ethnographies of groups with a questionnaire-based survey. The edited collection of reports on the observations of groups (Wuthnow, 1994b) offers a number of reports on American Bible-study groups (Lawson, 1994; Olson, 1994; Searl, 1994; Wigger, 1994). Wuthnow himself (1994a) summarises the results of these investigations and of the survey. Such groups represent a quarter of support groups in the USA and combine the support role with that of 'studying' the Bible (1994a, 68f). Indeed, what contributes most to participants' satisfaction are activities which contribute to their 'fellowship' (1994a, 146ff). On the other hand, statistically Bible-study contributes more than any other kind of group activity to faith development of members, not least because of the shared experience of reading and discussing the Bible (1994a, 277-280). Consideration of hermeneutical issues is not well developed in either book. However, two points are worth noting. One is that the significance of story-telling is highlighted, both the retelling of stories from the Bible, and the connection of those with participants' own stories (1994a, 310-314). Here Wuthnow's conclusion is significant:

> In small groups everyone is an expert. There is no need to listen to wise persons or sages, no need to study what others have said about sacred stories in order to discern their definitive meanings. Each story has multiple meanings. One person's interpretation is as good as another. If a sacred story elicits an example from my own experience, so much the better... In the process truth can be adapted much more readily to complex circumstances. We can agree to disagree – because our stories are all different. And yet we can also agree tacitly that our stories must have happy endings. (1994a, 313)

The second thing to note is that, alongside revealing the 'domestication' of the text described in the last paragraph, the research showed that a higher proportion of small group members (especially those who are also church members) believe in the literal truth and inerrancy of the Bible than in the general population (1994a, 280ff). Noting that this appears odd, alongside findings about relating the text to diverse experiences, Wuthnow concludes:

> These groups... do not sit around reading higher criticism or trying to find explanations for potential inconsistencies in the Bible. They are devoted to finding practical applications of biblical principals. The Bible is to be taken literally, and it is inerrant, not because it provides an air-tight metaphysical

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(Maxwell, 1998) which considers connections with 'faith maturity'; (Krause, 2002), which investigates correlation between various church-based support structures and health; and (Wuthnow, 2002), in which Wuthnow himself examines whether Bible-study and other similar groups promote forgiveness.

account of the universe but because its words are borne out in the daily experience of group members. (1994a, 281)

As will become apparent, there are some similarities between Bible-study groups in the USA and those in the UK studied in this project. They share a desire to relate the Bible to everyday experience. The ways they do that are different from those discussed above, although story-telling is a common factor. Further, the groups discussed in this thesis are all more sceptical about the Bible, than those mentioned above. Wuthnow does, however, offer a methodological starting point for a close study of Bible-study groups in the ethnographic approach found especially in (Wuthnow, 1994b). Such an approach will be discussed in the next chapter.

Yet this ethnographic approach is still not as interactive as it might be. It places the reporting of the ethnographer in the foreground, rather than a focus on members' methods, practice and perspectives. This places a particular filter on the views and voices of group members. It is hoped that, in a search for a more in-depth understanding of groups, the complex interaction between members' voices might be brought rather more to the centre of the stage. Again to anticipate the next chapter, discourse analysis might have this potential.

Forstorp's (1990; 1991) study of Bible reading in context in Sweden provides a rare example of explicit links between hermeneutics and the discourse of actual Bible readers. Like Village (2007), he is interested in whether those in the churches constitute 'interpretive communities', but he addresses this via ethnographic work. The data considered is, however, drawn mostly from interviews. It is therefore largely talk about Bible-reading, rather than Bible-reading talk. Nonetheless, this thesis shares Forstorp's interest in 'norms and strategies for reading and interpretation... employed by people reading and interpreting the Bible' (Forstorp, 1991, 67f).

An important study, which builds on Wuthnow's work and brings together ethnographic study with analysis of discourse, is that of Bielo (2007a). This anthropology PhD is a study of nineteen groups involved in Bible-study in six congregations, presented as a contribution to the anthropology of Christianity. As a

result of recording, transcribing and analysing the discourse of groups, Bielo
addresses a number of issues pertinent to this study. The theoretical core of the thesis
is that interpretation in groups is shaped by textual ideologies, identified through the
investigation of the groups' practice; in this case that ideology which relates to the
authority, relevance and textuality of the Bible (Bielo, 2007a, 82-91). This textual
ideology of the Bible in turn underpins other aspects of groups' discourse: their
interpretative styles – applying the Bible, establishing its meaning and explaining its
meaning (Bielo, 2007a, 111); the resources (such as members' congregational or
denominational experience) recruited by participants in interpreting the Bible that
form their 'interpretative matrix' (Bielo, 2007a, ch.4); and the ways in which the
Bible is recontextualised in order to support or challenge group members, or other
individuals and groups, and by relocating particular texts in relation to other Biblical
texts (Bielo, 2007a, ch.5; 2007b).

This project will also address some of these aspects of group interaction. Key
differences, however, relate to the context of the research and the approach to
discourse. Bielo's work took place within American Protestantism. He both assumes
and demonstrates a 'scripturalism' at work in all the groups he studies. This is seen in
the single textual ideology already alluded to, summarised in six principles[29]. Bielo is
at some pains to gauge the level of dissent from these principles, but through
interview and questionnaire, in addition to the analysis of discourse, demonstrates that
this is very low (2007a, 102-105).

My research will demonstrate that, in the groups studied in the different setting of
rural Anglicanism in the United Kingdom, while elements of the above ideology are
present, there is no single ideology at work. Rather, there are competing ideological
principles, some relating to the Bible, others drawn from contemporary discourse.
Similarly, a wider range of interpretative styles and resources are present in the
groups I have studied, than in Bielo's investigation. One of those styles, in general,
could be described as working at a critique of, or challenge to, the text being studied.

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[29] 'The Bible is the Word of God' (Bielo, 2007a, 82); 'The Bible is the same today as when it was
written' (Bielo, 2007a, 85); 'The Bible speaks to you in new and different ways every time you read it'
(Bielo, 2007a, 88); 'The Bible speaks directly to lives and situations' (Bielo, 2007a, 89); 'The Bible
tells a coherent story from beginning to end' (Bielo, 2007a, 91); 'The Bible is written perfectly' (Bielo,
2007a, 97).

Both the competing ideologies and the critique of the biblical text, relate to competing contextualisations of the text, in a dynamic, but occasionally conflictual process of interpretation.

It could be argued, further, that some of those features emerge from a different approach to discourse analysis from that of Bielo. He maintains that, 'the analysis of discourse begins with the analysis of texts in order to understand the processes of production' (Bielo, 2007a, 6). Although interactional in approach, this focuses attention somewhat on the outcome of discourse, on knowledge production. My approach to discourse analysis, discussed in the next chapter, while acknowledging the textuality of discourse analysis, views it not as an investigation of text-production, so much as of talk-in-interaction. In other words, the emphasis is on the sociality of discourse. This allows for exploration of the dynamics between different ideologies, resources and contextualisations – between the multiple 'texts' that arise in Bible-study talk.

There are a very few studies that relate the latter kind of discourse analytical questions to Bible-study or similar groups (previously discussed in Todd, 2005). There are studies of discourse recorded as it happens in church settings, focusing on interaction between teachers and children in an American context[30]. But the most significant work is Lehtinen's (2005) study of Seventh-Day Adventist Bible-study in Finland. He draws on ethnomethodological conversation analysis as a way of examining how participants in Bible-study 'describe their experiences in specific interactional context' (2005, 341). At a number of points, Lehtinen's work will provide an important comparative study to this one. For example, one point of interest is his particular focus is on participants telling a 'second story', drawn from their own experience, as a response to the story found in the Bible (cf. Arminen, 2004).

Before turning to a discussion of how ethnography and discourse analysis might contribute to the investigation of Bible-study groups, one further study should be

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[30] See (Baquedano-López, 2001; Zinsser, 1986). Baquedano-López explores connections between the telling of a traditional narrative and the construction of identity in both Spanish- and English-language religious instruction classes (cf. Baquedano-López, 2008). Zinsser examines fundamentalist Sunday Schools and Vacation Bible Schools, set up by self-professed 'fundamentalist' churches, as social contexts for literacy acquisition. To these approaches may be compared (Fader, 2008; Moore, 2008), which adopt similar approaches in Jewish and Muslim settings respectively.

mentioned, namely a PhD by Sarah Hall (2003). In her study, she worked with eight Bible-study groups in the United Kingdom, two of whom were pre-existent. Each group worked with a combination of historical-critical, literary critical and liberationist exegetical approaches. In addition to fieldwork notes, participants were interviewed. A grounded theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1990) to data analysis generated a typology of participants. Participants were categorised as 'thinkers', 'relaters', or 'changers'[31]. Like Forstorp, Hall brings an interest in hermeneutics into dialogue with Bible-study. In all but name, this is an action research approach which has much in common with this thesis[32]; and also originated in a frustration about lack of understanding of the relationship between biblical studies and Bible-study. This is another comparator for this research project. This thesis will, however, take a less interventionist approach to work with groups[33]. Further, this research will establish typologies of practice rather than typologies of participants.

2.5 Direction of the research

This chapter has located this project within practical theology. It has demonstrated an absence of thorough-going practical theology approaches to the use of the Bible in pastoral practice. It has also established the rarity of empirical research into the practice of Bible study. The survey of existing research has identified a number of critical questions, which complement those raised by reflection on my own practice. In addition, the survey has identified the value of a qualitative approach to complement quantitative ones; and of a number of methodological starting points, especially ethnography, discourse analysis and action research. These methodological directions will be the subject of the next chapter.

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[31] 'Thinkers' are those intellectually interested in historical criticism, as a tool for analysis of the background history of the Bible; and will see God in conceptual and textual terms. 'Relaters', interested in faith and relationships, focus on literary patterns in the text (conservative approach), or the story of the community behind the text (liberal approach); and they will find God in story in the text and relationship in the group. 'Changers' look to be inspired to act for change and will bring their own experience into dialogue with the text; they have a liberationist approach to discovering God both in relation to the liberative power of the text and in their own experience.

[32] The location of this research project in an action research frame will be discussed in the next chapter.

[33] This will be discussed in chapter 4, which considers how the research was operationalised.

Chapter 3
The emergence of a hybrid methodology

3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter identified, from relevant literature, a number of possible methodological starting points (action research, ethnography and discourse analysis). This chapter expands on that work, charting the development, over the course of the whole project, of a hybrid qualitative methodology for investigating the practice of Bible-study groups.

The chapter's structure is generated by initial work on methodology. This work took place during the first nine months of the PhD. A number of potential methodologies were examined from a theoretical perspective, as potential frames for the research in prospect. This took place in parallel with the first stage of the fieldwork – the identification of potential Bible-study groups, meeting with their leaders to discuss their participation and carrying out a pilot Bible-study (all of which are detailed in the next chapter).

Examination of methodologies generated some starting points for the fieldwork. Action research suggested a cyclical approach to the engagement with different groups, while ethnography and discourse analysis offered different perspectives on interaction with participants, gathering of data and analysis. However, as the fieldwork progressed (especially through work with the three main Bible-study groups), the practicalities of engagement and analysis shaped the contribution of different methodologies to the project. In addition, as I developed as a research practitioner, I discovered how different methodologies interacted with each other in practice.

This chapter offers both a picture of the initial potential of methodologies, discerned from their associated literature, and a preview of the sifting of those methodologies during the fieldwork. This is achieved by identifying connections between the initial perspectives and questions which a particular methodology appeared to offer, and the actual contribution, developed during the research. This provides an overview of the hybrid methodology which emerged. That overview is designed to enable the reader

to locate particular steps of methodological development, discussed subsequently, within the overall trajectory of the research.

3.2 Action Research

Swinton and Mowat's book on qualitative method and practical theology signals the potential of action research for investigations in practical theology. They suggest that:

> Both use a similar reflective process and both contain similar action-oriented and transformatively oriented dynamics and goals. (2006, 256)

This suggestion comes at the end of their book, in a brief section designed to integrate conclusions about other areas of qualitative method. Although the section includes thinking about the distinctive 'action' with which practical theology is concerned, it does not begin to develop a consideration of the similarities referred to, and makes next to no reference to action research literature. This section of the thesis does pursue the connections between practical theology and action research, in order to identify the potential for an action research approach to 'Bible-study'. In this it follows in the steps of a small number of people who have used action research within a theological framework. These include those who mention action research in passing (Adams, 1966; Dokecki, Newbrough, & O'Gorman, 2001); those who apply an action research methodology without significant evaluation (Hollenweger, 1975; McConnell, 1984); and those who go some way to explore the potential of the method (Lovat, 1988; Martin, 2000). Of the last, Lovat's work is perhaps the nearest to a mutual critique which engages action research and practical theology[34].

3.2.1 First connections between action research and practical theology

The previous chapter made clear that this research is concerned with two interlocking areas of practice. One is that of my work as theological educator and priest in facilitating Bible-study, the other is the shared practice of Bible-study groups. The aim of the research is to investigate the interrelationship of those practices, in order that the latter, the practice of Bible-study itself, may be better understood and supported.

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[34] It is, however, outside the bounds of congregational life, focusing rather on religious education – it draws on action research approaches to critique the 'Praxis Model' of Thomas Groome.

Prima facie this would seem to be a form of action research, given the definition of

that approach provided by Stephen Kemmis:

> Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants
> in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality
> and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their
> understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which the practices
> are carried out. (1993, 177)

Further, action research offered an initial methodological framework for the

investigation. This consisted of cycles of 'planning, acting, observing and reflecting'

(1993, 178), which, Kemmis suggests, form a spiral of self-reflection (Cf. Ebbutt,

1985). An immediate resonance is apparent between this approach and the spiral

cycles of some approaches to theological reflection. For example, Green (1990),

proposes a cycle inspired by liberation theology of: experience, exploration,

reflection, response. When the two cycles are juxtaposed, initial similarities and

differences become clear[35]:

plan	response
reflect act	reflection experience
observe	exploration
action research	**theological reflection**
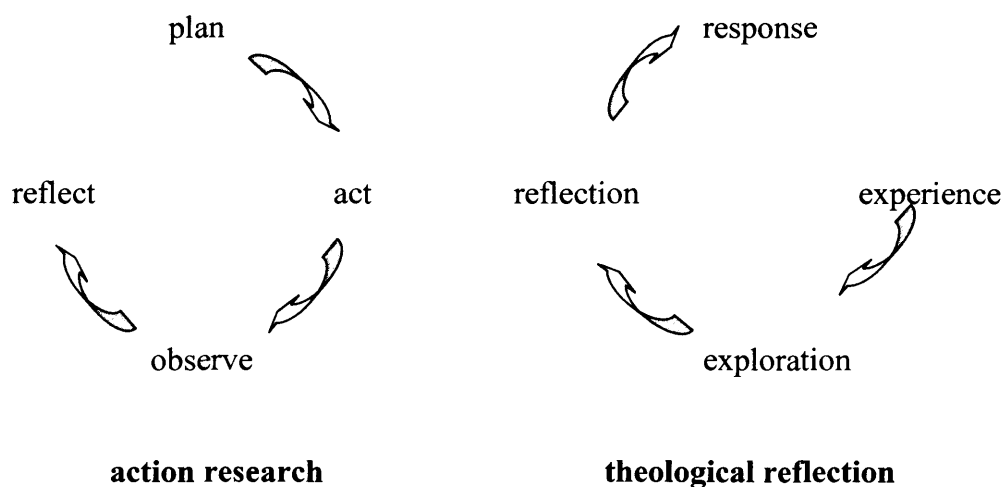
A key difference, at first sight, is the starting point, starting with consideration of

one's situation or with planning a particular action. This difference is reduced by the

realisation that both cycles are spiral, and that both models represent an exploration of

the tension between the wider situation and the particular action to be taken in that

situation. In both models, this tension is considered through the analysis

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[35] Stringer (1999) produces a version of the action research cycle that is even closer to Green's
"Pastoral Cycle". His cycle is "Look – Think – Act". However, Stringer's work seems less typical of
the body of action research literature than that of Kemmis.

(observation/exploration). It is further examined by reflection – gaining critical distance from the situation.

The difference is further reduced, by redrawing of Green's diagram, along the following lines. Green (1990, ch.6) makes clear that response involves consideration of possible outcomes and selection of the appropriate response, followed by implementation[36]. This suggests that, for the comparison, Green's response phase may be expanded to: response (planning), response (implementation/action). Further, it is clear that Green's two phases of experience and exploration are intimately connected, concerned with the two sides of recounting one's experience and discerning its meaning, in Green's terms (1990, 57), with anecdote and analysis. Again for comparison with action research, this suggests that experience and exploration may be collapsed into a single phase. The comparison of diagrams then demonstrates considerable congruence:

plan

response
(planning)

reflect   act

reflection   response
(implementation)

observe

experience/
exploration

action research   **theological reflection**
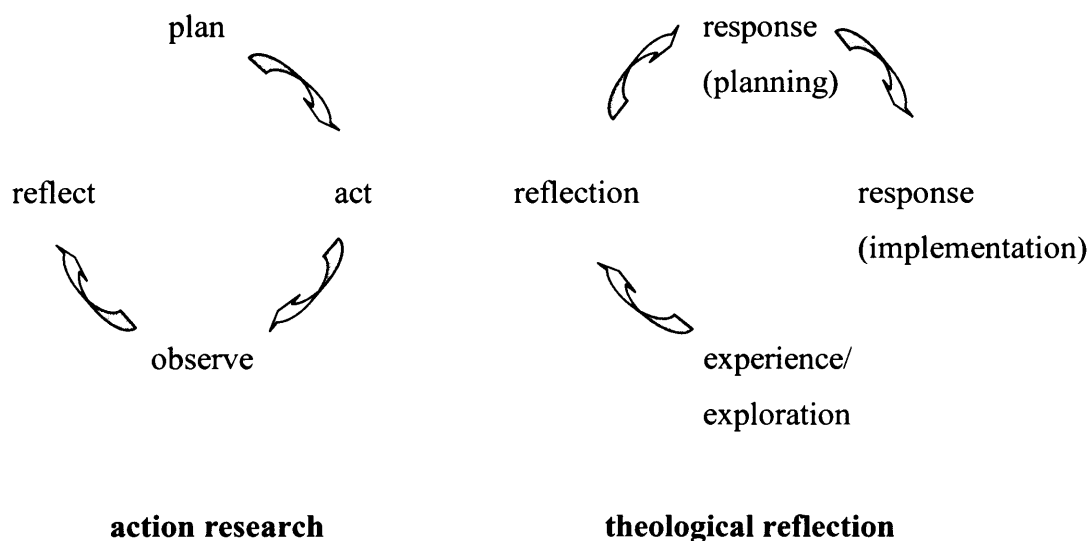
A further difference, not so apparent at first sight, might lie in the nature of the reflection, however. In Green's cycle, reflection involves dialogue between those reflecting and the Christian tradition, especially the Bible (1990, ch.5). The question arises as to whether action research involves such a dialogue with past tradition. In fact, something of this is also present in action research. Elliott articulates well the nuances of the debate for the action researcher, as he considers the place of the

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[36] This is in keeping with the liberation theology cycle of reflection which lies behind Green's model, which has three stages: see, judge, act. The key to Green's response phase is therefore action.

'traditional canon of four foundation disciplines' (1987, 154)[37] within the development of educational theory. Drawing on Gadamer, he envisages teachers who do action research as being involved in a reflective process:

> ...in which they deliberated about concrete practical problems in relation to the principles, values, and beliefs they brought to the situation. Such deliberations would benefit from eclectic appropriations of meanings distilled from a variety of sources, which might include the disciplines. But the appropriations of ideas and knowledge drawn from the disciplines will depend on the extent to which teachers view them as speaking to their concrete practical concerns. The ultimate test of the usefulness of the disciplines as sources of ideas is whether teachers can use them to construct a workable theory of the case. I say 'workable' because in practical reflection the outcome is both a theory and a form of action. (Elliott, 1987, 163)

Elliott allows us to articulate something of the dilemma of the practical theologian. For it becomes clear that the relationship between action research and the traditional educational disciplines is akin to that between practical theology and Schleiermacher's 'foundation' disciplines of philosophical and historical theology. Practitioners of both are engaged in asking pragmatic questions about the usefulness of knowledge (Rorty, 1999). Both do so eclectically, acknowledging the tradition in which they work, but remaining suspicious of claims by their 'foundation' disciplines to be prescriptive. Both can envisage re-working the disciplines on which they draw, and/or drawing on different ones.

This initial appraisal identified two similar processes, but also generates questions: What does each cycle privilege? In comparison with theological reflection, does action research privilege consideration of action over attention to the wider situation, and reflection on the present over consideration of past tradition? Both similarity and questions suggest a worthwhile dialogue between action research and practical theology. The next section explores methods of action research, to facilitate further dialogue with practical theology and to further determine the appropriateness of action research for my investigation.

3.2.2 Methods of action research

It is commonplace to root action research in the work of Kurt Lewin (see, e.g. Ebbutt, 1985; Kemmis, 1993; McKernan, 1991; McNiff & Whitehead, 2002; Reason &

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[37] The disciplines are: educational philosophy, psychology, sociology and history

Bradbury, 2006)[38]. Lewin's key article is concerned with effective social management of change. He sought to discover how to effect change in patterns of shopping and cooking amongst American 'housewives', and to test the different effects on them of lectures and group decision making. In this context he maps out a process of planning and evaluation which, he contests, improves the management of change. This is the basis for later thinking in action research (Lewin, 1959, 200):
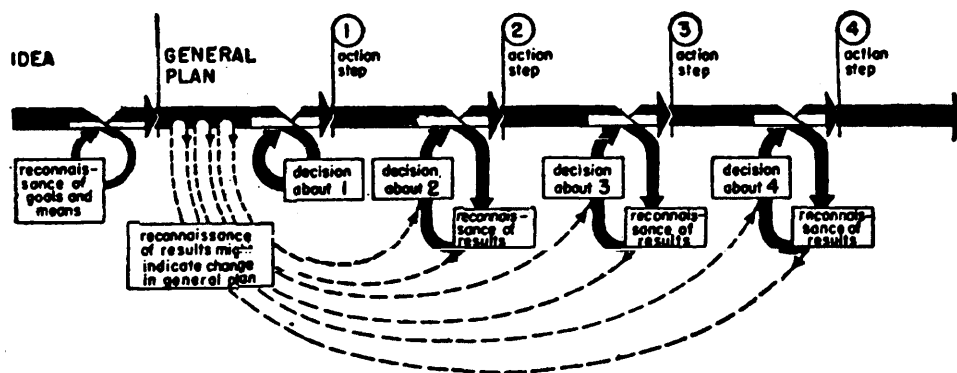
FIG. 2. Planning, fact-finding, and execution.

As can be seen from the diagram, the theory is that an initial idea, followed by reconnaissance, or fact finding, gives rise to a plan. This gives rise to a series of action steps, each preceded by a decision. Following each step there is further reconnaissance, which may modify the next step, or the general plan.

Lewin's spiral of cycles has given rise to numerous modifications. For example, Elliott (1991, 70) maintains that the initial idea out of which the action grows should also be modifiable in the light of evaluation of action steps. His diagrams portray distinct cycles, in each of which a revised general idea gives rise to an amended plan and appropriate action steps. Elliott also contends that reconnaissance should involve analysis as well as fact finding, and that evaluation of an action should only follow when the implementation of the action has been established[39].

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[38] Others are also referred to, notably John Collier (see McNiff, 2002, ch.3).

[39] Interestingly, Elliott (1991, 70) also says that 'reconnaissance... should constantly recur in the spiral of activities, rather than occur only at the beginning', despite the fact that this appears to have been Lewin's original intention.

The model cited at the beginning of this paper (plan, act, observe reflect), the 'Deakin' model, is a further variation. As McKernan points out (1991, 26f), this focuses especially on post-action reflection. It also encapsulates a suspicion of the concept of 'the initial idea', which is found in both Elliott and Lewin. This is in keeping with an epistemological stance which grows out of the critical theory of Habermas and the Frankfurt School. For Kemmis and other colleagues at Deakin University, the emphasis is on critical engagement with practice.

More recent writings have shown a move away from such diagrams. McNiff responds against what she sees as the prescriptiveness of the above models, expressing her reservations thus:

> An inherent assumption of propositional models is that practice can be portrayed as linear and sequential, neat and orderly. This frequently is not so. (2002, 52)

Another textbook of action research which departs from established diagrams is that of Reason and Bradbury (2001; 2006). Instead of diagrams of process, they propose a view of action research in which there are a variety of inter-related characteristics. Action research is concerned with 'practical issues', with 'knowledge-in-action'. It is an 'emergent developmental form', which assumes the values of 'participation and democracy', and is concerned about 'human flourishing' (2006, 2).

3.2.3 Epistemologies of action research

The above action research approaches demonstrate not only different research methods, but also different epistemologies. Appendix 3 to this thesis explores these epistemological distinctions and compares the way in which action research reacts against a positivist understanding of gathering knowledge, with a similar reaction in practical theology. That appendix establishes common ground between action researchers and practical theologians in the desire to escape from technical rationality; and that in both areas a similar epistemological tension exists. Both action researchers and practical theologians show signs of being divided on whether critical evaluation is integral to hermeneutical reflection, or requires a frame of reference

external to hermeneutics. In this sense both disciplines mirror, and draw on, the debate between Gadamer and Habermas on these questions[40]

The epistemological congruence between action research and practical theology reinforced the case for them being brought together in this research project. There seemed a good chance of this being, in Horlick-Jones and Rosenhead's terms, an exercise in 'transdisciplinarity'[41].

3.2.4 The envisaged contribution of action research and subsequent changes of emphasis

The initial intention, on the basis of the above discussions was that the action research cycle of plan-act-observe-reflect would offer a macro-strategy for this research project. This would involve planning a way of working with groups that was hermeneutical, educational and participative (and therefore flexible). This practice would be executed, observed and reflected on in interaction with one group, thence leading into further cycles with other groups. The interests of action research appeared to coincide here with undertaking an exercise in practical theology. The 'Deakin model' recommended itself as an appropriate model of reflection for me as practical theologian. It offered a direct approach to reflection on action, or even in action (Schön, 1987)[42]. While such an approach built on the 'Deakin model', it would also incorporate something of the approach of John Elliott. For the cycles of action and reflection to be incorporated in this project would build on an 'initial idea' of practice[43], with a view to developing it.

How this was to be implemented is considered in the next chapter, which examines how the research was put into operation. However, it is important to note here something of the ways in which this initial framework for the research was

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[40] (Gadamer, 1979, 1986, 1990; Habermas, 1972, 1990a, 1990b; How, 1995; Mendelson, 1979; Misgeld, 1977).

[41] Their criteria for such a designation are as follows: '...elements of methodologies drawn from different disciplines are combined within a single approach. That is, input and outputs are exchanged across disciplinary boundaries, in an evolved methodology which transcends disciplines. In epistemological terms, transdisciplinarity involves an integration of knowledges.' (2002, 56)

[42] This is a sharper model of reflection on practice than that offered by (Green, 1990), with its focus on the wider situation.

[43] That 'initial idea' was developed especially in the two reflections to be found in appendix 1, which explored an initial understanding of my practice; and in those sections of chapter 2, which located the practice of Bible-study within the field of practical theology.

subsequently modified. The key point at which reframing was precipitated (discussed in 4.2.2-4.2.3, pp.76-83), was during reflection on the pilot phase of the research. As part of consideration of the asymmetry between my participation and that of other members of the Pilot Group, I drew the conclusion that my interventions had unduly constrained interaction in the group. This led to a decision, implemented in practice, to intervene much less with subsequent groups and to pay more attention to groups' own practice.

This was the pivot for a number of inter-locking changes of interest. A key shift of emphasis was from an interest in how my facilitation of Bible-study might be improved, to one in how a shared practice of Bible-study might be improved[44]. At the same time curiosity about educational techniques for stimulating Bible-study began to be displaced by an interest in more fundamental questions about how Bible-study groups worked. And both these changes were accompanied by questions about how to maximise participation of group members in the research.

Taken together, these shifts reinforced (over time) the decision to reduce my intervention in groups, and to increase attention to the way in which group members shaped Bible-study themselves. This remained a practical concern, but significantly altered the action research frame. In particular, the decision to be driven much more by groups' existing practice reduced the potential for experimentation – for exploring different kinds of intervention[45]. In terms offered by the 'Deakin model' of plan-act-observe-reflect, there was an increasing commitment to be bound by groups' own planning and action, albeit still modified by my presence. Correspondingly, attention to observation of their practice and reflection assumed a higher profile.

Given how little is known empirically about 'Bible-study' talk (see the previous chapter, especially 2.4 – 2.4.3, pp.31-42), this focus was no bad thing. The next logical step, in action research terms, would be to plan to modify practice with one or more of the groups, in the light of knowledge of existing practice. But that kind of modification was displaced by decisions discussed here from within the timescale of

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[44] So, for example, an interest in my leadership, prominent in the Pilot Group analysis and present in consideration of Group 1, gave way to an interest in how others led groups, which was prominent in Groups 2 and 3.

[45] Once again, this differentiates this research project from that of (Hall, 2003)

this project, although some suggestions for 'Bible-study' practice will be made in the thesis' conclusions. Arguably, the quality of future intervention, rooted in the in-depth understanding of Bible-study provided by this investigation, should be greater than if I had continued with more active intervention, with correspondingly less attention to understanding of how groups functioned. But within the parameters of this project, <u>reducing</u> intervention might be regarded as an unusual aim for action research! It is, however, entirely congruent with research conducted by a practitioner working in collaboration and relationship with other practitioners.

The area in which a cyclical approach continued was in relation to my <u>research</u> practice, which was reviewed before engaging with each new group, in the light of reflection on my action with the previous one. This shaped the hybridity of the methodology and retrospectively informs this chapter.

3.3 Analysis of data

To return to the way in which a theoretical understanding of research methodology emerged in the early stages of the PhD, the 'Deakin Model' of action research was seen as raising a number of micro-strategic questions. Every stage of the model, plan-act-observe-reflect, implies the need for analysis. Elliott (1991, 70) too insists that the recurring element of reconnaisance involves not only fact-finding but also analysis. This need for analysis is apparent in reviewing the initial idea out of which the research emerges. But it was, perhaps, most acutely felt as observation and reflection were considered. What analytical approaches to these aspects of the action research cycle would enable the following: the sort of rigorous post-action reflection required by the 'Deakin model' (McKernan, 1991, 26f), and the continued hermeneutic of practice arising out of reflection?

The next sections of the chapter will show how the possible contributions of different methodological approaches to the analysis of data were considered. Approaches will include: ethnography and related consideration of reflexivity; discourse analysis, including its use within a wider ethnographic frame; and the particular contribution, within the discourse analysis spectrum, of conversation analytic investigation of 'institutional talk'. As indicated above, the sequence of these sections is generated by the theoretical investigation of methodology in the first nine months of the research.

The sections will also include some comment on the practical value, and adaptation, of the different approaches at later stages in the project, drawn together in the final section of the chapter.

3.3.1 An ethnographic frame

Two aspects of my research suggested a general approach to analysis. First, as indicated previously in this chapter, the research is concerned with an area of <u>shared</u> practice. This practice, of the interpretation of biblical texts, is the shared concern of me and of the local church groups with whom I worked. To say that immediately locates the practice, and therefore the research, in overlapping social contexts: the particular local church communities; the wider social settings in which the churches are situated (local, national and global); a broader church setting (e.g. the Church of England); the theological and educational academic networks to which I belong. Secondly, the research has a contextual interest (see 2.2, pp.17-18) in how people arrive at <u>local</u> readings – interpretations of the Bible which make sense in their situation. This makes the connection between interpretation and social context an explicit concern of the research[46].

My research is concerned, therefore, with interaction amongst people in relation to the social context of interactions. Further, I am involved in those interactions as a participant in the interpretative activity, and as an observer of what is going on – my role is that of the participant-observer. What this suggested in initial reflection on methodology was that, in broad terms, the analysis of the research would be ethnographic in character.

This is in keeping with the approach of David Silverman (1997b, 8-19). He characterises ethnography as being empirical, in other words as requiring observation of what happens 'in the field'. He also indicates the need for openness – 'to discover the elements making up the markers and tools that people mobilize in their

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[46] This is also in keeping with the definition of action research referred to previously: 'Action research is a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social (including educational) situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of (a) their own social or educational practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the situations in which the practices are carried out.' (Kemmis, 1993, 177)

interactions with others and more generally with the world' (1997b, 9). Thirdly,

Silverman suggests a requirement to ground observed phenomena.

> A study becomes ethnographic when the fieldworker is careful to connect the
> facts that s/he observes with the specific features of the *backdrop* against
> which these facts occur, which are linked to historical and cultural
> contingencies. (1997b, 10, emphasis in the original)

As detailed later in this chapter, an ethnographic approach was realised in particular

ways in this research. For example, the recording of my meetings with Bible-study

groups raised questions of analysis that required techniques that went beyond

traditional ethnographic field notes. As will be seen, what developed was a linguistic

ethnography approach drawing on discourse analytic techniques. This in turn

determined approaches to the relationship between the local context of a Bible-study

group and wider social contexts.

The question of my being a participant-observer continued to act as a catalyst for

reflection on my role as researcher. Given that this research is the work of a

practitioner, the dynamic of this reflection differed from traditional ethnography and

from the perspective of a researcher whose starting point is external to the social

world being investigated. The key question was not, how do I participate sufficiently

to understand Bible-study? Rather it was, how do I generate sufficient critical

distance from a familiar world, in order to 'observe' it?

3.3.2 Reflexivity and reflexive analysis

Reflection on my role within the research has generated throughout this project

questions of reflexivity. Initial exploration of this focused on a growing awareness, in

sociological and ethnographic research, that those who investigate how others

construct their social context, must be aware of how they themselves are also engaged

in such construction through their research. Those who deconstruct the lives of others

cannot expect to isolate their own work from such a process.

This area is considered by Hammersley and Atkinson. In examining the naturalistic

reaction (in ethnography) against positivism, they indicate that both these approaches

assume that the researcher may exist in a separate world from the one s/he researches.

They contend that this is a false assumption:

> Reflexivity implies that the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them... Also, it is emphasized that the production of knowledge by researchers has consequences... Nor are the consequences of research neutral or necessarily desirable. (1995, 16f)

Accordingly, they argue for a realism modified by reflexivity.

This position is not without its difficulties and challenges. Woolgar helpfully identifies some of these.

> ...whereas many social scientists agree that much is to be gained by shaking off the idea of observation as a docile record of pre-existing reality, they differ markedly as to the appropriate form of reflexive examination which ensues. (1988, 30f)

Woolgar argues coherently that the extent of social scientists' reflexivity (on a spectrum ranging from 'constitutive reflexivity' to 'benign introspection') depends on attitudes to representation. Those who emphasise the similarity of the representation to the research object represented will tend to be most involved in the reflexive process[47]. Those who stress the distinctiveness of the representation (the distance between the scientist and the object of research) will tend to sit more lightly to the need to be reflexive, other than to 'think about what we are doing' (1988, 22). Woolgar suggests that most social science lies somewhere between these two extremes.

In a fascinating piece of analysis, Woolgar illustrates the dilemma. On the one hand, the drive to be 'scientific' suggests that reflexivity be kept to a minimum, given that thorough-going reflexive investigation of scientific method undermines the critical distance which is foundational to science[48].

> On the other hand, the pretensions of social science to literary ideals generate the insistence that authors and readers constitute and form part of the scenes which they describe. This suggests the interrogation of the nature of textual representation in the course of research: the ethnography of the text. (Woolgar, 1988, 31)

Two reasons emerged early in the research for engaging with this dilemma. First, the imperative to be self-consciously reflexive is arguably not optional for those doing

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[47] Woolgar (1988, 21f) cites Garfinkel's ethnomethodology as an example of constitutive reflexivity
[48] Woolgar (1988, 23f) illustrates this by examining the limited reflexivity of the sociology of scientific knowledge

action research, researching their own practice; where the researcher deliberately eschews being an observer from the sidelines. This abandonment of detachment is a particular example of espousing the position of similarity, suggested by Woolgar. The position of action research is that representation (and analysis) of practice is best (if not only) carried out by the practitioner(s).

The practical upshot was the need for me to be aware of the way my participation with others in the interpretation of the Bible is integral to the local readings that emerge. Analysis of the interaction within groups would need to take this into account. For example, it would need to pay attention to the way in which the style of interaction I adopted might enable and/or disable voices other than my own.

The second reason identified for reflexivity to be built into my research is that it is by nature interpretive – concerned with the interpretation of texts, and with the interpretation of the interpretation. The reflexivity is obvious here, if only, once again, on the grounds of the similarity between the practice being researched and its representation. But it might also be argued that this dimension of my research places it inevitably in the domain of reflexive methodology. This is in keeping with the position of Alvesson and Sköldberg (2000), who point to a necessary coincidence between being reflective and being interpretative[49].

The challenge of gaining an analytical perspective on the reflexive spiral was a daunting one in the early stages of the PhD. There was a suspicion that this was a spiral from which one might never escape, forced Sisyphus-like to arrive at a new interpretation, only to find that one must interpret it - engaging in an endless series of deconstructions! This concern gave rise to initial criteria for a reflexive methodology, which would allow me to explore questions of involvement and representation, in a manageable (and finite) way.

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[49] '[Reflective] research can be seen as a fundamentally interpretive activity, which in contrast to – or at least to a greater degree than – other activity, is aware of this very fact. The recognition that all research work includes and is driven by an interpreter – who in the social sciences, moreover, often interacts with and contemplates other interpreters (the people studied) – here provides the key to a qualified methodological view. Thus method cannot be disengaged from theory and other elements of pre-understanding, since assumptions and notions in some sense determine interpretations and representations of the object of study. Hermeneutics is thus an important form of reflection.' (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2000, 7f)

One criterion was that the method of analysis should be specifically directed towards understanding how meaning is constructed within a social context. This is in keeping with the research aim, of understanding how group participants (including me) take responsibility for developing contextual readings of the Bible.

To avoid being sucked into a vortex of reflexivity, a second criteria was that the analytical method would allow for <u>some</u> distanciation[50]. It should provide some kind of perspective on the iterative process of interpretation (see below 3.3.3-3.3.4). This would allow for a sufficient critical distance between participation and observation, so that I might act as participant and observer and understand the dynamic between the two for a practitioner-researcher[51].

Initial questions of reflexivity were thus about understanding the layers of interpretation inherent in this project and how to establish critical distance to negotiate the layers. Over time, interest in my role found a further useful focus in the concept of 'alignment'. This alignment was not just between the <u>findings</u> of research and the <u>perspectives</u> of participants (as envisaged, for example, by Sarangi 2002); but rather between research <u>practice</u> and the <u>practice</u> of 'Bible-study' shared with participants[52].

It is worth noting here that the decision, detailed in 3.2.7 above, to reduce my intervention in the group process, following the pilot group, altered and simplified some of the reflexive questions needing to be addressed. The reduction of my leadership role when working with the first main Bible-study group, and the fact that others were entirely responsible for the leadership of the second and third groups, minimised the need to consider leadership as part of reflection on my participation in the 'world' of Bible-study. With attention focused more firmly on leadership of the groups by others, consideration of the dynamic between my role as researcher and as group member familiar with Bible-study became somewhat more straightforward; although it did not obviate attention to how leadership was negotiated around my presence both as researcher, and as someone who had also led such groups.

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[50] The use of this term has something in common with its use by Ricoeur, to denote the potential of the distance between author and text for generating meaning. For a discussion of this see (Smith, 1987).
[51] On this cf. (Gubrium, 1988), which offers a picture of discourse that is self-consciously understood and negotiated by participants in a practice setting (1988, 38f).
[52] See especially, sections 5.4.8 (pp.118-128) and 6.4.6 (pp.167-177).

3.3.3 Discourse Analysis

To return to initial methodological questions, the search for a reflexive methodology was focused on Discourse Analysis (hereafter DA). Definitions of DA are notoriously difficult (Johnstone, 2002, 1-4; Potter & Wetherell, 1987, 6ff). Taylor offers as approximation, 'discourse analysis is the close study of language in use' (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001a, 5). This captures something of the analytical task of examining language as it happens (rather than examining retrospective reflections on language use), usually through the production and consideration of transcripts of recordings.

In clarifying and expanding this, Taylor identifies a key assumption of DA, that language 'is not a neutral information-carrying vehicle... Rather, language is **constitutive**: it is the site where meanings are created and changed' (Wetherell et al., 2001a, 6). She then suggests, as a heuristic device, four main approaches to DA, with the following interests in linguistic patterns:

- the variation of language use in different social settings;

- the process of linguistic interaction;

- patterns of language use associated with a chosen issue or activity;

- language use within the wider context of society.

Phillips and Hardy (2002) provide a theoretical angle on the wide range of DA. They suggest two axes against which different approaches may be mapped. One axis represents variation of interest in text and context. All DA approaches focus on text (the text of language in use, most often represented by transcripts), but their interest in context varies from the very local to the global. The authors draw on Wetherell (Wetherell, Taylor, & Yates, 2001b, 380-399) in distinguishing contexts. The local context is the immediate linguistic interaction, in which an individual's turn at speaking is located within a conversational sequence. This is identified by Wetherell as the 'proximate' context. Typically, ethnomethodology, rooted in the work of Garfinkel (e.g. 1967), has this kind of concern, as it seeks to investigate how those things which are observed in a social context are made observable in particular examples of social interaction (Francis & Hester, 2004, 21-25). Conversation Analysis (CA), realises the interests of ethnomethodology as it examines conversation

turn by turn (see, e.g. Sacks, Schegloff, & Jefferson, 1974), in order to elucidate how meaning is accomplished in talk-in-interaction, through attention to the sequential structure of conversation and the categories deployed in conversation (Francis & Hester, 2004, 21).

Other approaches look more widely to the social and/or historical context of interactions, denoted the 'distal' context by Wetherell. Such approaches might develop 'genealogies' of fields of discourse, or combine DA and ethnography (of particular interest for this project).

The second axis proposed by Phillips and Hardy,

> reflects the choice between *constructivist* approaches that produce fine-grained explorations of the way in which a particular social reality has been constructed, and *critical* approaches, which focus more explicitly on the dynamics of power, knowledge, and ideology that surround discursive processes. (2002, 20)

At the critical end of this axis would be studies influenced by Foucault. At the other end would be research which tends to set questions of power aside, in the interests of being open to understanding discourse in its own terms (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Silverman, 1997a).

Phillips and Hardy's work confirmed the value of DA for my research: that it regards linguistic interaction as the site where social reality is constructed. A key requirement is to examine the way in which meaning evolves locally (as Biblical texts are discussed in relation to everyday life). DA should provide various perspectives on this, with its interest in how meaning is achieved and managed in the process of linguistic interaction. It therefore fulfils the first criterion identified above for a suitable analytical method.

DA also fulfils the second criterion of providing sufficient distanciation within the analysis. The act of transcribing recordings of groups interpreting the Bible and analysing the interactions within groups has the potential, realised in practice, to provide the necessary perspective for reflection – enabling me to be the observer of my own participation. Transcribing discourse is described by Mary Bucholtz as 'entextualisation' and 'recontextualisation' (2001, 179). It has, therefore, a significant

role to play in making practice visible (Silverman, 1997a, 212). This is in keeping

with the picture provided by Candace West, of the value of transcription for the

ethnographer.

> To conclude, then, the ethnographic payoffs of transcription are as follows.
> First, transcribing has the potential to clarify some enduring issues of
> interpretation in the field... Second, doing transcribing makes it possible to
> provide fine-grained data analyses that can show how the organization of talk
> or conduct constitutes some feature of the setting or is related to other features
> of the setting. Third, transcripts furnish exhibits of interviews and
> observations that can be used as the evidentiary basis of ethnographic claims.
> Fourth, transcription forms a record of those interviews and observations that
> is arguably less "filtered" (albeit not *unfiltered*: transcribing conventions
> themselves impose an order on the data) than field notes. And fifth,
> transcribing affords ethnographers who participate in some course of talk
> (such as an interview or informal conversation) a subsequent basis for
> evaluating their impact on talk. (1996, 344f)

Finally, it would seem that DA's focus on the 'how' of linguistic interaction may

provide exactly the kind of alternative interpretive angle, which was also identified

above as being essential to the reflexivity of my research project. David Silverman

(1997a, 23-25) identifies the particular value of the 'how' question. He suggests that

it helps us resist being driven by two of the 'Orthodoxies' of social science. It

encourages us to focus on the phenomenon being researched itself. We therefore

draw back from rushing to explain the phenomenon (the 'Explanatory Orthodoxy').

We also take time to understand and value the perspectives and skills of those we

research, rather than colluding with the 'Divine Orthodoxy' (*sic*), which assumes the

superiority of the researcher's skills and categories. Explaining and/or judging

practice is delayed, to allow sufficient time to enter into the intricacies of practice.

Silverman is clear that this approach does not avoid the 'why' question, but makes

apparent the need to first spend enough time asking 'how'(1997a, 35). The aim then

is to tap the reflexivity built into DA (Martin Rojo, 2001, 44; Potter, 1997, 146).

The contribution of DA as the field work unfolded was complex, and will receive

further comment below. At this stage, however, it should be noted that the pivot for

that contribution was the discipline of transcribing all meetings with Bible-study

groups. As discussed in the next chapter, transcriptions were to be of two kinds:

working transcriptions, which would capture sufficient detail to elucidate the flow of,

and interaction within, conversation; and more detailed transcriptions, which would offer a fine-scale picture of significant episodes of discussion.

In action research terms, transcription noticeably enhanced the observation of and reflection on practice. In keeping with section 3.3, the approach was adopted partly to enhance 'post-action reflection'. In practice, recording and transcription were to extend the process of observation beyond the practice event, bringing the voices out of the practice venue and offering the chance of 'post-action observation'! This further underlines how observation and reflection are inextricably linked, proceeding iteratively, rather than as a two-stage process (see further, 9.2, pp.256-262). The particular contribution of both transcription and attention to how discourse happens is to offer the researcher critical distance not only from other participants' voices, but also from their own. This 'distanciation' renders the voices 'strange' yet also enables a re-engagement with the practice, by providing this perspective on voices interacting.

3.3.4 DA and Ethnography

At the stage of establishing methodological possibilities, the question raised by sections 3.3.1 and 3.3.3 was how well an ethnographic approach and a DA one might work in combination – to provide a composite reflexive analytic methodology. Initial review of literature established precedent for the combination and highlighted possible benefits.

A database search produced a range of articles which consider the theory of combining ethnography and DA, and give examples of such a methodology in action. In an edition of *The Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, concerned with this area, Spencer (1994) identifies clearly what the two disciplines have to offer each other. He suggests that DA is of benefit to ethnography in the following ways. First, it induces, 'a sensitivity to the ethnographic interview as an interactive event that is subject to the familiar dynamics of everyday conversation' (1994, 269). Secondly, field notes are enhanced by analysis of discourse in the social setting. Thirdly, 'Discourse can ... provide one way of empirically grounding the ethnographer's interest in the local accomplishment of social and organizational processes" (1994, 271).

Similarly, Spencer proposes that ethnography adds value to DA. Ethnography provides insights into gaining access to research locations. It 'can be used to collect data on interactants' expectations, typifications, and the like' (1994, 273), revealing background knowledge out of which discourse is constructed. Field notes may be used to collect discourse data (in addition to, or in place of recordings). Further, 'an ethnographic-based approach can... sensitize discourse analysts to a broader view of the concept of discourse' (1994, 275). Combined approaches, therefore, as well as considering talk and interaction in the social setting, 'contextualize [them] by treating context and interaction as mutually constitutive realities' (1994, 275). It has to be noted that this approach is not necessarily uncontroversial amongst discourse analysts[53]. Nonetheless, Spencer's proposal suggested not only that a combined ethnography-DA approach might be possible, but also that it might shed light on local readings of the Bible, where talk about text is held in relation to social context[54].

Further weight is added to this conclusion by a particular direction taken by those who combine DA and ethnography. To some extent this trend is seen in Silverman's (1997a) work on HIV counselling. As emphasised in Peräkylä and Silverman (1991), the research combines an ethnographic interest with CA of HIV counselling interviews. More significant for my research, however, is the emphasis on the relevance of the approach for practice. There is an understanding that analysis of communication may enable evaluation of the practice of HIV counselling (Peräkylä & Silverman, 1991, 648; Silverman, 1997a, 211-225).

This trend towards ethnographic/DA approaches enabling evaluation of practice was seen in other articles from the medical context. For example, Ainsworth-Vaughn (1995) is concerned with how doctor and patient construct a discourse in which both play a part in the interpretation of symptoms and the management of treatment. Barnes (2000) considers the social production of healthcare practice, around 'clinical pathway guidelines'. In different ways, both articles aim to facilitate practitioners'

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[53] In the same journal Christian Kjaer Nelson (1994) discusses the ethnomethodologists' suspicion of data that is extrinsic to interaction, and the particular value of Michael Moerman's (1988) combination of ethnography and ethnomethodology, which goes some way to overcoming that suspicion. Miller (1994), on the other hand, pursues the practical possibilities of using ethnomethodology, CA and foucauldian discourse analysis as complementary methods, to construct 'ethnographies of institutional discourse' (Miller, 1994, 282f.).

[54] A further article worth comparing to Nelson's, is that by West (1996, 327-9)

understandings of power, through an appreciation of the often taken-for-granted discourses of the healthcare world. Ainsworth-Vaughn concludes:

> With precise analyses of medical discourse, providers can learn to recognize and own their powerful discourse moves, and both providers and patient educators can better support appropriate attempts patients make to control their medical experiences. (1995, 288)

The articles highlight the possibility of practitioners becoming sensitized to the discourse(s) in which they engage, for their own benefit, and for the benefit of those with whom they work[55]. This would seem to apply just as much in the area of theological education as in healthcare, and is therefore helpful for this research.

Once again, initial exploration of an area of methodology offered a number of insights, whose practical relevance for this research only became apparent over time. Worth noting at this point, is that the combination a discourse analytical interest in the detail of social interaction accomplished in and through conversation and an ethnographic concern for locating social practices in their wider context, continued to be a catalyst for analysis. The particular question which focused this approach was whether categories, practices and other relevant features from a wider context (such as church life, or contemporary society) could be shown to have 'procedural consequentiality', because participants in Bible-study groups actually oriented to them in conversation (see, e.g. Arminen, 2000)[56]. This question is discussed further in section 3.3.6.

3.3.5 Conversation Analysis and 'Institutional Talk'

Work on methodology discussed above articulated some key questions of principal relating to the analysis of data, for example about the relationship between local and wider contexts, or about the relationship between my role as experienced Bible-study participant and (inexperienced) social researcher. However, as I began to engage in field work, observing groups, listening to, and analysing recordings, the need for an understanding of specific analytical concerns or questions became apparent.

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[55] Cf. Hunt (1991), who considers the use of 'informality' and 'friendliness' in nurse-patient relationships, and Mallett and A'Hern (1996), who investigate the use of humour in communication between nurses and dialysis patients.
[56] It should be reiterated that such an approach, while not uncommon, is one that would evoke suspicion from many practitioners of conversational analysis and ethnomethodology, for whom the local context of talk, is the context of social interaction.

The area that generated understanding of such detailed concerns was a branch, and indeed sub-branch, of DA. The branch was Conversation Analysis (CA), the primary concern of which is 'the study of *recorded, naturally occurring talk-in-interaction*' (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, 14). The sub-branch is the study of 'Institutional Talk' through CA.

The aim of the next section will be to show how CA-based study of 'institutional talk' might provide specific analytical interests relating to Silverman's (1997a) 'how' questions of analysis – in this case, How is interaction managed locally? The next section will also seek to demonstrate that such 'how' questions can assist with 'why' questions – in broad terms, Why is interaction managed that way?

3.3.6 Developing the specifics of the how question

CA is usually regarded as emanating from the work of Harvey Sacks. A programmatic article is that by Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974). The article sets out one of the fundamental concerns of CA, namely turn-taking in conversation. The assumption of the article is that turn-taking is basic to the way in which conversation takes place, and further, that it is possible to identify (through studying transcripts of conversation) rules for such turn-taking. Such rules don't determine the structure of conversations, but can be seen to be utilised by participants in conversations. The rules are 'context-free', in that they are common to all conversations studied, and 'context-sensitive', in that they are adapted to different local contexts of talk-in-interaction (Sacks et al., 1974, 699f). The rules delineate how conversation is managed locally by participants, 'providing for the allocation of a next turn to one party, and co-ordinating transfer so as to minimize gap and overlap' (Sacks et al., 1974, 704).

Such rules also generate further interests in analysis of <u>sequences</u> of interaction (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 17f). An immediate concern is with what happens when turn-taking goes wrong, with mechanisms for 'repair' employed by participants (Sacks et al., 1974, 723f). Other consequent interests (Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, ch.2) include overlapping talk, adjacency pairs (e.g. question and answer, greetings and responses) and 'preference'. This last is concerned not with responses which are psychologically

preferred, but with the 'preferred' response towards which a particular turn in conversation is orientated[57].

Interest in everyday conversation gave rise, perhaps inevitably, to consideration of other kinds of talk-in-interaction. One particular sub-branch of CA, with particular relevance for this project, is the study of 'institutional talk'. As others have indicated (Dingwall, 1980,157; Drew & Heritage, 1992, 19; Hutchby & Wooffitt, 1998, 147; Peräkylä & Silverman, 1991, 628), the suggestion that CA be applied to other kinds of speech exchange than 'mundane conversation' is present in the paper by Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson (1974). In that article Sacks et al propose that conversation is but one of a range of speech-exchange systems[58].

The challenge which emerges is a comparative study of different speech-exchange systems in which conversation acts as the base-line. The article by Dingwall (1980) indicates how this challenge might apply to my research. In that paper Dingwall investigates what he describes as 'orchestrated' encounters, which lie somewhere between 'mundane conversation' and systems based on pre-allocation of turns (e.g. interactions in a court of law). An 'orchestrated' encounter is one in which one or more participants have responsibility for managing a multi-party interaction. Dingwall focuses on tutorials for trainee Health Visitors, where the tutor orchestrates proceedings, and examines how openings, closings, turn allocation and turn prolongation are managed[59]. Dingwall concludes that, in comparison with 'rule-centred' pre-allocated encounters, control in orchestrated encounters is 'role-centred'.

> An orchestrated encounter is characterised by the cession of the right to organise speech-exchange to one of the parties for the duration of the encounter. Examples of such organisation include that that party may act as an authorised starter and closer and as an arbiter of the distribution of the right to hold the floor and to introduce new topics. (1980, 169)

Prima facie, it appeared that Bible-study groups would fall into the 'orchestrated' encounter category, and that one could ask how far the interaction in such groups is

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[57] Basic examples of such orientation is provided by questions expecting the answer 'yes' or 'no' – beloved by Latin teachers!

[58] 'The linear array is one in which one polar type (exemplified by conversation) involves "one-turn-at-a-time" allocation, i.e. the use of local allocational means; the other pole (exemplified by debate) involves pre-allocation of all turns; and medial types (exemplified by meetings) involve various mixes of pre-allocational and local allocational means.' (1974, 729)

[59] Cf. Greg Myers' (1998) discussion of the role of the moderator in focus groups

managed by the leader(s). One could also pursue the question posed by Dingwall
(1980, 169) as to how the orchestrator's role is authorised. Such questions were seen
as applying to my role(s) in the early stages of the research, and later to the role(s) of
existing leaders of groups.

Dingwall's 'orchestrated encounter' would appear to correspond with what Drew and
Heritage describe as institutional interaction in non-formal settings[60]. In common
with more formal interactions, those in non-formal settings may be characterised: by
being orientated towards a significant goal of the institution; by certain constraints on
what contributions are allowable; and by inferential structures peculiar to the
institution (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 21-25). In contrast with more formal
interactions, non-formal ones are less uniform; may take place in private rather than in
public; are likely to involve negotiation between participants and perhaps some
overlap with ordinary conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 27f). It seemed,
therefore, that the work of Drew and Heritage on the dimensions of research into
'institutional talk' might well provide further clues for the analysis of talk-in-
interaction within Bible study groups[61].

A number of the dimensions are in keeping with other CA approaches. Thus Drew
and Heritage (1992, 29-45) identify two areas of turn design for analysis in
institutional talk. One is the choice of action at any particular turn (i.e. between
different actions); the other is the verbal shape of an action (i.e. between different
ways of expressing the same action). Another area is that of sequence, and the use of
particular formats[62]. A third is the extension of consideration of sequence, into the
examination of the overall structure of an interaction.

Any one of these, and combinations of them, may help to reveal the institutionality of
an interaction, and the character of that institutionality. In working with recordings
and transcriptions of interaction in Bible-study groups, it seemed important to focus

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[60] Non-formal settings would include 'medical, psychiatric, social-service, business and related
environments', in comparison with the more formal 'classroom interaction, courtroom interaction and
news interviews' (Drew & Heritage, 1992, 27)
[61] See also (Heritage, 1997)
[62] This approach is comparable to, and draws on, the interest of Silverman (1997a, ch.3) and Peräkylä
& Silverman (1991) in communication formats and what they reveal about the social nature of HIV
counselling.

on just these features. Two further areas, identified by Drew and Heritage (1992), further establish the value of the institutional talk approach for my research.

The first is lexical choice. The suggestion is that choice of words in institutional settings may cast light on interaction between participants. As Drew and Heritage put it:

> Lexical choice is a significant way through which speakers evoke and orient to the institutional context of their talk. Numerous studies have documented the incidence of 'lay' and 'technical' vocabularies in such areas as law and medicine, and it is clear that the use of such vocabularies can embody definite claims to specialized knowledge and institutional identities. (1992, 29)

Although interest in lexical choice goes beyond interest in technical or non-technical terms, this aspect alone demonstrated a resonance with this research. An interest in the language people use as they interpret the Bible is a central concern. Key questions include: Do people use the language of Biblical studies, or of particular traditions within church life? Do they use language that is, at least apparently, 'non-specialist' or 'lay'? How comfortably do people use technical language? To be able to map language use through CA-type techniques offered the possibility of generating answers to such questions. These, in turn, might generate insights into the reflexivity of the project, providing a perspective on my involvement, and on the language used in different layers of interpretation[63].

Not that consideration of lexical choice is necessarily straightforward. A number of important criticisms are made by Hester and Francis (2000a). They suggest that Drew and Heritage's analyses,

> Repeatedly provide 'contextually informed' readings which would seem to originate more from conventional sociological preconceptions about professional-client relations than from any contextual orientations which are demonstrably relevant to the participants themselves. (Hester & Francis, 2000a, 398)

Drawing on various examples, Hester and Francis (2000a, 398-401) seek to establish that, in each of the cases considered, the conclusion that Drew and Heritage draw is but one of a range of possible conclusions. Hester and Francis imply that Drew and

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[63] On reflexivity, see above section 3.3.2

Heritage's conclusions about the connections between interaction and context are built in part on unexamined and possibly unwarranted assumptions[64].

It is perfectly possible to put an alternative argument, however, that still takes account of Drew and Heritage's cogent demonstration that there are multiple interpretations of the relationship between a particular piece of discourse and the wider social context. They seem to argue that, because they are unreliable, such observations should not be made, and no attention should be paid to the wider context. I would want to argue, rather, that the speculative nature of some of Hester and Francis' conclusions require, not a withdrawal from the consideration of context, but rather a deeper, richer engagement with that context.

A further counter-argument to Hester and Francis, comes from Arminen (2000)[65]. Working from the analysis of particular transcripts, Arminen demonstrates that interpreting particular interactions may rely on the analyst's knowledge of the wider context of the interaction in view. The example given is of interpreting a misunderstanding in a tutorial for DOS Word 5.0. In this case the misunderstanding may only be understood by referring to the events of a previous interaction (2000, 438ff). Arminen concludes:

> ...the analyst's context-sensitive knowledge may allow a more fine-grained account of the institutional practice, which would not be gained without a reference to a wider context, or to some background knowledge. (2000, 440)

However, although cultural knowledge may be necessary in understanding talk-in-interaction, not all cultural knowledge is relevant. As Arminen puts it:

> The procedural consequentiality of context is a central methodological canon in the analysis of interaction. The analyst's task is to show in detail the way in which the parties build their activities as allowable and appropriate for their context. (2000, 453)

This observation prepares the way for a clear methodology for the study of institutional talk.

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[64] This grows out of their suspicion of the 'institutional talk programme', which is rooted in the belief that ethnomethodological use of CA is an approach that is distinct from traditional sociological concerns about social context. They maintain that drawing on an understanding of the social context of institutional interaction dilutes CA, and may lead, as suggested above to speculative conclusions. They argue consistently for what might be described as an unadulterated use of CA, which focuses only on the immediate context of the interaction under examination itself.

[65] Cf. Hutchby and Wooffitt's (1998, 113) similar point, based on their evaluation of (Moerman, 1988, 86f).

...the principal of procedural consequentiality offers a comparative approach. The analysis focuses on the difference between what goes on canonically in ordinary talk and what happens on some particular institutional occasion. This comparative analysis does not preclude the analyst from using knowledge of the context but directs its use so that the particular institutional relevancies of the interaction may be revealed. (2000, 454)[66]

The second area of interest, relating to institutional talk, identified by Drew and Heritage (1992-51), is in asymmetries in institutional interactions. Here they sharpen Dingwall's focus on the role of the orchestrator. They propose that asymmetries may arise from question and answer sequences, in which the orchestrator elicits responses to his/her questions from other participants. Alternatively, lack of symmetry may stem from the 'differential states of knowledge' of participants. A third possibility is that asymmetry has to do with something regarded as routine by an expert or professional, but unique or special by the lay participant.

All the above asymmetries would seem to be present in the interactions between trainee Health Visitors and their tutors analysed by Dingwall (1980-168). In prospect, it looked as though they might also be present in interaction between members of Bible-study groups with different roles, and between me and other participants, relating to different knowledge of biblical studies, or 'expert' and 'lay' approaches to interpreting the Bible. Certainly, it seemed to be worth asking the question: What asymmetries are present (if any) in such interactions? This would enable detailed consideration of the authorisation of the orchestrator, alluded to above, whether that role is mine, or belongs to someone else, or is shared[67]. Such approaches suggested that by noticing and transcribing any interactional asymmetries within the discourse of Bible-study groups, I might be able to explore not only how they arise but also why.

All the above suggested a particular approach to the study of talk-in-interaction in Bible-study groups. The approach would begin with the close attention of CA to significant sequences of interaction. In carrying out this analysis, it would be

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[66] Arminen echoes Schegloff (1992) who argues for two criteria: one, that the participants orientate towards a particular facet of the social context (which is therefore relevant); two, that there is some consequence of that aspect present in the discourse (that there is procedural consequentiality).
[67] Cf. (Horlick-Jones, Rosenhead, Georgiou, Ravetz, & Löfstedt, 2001), which considers asymmetry in risk-management workshops between facilitators and participants, and (Hutchby, 1996), which considers the dynamic between host and interviewee in the context of the radio show.

important not to assume the institutionality of the talk that takes place in the groups. Rather it would be necessary to demonstrate it, by comparison with 'mundane conversation'. Both Drew and Heritage (1992, 28) and Arminen (2000, 441-445) remind us that the boundaries between ordinary conversation and institutional talk are not fixed. Particularly in the non-formal setting, such as a Bible study group, both speech-exchange systems may be present and may shade into each other.

As the analysis moved outward from the techniques of CA, setting the interaction in a wider context, it would be necessary, once again, not to make too many assumptions. It would be necessary to avoid assuming that aspects of context are present in interactions, but again to demonstrate this to be the case. Such an approach may be summed up, in Silverman's (1997a, 34f) terms, as working from the 'How?' to the 'Why?'; giving priority and sufficient time to the former, so as to better effect the latter. This section has shown, therefore, that CA's attention to 'institutional talk' has the potential to reveal: the relationship of speech-exchange in Bible study groups to other kinds of speech-exchange, especially 'mundane conversation' and various kinds of 'institutional talk'; and perhaps, the institutional nature of the interaction in those groups. Such an approach began to furnish specific analytical concerns for this project. These included: the usual concerns of CA – turn-taking, sequence and overall organisation; and particular features, providing clues about institutionality, such as lexical choice and asymmetries in interaction.

There is, of course, a difference between recognising the potential of methodological approaches and putting them into practice effectively. The handling of discourse through transcription and subsequent analysis, for example, often felt like a set of craft skills, learnt through a process of apprenticeship[68]. But the above work on CA and 'institutional talk' began to bear fruit especially during the analysis of meetings with the second and third main Bible-study groups with whom I worked. In this context the analytical concerns, especially with asymmetry, enabled consideration of

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[68] This apprenticeship involved working my way through worked examples in published literature, having the opportunity to work alongside Tom Horlick-Jones (one of my supervisors) on data relating to his research, discussion in supervisions with both supervisors of the transcripts I had produced and my analysis of them, and presentation at conferences of this kind of work – not least the presentation at a British Association of Applied Linguistics conference which led to the publication of (Todd, 2005)

the distinctive shape of Bible-study conversations, in comparison with talk in other settings, notably educational ones.

3.3.7 Interim review – approaches to analysis

Identifying a qualitative research methodology is not a tidy process, especially if the approach, as is common, is a hybrid one. The second half of this chapter has offered a picture of how such a hybrid emerged in this project, which works at different levels.

Broad brush-strokes identify a number of overlapping frames and the questions of principle they raise. This research could, for example, be described as ethnographic, concerned with interaction amongst people in relation to its social context. It also involves my being a participant-observer, and reflexive, both because it is action-, or practitioner-research, and because it is by nature interpretive, concerned with how meaning is constructed. The designation, ethnographic, gives rise in turn to three criteria for an appropriate analytic methodology: that it is directed towards how meaning is constructed in a social context; that it allows for sufficient distance between practice and reflection; and that it provides a new perspective on the interpretive task.

Still at the level of broad brush-strokes, DA offers approaches which might fulfil those criteria, because of its interest in the constitutive nature of discourse, its use of transcription to create sufficient room for analysis, and its focus on the 'how' of linguistic interaction. Further, the chapter established precedent for Ethnography and DA being used in combination. The particular value of this lies in the opportunity to consider interaction and context as 'mutually constitutive' (Spencer, 1994). In relation to practice, ethnography and DA appear to have the potential to reveal the complexity of practice and to sensitize practitioners to the various discourses in play in their 'world'.

Amongst this overview are the seeds of aspects of the methodology that emerged during the fieldwork. At the middle level of detail, these might best be described as a series of disciplines, to which I was committed throughout the remainder of the research. One of these was to be a discipline of observation of social interaction, rooted in traditional ethnographic concerns with social practices recorded as field

notes in my research diary, but significantly extended by the DA practice of listening to and transcribing and re-transcribing recordings of interaction. This discipline was to enable me go on listening in different ways to the different voices in interaction beyond my impression gained in meetings.

A second discipline was to involve privileging the local in considering the dynamic between the local and the wider contexts. This was in keeping with an increasing commitment, discussed above in relation to action research, to understand the shared practice of Bible-study and how it was accomplished. This was predicated, in turn, on the discipline of giving priority of attention to the 'how' of the situation (how did Bible-study happen?) before drawing conclusions about why it worked that way. A third discipline was to be a commitment to continued reflection on my role in the research. Over time, as my role changed, attention extended to the interaction of roles within a group, including mine.

These disciplines are still some way from being a detailed map of analytical process. That began to emerge in the previous section of the chapter. This identified how CA transcription techniques and specific analytical interests (such as lexical choice, or asymmetry in interaction) might cast light on the institutionality of Bible-study conversation. How principles, disciplines and specific analytical concerns were put into practice are the concerns of the next chapters. But it should be noted here that this chapter does not offer a complete picture of the resources on which I drew. For example, the next two chapters will draw on an understanding of 'interpretative repertoires' (Edley, 2001; Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988) as part of an exploration of the linguistic resources that group members deployed. And chapters 6 and 7 will instead focus on the concept of 'voice' (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004). These explorations will become an important aspect of analysis of groups, not anticipated in the early exploration of methodology. Nonetheless the chapter does identify and defend key starting points for the hybrid methodology which underpins this thesis. The next chapter will explore the steps taken to put those starting points into practice during the field work phase of the research.

Chapter 4

Putting the research methodology into practice

4.1 Introduction

This chapter sets out aspects of the way in which the methodology, discussed in the last chapter, was put into operation. The chapter has been written retrospectively, towards the end of the project. It gathers, therefore, insights into the development of the research, previously noted and written up in other forms (including in research diaries and papers discussed with supervisors). This account is placed here in order to allow the reader to locate subsequent chapters, especially those that relate to the fieldwork, within the trajectory of that development. In due course, the reader will find the complement to this chapter in chapters 8 and 9 (8.4.1 – 8.4.4, pp.246-254; 9.2, pp.256-262) which provide a retrospective evaluation of the methodology, in the light of the outcomes of field work and analysis.

The chapter considers, therefore, the initial design of the field work and what was learnt from conducting a pilot group. It looks at modifications of research design in the light of the pilot. Finally it considers key ethical questions and how these were addressed, how data was recorded and is presented in the thesis.

4.2 Research design

4.2.1 Envisaging the research process

The first stage of operationalising the research involved gaining access to groups who would be interested to participate. The plan was to advertise in church publications for groups to take part. With the exception of the pilot group (see 4.2.2), this involved placing an article in the *East Anglican*, the newsletter of the Diocese of St. Edmundsbury & Ipswich, which was circulated, in electronic and paper forms, to all Anglican churches in Suffolk. This article (appendix 4) described the planned research and asked for interested people to contact me. This resulted in five enquiries. I had initial conversations with all respondents, the 'gate-keepers' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995, 34-35), who organized bible-study groups in their local church. I

then met with two respondents in May 2003[69]. Those meetings were conducted as semi-structured interviews recorded through field notes, involving the following:

- I invited those being interviewed to speak about their experience of Bible-study groups, and the make-up and context of groups.

- I described something of the background of my research (in my practice as priest and educator), the nature of the research, and something of the educational process I envisaged sharing with the group. This last used the document 'Questions worth asking' (appendix 2) as its focus.

- I indicated my desire to audio-record any subsequent meetings, to allow for later analysis, and my awareness of the need to protect people's identity.

- I sought to establish agreement from the organizers, to putting the idea of participating in the research to group members, to establish their consent.

These meeting resulted in agreement from two groups to participate, known here as G1 and G2. Contact and agreement with the third group, known as G3, arose in a similar way, but in November 2005, as I was coming to the end of the initial field work with G2. The particular choice of this group is discussed in 7.1 (pp.178-179).

Having established the initial agreement with G1 and G2[70], an approach to meeting with groups was planned, as follows. This is recorded here as originally envisaged, in order to show how the pilot group and subsequent experience modified the approach. Section 4.2.3 considers the effect of these modifications on the methodology.

(i)   First meeting with a particular group

This would begin with confirming the group's willingness for me to record the meeting. The main purpose would then be to encourage the group to discuss their corporate experience of reading and interpreting the Bible. A significant interest would be to identify the range of questions the group asked in relation to the Biblical text. The analytical concept which had by this point emerged from DA was that of 'interpretative repertoires'. It was thought that this concept might help map different

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[69] Although in one case this turned out to be a meeting with three people, all of whom led groups within the same group of parishes.

[70] G2 was one of the several groups meeting in the group of parishes in which I met with three leaders. Those leaders had discussed which of the groups they enabled should participate following my meeting with them.

approaches to interpretation used by the group. Interpretative repertoires are defined by Potter and Wetherell as:

> ...recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena, through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes). (1987, 149)[71]

The proceedings of this meeting would be recorded for subsequent analysis, with supplementary field-notes taken.

A subsidiary purpose of the meeting would be for me to respond to what I heard, outlining some of the questions I would ask of the Biblical text, and suggesting an approach for subsequent sessions. The final step would be to ask the group to discuss, after I had left whether they were willing to continue and to inform me of the outcome of the discussion. This group permission would be followed up by my seeking written permission from all participants (see 4.3 below). All three groups were willing to continue after the initial meeting with each of them.

(ii)   Second meeting with a group

At this meeting the main aim would be for me to introduce questions that might be asked of the Biblical text evolved from different approaches found in (academic) Biblical Studies, a worked example using a particular text. This would serve the purpose of introducing a new perspective on the 'interpretative repertoires' that may be brought into play, when discussing biblical interpretation. Questions would be of the kind to be found in 'Questions worth asking' (appendix 2).

I had previously piloted such a session in a number of different settings. Further, in initial meetings with leaders of Bible-study groups, there were strong indications, from responses to my approach, that there were some resonances with questions already being asked in groups. The response of participants would be invited. This meeting too would be recorded for later analysis.

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[71] Cf. (Edley, 2001; Wetherell, 1998; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). Potter and Wetherell evolved their definition of repertoires through consideration of the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), who examined divergent and conflicting repertoires in their social scientific study of science. Interpretative repertoires are discussed further in relation to the pilot group, and especially in relation to the discourse of G1, in chapter 5.

(iii)   Subsequent meetings with a group

In subsequent meetings of the group (perhaps three or four in number) the aim would be to work together at the interpretation of particular biblical texts. Participants would be encouraged to choose which questions they would like to ask of the text. My role would be to facilitate exploration, identifying resources for answering the questions. Participants would be encouraged to evaluate their own discussion and the relative merits of different interpretive questions asked. Again, meetings would be recorded in order to facilitate DA of transcripts. One potential interest would be the different 'interpretative repertoires' brought into play.

Other, more fine-scale, interests would be those associated with attention to the sequence of conversation (Sacks et al., 1974) and the nature of the conversation (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997) discussed in the last chapter (3.3.6, pp.64-71) – often described as speech-exchange format(s). My interest would be in the use of different formats in the 'institutional' setting of the Bible-study group, particularly in the interaction between me, as educator, and other participants. The hope would be to render this aspect of shared practice visible – open to examination.

These interests were indicative, designed to illustrate the kinds of insights which might be gained through use of DA, within an ethnographic framework, to pursue questions of: how the discourse of biblical interpretation takes place; and how meaning is constructed in the interplay between context, interaction and text. It was also envisaged that other aspects of DA might be drawn on, and unforeseen insights generated. I remained committed being open to what might happen in the 'reality' of the groups, as reflected in the detail of the transcripts.

4.2.2 The Pilot Group

I conceived of setting up a pilot Bible-study group in terms of the action research cycle of "planning, acting, observing and reflecting" (Kemmis, 1993, 178), which form a spiral of self-reflection. In one sense the pilot group was just such a cycle. In another sense, however, the exercise fitted within a larger cycle of research, as part of the planning phase, prior to working for extended periods with other groups.

In the first sense, setting up the Pilot Group was a prototypical cycle: planning an encounter with a Bible-study group and testing the planning; working through the encounter and considering the appropriateness of my action (and interventions); testing ideas about observing the shared practice of the group; and seeing if the exercise gave rise to productive reflection. My concerns included practical ones: with managing the group process at the same time as producing a recording and notes of proceedings – an aspect of being both participant and observer. I was also interested in whether the practical arrangements created an arena in which my theoretical assumptions could be investigated within the practice of a particular Bible-study group; allowing me, for instance, to observe how participants orientated to the models of biblical interpretation which I introduced into the group[72].

In the second sense, the pilot provided insights which contributed to the planning of my longer-term engagement with Group 1. As a direct result of the Pilot Group, I adapted aspects of practical arrangements (especially recording techniques), and of group process. As will become clear, I was also able to generate some hypotheses about how the Pilot Group engaged in biblical interpretation, which broadened my initial understanding of was going on in a Bible-study group. This is in keeping with what I proposed when writing about action research methodology (see 3.2.4, pp.50-52), that I would seek to understand and develop my initial 'idea' as part of the planning phase of my research[73].

The Pilot Group was established by advertising for participants in the Cathedral to which I was attached at the time, via the weekly sheet handed to those who attend services, on three Sundays in late July and early August 2003[74]. Fifteen people responded to the notice. I contacted all these by telephone or email, offering:

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[72] This is in keeping with Elliott's view that understanding learning involves considering means and ends together, and being attentive to, 'the quality of thinking realized in-process' (1985, 233).
[73] Thus modifying Kemmis' cycle referred to above in the light of Elliott's (1991) suggestions about the importance of understanding the initial idea, from which an action research cycle emerges, and modifying that idea as the action research proceeds.
[74] The advert read as follows: **BIBLE STUDY RESEARCH** Andrew Todd is carrying out a long-term piece of research on how the Bible is interpreted in local churches. He is looking for volunteers to join a pilot group, for a one-off Bible Study, which will take place one evening in the second half of August. If you would be interested in volunteering, or just finding out more, please drop a note to Andrew, via the Cathedral Office. No previous experience needed!

- A brief explanation of my research interests

- An explanation that this group would be a pilot for my work with other groups around the Diocese

- An indication that we would study the Gospel for the Sunday following the meeting

- An explanation that I would offer a number of questions that the group might choose to ask of the biblical text to be studied

- The opportunity for people to confirm that they were willing to be recorded, for my later listening and analysis. (This agreement was on the basis that in any transcripts read by people other than me, participants would be anonymous)

- Possible dates for an evening meeting lasting one and a half hours

- An indication that I would confirm the date and venue (which I subsequently did)

All those who had expressed interest in the group were willing to attend, but some were unable to do so. The group that emerged numbered eleven (other than me): six women and five men; mostly of retirement age, apart from two in their twenties; including two retired clergy; all of whom belonged to a wider group, identifiable within Cathedral congregations, of those interested in 'educational' events, articulate, with well-formed views on theological matters.

In preparation for the group, I studied the text that we would look at (John 6, particularly verses 56-69) drawing on various commentaries. I produced copies of 'Questions worth asking' (appendix 2) for participants' use. I practised my recording technique. I identified various resources that might be of use to the group[75]. I further sketched out how the group might proceed, as indicated in appendix 5.

My notes written immediately after the group indicate my perception that the meeting had 'worked'. Most people talked freely, and those that didn't seemed to be comfortable within the group. All members participated at least once, in addition to initial introductions. There seemed to be no gender-bias amongst those who

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[75] These included commentaries, a synopsis of the Gospels and a Greek-English interlinear version of the New Testament.

responded – if anything the women seemed less diffident than the men (this was born out by the audio recording). People contributed and interacted freely despite not all knowing each other. A variety of approaches were taken to interpreting the text, which was treated seriously, although discussion was lively, and, at times, humorous.

One major alteration to group process took place. Immediately after reading John 6 aloud, I introduced a question about what people noticed about the text; about what struck them. This was an effective question, generating a range of initial responses to the text. I concluded that the openness of this question provided a valuable starting point for discussion which I would use again.

As regards my being observer, and participant, and leader of the group, I discovered that to do all those and be host as well was demanding. I would not have to do this in subsequent groups; others would be responsible for hosting, and on some occasions, leading the groups.

Observation of Bible-study was based on three techniques. First, brief notes were made during the meeting. My aim was to record an outline of who said what when. This was ineffective, providing little additional information to that gleaned from the tape. Further, taking these notes was a distraction, reducing my capacity to observe and react to events in the group. I resolved in future, only to make notes of those things not apparent from the tape, such as body language, gesture, etc., or of things which I wanted to feed back into the group process. Secondly, I made notes immediately after the meeting, including my reactions to what had taken place, and a summary of the treatment of the biblical text during the meeting. These notes were more effective; clearly worth repeating.

Thirdly, I recorded the proceedings, using a tape-recorder and multi-directional microphone. This provided a usable recording, to which I listened a number of times. During the first listen, I noted timings of sections of discourse, with a brief note of who was speaking. When I listened for the second time, I produced an extended transcript, which indicated rather more detail of what was said. This provided a map for finding my way around the tape recording. My listening to the tape was integral to reflection on what had taken place and what it might mean. More highly detailed

transcripts were then produced of significant sections of discourse. In these, and all subsequent, transcripts participants have been identified as R (to indicate me, the researcher), F plus a number (to indicate a female participant), or M and a number (to indicate a male participant). In the case of the Pilot Group, participants are differentiated by the inclusion of a 'P' in their designation (FP1, MP1, etc). The protocol for these transcripts is to be found towards the beginning of the thesis (p.10), and is adapted from (Antaki, 2004). Further discussion of transcription is included in section 4.4, below.

Although the recording was of a sufficient quality for transcription, there was room for improvement. Further, having to time sections of discourse was time-consuming and imprecise. For both these reasons, I took the decision to use a 'MiniDisc' recorder for future meetings with groups. This provided much better sound quality, and automatically timed the recording; marking 'tracks' at regular intervals.

A particular point of reflection on the Pilot Group was my role within group process. Here previous interest in 'institutional' talk provided starting points for analysis. I suggested previously (3.3.5 – 3.3.6, pp.63-71) that Bible-study groups might come under the heading of 'orchestrated encounters' (Dingwall, 1980), or 'institutional interaction in non-formal settings' (Drew and Heritage, 1992, 21-25). This did seem to be the case in the Pilot Group. Interaction had a particular goal – studying the text; and interaction of a more general and mundane kind was kept to a minimum. A particular, although diverse, practice of interpretation was at work. And authority to manage the interaction was to some extent ceded to me, although also negotiated during the meeting[76].

A particular area of interest was the nature of the asymmetry (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997) between my participation in the discourse, and that of other members of the group. A fuller reflection on asymmetry in the pilot group is to be found as appendix 6.

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[76] This could be heard on the tape in the way in which my attempts to move conversation on sometimes required me to talk over other participants; and in the way in which my prompts did not always produce the intended response. This would seem to confirm the designation of interaction in a non-formal, rather than formal, setting.

The major area of asymmetry, identified there, centred on my interventions as facilitator. Analysis of my interventions in the reflection indicates that I engaged in the following actions:

- Summarising proceedings
- Capturing and enlarging on what I perceived to be significant points
- Posing questions to the group
- Providing information relevant to the study
- Answering questions of information posed to me
- Engaging in one-to-one conversations with others in relation to points of interest
- Encouraging people to speak
- Talking over the top of people (more than at turn-exchanges)
- Being 'humorous'

These actions taken together, in relation to the different participation of others in the group, map something of the asymmetries of my role within this 'institutional' interaction, as facilitator, educator, and researcher.

The reflection explores the reasons for this pattern of leadership. Importantly, it concludes that not only did my leadership constrain my facilitation of the group, but it also put limits on the research process. It identifies as key to the research that working with groups on Bible-study should be as participative as possible. This was a moment of realisation for me in the trajectory of the research, that (as the reflection puts it), 'researching shared practice is only possible if both practice and research are actually participative'. The reflection goes on to outline my re-evaluation of working with groups. This in turn provided a basis for the further re-evaluation discussed below (4.2.3).

My reflection after the Pilot Group also included exploration of how DA might contribute to the analysis of the conversation (appendix 7). This was usefully suggestive for later analysis of groups, especially G1, which gave rise to a fuller examination of how the concept of 'interpretative repertoires' might apply to Bible-study talk. The reflection illustrates how the Pilot Group notes, recordings and transcripts generated a distinctively discourse analytical approach.

The negotiation during the Pilot Group, mapped in appendix 7, also gave rise to a theological question to be carried forward into future analysis. Billig et al, in a discussion of Billig's earlier work, provide an intriguing reference to the part that God plays in discourse. In Billig's work on orthodox Judaism, he discovers that 'here also is a community whose culture is marked by dilemmatic argument... Even the Deity is believed to join in these discussions, as he argues with His prophets and even with Himself' (Billig et al., 1988, 18). The question within my research is: What part does God play in the discourse of the Bible-study groups?

There is little explicit in the Pilot Group's discussion that supplies an answer to this question. Their deference to the text might suggest that its voice is understood as coming from God. But the (sometimes firm) negotiation with the text might suggest that God's voice is to be found also within participants. Future work with groups may shed further light on this tentative suggestion, and on whether God is perceived by participants to be, in this context, argumentative.

4.2.3 Modifications to research design

On further reflection on my role in the Pilot Group, I decided to modify my approach with Group 1 (G1), to an even greater extent than in appendix 6. There were two key aspects to this. First, I resolved to be much more reticent in interaction with group members. This involved in part encouraging members to take responsibility for summarising proceedings, and commenting on significant points. It also involved being slower to offer information about the text and its interpretation. Secondly, I planned a different use of 'Questions worth asking'. I intended to let the group members draw in these questions at points in the discussion which they felt to be appropriate. At the beginning of each Bible-study I would remind members of the availability of the questions, if they seemed useful. The choice of whether to use the questions remained with participants, perhaps throwing some light on the interpretative approaches they favoured.

With G1, although I did lead the group (see the discussion of this in 8.2.4, pp.230-232), I succeeded in maintaining a much lower profile than in the Pilot Group. Further, as transcriptions indicate, participants shared responsibility for the direction

of conversation and interpretative approaches. There was an occasional engagement with 'Questions worth asking', but only as one aspect of their interpretative work.

Further modifications were then made in response to the practice of Group 2 (G2) and Group 3 (G3). Both groups had established patterns of leadership, which meant that my role was much more that of participant. They also had established ways of discussing Bible passages. Thus, although I did refer to 'Questions worth asking' in my initial meeting with each group, during subsequent meetings they were rarely referred to, and indeed received at least one hostile response in G2 (see 6.4.2, pp.138-146). I was content at the time (and am still) with the continued reduction of my responsibility for group direction. My attention had been caught by how transcriptions revealed multiple voices at work. This change in direction was discussed more fully in the previous chapter (3.2.4, pp.50-52).

This is very much in keeping with the research aim of investigating Bible-study groups, by paying attention not only to how their practice is facilitated, but also to the practice itself. Focusing on the 'how' of conversation, facilitated real attention to the how people in local churches read the Bible critically and contextually, and took responsibility for the interpretation of the text.

4.3 Ethics and representation

When the field work of this project was being planned, the School of Religious and Theological Studies at Cardiff did not have an established procedure for authorising research involving people. Nonetheless, careful attention was paid to ethical questions in discussions with supervisors. The following are the key steps taken to safeguard participants.

4.3.1 Protecting participants' identities

The decision was taken that current research practice required the protection of research participants from identification. The key reasons for this must be to ensure that they are not identified with the picture of their social interaction which becomes public through this thesis and other papers; and to protect them from having to be associated with the conclusions I draw about the evidence which they willingly provided. It was recognised that anonymity, in the text of this thesis, associated

papers and publications, was but the first step in this. Given that anonymous participants can be identified through other detail, every effort has been made to keep such details out of this, and other, texts. The groups G1, G2 and G3 are only identified as having their locus within Anglican parishes in rural Suffolk.

In relation to anonymity in transcripts and analysis, as for the Pilot Group, a system of letters and numbers is used to denote different participants. This was, again, a deliberate choice, not to provide instead imaginary names for them. Partly, I felt that I had no right to rename them, and partly I was aware that any name carries with it certain associations, which a reader might project into the text. The result may be to depersonalise the transcriptions somewhat; although participants' humanity comes through in other ways.

But there is an irony about participants' anonymity, given that I have argued that this research is participative; and given that the research would not be possible without the participation of group members. Yet no credit accrues to participants for the picture offered to me and to others of the practice of Bible-study, other than via the anonymous thanks offered in the acknowledgements of this thesis, and my more personal thanks to them at various points. The arrangements that I have arrived at represent, I hope, the best compromise possible within the constraints of producing a PhD thesis. This model requires that only one voice speaks in an identified way into the public domain, and takes not only full responsibility for the analysis, argument and conclusions (which I do), but also all the credit.

4.3.2 Informed consent

I sought and gained informed consent from all participants as follows. For G1, G2 and G3, as indicated above, I met with their 'gatekeepers' first. To them I explained my research interests, that the research was for a PhD, and that it might be published. I further explained that I wished to record meetings with the group, but that participants would be anonymous in transcripts. I asked each of them to seek the permission of the group and to inform me of the outcome, before we arranged a first meeting. Arrangements for preliminary consent from members of the Pilot Group are detailed above.

At the first meeting with each group (including the Pilot Group), I checked that they were happy for me to record proceedings (and did this again if new participants were present at subsequent meetings). I explained to the group my research interests, that the hoped-for outcome was a PhD, some or all of which might be published. At the end of the meeting I asked each group to decide at another meeting whether they wished to continue with their participation and to let me know. Only then did I make a date for a second meeting. Group consent was followed up, as I sought and gained written permission for the use of data from each participant, using the form to be found as appendix 8.

One further element contributed to participants' informed understanding of the research. This was a return visit to groups to share something of my initial analysis of the first five meetings I had shared with them, offering them the opportunity to respond. I conducted such visits with G1 (see 5.4.8, pp.118-128) and G2 (see 6.4.6, pp.167-177). Unfortunately this wasn't possible with G3, for reasons discussed in 7.4.7 (p.225).

4.4 Recording and handling data

Recording of data took the following forms. Throughout the research I kept a research diary (in several volumes). Meetings were recorded initially using tapes, but then (from G1 onwards) MiniDiscs with tapes as backup. After the pilot group, my consistent practice was to engage in two levels of transcription of recordings, and to code transcriptions.

I hand-wrote a complete working transcription of each recording. The aim with these was to focus on the middle ground, somewhere between a highly detailed transcription and merely providing a summary of what was discussed. The transcripts, therefore, capture the majority of words spoken by participants, in order to show the flow of conversation, while indicating gaps not transcribed at this stage. They also include editorial comments about such matters as tone of voice, in double brackets: ((comment)); and overlapping speech, indicated by a single square bracket at the beginning of the overlap in each participant's turn: [overlapping speech. The coding of working transcripts provided another way in which observation developed into analysis. Following a manual coding approach (Hammersley &

Atkinson, 1995, 193-203; Robson, 2002, 325-339; Tuffin & Howard, 2001, 199-204),
I further perused transcripts with an eye to the different approaches taken by
participants to the biblical text, marking related elements with coloured inks, and then
recording elements separately on index cards, to facilitate further comparison. The
aim of this exercise was to define an area of enquiry (which carries with it a number
of preconceptions on my part), but to allow the discourse itself to generate coding
categories within that area. This coding procedure was designed to mirror the dual
attention to the local discursive and wider contexts discussed above[77].

In a further analytical stage, sections of conversation, identified as being of particular
importance from working transcripts (and sometimes from the exercise of coding),
were transcribed in greater detail, working once again from the recordings. The
detailed transcriptions follow the protocols of CA, adapted from (Antaki, 2004) and
found at the beginning of the thesis (p.10), in the interests of providing as full a
written portrayal of discourse as possible. The transcripts contain a wealth of detail
about the talk. In addition to editorial comment in double brackets and overlapping
speech, also noted in working transcriptions, detailed transcripts include pauses in
speech, which are just noticeable: (.); and those which can be measured in seconds:
(1s). Other notation signifies the weight and pitch of speech: ↑rising pitch; ↓falling
pitch; °soft speech°; loud speech; LOUDER SPEECH. Information may also be
included about the speed of talk: >faster speech< ; <slower speech> ; lo:nger
syllables. Information is also recorded about in-breaths: .hh; out-breaths: hh;
laughter: heh (or hahh for less restrained laughter), including laughter in the middle of
a word: wo(h)rd; words which are cut off: wor-; and speech which follows
immediately from a previous phrase: phrase= =next phrase. Unclear speech is
signified by single brackets, with perhaps a guess at what was said: (?word). These
transcriptions, once one is used to reading them, give a sense of the humanity of the
discourse. They have the capacity to reveal tentative, or disturbed speech; to indicate
points where the tone of talk changes, either markedly, or more subtly. In particular,
they portray the interactive nature of conversation – how one turn gives way to, or

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[77] This kind of approach in which wider perspectives are brought together with the specific data is in
keeping with more recent approaches to Grounded Theory, in which the researcher enters, 'the
hermeneutic circle of multiple, partial and competing interpretations' (Pidgeon, 1996, 85; cf. Pidgeon
& Henwood, 1996).

projects another. Thus, for example, one can see how the shortest pause can provide an opening for a turn by another participant. They show how the tone of one turn is similar to, or in marked contrast to that of the next. These facets of talk give clues in turn as to how the conversation constructs social interaction.

Thus transcriptions portray the flow of interaction, and locate particular turns of conversation in their discursive context. This paves the way for connections to be made with the wider social context. This takes seriously the need to demonstrate the 'procedural consequentiality' of the wider context, by showing that participants orientate to it in a way which has consequences within the discourse (Schegloff, 1992). It can also demonstrate that understanding of the wider context is an important component of the analysis (See the discussion in 3.3.4, pp.61-63). The particular hope of this Janus-like approach is to uncover how a particular 'fragment or phrase… evokes for listeners the relevant context of argumentation' (Wetherell, 1998, 401).

In the thesis, a standard designation of groups and meetings is used. As indicated above the three main groups are labelled G1, G2 and G3. Meetings with them are then labelled in the order they took place as: G1.1, G1.2, G1.3, G1.4, G1.5, G1.6; G2.1, G2.1, G2.3, G2.4, G2.5, G2.6; G3.1, G3.2, G3.3, G3.4, G3.5. Transcripts from meetings are designated in relation to the group, then the meeting, then the number of the extract; thus Extract 1.1.1 is the first extract to appear in the thesis from meeting G1.1, and so on.

In keeping with discussion about transcription in 3.3.3 – 3.3.4 (pp.58-63) and above, a considerable quantity of discourse is presented in the thesis. Transcripts make participants' talk visible to the reader. Further, attention to construction of Bible-study talk requires precise reference to specific turns of conversation. Transcripts are therefore integral to analysis, rather than illustrative. Their extent means that the thesis exceeds the normal word limit for a Cardiff University PhD. The decision to proceed thus was taken in consultation with supervisors and, through them, with the University Registry and potential examiners. I would argue that this decision was not taken as an excuse to be anything other than succinct in writing up the research.

Chapter 5

Group 1

5.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with research carried out in partnership with Group 1 (G1), between September 2003 and September 2004. Part of the analysis of this group was published as a peer-reviewed article (Todd, 2005) in the *Journal of Applied Linguistics*. The article is reproduced as appendix 9. This chapter quotes substantially from it[78].

Planning for G1 had two key components: making contact with the group; and carrying forward insights from the Pilot Group. These were described in 4.2.1 (pp.73-76) and 4.2.2 – 4.2.3 (pp.76-83) respectively. A further aspect of group process, drawn from the Pilot Group, was my consistent use with G1 of a question about people's first reactions to the biblical passage, immediately after we had read it aloud. This question became a powerful part of group interaction.

A number of analytical questions were also carried over from the Pilot Group to G1. These included questions about the use of different 'interpretative repertoires', and any conflict between them; about the relationship between participants and the biblical text; about the part God plays in the discourse; about the wider discursive context of specific interactions. These questions will be addressed, as appropriate, as part of reflection on G1.

5.2 Carrying out the research

Following my meeting with the 'gatekeeper' of G1, F1.1, she sought and gained agreement from the group for an initial meeting with me, for them to talk about how they did Bible-study together, and for me to talk about my research. My hope was that this meeting would lead to further meetings in which we engaged in Bible Study,

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[78] This is in keeping with Cardiff University 'Senate Regulations for the Award of the Degree of PhD':
10.1   A candidate is at liberty to publish the whole or part of the work produced during his/her candidature prior to its submission as a whole, or part of a thesis, provided that in the published work it is nowhere stated that it is in consideration for a higher degree.
10.2   Such published work may later be incorporated in the thesis submitted.

given members' willingness. After this meeting (G1.1), group members agreed to participate in the research and to four Bible-study meetings.

My first meeting with G1 took place in early September 2003. Three aims for this meeting were successfully accomplished:

- To find out something of how the group works (through a group interview);
- To explain my research and how the group might be involved in it;
- To negotiate further meetings with the group (as above).

Further consideration of this session will be included in this chapter.

Subsequent meetings with the group took place as indicated below. On each occasion we had agreed to discuss one of the readings set for the following Sunday in the Anglican version of the Revised Common Lectionary[79]. We also agreed that we would tackle at least one of the following: an Old Testament reading; an Epistle; a Gospel. The actual readings are indicated:

G1.2   November 2003   Daniel 7.9-10, 13, 14

G1.3   December 2003   Luke 3.1-6

G1.4   January 2004   1 Corinthians 12.1-11

G1.5   January 2004   Psalm 24

These meetings followed a pattern. After the initial informal interaction amongst members, they settled into a circle of chairs in the sitting room of the house in which we met and a prayer was said. The chosen passage was read aloud by different members of the group, usually including the whole passage from which the lectionary reading was selected (Daniel 7, Luke 3.1-22, 1 Corinthians 12). I then initiated the discussion by asking about people's first reactions. Discussion usually lasted about an hour and a half. The meetings closed with a discussion of which passage we should study next (except in the case of G1.5), and with reflection or prayer. The group consistently asked that I lead them. This involved praying at the beginning and facilitating the reading aloud of the text, inviting people to discuss and occasionally

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[79] The Revised Common Lectionary is used by a number of Christian denominations to provide a pattern for readings at Sunday services, ensuring that during a three-year cycle congregations hear most of the Gospels read, together with much of the remainder of the New Testament and significant portions of the Old Testament. At least three readings are offered, usually with at least one from each of these sections of the Bible.

redirecting conversation. It also meant time-keeping and bringing proceedings to a close. Further consideration of my role will take place as part of the reflection on G1.

The group had up to ten members other than me. This included four married couples (F1.1 and M1.1, F1.2 and M1.2, F1.3 and M1.3, F1.4 and M1.4) and two others whose partners were not present (F1.5 and M1.5). Members were drawn from a few small Suffolk villages, joined together within an Anglican multi-parish benefice. Meetings took place in the homes of F 1.2 and M1.2, or of F1.1 and M1.1. At my first meeting (G1.1) members told me of the make-up and history of the group.

Members of G1 come from diverse backgrounds, including one Methodist and one Roman Catholic. The remainder are at present Anglican, but include two people of Pentecostal background, and a further two who had previously been Free Church members. It was clear from meetings with them that members were familiar with a wide range of denominations and church traditions, particularly with those that might be described as evangelical or charismatic. The whole group take their responsibility for lay ministry seriously, fulfilling various roles in the benefice and more widely. Two of the group are Readers[80], and one is ordained as a non-stipendiary minister, but exercised his parochial ministry in the nearby town.

Members sketched the group's history since its inception, in the early 1970s (the longest participating present members joined in the late 1970s). They spoke of the group at that point, and during the 1980s, being very charismatic and non-denominational. Membership in this period included a Free Church pastor and the local Anglican Vicar, and was as large as twenty or thirty. Members spoke of the group changing over time, and of different formats. Meetings with the group suggested that at that point it was experiencing a period of stability, characterised by members' valuing and caring for each other, and a sense of 'fellowship'. This enabled them to invite others into the group during Lent, while being clear that they don't want to join other house groups during that period[81].

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[80] Readers are trained and licensed lay ministers who lead worship, preach and may exercise a pastoral ministry.

[81] As will be seen, both the previous experience of participants in different churches and the current stability of the group are significant features of their discourse.

5.3 Handling the data analysis

As indicated in the previous chapter, all five meetings with the group were recorded using a MiniDisc recorder, and a tape recorder as back-up[82]. Recordings were automatically marked at five-minute intervals, ensuring manageable track lengths and easy handling. The five meetings resulted in more than seven and a half hours of recording. In addition to recordings, brief notes of details, not easily captured by an audio-recording, were made during meetings.

Working with recordings had the aspects previously discussed in 4.4 (pp.85-87), including: listening to recordings; producing a working transcript of each recording; coding working transcripts; producing detailed transcripts of significant sections of discourse, following the protocols of CA, adapted from (Antaki, 2004). Working through the data generated by G1 represented a significant stage in developing the craft skills of qualitative analysis, although development continued with G2 and G3. In particular, as I got faster at producing detailed transcriptions, enabling longer transcripts, which facilitated subsequent analysis, as individual turns of conversation were located in longer episodes of discussion.

5.4 Detailed analysis

5.4.1 G1.1

The initial direction of the discussion in G1.1 appeared to have been generated by my indication that I was interested in their experience of this Bible-study group. With little further prompting, members talked about who the members of the group are, the history of the group, the pattern of meetings now and the resources they use (drawn both from a range of published material and from the members themselves). A key *raison-d'être* for the group is 'fellowship', referred to by various people. This is encapsulated in a contribution from M1.4, one of the hard-of-hearing members:

Extract 1.1.1

1 M1.4: The (1s) most important part of the group as far as I'm concerned

2   .hh um because I do miss quite a lot that goes on (.) is of course the

3   fellowship (1s) this is most important I'd come for that even if I s- was

4   totally deaf ((followed by prolonged laughter))

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[82] Recording in mono allows for an uninterrupted recording of 160 minutes on a MiniDisc, more than enough for group meetings.

The group also discussed how they interpreted the Bible, (Todd, 2005, 223-226):
'The first signs of group members constructing in their conversation some particular
approaches to interpreting the Bible began to emerge from analysis of my first
meeting with the group. Between 15 and 20 minutes into the discussion members talk
turned to the importance of having the freedom to hold different viewpoints, even
when holding them involves challenging those associated with the authority of the
text. This first begins to emerge in the following line of talk, which follows from a
brief discussion of how the group's activities sounded to be 'a lot of fun'.

'Extract [1.1.2]

1[F1.1]:	We wouldn't do it if it wasn't <u>fun</u> (1s)
2[M1.2]:	Yeah hh (5s)
3[F1.1]:	and I think that's (.) in some ways that's (.) wul (.) I's going to say
4	that's part of our problem but I mean (.) sometimes we (.) we take a
5	very (.) ((getting quieter)) almost heretical view I would say of things
6	don't we we [(.) really don't
7[M1.2]:	[light hearted
8	°light hearted°=
9[F1.1]:	=we take a light hearted view we take a (4s) a sideways view (1s)
10	of things (.)
11[M1.1]:	I think [we're very
12[F1.1]:	[we're prepared to be very honest about ((yeh in background))
13	our doubts about things ((flatter tone of voice)) I'm not sure I believe
14	that I'm not sure ((change of tone)) hence our trouble with John Stott

'The delivery of these turns by [F1.1] is interesting because of the hesitancy with
which she leads up to the 'trouble with John Stott'. The hesitancy is seen in the
following phrases or words: 'in some ways', 'sometimes', 'almost'. Potter (1997:
150-158) has described these as 'uncertainty tokens', which act, as here, to reduce the
speaker's 'stake' or 'interest' in what she is expounding. These are reinforced by a
drawing-back (in interaction with [M1.2]) from the description 'heretical' in which
gentler alternatives are supplied ('light hearted', 'sideways'). [F1.1]'s hesitancy is

further seen in the pauses and 'repairs' (Sacks et al., 1974: 723-4) which perturb her talk (especially in lines 3 to 6 and 9 to 10).

'[F1.1]'s tentativeness begins to make sense as we reach line 14. A marked change of tone and direction, which was accompanied by laughter bubbling up in her speech, suggest the reason for the hesitancy – that [F1.1] has been leading up to an uncomfortable utterance. Or, to put it another way, a change of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981: ch.3), leads up to the introduction of a 'delicate object' (Silverman, 1997a: ch.4). The discomfort, or delicacy, arises because on an occasion recalled by [F1.1], honest expression of doubts brought group members into direct disagreement with the writings of a significant figure in the world of Bible study, John Stott. Stott is a well-known evangelical commentator on the Bible, regarded in certain church circles as having considerable authority, as being a definitive voice in the 'correct' interpretation of the Bible. The expected deference towards such a commentator provides a considerable challenge for the one who would disagree.

'In the turns following this extract [F1.1] and other participants constructed an alternative approach to this deferential one. This involved honesty about doubts, honouring people's contributions, sharing and fellowship. It also involved sitting more lightly to the expectation of discovering some great truth or insight, and eschewing an information-giving approach to Bible study. Given the tentativeness of [F1.1]'s turns, however, it would seem that in the above talk the alternative approach is held in tension with the more established evangelical one.

'Later in the meeting [F1.1] returned to this disagreement, confirming and expanding the above picture:

Extract [1.1.3]

1 [F1.1]:   I think that it's very often (.) wu a we pap we p'raps don't articulate

2   the question but I think my view would be that we're ask- the question

3   we're asking is (1s) <what's this> what's this passage saying to us

4   nd and I think in a sense that was our restlessness y'know as we've

5   said more than once now (.) the difficulty we had with the (.) study

6   we were u: (.) th- thing we were using with Romans >although we

7   persisted with it because it was a good catalyst< was that we didn't

8   agree with the assumptions (.) that the person made about what the

9   passage was saying so therefore we were saying actually (.)

10   ↑that verse <u>doesn't</u> say that to me...

'Here it is clear that the freedom to disagree with an authoritative viewpoint (a book about the Letter to the Romans) is espoused in the interests of discovering what the text says to members of the group (whether as individuals or as a group – see lines 3 and 10).

'The question of authority was discussed more directly, some 25 to 30 minutes into my first meeting with the group, by [M1.2], as he took the discussion from talk about what they did together in the group to its significance for him:

Extract [1.1.4]

1 [M1.2]:   I think I think mm (.) I think it's th- there there's an assumption

2   around and this is my assumption now that (.) I think as a group

3   we would say that th't the Bible has some sum authority (.)

4   in terms of: of how we live nd and and some some answers: mm

5   to- t- t- s- some of the deeper questions abou- so I think I think

6   from that (.) that point of view (.) where we'd I- I- I- I would (.)

7   hh from what I've heard people say and so on would would

8   reckon that there's a variety of (.) views on on on and

9   spiritualities within the group and- and- and in terms of the hh. I'd say

10   not the authority of the Bible because I don't think the authority's

11   questioned but but the interpre- how one interprets it nd nd and so on (.)

12   mm would vary (.) and we I think we work with that and we- we respect

13   that and we're able to to erm I've bin nd nd had the experience at times

14   of being put ri- y'know people trying to put me right becus I didn't quite

15   see things the way other people saw them

16 R: mmhum

17[M1.2]:   ( )within the group there was kind uv an accepted (.) view of things that

18   doesn't happen here I think that's one of the things that I particularly

19   appreciate coming from the kind of background that I did come from

20   where the was a where the truth had been given to a small group of people

21   and they and if you didn't quite fit in there (.) you weren't quite right

22   whereas somehow here (.) well hh you've got your view and I've got my

23   view and none of us are completely right at the end of the day but we've

24   got- we've got some hold of some facet of (.) God and nd his love nd all

25   the rest of it and that's that's what's important...

'In this extract the authority of the Bible is acknowledged, although in a qualified way (see lines 3 and 4: 'some authority'; 'some answers'). Once again, however, the authority is held in tension with the different views held by group members and the way [M1.2] perceives that the group works with those views. The tension is seen not only in what he says, but also in the manner of his talk - another example of highly disturbed speech, suggesting considerable uncertainty. In the midst of this turn, [M1.2] constructs a critical distance between the authority of the Bible and what the group does, by indicating, rather ambiguously, that the authority is 'not questioned', and by using the term 'interpretations' of members' perspectives. An 'interpretation', in evangelical circles, is a partial, relative take on the text, to be distinguished, perhaps, from the 'meaning' of a particular Bible passage, which has a more absolute feel (Cf. Forstorp, 1991, 68).

'But for [M1.2], this relativizing of the meaning of the Bible is to be welcomed, not least theologically, because it offers access to at least 'some facet of God' for group members. This experience is contrasted favourably, in lines 13 to 15 and 17 to 21, with his previous experience of a more authoritarian kind of Bible study, in which there was 'an accepted view of things', 'the truth had been given to a small group of people', and in which people who disagreed were 'put right'. [M1.2]'s background, revealed elsewhere in the data, was Northern Ireland Protestantism; a conservative Christian group with a very high view of the authority both of the Bible and of their church leaders. Nonetheless, despite the negative descriptions of that experience, and despite finding alternative authority structures within the group, [M1.2], along with other group members, has not completely abandoned notions of the authority of the Bible.

'Further examination of this meeting made clear that the group's desired freedom of interpretation is from the views and agendas not only of commentators on the Bible,

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but also of churches, of different translations from the original language and of the writers of the texts themselves (particularly as, to quote [F1.2], 'quite a lot of [the Bible]'s written by men'). No stage of the composition, transmission or interpretation of the Bible is free from the hermeneutic of suspicion which handles authority claims with some caution. Although members do regard the Bible as authoritative, they also articulate something of the difficulty of touching that authority in the midst of the perspectives of writers and translators, commentators and churches. They want to deconstruct the dominant reading(s) (Fowl, 1998). So (to quote [M1.1]) they 'pursue' the authority, sharing their doubts and interpretations and encountering God in each other, asking the question of the text, 'What does that say to me/us now today?' And this question is both personal and corporate.'

(Todd, 2005, 226-229) discusses how the above interaction gives rise to conclusions about 'interpretative repertoires' at work in the discourse of G1:

'While further data is needed to develop this picture, the analysis thus far gives rise to the question signalled at the beginning of the paper – Is the concept of 'interpretative repertoire' a useful heuristic device here? Potter and Wetherell identify these repertoires as:

> ...recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena, through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes). (Potter & Wetherell, 1987: 149) Cf. (Wetherell & Potter, 1988)

'The work of Potter and Wetherell drew upon earlier studies by Gilbert and Mulkay, who had identified repertoires through their display of, 'certain recurrent stylistic, grammatical and lexical features which appear to be coherently connected' (1984: 55f). They had identified two major repertoires in the discourse of scientists (in particular Biochemists), an 'empiricist' and a 'contingent' repertoire. These, they suggested, were to be found often in different contexts (the former repertoire in scientists' formal papers; the latter in more informal discourse, such as interviews); sometimes together (for example in an asymmetrical way to account for differences in the findings of scientists).

'Gilbert and Mulkay's work suggested at an early stage of my analysis a hypothetical parallel between the Bible-study group talk and scientists' repertoires: that talk built

around 'authority' might be labelled a 'canonical' repertoire, analogous to the 'empiricist' scientific one; and the 'What does the text say to me/us?' construction, with its emphasis on freedom of interpretation, might be labelled, like the alternative scientific one, a 'contingent' repertoire. The hypothesis provides some working questions for the interpretation of remaining data, particularly: How distinctive is the preferred interpretative approach of the group in comparison with the approach(es) to which members exhibit some suspicion? To what extent, and how, do different interpretative approaches co-exist in the talk of the group?

'The distinctiveness of the 'repertoires' was established in coding other sections of the data, including the four meetings in which discussion focused on particular passages from the Bible. In each of these sessions, albeit to a different degree, there was evidence of two contrasting approaches to Bible study and wider matters of faith. Often, but not invariably, this occurred in conversation which worked at the 'meta' level of reflection on how the Bible passage was being interpreted. This group, in contrast with others in the wider research study, relished this kind of conversation, perhaps because of their long experience of Bible study.

'The 'canonical' repertoire was frequently used of others, particularly 'prescriptive' leaders, who had 'a corner on the truth'. Repeated facets of the approach of such leaders, and of the repertoire, included: taking the Bible 'literally', or 'at face value'; regarding it as 'inspired' and 'agenda-free' – what 'God said', not what 'the person who wrote it said'; taking great interest in the 'nitty-picky' detail – 'they would say that every verse has a meaning...'; teaching from 'up-front'; putting other people right. These facets delineate a univocal approach to the meaning of the Bible, dependent on the authority of the leader, although legitimated as the authoritative word of God. The theology that goes with such an approach is that 'God controls every step of the way' and is a 'controlling God'. And 'God's word' is singular. Although commonly used for talking about other people's perspective on reading the Bible, the lexicality of this repertoire was available to, and used by group members to articulate their own approaches, as will be seen below.

'In contrast, the 'contingent' repertoire, used by the group as part of their construction of an alternative approach to interpreting the Bible, emerged as a multi-vocal one, in

which 'everyone's contributing... learning in different ways'. Again and again, group members talk about how God 'speaks to us/me'. This happens 'in all sorts of ways' – diversity of meaning is key. Necessarily, this is held in tension with the suspicion of dominant readings, which involves: identifying the use of texts as if they were 'propaganda'; recognising not only that 'a translation is only a translation', but also that the writers of the biblical texts 'also had their own agenda'. The group's own approach to the text, therefore, involves having the confidence to handle it 'in a different way', to interpret it 'in a broader way'. It also means having a 'human view' of the text, which bears 'the very firm imprint of man' and may have 'bias' or 'prejudice'. This relativizing of both the text and its meaning is what allows different perspectives to be valued – 'we haven't necessarily got to see it exactly the same...' The contextual approach is further underpinned by a stress on the <u>present</u> meaning(s) of the text, rather than on a search for a past meaning. The theology here is one in which God is expected to speak, and may do so through the text, or independently of it. But God's 'living word' is not to be determined by the text, or by any one individual, and is plural.

'This analysis underlines the appropriateness of the analogy between Gilbert & Mulkay's (1984) repertoires found in scientific discourse and patterns of Bible-study talk. It becomes clear that those who use both the 'empiricist' and 'canonical' repertoires are constrained by an external authority – that of the empirical method, or of the Bible. Serving these masters can in turn endow the servants with considerable authority. This is part of the identity of those who belong in each world. The authority of empiricism, or of the Bible, establishes the boundaries of the world of the scientist, on the one hand, or of the member of the Bible study group, on the other. That this holds good in the Bible-study group is underlined by members' attachment to the text. Even when working contingently, the Bible is a key *raison d'être* of the group.

'This similarity between the two worlds should not be surprising. I have argued elsewhere (Todd, 2000) that there are close similarities between the notion of transcendent deity and the 'transcendent' laws of nature, which are both claims to authority (Cf. Chapman, 2002: 21-26). And in the strongest expression of the 'canonical' approach to the Bible, where 'interpretation' is shunned in favour of 'the

meaning' of the text, there are close parallels with the world of science as described

by Gilbert and Mulkay:

> Empiricist discourse is organised in a manner which denies its character as an interpretative product and which denies that its author's actions are relevant to its content. (1984: 56)

'Further, the 'contingent' repertoire has one particular function which is common to both worlds. It is employed as a way of dealing with conflict which arises in the 'empiricist'/'canonical' arena. Gilbert and Mulkay, as already indicated, identify the use of the 'contingent' repertoire by scientists in informal settings, 'to construct accounts in which the connection between their actions and beliefs and the realm of biochemical phenomena appeared much less direct and much more dependent on other variable influences' (1984: 57). Similarly, in the discourse of the group, a 'contingent' repertoire is used in a way which decreases, and mitigates the direct way in which the Biblical text speaks to participants in the 'canonical' repertoire. In the 'contingent', the text still speaks, but, rather than being passively received by members, it is contingent on their response and context. They play an active part in interpretation, sifting and personalising different understandings of what the text might have to say to them.'

In the two repertoires there are signs of the group working in ways which connect with Fowl's work on 'stories of interpretation' (1998, ch.2). In the 'canonical' repertoire there are indications of a 'determinate' reading, which assumes that a text has a meaning 'conceived of (at least implicitly) as a sort of property with which the text is endued' (Fowl, 1998, 33). This modernist belief in a meaning waiting to be uncovered, is, however accompanied by a sense that the ur-meaning is elusive, or inappropriate. Thus, in the 'contingent' repertoire, there are signs of what Fowl describes as an 'anti-determinate reading' – a reaction against the 'determinate'. Fowl, following Derrida, suggests that this involves close attention both to the 'dominant interpretation' of a text and to elements of the text which are 'other' and open up the possibility of deconstructing the 'dominant interpretation'. The beginnings of such deconstruction are seen in G1.1's identification of the agendas of writers, translators, interpreters and churches.

Further, in the way in which G1 hold two repertoires in tension, there may be the first suggestion of an 'underdetermined' reading. This sits light to both the search for meaning and the drive to deconstruct, holding diverse interpretations together 'without having to fit [them] all under a single determinate theory of interpretation' (Fowl, 1998, 59). However, two questions remain, to be addressed in further analysis of G1. The first, raised by Fowl, is whether the 'underdetermined' reading has any critical edge, whether it allows for the legitimation of any practice at all that the reader wants to connect with the text. The second question, which I would raise concerning Fowl, is whether such an approach really leads to the theological interpretation of the text, or whether it is rather the articulation of the discomfort of living in the hinterland between 'canonical' and 'contingent' repertoires.

One further thing needs to be tested. That is whether or not the group's espoused approaches to reading the Bible, expressed in G1.1, bear any resemblance to the way they actually read the text!

5.4.2 G1.2

As indicated above, discussion in G1.2 focused on Daniel 7.9-10, 13, 14, against the background of the whole of Daniel 7. Two members of the group, F1.3 and M1.3, were present this time, having not been there for G1.1.

The presence of F1.3 was particularly significant, because she often sought to locate the discussion within the 'canonical' repertoire. Her role and the way the two repertoires were drawn on in this meeting were discussed in (Todd, 2005, 229-233): 'The distinctiveness of the repertoires is apparent, but in addition, a more complex relationship between them emerges. In particular, the data which follow draw attention to the flow of talk within and between repertoires. It is this discursive movement that reveals a weakness in the concept of repertoire, and points to the possibility of a different description, 'node', which accommodates distinctiveness and inter-connection.

˙Early on in this meeting I was invited to comment on the origins of the Book of Daniel. After some initial negotiation, about whether I should give an answer, I offered a typical historico-critical response to the question of the origin of Daniel, suggesting two different settings for the two halves of the book, with chapters 1-6

coming from the period of the historical Daniel, chapter seven onwards from four centuries later. I was drawn by the question into a particular aspect of the role of the 'expert' theological educator – imparting knowledge.

'This provoked a strong response from [F1.3], in which she established her own approach, which is concerned with the literal truth of the text – what it said took place, took place. This kind of debate, or stand-off, was familiar to all present. The underlying question is about the authority of the text. [F1.3] appears consistently in the data as the person most likely to use the 'canonical' repertoire of her own approach, most attached to taking the text 'at its face value'. For others, who contributed to the discussion, a more critical approach was not inconsistent with the Bible being authoritative. And the conclusions arrived at, for example that Daniel might have had two authors, did not imply that the Bible was not to be trusted.

'The analytical question here is, how do group members talk their way through such a debate? How do they negotiate the disagreement about the authority of the text? Clues are seen in a number of turns in which they explore a question from [M1.1]:

Extract [1.2.1a]

1[M1.1]:   why then do some denominations take it [Daniel] literally (2s) when

2   other denominations interpret it in a (.) in a broa:der (1s) way (4s)

3[F1.2]:   some like (.) going into all the little nitty picky bits and others like (.)

4   to concentrate on (.) sort uv practical christian living (2s)

5[M1.1]:   so would the Brethren (.) um analyse this passage in Daniel in the

6   same way as they would analyse a gospel passage

7[M1.2]:   °oh yeah°

8[M1.1]:   or and [an- an epistle and (.) an ordinary prophet

9[F1.2]:   [mm ((doubtfully))

10[M1.1]: so you'd have the same [sort of process

11[M1.2]:   [you could I've I've I've known I've known

12   three maybe three weeks of mee- y'know evening services ( ) every night

13   f- five nights a week on (.) someone just on the Book of Daniel or even

14   on Daniel's dreams going into de- i:nfinite detail about what each one

15   and what they meant and how they related and so on (.) and and and mm

16   but at but at the end of the day the message as F1 says was the same it was

17   about encouragement it was about the fact that God is sovereign it was erm

18   but(.) if you (.) start from a position of believing that the Bible y'know the

19   th- th- is is is God-inspired and then- and literally true then it doesn't

20   matter whether it's Daniel or whether it's Leviticus or what it is

21   it is it is the word of God and and therefore to be taken at its

22   face value and therefore all the way through (.) mm ((clears throat))

23   everything will be taken at its face value

'In these turns, the 'canonical' repertoire is used of other people's approach to the
Book of Daniel. [M1.1]'s question about what kind of Bible-study would have taken
place within [M1.2]'s previous experience of being a member of the Brethren (the
conservative protestant group referred to above), initiates the exploration. [M1.2]'s
response provides a not-wholly positive picture of a very detailed exercise producing
meagre results, before concluding with an encapsulation of this approach to biblical
interpretation in lines 17 to 23. This stands as something of a 'formulation' (Heritage
& Watson, 1979) – a summary of an aspect of the conversation thus far offered to
other participants. Further the formulation draws on lexical terms central to the
'canonical' repertoire – notably, 'God-inspired'; 'word of God'; 'taken at its face
value'. This formulation having been achieved, however, [M1.1] (as often,
provocative) tests it.

'Extract [1.2.1b]

24[M1.1]: but if it's the word of God does it have to be (.) taken at face value can you

25   can you trust it as being the word of God (2s)

26   [and not necessarily take it at face value

27 [F1.3]: [can you what what trust it=

(Lines 28 to 37 involved clarifying what [M1.1] had said for [F1.3]'s benefit).

38[M1.1]: which involves (3s) having the confidence (.) to handle it in a

39   different way (3s) it was interesting to begin with y'know we were

40   talking about well you [F1.3] were talking in particular about a

41   particular way of handling Daniel i- i- in terms of I don't know well

42   yes in terms of relating to Christ (.) and yet we seem to have gone round

43   and (.) we've encouraged each other to look at it in a different way and we

44   said this is in fact a different sort of writing (.) and as R has said it's

45   spread out in time and things (2s) so I think well I'm I'm just intrigued

46   (.) it- it gives us a sort uv a (.) if- if we can still believe it and trust it

47   being (.) the inspired word of God (.) we don't have to take it at face

48   value but we still get something out of it which is <u>in</u>spired (.) is that=

'Especially in lines 24 to 26 and in lines 45 to 48, [M1.1] appears to be stretching the interpretative approach here, perhaps in order to escape from the uncompromising authority associated with taking the text 'at face value'. He does this by offering to the group a way in which some of the 'canonical' lexicality ('word of God', 'inspired') could apply to an interpretative approach which doesn't take the biblical text 'at face value'. The immediate consequence was that [F1.3] reacted strongly against [M1.1]'s suggested approach, restating the literalist position that the Book was written by the historical Daniel, and what it said took place did take place. Others in the group however orientated towards [M1.1]'s position, affirming the validity of his question, holding open the possibility that Daniel need not have been written by the historical figure Daniel, but perhaps by another Daniel!

'Although the interaction was precipitated by my part in it, the group appeared to be entirely used to this kind of discussion. The discussion, although spirited, was not heated, nor particularly productive for participants. Talk did not shift very far from the initial stand-off, and remained very much in the realm of what interpretation might be permitted. The key analytical point, however, is that [M1.1], while drawing on a number of the lexical terms characteristic of the 'canonical' repertoire, tests one in particular – that which relates to taking the text 'at its face value'.

'Within the next couple of turns (after those just discussed), however, the discussion shifted into different, 'contingent' territory. Participant [M1.2] led the discussion into this area. His point of departure was a brief discussion of the existence of more than one 'Isaiah' (in other words, more than one writer of the Book of Isaiah, presumably seen by him as a well-established parallel to the idea of there being two 'Daniels'):

'**Extract [1.2.2]**

1[M1.2]:   ...it doesn't <u>actually</u> matter

2[F1.3]:   [no °no°

3[M1.2]:   [because what- what I think I've- my responsibility is to look at this

4   passage nd say what what does that (.) say to me <u>now</u>

5[F1.3]:   yes

6[M1.2]:   and how can that help and encourage me and how can that p'raps can I use

7   that to encourage other people (.) mm and (.) I- I- I- nd knowing that it

8   that this is a word from God t- to us and t- and and to each generation and

9   and and actually trying to say what is the word what is God's word what is

10   God saying and how- how are we to respond to it that for me is the important

11   thing now no- I can't have a conversation with my family at home as I I-

12   tried last week on a couple of occasions and it almost ended up in- in- (.)

13   in- in- in tears again because they just they can't they can't come at

14   anything that's not the literal (.) absolute literal truth every verse is- is-

15   is- is true and their faith is wonderful their their their commitment to

16   God is wonderful and and that's fine I've no problem with that I can't

17   I can't go there now (.) mm (.) and I don't particularly I didn't ask to not

18   go there I didn't ask to end up seeing things in a different way but it's

19   happened it's part of the journey

20[F1.3]: hh. nn but we will all see if we read the chapter (.) because it's the

21   living word of God and we're all different (.) and no two of us s the same

22   if we want to seek the truth as the prayer said at the beginning (.) then

23   God will speak to us (.) possibly in different ways (.) varying ways to

24   each of us we haven't- it's unity in diversity we haven't necessarily

25   got to all see it exactly the same have we

26[F1.2]: no

27[F1.3]: t- to grasp the truth that's <u>in</u> it mm because otherwise (.) you get into

28   terrible trouble if for example R said now you've all got to believe

29   A B C and D about this passage we'd all go home distressed because

30   we we mightn't heh we mightn't all feel the same

'In lines 3 and 4 [M1.2] steers the group into the safe territory of 'what does [the

passage] say to me now?' which is at the heart of the 'contingent' repertoire. He then

expands this idea in lines 6 to 11, before identifying the personal difficulty of having

arrived in this interpretative place. [F1.3], who had previously been a forthright

proponent of a literalist historical approach to the text, next orientates strongly

towards this approach in the next turn (lines 20-25), further demonstrating that it is built on an understanding that God speaks to participants in the present.

'The lexicality of this turn is interesting. [F1.3] leads into the idea that God speaks to participants by using the phrase 'the living word of God'. This picks up a phrase characteristic of the 'canonical' approach ('word of God'), but radically shifts the emphasis of it. In previous discussion, 'the word of God' for [F1.3] has meant the singular word that God spoke in the past (through Daniel, for example) and which is held in the biblical text. 'The living word of God' appears, in contrast, to be the plural word(s) of God which are discovered by those who engage with the text, which God speaks in the present, 'in different ways, varying ways'. We shall return to this transition below.

'All this illustrates the way the 'contingent' repertoire works within discussion of a Bible passage. Its distance from the 'canonical' one is indicated by a number of features of the talk. First, [M1.2] clearly perceives the 'contingent' approach to be very different from his previous experience of the 'canonical' – so different as to divide him from other members of his family. Secondly, the move into 'contingent' talk produces a marked shift in [F1.3]'s talk. Apart from the differences of content noted in the last paragraph, she also arrives at a place of positive and inclusive agreement with other participants, where previously she had been defending a position against their modification. Thirdly, the exchange between [M1.2] and [F1.3] unlocked the talk of the whole group, which continued to focus for most of the remainder of the meeting on 'contingent' concerns, exploring what the passage did say to participants. And a much wider range of participants joined in the conversation (suggesting that they felt included).'

The tenor of this part of the meeting recalled things espoused by group members in our first meeting. They had suggested that they held a variety of views about how to interpret the Bible; and worked with different views as facets of God. It was important for them that different views were valued; that there was freedom to doubt. This was in keeping with the weight they placed on fellowship and supporting each other.

One of the features of subsequent interaction was talk about how God spoke to people today, without the Biblical text. In response to a question from me about what the text was saying to the group at that moment, F1.5 indicated that it said that 'God does speak to us in dreams'. This led to significant discussion about God speaking in dreams, to which female participants orientated strongly, but which left male participants somewhat bemused. Later in G1.2, in response to F1.3 talking about Christians who didn't have access to the Bible, F1.2 said that God could speak to such people without the Bible. She followed this with an anecdote about a Gypsy she had known who couldn't read. This woman would visit the Christian Bookshop where F1.2 worked, and say that God had said something to her, asking F1.2 to find it in the Bible. The implication was that the Bible was only one channel by which people received God's word today, and did not define the full extent of the 'contingent' repertoire.

A related question was whether the text would always speak to people. M1.2 entered this arena speaking about there being truth in the text for all. He then expanded on what he felt ought to happen as the group engaged with a passage:

Extract 1.2.3

1 M1.2: ...if I read that and it doesn't spe- say anything to me (.) it doesn't really
2   matter where it comes from (.) um (.) but if I:: try to open myself up to
3   saying well this is the word of God and theref- and nd nd and there's
4   something in this for me then (.) um and nd something (1s) from that bec-
5   comes then it's is important nd nd nd nd nd it's done its job (.) mm

This extract seems to nod in a 'canonical' direction, but through its stress on present engagement with the text belongs properly in the 'contingent' repertoire. It gives rise to an anecdote from F1.3, which continues this line, as is seen from the conclusion of her turn:

1F1.3: ...there will <u>be</u> s- something somewhere for us even in the <u>driest</u> bits of
2   scripture (.) if we seek it out

Both these speakers seem confident, in abstract, that something positive will happen whenever people engage with the Bible. However M1.2 at least is less certain of what has emerged this time, as is seen here.

Extract 1.2.4

1	M1.2:	...hh my question is should we always expect to get something out of every
2		passage we look at (.) or is this a passage that we get something out of whe-
3		when we're (.) in (.) more of the context of which i- i- i- i- the people to
4		whom it was written (.) so I'm I'm actually struggling tonight to get
5		anything other than u a kind of a a a- a- a future kind of thing tha a- a- a- t
6		God is i- in control nd all the rest of it and and that but in actual nitty-gritty
7		terms about something for tonight I- I'm not sure I can get anything from
8		this passage but I <u>know</u> if I- I- as- I assume that if I were in a different
9		situation (.) and rea:lly feeling dow:n and under and trampled on (.) and all
10		the rest of it (.) that passage might well speak to me so should we expect a
11		pa- passage (.) every passage to speak to everybody every time you (.) you
12		open and read it...

This suggests that the 'contingent' repertoire has a contextual dimension to it, of necessity, given that this passage doesn't speak to M1.2 this time. Other participants were less bothered about grappling to this extent with the text. Earlier F1.2 had made it clear that she was content to stick with the odd 'gold nugget' that she could extract from the 'big lump of stone' that was the passage. In her case this was the picture of God as 'ancient of days' (Daniel 7.13)

To conclude, for G1 on this occasion the 'contingent' repertoire provided a way out of disagreements about the extent of the 'canonical' approach[83]. But exploring what God was saying to different people in relation to this text didn't quite match the high expectations articulated here and earlier in G1.1. In this case, the 'underdetermined' approach (Fowl, 1998) was under-productive.

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[83] In this there is a further partial parallel with the discourse of scientists, explored in (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984), which considers how scientists employ the 'contingent' repertoire to resolve conflicts that cannot be resolved in an 'empiricist' way. The parallel is partial, however, because scientists 'contingent' talk is still directed towards finding an 'empiricist' answer, believing that 'the truth will out' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984, ch.5); whereas G1 appear happy to leave 'canonical' questions unresolved, if they can find agreement in a 'contingent' way. For them the 'truth' can be found in what the text says to me/us, and it is a truth that is multi-faceted and contextual.

5.4.3 G1.3

G1.3 involved a discussion of Luke 3.1-6, against the wider background of 3.1-22. F1.5 was absent from this discussion, and M1.5 was present for the first time. The discussion was lively and focused on the colourful figure of John the Baptist. As in the previous session, reading the text aloud led into my asking a question about what their first reaction was. The initial response came from the key exponent of a literal historical approach to the text, F1.3.

Extract 1.3.1

```
1 F1.3:   I think it's interesting that Luke (.) erm (.) makes (.) it absolutely clear (.)
2         when this was by (.) giving us a list of who was (.) in power in the various
3         regions at the time .hh so there was no mistake about it (.) andum it- it wus-
4         it became (.) uh (.) becomes for anybody reading it (.) a historical event as
5         well as (.) a spiritual (.) event (8s)
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On this occasion, however, no-one in the group orientated to this 'positioning' of the opening two verses of the passage.

Instead F1.1 introduced an approach, which recurred a number of times in this session, referring to 'a couple of lovely phrases in the *Message* translation'. This use of *The Message*, a paraphrase of the Bible, was one aspect of interaction coded as 'getting into the story'. There seemed to be a clear feeling that the paraphrase cast fresh light on the passage[84].

Another strand of 'getting into the story' was then introduced by F1.3, who indicated that she had never understood verse 7, and why John the Baptist spoke of people fleeing 'from the coming wrath'. This strand included other people sharing things they hadn't noticed about the passage before, particularly similarities apparent in Luke's version of events between John and Jesus. In order to increase their understanding of the passage, participants explored related passages found elsewhere in the Bible. This kind of action, coded as 'Scripture interpreting Scripture'[85], included discussion of: parallel texts relating to John the Baptist; related passages

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[84] On the other hand, late on in the discussion, F1.3 and especially M1.2 reacted strongly against 'footnotes' and the footnotes in the Schofield Bible in particular.
[85] This was somewhat reminiscent of the canonical criticism of e.g. (Childs, 1993).

about Jesus; passages relevant to the question of whether John had taken a Nazirite vow; and the 'desert' tradition in Judaism[86].

Perhaps the most significant, and certainly most frequent, aspect of 'getting into the story' involved exploring what I would describe as 'modern parallels'. In summary, this involved comparing John the Baptist to modern figures, notably Ian Paisley, and comparing the behaviour of those who sought John out to those who go to evangelistic rallies today. The question arises, what kind of interpretation was going on here, and in what repertoire does it belong?

A key section of discourse, which occurred about two-thirds of the way through the meeting, provides some clues. The wider discussion was about why people travelled considerable distances to see and hear John. In response to a question from me, about how the parallel between John and Ian Paisley worked, M1.2 provided a slightly derogatory version of the parallel:

Extract 1.3.2

1 M1.2:   ...((fairly high pitch)) people go to Spring Harvest[87] from all over the

2   country s- sad people um (.) but ((laughter)) y'know ((further laughter))and

3   they come fr- y'know and nd nd they're flocking to Toronto or they were I

4   don't know whether they are now but they're still people go out for their

5   annual fix to Toronto every year .hh I know a number of pastors who do

6   that mm I'm surprised they haven't hired a charter flight or something for it

For M1.2, and for others who joined in with the banter, it appears that drawing this kind of 'modern parallel' allows the participant to keep his/her distance from the challenge of John the Baptist. They can admire and show interest in this figure, who is 'colourful', a 'wild man from the wilderness'; but they can detach themselves from the demands of his message. To return once more to the language of 'positioning' (Davies & Harré, 2001; Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998), what the group appear to be doing, is showing how other people and their practices (such as going to Toronto for a spiritual top-up) are 'positioned' by figures like John.

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[86] It is worth noting that this pursuit of related aspects of the Bible, prominent in this meeting, was something which M1.2 had suggested the group did not engage in much, in G1.1. The specific comment there related to not cross-referencing and to taking a passage 'as it stands'.

[87] Spring Harvest is a residential evangelical event in the UK.

This would appear to be a skilful deployment within the 'contingent' repertoire, therefore, allowing participants to side-step such a 'positioning' themselves. The humour[88], and mildly derogatory tone, suggest that the group is involved in a 'delicate' negotiation with the text (cf. Silverman, 1997a, ch.4).

This is important for M1.2 because of his previous experience in relation to such passages. The key turns occur in a section of discourse about whether and how John's message might be 'good news':

Extract 1.3.3

1 M1.2: but good news is (.) there actually is a way out but if you go on the way

2 you're going (.) um because I was brought up on this sort of stuff and it was

3 called th- the gospel (.)

4 ??: [((short laugh))

5 F1.3: [it ↑was

6 M1.2: it was called the gospel (.5s) I used to go to gospel meetings and be dangled

7 over the flames every night ((laughter)) ((clears throat)) but it was still- at

8 the end of it there was still good news because I er- er- er- if I decided that I

9 would sort uv (.) re- repent (.) in in good John fashion then I wouldn't ha- I

10 wouldn't need to be dangled I wouldn't need to worry about being dangled

11 anymore so i- i- it actually I suppose in one sense it was good news (.) it

12 just was a (.) bad news way of t- t- going about it ((laughter))

M1.2 knows exactly what it is like to be 'positioned' by certain kinds of speakers working in a way that is analogous to John the Baptist. He doesn't want to return to that kind of theological approach, in which even good news is bad news! In Fowl's terms (1998), this is a good example of an anti-determinate reading. It skilfully deconstructs a particular evangelical theology; a 'dominant reading', which holds people over the flames of hell in order to show them that the gospel is the fire-escape. Working through such a critique is clearly not new to M1.2 and other members of G1. They can use it to keep the text at arm's length, and enjoy it!

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[88] The humour was already present in the interaction before M1.2's turn in the use by one participant of what can only be described as a 'Monty Python' voice!

This approach is, however, not the only thread in this interaction. Its 'contingent' character is both challenged, and underlined, by the way in which the group explores the spiritual dimension of the passage, and of parallel modern events. The initial question was whether people came to John the Baptist, or to modern evangelistic events, because they were carried along by a 'herd instinct'. The following extract encapsulates the direction of the conversation:

Extract 1.3.4

1 M1.2: ...is this ↑revival is- wor did th- they desi:re the urge to (.) to actually (.)

2 um repent and so on was it- (.) was it persuaded by rhetoric or was it the

3 conviction of the Holy Spirit because (.) <u>my</u> understanding is that (.) con-

4 rhetoric will never bring a person to a point (.) of of inner conviction it- it-

5 it's the spirit of God does that...

M1.2 invited others to comment on this, which they did. The following conversation (between F1.1, F1.3, F1.2, M1.1. and M1.2) implied that on such occasions God, and especially God's spirit, might be at work. But this would be in unpredictable ways; the internal work of the Holy Spirit, rather than the external work of the speaker, would make the difference. This was expressed by M1.1 as he extrapolated from the account of Elijah finding God in the still small voice on Mount Horeb, after the preceding dramatic events (or 'circus' as M1.1 put it)[89]:

Extract 1.3.5

1 M1.1: ...and whether (.) in some way (.) erm (.) what John what God was doing

2 through John was (.) a bit like what (.) God was doing through Billy

3 Graham it was a sort of a (.) it w's a <u>hook</u> some way of attracting people's

4 attention (.) and the <u>real</u> work (.) which was going on (.) was being done by

5 the ((gradually getting quieter)) Holy Spirit in the stillness and the silence

6 afterwards (.)

Participants drew back from talking about John 'on a very human level', as M1.2 put it, and ventured into a 'spiritual' interpretation of the text. At first sight this looks like a bid for a 'canonical' interpretation, re-establishing the divine authority of the text. However, a second glance reveals that the interpretation, whether of what was going

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[89] 1 Kings 19

on around John, or at modern parallel events, or of what might happen to members of the group, is entirely 'contingent'. The thing that counts is the present internal work of God's Spirit, the personal relationship with God.

So what does the text mean for the group on this occasion? In summary, Luke 3.1-6 (or 1-22) offered the opportunity for some to identify their present understanding of John the Baptist and his ilk, over against previous (imposed) understandings, in which a fierce interpretation of a fierce text had held them in thrall. But the thought that God might nonetheless be at work in such situations, enabled them to reaffirm the internal work of God in their own and others' lives. It also enabled them to be loyal to the text, albeit in a 'contingent' way.

5.4.4 G1.4

The Focus for G1.4 was 1 Corinthians 12.1-11 (seen within the whole of ch.12). F1.2 and M1.2 were not present, and the venue, rather than being their home, was that of F1.1 and M1.1. The group seemed to find the text both close to their experience and affirmative of their understanding of 'church'. As in the previous meeting (G1.3), members entered into the discussion by exploring modern parallels to their perceptions of the text's meaning. Unlike G1.3, however, the parallels were used, not to distance themselves from the text, but rather to recruit it to their cause.

Thus in discussion of cliques in the church at Corinth, they drew parallels with those they encountered who had an exclusive understanding of Christianity, and of whom they disapproved. These included people who regarded only those who had the gift of tongues as being real Christians; or who believed Roman Catholics not to be Christians[90]; or who understood the experience of 'being saved' as the touchstone of orthodoxy. F1.1 expressed the attitude to which members of the group consistently objected:

Extract 1.4.1

1 F1.1:   but it's this kind've ((F1.3 in the background)) agenda that says (1s) I've

2   got the corner on the truth (.) and [nd I'm right...

3 F?:   [yes

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[90] This opinion was expressed on some past occasion to F1.3, who is married to M1.3 – a Roman Catholic. F1.3 recounted how she had corrected the thinking of the speaker!

It is easy to see this as the antithesis of the group's acceptance (within the contingent repertoire) of a variety of sincerely held views and interpretations of the Bible.

This discussion paved the way for a strong identification of members of the group with the text, which led in turn to an exploration of the significance of the text for the church today. The group identified with the way in which Paul, in this text, was seeking to convince the Corinthian Christians of an understanding of church rooted in two ideas. The first is that within the church the one Spirit gives different gifts to different people; the second, that those in the church are diverse, but interdependent, members of a single body.

These ideas were transposed into contemporary church situations over the course of half the evening's discussion. The point of entry concerned the difficulty of helping people to join the right church, where they could make good use of their gifts. I picked up on this, apparently counter-cultural approach:

Extract 1.4.2

1 R: that's thts quite different from (.) qui- the reasons that people have (.) very

2   often °it seems to me°=

3 M1.1:   =yes

4 R: where they're looking for (.) the church that will feed <u>them</u>=

5 ??:   =yes ((more than one voice))

6 R: rather than (.) the church where they might be part of the feeding ((strong

7   agreement in the background))

8 F1.1:   exactly

9 R: yeah

10 M1.1: exactly (.) and I- I think I think the church likes to perpetuate (.) that

11   because it gives a sense of identity (.) mm °very often°

12 F1.3: perpetuate what [M1.1]

13 M1.1: perpetuate the feeling that a church is somewhere where you are fed...

The group were in strong agreement, that their approach to helping people find a church was not universal. There are signs here of the group identifying a critical gap between the church's rhetoric and its prevailing culture. The rhetoric, espoused by the Church of England, amongst others, is that every member of the church has a

ministry to exercise in which their gifts will be used. In this predominantly lay group, this rhetoric is taken seriously and put into practice. They clearly understand, however, that theirs is a minority position, running counter to the majority position driven, perhaps, by the prevailing consumer culture, which accustoms people to expect a range of choices.

The group were equally clear that the clergy were responsible for the gap between rhetoric and practice, as seen in the following extract. The interaction took place shortly after the previous extract. M1.1 begins by contrasting churches where people just go to be fed, with those where life is different.

Extract 1.4.3

1 M1.1: ((lots of coughing in the background)) and yet there ↑are churches where
2   y'know they're brim full of people who (.) feel that they've got something
3   they want to give (1s) nd so I think yu know its not s- cut and dried (1s) like
4   that
5 F1.3: th- the the secret is for the (.) priest (.) the the er vicar the rector the minister
6   whoever it is who leads the congregation (.) to sus- s- to recognise the gifts
7   within his congregation and dear ↑lord to ↓use them ((exaggerated for
8   effect)) ↑oh ↓dear ↑lord to ↓use them ((some laughter))

Again, there is a theology here about the use of gifts in the ministry of the church that is in keeping with the 'contingent' emphasis on 'honouring' everybody's contribution. But there is also, within this and further interaction, an antipathy towards authority figures who don't work inclusively, in keeping with the group's suspicion of the 'canonical' repertoire, and their desire to deconstruct dominant readings.

To anticipate discussion G1.5, this meeting included a short section of interaction, which underlines this tentative conclusion. M1.1 talked about the Bible study group being a good way of 'being church'. But he contrasted this way of 'being church', which featured everyone contributing and people learning in different ways, with what took place in church on Sunday. In this latter context, 'it's all very much focused on what's happening at the front...' There is here a hint that Sunday church is not only a more formal context, but also one where one is more likely to encounter the 'canonical' repertoire, passively received from the authoritative figure at the front.

G1.4 reveals, therefore, group members' continued desire to deconstruct exclusivity. Interestingly, on this occasion, not only is the text drawn into the group's working theology of ministry, but it also provides the anti-determinate reading (Fowl, 1998). It offers the key to deconstructing the church, and the gap between the church's rhetoric of 'every member ministry' and its hierarchical, indeed hieratic, practice.

5.4.5 G1.5

G1.5 involved a study of Psalm 24 and a discussion of what made for a good Bible study. All members were present.

Discussion of the text took off at something of a tangent. Following discussion of the ritual setting Psalm 24 might have had originally, M1.1 picked up on the reference in verse 6 to 'the God of Jacob'. In contrast to G1.4, in which the text became a tool of deconstruction, in G1.5 participants returned to deconstructing the text itself. There were two facets of the Jacob story in the Old Testament which produced discomfort. The first was that Jacob's journey to patriarchal status was marked by deceit. Jacob persuaded his brother Esau to sell him his birthright, and tricked his father into giving him a final blessing meant, again, for Esau.

F1.2 expressed what was at issue.

Extract 1.5.1

1 F1.2:   I'd love to know how <u>God</u> had planned to work it

2 F1.3:   Yeh

3 F1.2:   Because presumably God didn't plan (.) for Jacob (.) to (.) cheat and twist

4   nd nd so on so how was God going to work out (.) that he (.) wus in (.) yu

5   know was more important than Esau and got the blessing rather than

6   Esau...

F1.2 and other members could not fit their image of God, who knows no deceit, with the story of Jacob, 'the twister', being God's chosen instrument. Once again, this is a 'canonical' wrestling with the gap between an authoritative text and members' theology. Subsequent discourse explored a number of possible resolutions within a 'canonical' context. These included literalist interpretations: the text itself exonerates God (Jacob and Rebecca were at fault, because they did not wait for God's timing);

God is in control whatever happens. These viewpoints were offered somewhat uncomfortably. Other more critical viewpoints were aired: the Bible is the word of God, but not necessarily literally true[91]; the Bible bears the 'very firm imprint of man (*sic*)' – not so much what God said, as what the person who wrote it said. Within this discourse, however, no resolution took place, not least because the focus of discomfort shifted.

Subsequent interaction returned to inclusivism. The question was about whether God was the God of Esau as well as the God of Jacob. The interesting thing is that although this concern is congruent with concerns constructed within the 'contingent' repertoire, the discussion took place very much within the 'canonical' one. Other conundrums about inclusivity were drawn from elsewhere in the Bible (concerning God's attitude to Ishmael and the nations descended from him; and the question of whether Gentiles were included in God's plan before the time of Christ); and possible counter-cases were drawn also from a variety of Biblical texts (prophetic texts about the inclusion of Gentiles before Christ; other prominent non-Jews who were included both in the story of Israel and in the genealogy of Christ).

This discourse has some points of contact with Canonical Criticism[92]. A variety of texts were interpreted by locating them within the wider context of the Canon of Scripture. This approach acknowledges that our interpretation is always shaped by knowledge of the Canon, and a composite theology built from it. On the other hand, it presents ways of resolving difficult issues without tackling the difficult text in its own right. In both G1.4 and G1.5 there is clear evidence of members drawing on texts which fit their inclusive theology. In G1.4 such a text was pressed into service as a critique of church practice. In G1.5 useful texts provided a critique of other, less comfortable texts. It would seem that in the latter, something akin to Canonical Criticism provided the opportunity for 'contingent' concerns to be discussed within the 'canonical' repertoire. G1 appears to be attached both to its inclusive theology, and to retaining a foothold in the 'canonical' repertoire.

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[91] This argument was rehearsed previously in G1.2.
[92] As pioneered by Brevard Childs. See, for example, (Childs, 1993).

5.4.6 The two repertoires

How then do the two repertoires function for G1? The first thing to be said is that they function within a single context and recurred throughout our meetings. This is in contrast to Gilbert and Mulkay's (1984) initial findings that scientists used the 'empiricist' and 'contingent' repertoires primarily within different contexts (the formal scientific paper, and the informal interview). In G1, discussion of what the text says to me/us, was interspersed with interaction relating to the authority of the text.

This contrast with scientific discourse is mitigated however, by the observation that the meetings of G1 were clearly 'informal'. In this setting, although the 'canonical' is present, the 'contingent' repertoire is preferred. This is akin to scientists' use of their 'contingent' repertoire in informal settings. This conclusion is strengthened by M1.1's distinction, noted above, between the more informal experience of 'being church' in group meetings, and the more formal experience of being in church on Sunday. The two repertoires may, to some extent have their own contexts, or at least a context in which each dominates.

To conclude, members of G1 locate their conversations within two repertoires. The 'contingent' is preferred in which there is an accepted diversity of interpretation, as each participant seeks out 'what the text says to me/us'. This is a personal, yet corporate, approach. The other less comfortable repertoire is the 'canonical', which works around the acknowledged authority of the text. Yet members of G1 choose not to escape entirely from this repertoire. They deconstruct and negotiate around the 'determinate' readings (Fowl 1998) which emerge in this repertoire, but continue to acknowledge that the Bible 'has some authority'. Presumably, abandoning this precept would be to let go of a key element of the identity of the group – which is drawn together by the Bible. It might also be to detach the group from the other settings in which members experience 'being church', and in which the 'canonical' is much more the norm.

5.4.7 Note – A really useful question

During the Pilot Group, I discovered the value of asking members of that group what they noticed about the text under consideration. Responses to this question set the

agenda for much of the subsequent discussion. With G1, I consistently used this question, or something very similar, as a discussion starter. Its value in G1 is worthy of further comment, suggesting, as it does, wider applicability. This is to be found as appendix 10.

5.4.8 G1.6

As part of my work with G1, I had a further meeting with them in September 2004 (G1.6). The intention was to engage in some form of respondent validation. Bloor (1978) envisages such an approach, recording how he shared reports on his research with participants in order to establish via their responses, 'some sort of correspondence between an analyst's and collectivity members' views of their social world' (1978, 548).

Bloor acknowledges some difficulties with this approach, including framing reports within an academic paradigm, not shared, nor necessarily of interest to or fully understood by participants. Other difficulties are revealed by the naturalistic approach to checking back with respondents of Lincoln and Guba (1985). They view 'member checks' as complementary to triangulation, designed to assess the 'intentionality' of respondents' actions (1985). They further maintain that whereas triangulation is carried out in relation to data, the focus of member checks is on constructions. The difficulty is two-fold. First, following the 'interpretive turn' in the social sciences, it is difficult to maintain a firm boundary between data and construction (Sarangi, 2002). Secondly, responses elicited during respondent validation must themselves be treated as data (Hammersley, 1990), given that, '...seeking feedback constitutes another speech event...' (Sarangi, 2002, 119). Far from assessing intentionality, respondent validation adds a further layer of interwoven data and interpretation[93].

This exercise nonetheless has value. While one might not want to go as far as Cicourel (1973), seeking out multiple perspectives through 'indefinite triangulation', different perspectives do add to the research. Sarangi (2002) highlights the possibility of aligning the perspectives of participants with those of the analyst in the interests of

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[93] Cf. (Hammersley 1990, 83f), 'And in no circumstances can participant responses be taken as absolutely certain evidence for either the truth or the falsity of claims'

'collaborative interpretation'. Bloor (1997) concludes that, whereas collecting member's responses to analysis has been regarded as an alternative technique to triangulation (both offering the chance of validation of results):

> Neither technique can validate findings, but both techniques can be said to be *relevant* [italics in original] to the issue of validity, in so far as both techniques may yield new data that throw fresh light on the investigation and provide a spur for deeper and richer analyses. (Bloor, 1997, 49)

He concludes, following Emerson, that such approaches are 'opportunities for reflexive elaboration'.

In keeping with the work of Bloor, Hammersley and Sarangi, one of the approaches in G1.6 was to share my analysis of previous meetings with G1. As will be seen this took two different forms (see 2 and 4 below). In keeping with the approach of Cicourel, I also invited the group to work directly with a portion of the data (see 3 below). In detail the strategy was as follows:

1. I invited the group to comment, with the benefit of hindsight, on the difference my presence had made to the group

2. I shared my particular interpretation of something M1.1 had said about the nature of the group. I asked them to comment further on the idea that the group represented a different way of 'being church', to that experienced in worship on a Sunday.

3. I then played a portion of tape, which featured a disagreement (from my perspective) on the interpretation of Daniel from G1.2, and asked them to say what they thought was going on.

4. I shared a paper I had prepared (appendix 11) which gave a more developed interpretation from me – my understanding of what was going on in the group. I then asked them if they recognised the analysis as relating to them.

The order of these was deliberate: an opening question orientated towards the conversation which took place at the end of our previous meeting, but which also acknowledged the chronological distance from that meeting; a discrete piece of reporting back and response which I deemed useful but non-threatening; the more challenging exercise of listening to themselves and reflecting on their own process,

without knowing how I had interpreted the data; finally, the sharing of my perspective with the opportunity for further response[94].

The most significant points arising out of G1.6 are as follows. They seemed to have a clear sense of my role in previous meetings. F1.1 identified facilitating discussion as a key aspect of this, while noting that I had sometimes pushed conversation in a particular direction. M1.1 commented on the ease with which I had fitted in with the group, suggesting that I fitted in with their kind of 'club-ism', qualifying as one of those 'people like us, dear'! He contrasted my acceptance with the difficulty the group had had with people who had joined in the past, who had not fitted in.

These observations clarify some of the questions about the possible alignment between my views and those of the group. Alignment starts not at this point but much further back. From the beginning members of G1 and I all shared, I would contend, a sense of the value of the Bible-study group as a forum for people to share and develop their faith, through discussion of biblical texts. Further, my understanding that critical understandings of the text might contribute to such a faith practice were shared by many in G1, and at least admitted into conversation by the remainder. The alignment taking place in G1.6 seems to have been about group members seeing themselves as research subjects and partners with me in analysis. Alignment here is both similar to, and at the same time more complex than, that considered by Sarangi (2002). This is because of my multiple roles, as priest, theological educator and researcher.

My question to the group about whether 'being church' in the group differed from their experience on Sunday gave rise both to alignment and elaboration. The elaboration focused on the nature and purpose of the group. Various members contributed to a picture of a group drawn from different, geographically spread, Sunday congregations – members rarely worshipped together on Sunday. The group functioned, therefore, as a 'feeding place' which supported them in their various church responsibilities. The term 'Core group' expressed the importance of this function[95]. M1.1 used elements of the inclusive theology discussed previously to

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[94] This strategy grew out of a useful discussion with my two supervisors, shortly before G1.6
[95] Although the more usual and popular term, 'cell group' was eschewed as jargon!

reinforce the depiction, underlining the combination of Bible study and fellowship and the significance of people's contributions.

Others attributed the group's ability to value different contributions, to the work of a previous priest. According to F1.2, he had got 'people involved' and 'encouraged lay people to do things'. He had contributed to them being 'not used to simply being spoken to from the front'. As she put it, 'we're not in awe of collars'[96]. The success of the priest in empowering the group was experienced when he left, when there was 'no vacuum' in the group. All these contributions point to the inclusive, collaborative authority structure at work in G1.

The portion of tape that I played to the group represented nearly fifteen minutes of discussion of Daniel 7 from G1.2 (see 5.4.2 above). This featured my response to a question from M1.4 (a standard historico-critical perspective on Daniel). This gave rise to a literalist historical response from F1.3 and a lengthy discussion, eventually resolved by M1.2 encouraging the group to consider what the text said to them.

A key point of interest lies in the group's treatment of disagreement. Various members accounted for disagreement by deploying the 'contingent' repertoire previously identified, as the following extract demonstrates.

Extract 1.6.1

1 M1.1:   we were trying to sort've bring the justification of our own backgrounds (.)

2   into a forum where we could agree and-nd seek acceptance from each other

3   (.) and tha:t's the relationship I suppose so I think very much we were (.)

4   actually trying to form community in that respect (.) I think there's an awful

5   lot of self-justification going on I think each of us was trying to justify our

6   own take on the passage (1s) mm

7 F1.3:   but then if you if you er read scripture and you .hh you it speaks to you: (.)

8   then (1s) you- (.) you will be fairly firm about how you understand it won't

9   you you

10 M1.1:   [yes

11 F1.3:   [wouldn't be wishy washy over it if if you felt that it spoke to you in a

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[96] i.e. clerical collars

12   certain way hh. then (.) alright it may speak to somebody else in a different

13   way but (2s)

14 M1.1: but if we didn't have firm views we wouldn't have a discussion=

15 F1.3: no exactly that's what I'm saying you you've (.) yes (.) precisely

16 M1.1: heh

17 F1.2: d'you think it was (.) self justification or d'you think it was explaining (.)

18   whe:re (.) we were coming from because the more we do that the more we

19   understand each other

20 M1.1: could uv been a bit of each

21 F1.2: umm

22 F1.5: I would've said it was that- (1s) p-put that way [just trying to explain your ( )

23 M1.1:   [justifying where they were

24   coming- explaining where they were coming from from

25 F1.5: wouldn't say people were justifying it particularly but just explaining why

26   they (.) thought what they thought n

27 M1.1: [yes

28 F1.5: [believed what they believed [which isn't really the same thing

29 F1.2:   [where they where ea

30   because each one will be in a different <u>place</u> (.) with our Christian walk (.)

31   and nd it's the place we're in and we we spend our time (.) on these

32   evenings sharing with one another where we are don't we but with that we

33   can (.) glean from the others

34 F1.2: but also our our our our very different backgrounds (.) have (.) mean that

35   we do actually come at things from from very different angles

Members involved in this discussion carefully construct a 'contingent' explanation.
'Justifications' are set in a community context (which offers the possibility of
acceptance), making for good discussion. They then become explanations, related to
the 'place' people are in, or their backgrounds, which are part of the 'sharing' which
happens on these occasions, from which people 'glean' things. As F1.1 puts it a little
later in the discussion:

F1.1:   yes there were some bits of disagreement bu- (.) it was more disagreement I
        felt in a kind uv (.) in a wrestling with something way y'know of a shaping
        something

Another significant response occurred more immediately after I had played the section of tape to the group:

Extract 1.6.2

1 F1.3: I'm astounded hh. we've said all along we didn't go into theology the whole

2   of that was [theology

3 F1.4:   [theology heh

4 F1.3: I'm- I'm astounded I mean (.) we just had a quarter of an hour deep

5   theology then haven't we [would you say

6 R: [yeh (.) yeh

7 F1.3: nd nd we've said all along ah we don't do much the(h)ology we certainly

8   did then would you agree with that=

9 R: =yes absolutely °yes I would°

10 F1.3: I'm amazed

The significance of this exchange was not apparent to me at the time, nor is it apparent until later in the discourse. It is only reinforced and clarified at the point at which people were responding to my research report (appendix 11). Only from the analysis of this later section of the recording did it become apparent that the group were themselves naming different repertoires.

The difficulty of interpretation lies in understanding of what constitutes 'theology'. The previous debate to which F1.3 refers related to particular questions which I had offered (amongst a range of others) as ones worth asking of any biblical text, which had a 'theological interest':

- What does this text say about God?
- What does the passage say about the relationship between God and humanity, or between God and creation?
- What theological themes (e.g. faith, forgiveness, mission, identity, etc.) are present in the text?
- How does the text connect with later Christian theological thinking?
- How is my/our faith affected by this passage?

The group and I had explored previously whether these were the sort of questions members would ask themselves, arriving at the conclusion that they would not.

The absence of these, quite specific, questions did not signify to me that the group did not 'do theology'. As will be clear from previous analysis, I believe that G1 built a distinctive theology of engaging with the Bible, around, for example, God speaking to people in different ways, both through the text and more directly. To my mind members had developed a practical theology which connected text, God and members' experience. My own response to F1.3 almost certainly carried this kind of assumption. However, later discourse indicated that this was not what most group members understood by 'doing theology'.

An early response to my research paper (appendix 11) came from F1.2.

Extract 1.6.3

1 F1.2: this is why we (.) felt perhaps that we weren't (.) that we didn't do theology

2   as much as practical Christianity and it's possibly because (.) even if we

3   disagree about the theology what's important for us (.) is the practical

4   outworking of our faith would you say that's ((tokens of agreement in the

5   background)) because we all are from if you like different theological

6   backgrounds and nd so on (.)

7 F1.3: yes

8 F1.2: we have in common a great desire (2s) to listen to what God's saying to us

9   and and and do it I think (.) mm

For F1.2, each member of the group may have a different theology, which may give rise to disagreement. This connects with F1.3's response to the recording of members disagreeing, transcribed above. Doing theology involves offering inherited viewpoints. Specifically in the discussion of Daniel 7, it involved me, F1.3 and others negotiating around critical and literalist historical evaluations of the text. Such different viewpoints, according to F1.2, are the result of people having different backgrounds. In contrast to this, however, is 'practical Christianity', which F1.2 suggests is a common desire, built around 'listen[ing] to what God's saying to us and do[ing] it.'

The immediate response to this suggestion comes from M1.1, who offers a contrasting understanding which I then picked up.

Extract 1.6.4

1	M1.1:	and I think we've probably got a fear of the word theology but I suspect
2		what God is doing with us now (1s) is probably as- as good a definition as
3		any of (.) theology (3s)
4	R:	yeh I mean I- having done a lot of listening I- t- t- to the recordings I th-
5		yeh I mean I think it's a question of whether you want to apply the word
6		theology (.) to the to the business of what's this saying to me now…

During this lengthy turn, I drew on particular examples of discourse from a previous meeting, which supported this suggestion, concluding:

Extract 1.6.5

1	R:	…and it seemed to me what you- y' know in that business of saying not yer
2		not only were you saying what does this text say to t- t- t- me t- t- us you
3		were also saying and what's it saying to the church nd what do we have to
4		learn from this text and ↑that that it seems to me is ( ) you might want to
5		call it practical theology but it's certainly theology (.) erm because it's
6		about what kind of God do we believe in ((various tokens of agreement
7		during this last section)) (.) erm

This drew an immediate response from F1.3, which suggests that she is not keen on orientating to the understanding of 'theology' which I and M1.1 were constructing. The strength of her position draws agreement from the researcher!

Extract 1.6.6

1	F1.3:	severa- several of us- of us here have to get up in a pulpit (.) er (.) you know
2		nd give an address or sermon or whatever you want to call it (1 s) and it is
3		vital to me that I get my the(h)ology correct because I find it a tremendous
4		responsibility because one's dealing with people's eternity it frightens the
5		life out of me
6	R:	yeh
7	F1.3:	d'you d'you find that I'm terrified
8	R:	er me too
9	F1.3:	yes because if we stand up and proclaim (.) er as M1.1's said church is
10		usually from the front nd if- we- if I find I'm in the front and I proclaim and
11		I proclaim it wrong (.) then (.) th- that that's terrible and (.) one of the things
12		I like in a group like this is that I'm always seeking (.) th- the right the truth

13   I I I'm trying to pick nuggets out and get get th- theology straight in my

14   head because I you can't stand up and proclaim unless you understand it

For F1.3 there still seems to be a contrast between the authoritative theology of sermons and what happens in the group. Immediately following this, M1.1 constructs an alignment with my researcher's interpretation of what has taken place in our meetings. He uses this alignment to discuss F1.3's position on preaching. This discussion is then picked up by F1.2.

Extract 1.6.7

1 M1.1:   but that that's very interesting in the light of (.) uv this paper [R] about

2   Gilbert and Mulkay ((small interaction with R and M1.3 about

3   pronunciation of Mulkay)) mm because what you're describing [F1.3] and

4   what [F1.2] and you [R] were alluding to is almost u a canonical

5   understanding of of preaching (.) you are preaching something which um

6   has comes from the authority of the text which you are desperately trying to

7   interpret in the correct way

8 F1.3:   that's right

9 M1.1:   (.) erm ah you're saying that you want to take it you're saying it must make

10   a difference to us and you're trying to be absolutely precise about the way

11   in which that might happen which seems to fit this canonical one and yet

12   I'm sure there's a contingent model as well which is preaching from the

13   point of view of what is this saying to us well I can tell you what it's saying

14   to me what does it say to you (.) erm and nd the inclusiveness and the

15   valuing of different viewpoints about- about a passage which doesn't to me

16   (.) say I need to be so concerned about whether I'm being theologically

17   correct (1s) because the correctness in that context is whether I'm being

18   honest (.) about how I view the passage's value for me or how I might view

19   the value of the passage for us where we are whoever the us is

20 F1.2:   don't you think at the end of the day though (.) those of us who do preach

21   have t- bear in mind that second thing otherwise you would never ever have

22   the courage to stand up becus ((coughing)) becus we're humans and not

23   God and therefore (.) what we say is never going to be totally (.) canonical

24   if you like erm and I take great comfort in the fact that peop- that God can

25   make people forget things ((laughter)) and and sometimes they might hear

26   something that you say and it's of help to them (.) and and the rest (.)

27   they've they're off on their own thoughts and and and that's a big comfort

28   that what I say from beginning to end hasn't got to be (.) hasn't got to be so

29   (.) important that people have got te hear it all and it hasn't got to be so

30   perfect cos it can't be correct that people have got to hear it all but actually

31   God can just pick a word a phrase a sentence

This turn gave rise to positive responses to the idea that God speaks to people in a variety of ways in relation to sermons, through the odd word, or phrase, or throwaway line; through something the preacher was not aware of having said[97]. What is interesting here is the suggestion from F1.2, echoed by others, that this is comforting because it releases the preacher, to some extent, from the burden of getting the theology right.

Reviewing this data, a number of things become clear. In this session members recognised implicitly (and to some extent explicitly) two different ways of working connected both with group meetings and preaching. F1.3 played a significant role in identifying a 'canonical' approach which had to do with 'theology', the authority of which is underlined by her sense of needing to get it right when preaching. Three things suggest that this identification was shaped by members rather than me. First, as the transcript shows, this understanding of theology is at odds with my own[98]. Secondly, the example of preaching, was introduced by a group member not me. Thirdly, it is M1.1 who made the connection between F1.3's portrayal of preaching and the word 'canonical'. This is not to say that I played no part in shaping this construction, but rather that the group demonstrated a real alignment between their thinking and mine, in which they reshaped and extended my analysis.

The alternative way of working was labelled by F1.2 as 'practical Christianity', and identified as 'contingent' by M1.1. This has to do with hearing what God is saying to different people, holding it within 'community' and doing it. This way of talking about their practice offers a greater degree of comfort for group members in two

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[97] This seems in keeping with the group's discussion in earlier meetings of ways in which God speaks to individuals in ways which may connect only tangentially with the biblical text under consideration.
[98] My understanding of theology is only shared to any extent within the Group by M1.1, with whose theological education I had significant contact!

ways. First, it allows them to work with, different people's inherited theologies; to move from 'disagreement' to 'wrestling' together. Secondly, it relieves them of some of the weight of having to get the 'theology' right in preaching. It is worth underlining that God is seen as working in a much more straightforward way in the lives of individuals in the present, than through the tangle of inherited texts and interpretations. The inherited theologies have the greater authority claims, but the personal insights are more useful and have, therefore, the greater practical authority!

It is important, however, not to overplay the distinction between 'canonical' 'theology' and 'contingent' 'practical Christianity'. They are talked of as coexisting both in group meetings and in preaching. Their close connection is clearly demonstrated, explicitly by participants' talk, and implicitly in the way talk shifts from one repertoire to the other and back again. Nonetheless, there does seem to be a real tension between the two, and a preference for the more comfortable 'practical Christianity'. The connection and tension between the repertoires is further discussed in (Todd, 2005) (appendix 9).

Chapter 6
Group 2

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with research carried out with Group 2 (G2). Contact with G2 was generated as discussed in 4.2.1 (pp.73-76). Following contact in 2003, I negotiated an initial meeting with G2 in October 2004[99], having indicated my desire to record proceedings, on the basis of anonymity for members in transcriptions and my assurance that I would seek their permission to publish any transcripts. Following this meeting (G2.1) members agreed to my returning for four further meetings.

6.1.1 Following G1

In practical terms, meetings with G2 were set up in a similar way to G1. The same recording techniques were used. The plan for the first meeting was similar, although G2 placed constraints around this, as will be seen. The aim to have four further meetings, during which I participated in the group's study of particular Bible passages, was the same for both groups.

The more complex question is about continuity in analysis. Having done significant work on 'interpretative repertoires' in the discourse of G1, it would have been all too easy to analyse G2 only as a comparator to G1, in terms of deviation from a base-line. The aim here is rather to allow G2 to speak with its own voice(s), and to hold back on comparison until the later stages of analysis.

This approach requires an opening-up of analytical questions. Rather than looking for a 'contingent' or 'canonical' repertoire, interest will return to the initial question of what patterns of discourse emerge in G2. Other open analytical questions will include:

- What kind of speech-exchange is taking place in these meetings?
- What is the relationship between participants and the Bible, and how is that relationship constructed?
- What part does God play in the discourse of G2?

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[99] I had, between May 2003 and October 2004 completed the majority of the field work with G1.

- What work of identity- and meaning-making is going on here?

In a sense, the aim is to cultivate something of a second naïveté (to borrow from Ricoeur), within a continuing iterative process of discovery and critical analysis.

6.2 Carrying out the research

Prior to my first meeting with G2 in October 2004, group members had discussed the possibility of my using the whole session to explore the concept of Bible study with them and to talk about my research. Their decision was not to lose a whole session of actually studying the Bible, and so to give me a limited amount of time. In practice this worked out as about 45 minutes of discussion around my research and 50 minutes of Bible study. Nonetheless it was possible to fulfil my three aims, which were:

- To find out something about the nature of the group and their understanding of their purpose;

- To explain my research, especially my interests in relation to Bible study;

- To negotiate further meetings with the group to participate in, and record, their Bible-study.

The four subsequent meetings took place in four consecutive weeks in November 2004. The choice of texts studied and mode of working were determined by the group's existing use of a Scripture Union guide to studying John's Gospel, from the 'Lifebuilder' series (Connelly, 2001). The texts were as follows:

G2.2 John 6

G2.3 John 7.1-52

G2.4 John 7.53 – 8.59

G2.5 John 9

The pattern of these meetings was that people arrived and gathered (standing around) in the kitchen of the house of M2.1 and F2.1 for coffee and biscuits, and conversation about mundane matters, typically news of family and friends. After about quarter of an hour members moved into the sitting room of the house, taking their places in a single circle of comfortable chairs. They very quickly settled to studying the Bible, which was initiated with a prayer from the leader for that evening. Interaction focused on reading the Bible passage and then tackling the questions from the study

guide, often interpreted by the leader. This lasted for about seventy minutes. The formal session concluded with up to ten minutes of prayer, related both to the evening's conversation and to needs of group members or others. Further, mundane conversation ensued, briefly, as people left via the kitchen.

In contrast to G1, I played no formal leadership role within the above meetings. I was welcomed as a group member and participated in conversation. There were, however, some signs of ambivalence to my presence in the group, to be discussed in relation to individual sessions.

There were ten group members, other than me. These included a married couple, M2.1 and F2.1, who hosted the group and shared in group leadership with M2.2. F2.1 is ordained, but licensed as a local minister, not having overall responsibility for the parishes, therefore, but sharing part-time in the tasks of ministry[100]. M2.2 is an accredited lay minister[101]. Further members had been members of the church for some time, M2.3, F2.2, F2.3 and F2.4. F2.4 holds a lay leadership position in the parishes[102], but played no formal leadership role in the group. The three remaining members, F2.5, F2.6 and F2.7 were all more recent members of the local church (with membership measured in months rather than years). Their membership resulted in each case from participation in an 'Alpha Course' run by the church, to encourage people to consider becoming involved, or more involved in church life. The group exists in part as a follow-up to such 'Alpha Courses', providing further opportunities for learning and discussion about Christianity and continued fellowship and support. The origins of the group lie in the late 1990s, when M2.1 and F2.1 experienced being nurtured themselves in a similar group led by others. The group, because of its aim of supporting new members of the church, appeared at this stage to have a relatively high turn-over (but see 6.4.6, pp.167-177, on this).

6.3 Handling the data analysis

As with G1, sessions were recorded producing between seven and eight hours of data. Brief field-notes were made during sessions in addition to recording. Listening to

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[100] In Anglican terms she is an Ordained Local Minister (OLM).
[101] A Reader.
[102] As a Lay Elder.

recordings gave rise to working transcriptions, which were manually coded for approaches to interpreting the Bible. More detailed transcriptions of significant passages were prepared (using the CA protocol derived from (Antaki, 2004) to be found on p.10). An important lesson carried forward from analysis of G1 was that there was a value in longer detailed transcriptions, which provide a more nuanced picture of the discursive context of particular turns and sequences of conversation. These allow in turn for a better understanding of speech-exchange patterns. Discussion of speech-exchange patterns will be found in the next section.

6.4 Detailed analysis

6.4.1 G2.1

I planned to use previously developed 'First Meeting Questions' (appendix 12) to elucidate key data about G2. In practice time constraints limited the scope of my questioning. Nonetheless transcripts and coding reveal a number of interesting facets of the group's approach to Bible-study.

In response to a question about what the group did, what worked well, or what members were interested in, participants mentioned their present 'questionnaire' approach (mentioned above and discussed further below) and spoke of the need to have some sort of 'framework'. Alongside this, M2.2 spoke of the importance of variety, in relation to using different translations of the Bible, and of the value and danger of going off at a tangent.

Responses to a question about what people hoped to get out of reading the Bible, spoke of relationship with God, and about learning. The subject of the learning was expressed theologically as being about the 'nature of Christ' (M2.3), or 'revelation itself' (F2.1). More generally, learning was seen as always providing something new, even if that was about re-appropriating the familiar.

A comment on the value of sharing together led to a longer discussion about the nature of the group. Conversation focused on the balance between 'Bible-study' and 'fellowship'. For several members these were held in tension. There was also interest in whether 'study' was an appropriate word; some preferred the term 'Bible group'. For M2.2 study was historically the preserve of the expert, the 'reverend'. F2.6,

however, preferred to stick with Bible-study, valuing the focused nature of the conversation. It was important to all speakers that 'Bible' featured in the description of the group – 'home group' would not do. Indeed, participants had a high view of the part the Bible played in meetings. It was 'central', the 'trigger', the 'bedrock', the 'reason for meeting'. And what they were doing was thinking about its application.

The time constraints of having to explore the group's self-understanding, and outline my research, within a forty minute period, may have limited the initial data. On the other hand, I was able to get a first taste of them engaged in Bible-study at this initial meeting. This revealed something of their pattern of interaction.

An immediate facet of interaction underlined the ambivalence to my presence in the group, mentioned above. As we turned from discussion of my research to Bible-study, the leader began thus:

Extract 2.1.1

1 F2.1:   OK ((slightly heavy tone)) mm (.) better late than never ((lighter tone))
2   we come on to (.) chapter four of John ((sound of page turning)) and
3   study four in your ↑books which is (.) on page eighteen (1s) erm (1s)
4   this is the Samaritan woman at the well (.) erm and then the healing of
5   the (.) official's son and I don't think we- I mean there's just ↑such a
6   lot in this chapter 'nd we're not going to be- I mean even if we had a
7   normal session I don't think we'd get through it all so I think we'll
8   concentrate on the woman at the well erm as much as much as we can
9   (.) erm and I don't know if you've had a look at the questions in the
10   study at all…

The clues to a less than positive feeling lie: in line 1, in the phrase 'better late than never' (delivered with a slightly forced good humour); in line 7, in the reference to this being not a 'normal session'; as well as in the general sense of being under time constraints.

The session continued, however, in a positive vein, revealing a considerable amount about the group's usual speech-exchange pattern. The first clue may be seen in lines 9 and 10 in the reference to the 'questions in the study'. It is these questions which provide boundary markers for episodes of conversation in meetings.

In considering the speech-exchange patterns of G2, I drew on analytical concerns identified in 3.3.6 (pp.64-71): management of turn-taking; what is done within turns; organisation of sequences of turns; repair; the structure of episodes of conversation (Sacks et al., 1974; Schegloff, 1999). And further: lexical choice; and interactional asymmetries (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997). A number of these facets are relevant to analysis of G2's discourse, as may be seen from the following extract which occurred immediately after participants had read aloud John 4.1-42[103].

Extract 2.1.2

1	F2.1:	first question we've got here is why do you think Jesus <u>had</u> to go
2		through Samaria on his way to Galilee giv'n that (.) I've explained th't
3		th't many (.) avoided it (2s)
4	M2.2:	well if it was ((name of County)) it would be road works ((laughter))
5	F? :	or weather
6	F2.1:	or weather (.) flooding
7	M2.1:	wrong type of leaves on the line
9	M2.3:	but (.) interesting you used the word had
10	F2.1:	yes ((echoed by others))
11	M2.3:	chose to (.) I would (4s) umm °it was part [of his plan°
12	F2.6:	[I'd 've I'd have said that
13		the shortest distance between any two points is a straight line it'd have
14		been quicker to go straight through
15	F2.1:	mm
16	M2.2	maybe he felt he had to because he'd got a message for everyone
17	F2.1:	yeh
18	M2.3:	yeh
19	F2.2:	well he wasn't letting (1s) umm (2s) local prejudice nd and divisions
20		(.) affect him was he he was he was (.) just (.) going becus ↑people (.)
21		just people as is y'know not Samaritan not Jew but people so he was (.)
22		keeping his own true course so to speak
23	F2.1:	mm (2s) well it was the logical way to go you're right you're right

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[103] The usual practice of G2 was to read round the circle of participants, with each person reading a verse or two of a substantial part of the Bible passage under consideration, at the invitation of the leader for that session.

24   F2.6 but it was quite dangerous (.) I think for Jews travelling through

25   (   ) ((laughter beginning to bubble up)) but I suppose he felt he would

26   be alright heh heh sort uv divine protection erm but I think there's-

27   y'know possibly there's more of a suggestion of it was it was he had to

28   because it was part of his (.) his (.) mission his intention to ((agreement

29   in the background)) to do that

30 M2.1:   part of him being obedient (   )[104]

The episode is initiated by F2.1, as leader on that evening, introducing a discussion question from the study guide. Broadly questions were of two types: encouraging people to think carefully about the passage (as here); or designed to elicit a response about its relevance for life today. F2.1's role also includes supplying continuers which facilitate participation – examples are to be found in lines 15, 17 and 23[105]. F2.1 also plays a significant part in establishing the preferred answer to the question (lines 23 to 29). These lines offer a 'formulation' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage & Watson, 1979). They represent a commentary on the conversation thus far, but, as with all formulations, one which makes particular choices about reporting what the discussion has been about.

In these lines F2.1 is working carefully with the 'dis-preferred' (Heritage, 1988; Wooffitt, 2001) response to the question of F2.6 (lines 12-14)[106]. F2.6 is affirmed in line 23, but nonetheless corrected on historical grounds (it was dangerous at that time for Jews to travel through Samaria), and more importantly on theological grounds. The 'preferred' response imputes the highest motive to Jesus – what he does is part of his intention or mission. This is in keeping with the responses of M2.3 (line 11), M2.2 (line 16) and F2.2 (lines 19-22).

In Schegloff's terms (1999), turn-taking here is like mundane conversation in that one person speaks at a time. But other aspects are very different from mundane conversation. What happens within turns appears to have certain parameters. Further

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[104] Subsequently to this turn F2.1 introduced a new question from the study guide.

[105] Continuers are often in the form 'mm','yes', etc. They intersperse turns from another participant, supporting those turns.

[106] For a further discussion of 'preferred' and 'dis-preferred' responses to turns of conversation see in the next chapter, section 7.4.3, pp.185-193.

the structure of an episode, on the basis of this example, is clear: a set question is posed and the desired outcome is for it to be answered in a way considered appropriate by the group. This gives rise to a narrower range of sequences of turns than would be the case in mundane conversation. There is also a marked interactional asymmetry between the leader, F2.1, and other participants, notably F2.6, both in terms of number and length of turns (see further in relation to G2.3), and in terms of knowledge of the Bible and 'know-how' (Heritage, 1997) about what constitutes appropriate interaction in this group[107].

This episode has every appearance of what Dingwall (1980) would describe as an 'orchestrated encounter' (again, see 3.3.6, pp.64-71)[108]. In such encounters, leadership roles are key:

> An orchestrated encounter is characterised by the cession of the right to organise speech-exchange to one of the parties for the duration of the encounter. (1980, 169)

G2.1 and extract 2.1.2 in particular fit Dingwall's description well. The transition from general conversation in the kitchen to a different kind of interaction in the sitting room, suggests that there is a shared commitment to a purposeful encounter amongst members, facilitated by the agreed leader. Extract 2.1.2, as discussed above, illustrates how this purpose is achieved in interaction, with participants negotiating preferred and dis-preferred responses, not least through an asymmetry of roles[109].

The work of Mehan (1979) suggests particular parallels with classroom talk. In particular, the role of the leader of the discussion (in collaboration with the study guide), bears striking resemblances to that of the teacher in Mehan's study. Both initiate discussion, manage responses and offer evaluations of those responses as part of the normal progress of conversation. The discourse of G2 does not depend on

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[107] One further feature occurs in this episode which reoccurs in numerous other examples from the discourse of G2, namely humour. Here it is to be found early in the episode (in lines 4-7). Elsewhere it is to be found more usually at the end of an episode, with M2.1 and M2.2 being frequent initiators of such exchanges.

[108] Such encounters lie somewhere between mundane conversation and 'pre-allocated encounters' (e.g. an exchange in a court of law). Both orchestrated and pre-allocated encounters represent ways of maintaining a particular focus of attention, such as a coherent theme within a discussion. The former tend to be more 'role-centred', the latter more 'rule-centred' (Dingwall, 1980, 168-169). The consideration of rule-centred and role-centred organisation of the talk of G2 is pursued below in section 6.4.5, particularly in relation to the interaction of the study guide and the human leaders of the group.

[109] Humour may also reflect something of the constraints placed by the group around their conversation about the Bible (this is explored further in relation to G2.2).

people putting their hands in the air, or the nomination of particular people to contribute, or participants waiting for the leader to recognise their bid to reply. But replies do follow, and depend on, general invitations, and there is a clear sense of what constitutes 'interactional competence'. Further, at least in G2.2, 'violations' of the norms of speech-exchange can occur and require to be 'sanctioned'. These practices depend heavily on the asymmetry of role between the leader and other participants, although in G2 the 'teacher' role rotates[110, 111].

Before continuing, however, doubt about who has been given responsibility for the orchestration ought to be noted. The immediate answer would be that F2.1 is the orchestrator. But there is some tension here between her role and that of the study guide (Connelly, 2001). The latter supplies an introduction to discussion, questions to be discussed and some answers to questions (to be found, textbook style, at the back of the book). The introduction to John 4 speaks of Jesus breaking through barriers of fear and prejudice to bring people to faith. This may be reflected in part in what F2.2 says in lines 19-22. An introductory question asks the participant: 'When have you been able to turn an ordinary conversation into a discussion about Jesus?' (Connelly, 2001, 18). This appears to be exactly what takes place in the interaction between F2.6 and F2.1!

The study guide's teacher-type role is further underlined by a comment later from F2.6, who indicated that she had 'cheated' by looking the answer to a question up in the back of the guide. On the other hand, F2.1 sounds a clear note about the limitations of the guide at another point, as she introduces the final question, although the tone of this turn becomes steadily more tentative as she explores an alternative, less demanding version:

Extract 2.1.3

1 F2.1:   ((Quoting)) what principles can you draw from Jesus's conversation
2   with the woman to help you in discussing the Gospel with

---

[110] This is limited to three leaders within meetings G2.1 to G2.5. G2.6 offered evidence that G2 was working towards all participants leading sessions.
[111] Such well-developed patterns may be one reason why my presence, and my offering of alternative questions for discussion, gave rise to an ambivalent reaction. An alternative leader, initiating alternative or rival patterns of speech-exchange could pose a significant threat to the good order of the group's meetings.

3   non-Christians I think I said last week some of these questions sort've

4   imply that we're all fully paid up card carrying missionaries who just

5   need a bit of help umm so I mean (.) y'know (1s) we s- just started to

6   touch at the end last week about y'know how much do we talk about

7   the gospel with (.) non- non-Christians or y'know ((mm in background

8   from another participant)) and where do we start if we do ((getting

9   steadily quieter)) which I think is (.) probably what I would want to say

10   rather than

Whatever quite the balance between the role played by F2.1 and the study guide, there seems little doubt that particular readings of the Bible are promoted, constraining it from speaking with other voices. In Fowl's (1998) terms, a dominant reading is encouraged within the group, and those less familiar with Bible-study (like F2.6) are socialised into such a reading. This reading exhibits deference to Jesus, as here the highest motive is read into his actions. Questions to be carried forward to other meetings of G2 include: the extent to which the leader or the study guide do orchestrate discussion; and whether participants negotiate with the orchestration of either. At this point, discussion has a conservative feel associated with an evangelical theology, but the question remains as to whether this is the whole picture.

6.4.2 G2.2

G2.2 saw a full attendance of group members. The opening of the more formal proceedings was affected briefly by the news of the engagement of F2.6, but the regular speech-exchange format was soon established. M2.1 acted as leader, introducing questions from the study guide, although with a greater freedom of interpretation than F2.1 had exercised in G2.1. As will be seen, that greater freedom is matched by a conversation in the group in which other freedoms are exercised. A key aspect of the analysis of this meeting lies in the consideration of two areas of latitude which participants exercised: in their relationship with the biblical text and in the speech-exchange pattern itself.

Some tension continued to be apparent around my presence. As I reintroduced my proposed questions for Bible-study, F2.4 suggested that they might be 'rather too much for people like F2.6'. This led to M2.1 and I playing down the questions,

indicating that they were merely a possible resource. In a further episode, I talked with F2.1 about the parallels between Jesus and Moses in John 6, the passage being considered; this generated a growing rapport with F2.1, who supplied continuers to my turns as she would to any other group member. F2.4, however, redirects the conversation in a quite definite way, by reading from William Temple's *Readings in St. John's Gospel*, as a way of introducing a point unconnected with my exchange with F2.1[112].

Extract 2.2.1

1 F2.1:	...but the walking on the water is a much more (2s) sort of divinely (.)
2	empowered thing (.) perhaps
3 R:	although there might be a Moses connection too
4 F2.1:	yes (.)
5 R:	although rather- perhaps more than Moses th- I mean Moses associated
6	with the Red Sea n
7 F2.1:	yes
8 R:	a certain amount of of power with water
9 F2.1:	yes
10 R:	too (.) perhaps another bit of
11 F2.4:	there's quite a nice [comment in this can I can I read it
12 R:	[this is like Moses but more so ( )
13 F2.4:	can I go ahead ((appealing to M2.1))
14 M2.1:	yes please do
15 F2.4:	((reads from commentary))

Debate continued with a discussion about how charities generate giving in the face of seemingly impossible odds. Following on from this, M2.2 asked a question: 'isn't this what this parable is about hearts and minds about people giving instead of expecting it to be laid on?' The immediate response from M2.1 and F2.1 was that the Biblical passage is not a parable. After some further confusion, M2.3 responded to the substantive point:

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[112] F2.4 tended to offer a more conservative line than other members of the group on how the Bible should be interpreted, often wanting to hold onto a literal reading of the text, as will be demonstrated in the discussion in this section of extract 2.2.3.

Extract 2.2.3

1 M2.3:   years and years ago I had an R E lesson er where we did this and the

2   teacher taught a completely different a- reading of this and and the way

3   he started the lesson was he said ((quickly)) right someone give me

4   some sweets (.)

5 F2.7:   sorry say that again [he said what

6 M2.3:   [he just- just asked someone give him some sweets

7   y'know and we all sat there [(   ) sweets

8 F2.7:   [oh right

9 M2.3:   and he just kept on go on go on give me some sweets (.) and eventually

10   one kid put his hand up and gave him some sweets (.) and then (.) two

11   more people did

12 M2.1:   right

13 M2.3:   and about by the end about he had ten offers of sweets and and his

14   reading and I'm I'm only just reporting this [cos

15 F2.7:   [shouldn't have had sweets

16   in school should they=

17 M2.3:   =was that actually what it was wu- was this was a way of (.) actually

18   getting people to sort uv start giving (.) pretty much along the what

19   you've just said actually (.) and nd not that i- the miracle was sort uv

20   getting people to open up and give rather than (.) producing something

21   out of nothing now (.) take that as you will becus (.)

22   [I've struggled with that for years whether that was right or- or-

23 M2.2   [I think I think I think I think it's ju- it's just such a good miracle t- to

24   change people's whole attitudes

25 M2.1:   yes

26 M2.3:   [but

27 M2.2:   [rather than just y'know have a have a one-off

28 ?   yes ((obscured by cough from R))

29 M2.1:   it is a change uv change uv (.) [attitude

30 F 2.4:   [that is an interpretation though

31   [there's a um a play called

32 M2.3:   [I'm not saying it was right it's just it was radical as far as I was

33   concerned

34 F2,4:   ( ) there's a play called man born to be king by Dorothy Sayers n and

35   that that's what happens then that everybody produces there own

36   picnics (.) you know but I (.) I think i- (.) if this film vivo christo re um

37   (.) you know does show that (.) God can do miracles as well y'know nd

38   of course its sort of two isn't it two [sides of

39 M2.2:   [well there was no question about

40   the water into wine

41 F2.4:   [yes

42 M2.2:   [that was a definite changing of

43 M2.1:   um

44 M2.2:   and maybe: Philip was saying this is hopeless (.) this is unsolvable do

45   one of you:r (.) do one of your major miracles you know and maybe

46   Andrew was saying well ( ) we've got a little bit here and this little

47   boy is willing to give what he's got (.) y'know it doesn- I think it's just

48   a lovely idea [(.) whether it was true or not I don't know

49 M2.1:   [yes (.) well it's it it it's yes it's still a miracle in a way

50   isn't it

51 M2.2:   yah

52 M2.1:   as you say changing people's hearts the chances are that y'know if they

53   were around for the Passover (.) erm that they would have had

54   something with them ( ) and fed all that number

M2.2's question referred to above, and echoed at lines 23-24 and 44-48, provides the opportunity for M2.3 to explore this essentially rationalist understanding of the feeding of the 5000 – something with which he has struggled for years. He introduces his struggle as an anecdote about his RE teacher, hedged with significant disclaimers: 'I'm only just reporting this' (line 14); what you've just said actually (lines 18-19); 'take that as you will' (line 21); 'I'm not saying it was right' (line 32). The key turn, in which M2.3 actually approaches the rationalist interpretation, is in lines 17-22. It is characterised by hesitancy, with a number of pauses and repairs. Indeed, such is the hesitancy that M2.2 takes the pause at the end of line 21 as an opportunity for turn-exchange, although a key aspect of M2.3's turn is yet to come. Such an indirect, hesitant approach signals that this interpretation is a 'delicate object'(Silverman,

1997a, ch.4), for M2.3. Despite M2.2's enthusiasm, M2.3 appears uncertain of the likely response to such an approach.

In fact, the response is mixed. As indicated, M2.2 agrees with and develops this reading of John 6; changing people's whole attitudes is so good in contrast with a one-off miracle (lines 23-4 and 27). This interesting twist to the interpretation draws, in due course, the additional support of M2.1, the leader for the evening, in lines 49-50 and 52-54. Key to both these participants supporting the rationalist interpretation is that changing people's hearts, drawing out their generosity, is still a miracle; or even more of a miracle than Jesus producing food out of thin air.

F2.4, however, is not entirely happy with this approach. Although she can find some kind of authority (in a Dorothy Sayers play) for it, she wants to hold onto the possibility that God does miracles in which the laws of nature are suspended (lines 36-38). But this turn is at least as hesitant as any of M2.3, with lots of pauses and repairs, and the suggestion that there are two sides to the debate. M2.2's response in the following line is striking. Such miracles as F2.4 has in mind do occur elsewhere (as when Jesus turned water into wine at the wedding at Cana), but this miracle is not about that kind of thing.

This episode reveals how G2 members, albeit the more experienced ones, can and do negotiate with 'dominant readings' (Fowl, 1998) of the Bible, creating room for a certain freedom of interpretation. They can find ways of talking up a very modern approach to miracle[113], which would challenge (albeit cautiously) more traditional evangelical understandings of the supernatural nature of Jesus feeding 5000 people. The study guide appears to allow for this possibility almost by accident. Relevant sections of the guide (Connelly, 2001, 24-26, 98-99) avoid the question of miracle, by regarding the episode as an opportunity to focus on how Jesus enables his disciples to cope with 'impossible' situations. On this occasion the orchestration provided by the guide allows room for exploration.

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[113] This modern reading is characterised by an approach to the supernatural which avoids interpreting the miracle as being about God intervening in a way which runs contrary to the 'laws of nature', by locating the miraculous action of Jesus in the domain of people's attitude and motivation.

Interestingly, the greater freedom in relation to the text is mirrored by a shift in the speech-exchange patterns during and immediately after extract 2.2.3. Within the extract the role of the human 'orchestrator' is less dominant than elsewhere. Indeed, the leader, M2.1, is drawn into orientating to the interpretation that M2.3 and M2.2 have together constructed. This is seen in M2.1's concluding formulation (lines 49-50 and 52-54) which offers an evaluation (Mehan, 1979) that is, albeit in a qualified way (see line 49), a positive affirmation of the conversation's direction.

This loosening of the speech-exchange patterns was extended in the turns that followed, as F2.7 and F2.2 both introduced questions for discussion, not to be found in the study guide. F2.2's question had to do with a matter of detail in the text (why grass is mentioned in John 6.10). The first question, however, had rather more 'edge'.

Extract 2.2.4

1 F2.7:	then why (.) –ust changing tack slightly
2 M2.1:	yeh
3 F2.7:	why was it just men (.) that count
4 M2.1:	interesting point interesting point only men count er tha:t's a general
5	phrase ((laughter)) er which (.)
6 F2.1:	not to be taken literally ((more laughter))
7 M2.2:	you've [been playing too much golf
8 F2.1:	[had a hard married life
9 M2.1:	been playing too much golf yes er I think we come back to the sort to
10	the patriarchal um spirit of the times (.) really and do feel free to chip
11	in anybody=
12 F2.7:	=well it's just I thought other times men a- women listened as well to
13	[tu Jesus
14 M2.1:	[well (.) that's why there is (.) a suggestion for instance amongst some
15	of the commentaries that that feeding the five thousand was only the
16	men were counted there could uv been y'know=
17 F2.7:	[oh I see
18 M2.1:	[=fifteen thousand there could 've been women and children as well
19	well er there clearly was a little kid there
20 F2.7:	so they were counting the men
21 M2.1:	so it's

22 F2.7:   right

23 M2.1:   perhaps y'know I don't know whether it was a bit like the Masai as

24   well I mean who actually counts these er is it one two three many

25   that's the way the Masai work isn't it when they're –en they're

26   counting so (.) it I think we can take it to mean a large number and

27   there's also which we said in previous sessions that that this is erm (.)

28   John and it it it's we believe that that this is written some time

29   afterwards yu know several tens of years afterwards so it's sort uv

30   reflecting back (.) on er er on on the position (3s) interesting

31   ((change of tone)) yes but sa- sadly we haven't been able to er keep

32   that to perpetuate that my- that only men count bit

33 F?:   mmmm[mm ((with rising and falling pitch))

34 F?:   [haah ((high pitch)

35 F2.4:   shall I just push him off his chair

36 F?:   yes ((general laughter))

37 M2.3:   I'm going to move away I think ((laughter))

38 M2.1:   Yes (.) er you're going to be busy with this with editing this particular

39   one aren't you R

A number of strands are woven together in these turns. The 'violation' of the norms
of the group's default speech-exchange pattern, in which questions are asked by those
not carrying the leadership role, is 'sanctioned' (Mehan, 1979) by M2.1 in lines 10
and 11. This is both an invitation to participation and allows him to retain authority
for orchestration.

F2.7 raises a possible three questions, all of which help focus subsequent turns. There
is a straightforward question as to why the text of John's Gospel constructs the
account of a feeding miracle in a particular way. This is addressed by M2.1 in lines
9-19, in terms of there having been women and children there who were not counted;
in lines 23-26, in terms of ways of counting found in other, perhaps more 'primitive',
cultures; and in lines 27-30, in relation to John being written after events referred to.
These answers, with their varying degrees of relevance, appear to act as a way of
excusing the biblical text for being 'patriarchal'. This is in some sense an answer to
the second, implicit, question: do women not count in the Bible?

The third, also implicit, question is whether only men count today, including within the group. In lines 4 and 31-32, M2.1 twice offers an answer which takes the group into a more intimate area of discussion. The answer would be described in contemporary conversation as 'politically incorrect'. In terms of Jefferson, Sacks and Schegloff's (1987) analysis of the place of laughter in conversation, M2.1 offers an 'impropriety' – the view that only men do, or should count. This is indicated by the laughter that ensues and by the careful way in which the impropriety is managed by others.

So F2.1 (M2.1's spouse) offers in line 6 an immediate rejection of the 'improper' suggestion, and M2.2 and F2.1 offer two further opportunities for scaling down the significance of what M2.1 has said in lines 7 and 8. M2.1 orientates to the first (more congenial and masculine) turn of M2.2 and, in repeating it, de-escalates his impropriety. However, M2.1, following a subtle but distinct change of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981) revealed by the change in tone and the ironic 'sadly', offers a similar but perhaps stronger 'impropriety'. This provokes different verbal responses than straightforward laughter in lines 33 and 34. The rising and falling 'mmm' in particular suggests orientation to an 'escalation' of impropriety. De-escalation is managed, however, via a rejection from F2.4 in line 35 (which provokes group orientation in the form of general laughter) and a disaffiliation from another male participant, M2.3, in line 37[114]. Following discussion of the second question raised in relation to the biblical passage and some further less gendered 'humour', and with encouragement from F2.1, M2.1 re-establishes the predominant speech-exchange pattern, via a formulation which ignores much of the immediately preceding conversation.

Extracts 2.2.2 – 2.2.4 demonstrate that G2 have the capacity to exercise a certain degree of latitude in their shared study of the Bible. Speech-exchange patterns can be stretched by questions from those not orchestrating the discussion. And in less comfortable ways, the group can venture into more intimate, and less formal, discussion, albeit within the overall safe, established framework. At the same time,

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[114] M2.1 then appears to realise something of the intimacy of the conversation, in relation to my recording of it, in lines 38-39, providing a self-fulfilling prophecy about my interest in it!

modern questions about the Bible can be aired and explored, here in relation to the natural, or supernatural nature of miracles, and to gender questions.

In contrast to G1, this group engage in little or no explicit reflection on how they interpret the Bible. Further, there is little explicit challenge offered to the Bible. Changing 'people's hearts and minds' is for participants still a miracle, not a rationalist explanation of why the feeding of the 5000 is not a miracle. Further, no-one accuses the Bible outright of being sexist. Indeed, the carefully managed 'impropriety' of M2.1 might just have reinforced the feeling that challenging discriminatory texts or readings might be an unwise thing to do. That said, G2 do stretch the orthodoxy of both their interpretations and patterns of conversation. They construct their engagement so as to find some room for negotiation. Up to this point, therefore, their conversation offers no evidence of alternative 'interpretative repertoires'.

6.4.3 G2.3

G2.3 involved discussion of John 7. Fewer members were present – six in addition to me. The session was led by F2.1. In contrast to G2.2, conversation flowed within expected speech-exchange patterns. Questions from the study guide led to varied responses and usually a formulation from the leader. Or in Mehan's (1979) terms 'initiation' led to 'reply' and then to 'evaluation'. The nature of the asymmetry in this pattern is underlined by a turn count. F2.1, the leader on this occasion, had over sixty-five turns. M2.1 and M2.2, the two other leaders, had around forty turns each. The other three participants (F2.2, F2.3 and F2.6) had around fifteen turns each.

Nonetheless, all participants did engage in discussion. One episode illustrates this, and also something of the group's self-understanding. This discussion followed two questions about the biblical text. It was initiated by a question about the significance of the passage for today:

Extract 2.3.1

1 F2.1:   um (.) our third question sort uv (.) brings us ontu what's going on in
2   our own lives ((quoting)) what counsel would you give a believer who
3   faces spiritual opposish- opposition from his or her family erm (.) you
4   know maybe some of us're in that boat so I don't know about just

5		giving advice but y'know is it difficult to be a (.) Christian and to talk
6		about (.) Christianity with ones (.) family and (.) friends (.) or not even
7		to talk [about it but do we get some stick about it
8	F2.2:	[I think you have to know (.) I think you have to know when to
9		and when to shut up

F2.2, F2.6, M2.1, M2.2 and F2.3, together with F2.1, all shared anecdotes of interaction between them and others (family, friends and colleagues) that had been related to their Christian faith. These stories featured a range of experiences from mild interest to mild opposition shown by others. The discussion took more than ten minutes. Key to the conversation was a sense of being different. Each of the participants displayed some sense of the need to interpret their faith to those who do not share it, both in response to positive and negative reactions. The sense of being set apart and of what others think was captured by F2.2 (reinforced by F2.1).

Extract 2.3.2

1	F2.2:	either that we've got two heads (.) and we're sort uv definitely peculiar
2		or that we think we're perfect
3	F2.1:	[yes
4	F2.2:	[there's these sort [uv two attitudes (.) y'know
5	F2.1:	[yes you're absolutely right
6		totally bonkers or holier than thou

There may be a clue here to G2's identity constructed in their talk – in both its mode and substance. There appears to be a strong shared identity constructed over against that of others who don't share their faith. This reflects their valuing 'fellowship' in G2.1. Like G1, members of G2 experience meetings as part of being church. Unlike G1, G2's meetings are not a refuge from other aspects of church, however, but part of a largely positive experience of church. G2 has no need to develop a critique of church rooted in the Bible. Correspondingly, engagement with voices from contemporary culture is a limited affair, for which there is some room, but which, if taken too far, might disturb their safe space. There is no need for members to listen for God's voice outside the church, and every reason to listen for it in the Bible, in authoritative commentators and group leaders, as well as their own church-related

experience. This formulation of the G2's experience remains, at this stage, a working hypothesis, to be tested in further analysis.

6.4.4 G2.4

This group meeting involved discussion of John 7.53 – 8.59. Seven members were present in addition to me. The session was led by M2.2. His style of leadership was different to those of F2.1 and M2.1, involving a greater propensity to offer information about the passage, of a predominantly historical kind[115]. M2.2 thus created a critical gap between his leadership and that of the guide. This is further seen in his relaxed attitude to the guide's questions, selecting from amongst them and not always using one as the starting point for a new line of conversation. On the other hand, it remained clear that M2.2, as leader for the evening, was 'in charge'. He retained responsibility for orchestrating the encounter.

Two features of discussion extend the tentative picture of the group's sense of identity sketched above. The first is the strong Christological perspective which featured as one approach to interpreting the Bible here and in other discussions. The second feature is further evidence concerning the awareness of differences of culture shown in the group's interaction. These two represent recurrent strands, found here and on other occasions, woven together within the group's approach to interpreting the Bible.

The above elements are seen in the discussion of John 7.53 – 8.11. This passage is the account of a woman caught in adultery, brought to Jesus by the scribes and the Pharisees for him to judge whether she should be stoned for the act, as was indicated in the 'Law of Moses'. M2.2 featured largely initially, although in interaction with others. A significant component of the initial stages of the discussion involved him introducing the fruits of historical criticism to the group[116].

This gave rise to a short exchange initiated by F2.7 who described the stoning as 'fairly horrible'. Initial response to this was that there was a significant cultural

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[115] In particular M2.2 used specific passages from the Old Testament to explain the New Testament passage under consideration, and especially the customs and practices found in John 8. Little of this additional historical material is to be found in the study guide.
[116] This included information about the history of the passage within the Gospel – that it was not found in the Gospel before the third century; and about the historical background to the first-century practice of stoning those caught in adultery.

difference between people in the first century and today. They had a 'different sense of justice'. Others then pointed out that such practices did take place today, but in other parts of the world. The interaction confirms awareness amongst participants that they are culturally situated, and that the biblical text had a different cultural location. There is a question implicit here about whether, therefore, Jesus is also located in a different culture than participants, or whether he transcends cultural differences. Whether or not this was the precise question underlying G2's interaction, there is certainly evidence for tension in their talk between cultural awareness and a strong theology of who Jesus is.

So how was Jesus treated in the discussion of the story of the woman caught in adultery? First, a certain distance was established between Jesus and the scribes and Pharisees. This was facilitated by a question from the study guide, introduced by M2.2: 'While it is obvious that the woman is guilty, what elements of a set-up can you find in this situation?' The easy and obvious conclusion, that Jesus had been set up by the religious authorities, was quickly reached. Jesus' innocence began to raise him above his culture.

Secondly, Jesus' consistency of thinking and approach were established in the following extract. The extract followed an exchange which characterised the distance between first-century and contemporary culture in terms of a difference between a hard-line morality (then) and a greater sympathy for people (today).

Extract 2.4.1

1 M 2.2:   do you think in number eight it says do you think Jesus is condoning

2   the woman's (.) sin by not condemning her (.)

3 various: no

4 F2.7:   no because he says go but do not sin again

5   [y'know

6 F2.5:   [and he doesn't actually forgive her either

7 F2.7:   he just spares her but (3s) given a second chance

8 M2.2:   yes (1s)

9 F2.7:   and we all need a second chance

10 M2.2:   well and a third chance [and a fourth chance

11 F2.2:   [I's going to say I wonder how many chances

12   we actually get

13 F2.7:   hehe oh lots more

14 M2.2:   mm

15 F2.7:   mm (3s)

16 F2.2:   but also she mu- she has suffered a bit anyway (.) during this hasn't

17   she

18 F?:   mm

19 M2.2:   well it must have been a nasty moment when they said lie down we're

20   going to throw stones at [you

21 F2.2:   [well y'know (.) she's had (.) s- y'know a lead

22   up to the punishment and suddenly it isn't there

23 F2.5:   and of course you don't know why she comm- mitted adultery in the

            first place

There followed a number of turns in which participants discussed whether adultery could ever be excusable, with the conclusion that this was not the case, but that sympathy, or even empathy, might be appropriate in relation to those caught up in such situations ('love the sinner, hate the sin'). The conversation then returned to Jesus' reaction:

Extract 2.4.2

1 M2.1:   ...I think that (.) is forgiveness implied in the go now and leave your

2   life of sin he's giving her a chance to start a new life [( )

3 M2.3:   [I think it's a new

4   chance isn't it

5 M2.1:   mm

6 F2.5:   it's not a forgiveness it's not saying (.) your sins are forgiven

7 M2.2   no he often does say your sins are forgiven but I think he- he's just

8   telling her to move on

9 various: mm

10 M2.2:   maybe he's not (.) I think he's in a position to judge her but just chose

11   not to

12 F2.5:   mm

13 M2.1:   well what he what he wanted to do was to expose their sin and their

14   hypocrisy wasn't it

15 M2.2:   absolutely

16 M2.3:   yes [( )

17 M2.1:   [the mob's and the pharisees' sin of hypocrisy

18 M2.3:   we're trying to read too much into that last bit

19 M2.1:   yes

20 M2.3:   as to whether she we- cos it doesn't say whether she's asked for

            forgiveness or not

The picture of Jesus that emerged from these extracts is, perhaps, a rather detached one. The conversation constructs for Jesus a path between the harsh judgementalism that would say that the woman should be stoned, and the laissez-faire attitude that would condone her sin. This path between condemnation and condonement situates Jesus between, or above, the 'different sense of justice' of the first century and todays's culture which fails to be shocked by adultery.

This location produces a Jesus with a less than warm character. He gives the woman a second chance, but not forgiveness. 'He's telling her to move on'. This text is set apart from others where Jesus makes forgiveness explicit. Jesus' detachment is further underlined by the identification of Jesus' primary intention, which is to expose the sin and hypocrisy of those who bring the woman to him. The woman is protected from this hypocrisy by Jesus, but the real focus is not on her.

This reading of the passage is perfectly justifiable, even if others have read it as portraying a warmer Jesus who focuses both on the crowd and the woman. But the point is that it helpfully dissolves the cultural tension between first and twenty-first century moralities. In transcending both cultures, Jesus provides a way for participants to do the same.

The interaction of cultural awareness and the group's understanding of Jesus, featured again a some ten minutes after the above extracts.

Extract 2.4.3

1 M2.2:   the- number four in our in our erm (1s) lifebuilders book it says (1s)

2   Jesus says if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be (.) you

3   will indeed die in your sins what is the response of our contemporary

4		culture to that claim (.)
5	F2.7:	die in your ↑sins
6	M2.2:	well yes die unforgiven go to hell (3s)
7	F?:	((clears throat))
8	M2.1:	that was an explanation rather than an injunction
9	M2.2:	yes I wasn't going to ( ) ((end of turn obscured by laughter))
10	F2.5:	what you on today M2.1 ((laughter))
11	M2.2:	he he he's obviously on something
12	F2.5:	yes he is

Lines 13-20 pursue this humorous conversation about the explanation for M2.1's risqué behaviour, before conversation returns to the study guide's question.

21	F2.2:	it's rather a wide um ((quoting)) what is the response of our
22		contemporary culture I mean (.) how many (.) different (.) cultural
23		identities have we got in England at the moment
24	F2.5:	well how many different cultural identities have we got with- probably
25		in this room
26	F2.2:	well yeh probably that's right erm it's a bit of a (.)
27	M2.1:	well what do we think
28	F2.2:	do we want to narrow that down a bit
29	M2.1:	right (.) what what d'you
30	F2.7:	in this room
31	M2.1:	what do you [think what do I think
32	F2.2:	[say (.) elderly middle aged o:r conservative o:r hehe
33		[d'yu know what I mean
33	M2.1:	[no don't go elderly middle aged F2.2 say what you think instead
34		((laughter))
35	M2.3:	oh it's a good point actually what is [contemporary culture
36	F2.2:	[yes
37	M2.3:	are we saying
38	M2.1:	yeh
39	M2.3:	people that haven't given their lives to Christ
40	M2.1:	yes
41	M2.3:	non-Christians is that what we're saying or is it
42	F2.2:	cos they wouldn't know that- they would think they weren't sinning

43   wouldn't they if they didn't believe in Christ they would think ah I

44   haven't done anything wrong really [(.) so they

45 M2.2:   [well there must be very lots of

46   very good Hindus (.) and very good Buddhists and very good Muslims

47   who who do all the things in terms of human relations (.) that we think

48   are right (.) but they don't believe that Jesus is the is the son of God

49 various: mm

50 M2.2:   should they

51 M2.1:   I can think of several people in my family and in F2.1's family who

52   would fall into that category [I think

53 M2.2:   [yah

54 M2.1:   I expect we all can can't we

55 M2.3:   mm

56 M2.2:   many of us would hope that (.) they might (3.5s) e::rr (.) at the last

57   have a have have a have a future in heaven (.) or whatever

58 F2.2:   don't you think God would be pleased that they may that they'd seen

59   the light through a different channel maybe I know it's not Jesus Christ

60   but maybe they didn't have the opportunity (.) I don't know

61 F?:   [cos

62 M2.1:   [what he'd like though is just a response (.) to him (.) isn't it

63 F2.2:   but he what he wants is how we behave (.) really

64 M2.3:   [no

65 M2.1:   [no what he wants is a loving a loving response to him which manifests

66   itself in (.) behaviour y'know loving behaviour to one another isn't it

The clear implication of the question from the study guide is that the saying of Jesus, about those who do not believe in him dying in their sins, is a challenge to our contemporary culture. A range of possible responses to this can be envisaged, ranging from an uncompromising acknowledgement that Jesus' hard saying must stand over against contemporary culture, to a position in which it must be radically re-interpreted for our multi-cultural times.

Participants in G2 chart a path between these two extremes. In terms of culture, the distance between first and twenty-first centuries is again acknowledged in the

engagement with the question. Similarly, their participation in contemporary culture seems to be part of their understanding (lines 21 to 34). At that point, however, M2.3 provides an opportunity for members of the group to distance themselves from contemporary culture, by tentatively defining it as referring to non-Christians. This aligns the group with the Christ who transcends culture, and enables F 2.2 to evaluate (the rest of) society's likely response in lines 42-44.

This emerges very quickly as a problematic response. An inclusive voice from contemporary culture (found elsewhere in the group's discourse) emerges in the discussion of the issue of good people (from participants' families or from other faiths) who ought to qualify somehow for heaven even if they don't believe! Good behaviour as the criterion by which God judges us is explored, but M2.1 steers the group away from this pelagian approach, into the more orthodox territory of the requirement being to love God. This does not close the interaction, however, which continued for a further ten minutes or more. Some resolution was provided by a return to the literal sense of the text, negotiated within the group, but formulated by

F2.5:   I suppo- yes actually cos it's a negat- it's actually you have if you do
               NOT believe not if you believe (1s) I'm the wu- who I claim to be you
               will (.) be saved but if you don't (.) you will di- it's sort uv a

Jesus' hard words are directed at those who have had the opportunity to believe, because they have heard his message, but who have actively rejected that. This leaves open the question of God's generosity towards those who haven't had that opportunity, and the more difficult question of what constitutes having had the opportunity.

A parallel from the world of medicine elucidates G2's disocurse here and subsequently. Mishler (1984), proposed that in encounters between patients and doctors, two voices are commonly at work: the 'technical-scientific' voice of medicine and the voice of the lifeworld, which presents a more 'natural attitude'. The effect is that in many situations the voice of medicine interrupts the voice of the lifeworld, providing a 'de-contextualisation' of the experience of illness. The concept of 'voice' has been explored elsewhere in the literature of linguistic ethnography. The influences behind its use here are to be found in (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999) and more recently (Sarangi, 2004). Both Atkinson (1992, 469-470) and Sarangi (2004, 3)

seek to modify the dichotomous nature of Mishler's analysis. Atkinson urges more of a 'thick description' of the rhetoric of medical discourse, and both he and Sarangi require one to look carefully at notions of contextualisation, de-contextualisation and re-contextualisation[117]. This is an argument for a careful exploration of the contextualisation at work in any discourse, but perhaps especially those voices (whether scientific or religious) which construct themselves as 'de-contextualising'.

In the discourse of G2.4 several voices are apparent, but two in particular stand out. The first voice is a dual voice – that of Jesus, which is also, at least to some extent, the voice of the text. This is not a scientific-technical voice, but has similar authority. In terms used in analysis of G1, this is a 'canonical' voice. The second voice is the lifeworld voice, which may arise as a voice for inclusivity, rooted in fellow-feeling for those who are not church members. As shown above, the 'canonical' voice, like the voice of medicine, has an apparently de-contextualising effect. The lifeworld, on the other hand specifically introduces contextual questions, derived from the experience of family or community life. The dominant voice is that of Jesus/the text, welcomed as the foundation of group identity, as argued previously. It is, therefore, the lifeworld voice which interrupts and demands a re-contextualisation. A good example of this is seen in extract 2.4.3. The contribution of M2.2, and subsequent turn-takers, in lines 45-60, introduces people, imaginary and real who challenge the line being taken on God's judgement. Lines 62-66 then offer a snapshot of how the 'canonical' voice reasserts itself. But, as discussed above, further negotiation takes place until the voice of Jesus/the text is constrained to be just what it is and no more, in the rather perturbed formulation of F2.5.

The speech-exchange pattern of G2, it might be argued, also contributes to this pattern of interaction of different voices. The parallel with Mehan's (1979) work makes clear that the orchestrated speech-exchange pattern establishes an authoritative framework. I would argue that this favours the 'canonical' voice. The authoritative questions from the study guide, and the formulations at the end of discussion of questions, provide boundaries for a 'canonical' talking space. The lifeworld voice intrudes into

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[117] From another field (risk assessment) Horlick-Jones (1998) argues for the value of contextualising scientific discourse (rather than regarding it as without human, or social context), in the interests of the integration of different contributions to discourse and corresponding 'knowledges'.

this, but has a limited effect in re-contextualising the authoritative voice of Jesus/the text. This intrusion is expected and welcomed, but carefully constrained, perhaps in the interests of safeguarding the group's identity. Unlike G1, therefore, we can now confirm that 'contingent' voices are not a distinctive 'interpretative repertoire' in the discourse of G2.

On the other hand evidence from other meetings, also found in this one, suggests that the participants are not entirely comfortable in the 'canonical' space. Improprieties (Jefferson et al., 1987), discussed in relation to G2.2, but found in all meetings in the 'edgy' humour, suggest that participants need to leaven their authority-centred conversation.

6.4.5 G2.5

This group meeting focused on John 9, and the healing by Jesus of a man born blind and the subsequent scrutiny of the healing by the Pharisees. Eight members were present in addition to me and the session was led by F2.1. This session provides the opportunity to comment further on different facets of the group's *modus operandi*, including aspects of the speech-exchange patterns, and the 'voices' at work in the discourse.

In relation to speech-exchange, the pattern was, in one sense, familiar. Following conversation in the kitchen about mundane matters[118], the move into the sitting room signalled a corresponding move to prayer and purposeful conversation about John 9 – a transition from 'pre-encounter' to 'encounter' in this 'tutorial'-like conversation (cf. Dingwall, 1980). The conversation evolved in relation to the study-guide's questions. Eleven of a possible fourteen questions from the guide (Connelly, 2001) were posed, sometimes in adapted form, usually by F2.1, punctuating seventy minutes of conversation fairly evenly.

Towards the end of the session, following a suggestion made previously by M2.3, with the agreement of the group leaders, I encouraged group members to reflect again on what Bible-study meant for them, in the light of the evening's discussion. One

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[118] This included the television programme, 'I'm a celebrity, get me out of here!' and a forthcoming Christmas party.

feature of it is particularly worthy of comment, namely a brief conversation about the study guide and the group's relation to it.

Extract 2.5.1

1 M2.1:   but what we do ring the changes on is the ↑way we look at something

2   so °I mean° if we wanted to look at a Gospel this time (.) we felt th- it

3   would be helpful to have a bit more structure err and actually it's jolly

4   helpful if someone else has done heh y'know some scholars or

5   something have done that structuring so (.) we've gone back to these

6   lifebuilders fer for John which we probably (.) haven't (.) used fo:r two

7   or three ↑years

8 F2.1:   mm

9 M2.1:   you know we used to use them (.) err till the infamous Ada Lumb came

10   along but umm

The next few lines were taken up with humour around the mention of this person, author of other study material the group had used – they had referred to her before, as having offered rather contrived and involved questions.

20 R: and does it work well this this one (.) I mean the lifebuilders (.) does it

21 F2.7:   wul it's nice in a way cos it's structured so you keep to (.) you can go

22   off track can't you y'know but you come back you can keep to (.) the

23   points (1s) [I mean

24 F2.6:   [ther there have been a couple of questions that (.) when

25   I've read actually read the questions I've thought (2s) well ↑there's a

26   different way of askin ↑it

27 ??   [mm

28 R: [heh heh yeh

29 F2.6:   it's it's it's instead of just approaching it say right (.) what did you

30   think of (1s) it (.) they phrase so that you really do think (.) about what

31   you're going to say (.) and about what that passage meant (.) instead of

32   just reading it (.) well I'm- it means this to me but rephrasing it (.)

33   makes it (.)

34 M2.2:   but not all the thr- not all the questions are are all that brilliant so

35   whoever's running it has to sort of decide which questions they're

36   going tu (.) major on really

This extract confirms aspects of the study-guide's 'voice'. It's a directive voice providing a structure for conversation (lines 3, 5, 21)[119], but this is on the whole welcomed. The voice has a particular authority – that of 'some scholars' (line 4). The 'voice' asks questions specific to the text being discussed[120]. It may be provocative, but again this is welcome. This is the experience of F2.6, portrayed in lines 24 to 33. Lines 29 to 33, in particular, suggest that the study-guide is an effective 'teacher' in Mehan's (1979) terms. Its questions act as initiations, inviting reply, and careful reply at that. Or, to put it another way, the questions, offered by the group leader, act as an 'invitation to bid' (Mehan, 1979, ch.3).

It might appear from this that the study-guide is the primary teacher for the group. There is, however, more to be said about the partnership between guide and leader. So in lines 34 to 36 M2.2 makes clear that not all the guide's questions 'are all that brilliant'. He further indicates the leader's responsibility to select questions. A further way in which the balance swings towards the human 'teacher' is in the offering of 'evaluations' of people's replies (Mehan, 1979). We have noted previously how leader often offers a 'formulation' (Garfinkel & Sacks, 1970; Heritage & Watson, 1979) of the conversation, prior to moving on to the next question. These may be influenced by the study-guide's views, but require the responsiveness of the human leader to pick up and interpret the nuances of members' contributions.

The balance between book and human is well illustrated by the exchanges earlier in the session. F2.7 had responded to the leader, F2.1, following her bid to bring the discussion to an end. F2.7 reopened the conversation by asking about 'question ten' the study-guide. This initiated a further five minutes discussion of the biblical passage, before we moved on to reflect on what Bible-study was about.

Extract 2.5.2

1 F2.1:   ...(4s) I think we'll call a halt there (.) erm

2 F2.7:   I wus just going to ask

3 F2.1:   yeh

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[119] This was referred to a little later in the discussion as a 'framework'.
[120] That it is the guide which asks the questions evokes no strong reaction in the conversation, although in an evangelical group one might expect that the text's questions might be regarded as primary!

4 F2.7:   about question ten [what

5 F2.1:   [yeh we ought to do question ten

6 F2.7:   pardon

7 F2.1:   go on then

8 F2.7:   no I was just going to say to (.) question ten I'm just trying to think

9   my<u>self</u> (2.5s) ho:w we would demonstrate his glory

The guide provided, in the question referred to, both a possible topic of conversation

<u>and</u> a pretext for initiating it. But the right to introduce the topic still rests with the

human leader, F2.1. This is in line with Dingwall's suggestion that in orchestrated

encounters one party 'may act as an authorised starter and closer and as an arbiter of

the distribution of the right to hold the floor and to introduce new topics' (1980, 169).

As indicated previously, the leader discovers a way of affirming, or 'sanctioning'

(Mehan, 1979), displays of initiative such as that shown by F2.7. This is seen in lines

5 and 7.

The nuances of the relationship between book, human leader and group provide

further insight into the way Dingwall's work is of significance here. His contention

was that 'orchestrated encounters' tend to be more 'role-centred' than 'rule-centred'

(1980, 168-169). It could plausibly be said that in G2 both possibilities apply. The

study-guide offers a potential rule, that members should address its questions; the role

of leader is significant in determining the subsequent direction of conversation.

To summarise, the study-guide's voice is heard in tension with at least two other

'voices'. One is that of the text itself, which is constrained to speak through the

guide's questions and commentary. This is the power of the study-guide. This is

further held in tension with the human leader's power, which is to shape and direct the

conversation which flows from the guide's questions – to monitor and evaluate

replies. The rule-centred interventions of the guide are a real constraint. The human

leader and the group consent to place themselves within this framework.

Occasionally, questions are ignored or re-shaped, but rarely do members find another

point of initiation for conversation. And digressions are always limited by the need to

turn to the next question. The role-centred shaping of the leader operates within the

rule-centred frame of the study-guide. Clearly, from conversation considered here,

the group do know other ways of working. But in the sessions I shared with them, the

above is the consistent picture. Questions that flow from this are, how this speech-exchange pattern interacts with the theology of the discussion, and how much space for negotiation is to be found between question and formulation. These can only be explored by considering further discourse.

To turn then to the main strands of conversation in relation to John 9, the following are the turns immediately following the first question from the study-guide.

Extract 2.5.3

1	F2.1:	umm looking at the beginning ((stifling a yawn)) of our study ahm (3s)
2		((cough)) there's a quick summary here and obviously it's what we've
3		read ((continues, quoting)) Jesus meets a man blind from birth the man
4		illustrates that those who are blind often see clearly (.) while others
5		with sight see <nothing at all> (1s) looking at the beginning of the
6		chapter first of all then (.) err ((quoting again)) based on the question
7		the disciples asked Jesus in verse two how do they view the relation
8		between sickness and sin (8s)
9	F2.5:	it's implied th't (1s) I think what they're trying to say is th't you-
10		you're only it- he's only ill because either he's a sinner or his parents
11		were
12	F2.1:	mm
13	F2.5:	so it's a punishment
14	F2.1:	mm
15	F2.5:	so sickness (.) or disability is a punishment (3s)
16	F2.1:	yeh (5s) there's um I mean [there's
17	M2.1:	[which is a long standish Jewish
18	F2.1:	yeh
19	M2.1:	tradition isn't it
20	F2.1:	wul I mean there's there's some bits in the Old Testament about the
21		sins of the Fathers being (.) visited on the (.) sons °and that° (.) umm
22	M2.2	from generation to generation ↓°but I don't believe any of that°

There are a number of points to note in this extract. Lines 1 to 8 offer a typical initiation of an episode within the conversation, with introductory remarks and a question. The long pause (8 seconds) after the question is not untypical in this setting.

The reply comes from F2.5, who starts with some disclaimers and hesitations in lines 9 and 10, but who becomes more definite as her 'bid to reply' (Mehan, 1979) is supported by continuers from F2.1 in lines 12 and 14 (the further continuer in line 16, 'yeh', does not elicit another turn, however). The response then receives a positive 'evaluation' (Mehan, 1979) in lines 16 to 21. M2.2's turn is interesting. He picks up the evaluation, but then, quietly and in a deep voice, bluntly disagrees with the theology. This is the first of a number of turns from M2.2, who represented a significant 'voice' in the evening's conversation, discussed further below.

In the five minutes, or so, of conversation that followed before the next question, different members responded to the issue of sin and illness. Contemporary views were cited[121]. Participants worked at the distinction between punishment for sin and cause and effect, especially M2.1 and F2.2.

Extract 2.5.4

1	M2.1:	...I think the- the bit that's wrong is the way they attributed to (.)
2		y'know (.) God is deliberately doing that t' the
3	F2.2:	[yeh (.) that's right
4	M2.1	[(.) to the children because of what your grandfather did or your
5		great-grandfather
6	F2.2:	[yeh
7	M2.1:	[what have you whereas actually by giving freewill (.) to (.) a
8		generation that did Chernobyl or y'know petrochemical plant that (.) 9
		pollutes (.) [the water or something like that
10	F2.2:	it's cause and effect isn't it (.) really
11	M2.1:	[it is a consequence (.) yes
12	F2.2:	[and cause and effect can go down the line
13	M2.1:	yeh
14	F2.2:	but as you say it's certainly not God's (2s) after effect
15	F??:	and retribution
16	F2.2:	it's our own

---

[121] These included those of the footballer, Glen Hoddle, in relation to disability, and a more general view that some regarded AIDS as God's retribution.

This clear rationalist viewpoint was questioned by F2.5, in the light of people's common response, when struck down by illness, 'why me?' But this line was in turn countered by F2.3, speaking out of her own experience of illness. She suggested first, that the question should be 'why not me?' and secondly, that illness was an opportunity for people to get their life back in order, as it had been for her (it had been a 'kick up the arse'). The theology that seems to be at work here shapes F2.1's formulation, before introducing the next question:

Extract 2.5.5

1	F2.1:	ther they're opportunities aren't they fur fur (.) for healing and for
2		new (.) things (.)
3	M2.2:	yes
4	F2.1:	to come out of it (.) mm (.) (not that) God wants us to be ill (.) but (.)
5		or- or- or- or upset in any other y'know in other ways but- but- but out
6		of those situations something (.) can- can be (.) can be can be made

The line seems clear. Suffering is the consequence of our actions, and part of having free-will. God does not will it upon us. Yet God will help us make the most of the situation, so that good may come from it. In the next section of discourse a further, not unexpected, question emerges, about what happens when cause does not lead to effect; about whether 'people who do bad things ought to be punished'. This is construed, by F2.1 in particular, as a matter of 'fairness' and our desire for it. In response, conversation allowed for the possibility that God, rather than we, would sort out the complexity of such situation, but after death rather than in the present.

Further 'voices' in the conversation of G2 are noticeable here, brought into dialogue with the questions from the study-guide. They include 'popular' voices, such as that which says that AIDS is God's retribution, or (in discourse not otherwise recorded here) that 'only the good die young'. These are constructed as other people's voices and operate as a useful foil for the views of guide or text, introduced, perhaps, with the phrase, 'but what about...?' Other 'voices' that emerge are also contemporary, but are recruited to deconstruct text and/or guide. They are expressed in the words 'cause and effect', and 'fairness'. The former, from the context, expresses an empirical world-view; the latter, again from the context, articulates an ethical perspective, embracing equal treatment for all. These 'voices' are adopted by

participants themselves, as part of the theological engagement with the text mediated by the guide. The one acts to counter the idea that God uses illness to punish people for sin. The other reenlists God's help in resolving the difficulties of the 'cause and effect' line. But they have in common the characteristic of providing a modern language which acts as an alternative to that of sin and punishment. In this respect, they work in a way not unlike the alternative understanding of miracle discussed in section 6.4.2. The theme of miracle also emerges in G2.5, extending understanding of 'voices' at work.

The episode which provides the opportunity for this development in understanding, follows a discussion of the different responses of characters in John 9 to the healing of the blind man. Having considered the response of his neighbours, attention shifted to the Pharisees. The plot of the chapter involves the Pharisees investigating the healing, which had taken place on the Sabbath. They cannot accept that the healing might have been the work of someone who came from God. Because Jesus 'broke' the Sabbath he must be a sinner. The consequence is that they throw out the healed man, thus demonstrating, in the Gospel's terms, their own 'blindness'[122].

Certainly, members of G2 were very willing to identify with Jesus and the blind man over against the Pharisees. They emphasised the insight of the healed man, picking up the thought that he was a prophet, and found the Pharisees' lack of understanding to be more or less inexcusable – they had visible evidence; they should have believed. Group members' own opposition to the Pharisees grew throughout the conversation. This was the precursor to what turned out to be a pivotal question.

Extract 2.5.6

1 F2.1:   what about now then what about us ((quoting)) when might Christians
2   today exhibit the Pharisees' attitude towards a marvellous work of
3   God's grace or power (21s)
4 ?F2.7:   mm (.) that's a hard one
5 F2.2:   I's just thinking that heh
6 F2.1:   I went to um=

---

[122] This mini-plot is part of a larger plot-line in the Gospel, which is about a growing opposition between Jesus and the Pharisees, or 'the Jews' (the Gospel's own term). Commentators have sometimes seen this, and the blind man's experience of rejection, as reflecting the experience of the church which gave rise to the Gospel (see, for example, Stibbe, 1993).

7 F2.2: =can we rephrase that one cos I don't know that I

8 F2.1: how would you like to rephrase it

9 F2.2: I don't kno(h)w hahh ((general laughter))

10 M2.1: [umm

11 F2.7: [((unclear – quieter))

12 F2.2: it's it's quite a

13 M2.1: I guess if they (.)

14 F2.7: [I can't think of a ( ) answer

15 M2.1: [don't stand up fer someone else who querie- for a non-Christian who

16 queries it (.) might (.) ( ) as an example of it ( ) I mean someone might

17 say that was fantastic oh it would have happened anyway or he

18 deserved it or he earned it nd and a Christian might say quietly to

19 himself herself (.) y'know it's an answer to prayer or something or it's

20 °((getting quieter)) a miracle or I don't know I don't know do ↑you°

21 F2.5: well I's going t- I was just thinking sort uv(.) if we had a- if there's a

22 healing service on at the church (.)

23 M2.1: mm

24 F2.5: how many people (.) yu know would actually (.) totally (.) hand on

25 heart say that's the power of God or how many people would think (.)

26 is it possible it's psychosomatic it's a ( )((obscured by cough in

27 background)) and it's a (.)

28 M2.1: mm

29 F2.5: healing services are quite a- a strange thing (.) when (2s) someone can

30 have a really (.5s) severe problem (.5s) and then (.) completely better

31 (.) [just like that

32 F2.7: [have you have you been to one

33 F2.5: I haven't been to one but I (.) have (.) I know someone who (.) went to

34 one (.) and (.) had a huge change

35 F2.7: because you'd want to sort uv (.) go to see it (.) [to believe it

36 F2.1: [exactly

37 F2.5: but you can't

38 F2.1: we're suspicious [and

39 F2.5: [yes and we're sus-

40 F2.2: we have to see

41 R: so are you ↑really better

42 various   yes yeh

43 F2.5:   well heh (1s) it wasn't me

44 R: no no no (.) no I- I was just imagining the question that would

45   [go through your head

46 F2.5:   [the question is=

47 F2.1:   =were you ill in the first place

48 F2.5:   yeh I's going to say was were they read- were they really (.) better but

49   (.) going to the healing service says give you the permission (.) to start

50   feeling better y'know if you've got (.) a bad knee (2s) you can sort uv

51   not put weight on it not trust it and suddenly (.) someone saying (.)

52 F2.7:   do it

53 F2.5:   do it (.) you've got that trust

54 M2.1:   yeh

55 F2.5:   we're all (.) we are (.) I think we're all a bit scepti- (.) well no (.)

56 F2.1:   [yeh yeh yeh

56 F2.5:   [I don- I shouldn't say we are but I think there is [a degree of

57 F2.1   [we are

58 F2.7:   [we are I think we are

59 M2.2:   [I'm enormously sceptical yes enormously

60 M2.1:   and as a doctor

61 M2.2:   yes (.) [I mean I think [healing

62 F2.7:   [oh ye:h

63 M2.1:   [is that because you're a doctor

64   [or (.) er

65 M2.2:   [healing is [making whole is very much about accepting=

66 F2.7:   [because of your scientific brain ( )

67 M2.2:   =what you've got and not (.) very much about an instant cure which (.)

68   [I'm suspicious about

69 F??   [but do you put miracle=

70 F??   miracle=

It is not surprising that the question in lines 1-3 provokes some disturbance in the
conversation – which begins with an incredibly long 21 second pause. The work done

previously involved identifying over against the Pharisees, and with Jesus and the man healed of blindness. The question prompts participants to identify <u>with</u> the Pharisees, or at least their actions. The long pause is followed by an attempt to negotiate with the question, lines 4-14, until M2.1 comes to the rescue with a candidate answer (lines 13 and 15-20). There is some ambiguity in the answer. He says 'stand up <u>for</u>...', but the sense is stand up <u>to</u>. Nonetheless, by identifying an imaginary situation in which a Christian might exhibit Pharisee-like behaviour, he paves the way for F2.5 to uncover her feelings of suspicion about miraculous healing, and her scepticism.

She begins hesitantly in line 24, with a number of pauses and phrases to hedge the question ('actually', 'totally', 'hand on heart'). But once started, she works in partnership with other members (including me) to identify a number of possible, suspicious thoughts: 'we have to see'; 'are you really better'; 'were you ill in the first place'; a healing service gives you 'permission to start feeling better'. Then at line 55, again starting hesitantly, with pauses, hesitations and repairs, F2.5 introduces, or almost introduces, the thought that we might be somewhat sceptical. This draws a variety of contributions, all of which are aligned with this suggestion, in a section of discourse full of excitement, with lots of overlapping contributions from different participants.

These culminate in M2.2's contribution that he is 'enormously sceptical'. Working with M2.1 and F2.7, this is presented as his view, 'as a doctor'. The view is that healing 'is very much about accepting what you've got'. This is typical of a number of turns from M2.2 during the evening that characterised healing as about getting one's priorities right, sorting oneself out and preparing for death. This prominent voice prepares the way for others to join the discussion, talking about healing as feeling 'more at peace', having strength to cope, being 'whole'. A significant contemporary image for healing was suggested by M2.1 – 'that of defragging'[123].

This is a theology of healing, firmly shaped by contemporary voices of suspicion and scepticism. Further it is quite a long way from healing which is 'a marvellous work

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[123] Meaning re-arranging the files on a computer hard drive, in order to increase the computer's efficiency.

of God's grace and power' (the phrasing of the study-guide quoted in lines 2 and 3 above). M2.2's voice, reduces the possibility of God's intervention. Taking the evening's theology as a whole, God's significant moments for definitive action are portrayed as being in creation – setting in train a process of cause and effect; and after death, or at the end of creation – the moment of judgement. God remains present between those two moments, but to provide strength to cope, to sort out one's life.

This range of sceptical voices, through which the theology is constructed, is a very significant part of the speech-exchange pattern of the group. It is clear that the relatively conservative (in theological terms) study-guide may have the power to initiate conversation, but it does not have the power to determine the outcome. This lies partly in the role of the leader. But it also lies in a number of contemporary voices, which may be spoken by any participant. In extract 2.5.6 F2.5 introduces the sceptical voice. In G2.2, it was M2.3. But a key articulator of this voice is M2.2, who carries the alternative authority of being a doctor, as well as the authority of being a group leader. These voices shape the theological response to the guide's questions, in the space between those questions, in the 'ring' held by the leader.

The above discussion allows for a nuanced understanding of the contextualisations at work in G2's talk. Thus for example, the 'voice' of the study-guide contextualises the discourse in a particular way, through its directive questions about the details of the biblical text, and the relevance of that for today. The sceptical voices of M2.2 and others re-contextualise the discourse in a markedly different way. This is most obvious in extract 2.5.6 and the conversation that leads up to it. In the preceding conversation, participants identified with Jesus and the man healed of blindness over and against the scepticism of the Pharisees, implicitly accepting that healing had taken place. In extract 2.5.6 discussion of the same biblical passage is radically re-contextualised after a marked hiatus. Contemporary voices shape an altogether more sceptical treatment of healing, not dissimilar to the questions of the Pharisees in the passage!

6.4.6 G2.6

This meeting in February 2006 allowed me to return to G2 and involve the members in the analysis of the my first five meetings with them. A full rationale for the type of

exercise conducted here is to be found in relation to the write-up of G1.6 (see 5.4.8 above pp.118-128)[124]. Planning for this visit to G2 involved identifying elements of analysis considered previously in this chapter, which might be enlarged by eliciting further perspectives from group members. These included: conclusions about group identity and roles, especially in relation to G2.4 (see 6.4.4 above); speech-exchange patterns, the part played by the study-guide in the group's conversations, and the combination of formality and informality which resulted (see especially 6.4.5 above on G2.5); and reflections on different voices at work in the group's conversations.

The strategy which I adopted for this visit to the group was as follows:

1. I offered the opportunity for members to talk about how the group met their, possibly different needs, explicitly recalling earlier discussions of what Bible study meant to them.

2. The follow-up to part 1 of the discussion was a more detailed question about participants' awareness of different roles within the group.

3. In order to further explore the group's speech-exchange patterns, I next prompted a conversation about the use of different kinds of question within their discussion. The starting point was the two kinds of question most often supplied by the study-guide. This provided the opportunity for talking about the role of the study-guide within the activity of the group.

4. All three of the above approaches allowed the group to talk about what I judged to be the relatively comfortable general area of group process and dynamic. This paved the way for playing, as indicated at the opening of this meeting, a section of recording of G2.5 to participants. This was a discussion of miracle, chosen with the hope of eliciting an explicit discussion of the group's wrestling with what appeared to be a problematic area of theology.

5. As a back-up, which proved necessary, I had prepared questions relating to other problematic areas of the 'hard' sayings of Jesus and being inclusive/fair. I had originally planned to follow this with an introduction to the idea of different

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[124] In summary, the aim of this exercise is in keeping with those of (Bloor, 1978, 1997; Cicourel, 1973); it is concerned with seeking _further_ perspectives from participants to stimulate fresh reflection. Sarangi (2002) provides a further nuance, with his suggestion that what is being sought in such exercises is possible 'alignment' between the perspectives of the researcher and the participants. Alignment of perspectives is explored here in the full realisation that this adds further layers of data and interpretation to those which existed prior to this speech-event, rather than providing a direct confirmation of prior conclusions (Bloor, 1978, 1997; Hammersley, 1990; Sarangi, 2002).

voices at work in members' conversation, to test their possible alignment with this emerging theory. In practice, aware of time constraints, I used the theory of 'voices' to introduce the topic of 'inclusiveness'/'fairness'. With some further prompting, participants responded both to the specific questions about discussion and to the theory.

6. The final question extended the possibility of the group engaging with the 'voices' theory. I raised the question of where the voice of God might be in their discussion, commenting on my perception that members of G1 heard the voice of God in and through each other. The question prompted an interesting response.

The meeting took place, not in the home of M2.1 and F2.1 as previously, but in the home of M2.2. That said, the setting was not dissimilar to that of other meetings. The house is a large one set in its own grounds in a rural setting. The group gathered initially in the kitchen, discussing mundane matters and exchanging greetings over coffee. We then moved through to a large sitting room, with sufficient comfortable chairs for the eight people present. The group welcomed me and, in contrast with G2.1, had set aside the whole evening for whatever I wished to discuss with them. The meeting began, as was their practice, with prayer.

After the opening prayer, and having been given the floor by F2.1, I introduced the evening, as being an opportunity to share some of the things I had noticed about our discussions. This was so that I might hear participants' responses to my observations, in order to 'check out' my perceptions. This paved the way for an invitation to members to talk about the purpose of the group.

Extract 2.6.1

1 R:	I have one or two things to start with about umm the <u>purpose</u> of the
2	group (.) and the roles that you played (1s) umm (.) when we met first
3	and when we met for the last time (.) on both occasions we spoke
4	about what Bible study meant to you umm and you said all sorts of
5	umm interesting nd and I mean things which I responded to very
6	warmly (.) umm so I got (.) I began to get some impression of the way
7	that this group meets the needs of different members cos I mean you
8	F2.5 were saying at that point you were quite a new member of the
9	group

10 F2.5:   I was

11 R: erm ((cough)) and probably F2.6 likewise I think you'd pr'aps been

12   slightly longer member of it or

13 F2.6   yeh just before [(   ) about six months before

14 R: [yeh but not much longer

15   whereas others had been in the group group longer for instance some

16   of you were in another group that was the predecessor of this group

17   (1s) umm so I got some impression that y'know that different people

18   had different needs were looking for different things umm (.) and I

19   would be just interested to hear you talk just for a moment or two (.)

20   umm about how you see the group meeting what different people need

21   and want (.) and just y'know(.) how it is now if you like umm y'know

22   what you: particularly look for or how you see it meeting different

23   people's needs (.) if that that's a possibility

In response to this a significant number of participants spoke of the value of the group itself. M2.2 indicated that he would come to the group even if it was discussing 'something irrelevant'. A key concept, revealed by coding, is the supportive fellowship of the group. This support is deemed (by F2.4) to assist those new in faith, providing space for them to discuss their difficulties with belief. F2.2 perceived this as a wider benefit, a time in which people could relax and discuss 'without fear' 'all the little problems you've got' (in this context problems with faith). This support was regarded as so important by F2.4 that she maintained that 'every Christian should belong to a home group', to find support not provided in church.

Support found in the group was something of a corner stone for the way the group expressed their identity on this occasion. Prayer was integral to the support and fellowship. Members spoke of how they shared problems of everyday life in conversation and then in prayer. Other elements were built on this foundation. Thus F2.1, in discussing the church's decision to encourage members of different groups to call them 'home groups' rather than 'Bible-study groups', indicated that this was about not just being 'almost academic and biblical', but 'about much more than that'. This piece of identity work was extended a little later in the meeting.

The sense of fellowship and support also connected with a perceived difference of contribution. As well as identifying the value of individual members' contributions, a number of participants appreciated the mix of people in the group and the changing dynamic that resulted. F2.4 identified this as a 'microcosm of what the church should be'. This conversation was extended beyond my question about different roles played within the group (objective 2 above). M2.2 spoke of the value of the different experiences which group members brought to discussion. And much later in the discussion, towards the end of our meeting, participants spoke of their difference being a positive feature of their rural location, where they had less opportunity to choose a church of like-minded people.

The importance of the group, of sharing and support; the valuing of different points of view; an egalitarian desire to hear each other speak; these elements replicate the dimensions of earlier conversations – especially that in the closing stages of G2.5 (see 6.4.5). This final meeting with the group adds another layer of evidence for a consistent picture of the group's identity. Although this constitutes further data, the recurring points of view increase the plausibility of earlier analysis.

To return to analysis of G2.6; given the relatively narrow social range of the members of the group all of whom lived in a predominantly white, prosperous group of rural commuter villages, it would be possible to be sceptical about the difference of experience represented. What needs to be said is that the group was indeed serious about hearing different views from members. There was within the whole meeting mention of significant, memorable contributions made by M2.1, M2.2, M2.3, F2.1 and F2.3. Further, in responding to my question about roles, the group spoke of how all members had now been encouraged to lead the group; and all except F2.7 had done so at the point of my return visit. I take this to represent a real desire to be egalitarian and inclusive, even though the extension of this principle, discussed below, caused them theological problems.

The above responses were complemented by further discussion of the place of academic points of view within the life and identity of the group, already alluded to above. On the one hand, academic points were valued. In particular, this meant knowledge about the historical context of a Bible passage. Thus M2.1 spoke of the

need to start with a historical perspective when handling 'the really hot topics', such
as the role of women in the church. This is no simplistic hermeneutic as he indicates:

Extract 2.6.2

1 M2.1:	[you've got to] begin to think well (.) does it did it mean then what (.)
2	it has been taken to mean today or or how d'you how do you take
3	things forward when y'know given that actually the message might be
4	there but but actually society has (.) changed completely umm to just
5	choose- I say there are times when you I think it is (.) umm (.) well
6	important essential really tu tu try and get the most out uv of
7	understanding and application tu tu to do a bit of (.) digging and go
8	back (.) the difficulty is always of course y'know you start saying well
9	in those days but actually do we know and then what what authority
10	are you quoting that do we really know what it was like in those days

On the other hand, a number of elements of conversation indicate that this type of
knowledge was secondary to the identity of the group, a useful tool rather than the be
all and end all of their practice. Thus F2.1 suggested a contrast between 'all the
learning in the world' (see below line 3) and insight:

Extract 2.6.3

1 F2.1:	...I learn things umm I get little (.) nuggets (.) of insight (.) you know
2	from this group and so it just goes to show you don't y'know (.) all all
3	the (.) learning in the world ( ) [it's just the insight you get at the=
4 F2.4:	[you never stop learning do you ( )
5 F2.1:	[=moment it s very=
F2.3:	[the day you stop learning you've had it
6 F2.1:	=very valuable and I learn from you guys all the time

This 'insight' expresses well the kind of learning from each other which group
members had talked about in previous meetings[125]. In a further piece of identity
work, F2.4 was clear that this had to do with being a Christian group rather than
'another kind of evening class'.

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[125] It also establishes a parallel with G1. Discussion of G1.6 in section 5.4.8 (pp.118-128) noted that
insight was valued and Extract 1.6.6 included the word 'nuggets' in this context.

Similar points were made just over ten minutes later, again by F2.1 in co-operation with F2.2 (and F2.4). This followed a discussion about the group's current approach to their meetings, which involved considering, and responding to, works of art.

Extract 2.6.4

1	F2.1:	I think we've got a similar tension as we have with the Bible passages
2		some knowledge is helpful
3	F2.2:	yeh
4	F2.1:	some of it we cannot interpret without having that information
5	F2.2:	yeh
6	F2.1:	that this means dot and that means dot
7	F2.2:	yeh
8	F2.1:	( ) but equally it's not er an art appreciation course and nd nd
9	F2.2:	that's [right
10	F2.4:	[oh that's what I was going to say
11	F2.1:	and in a way what we're about is not about umm you know
12	F2.2:	artistric (.) as such
13	F2.1:	biblical (.) study in a (.) purely theoretical [(.) way
14	F2.2:	[yeh
15	F2.1:	so it's trying it's trying to dig enough
16	F2.2:	yeh
17	F2.1:	to give us something to help us but it's about responding to the
18		pictures as Christians and what it tells us about Christ…

Art appreciation, like historical criticism, has its place. But the key to the group's identity is their faith response, individual and shared, to the Bible passage, or the painting that they are considering. And all members participate in, and may lead, that response, whatever the extent of their 'academic' knowledge.

Something of the same tension between expert knowledge and the insights of the group is to be found in the conversation about the kind of questions the group worked with (introduced as indicated above, objective 3). Conversation that ensued included discussion of 'frightful' or 'extreme' questions, not in touch with the reality of the group's experience. Alongside this was a clear statement that members brought their own questions to discussion. M2.1, in a lengthy turn, indicated that the group had

developed in their use of questions. His comment on their use of the study-guide, was that questions found there provided a 'framework' which made for a disciplined approach. In a number of turns, however, he and F2.2 indicated that they felt entirely happy to 'edit', 'adapt', 'expand' and 'juggle' the framework.

There is a sense of considerable alignment (Sarangi, 2002) here with conclusions drawn about speech-exchange patterns in G2.5 (see 6.4.5 above). In particular the view that the study-guide provided a 'framework' and discipline correlates well with my suggestion that the speech-exchange pattern is generated in part by the rule-centred (Dingwall, 1980) invitations to bid to reply (Mehan, 1979), provided by the study-guide. But the various terms used for adjusting questions confirm that the part played by the study-guide is held in tension with the role-centred (Dingwall, 1980) contribution of the leader of the group, who shapes the flow of conversation between questions. Further, conclusions about the place of academic points find their wider context. Guide and leader play their part in ensuring that exploration of faith by the group is well-served, but served rather than driven, by the scholarly framework.

Thus far, a variety of elements of correlation have been identified, between talk in this meeting and previous conversations. No particular surprises have emerged. The section of discourse, which followed the playing of a short piece of data from an earlier meeting (in keeping with objective 4 above), to some extent continues that trend. However, some of the alignment that followed emerged after initial lack of engagement.

The data played was a recording of conversation about the man born blind in John 9, in particular the discourse stimulated by a question from the study-guide about when present-day Christians might behave like the Pharisees, in their response to God's grace. This was the question which was followed by a twenty-one second pause, before conversation ensued. I asked members to comment on what they noticed about the conversation. Initial response centred on whether they answered the question and the very long pause. Their perceived failure to answer the question was rationalised by F2.4 indicating that 'sort of kicking off' was what questions were for. The question was recognised as a challenging one. 'No wonder,' said F2.1, there was such a long pause.

Other elements of revisiting familiar topics followed, including further discussion of the value of thought-provoking questions. I then sought to get them to discuss the problematic area of theology – their own suspicion of healing miracles.

Extract 2.6.5

1 R:	one of the things you were saying early on in that that extract was
2	we're a bit suspicious about healing (.) and the Pharisees had been
3	doing [exactly=
4 M2.1:	[yes (but but)
5 R:	=that kind of <u>were</u> you healed nd and
6 M2.1:	[yes
7 R:	[who did it then who who does he think he is anyway to be doing this
8	kind of thing
9 F2.1:	mm
10 R:	and you that yo- actually did enable you to talk about I mean your
11	your feeling after the (.) the Cathedral thing
12 F2.1:	mm
13 M2.1:	[it was probably R who gave that talk wasn't it or that workshop
14 R:	[you still had your questions your
15 F2.1:	mm
16 R:	no it wasn't wasn't ((laughter)) do you see what I mean so I think there
17	was- and that was quite a difficult area to tackle in some ways
18	perhaps (.)
19 F2.1:	[yeh
20 R:	[y'know th't that we do have this kind of you I think you said sceptical
21	was your word M2.2
22 F2.1:	umm
23 R:	whether as a doctor or not (.)
22 F2.4:	( ) actually it was a wonderful service that wonderful day that day
23 F2.1:	it was very good [yeh
24 F2.4:	[yeh amazing guy (3s)
25 F2.1:	°mm° (3s)

In the above passage there are some signs of F2.1 engaging with what I was saying, by supplying continuers. But the response of F2.4, which runs entirely counter to a conversation about scepticism, seems to prevent any discussion of such matters. And after the second three second pause, being less capable of sustaining long pauses than the group, I moved on to my next gambit. Interestingly, F2.4 had previously (in G2.2) expressed a stronger belief than other members in the possibility of miracle. Further, the conversation of G2.5 had taken place in her absence. Perhaps, in the face of such enthusiasm for the healing service, into which F2.1 is drawn (line 23), members felt unable to tackle an explicit discussion of scepticism. Or perhaps, I simply didn't take the more rule-centred option of leaving a very long silence and expecting a reply!

Following this episode, I therefore introduced the alternative area of problematic theology, identified in objective 5 above. I outlined the suggestion that there were different voices at work in their conversation: those heard from the text of John (in particular Jesus telling people they would 'die in their sins'); and others coming from 'the world', which asked how such textual voices fitted with being fair. This provided the opportunity to reintroduce the notion of suspicion in a less direct way, as an aspect of the voice coming from the world. I also raised in my introduction the notion of inclusivity, as belonging to the voice coming from the world. This opening was successful in prompting a lengthy conversation lasting over ten minutes.

F2.4 was clear about the crux of the matter. She recognised the inclusive voice of our society, but, somewhat reluctantly, holding that Jesus 'didn't believe that' – people had to believe in him. M2.1, a little later, added a nuance to this. He spoke of Jesus' inclusivity being there in his calling everyone, but that this demanded a response from each person. Nonetheless, the group continued to wrestle with how various 'good' people could be included in the kingdom of God. Even F2.4, who questioned the use of the term 'good' (on the grounds that no-one was good except God), was concerned to include her non-Christian son in the kingdom.

What was striking was that this wrestling was at one with the identity-work done earlier in the evening. For F2.1, it was part of balancing different points of view. This was a *via media* for her, between recognising that people might be in 'a different place' in their faith, and being 'too wishy-washy', between valuing different opinions

and saying that 'anything goes'. In this contribution, conversation came close to an explicit recognition that different 'voices', in my terms, competed for the attention of participants. And certainly the wrestling with the particular example of this, which I had reminded them of, indicated a real alignment with my analysis of G2.5.

Interestingly, the group identity received an added ecclesial dimension during this discussion. F2.4, while holding a more conservative position than some in the group, was nonetheless clear that she and they did not have the certainty of 'the old Presbyterians', perhaps because of 'our culture'. This point of view was complemented by M2.1, who also identified the group over and against another church group, the charismatic church of Holy Trinity, Brompton[126]. For M2.1, the group was not like members of that church, because they kept in mind people around them from daily life, rather than just going for 'the big picture'. This confirmed a sense that members were aware of their wrestling with 'determinate' readings (Fowl, 1998), in the interests of those around them. Nonetheless, F2.4 cherished some hope that things could be different.

Extract 2.6.6

1 F2.4:	but -ut er R's talking about these (.) the different voices in the group
2	and I I think that's because none of us is umm (3s) is where perhaps
3	we wud like to be

Finally, comment needs to be made on the group's response to my final question about where in their meetings they experienced God's voice. M2.1 responded, in a contribution alluded to above, by talking of the importance of keeping other people, from daily life in mind. But then F2.1 suggested that there was 'something too not just about the voice of God, but about the ear of God'. For her the experience of God, of which she was aware at that moment, was that of bringing prayers to God about particular people or situations, and of God listening. This clearly did not provide an example of 'alignment' with my viewpoint, but rather a creative theological mind at work.

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[126] There is something of an irony here, given that Holy Trinity originated the Alpha Course, which was a key reason for the formation of G2.

Chapter 7
Group 3

7.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with research carried out with Group 3 (G3), between January and June 2006. Setting the work with this group within the wider research framework, it was clear by this stage, that while my participation in groups' practice was not insignificant, the groups were also shaping my research hermeneutic. Data from G1 and G2, considered from a DA perspective, suggested that I pay attention to interaction between three inter-related social contexts: the Bible-study group itself; the church; and contemporary culture. A key focus became the way members negotiated their interaction with these three contexts in their Bible-study talk, and the language resources used in the negotiation. My interest was in how resources drawn from different social contexts were brought to bear on the engagement with the Bible, and how that informed membership of those different contexts.

Evolving a third case-study had a clear aim, therefore. This was to enrich the picture of the interaction sketched above, providing a further in-depth study of a particular existing Bible-study group. There was every reason not to change the method of approach to G3, except in so far as their practice required it. However, one particular variation suggested itself, in the interests of enriching the cumulative picture of groups. Both G1 and G2 had emerged from a similar church tradition, broadly evangelical in character. One possible third group had been set up by a church of a different, high church or anglo-catholic, tradition. This seemed to present something of an 'independent variable'. Such a church setting might provide members with different understandings of church life, the Bible, and patterns of authority, than had pertained within G1 and G2. Historically, the evangelical tradition has focused on reformation concerns, particularly about the primary authority of the Bible and the individual's relationship with God. The Anglo-catholic tradition (see, for example, Butler, 1988; Worrall, 1993), has valued the authority of the church, as the interpreter of the Bible and later tradition, and as the means by which people can find God's grace. This emphasis has been accompanied by one on ritual and symbol (within liturgy), rather more than on the spoken or written word. Given the possibility of these different kinds of emphasis being present, this group was selected as G3.

Two caveats need to be sounded at this point. One is that identifying this 'independent variable' was not designed, as in some branches of quantitative research, to allow for the isolation of differences which correlated definitively with this variable. Rather, it had the more limited aim of broadening the scope of the in-depth case studies. In this sense, the strategy is similar to that envisaged by Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, 36-45), who discuss the strategic selection of cases, for the purpose of testing emerging theory. Given an interest in participants' use of resources from different contexts, studying a group which shared the same contexts as other groups (as members of a Bible-study group, a church and wider society) but whose affiliation to those contexts might be notably different, commended itself.

The second caveat, consistently imposed in this project, is to ensure that, in commenting on the significance of the group's context, this should be based on data which revealed that members did actually orientate to features of that context (cf. Atkinson, 1985; Widdicombe, 1998). In practice this orientation was demonstrated both by members' talk and wider practice.

As previously, research planning was shaped by the preceding discussion. Questions evolved in relation to G2 apply equally to G3:

- What kind of speech-exchange is taking place in these meetings?
- What is the relationship between participants and the Bible, and how is that relationship constructed?
- What part does God play in the discourse of the group?
- What work of identity- and meaning-making is going on here?

However, these questions are supplemented by that relating to the interaction between different social contexts achieved in the group, identified above. This provides one particular interest in the consideration of the speech-exchange patterns of G3. Further, it indicates the possibility of carrying into the analysis of G3 a variety of approaches to the use of linguistic resources, evolved in relation to G1 and G2, without assuming their automatic usefulness. These approaches include those which identify linguistic resources as 'interpretative repertoires'(Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988), 'discursive nodes' (Todd, 2005) and 'voices' (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004).

7.2 Carrying out the research

Contact had arisen with G3 through meetings with the group leader, the parish priest, about other church matters. This became an opportunity to negotiate a first meeting with the group in January 2006. The setting for the meeting will be discussed below under 'first observations'. The group gave me the whole of their time that evening, providing ample time for me to achieve my aims:

- To find out something about the nature of the group and their understanding of their purpose;

- To explain my research, especially my interests in relation to Bible study;

- To negotiate further meetings with the group at which I would participate in, and record, their study of the Bible.

The data generated will be discussed in due course.

This initial meeting led to four subsequent meetings to do Bible-study together. These took place between January and June 2006. The meetings considered, as was the group's practice, the lectionary readings for the following Sunday, the value of which group members had already commented on in our first meeting. The texts considered were as follows:

G3.2   January   1 Cor 9.16-23; Mk 1.29-39

G3.3   February   Mk 9.2-9; 2 Cor 4.3-6

G3.4   June   Mk 4.26-34; 2 Cor 5.6-17

G3.5   June   Mk 5.21-43; 2 Cor 8.7-15; Wisdom 1.13-15; 2.23-24

Given that on each occasion there were three possible readings to be discussed, the choices made reveal a marked preference for the Gospel reading, followed closely by the Epistles; with the Old Testament reading being a distinctly unpopular choice. This order of preference was made explicit in the group's discussion.

There were 15 group members in total, some of whom attended regularly, others only once or twice. The average attendance of the group was between 7 and 9. Ethnographic observation of the group produced striking results, discussed separately under 'first observations'. The group's own account of their history and practice is considered as part of G3.1.

As with G1 and G2, sessions were recorded, producing over six hours of recording. Brief field-notes were also made during sessions. As previously analysis included working transcriptions, associated coding and more detailed transcriptions of significant passages (the latter using the CA protocol derived from (Antaki, 2004) to be found on p.10).

7.3 First observations

Reference was made above to the striking nature of the group's practice. This is revealed in a number of facets. First is the framing of Bible-study by acts of worship. Meetings were preceded by Communion services ('Mass') in church, lasting half an hour. And meetings ended (usually at 9 o'clock) with the late-night service of Compline, said in the room where they were meeting. Less obviously, studying the lectionary readings for the following Sunday made a connection with Sunday worship, explicitly valued by those taking part. This aspect gives an initial picture of a group firmly rooted in the liturgical and Eucharistic heritage of high church Anglicans. To locate this heritage historically, the Anglo-catholic tradition was rooted in a desire to re-establish liturgy, and the Eucharist in particular, at the heart of church life, and as the framework for nurturing the Christian's relationship with God. This is integral to an understanding of the Church's authority.

Leadership and venue might be said to be consistent with this heritage too. Meetings were led almost always by the parish priest. The exceptions to this were G3.1, which I led, and past occasions to which members referred, when lay members had led the group in the absence of the priest. Correspondingly the venue for the meetings was the vicarage study. This provided quite a different feel, in comparison with G1 and G2, both of which met in members' sitting rooms. The layout of the study is significant here:

Fireplace

The Chair

Sofa

ch

ch = chair

ch

Desk

ch   ch   ch   ch   ch
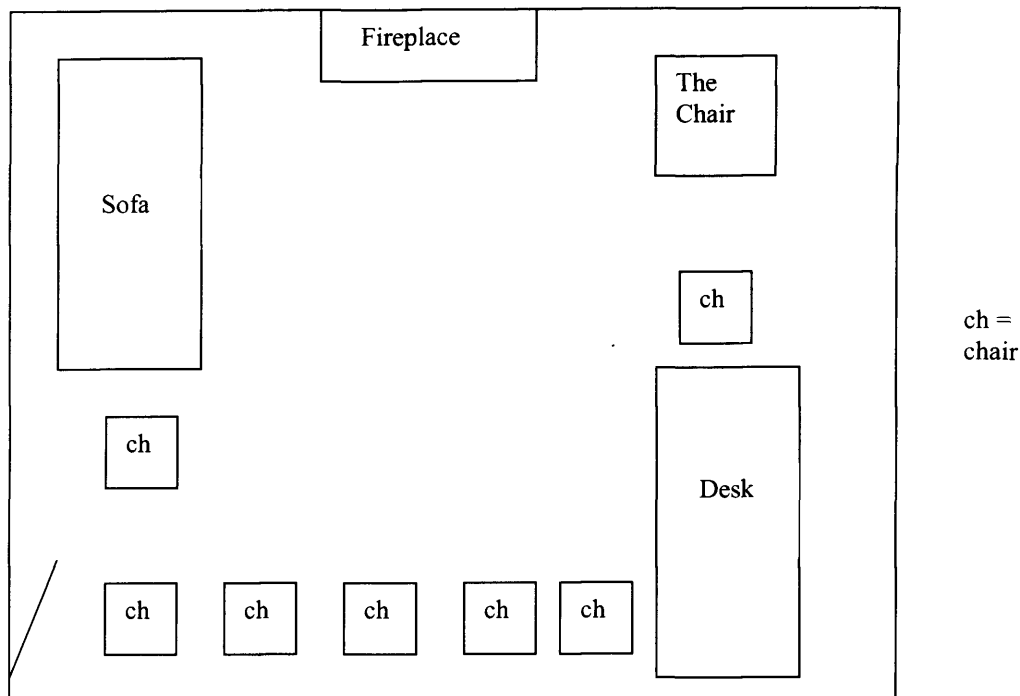
The priest sat always in the large armchair on the right of the fireplace ('The Chair'), others sat in the other chairs or on the sofa. Mostly, the chair between the priest's chair and the desk was left vacant. Given the position of the (somewhat imposing) desk, this led to conversation taking place between the priest in one corner and those seated on two opposite sides of the room. My impression, as participant, was of lots of parallel individual conversations between each member and the priest. This is borne out by later analysis of the speech-exchange patterns. These one-to-one conversations led me to wonder if this was the reason for, or at the very least in keeping with, the fluctuating group membership. If the attraction is conversation with the priest, then that might reduce the sense of group identity for at least some members – although it was clear that core members did have more of a sense of togetherness.

Other elements which contributed to the feeling of being in the vicarage study included: the priest's cassock, worn throughout the evening; the regular ringing of the telephone (albeit with muted answer-machine); the practice of lay members organising coffee in the (single) priest's kitchen, while he finished off his responsibilities in church; and the presence of the vicarage cat – who walked over everything and everybody!

My clear impression from observing the group was of a tacit understanding of the priest's authority. However, it should be said that this felt entirely benevolent – people clearly came gladly to the group. The question raised, however, is the way in which this authority dynamic shapes the group's discourse. This will be a significant focus of the consideration of speech-exchange patterns below.

7.4 Detailed analysis

7.4.1 G3.1

The first aim of this meeting was for me to discover something of the group's self-understanding, using something like the format of a group interview[127]. Usefully, we were able to discuss their study the previous week as a worked example of their practice.

Transcripts and coding revealed a number of facets of the group's life. G3 had a relatively short history, of some eighteen months, although other discussion and Bible-study groups had preceded it in the parishes. The group had originated with the priest. They met weekly, except when they met with members of a local Baptist church, for example during Lent. Members of the group were experienced church members and included at least two lay ministers[128], together with a number of others who played leading roles in the life of the church.

In response to my question about what they did, members talked about studying the lessons for the following Sunday, but also (as other groups had) about the value of bringing different versions of the Bible. When asked what they hoped to get out of meeting together, they responded in a variety of ways. M3.2 suggested that it was to do with 'one's knowledge of the Bible and its meaning'. This was seen in terms of understanding the original setting of the text – F3.2 described meetings as 'a bit of a history lesson and a geography lesson'. M3.3 talked about the importance of 'contextual things', which he made clear were about historical context. Learning such things was described by F3.3 as 'enlightening', and by F3.2 as providing 'inspiration'

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[127] I asked questions about: membership of the group; how long they had been meeting; whose idea the group had been; frequency of meeting; who led the group; what kind of things they did when they met; what they hoped to get out of doing those things. Further questions then probed some of the detail of their practice, in relation to: whether worshipping together added to the experience; the balance between fellowship and study; the difficulties or challenges of Bible-study.

[128] One Reader and one Lay Elder.

to read the Bible. Discussion was seen as a way of gaining understanding of the Bible's meaning. Members highlighted the value of hearing other people's 'insights' (F3.3) or 'viewpoints' (M3.2), which was part of the 'fellowship' (M3.2). All this contributed to a better understanding of the readings when read in church the following Sunday – as F3.5 put it 'suddenly things fall into place'. For F3.3 such understanding fed her ministry as a Lay Elder. One particular question which emerged from analysis of discussion was the nature of the relevance of their study for today. This was espoused by more than one person. For instance, F3.2 talked about 'bringing it to how we are now'. The question of how study was relevant today needs to be carried over into analysis of other meetings.

Recalling their discussion of the previous week's Gospel (John 2.1-11 – the wedding at Cana) reinforced the picture of real interest in historical context[129]. Such knowledge was drawn from commentaries, from a column on the Sunday readings in *The Church Times*, and (in the case of F3.3) from the Internet. One example of the text's relevance for today was given by F3.5 talking about the connection, which she had never before noted, between the passage and the Eucharist.

Further evidence was provided, after I had indicated my research interests, by the group's discussion of 'Questions worth asking'. I encouraged them to discuss these in twos and threes, and then sought feedback. Different participants responded to the whole range of questions. Two points are of particular interest. One is the engagement of F3.1, more vocal in this part of the meeting than earlier, with the question: 'How can I/we enter imaginatively into the text (e.g. being caught up in the plot, identifying with the characters, or seeing myself/ourselves in a particular setting)?' She spoke of putting herself in the position of people in the text, of being 'almost there' – 'in your mind you're enacting things'. And she illustrated this in relation to the previous week's Gospel.

The second thing of note is the formulation provided by F3.5.

Extract 3.1.1

1 F3.5:   well hh (2s) for me (.) the one number one is quite important because

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[129] They were interested particularly in the first-century customs surrounding the water jars which were the vessels for water become wine.

2		what does the text say about God and this (.) is (.) I think the prime
3		reason why I would want to read the Bible to find out more (.) and then
4		(.) what is going on in this passage and then how does it relate to
5		everyday life and not (.) on the whole so (.) concerned (.) with its place
6		in human history
7	R:	right (1s)
8	F3.5:	that's just me

This summary locates interpretation in a theological arena. Understanding God is the primary aim. What is of significance, however, is how this aim is qualified. The two key facets of F3.5's specific interest, in lines 4-5, are about understanding what is going on in the passage being considered, and about relating this to everyday life. As will be seen this expresses succinctly the agenda of the lay members of the group.

The lack of interest in the place of the text in human history is significant. In keeping with analysis of G3.1, and as subsequent analysis will also show, this is not a rejection of bringing historical insight to bear on a passage in the Bible. Rather, it appears that what F3.5 is not interested in is the significance of the text beyond the parameters of (her) everyday life. The phrase, 'the place [of the text] in human history', articulates, whether consciously or unconsciously, the possibility that the historico-critical project can have wider interpretative horizons than the here and now. Something's 'place in history' suggests a significance that transcends a particular location, whether ancient or modern. Interestingly, F3.5's phrase is reinterpretation of my question, 'How does the text connect with human history?' I would contend that my question is more contextual than this interpretation would suggest. But as will be seen, the experience of lay members of the group is of the priest's tendency to follow the modernist agenda and look for the meaning of a text, rather than a meaning which works for now. F3.5's comment appears to anticipate, or reflect, a key difference of interest between lay members of the group and the priest who leads them, explored below.

7.4.2 Speech-exchange patterns

Before considering subsequent meetings with G3 individually, it is worth delineating something of the general characteristics of the speech-exchange patterns at work in them. As noted previously, Dingwall (1980, 168-169) suggests that 'orchestrated encounters' tend to be more role-centred than rule-centred. This certainly seems to

apply here. The parish priest, as leader of the group, exercised a very definite role within the meetings. And unlike G2, this was not combined with patterns from elsewhere (from a study-guide, for instance).

Key features of that role involved almost invariably introducing each passage from the Bible. Usually these were quite brief, but in G3.3 an introduction lasted for nearly 7 minutes. These introductions touched on the passage's background and lines of possible interpretation. Although these introductions characteristically concluded with a relatively open invitation to people to express thoughts, feelings and comments, their detail often generated the direction of subsequent discussion. Thus the final part of the introduction in G3.2 was as follows:

Extract 3.2.1

1 M3.1:	... the the sort of phrase which um (.) comes off the page I think um
2	about becoming all things to all men or all things to all people
3	depending on (.) the translation I think is a (.) is a an interesting one
4	um wheres Paul starts off by erm in a slightly sort of (.) defensive
5	mode um claiming his own authority or exerting his own authority um
6	as an apostle as a preacher and as a teacher erm and continues in
7	slightly defensive way um talking about how he um spreads the Gospel
8	of Christ um by (.) to use a modern phrase getting alongside people
9	um rather than imposing he starts off from where they are as it were
10	(2s) um (1s) I don't know whether people had any feelings about the
11	passage or any thoughts about it (4s)

With subsequent questions or prompts from the priest, conversation about his candidate interpretation (lines 1-9) took up the next 40 minutes. Further discussion of the subsequent conversation will take place in section 7.4.3.

Subsequent questions and prompts were also mostly part of the role of the priest, with one or two exceptions to be considered shortly. Correspondingly the priest retained the right to have the last word, providing an appropriate formulation of the conversation before moving discussion on. Such an approach did however generate lots of space for people to contribute to the conversation in hand, which they did gladly, and not always in ways which connected directly with the priest's introduction. In a not too dissimilar a way to G2, G3's discussion felt like the kind of

orchestrated encounter that might otherwise take place in a classroom (Mehan, 1979). The group has ceded to the priest the right to start, finish and guide conversation, and his preparatory work (expressed in his introduction) often shapes discussion. What remains to be seen is how lay participants negotiate with this framing of their conversation.

The other facet of orchestration, noted above, was the tendency for there to be parallel conversations between the priest and individuals within the group. This was partly made possible by the skill of the 'teacher'. The parish priest showed considerable skill in remembering different people's contributions or questions, and returning to them when the opportunity presented itself. A good example of parallel conversations occurred in G3.3. The stimulus was a question from the priest about what members thought it was that 'veils the gospel' (picking up a phrase from the text), that 'blinds people to God'. The immediate and brief response from F3.3 was 'science'. This led to a conversation between F3.3 and the priest, which was one of the features of the next fifteen minutes of discussion. But this was woven in with another conversation between the priest and M3.4, initiated by his response to the same question, which was that it was 'possessiveness' that acted as a barrier between people and God. The priest responded fully to each of the two participants, which included re-initiating the conversation with F3.3 when it might otherwise have been lost. The following extract illustrates this.

Extract 3.3.1

1 M3.4:	I think possessiveness (1s) um is one of the biggest barriers (.) between
2	(.) man's relation (.) with God (1s) um (.) self-satisfaction (.) it's me
3	it's mine (.) no matter what um (.) I mean you you experienced the
4	monastic life in (.) in (.) your (.) college (.) I experienced it where I
5	was the (.) th- the vow of poverty (.) really did (.) sever you just put it
6	all to one side and say (.) that's no longer any concern (.) it's between
7	me and God (.) um then the other chastity comes in and obedience
8	that's another dist- a different story altogether um (5s) there are lots
9	and lots of barriers (.) of people not to like or believe in God because
10	they (.) there are so many possessions they have they don't want to
11	give up in order to (.) believe in God (4s)

12 M3.1:   mm (.) is it that they don't want to give them up or (.) could- could it in

13   some way be that (.) um they one can turn (.) material possessions

14   wealth into (.) um (.) almost a (.) a god in itself (2s)

15 M3.4:   that- that's right the- it's it's (manna)

16 M3.1:   false dependence [upon

17 M3.4:   [that's right

18 M3.1:   um it's interesting the science thing becus I have friends who are (.)

19   who are (.) scientists who also Christians um and they would argue th-

20   the other way to your husband perhaps that as scientists they see I

21   think of of one who's a biologist and(.) and he sees y'know great order

22   (.) um in in in in creation y'know there is great order and everything is

23   so finely tuned and finely balanced and it's- does anyone watch these

24   wonderful um er nature programmes on [television

25 F3.3:   [yes well ( )

26 M3.1:   and um er these are revelations

27   [y'know (.)   [transfigurations in a way

28 M3.4:   [°that's good [um°

29 F3.3:   [yes that's what makes me certain you know ( )

30 M3.1:   you se- you see how everything sort uv fits together and how it's all

31   finely tuned and finely balanced

32 F3.3:   yeh

33 M3.1:   there's great order um in the universe isn't there (.)

34   [um

35 F3.3:   [yes and people watch things like that and say how marvellous you

36   know and yet I think to myself well (.) who (.) created them

37 M3.1:   mm

38 F3.3:   how can you watch something like that (.) and not think well (.) who

39   but God could have made it...

In this extract M3.4 offers his understanding of what veils the gospel, expanding on
this in relation to the priest's and his experience of the monastic life[130]. M3.1
responds to this by offering a gloss, or formulation, which both interprets M3.4's
response and projects agreement ('is it... or could... it in some way be', lines 12-14).

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[130] He appears to have spent time as a member of a religious community.

In interaction with M3.1, M3.4 supplies the projected response in lines 15 and 17. Having negotiated the interpretation of M3.4's contribution, M3.1 returns to that of F3.3. He offers a counter-anecdote to F3.3's previous suggestion that scientists (like her husband) believed that there was always an explanation for everything. This turn too is projected towards a specific hearer, as is indicated not only by 'your husband' in line 20, but also by the opening line which establishes M3.1 as a 'second speaker' (Myers, 2007) on the subject of science. The apparently open question about television nature then allows F3.3 to establish her own position as a response to what M3.1 has said, with the support of his continuers, or 'backchannels' (lines 32, 34, 37). The interaction here demonstrates not only M3.1's attention to the two participants, but also the skilful, tutor-like, management of the two conversations.

These parallel conversations provide further clues to the character of the speech-exchange. Characteristically, the contributions of both F3.3 and M3.4 are anecdotes. F3.3's identification of science as the problem is rooted in the story of the challenge her husband, a scientist, provided to her faith. M3.4's response to the question was illustrated by more than one anecdote. Such anecdotes were offered throughout the meetings with G3, sometimes extending into quite long stories. As we shall see, almost all of the anecdotes related to people's personal religious experience, or their experience of church life. There is some similarity here with the data considered by Lehtinen (2005), in which he identified a pattern of telling 'second stories' relating to biblical passages in Seventh-Day Adventist Bible study in Finland. However, the stories identified there were much more closely related to the detail of the passages considered, and to the way in which the passage had played out in participants' lives. They were also specifically elicited by the leader. In G3, it was more of a case of creating space in which anecdotes of varying degrees of relevance might be told. However, explicit connections with the passage were sometimes made by the priest as part of his formulations, which related anecdotes, or their import, back to the passage being studied. Thus in the conversation with M3.4 discussed above, a little after the turns in extract 3.3.1, M3.4 added an anecdote about being on a mission. In response the priest offered the following formulation, which makes explicit links between the anecdote and the text under consideration.

Extract 3.3.2

1	M3.1:	well (.) I'm just wondering (1s) verse five um we do not proclaim
2		ourselves we proclaim Jesus Christ (.) as Lord and ourselves as your
3		slaves for Chr- for Jesus' sake (.) doesn't that indicate that perhaps (.)
4		each of us has within themselves um (.) the ability to in some way (.)
5		make an impression (.) on other people (.) um to make an impression
6		on (.) perhaps on the difference that Christ has made (.) to our lives (.)
7		and the difference that we're trying to (.) um make in other people's
8		lives in Christ's name just just through the love of God um (.) serving
9		other people (.) um (.) witnessing um in not in a necessarily a um a- an
10		overt evangelistic way you know saying you should believe because of
11		this this this and this but actually revealing Christ to (.) other people
12		through the way we treat them

Interaction around stories and anecdotes, paying attention to different roles, and speech-exchange patterns, is further discussed below, in relation to G3.3.

The above facets of discussion also illuminate further elements of G3's speech-exchange pattern. In discussing such analysis, Heritage (1997) notes the significance of various asymmetries in discourse. In G3 there are a number of dimensions to the asymmetry between the priest/leader and others. Acting as a tutor-like figure (Mehan, 1979), by opening, guiding and closing episodes of conversation is part of this. But the characteristic pattern of types of contribution to the interaction is another. Other participants tended to offer anecdotes from their own experience, often with the priest's encouragement, because he had spotted its relevance[131]. The priest, on the other hand, told some anecdotes, but these tended to be drawn from the experience of people he had encountered in ministry, rather than his own. Further, as illustrated above, one of his key contributions was to provide a theological gloss on other people's anecdotes, which transformed them into a paradigm for Christian behaviour. This role and type of contribution was underpinned by an asymmetry of knowledge, in relation to the text and theology; as well as by his wearing a cassock and meetings being in his study, with the layout shown above.

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[131] Lengthy contributions of this kind were elicited or gladly received from F3.7 on American church life in G3.2; M3.2 on retreats in G3.3; F3.10 on schools in G3.4; and M3.5 on church regeneration in G3.5.

If one was, at this point, to tentatively connect speech-exchange pattern with use of linguistic resources within the group, then the analogy that suggests itself is the notion of 'voice' in medical settings. As with G2, this draws on Mishler's (1984) understanding of the interaction of the authoritative medical 'voice' and the 'voice of the lifeworld', characteristically to be found in the patient's telling of the story of their illness (see above, 6.4.4 and 6.45, pp.148-167). The existence in G3 of a strongly authoritative (and modernist) theological 'voice', together with lay participants' telling stories of their religious experience, might alert us to a possible parallel. Of course, this will have to be considered in the light of the work of (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999) and (Sarangi, 2004), also discussed previously. Nonetheless, the hint of a parallel might encourage further investigation of whether the notion of different 'voices' adds depth to the analysis; whether the concept of 'voices' 'interrupting each other is useful in relation to G3, and elucidates the group's contextualisation and re-contextualisation[132].

The quite heavily shaped speech-exchange pattern, generated by the asymmetry of role and turn-type between the priest and the other participants discussed above, is further demonstrated by exceptions to the pattern. In particular at one point in G3.5 M3.5 took over the co-ordinating role within the conversation for a short period:

Extract 3.5.1

1 M3.5:	it's interesting that um (2s) that Jesus says it's your faith has made you
2	whole (1s) but she really wouldn't have (.) thought that her disposition
3	was anything but she would have thought that her disposition was
4	anything but faithful erm she came in fear and trembling um (.)
5	[so its
6 F3.10:	[yet she was desperate to touch wasn't she
7 M3.5:	what
8 F3.10:	she was desperate to touch
9 M3.5:	desperate to touch [(2s) yes (.) yes
10 F3.10:	[to have that (.) that moment when she thought if I

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[132] In this last respect, Horlick-Jones (2003; 2005) encourages the study of multiple contextualisations in social interaction, and a close attention to the possible contingency of apparently 'de-contextualised' modes of reasoning. Horlick-Jones' work relates to social interaction in relation to risk, another area in which expert and lay voices are to be found in interaction, which in turn manifests a diversity of ways of reasoning.

11		touch that will do it
12 M3.5:		right
13 F3.5:		she didn't want anything more from it d- did she
14 M3.5:		exactly yes but very-
15 F3.10:		she didn't want [to stop and talk (.) yes
16 F3.2:		[she was embarrassed that [that he even knew
17 M3.5:		[right
18 F3.2:		mm
19 M3.5:		but her fear is ther- nevertheless spoken of isn't it
20 F3.2:		mm
21 M3.5:		it that thut she she did it but she didn't do it with great (.) with any
22		great confidence do you think
23 F3.3:		[( )
24 F3.10:		[oh no I think she was confident
25 M3.5:		yeh (1s)
26 F3.4:		if she didn't have faith why [did she do it
27 F3.3:		[why did she bother
28 M3.5:		right
29 F3.10:		if I but touch his clothes I will be made well
30		[that's surely a confident person speaking
30 M3.5:		[yes that's ver- that's very straightforward isn't it

It is to be noted how different this episode is from others described. Turns are short, with a notable degree of overlap. M3.5's interpretation of a key point in the passage begins a conversation with F3.10, which then draws in four other participants. M3.5 continues to play a key role by supplying the kind of 'continuers' to be found in lines 9, 12, 14, 15, 17, 25, 28, 30 and beyond this extract. It is perhaps the case that only with the degree of intervention from M3.5 could such an alternative, and rare, pattern of conversation be established[133].

The kind of carefully orchestrated discussion outlined above provides the background for an examination of the handling of particular biblical passages. That examination

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[133] A similar pattern of conversation took place briefly in G3.3, when I initiated a discussion, which was also sustained only by a higher than normal degree of intervention.

follows, and begins with consideration of what happens when a dis-preferred

interpretation enters the theological arena.

7.4.3 G3.2

G3.2, the first meeting in which the group and I did Bible-study together, focused first

on 1 Corinthians 9.16-23. In the priest's introduction, referred to above (see section

7.4.2), he made reference to the history of the city of Corinth and how Paul's two

letters addressed a lack of unity in the Corinthian church. This introduction

concluded with Extract 3.2.1 transcribed above. One of the points of interest from

this meeting is not only the length of conversation this provoked, but the nature of that

conversation. The discussion commenced thus (the last part of M3.1's introduction is

included again for completeness):

Extract 3.2.1 (extended)

1	M3.1:	... the the sort of phrase which um (.) comes off the page I think um
2		about becoming all things to all men or all things to all people
3		depending on (.) the translation I think is a (.) is a an interesting one
4		um wheres Paul starts of by erm in a slightly sort of (.) defensive mode
5		um claiming his own authority or exerting his own authority um as an
6		apostle as a preacher and as a teacher erm and continues in slightly
7		defensive way um talking about how he um spreads the Gospel of
8		Christ um by (.) to use a modern phrase getting alongside people um
9		rather than imposing he starts off from where they are as it were (2s)
10		um (1s) I don't know whether people had any feelings about the
11		passage or any thoughts about it (4s)
12	F3.7:	I have (.) I have trouble understanding (.) twenty (.) it wasn't until
13		what is your name
14	F3.3:	((says name))
15	F3.7:	yeh it wasn't until F3.3 read it made it a bit clearer because the way
16		she (.) the way she read it the whole sense changed with the- the sound
17		of her voice ↑I found that somewhat hypocritical actually °I shouldn't
18		say that in here° but y'know it's as if he's not being truthful or I'll
19		becall I'll do it your way because I'm with you and I'll do it your way
20		because I'm with you and that just seems to me to rather two-faced (.)
21		[it's sort uv creeping up to people

22 M3.4:	[you mean like the liberal party ((laughter))
23 F3.7:	hm
24 M3.4:	you mean like the liberal party ((laughter including F3.7))
25 F3.4:	I think he's just doing it so that each group of people can understand
26	him (.) you know preaching is like reading to him he's got to do it (4s)
27	so he sticks with y'know he goes as they are so that perhaps the people
28	can understand him (.)
29 F?:	mm
30 F3.7:	[( ) mm
30 F3.5:	[I mean if someone preaches to me from the old King James Bible I'm
31	lost (.) so they have to come to mine
32 F3.3:	sorry F3.5 ((laughter))

In analysing the above, CA supplies a key question, which touches first on speech-exchange, and then, by extrapolation, on members' interpretative approach. Heritage (1988) highlights the facet of CA, concerned with how particular actions in conversation project a 'preferred' (Wooffitt, 2001, 56) action in the next turn. Those using the CA approach in relation to mundane conversation, as Heritage argues, would expect that such a projected action is a 'requirement' and 'normative' (1988, 129) – placing a moral obligation on the next speaker. This is not to say that they will necessarily provide the preferred response. Heritage pursues a number of examples of 'dis-preferred' (Heritage, 1988, 138; Wooffitt, 2001, 56) responses. He maintains that, because the previous turn has projected a different outcome, such actions require to be accounted for by the speaker – another normative requirement with moral force. This is demonstrated in turn by the way in which, 'failures to provide accounts attract either overt or covert pursuits of them or sanctions' (Heritage, 1988, 135).

In understanding the role of the Priest in G3 in the group's speech-exchange pattern, CA questions the discourse as follows. Does the invitation offered by M3.1 in lines 10-11 project a required agreement with the candidate interpretation of the biblical passage in lines 1-9? If so, then it would seem that F3.7 doesn't feel the need to offer the required next turn. Her interpretation of verse twenty of the passage is less than respectful of St. Paul, describing him as 'somewhat hypocritical' (line 17), not 'truthful' (line 18), 'rather two-faced' (line 20), 'creeping up to people' (line 21). On

the other hand F3.7 does seem to recognise that she is contravening a norm. There is a tentativeness about her turn. Beyond her hesitations and repairs, her interpretation has to do with the trouble <u>she has</u> understanding the verse (line 12). Further she interposes a number of qualifiers which mitigate the sharpness of her view: 'somewhat' (line 17); 'as if' (line 18); 'rather' (line 20); 'sort uv' (line 21). And she does herself indicate the inappropriateness of her contribution in lines 17-18, where she says in a quieter voice, 'I shouldn't say that in here'.

So is F3.7's turn a dis-preferred action in the group's view? The actions of the next two speakers begin to suggest both, that F3.7 has transgressed a norm, and has not yet accounted for this in an adequate way. M3.4 deflects the seriousness of what has been said with humour – a not unexpected response to the handling of what might be a 'delicate object' (Silverman, 1997a, ch.4). F3.4, however, supplies the agreement that F3.7 did not in lines 25-28. These are but the first exchanges in a lengthy handling by members of F3.7's 'transgression'.

Immediately F3.7 re-enters discussion, as is revealed in the next extract, which is numbered sequentially with the last.

Extract 3.2.2

33 F3.7:	but then if he's doing it differently with various groups and some of
34	those groups intermingle (2s) are the what like ( ) as unto Jews I
35	become as a Jew and if he's with a different group (.) are they then
36	going to say what's all this about he didn't talk like this to us
37 F3.4:	he's still preaching [( )
38 F3.2:	[I was going to say it's a mode of approach really
39	it's not really being dishonest I mean ((cough)) in a factory and you
40	had to address the directors you wouldn't address them necessarily in
41	the same way as you might address the workers for instance (.) and um
42	what you said wouldn't be any the less truthful (.) it would just be
43	easier for them to understand that's that's how I see it (2s)

In these turns F3.7 acts in accordance with being held to account, but by reinforcing her position. This elicits the first of a series of warrants from others for the preferred interpretation: speaking in different ways to different people is in keeping with members' contemporary experience of life in, say, a factory.

The sequence of turns that follows involves the priest to a significant extent. He first explains something of the detail of his understanding of the text, in response to a question from F3.7. This draws out the following formulation of the preferred response from F3.3.

Extract 3.2.3

1 F3.3:	perhaps he'd sort uv take- taken the trouble to (.) to find out what each
2	each group that he (.) lists (.) what their position was and what they
3	thought and to (.) tried to explain things to them from their angle sort
4	of thing

The Priest then supplies three further warrants for this view. The first is another passage of Scripture (drawn from the Acts of the Apostles), offered as a positive 'illustration' of the way in which St. Paul adapts what he says to the culture of his hearers – in this case in Athens. The second is an example of what happens when people do not work this way, drawn from the history of how nineteenth-century missionaries failed to take into account the culture of their audience, and imposed a 'white middle-class expression of Christianity'.

The third warrant rooted in the passage being discussed, together with its out-turn, make clear that M3.1's speech is still orientated towards F3.7's 'transgression':

Extract 3.2.4

1 M3.1:	...(6s) I mean he says in verse nineteen (.) though I am f- free with
2	respect to all (.) and I think he's saying something um that he's
3	actually (.) um alive to the (.) the culture of God (2s) and so therefore
4	can (.) sit lightly to the culture of men (3s) that make ↑sense (1s) no
5 F3.7:	probably le- it will later ((M3.1 laughs)) one in the morning I'll jump
6	up of course Father M3.1 ( )
7 M3.1:	well no you see he's not he's doesn't see himself as being tied to a
8	particular (.) um culture (1s) himself because he actually says that um
9	you know I'm not (.) a subject um to the law I am free (.) um and
10	therefore in or- from that position of being free he can sort uv jump
11	from culture to culture and um express (.) God's truth in a way that
12	they can (.) understand and in a way in which they're receptive

This third warrant is perhaps the most powerful of all. St. Paul's chameleon-like approach to different cultures is legitimated by locating him, citing his own words, in a supra-cultural position, in the culture of God. Drawing on the work of Berger (1967), one might suggest that Paul is located here not under a sacred canopy, but as a living link between culture and the canopy itself! It is this warrant which is directed in line 4 towards F3.7. Even the 'no' after a pause does not remove the requirement for her to agree that it does make sense. Although she still finds it impossible to supply the projected turn, F3.7 does supply the necessary 'account' for her action (Heritage, 1988), by suggesting that it will make sense later. Even this account, however, does not prevent M3.1 reinforcing his argument in lines 7-12.

At this point, the question of whether one should present oneself differently for different audiences took a new turn. M3.4 offered the example of a bishop going round talking to people of different 'churchmanship', or tradition within Christianity, and having to adapt accordingly. This provided a jumping-off point for a lengthy conversation about how far church worship should be adapted for the sake of those of different background or age. Such a discussion of church life and practice was common in the meetings I had with the group – representing safe ground for discussion[134].

The above examples of discourse provide a number of clues to the group's speech-exchange patterns, justifying and extending the outline given earlier in section 7.4.2. The power of the priest's opening of a discussion of a text, in a tutor-like way (Mehan, 1979), is clear. An apparently open initiatory remark such as, 'I don't know whether people had any feelings about the passage or any thoughts about it', actually depends for its force on the preceding interpretation offered by M3.1. The opening is heard by group members as projecting a required next turn in which the speaker will agree with the interpretation. This is demonstrated by the episode considered above, in which (unusually for the group) agreement is not offered, and has to be pursued somewhat relentlessly through five minutes and numerous turns of conversation.

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[134] Interestingly, F3.7 spoke enthusiastically, and at length, about the need to adapt worship for young people. This was fully illustrated by the use of anecdote about her experience in America, the style of which was again typical of the character of the response of lay members of G3.

But the analysis of this section of G3.2 has greater potential than this. The conversation suggests some important things about members' different interpretative approaches and raises questions about the discursive resources they deploy. An approach to the analysis of the interpretative approaches is suggested, in part, by the conversation itself, in particular by Extract 3.2.4. If St. Paul was involved in inter-cultural conversation, so is the group. The work of Atkinson in understanding medical talk offers a potential characterisation of discussion. His work is articulated as examining different 'cultural domains' (Atkinson, 1995, 18) especially that of medicine. It is out of this ethnographic stance that he develops subsequent work on the 'voices of medicine' (1995, ch.7). The task suggested is to begin to identify the cultural domains in which members of G3 are working, in order to understand their 'voices', or other linguistic resources on which they draw.

The most striking contrast in the discourse thus far is between the cultural domain in which the priest works and that which gives rise to F3.7's dis-preferred response. I would suggest that the priest's discourse might be located within a professional domain, not unlike that of the world of medicine explored by Atkinson. He draws on professional knowledge – that of the theologian. This has a modernist flavour – texts have particular meanings, discovered through the use of historical criticism. Such meanings are perceived as transcending culture. Indeed they are akin to the kind of knowledge attributed above to St. Paul in relation to the cultures of Jew or Greek. Such meanings may be applied, but are not altered much in the application[135].

In relation to the work of Bevans (1992; 2002) on contextual theology, this is close to a 'translation' model, centred on a perception that the articulation of theology, but not its substance, is changed by engagement with culture. M3.1's professional, modernist discourse is correspondingly de-personalised, although elsewhere this is mitigated by the use of anecdote drawn from professional experience. There are parallels here too with Atkinson's work, in which he identifies a contrast, within medical practice, between 'the decontextualized and impersonal modes of journal science' and forms of knowledge which are more personal, 'expressed in narrative ways, especially in the

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[135] In the wider conversation of this meeting there are parallels with the worship of the church, which may be adapted, but not compromised by being made culturally relevant.

personal anecdotes of recollection and biographically grounded experience' (1995, 146-147).

The mention of journal science points to further parallels; with Gilbert and Mulkay's work (1984). The priest's discourse has a distinctly 'canonical' feel – rooted in strongly warranted constructions of transcendent authority. For two reasons, however, it is not clear that this qualifies as a 'repertoire' here (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988). First, there is no indication, at this point at least, that others share this discourse. Secondly, there are indications of some lexicality shared by different speakers, including M3.1, that doesn't immediately correlate with a 'canonical' discourse. M3.1 characterises Paul as 'getting alongside people' (extract 3.2.1, line 8), and as starting 'from where they are' (line 9). These are not far from F3.7's lexicality highlighted above, or from F3.3 talking about Paul explaining things to the Corinthians 'from their angle' (extract 3.2.3, line 3)[136]. One might say, provisionally, that M3.1 speaks with a 'canonical' 'voice', but that he shares a contemporary lexicality with other participants.

The way F3.7 speaks, in extract 3.2.1 lines 17-21, is the mirror-image of this. Despite some shared lexicality, she would seem to operate in a very different cultural domain from M3.1. In this domain those who speak with different voices to different people will be found out, and will be seen as hypocrites, lacking truthfulness, being two-faced, lacking in 'integrity'. It might even be suggested, drawing on contemporary media-speak, that such a person was engaging in 'spin'. In this contemporary critical arena, chameleons can expect to be deconstructed, irrespective of their apparent claims to authority, or status. The contemporary lexicality employed by F3.7, is put to service in her deconstruction of St. Paul, which contrasts strongly with the more reverential approach to key figures in the Bible, more usual in the group's conversation. Her search for Paul's motivation suggests, again by analogy with Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), a strong 'contingent' feel. But once more this is a 'contingent' 'voice' rather than a 'repertoire'. This voice interrupts the 'canonical' approach and makes a strong bid to re-contextualise what it says about Paul. But it

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[136] There is some further similarity with F3.2's warrant drawn from contemporary experience in extract 3.2.2

doesn't establish a new way of talking about Paul, shared with the rest of the group.
It should also be noted that this kind of 'voice' is rare in the data generated by G3.

On the whole, this contemporary critical domain is not a favoured location for the
group's conversation. But then neither is the modernist, supra-cultural
Weltanschauung. The group's preferred arena for interpretation lies elsewhere, within
the life of the church community and their participation in that. It is this domain
which often shapes their engagement both with the text, and with contemporary
society. The following extract illustrates the tenor of such conversation. It follows
from discussion referred to above about adapting church worship (specifically in their
church), to the needs of different groups; and about whether this constitutes an
appropriate changing of the 'expression' of worship, or an inappropriate use of
'gimmicks' or 'jargon' in which value of traditional patterns is eroded, as things 'go
adrift'. F3.1 takes advantage of a lengthy (11 second) pause to pick up an implicit
invitation offered in a previous turn by M3.1, who referred to her strong feelings
about worship in church and the particular issue she then addresses.

Extract 3.2.5

1 F3.1:	I've been listening all this time (.) um (s) I just feel it's a great pity
2	really that that there has to be two (.) sets of (.) people in the church
3	cos (1s) it should just be one
4 M3.1:	or three even
5 F3.1:	[or even three yes (.) yes (.) yes (.)
6	[((various voices apparently agreeing with the number))
7 F3.1:	um I suppose it (.) it's all up to the individual as to what they like (.) to
8	get out of their church service (1s)
9 F3.4:	well it's people isn't it I mean people are never going to be all the
10	same (.)
11 F3.1:	no
12 F3.4:	[they're always ( ) different in every walk of life
13 F3.1:	[no (.) although you see at one time you never would have had (.) a
14	family service nd and you know in the Victorian era everybody (.) was
15	more or less felt ob<u>liged</u> to go to church you know right especially if
16	you [had large households
17 F3.4:	[exactly yes

18 F3.1:   with maids you know servants and they all had to go to church (.)

19   maybe the cook didn't but um everybody just went so (.) where did we

20   go wrong why is it

21 F3.4:   [was- was that right

22 F3.7:   [now people don't feel the need to go to church

These turns exhibit a number of typical features of G3's conversation: great concern

for church life today – in this case for the unity of the church community; and a sense

that people don't come to church as they used to. These are combined with a belief

that in some ways church life was better in the past, although both F3.1's description

(e.g 'obliged to go' in line 15, 'had to go' in line 18) and F3.4's question in line 21

indicate that this is not simply romantic nostalgia. There is a rather resigned

acceptance of contemporary wisdom: 'it's all up to the individual' (line 7); 'people

are never going to be all the same' (lines 9-10). One almost detects a sense that

freedom of choice, rather than compulsion, ought to be a good thing. But this is held

in tension with the questions, 'why is it now people don't feel the need to go to

church?', and, 'where did we go wrong?' (lines 19-22) given that they don't come.

Discomfort about their current church situation was further reflected in the twenty-

five minutes of discussion which followed the above extract. Participants shared

anecdotes from their past experience of church life, nearly all of which were seen as

positive, good examples of what church was about. Prominent amongst these were

extended narratives offered by F3.6 about her experience of church in America. But

F3.5, M3.4 and F3.1 also shared their experience. These contribute to a picture of a

church-focused cultural domain, in which the group finds a shared voice. This

appears to be a domain from which members look both out at those who choose not to

enter their culture, and back to the brighter days of the past.

The church-focussed nature of this domain is in keeping with observation of the

group's practice, discussed in 7.3. The life of the group is very much an extension of

the life of the local church. Further, the group has constructed a critical gap, on most

occasions, between members' practice and talk and that of those who don't belong to

the church community. Even when the discourse of wider society enters

uncomfortably into conversation (in the dis-preferred response of F3.7), analysis

shows it to be the 'deviant case' (Bloor, 1978; Heritage, 1988, 133-135) that confirms the existence of the critical gap.

Analysis of G3.2 contributes to a growing understanding of the group's discourse and the different domains of members' conversation. This meeting suggested two quite different cultural contexts: that of the professional theologian; and a contemporary deconstructive voice. But it also enabled us to begin to identify a third domain, shared by lay members, in which a church perspective dominates. In this arena, conversation often involves the use of personal anecdote and the lexicality of mundane conversation. This domain overlaps with that of F3.7's dis-preferred response, therefore, in terms of lexical choice. But this is the conversation of people who look out from the church community into wider society – who are puzzled about contemporary culture's response to church, rather than using that culture's tools wholeheartedly to deconstruct church or text. The church domain also overlaps with the professional one, for instance in the use of anecdote, in the concern about church life, and again, to some extent, in lexicality. But the character of the conversation is different. The interpretations and anecdotes of lay members are personal; those of the priest are more professional, in the sense of being 'detached' – offering the possibility of a discourse which transcends culture.

Within the three domains two strong 'voices' have been identified thus far: one being the 'canonical' voice of the priest; the other the dis-preferred 'contingent' voice of F3.7 on a specific occasion. As yet the 'voice' of lay participants, lacks a strong characterisation. We turn to other meetings, to examine how they extend this analysis.

7.4.4 G3.3

G3.3 provides a useful window onto discourse in the church-focused domain, especially in relation to the extended use of anecdote. The main text for discussion was Mark 9.2-9, identified by M3.1 as an account of the transfiguration of Jesus. A typical, if somewhat lengthy (approaching seven minutes), introduction from M3.1 led to a brief discussion of the detail of the passage. Within this discussion M3.4 likened the disciples' experience of witnessing Jesus' transfiguration on the mountaintop to gaining a 'greater revelation' of God while on retreat.

A few minutes later M3.1 picked up this interpretation and turned it into a question.
This generated a lengthy exchange of anecdotes.

Extract 3.3.3

1 M3.1:	...following what you were saying M3.4 about um (.) y'know being on
2		retreat a:nd um having a greater sense of the (.) presence of God on
3		retreat (.) um I wonder if anybody can identify (.) um sort uv
4		mountain-top experiences as it were when (.) God was seen to be or
5		felt to be very close or (.) when you um (.) had a sort uv revelation of
6		God (4s)
7 M3.4:	I mean I can remember (.) oh many many years ago (.) em (.) after
8		Prime (.) and before mass we had a period of meditation (.) and you
9		didn't necessarily have to stay in the chapel I- I used to go (.) for a
10		walk in the er along the the the valley um (.) and (.) to hear the dawn
11		chorus (.) um and to feel (.) the presence of God in that (.) couldn't call
12		it dawn chorus er couldn't call it silence in that (.) nearness of him (.)
13		just by being there you know it- er a wonderful experience (4s)
14 F3.4:	it was rather lovely at [pilgrimage site] that wasn't an experience of
15		God but on the Saturday night when I went round after mum died (.)
16		um I came out from I'd been in the nun's chapel I came out and the
17		they'd been processing round and ave maria was (.) going all the way
18		round the grounds the lights were on and of course they've got those
19		recorders all the way round haven't they so the music it was really
20		rather lovely when I came out of there that wasn't

A number of features of this extract are significant. First, the telling of stories is
usually occasioned by the preceding turn of conversation (see, for example, Jefferson,
1978). M3.1, as leader, appears to project the possibility of story-telling by implicitly
inviting people to share 'experiences' similar to that of M3.4. This is a different
approach to his initial question to the group (used on other occasions), which sought
'comments or questions' relating to the Bible passage. To some extent the projection
here is built on the general experience alluded to by M3.4 ('if you go say on a
retreat'), which is presented as if it were a first story of a particular experience (lines 1
and 2 understood in the light of lines 3-6).

This piece of orchestration is not without parallel. The above sequence of stories is unlike sequences in more mundane settings, where an actual first story is normally required to initiate a series (Coates, 2001; Ryave, 1978). But it is not dissimilar to the Seventh Day Adventist Bible study examined by Lehtinen (2005). In that setting too, participants were invited to share their 'own experience', to relate the text to their 'own life', by the group leader. As has been suggested previously, the group studied by Lehtinen appear to be constrained in their response to such invitations. Although they share 'second stories', achieving similarity between their own experience and the biblical text, their sharing of that experience is firmly shaped by the theological language of the text. G3 have greater freedom and their anecdotes appear to be more fully developed narratives. Further, they are one stage removed from the text, being developed rather within the church-focused domain. Thus in the extract above, the second story offered by M3.4 himself, and that offered by F3.4, achieve similarity not so much with the text (although the motif of transfiguration remains), but rather with the first story (and experience) of M3.4 (as constructed by M3.1).

Lehtinen compares second story telling of the Seventh Day Adventist group with that discussed in studies of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) groups, where once again second stories are invited by a group leader as part of the structure of meetings (see Arminen, 2004). Lehtinen concludes that the Bible-study group differs in the similarity achieved by the telling of second stories. Whereas in AA groups the similarity is between the experience of members, in the Bible-study group this similarity is secondary to that between the participant's experience and the text. G3, while retaining some connection with the text are closer in this respect to AA groups than the Seventh Day Adventist Group. The main similarity is between participants' experience.

There are further comparisons to be made between the extract above (and wider practice of G3) and the conversation of AA groups. In the extract both M3.4's second story and that of F3.4 are constructed as complete anecdotes. The first opens with 'I can remember' (line 7) which establishes the story and closes with 'a wonderful experience' (line 13). Not only does this last draw out the significance of the story, it also, with the pause that follows, completes it. F3.4 opens and closes her anecdote with a similar evaluation of the experience she relates: 'it was rather lovely'. The

puzzle is in the sequencing of the two second stories in relation to M3.1's implicit invitation. M3.4 clearly orientates to M3.1's projection. This is seen not only in the gloss referred to above, that this was 'a wonderful experience', but also in the reference to M3.4 knowing something of the 'presence of God', or God's 'nearness'. Both these echo closely the previous turn of M3.1.

On the other hand, it is less clear how F3.4's turn picks up the sequence. The main clue is in her evaluation that this 'wasn't an experience of God' (lines 14-15). This clearly sets her story apart from the preceding one. However, the description of her experience as 'rather lovely' and the anecdote itself suggest that she regarded it as being within touching distance of being a 'mountain top experience'. It would seem that she orientates primarily to M3.1's turn, and only in a secondary way to the preceding turn of M3.4. This pattern was repeated in the turns of conversation that followed. So, for example, the next anecdote but one was offered by F3.8. This was quite different from the one before it. Indeed so different was it that she did some special work to introduce it by first asking, 'anyone been to Madeira', which became the pretext for talking about an experience there. But the experience was very much in keeping with the original invitation. Like AA groups a single 'first story' could occasion a succession of stories told by members of G3 which orientated primarily to that 'first story' rather than to the preceding one, despite the fact that the 'first story' was 'sequentially far away (for a situated activity)' (Arminen, 2004, 341). In this part of G3.3 the sequence consisted of ten 'second stories' in total.

Given that G3's story-telling, like other aspects of their discourse, is orchestrated and unlike mundane conversation, it is instructive to examine the role of M3.1 in closing the sequence and in projecting the next opening for discussion. Towards the end of this sequence of stories M3.4 spoke of being on retreat, when 'you do get... closer and closer and closer to God', when 'he does become dazzling white.' M3.4 thus provided a direct interpretative link with the biblical text. This occasioned a number of turns primarily from the priest. His initial interpretation identified preceding conversation as people talking about 'experience of transfiguration', about occasions when they had 'suddenly been stopped in [their] tracks'; 'felt God was very close'; which involved 'a revelation'. Developing this he quoted a writer who described such experiences as 'a time when our eyes focus on one thing and our heart finds another.'

Two turns later he offered a rather more abstract interpretation, before opening
another episode of conversation.

Extract 3.3.4

1 M3.1:   er religious experience in the terms that we've been talking about is

2   very personal very personal revelation isn't it which links in quite well

3   with the gospel where these (.) um three disciples were given a great (.)

4   personal y'know insight into (.) into God and it's um I mean hold that

5   thought because I think it relates quite closely to um thu thu the the

6   second reading for Sunday (.) erm but I wanted you know we've had

7   some positives what about um you could turn (.) what we've been

8   talking about on its head (.) um (.) and um you know from the negative

9   point of view in a way (.) um where do you think (.) that (.) you need

10   (.) to see things (.) through different eyes y'know where's what where

11   do you need transfiguration (3s)

12 M3.4:   I don't quite understand

13 M3.1:   well (.) hh (4s) over what issues (.) do you need um (1s) to see things

14   differently for instance (.) um I'll give you er an example um (2s)

15   when I g- when I go to [local big town] as I did last week um on

16   virtually on every corner (.) um there are big issue salesmen (.) and um

17   (3s) and I'm see those people um (.) should see those people um

18   through yu know people as people in need (.) um need of my help um

19   and it's true that people who beg on the streets I should see them um (.)

20   I should recognise Christ in them and meet their need but very often I

21   don't (.) y'know I I (1s) explain myself I don't see things as I God sees

22   them I'm not sensitive to other people's needs (.) um there's a need for

23   sort uv transfiguration of my

24 M3.4:   I get y- it

25 M3.1:   got ↑it

26 M3.4:   yeh...

The priest, having characterised the stories as about 'religious experience', connects
this again with them being revelation, albeit 'very personal'. He then links this
explicitly with the Bible reading; with the experience of the disciples who witnessed

Jesus' transfiguration. Thus in G3, it is the leader of the group, rather than the other members, who attaches the 'second stories' more closely to the biblical text – doing the work that in the group studied by Lehtinen (2005) participants achieved themselves. This is an aspect of M3.1's increasingly apparent role of providing paradigmatic interpretations of the connections between passages studied and members' conversation.

Building on his interpretation, M3.1 next offers a new direction for conversation in lines 6-11. The question which invites response is, however, too abstract, as the pause and M3.4's response make clear. So M3.1 offers a prototypical 'first story' which illustrates what he has in mind. That it is offered as a 'prototype' is indicated not only in the comment that this is 'an example', but also because it comes with built-in interpretation, in the form of a commentary on how the priest is seeing people and how he ought to be seeing them, which illustrates his need of transfiguration. This is immediately clear to M3.4, who goes on to offer an extended 'second story' about a neighbour with whom he did not get on. This was the first of another cycle of 'second stories', which included contributions from: F3.8 about a difficult colleague at work; me about someone who irritated me at theological college; M3.1 himself about a parishioner whom he grew to understand; and F3.5 about a child in the parish to whom she had a negative attitude until she shared an experience with him.

The cycle of stories relating to members need to be 'transfigured' was brought to a conclusion in the following way.

Extract 3.3.5

1 M3.1:	so there's a revelation but there's also the power that we have with
2	God's help to transfigure a situation as ( ) you were saying ( ) with
3	your work colleague
4 F3.8:	mm
5 M3.1:	um that er (.) through (2s) your sort uv persistence y'know to try and
6	find a way of (.) engaging communicating um and asking God to help
7	in this [(.) um
8 F3.8:	[well I do truly believe (.) he had a helping hand in it somewhere
9	I don't know where it would have come from otherwise heheh honestly
10 M3.1:	yeh

Although this formulation is in one sense achieved in interaction between M3.1 and F3.8, this is in keeping with the underlying pattern of G3's discourse. Here a formulation is offered by M3.1 (lines 1-2). The role of F3.8 is to agree that this does interpret the experience encapsulated in her 'second story'.

To conclude, G3.3 enhances understanding of the speech-exchange pattern of the group, and in particular the role of 'second stories' within that pattern. At the risk of over-constructing, the pattern involves M3.1 offering both introduction and closing formulation. Between those two things, an invitation (perhaps with a paradigmatic 'first story') from the priest, creates the opportunity for a series of 'second stories', all of which orientate primarily to the opening projection. It might be noted that there is a parallel with another pattern referred to previously, that of one-to-one conversations between the priest and individual participants (see above, section 7.4.2). Indeed, the orientation to the priest's invitation, by offering successive 'second stories' extends our understanding of the one-to-one interaction between him and the participants.

Some of the interpretative work done in this meeting can be identified. A key 'voice' which emerges might be described as a 'connecting' voice. It is a response to, and framed by, the Priest's 'canonical' voice – they exist in interaction with each other. Lay participants' 'second stories' establish some connection between the text, as interpreted by M3.1, and their personal experience. This personal re-contextualisation work appears to allow individuals to draw their experience under the shelter of the 'canonical' 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) offered by their leader. This seems to have the advantage of allowing them to identify positive experiences within the church-focused domain. In this it is distinct from the 'contingent' voice of F3.7 in G3.2, which came from a rather different, contemporary deconstructive domain and challenged the 'canonical' perspective. In G3.3 at least, the 'connecting' voice sounds in a rather formulaic way, which barely interrupts the 'canonical' at all.

In the light of the above, the identification of a 'connecting' voice raises further questions. Can the 'connecting' voice interrupt? And, given the parallel between G3 and AA groups, can further light can be shed on the 'alignment and affinity'

(Arminen, 2004, 340) being constructed by G3[137]? Attention needs to be paid to the different roles played here by not only M3.1 and the other participants, but also by the Biblical text being studied. The conclusion generated by G3.3 is that lay participants did not here relate their anecdotes explicitly to the text, as did the Seventh Day Adventist group in Lehtinen's (2005) study. Connection with the text is indirect in G3, achieved by M3.1. G3.4 will provide the opportunity to examine whether this is a complete picture of the interaction between text, priest and lay members of the group.

7.4.5 G3.4

G3.4 supplies clarification alluded to in the previous section, offering the opportunity to explore the following triangle of affinity and alignment:

$$\text{Priest} \longleftrightarrow \text{Text}$$

Participants
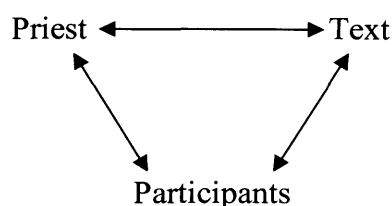
The opportunity is provided by the fact that alignment is not straightforward matter in this discussion. Various dimensions of alignment are subject to considerable negotiation in the first part of the meeting.

The passage initially discussed by the group was Mark 4.26-34. A parable dominated early conversation, that of the mustard seed, likened by Jesus to the kingdom of God, which grows from the smallest seed to the biggest of trees. This image presented a problem for various members (F3.1 chiefly, but also F3.3, F3.2 and F3.10), whose horticultural understanding didn't fit with the parable. For them mustard plants are not large trees and they wrestled briefly with how to make sense of the image. As F3.1 and F3.10 agreed, they would rather Jesus had used a picture of an acorn growing into an oak tree, which would have made better sense to them. I would suggest that this debate is not incidental. If a text is going to work for participants as

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[137] It should be noted that the usage of 'alignment' here is distinct from that used previously in the thesis. Elsewhere, stimulated by (Sarangi, 2002), the question has been about alignment between research perspectives (mine especially) and those of participants as they reflected on their identity and group interaction. Here the focus, following Arminen's work on AA groups, is how alignment between group members is constructed in discourse, when they are engaged in the primary 'work' of the group.

a springboard for conversation, it has to make sense for them. Further, the conversation here suggests that as a *sine qua non*, it has to make sense in the domain of everyday experience. This would appear to be a dimension of the 'connecting' voice. The interaction between this and the 'canonical' voice involves negotiating some kind of alignment between lay participants and the Bible passage being discussed. But the need for this alignment only becomes obvious when it is missing, or problematic, as here[138].

Even when the difficulty with the image had been aired, there was still further negotiation, before a previous pattern of conversation, seen in G3.3, became established. It will be argued that this negotiation concerns other dimensions of alignment within the group, and elucidates other aspects of the 'connecting' voice of lay participants. This is illustrated by a longer than usual extract, interspersed with analysis.

Extract 3.4.1a

1 M3.1:	certainly the point that he's making as F3.10 says is that something
2	very very tiny little [stone
3 F3.1:	[yes
4 M3.1:	produces [something which is large
5 F3.1	[produces a large (1s) yes
6 M3.1:	yeh
7 F3.1:	yeh
8 M3.1:	but what what does that actually say what can we draw from that

Lines 1-7 achieve, in interaction between M3.1 and F3.1 (chief protagonist in the preceding debate about the parable), a 'common sense' interpretation of the parable which might work for the group as a stimulus for discussion. It should be noted that the priest introduces this partly by identifying with another participant, F3.10 – appealing to what she had said. Arminen (2004, 335) suggests that such identification was one way in which members of the AA group he studied achieved alignment with

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[138] In retrospect alignment between participants and the text was present in G3.3 – the transfiguration of Jesus in the presence of the disciples was something they could engage with. But this has a taken-for-granted quality. Incidentally, this further suggests that religious experience is also something that group members take for granted – it is a 'normal' and unproblematic part of their lives.

each other. Line 8, therefore, tests alignment of participants both with the text and with M3.1. He projects the possibility of a different kind of engagement with the text, which might explore the implications of the image of small things growing into large ones.

Extract 3.4.1b

9 F3.9:	well it says to me that a small (.) beginning of faith can (2s) can
10	become (.) so what (.) you know what you've achieved because you
11	started off (.) with a simple child like faith probably as I did and it just
12	(.) you know it grows as we grow
13 M3.1:	yes yeh [and that's
14 F3.9:	[you know as my days are so my strength is and um (.) that's
15	how it speaks to me of a small beginning and a you know
16 F3.10?:	yeh

In lines 9-15, in interaction with M3.1, F3.9 offers something of a 'second story', clearly aligned with M3.1's interpretation of the parable. As it turns out, this story acts as a paradigm for subsequent conversation. The 'story' is optimistic and is marked (as elsewhere in F3.9's speech) by aphorism – 'as my days are so my strength is' (line 14). F3.9's response provides the opportunity for M3.1 to issue a second invitation to engage with his interpretation of the parable. But, as will be seen, this invitation is constructed, more explicitly than the previous one, as an encouragement to share experience. Story-telling would be a natural response to such an invitation, as elsewhere in the discourse of G3. Here, however, what actually happens next is further negotiation and alignment work.

Extract 3.4.1c

17 M3.1:	and does that sort uv resonate with (.) with people's experience I mean
18	can you think of (.) um (.) not necessarily <u>purely</u> in faith terms but um
19	(.) um small beginnings you know um (.) sort uv something which
20	started very small (.) um has developed and grown in your life (3s)
21 F3.1:	yeh but what's he actually relating it to is he relating it to ↑us I can't
22	quite (.) fathom that out um (.)
23 M3.1:	[well ( )

24 F3.1   [is he saying that we all grow from (.) small beginnings as we do say in

25   our mother's womb we're very well wus just one cell aren't we to start

26   with and we all grow to become (.) something (.)

27 M3.1:   [well it's it

28 F3.1:   [larger but then and then

29 F3.2:   spiritually I think

30 F3.1:   [spiritually

31 M3.1:   [it's it's yes if you look at the beginning he- he's talking about the

32   kingdom of God <is [like this > and he's not talking about (.)

33 F3.1:   [um yes he's saying the kingdom of God

34   that's right

35 M3.1:   a sort of a physical point he's using um a physical thing a mustard seed

36   growing into a huge plant to talk about a spiritual reality [so=

37 F3.1:   [um

38 M3.1:   =um as F3.9 was saying um (.) er the seed of faith is sown in us

39   perhaps by our parents um by our teachers whatever nd and this grows

40   to maturity within us (.) and I'm just wondering whether th- that sort

41   uv resonates with people's own experience in other areas um

42   sometimes when we can (.) um (.) er get involved in something just in

43   a very small way it almost sort of takes over our life y'know it

44   becomes a vo:cation in the truest sense um (8s)

Once again, F3.1 leads the negotiation. She 'can't quite fathom… out' what Jesus is saying. In lines 24 to 28 she tests the application of the 'common sense' interpretation of the parable, that it is about small things which grow larger. She asks whether this applies to our physical development. Two things need to be said here. One is about speech-exchange. F3.1 is disturbing the usual pattern of the group. Not only is this obvious from her response – seeking elucidation, rather than telling a 'second story'; it is also apparent from the increased overlap between her turns and those of M3.1 in lines 23-34, not present when a pattern of sequential story-telling is established (as in G3.3).

The second thing concerns what F3.1 says. It might appear that her question is naïve, at least amongst those who have encountered parables before. I would argue that this is not the case. As will be seen, she tests the text's interpretation in a number of ways. This question is but the logical next step in her exploration of whether she can align to the conversation. There is a hint of what is to come in lines 33 to 34, where she agrees with M3.1 that what Jesus is talking about is the kingdom of God. But for the moment she is exploring the concept of little things which grow. This draws an expected response (in discussion of parables). As lines 35 to 36 make clear, parables use physical things to talk about spiritual realities. What both the speech-exchange pattern and the substance of F3.1's turns suggest is that her 'connecting' voice does interrupt (Atkinson, 1995; Mishler, 1984) the 'canonical' one. This is seen in her not telling a 'second story', and in her questioning of M3.1's interpretation.

Following this explanation, M3.1, in lines 38-44, reiterates his preferred interpretation of which spiritual reality is suggested here. In conversational terms, he does this by taking a 'second speaker' position (Myers, 2007), beginning 'as F3.9 was saying', and identifying with this participant and her interpretation (Arminen, 2004). This enables the priest to reiterate his invitation, in lines 40-44, to align with the interpretation.

Extract 3.4.1d

45 F3.3:	can't think of anything except singing (2s)	
46 M3.1:	that's a good example heheh	
47 F3.1:	I didn't hear what you said sorry	
48 F3.3:	singing	
49 F3.1:	yes (.)	
50 F3.3:	um I've always loved it and my (.) my father was a church organist so	
51	as soon as I was any age at all I got roped into the church choir	
52 M3.1:	mm	
53 F3.1:	then I went to school and we had a marvellous choir there and after I	
54	left (.) we f- formed a sort uv post school choir which I sang in for	
55	about forty years and it and there again that was something small that	
56	(.) thut grew	
57 M3.1:	mm	
58 F3.3:	nd gave an awful lot of pleasure to an awful lot of people	

In response to the invitation, F3.3 'bids' (Mehan, 1979, ch.3) to contribute an experience in line 45. This bid is affirmed in the slightly surprised response of M3.1 and, following the necessary clarification for hard-of-hearing F3.1, F3.3 tells her story. The speech exchange here appears to revert to a more stable pattern, with no overlap and M3.1 supplying continuers to F3.3. However, the next turns reveal that alignment is not yet achieved within the group.

Extract 3.4.1e

59 M3.1:	yeh (.) mm (3s) what about in terms of our own faith journeys then (.)
60	um and where we have discerned (.) begin to discern what God is
61	asking of us (.)
62 F3.1:	I don't think it erm it neces- for me it doesn't nece- it hasn't
63	necessarily started (.) small and grown large it's sometimes it's gone
64	li(h)ke that (.) [and then
65 M3.1:	[sorry can you explain
66 F3.1:	well (.) i- i:t's not a always ever growing sometimes i- it fades a bit
67	(1s) has done in ma lifetime n then nd then gone to the other extreme n
68	(.) grown quite (.) um (.) extensively according to what's happening to
69	me (.)
70 M3.1:	mm (4s)

In this section, the first piece of alignment work is done by M3.1 himself. His question in line 59, 'what about in terms of our own faith journeys then', suggests that, for M3.1, F3.3's story was not sufficiently aligned to his interpretation of the parable. This tightening of the interpretative focus provokes a further contribution from F3.1. Her experience is <u>not</u> aligned with the preferred interpretation – her faith has not developed in a continuous positive trajectory. As for lots of people, it has its ups and downs! Once again, the speech pattern is more disturbed here, with some overlap and lots of repairs and pauses. There continues to be an observable tension between 'canonical' and 'connecting' voices. In terms of alignment, F3.9 comes to the rescue.

Extract 3.4.1f

| 71 F3.9: | my experience is that you move on (.) you have to keep moving on all |

72		the time (.)
73	M3.1:	yeh
74	F3.9:	you can't sort uv say oh I'm on this level (.) something changes and
75		you move on and you move on with the Lord and you become yu
76		studies your daily studies become deeper and yer prayer list become
77		longer
78	M3.1:	yeh
79	F3.9:	and the things you do y'know and (.) the older I get the more I commit
80		to the Lord because I feel thut yu know (.) he's just in control
81		sometimes when there's things I can't do I just have tu (.) put them
82		down at his feet and say I can't do it Lord and I need you nd
83	M3.1:	yeh (.) I think we get that that sense I- I feel in the um (.) um ((turning
84		pages)) (1s) in the other um parable there of um the sort of seed
85		growing secretly as it were um of (.) um (2s) of um (1s) of handing
86		over s- I suppose of handing over the growth process to God (.) um
87		although we have to cooperate obviously with his grace (.) um cos we
88		all have that (.) um (.) ability (.) and (3s) but it's the s- sense that if
89		we're open to the spirit of God (.) then what (.) the gifts he has given
90		us (.) um (.) are there to be erm drawn out according to <u>his</u> will (.) not
91		necessarily according to ours (.) um so there i- there has to be a certain
92		letting go isn't there y'know (2s)

F3.9, with the support of M3.1's continuers, expands on her previous paradigmatic second story. Part of her positive growth in faith involves a greater dependency on 'the Lord'. This provides the opportunity for M3.1 to reattach this interpretation to the Bible passage being studied, specifically to a second parable found there. However, F3.1 has not yet finished her alignment work, as the final section illustrates.

Extract 3.4.1g

93	F3.1	I's just thinking that um (.) thut that the kingdom of heaven he's he's
94		trying to say the kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed growing in-
95		or a tree and I was just thinking thut (.) i- it means that the kingdom is
96		heaven of heaven (.) is all encompassing (.) I don't know whether
97		somebody's said that already but I (.) um nd and that's what you know

98		because of the the canopy of a tree it's: (.) it's spreading over (.) and
99		and and everybody is included in it (2s)
100	M3.1:	so what you're saying is is that um (.) um as our faith grows (.) um and
101		expands it's it's it's affecting and touching other people's lives (.) yes
102	F3.1:	well it would do I suppose but not everybody believes...

In lines 93-99, F3.1 returns to the original parable, picking up the question of how it relates to the kingdom of heaven[139]. She appears to have spotted that the priest's preferred interpretation misses key aspects of the parable. The parable is not only about the growth of a small seed into a large tree, it is also about the tree providing shelter, which M3.1 has missed. Further the parable is about the growth of the kingdom of heaven, and not of individual faith. However, this bid to explore a different interpretation is firmly brought back into alignment, stretching the thrust of the parable considerably. In lines M3.1 puts into F3.1's mouth ('so what you're saying is...') a slight adaptation of his previous interpretation, which is once again cast in terms of individual faith, rather than the kingdom. In his final 'yes' he invites alignment from F3.1. Reluctantly, she accedes, 'well it would do I suppose...' Conversation that follows aligned to M3.1's interpretation, as participants, including F3.1, considered how their faith had touched other members of their family.

What the above analysis illustrates is different approaches to alignment in G3. M3.1's turns exhibit a strong drive towards alignment of all parties with his chosen interpretation of the Bible passage. In this he builds on contributions from others, notably F3.9, who do align to this interpretation. This happens through explicit identification with them, from a 'second speaker' position. Conversely, M3.1 seeks to bring into alignment those who seek to pursue other lines, F3.1 in particular, but also F3.3. More disturbed speech patterns coincide with such realignment work. This drive towards alignment is in keeping with the priest's tutor-like role (Mehan, 1979). But this extract shows this role being exercised in a rather more directive way than elsewhere in the data. In terms of 'voices' interacting, it appears that M3.1 projects invitations to align with his 'canonical' voice that anticipate lay participants responding positively to his interpretative work in their own 'connecting' voice.

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[139] This was anticipated above in line 33.

For lay participants, alignment may work in this way for some, but may be tested by others. F3.1's persistent negotiation reveals a range of concerns. Her interruptions of the 'canonical' frame relate to: alignment with the text itself (does it make sense to me?); alignment between the proposed interpretation and experience (are these two compatible for me?); and alignment between the interpretation and the text (does the former do justice to my reading of the latter?) But these interruptions are integral to her use of a 'connecting' voice. Although they trouble the conversation, they have the same outcome as the telling of 'second stories' – connecting an understanding of the text, mediated by M3.1, with personal experience.

The priest's interpretation is the pivot for much of this conversation. What it doesn't enable to any great extent in this extract is alignment of participants with each other. Indeed, the drive towards alignment with a relatively narrow interpretation tends to channel interactions into one-to-one conversations, like those already noted. This is confirmed by a different kind of conversation (which lacked a strong interpretation) following the reading aloud of a second passage, 2 Corinthians 5.6-17. Following some humour about the difficulty of understanding the passage, F3.1 introduced a possible area for discussion arising from it.

Extract 3.4.2

1 F3.1:   well it talks about fearing the- fearing the Lord (.) and you don't hear

2   much about that these days do you about .hh fearing the Lord

3 F3.3:   fearing [the Lord is beginning of wisdom

4 F3.1:   [um in Victorian times used to fear the Lord all the time hehheh

M3.1's facilitation here is different to that in extract 3.4.1. Following this exchange he certainly probes participants' on the phrase 'fear of the Lord', but his more open questions do not depend on a particular interpretation from him: 'do you fear the Lord'; 'what about others... does the fear of the Lord mean anything to you'; 'but what does fearing the Lord mean to you'. A further question follows this about what people felt about what Paul says about judgement. These questions together provoked a conversation in which lay participants interacted rather more with each other than earlier in the evening, as this short extract illustrates.

Extract 3.4.3

1 M3.1:	what about um (.) others does the fear of the Lord mean (.) anything (.)
2	to you (.) [F3.9] perhaps
3 F3.9:	fear him ye saints and you'll have nothing else to fear
4 M3.1:	mm but what does what does fearing the Lord <u>mean</u> to you ( )
5 F3.3:	do you think it really means fear
6 F3.2:	no I don't
7 M3.1:	that's what I'm asking what what do you think it means
8 F3.3:	I don't think it does I think it's more like respect
9 F3.2:	respect I wus going [to say exactly the same
10 F3?:	[reverence mm

Alignment between participants is suggested by the adjacency pair in lines 5 and 6 and the three voices working together to interpret the phrase in lines 8, 9 and 10. Further conversation suggests, however, that it is not only M3.1's facilitation that enables alignment between lay participants. This is also connected somehow with the substance of the discussion, involving: a sense of regret that something of the 'fear of the Lord' has been lost in recent history; a commitment on the part of group members to cultivating a sense of respect for God; a disappointment that this does not guide the behaviour of others; a desire for close family members and friends to share their respect for God; a sense of reassurance that those who do not fear God will ultimately be judged for this behaviour.

What these facets appear to show is that alignment with each other is connected with being members of a particular group, different from other sections of society. Their participation in the church-focused domain seems to be perceived by them as a persistence of an earlier culture, but at the same time as something which sustains them. Taking into account the wider picture of G3, their individual and shared speaking with a 'connecting' voice enables them to talk-up the positive experience of belonging within the domain. They talk into existence connections between the Priest's interpretations of passages and their own experience. Sometimes this is a straightforward appropriation, for instance through the telling of 'second stories', sometimes negotiation, or interruption, is necessary, before personal experience and interpretation settle into alignment. Much of the time, lay participants articulate their

'connecting' voices in parallel, or even in tension, with each other. But on occasion their voices interact to draw them towards each other.

In this rich picture there remains, however, a critical tension between the part played in the discourse of G3 by the Priest and by lay participants. For the Priest it appears that God and the Bible speak with a modern, transcendent, theological voice. This voice can both enable and constrain lay participants. But when they hear God or the text speak, they do so as a reflection back off their own personal experience. Given that the necessary alignment between text, interpretation and personal experience is achieved, M3.1's 'canonical' interpretation may evoke a sense of God at work in lay participants' lives.

7.4.6 G3.5

Analysis of G3 thus far strongly suggests an asymmetry between the different 'voices' in the group's discussion. This is apparent in the speech-exchange patterns (see section 7.4.2 above) and in interpretation of Bible passages. In his directive introductions, particular questions and prompts, managing parallel conversations, engaging with dis-preferred responses and providing closing formulations, M3.1 consistently defines the ground on which discussion takes place. It is noticeable (in comparison with other groups) that in this group it is very rare for other participants to provide a direction for discussion. One or two examples of others playing some co-ordinating role have been discussed – including M3.5 (see 7.4.2). But such redirection of the conversation was limited and temporary. Participants' questions and comments sometimes modify the direction set by M3.1, but they are always re-active to it.

Further, modification of M3.1's direction is limited in scope. F3.7's 'contingent' voice (section 7.4.3) is deprived of its impact as the group talks its way back to the realm of preferred responses. Even F3.1's more moderate, but more sustained, negotiation (section 7.4.5) has much more the effect of allowing her to engage with M3.1's interpretation, than of altering it. And not infrequently, in responding to negotiation in talk, M3.1 identifies with other participants closest to his own position (Arminen, 2004), sometimes adopting a 'second speaker' position in relation to their contribution (Myers, 2007). The 'canonical' framework thus appears to constrain lay

participants considerably. G3.5 offers a particular example of such constraints at work, and the opportunity to consider the situational character of the 'connecting' voice.

During this meeting the group discussed 2 Corinthians 8.7-15, in which Paul encourages the Corinthians to give money to the church in Jerusalem. In his introduction (lasting just over a minute and a half) M3.1 explained this and connected it with being generous to each other, in response to God's generosity to us. After initial discussion focused on understanding the passage, and a link between this reading and the Gospel for the Sunday, M3.1 suggested that the readings touched on God's generosity and the importance of being generous in response to people's needs. M3.5 linked this with the description in the Acts of the Apostles of the early church holding 'all things in common', but then contrasted this with the attitude of some Christians today, that their faith led to their own material prosperity. This prepared the ground for the following discussion.

Extract 3.5.2

1 F3.9:	would you see it as (.) what you saying is like casting your bread on
2	the water
3 M3.5:	right yeh
4 F3.9:	mm (2s)
5 M3.5:	he is really saying that isn't he he's saying y'know just go out in faith
6	y'know and be generous as yo- as you say Father
7 M3.1:	mm
8 M3.5:	((clears throat)) (1s) it's difficult to do because it it goes against the
9	very (.) fibre of our of our common sense heheh (4s)
10 M3.1:	also something in verse ten there's something very familiar isn't it
11	about he's obviously (.) hinting that last year (.) umm the Corinthians
12	started off doing very well (.) in their charitable giving ((laughter)) it's
13	all tailed off
14	((more laughter followed by 'phone ringing until the end of line 19))
15 F3.10:	does call for balance though doesn't it (.)
16 M3.1:	oh yes
17 F3.10:	((quoting)) there is to be a question of fair balance between your

18		present abundance and their need and that their abundance may be
19		from your need
20	M3.1:	mm
21	F3.10:	and in order that there be a fair balance (.)
22	M3.1:	and there and that sort of correlates to the: (.) right at the end there
23		((quoting)) as it is written the one who had much did not have too
24		much the one who had little did not have too little which is a reference
25		to the giving of the manna in Exodus (.) that God provided (.) erm (.)
26		sufficient (5s) do we get the balance right

At the beginning of the extract, F3.9 and M3.5 develop an ideal of generosity (lines 1-6), clearly linked by M3.5 to M3.1's setting of this theme (line 6). This ideal is modified somewhat by M3.5 suggesting (lines 8 and 9) that it doesn't come naturally. With this M3.1 concurs supplying a parallel in what Paul says to the Corinthians. F3.10, however, introduces another quote (within lines 15-21), which shifts the focus onto the question of balance in generosity. M3.1 accepts this qualification of the generosity theme, supplying a further warrant for it from the Bible passage and turning it into a question to the group in line 26.

F3.10's intervention is significant. Although mediated by M3.1, it stimulates discussion about the difficulty of finding a balance in giving to charity. This suggests a relatively open discussion, where different viewpoints and directions are welcome. This is mirrored by the speech-exchange pattern, which has the texture of a group discussion. Thus F3.9 and M3.5 are in conversation with each other (lines 1-6) as well as with M3.1. However, as has happened previously[140], M3.1 chose to take the conversation in a more specific direction.

The first indication was in discussion about finding a balance in giving amidst multiple appeals from charities. M3.1 mentioned within this the situation of Christian charities, and asked the question about whether 'we' might have a responsibility to channel giving to these charities, which don't get so much support from the 'general public'. A few turns later M3.1 then introduced the following question.

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[140] See the treatment of F3.3's contribution in extracts 3.4.1.d and e.

Extract 3.5.3

1	M3.1:	what do um people (.) d- do people have a definite um discipline about
2		charitable giving do you decide as St. Paul suggests (.) um elsewhere
3		but um y'know at the beginning of the week (.) x amount of money is
4		going to be spent y'know you're going to give x amount of money he's
5		talking about the contribution to the church (.) um or is your charitable
6		giving (.) I hope your giving to the church is not haphazard heheh but
7		er but (.) um (.) in these days of erm envelope schemes and um (.) and
8		er planned giving it shouldn't be but um what about our general (.)
9		charitable giving do you have a definite (.) ru:le (4s)
10	F3.10:	it's very hard you're (1s) bom<u>bard</u>ed with envelopes through the door
11		((noises suggesting agreement from others)) I'm I think I
12	M3.1:	but isn't that isn't that an argument <u>for</u> having a definite
13		[( )
14	F3.2:	[mm mm yes
14	F3.10:	[oh yes yes and and (.) my: er justification for putting an awful lot in
15		the bin (.) is the fact that yes I have got certain things=
16	F3.2:	[yes um
17	F3.10:	[=I do give to but then (1s) there are some that if you do read them that
18		they catch you nd nd you do the extra
19	M3.1:	mm
20	F3.2:	mm
21	F3.10:	[sort uv ( )
22	F3.3:	[you hear so many cases uv uv of er fraud and embezzlement in the (.)
23		hierarchy of these things that it makes me very (.) dubious about (.)
24		giving (.) in that [( )
25	M3.1:	[yes but there cert- there are mainstream charities
26		which you (.) one can trust Christian charities one can trust

In lines 1-9 M3.1 develops quite a closed question about whether members have a planned approach to giving to charity. This starts as a question about 'people' having such an approach, but by line 9 it has become, 'do you have a definite rule'. This direct question is further legitimated, by an (unspecified) reference to St. Paul. M3.1 also clarifies that the question is about general charitable giving, given that giving to

the church should already be in order (lines 6-9). This turn projects a distinct preferred response. This is confirmed when F3.10 attempts to negotiate (on the basis of everyday experience) with the question, rather than providing the preferred response. M3.1 restates his question on the <u>basis</u> of F3.10's objection. This provokes the preferred response, that participants do have a rule for giving, from F3.10 and F3.2. F3.3 then provides another reason why giving to charity is not straightforward, which is also countered by M3.1 (in lines 25 and 26).

This interaction again illustrates engagement between the 'canonical' and 'connecting' voices. The 'canonical' voice, in the mouth of M3.1, articulates a particular line on giving, which takes its authority from St. Paul. This line is articulated in the form of a direct question with a clear, preferred response. The concept of having a 'rule' locates the following interaction within the church-focused domain[141]. F3.10 and F3.3 connect the question, and their responses to everyday experience, and to questions about charities that one might come across in the media. In another group such responses might develop into a fully articulated 'contingent' voice, in which suspicion of charities could be explored; but in this group there is only room to be 'slightly cynical', as F3.5 describes it. M3.1's handling of the conversation, in this episode at least, reduces considerably the room for full-blown 'contingent' responses.

This is confirmed when, a few turns after the last extract, M3.1 invited M3.5 to talk about his experience in North America of church regeneration, which he did at some length. A key feature of both invitation and response was the way in which regeneration in poorer areas had been supported by giving from other, wealthier parishes. This led in turn to a formulation, achieved by M3.1 in interaction with M3.5, which emphasised the importance of giving to 'the mission of the church overseas'. This interaction returns the conversation firmly to the church-focused domain – the proper location for discussion about giving, which is part of community building in the international church family.

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[141] 'Rule', in this context, suggests a rule of life, designed to support the spiritual growth of church members.

Throughout the above interaction M3.1's turns strongly shape the conversation. As elsewhere in the data from G3[142], wider discussion of an issue leads to a conversation with a narrower interpretative focus. An increasingly definite approach to giving to charity and to the church's work emerges in M3.1's contributions. If his role is tutor-like (Mehan, 1979) then the kind of 'education' that unfolds here involves the communication of particular truths by the leader. Relating these to everyday experience is shaped here as preliminary to their appropriation. Part of being a good 'learner' is a 'yes' to the Priest's interpretation. The 'connecting' voice is, therefore, a noticeably occasioned response to a strongly orchestrated conversation.

Taken together with other episodes of discourse, G3.5 elucidates the way in which speech-exchange is interwoven with the different roles taken by Priest and lay participants in this Bible-study group. In keeping with the work of Atkinson (1985), this chapter has paid close attention to sequence organisation in order to understand the identities constructed within G3. Or, to quote Widdicombe and Wooffitt, the concern has been, 'to identify and describe a range of procedures through which individuals produce, negotiate, modify and use their social identities in social interaction' (1995, 73). In parallel with this latter work on youth sub-cultures, G3 offers us a picture of a group working up their shared identity within the sub-culture of the church-focused domain. Some of this identity work involves deploying cultural resources (Atkinson, 1985; Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). These resources are drawn both from the discourse of everyday experience and from particular theological discourse and are employed with a considerable degree of asymmetry between Priest and lay participants. But the construction of identity relies as much on <u>how</u> the resources are put to work, as on what they are. Identity is constructed in the interaction of the 'canonical' and 'connecting' voices, as well as in the group's shared work of limiting the impact of more suspicious, 'contingent' concerns.

But, given the reason for choosing this group, the question ought to be asked: Is this a noticeably Anglo-catholic sub-culture? The strongest indication lies in the way that lay members in their interaction cede key rights to the Priest (cf. Mehan, 1979). One of these is the right to teach, to offer a particular church line, which is in keeping with

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[142] Again see the treatment of F3.3's contribution in extracts 3.4.1.d and e.

the historical emphasis on the teaching authority of the church. The second right is that of directing the interpretation of biblical texts. To cede this right to one's priest is to place oneself firmly within a catholic tradition, in contrast with the reformation principle of everyone having the opportunity to read and interpret the Bible. This aspect of G3 will provide an interesting point of contrast, in the next chapter, with the other two groups, which both live out a more evangelical (and therefore reformation) heritage.

7.4.7 Absence of a return visit to G3

Unfortunately it was not possible to undertake a return visit to G3 to get their response to my findings. The reasons for this are somewhat involved. A serious concern about my health in 2007 led to a minor operation in March, which then revealed the need for a major operation in June, followed by a two month recovery period and a house move to South Wales. This delayed completion of the initial write-up of G3 until the end of 2007. Following this I made a number of attempts to contact the priest to seek a return visit. Phone contact eventually revealed two things. One was that his email had been inoperative, which accounted for my having received no reply. The other was that the Bible-study group had in any case not been running during the 2007-08 year, because the priest had a significant number of extra duties because of a shortage of clergy in neighbouring parishes. An invitation was promised if the group met during the autumn of 2008, but at the point at which the thesis was being finalised, this had not been forthcoming.

Chapter 8
Group Comparison

8.1 Introduction

This chapter draws together data and analysis relating to G1, G2 and G3, into a comparative study of the findings of the field work. Similarities and differences between groups are identified in order to consider the extent to which they offer a disparate or coherent picture of the practice of Bible-study groups. The chapter also focuses on the coherence of the research methodology adopted in this project. Both these comparative elements pave the way for further reflection in the next chapter on practical theology and Bible-study.

In order to draw out the significant features of analysis of the three Bible-study groups, I compared the findings of the three preceding chapters. Existing analysis of each group was coded manually, to facilitate the comparison. Coding was focused in three broadly defined areas: group interaction, behaviour and identity; approaches to and relationship with the Bible; methodological approaches. The first two areas reflect earlier findings that interaction within groups and their approaches to biblical interpretation represent two inter-twined dimensions of their practice. This chapter's first aim, therefore, is to add a further, comparative analytical layer to develop understanding of the groups' interaction and interpretation and how they inter-relate.

The third area of coding represents the interest in methodology signalled above. Reflecting back on the linguistic ethnographic frame used in the investigation of the practice of the Bible-study groups, it is clear that different aspects have been brought to bear at different points. To some extent this has been a cumulative process. In particular, groups' use of different linguistic resources has been elucidated in different ways (e.g. by reference to notions of 'interpretative repertoire', 'discursive node', 'voice' and 'cultural domain'). A further layer of comparative analysis of this area has the aim of uncovering whether there is a clear methodological trajectory and if so, what it might be.

More precise headings for comparison emerged iteratively, with initial possibilities being developed and refined as significant features of group analysis were identified

and then compared. Over time a comparative grid emerged, which provides the basis for this discussion (see appendix 13).

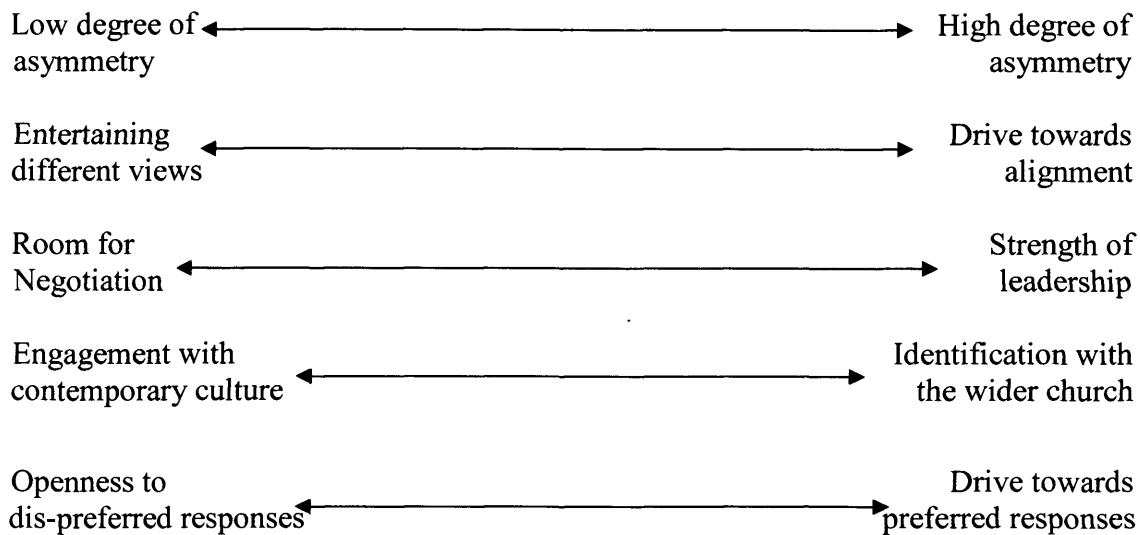## 8.2 Group interaction, behaviour and identity

8.2.1 Group interaction, behaviour and identity – introduction

At the heart of comparative analysis of this dimension of the research lies the concept of speech-exchange patterns. In broad terms, G3 had the most definite pattern, with the priest shaping episodes of conversation through his introductions, redirections and closing formulations. This contributed to a marked asymmetry in discourse (Heritage, 1997) between priest and lay participants, and a strong sense of a rather directive tutor-like approach (Mehan, 1979).

G2 had a not dissimilar pattern to G3, sharing features of the asymmetry between tutor-like leader and other participants. In both groups there were asymmetries of role, knowledge and numbers of turns taken by leaders in comparison to other members. However, asymmetry in G2 was less marked than in G3. Mitigating factors in G2 were: that leadership was shared; and the tension between the more 'rule-centred' leadership of the study-guide and the more 'role-centred' human leadership (Dingwall, 1980). These are discussed further below in 8.2.2.

G1 had the most participative speech-exchange pattern. This was enabled, in part, by my leadership, which offered little or no introduction to particular texts, but rather an open question, along the lines of: what strikes you about this text? This is discussed further below in section 8.2.3. There was the least asymmetry, therefore, in G1, and the greatest potential for all participants not only to participate in conversation, but also to initiate discussion, or offer formulations of the conversation thus far.

This summary of the differences in speech-exchange between the three groups provides the background for a wider comparison of group interaction, behaviour and identity. This explores (in subsequent sections) a number of axes which to some extent parallel that of low and high degrees of asymmetry in speech-exchange, and each other (as well as one dimension which doesn't fit the same pattern). The axes might be represented thus:

Low degree of ◄————————————————► High degree of
asymmetry   asymmetry

Entertaining ◄————————————————► Drive towards
different views   alignment

Room for ◄————————————————► Strength of
Negotiation   leadership

Engagement with ◄————————————► Identification with
contemporary culture   the wider church

Openness to ◄————————————————► Drive towards
dis-preferred responses   preferred responses

8.2.2 Group interaction, behaviour and identity – alignment within the groups

The concept of 'alignment' used here emerged from analysis of G3.4 (see 7.4.5, pp.209-219). The concern is with 'alignment' between group members, demonstrated within speech-exchange patterns[143]. In G3 I examined how alignment within the group was achieved through the different roles of the priest and lay members, and especially through the telling of 'second stories' by the latter (cf. Arminen, 2004; Lehtinen, 2005). In the discussion of G3.4, this alignment was seen to depend not simply on the priest's directive leadership, but also on the relationship of lay participants with the biblical text. In brief, the text and the priest's interpretation of it both needed to make sense, and to be congruent with each other, for alignment to be achieved. But the drive towards alignment was strong. This was clearly demonstrated in G3.2 (see 7.4.3, pp.193-202) as participants dealt with a 'dis-preferred' response to the leader's initial interpretation (Heritage, 1988; Wooffitt, 2001).

A further feature of G3 was that alignment within the group was particularly between individual lay members and the priest, demonstrated by his capacity to hold parallel one-to-one conversations with participants (see 7.4.2, pp.185-193); and by the way that his prompting led to a series of 'second stories' orientated towards that prompting (see 7.4.4, pp.202-209).

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[143] The parallel instance which gave rise to this analytical question was the way in which the practice of AA groups facilitated such alignment (Arminen, 2004).

The strength of the drive towards alignment was not replicated in the other two groups. G2 shares some features with G3: group leaders introduced episodes of conversation, albeit more briefly than the priest in G3; leaders also supplied continuers which contributed to the momentum of conversation and offered formulations which closed episodes. These features contributed, together with leaders taking a greater number of turns, to a marked asymmetry (Heritage, 1997) between them and other participants. Their tutor-like role (Mehan, 1979) points to a drive to align other participants. This receives some confirmation by the example in G2.1 (see 6.4.1, pp.132-138) of a dis-preferred interpretation being re-aligned; and by the espoused purpose of the group: to nurture new church members.

However, the drive towards alignment in G2 was mitigated by a number of factors alluded to above. One of these was the tension between the study-guide used by the group and the human leaders. This tension left room for negotiation, which could be initiated by any participant, sometimes generating new episodes of discussion. Further, the existence of three leaders, willing to share their own uncertainties (and even improprieties, in the case of M2.1) contributed to a framework for discussion flexible enough to allow room for some cautious sharing and exploration of more sceptical views. This was particularly enabled by the sceptical voice of M2.2, a group leader, who was also a doctor and drew on his medical experience as he engaged with questions of miracle and healing (see especially 6.4.5, pp.156-167). The resulting combination of a framework for socialising participants within the group and room to voice contemporary suspicious views, might best be characterised as sceptical deference!

G1 provided a rather different picture of alignment. Its members did not seek a single interpretation with which all might align. They engaged in disagreement to a much greater extent than the other two groups, especially between more critical-historical perspectives and more literalist ones (for example, see 5.4.2, pp.100-107). Perhaps in response to the familiar dissonance arising from such disagreement, they appeared to have evolved over the history of the group a more inclusive, 'contingent' mode of conversation. This was predicated precisely on the advantage of not seeking alignment, except with the principle of inclusivity. This is powerfully expressed in the following brief extract, already quoted in 5.4.2:

Extract 1.2.2 (section)

20 F1.3:   But we will all see if we read the chapter (.) because it's the living

21   word of God and we're all different (.) and no two of us s the same if

22   we want to seek the truth as the prayer said at the beginning (.) then

23   God will speak to us (.) possibly in different ways (.) varying ways to

24   each of us we haven't- it's unity in diversity we haven't necessarily got

25   to all see it exactly the same have we

8.2.3 Group interaction, behaviour and identity – the role of silence

The comparative consideration of alignment amongst group members in the different groups gave rise to an interesting reflection on the part silence played in group conversations and its significance for an understanding of power dynamics. This reflection is to be found as appendix 14.

8.2.4 Group interaction, behaviour and identity - leadership

Leadership has already been mentioned in connection with alignment. The strong and directive leadership of the priest in G3 was a clear factor in the strong drive to alignment between participants and him, and perhaps in the lack of significant alignment between <u>lay</u> members of the group[144]. This leadership constrained negotiation both about the form of conversation, and the interpretation of texts.

The leadership of G2 has already been highlighted as having a clear pattern, but a number of features which made for a more open texture of conversation, and therefore of alignment, than in G3. Thus G2 has similarities of speech-exchange pattern with G3, especially the introduction and closing of episodes of discussion by the leader, and questions to participants (although in G2 these came largely from the study-guide, adapted by the human leader). But the tensions and dynamics of leadership noted above provided greater room than in G3 for negotiation both with the structure of discussion and its content.

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[144] As noted previously, the features of his leadership included: lengthy introductions to passages, which projected a particular direction for conversation; managing parallel conversations; projecting the possibility of particular kinds of turn from other participants (especially 'second stories'); redirecting conversation in a way that narrowed, rather than broadened, the discussion projecting a 'preferred', or 'canonical' interpretation (see in particular discussion of G3.5 in 7.4.6, pp.219-225); and closing formulations which re-attached conversation to the priest's interpretation of the Bible passage being discussed.

The leadership of G1 was as different to that of G2 and G3 as was their pattern of alignment. Not least, this is because G1 delegated leadership of the sessions to me. My leadership was consciously low-profile[145]. As noted in chapter 5 and above, the key stimulus to discussion of Bible passages was a question of the kind: 'What strikes you about this passage?' This invitation to discuss the text was not proceeded by any introduction as to how it might be interpreted, and although I did redirect conversation from time to time, I did not engage in closing formulations with any regularity. It might be suggested, therefore, that my leadership of the group played a significant part in creating room for the negotiation that took place within discussion.

Certainly, my leadership cannot be regarded as insignificant. However, a number of aspects of G1 data suggest that it did not set a new direction for the group. In the direct evaluation of my role in G1.6 (see 5.4.8, pp.118-128), it was recognised as 'facilitative' and valued as such. Other data suggested that a more directive role would not have been possible. In G1.2 (see 5.4.2, pp.100-107), when I did respond to an invitation to comment on the history of the Book of Daniel in a definite, historico-critical way, this provoked quite a strong reaction on the part of F1.3. A little later in that meeting she further commented on what would have happened had I adopted a more directive leadership style:

Extract 1.2.2 (section)

27 F1.3:   ...otherwise (.) you get into

28   terrible trouble if for example R said now you've all got to believe

29   A B C and D about this passage we'd all go home distressed because

30   we we mightn't heh we mightn't all feel the same

These direct responses to my leadership were accompanied by a number of references to the negative consequences of those whose directive leadership style they had experienced in the past. These elements of the data suggest strongly that I was aligning to the group's inclusive approach to Bible-study at least as much as they were aligning to my educational style.

Conversely, the very different part that I played in both G2 and G3, where I had no leadership role, may also have been occasioned by each group's practice. The

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[145] This was in intended contrast with my tendency to over-intervene in the earlier Pilot Group.

ambivalence to my participation, discussed in relation to G2.1 (see 6.4.1, pp.132-138) which diminished over time, suggests a concern that I would disturb the existing leadership pattern. Given that two of the leaders had experienced me leading educational events in the past, this might not have been an unreasonable fear. My adopting a predominantly 'participant' role, should be seen partly against this background. Similarly with G3, my role was again constrained by the established pattern of leadership. The occasions on which my role reached beyond those constraints actually underline how they worked. In my first meeting with G3 I was given the chair, which was the only way in which I could have had sufficient manoeuvring room to introduce my research. On the only other occasion on which I briefly led discussion, this involved a much more interactive speech-exchange pattern.

8.2.5 Group interaction, behaviour and identity – relating to church and contemporary culture

Alongside the above dimensions of group identity, it was possible to demonstrate the different ways in which the three groups related to the wider church and to contemporary culture. The dynamic of this axis was different in each group, reflecting (as well as reflected in) different speech-exchange patterns. G3 presented an identity located almost exclusively within a church-focused domain. The reasons for this appear complex. In part, this church-focused domain represented a possible arena for interaction between the priest's modernist theological discourse and the lay participant's more experiential way of talking. In part, however, church-focused talk included a shared concern for the well-being of the church, in the light of perceived decline in interest from those outside the church community.

Whatever quite the reason for it, the group's particular focus on the church made for a group that appeared to be very much an extension of church life outside the group. Further, this strong ecclesial identity meant that of all the groups, the discourses of contemporary culture intruded least. In chapter 7, we noted that contemporary discourse provided some lexical possibilities for both priest and lay participants. But rarely did other aspects of contemporary discourse surface. And when this did happen, as when F3.7 adopted a deconstructive approach to the text in G3.2 (7.4.3, pp.193-202), then the group treated her intervention as a 'dis-preferred' response (Heritage, 1988; Wooffitt, 2001).

G2 presented a positive attachment to the wider church, combined with a particular understanding of the group's role – to nurture people as church members. This group, like G3, voiced little criticism of the wider church, although in our last meeting, they did position themselves over against strongly authoritarian approaches to Christianity. This was in keeping with the way their positive attitude to the church, and deferential approach to Jesus, nonetheless included space for scepticism in their biblical interpretation rooted in their membership of contemporary society[146]. As indicated above, the possibility of being sceptical was reinforced by the voice of M2.2. On occasion, as happened in G2.4 (see 6.4.4, pp.148-156), group members revealed an explicit awareness of the distance between New Testament assumptions and those of contemporary culture (in that case in relation to God's judgement and inclusivity). The outcome was that deference to Jesus, and therefore to the central tenets of the New Testament passages, constrained, or ordered the voices coming from contemporary culture. Interestingly, the same was true of the modernist 'academic' voice, which was explicitly described as important to the group, but secondary (see 8.3.3 below).

G1 represented the most critical voice in relation to the church and the most positive, although far from unquestioning, appropriation of contemporary discourse. Discussion in 5.4.4 and 5.4.5 (pp.112-116) of G1.4 and G1.5 highlighted some of the key features of the group's critique of the contemporary church[147]. The group's inclusive approach to ministry mirrored, and was born out by, their inclusive approach to each other. Inclusivity was therefore a thorough-going aspect of their practice and identity. It was also justified theologically, not least from texts from the Pauline corpus within the New Testament. And it made possible both the deconstruction of biblical passages with which members did not agree, and an understanding that God might speak as well through people today, as through the text.

It is significant that the incorporation of inclusivity into the heart of their practice was achieved by G1 as a consequence of their having worked with their negative

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[146] Thus for example, in G2.2 members talked around an essentially rationalist interpretation of the feeding of the 5000, while not losing the sense that it was a miracle.
[147] These included: a marked reaction to a gap between a rhetoric of ministry shared between clergy and laity and the lack of such sharing in practice; criticism of church leaders who did not behave inclusively, and did not therefore enable others to realise their gifts; and a real suspicion of a church culture that was directed too much to what happened 'at the front'.

experience of more exclusive approaches; of their being set free to lead their own group by a previous church leader; and of a long history of working together. This group appears, especially in the light of G2 and G3 to be somewhat unusual! And their current practice still required considerable work to maintain it. This was demonstrated by meeting G1.2 (see 5.4.2, pp.100-107) where there was a marked transition from a stand-off between critical and literalist views to a more inclusive approach to the passage being studied.

If G3 dealt with contemporary voices as 'dis-preferred', and if G2 smuggled such voices into their discourse under the cloak of 'preferred' voices, it might almost be said that G1 embraced being 'dis-preferred' in relation to the contemporary church. This suggestion is borne out by their self-characterisation in G1.1 as 'heretical', 'light-hearted', 'honest about our doubts', and by their ambivalence expressed in that meeting and elsewhere towards authority, including the authority of the Bible.

8.2.6 Group interaction, behaviour and identity – 'fellowship'

The above comparison of groups provides a picture of a number of axes with a similar gradient. G3, with its high degree of asymmetry in its speech-exchange pattern, had a correspondingly strong drive to alignment within the group, and directive leadership. The group remained firmly within the church-focused domain, working with 'preferred' responses appropriate to that context. G2, still with a significant degree of asymmetry, exhibited a gentler approach to alignment and leadership, which created room for some engagement with contemporary society. G1, with the lowest degree of asymmetry, revealed something of a preference for including the 'dis-preferred' over the dubious attractions of strong leadership and a drive to align participants.

In relation to 'fellowship', however, matters do not quite follow that pattern. There would be some argument for a picture of G1 having the highest degree of familiarity and open interaction with each other, G3 having the least (especially given the lack of alignment amongst lay members) and G2 representing a mid point on this axis. However, this would be to ignore a distinct difference between G1 and G2's understanding of fellowship and that of G3.

For all three groups 'fellowship' is an aspect of their *raison d'être*, connected with the value of learning from each other, and of each others' 'insights'. However, whereas for G3 this was the limit of their consideration, for G1 and G2, discussion about fellowship was integral to their consideration of group identity. Both wrestled at different points with the balance between fellowship and study in their practice, and therefore with how each group should be designated. For both the term 'Bible-study group' did not adequately reflect the depth of their fellowship. For G1, the 'feeding' they received from each other made this a 'core group'; for G2, 'Bible group' captured something of their combination of being together and focusing on the Bible.

There were other indicators of a difference between Groups 1 and 2, on the one hand, and G3, on the other. The practice of G1 and G2 included significant time for sharing of personal news informally at the beginning of meetings[148]. The formal framing of meetings with worship reduced G3's opportunity for such sharing. In G1, M1.4 suggested during our first meeting that fellowship was the most important aspect of the group. In G2 fellowship extended into shared intercessory prayer at the end of meetings. In marked contrast, the one-to-one conversations between participants and leader in G3, would seem to match the lower profile of 'fellowship' in the group, and to reduce the opportunity for lay participants to share with each other. Correspondingly, they spoke more strongly than the other groups about the learning that took place in their meetings.

It seems plausible that amongst the different emphases on fellowship are inter-twined two different theologies of group practice. Both G1 and G2 spoke of the importance of different contributions from different people, and of how that related to an ideal model of the church. This was explicitly linked by G1 to aspects of Pauline theology[149]. This theology relates well to the practice of both Groups 1 and 2, which is not surprising given the location of both broadly within an evangelical tradition.

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[148] Although only G2 had a separate location, the kitchen, for this activity.
[149] Thus in G1.4 (5.4.4, pp.112-115), in relation to a discussion of 1 Corinthians 12.1-11, two aspects of the ideal nature of the church were identified: one, that different gifts, given by the Holy Spirit to different people, should be drawn on within the life of the church; two, that members of the church are diverse, but depend on one another.

There was little trace of such a theology in G3. Perhaps this should not be surprising. Unlike the other two groups, and in keeping with their Anglo-catholic tradition, members had a marked preference for passages from the Gospels, over those from other parts of the Bible. The Gospels might suggest a rather different kind of ecclesiology, to that derived from the Pauline corpus. A key set of narratives concern Jesus gathering round him disciples, and encouraging them to go and make new disciples. Although it receives no explicit discussion, the picture of disciples sitting at the feet of a teacher, would fit rather well with the practice of G3 – not least their one-to-one conversations with the priest.

The above comparison of the interaction, identity and behaviour of the three groups is fundamental to the further comparison that follows, of the groups' approaches to the interpretation of the Bible (as well as of the methodology adopted in understanding the discourse of the three groups). In due course, this section will also provide insights for a reflection on this project as action research, which might be of interest to others involved in Bible-study and similar groups. At the very least the comparison provides questions for interrogating the wider practice of studying and interpreting the Bible.

8.3 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible
8.3.1 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible – introduction
In all three groups interpretation of biblical passages was a dynamic process. It is possible, however, to identify some key poles around which that dynamic was constructed. The dynamic and the poles are represented in the following diagram:

Authority of
the biblical text

Insight

Close study   Personal

experience
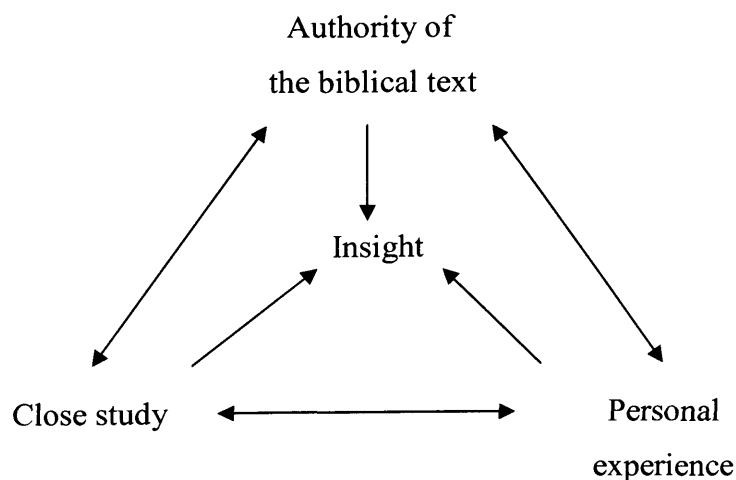
In broad terms, in each group there was an understanding that the Bible and passages in it held some authority. However that authority was held in tension with the other poles and was subject, in different ways, to negotiation. Similarly, close study of the text, especially critical historical study formed a key component of all groups' interpretative strategies, but again members held critical approaches at arm's length. And personal experience provided a variety of frames for interpreting passages, but never dominated to the extent that discussion of experience displaced seeking meaning in the text. Rather it was part of the meaning making.

These three poles were brought into relationship with each other by the hoped-for outcome of groups' activities. Although all three groups identified what they did as about learning, and two groups had a tutorial-like structure, yet their kind of learning was not so much about increased knowledge and understanding of the text, as about the search for 'insight'. In this context insight appears to be about personal and/or shared identity being enhanced or affirmed by talking about the Bible.

8.3.2 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible – authority

The clearest demonstration of tension in relation to the authority of the text was to be found in G1's conversation, especially in explicit discussion of this area in G1.1. This episode, considered above in 5.4.1 (pp.91-100), illustrated the ambivalence towards the authority of the text[150]. The inclusivity which is a dominant characteristic of this group limits the extent of the authority. This is at one with a reaction against the over-bearing authority of some church leaders (discussed quite often by G1), who use the Bible to 'put [people] right'. It is also about the importance of personal insight, of group members getting 'hold of some facet of God...'

G2 appears at first sight to have a more straightforward approach to the authority of the Bible, revealed in the deference participants exhibit towards Jesus in particular[151]. But this deference is part of a larger dynamic. In this chapter (see 8.2.5) we have

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[150] As noted in ch.5, the authority of the text is qualified (it has 'some authority'). Further it is held in tension with the need to accommodate different views and interpretations.

[151] This was apparent in G2.1 (see 6.4.1, pp.132-138) in discussion of John 4.1-42. F2.6 suggested that Jesus' reason for travelling to Galilee through Samaria was because, 'it'd have been quicker to go straight through'. This common sense interpretation was treated by the group as a 'dis-preferred response', and a number of turns were devoted to working up an understanding of Jesus' travel plans being part of his 'mission'.

already noted the way the feeding of the five thousand was treated in G2.2. In that discussion, deference to Jesus meant that his having conducted a miracle was not contested. Nonetheless the nature of the miracle was subject to rationalist scrutiny, which limited its effect to 'changing people's hearts'. The tension between deference to Jesus and the text, and a more suspicious treatment of the text is even more clearly evidenced in G2.4 (see 6.4.4, pp.148-156) in which Jesus' treatment of the woman caught in adultery (John 7.53-8.11) was discussed. In that discussion participants worked hard both to hold on to understandings of sin and judgement, and to encompass an understanding of not excluding from salvation those, 'who do all the things in terms of human relations that we think are right'. The latter would include for members 'good' Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, and members of their families who did not espouse Christian faith. As with G1, members of G2 hold received notions of the text's authority in tension with aspects of their experience of contemporary culture, which question that authority. The 'canonical' voice co-exists and interacts with contemporary, more 'contingent' ones.

The authority of the Bible receives the strongest structural support in the discourse of G3, where formal patterns of leadership and speech-exchange minimise the possibility of challenging that authority. This was seen in the directive introductions to particular passages offered by the priest and his closing formulations. The latter frequently connected the discussion back to the biblical text, which provided a legitimation, or 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) for group conversation. The priest approached the authoritative text from a modernist perspective. But his historical approach served the goal of communicating the text's challenge to live a faithful life. In this the priest was the only member of any of the groups to <u>consistently</u> treat the text (as interpreted by him) as an external and impersonal reference point for human experience, to be applied to that experience without being substantially challenged in the process.

This was not the case for lay group members, who engaged in limited negotiation with the text and its interpretation. As noted previously, the openly sceptical challenge of F3.7 in G3.2 (see 7.4.3, pp.193-202), received the group response appropriate to a dis-preferred contribution. This response, and the rarity of such a lack of deference to the text (and to St. Paul in this case), confirm the constraining effect of the group's approach to authority. But more limited negotiation was

acceptable. Thus, as discussed in 7.4.5 (pp.209-219), F3.1 was able to test whether a particular parable made sense to her; whether an interpretation was compatible with her experience, and whether it was consistent in her view with the text. Thus even in G3, the authority of the text is held in tension with participants' desire to appropriate the text personally.

8.3.3 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible – close study

All groups engaged in close study of biblical passages. This is shown in their interest in different English translations of the Bible. Particularly G1 and G2 exploited the potential of comparing different translations to elucidate a passage. Alongside more literal translations, both these groups referred to translations designed to make the text accessible, by the use of idiomatic paraphrase, especially *The Message*. But even G3 drew on a range of translations, ranging from *The Authorised Version* to the *Good News Bible*. G1 and G2 showed a greater facility for navigating both the text and the different translations, which one might expect from groups rooted in the evangelical tradition, but members of G3 worked hard at increasing their familiarity. The key question, however, for all groups is whether close study of the text was central to their activity or served another end.

G1 exhibited the greatest range of approaches to close study of the text. G1.2, referred to above and discussed in 5.4.2 (pp.100-107), demonstrated the familiarity with which group members approached both critical historical and literal approaches to the Book of Daniel, and the difficulty of accommodating both approaches[152]. But they also adopted an approach to the text which might be described as 'Scripture interpreting Scripture'. Thus in considering John the Baptist in G1.3 (see 5.4.3, pp.108-112), a variety of related texts were referred to in order to enhance understanding of John's significance. This, together with the consideration of Jacob in G1.4, suggested an approach, noted in chapter 5, akin to the canonical criticism of Brevard Childs (e.g. Childs, 1993), which allows for texts to be critiqued in the light of an understanding of the whole canon of scripture and a composite theology which draws on its many texts.

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[152] Critical approaches included a redaction-critical approach which situated and dated texts in relation to a wider understanding of the historical context.

It is significant, however, that even this range of approaches did not mean that close study of the text was all-sufficient for G1. As discussed at some length in chapter five, discomfort with the conflict between approaches, and rejection of dominant approaches to interpretation led members to adopt a much more 'contingent' approach to the text. The focus for this inclusive approach, in which individuals' viewpoints were valued, was 'what the text says to me/us'.

G2's range of approaches to close reading was more limited than that found in G1, which was partly the outcome of adopting a particular study guide (Connelly, 2003). The guide provided two kinds of question, one about understanding the detail of the text, the other about the text's application to Christian life today. In understanding the text members acknowledged the value of historical knowledge[153]. In G2.6 (see 6.4.6, pp.167-177) the significance of this knowledge was discussed by M2.1. He highlighted its value in relation to discussing 'hot topics', i.e. controversial ones. But he also laid out a sophisticated hermeneutic which acknowledged the difficulty of bridging the historical gap between our social context and that of the text.

At more than one point, members discussed the secondary nature of the historical perspective. One of the most interesting evaluations of this also came in meeting G2.6 (see 6.4.6, pp.167-177, especially extract 2.6.4). In the discussion, F2.1 and F2.2 drew an analogy between the consideration of art and academic study of the Bible. Their focus is not theoretical Bible study (nor art appreciation). Historical study is useful, and sometimes an essential preliminary. But human response is the central aim of their meetings, especially to Christ.

In G3 close study of the text drawing on historical criticism was predominantly the responsibility of the priest. Lay participants shared in this to some extent, speaking for example of the value of commentaries. As discussed in 7.4.1 (pp.183-185), however, for lay participants historical knowledge helps with understanding 'what is going on in this passage', but conversation needs to be directed towards 'how does it

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[153] They valued in particular, an historical approach which located texts both geographically and in relation to their socio-cultural setting – within the 'world' of the New Testament.

relate to everyday life'. The contemporary significance of a text for participants

themselves is much more important than the text's 'place in human history'[154].

8.3.4 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible – personal experience

It is clear from the above that the relationship between the biblical text and

participants' experience is key to the way in which members of all three groups

negotiated both with the authority of the Bible and with their close study of its texts.

The question arises as to whether, therefore, personal experience is the organising

principle of the groups' interpretative strategies.

Such a suggestion would certainly be stretching the evidence provided by G3, where

the role of personal experience, while important to lay members, was significantly

constrained. The constraints can be observed in three ways. One is in the nature of

the experience on which participants draw – it is religious or church experience which

forms the dominant focus. Thus members talked about their current experience of

church life and discomfort with it in G3.2; while in G3.3 they shared more positive

religious experiences, not least those connected with retreats and pilgrimage. The

boundary case, in terms of how closely members approached everyday life, was found

also in G3.3, in a cycle of 'second stories' (Arminen, 2004; Lehtinen, 2005) about

getting on with difficult people – a neighbour, a colleague at work, etc. Although at

least some stories focused on everyday relationships with those outside the church

community, nonetheless the stories are very carefully constructed around the idea,

derived from the Bible passage being studied, that God can transfigure the lives of

Christ's disciples today. Experience is viewed as from the church community,

looking outwards.

The second layer of evidence for constraint lies in how experience is introduced into

conversation, within the rather formal speech-exchange pattern of G3. As already

alluded to, the opportunity projected by the priest to tell 'second stories' was the most

significant arena for sharing experience. The constraints can be seen in the way in

which the direction for such stories was consistently rooted in the priest's

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[154] This limiting of the impact of historical criticism by lay group members was perhaps echoed by
their silences after the more thorough-going historical formulations of the priest (see appendix 14).

interpretation of the Bible, and in the way lay members aligned their stories to particular interpretations. The third area of evidence, discussed above (8.3.2), is the limited scope for critique and suspicion of the Bible and the priest's interpretations, arising out of experience. It is clear that in G3 personal experience is constrained by other dimensions of interpretation, which are held together by the relationship and interaction between priest and lay members. It is important, however, not to overstate the constraints. While G3 mobilise their personal experience to a lesser extent than other groups, they haven't lost touch with the way others outside the church see life. In discussing church life today, although regretful about an apparent loss of interest in the church in wider society, they remain realistic about how others see them. They have not talked themselves into the isolation of 'groupthink' (Janis, 1982).

If G3 made only occasional forays across the boundary between experience in the church-focused domain and that which has to do with other aspects of life, then G2 appeared rather more used to this kind of two-way journey. The journey outward into wider experience would be characterised by G2 as 'application'[155]. The discourse of G2 gave rise to a number of anecdotes illustrating such applications, not least in the context of interactions with those who didn't share members' faith. This was very much in keeping with a number of questions in the study guide (Connelly, 2003), of the kind: How would you relate this aspect of the text to your life as a Christian?

The journey back across the border is indicated by the way contemporary discourses of rationalism or inclusivism were imported into conversation about Bible passages, even if that involved smuggling them past the border guards of deference to the text. On occasion this led to quite explicit questions drawn from experience being asked of the text and its interpretation. This is, for example, another way of construing the questions raised about the theology of judgement in the light of the experience of good people who did not share participants' Christian faith (see above, 8.3.2).

G2 provides a picture of a broader use of personal experience in the interpretation of texts than does G3. Nonetheless, while for G2 experience may disturb received

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[155] The model is a traditional one, which understands exegesis as being driven by exposition of the text, the fruits of which are applied to the reader or hearer's context. In G2.5 expressed the model of applying the text in terms of how group members might 'relate it to life'; or ask what they might 'do with this in my life'.

readings of the text, this is a form of gentle subversion, rather than overt critique of authority structures[156]. The use of experience in interpretation is constrained by both the authority of the text and close study of it (the latter not least in relation to 'hot topics', as noted above). Further, much conversation about mundane matters, shared by G2 members, had a separate location – the kitchens in which they met at the beginning of the evening to drink coffee and share news, before moving to another room for the main, interpretative business of the evening.

G1 provides, within the groups studied, the clearest example of personal experience being integrated into biblical interpretation. Thus, within their close study of Bible passages, they frequently deployed aspects of their own experience which paralleled events in the biblical text. A skilful example of this was provided by G1.3, when modern parallels for the 'colourful' figure of John the Baptist were discussed. As considered in chapter 5 (5.4.3, pp.108-112), the effect of the parallels was to show how other Christians might be 'positioned' (Davies & Harré, 2001; Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998) by the biblical text, while at the same time enabling group members to avoid such positioning. This was important because of members' previous experience of being held in thrall by fierce messages of judgement preached by figures akin to John the Baptist.

This is one example of how G1 drew on their experience in order to hold at a distance both the authority of the text and biblically-derived understandings of what it meant to be a Christian today with which they disagreed. They articulated the general principal at work amongst them in G1.1 (see 5.4.1, pp.91-100) as 'pursuing the authority of Scripture', which in practice meant exercising suspicion towards the agendas of all those responsible for the transmission and interpretation of the Bible: churches, commentators, translators and even the writers of the texts themselves. This contemporary suspicion was demonstrated, for instance, by an awareness of the gendered nature of the Bible – '…some of us have felt that it's very obvious that a lot of [the Bible]'s written by men.'

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[156] In relation to Fowl (1998), 'determinate' readings are shaken, but full-blown 'anti-determinate' readings rooted in experience are not present.

This kind of interpretation, in which contemporary experience provided a 'contingent' approach to the Bible, was at the heart of what G1 described as 'practical Christianity' (see 5.4.8, pp.118-128). As I concluded there, 'this has to do with hearing what God is saying to different people, holding it within "community" and doing it' (p.127). But even in this case, personal experience does not entirely drive members' interpretation. Its gradient is still, on the whole, from the text towards experience; it is about 'what the text says to me/us'. Although G1's approach has something in common with liberationist approaches (see the discussion in 2.4.1, pp.31-32), yet their interpretation lacks the radical reworking in the light of experience found in Latin American, Feminist or Black theologies.

Why this is the case, is complex. One reason is that, while creating some critical distance between themselves and both the text's authority of the text and approaches to its close study, G1 clearly feel the imperative to go on engaging with these things. This is in keeping with their continued, albeit critical, attachment to an evangelical tradition within church life. The second reason may be that their interpretative use of experience pivots on being inclusive. This axiom, that everybody's contribution is valuable, may itself mitigate against a distinct, radical reworking of biblical interpretation. Inclusivism appears to be a self-limiting 'anti-determinate' reading (Fowl, 1998)[157]. Whatever the reasons, however, it is clear that G1, while integrating personal experience more thoroughly than G2 or G3, still hold it in tension with the authority of the text and close study of it.

For all three groups personal experience provides varying degrees of contextualisation of their interpretation of the Bible. For none of them, however, would Bevans' (1992, ch.5; 2002, ch.5) 'anthropological' model of contextual theology apply, in which contemporary culture sets the agenda. Rather there are elements of Bevans' 'synthetic' model (1992, ch.7; 2002, ch.7). In this model, the gospel and later Christian tradition are held to be important, but the part that culture plays in theology is also recognised. In Bevans' view the model also involves recognition of different cultural perspectives and of the possibility of dialogue between them. G2 shows something of this awareness of different cultures at work, without establishing an

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[157] Inclusivism differs markedly from the lens of marginalisation, which is a key focus for many liberationist readings.

explicit synthesis of them. G1 approaches closer to this model with their valuing different viewpoints and at least bringing them into conversation. G3 shows only occasional glimpses, remaining closer to the 'translation' model.

8.3.5 Approaches to and relationship with the Bible – 'insight'

If then the authority of the Bible, close study of its texts and personal experience are held in tension by all three groups, and no one pole of the triangle dominates, a further question arises: When does interpretation catch fire for these groups? What are the most positive aspects of their experience of discussing the Bible together which encourage them to keep going? For all three groups there is a positive answer to these questions.

For G1, in meeting G1.2, this was expressed by F1.2. In contrast to the attempts of others to understand all the 'nitty-picky' detail of a Bible passage, she spoke of her own approach to the text. She saw it as being like a 'big lump of stone', inside which were 'a gold nugget or two'. This would seem to coincide with the theological aspiration (see 8.3.2) that the outcome of G1's discussion will be that members get 'some hold of some facet of God and his love...' Further, this kind of personal learning is intimately connected with interacting together. As F1.2 indicated in meeting G1.1, 'it's almost a by-product of just us being together'.

Members of G2 expressed something similar as they reflected back on their interaction in meeting G2.6 (see 6.4.6, pp.167-177, especially extract 2.6.3). As F2.1 put it, 'I get little nuggets of insight, you know, from this group'. Such insight was explicitly contrasted with 'all the learning in the world', thus reinforcing the picture of the 'academic' approach being secondary to the hoped-for outcome of group interaction. The phrase 'nuggets of insight' expresses well the best experience of both G2 and G1. For G2, as they commented in meeting G2.5, the experience is about seeing 'a bit more clearly' or 'another way round', or ideas falling into place 'like a jigsaw'. As with G1, for G2 the insight connects with theological aspiration. In meeting G2.1 this was expressed as learning new things about the 'nature of Christ' or 'relationship with God'. And for both G2 and G1 the insight arises out of interaction – it is about learning from each other.

G3 shared at least some of both the experience and aspirations of the other two groups. In meeting G3.1 (see 7.4.1, pp.183-185), speaking of their experience prior to my visits, they talked of the importance of other people's 'insights' which connected with their 'fellowship'. They referred too to moments of insight, although these did not necessarily take place during group meetings. It might be that in church on Sunday, as they heard again the readings they had been discussing, that 'suddenly things fall into place'[158]. In practice, however, in contrast with the other two groups, it was much more difficult to observe such insights emerging within the rather constrained interaction of G3.

Nonetheless, the possibility of insight, resulting from shared Bible-study, offers some clue as to the impetus of all three groups. At the very least it appears as an aspiration they share. However elusive such moments might prove, they provide an incentive to engage with the different dimensions of interpretation: with the authority of the text and its interpreters; with close study of particular passages; and with the relationship between interpretation and personal experience. But, as F2.1's views discussed above suggest, insight also keeps other dimensions of interpretation in perspective, even if they represent 'all the learning in the world'.

Further work, to draw out the significance of this analysis of groups' interpretative strategies and experience, for an understanding of the theology practised by the groups, will be an important aspect of the next chapter's reflections.

8.4 Methodological approaches
8.4.1 Methodological approaches – introduction
As indicated in the introduction to this chapter, the comparative analysis of methodological approaches has the purpose of making sense of the cumulative use of different analytical resources, in order to discern whether there is a methodological trajectory, and how it can be mapped. A particular issue is the use of different descriptions of the linguistic resources deployed by the groups. While different terms ('interpretative repertoire', 'node', 'voice') contribute to the richness of the research,

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[158] This is in keeping with the way their Bible-study group was integrated within the liturgical pattern of church life, and appropriate to the church's Anglo-Catholic tradition.

the complexity needs further interrogation, in order to evaluate the contribution made by use of those terms to understanding Bible-study groups.
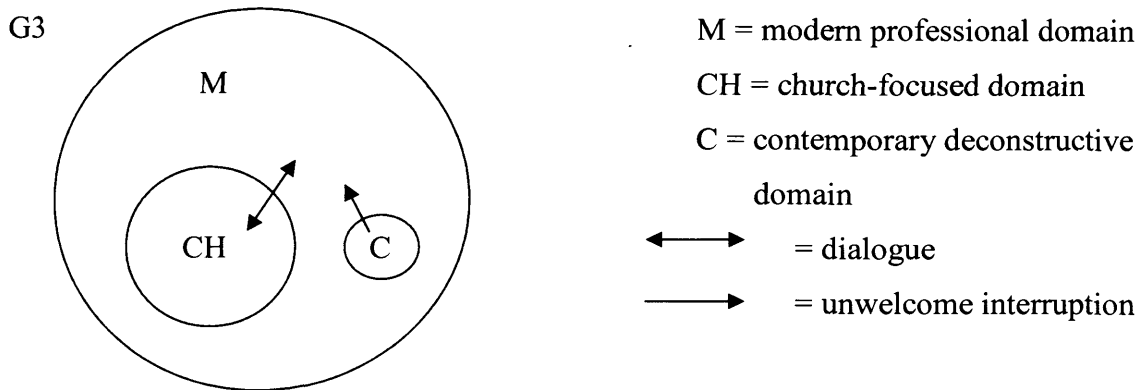
In essence this is a problem of contextualisation. What is needed is an analytical frame that will contextualise the different approaches to groups' talk. This frame is provided by the approach to G3. The chapter on that group (see especially 7.4.3, pp.193-202) adopted Atkinson's term 'cultural domain' (1995, 18), drawn from his study of medicine. The term was used to characterise not the linguistic resources deployed in G3, but rather the space in which those resources operated. I will argue that the concept of 'cultural domain' may be employed retrospectively to all three groups, to contextualise exploration of their talk-in-interaction. This will include comparison of terms used to denote linguistic resources and revisiting parallels with other kinds of discourse, especially science and medicine.

8.4.2 Methodological approaches – 'cultural domains'

Analysis of G3 identified three cultural domains for members' talk (see especially 7.4.3, pp.193-202). The first identification was of the priest's preferred domain, which is professional and modernist, in which conversation is constructed around expert knowledge arising out of critical study of the Bible. This is a domain in which one encounters apparently de-contextualised meanings for texts, regarded as definitive, and as determinative of Christian belief and church practice. In G3 this domain is simultaneously critical and confessional. The second domain to be uncovered was the contemporary critical, or deconstructive domain, characterised by explicit re-contextualisation of apparently transcendent interpretations, in terms of their proponents' motives, assumptions and agendas. This domain was not one often visited by members of G3. And on the occasion when F3.7 entered this domain (as she engaged with the theology of St. Paul), group members talked down her gambit, treating it as 'dis-preferred', revealing their unwillingness to enter that domain with her. This gave rise to the identification of a third domain in which the majority of group interaction took place – the 'church-focused' domain, where conversation focuses on religious or church experience. Here there was a more limited, or passive, re-contextualisation of the priest's professional interpretations, as lay members told 'second stories' that aligned their own experience to the interpretation. The priest only partially entered this domain, for example by sharing anecdotes of his

professional experience. The church-focused domain is contained within and
constrained by the professional domain.

The above analysis can be represented diagrammatically, as follows:

G3

M = modern professional domain

CH = church-focused domain

C = contemporary deconstructive
    domain
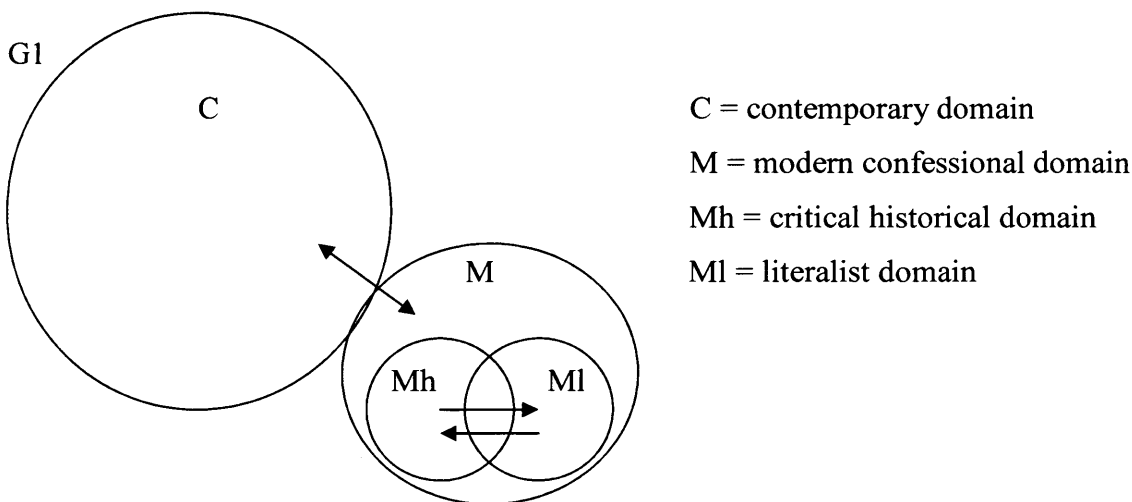
◄——► = dialogue

——► = unwelcome interruption

In the diagram the dominant cultural domain contains the other domains. Further, the
size of the circles representing the domains is broadly proportional to their
significance for the interaction. Finally, the nature of the interaction between domains
is denoted by different kinds of arrow. The analytical approach and diagram make
possible similar, retrospective analysis of the cultural domains operating in G1 and
G2.

A modern domain is also part of the life of G1. Once again this is characterised by
the search for the meaning of the text and its relationship to living out the Christian
faith – it is modern and confessional. However, members of G1 orientate differently
to this domain, than do members of G3. First, there is no strong asymmetry of
professional knowledge, which is held and used by the group corporately. In part this
results from a number of members having participated in theological education, in
part from the drive to be inclusive. Secondly, G1 appeared to operate in this domain
in two distinct ways. Members deployed both a critical historical approach to the
Bible, and also a literalist approach, with some conflict between these two, as well as
attempts to explore overlap between them (see 5.4.2, pp.100-107). Such was the
difference between them that they might qualify as domains in their own right.

G1's conversation also took place within a second major domain, which was
contemporary both in the sense of being an arena for deconstruction, and in the sense

of being characterised by inclusivity. In this domain conversation was constructed around 'what the text says to me/us', and a respect for the different contributions of members. For them this domain represented an alternative way of interacting that avoided both the conflict and authoritarian demands of the modern domain. Diagrammatically G1's domains can be shown as follows (with the same conventions as the G3 diagram).

C = contemporary domain

M = modern confessional domain

Mh = critical historical domain

Ml = literalist domain

It should be noted that the diagram indicates that the relationship between domains Mh and Ml is characterised both by mutual unwelcome interruption and by some overlap. The fact that domain M (including both Mh and Ml) is situated outside domain C indicates that, although the dialogue between C and M serves the interests of C, the contemporary domain did not contain the modern one. Rather conversation shifted from the modern to the contemporary as a reaction against the former. This was an almost abrupt shift, resulting in a markedly different type of speech-exchange.

G2 provides a further variation on interaction between similar domains. The primary, controlling, domain is modern and confessional. While not strictly characterised by literalism, it is marked by a high degree of deference to Christ and therefore to the Bible as speaking of him. Two domains serve the interests of this primary direction of members' interaction. One is the modern, but critical historical domain. The talk in this domain is explicitly recognised as an important, but secondary, resource. The second domain that serves G2's primary interest is the contemporary one. Again, as with G1, talk in this domain is marked both by deconstruction and a degree of inclusivism. However, this domain is covert in G2's conversation. Dialogue between

the modern confessional domain and the contemporary one is characterised by two features: one is the 'application' of biblical texts to everyday life, the other is bringing a contemporary suspicion to bear on interpretation of texts. This analysis would appear diagrammatically as follows (with the same conventions as above).

M = modern confessional domain

Mh = modern historical critical domain

C = contemporary domain
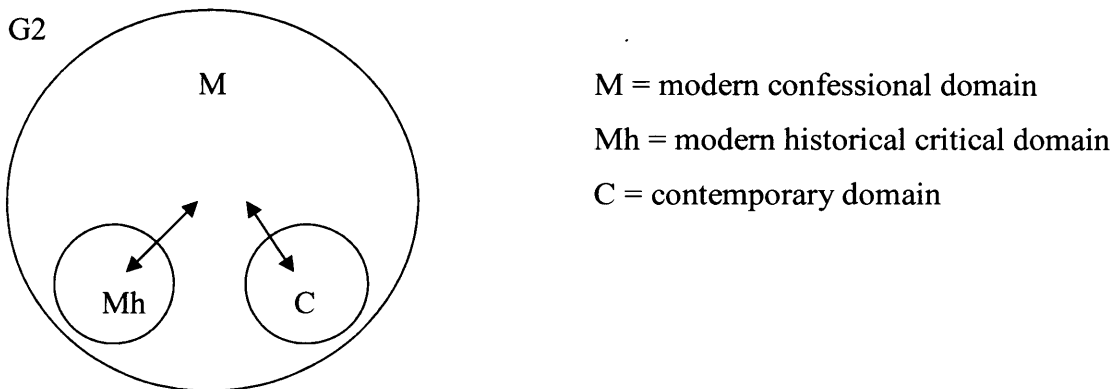
This discussion of cultural domains of interaction, and associated diagrams, provides a context for further discussion of the use of linguistic resources in the groups.

8.4.3 Methodological approaches – linguistic resources

It is perhaps significant that within the chronology of this project I worked first with G1. The above analysis of their cultural domains and accompanying diagram indicate the necessity to account for the movement between modern and contemporary domains. The differences in speech-exchange between them (the modern marked by dominant voices and disagreement; the contemporary by more equal participation) provoked a search for a characterisation of linguistic resources that focused on difference and separation.

The term 'interpretative repertoire' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988) enabled such a characterisation, and provoked an investigation of such areas as differences of lexicality employed in the two domains. The work of Gilbert and Mulkay in particular provided a parallel between the sociology of scientific knowledge and the discourse of G1, in which scientists' 'empiricist' and 'contingent' repertoires were compared with possible 'canonical' and 'contingent' repertoires in G1. This parallel reinforced the value of the term 'interpretative repertoire'. Some critical issues arose, however, as the term was applied to G1, not least that distinction between the lexicality operating in the two

domains, while demonstrable, was far from absolute, and that areas of overlap actually facilitated movement between the 'canonical' and the 'contingent'.

In (Todd, 2005) I argued that the weakness of the term 'interpretative repertoire' was that it focused attention on the boundaries around different kinds of talk. As a modification of the theory, I proposed that the term 'discursive node' better fitted the combination of distinction between 'canonical' and 'contingent' talk and the flow between them.

The analytical issue was, however, rather different in the cases of both G2 and G3. As is clear from the cultural domain analysis, different domains are at work here too. However, negotiation in and between domains was not like that in G1. In both G2 and G3 there was a dominant modern domain (albeit of a slightly different kind in each case) into which other domains intruded as indicated in the analysis and diagrams above. Although concerns associated with the concept of 'discursive node' remained (not least that of lexicality), a new analytical concern arose. This was how to account for ways in which talk of different kinds interrupted each other within a single, but differentiated arena.

For this purpose the idea of 'voice' recommended itself, drawing in particular on studies of interaction in medical settings (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004). 'Voice' allows for an exploration of interruption between voices (as in the interruption of the medical voice by that of the 'life-world' in Mishler's original study). This can be developed into examination of different voices contextualising and re-contextualising interaction (see also on this Horlick-Jones, 2003, 2005). This is a more human and interactive picture of conversation. It also provides the opportunity to separate notions of 'canonical' or 'contingent' from that of 'interpretative repertoire', and to show that they function equally well, at least in this study, as designations of different 'voices'.

Thus in G2 the prominent 'voice' in the modern confessional domain is that of Jesus/the text (see 6.4.4. pp.148-156), which has a distinct 'canonical' flavour. Members construct this voice as one with considerable authority, which transcends more 'contingent' concerns. It is reinforced by the modern historical voice, which,

while subsidiary, enhances the authority of the Jesus/text voice, by rooting it in the views of commentators and the study-guide used by G2.

Yet 'contingent' concerns do intrude from the contemporary domain, interrupting the modern one[159]. In doing so, they both interrupt the 'canonical' voice and reveal the latter to be itself a culturally-rooted contextualisation. This contributes to the case for resisting the notion that certain views 'de-contextualise' events and their interpretations[160]. Rather, we can argue that what we observe are competing contextualisations in the multiple voices of authoritative/professional figures and lay participants; in the interaction of life-world voices with those of medicine, or scientific empiricism, or authoritative biblical interpretation (cf. Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Horlick-Jones, 2003, 2005; Sarangi, 2004).

G3 furnishes a somewhat similar picture. Once again the dominant domain is a confessional modern one. The difference from G2 is as follows. In G3 the modern domain fully incorporates critical historical study. The domain is constructed largely by the priest. His is the 'canonical' voice, which has considerable authority; deriving from the articulation of the domain as supra-cultural; from the commentators to whom he refers; and from the way in which conversation is framed, both in speech-exchange patterns and physical setting.

The effect of this strong 'canonical' contextualisation of G3's interaction is to severely limit more 'contingent' voices. A contemporary voice might interrupt the discourse briefly, only to be defused by the group's interaction. This leaves scope only for the 'connecting voice' (see 7.4.4, pp.202-209) which relates 'canonical' interpretations to the church/religious experience of lay participants, establishing the 'church-focused' domain, in which priest-lay interaction may take place. This 'connecting voice' has some 'contingent' concerns, particularly to contextualise interpretation in relation to personal experience. But it lacks the power of other contemporary voices (in G1 or G2) to critique the authority of the 'canonical'.

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[159] In examples already considered in this chapter, a rationalist voice interrupts a discussion of miracle, re-contextualising it as about changing hearts and minds; or an inclusive voice deconstructs notions of judgement, by raising contemporary questions about goodness.
[160] Mishler (1984) suggested this was the case for the medical 'voice'.

8.4.4 Methodological approaches – The trajectory of an exercise in linguistic ethnography

The above comparative analysis illustrates clearly that the linguistic ethnography of these groups has a methodological trajectory. While analysis remained responsive to each group's particularity, consistent concerns ensured the emergence of a rich, but coherent, picture. Those concerns were with groups' speech-exchange patterns, but also within them with how members deployed linguistic resources that demonstrated an orientation to a wider context. This combined attention to the detail of talk-in-interaction, characteristic of CA, with wider discourse analytic concerns.

Within the trajectory, work on G1 utilising the concept of 'interpretative repertoire' (and the modified concept of 'discursive node') enabled attention to be paid to distinctions between ways of talking; and a useful working distinction between 'canonical' and 'contingent' talk, which enabled further exploration of negotiation around interpretations to which transcendent authority was attributed. Work on the particularity of G2 (and subsequently G3) drawing on the idea of 'voice', allowed for a more nuanced picture of the interaction of linguistic resources, rooted in exploration of interruption and dialogue, of contextualisation and re-contextualisation[161]. Finally, work on G3 stimulated further exploration of the complex arena in which resources interacted, using the idea of 'cultural domain'. This in turn provided the frame for mapping the whole trajectory.

There is further work to be done in the next chapter on drawing out the significance of the above, not least for the use of such methodology in practical theology. For now two further points need to be made. One is that exploration of linguistic resources provides a further layer to the analysis of group interaction, behaviour and identity and of approaches to and relationship with the Bible. For example, the interaction of voices and cultural domains elucidates the variety of ways in which members of the three groups construct and negotiate with authority.

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[161] This is a rather more nuanced discussion of re-contextualisation than that of (Bielo, 2007a, 2007b), which offers a much more one-dimensional picture of biblical texts being used to support or challenge group participants.

The second is that work on linguistic resources demonstrates how work on the particularity of speech-exchange in groups can, and should, be connected with wider social contexts, as argued by those who combine DA and ethnography (see, for example, Miller, 1994; Moerman, 1988; Nelson, 1994; Spencer, 1994). What is offered here is an approach to social interaction not dissimilar to that envisaged by Miller, which provides, 'an analytic framework for studying how talk and social context are inextricably intertwined and coterminous aspects of socially organised settings' (1994, 280). The work on repertoires, nodes, voices and domains, maps out an understanding of how macro-contexts for social interaction are recruited by participants as the dynamic micro-contexts for particular interactions.

Chapter 9

A practical theology of Bible-study

9.1 Introduction

The aim of this research project (stated in 2.3.2, pp.22-23) has been to investigate the practice of Bible-study groups, with a view to understanding it as a practice in its own right, and how it is facilitated. A central question underlying the investigation is: how is theory developed and expressed, as part of this practice? Section 2.3.2 also offered an initial working model of the practice-oriented theory-building work of a Bible-study group – that groups enter into a dialogue involving: the text, its existing interpretations, experience and different interpretative approaches; that this generates an understanding of the interpretation(s) of the text that works for members of the group.

The previous chapter provides clear evidence for the practice of the three groups studied in this project working in a dialogical way. The primary case for this is made in sections 8.3.1 – 8.3.5 (pp.236-246) in their examination of the negotiation in which participants engaged, in relation to the authority of the Bible, close study of the text and the incorporation of personal experience into their practice. The dialogue lies not only within individual dimensions of the negotiation, but also in the interaction between dimensions. Of particular significance, however, is that 'insight' represents for groups the desired outcome of this dynamic interaction. This suggests that dialogue is not constrained by a desire for rational synthesis (see further below).

But chapter 8 not only offers a picture of the dimensions of the dialogue at work in the groups (discussed further below), but also further evidence of its dynamics. Some of this is provided in 8.2.1 – 8.2.5 (pp.227-234) which explore axes of group behaviour and identity which paralleled the degree of asymmetry in the speech-exchange patterns of groups. These axes involved finding a balance, different in each group, between: creating space for different views and working towards alignment of viewpoints within the group; allowing room for negotiation about meaning and leadership being exercised; engaging with contemporary culture and reinforcing belonging to the church; working with dis-preferred responses to questions for discussion and working at preferred answers. It is in the dynamic space between the

polarities of these axes – a space that is not straightforwardly either 'liberal' or 'conservative' – that interpretation takes place. Sections 8.4.1 – 8.4.4 (pp.246-254) further extend the characterisation of groups' dynamics through close attention to the interaction of voices and cultural domains. This provides a detailed understanding of interruption and dialogue, of contextualisation and re-contextualisation.

This chapter examines the dynamics of the groups further, in order to establish an understanding of the theorising of the groups. This will enable, in turn, a characterisation of the dimensions of groups' practice, and a reflection on the extent to which this constitutes doing practical theology. This will enable a brief discussion of the contribution of this theology to the conversation between practical theology and hermeneutics. The chapter first offers, however, a reflection on the methodology of the project. This will focus on how the methodology contributed to an understanding of the dialogue of Bible-study.

9.2 Excursus – methodological dynamics

This research has established a series of methodological frames for the investigation of Bible-study. The widest frame has been action research, to which we return later in the chapter and in the conclusion. Within that wider frame other frames have facilitated analysis at the micro-level. These latter frames were identified initially with a view to facilitating what action research would term post-action reflection (see e.g. Kemmis, 1993). Two facets of the research suggested an ethnographic frame. One was the interest in setting local practice within wider contexts. The other was that I was seeking to reflect on practice that I would share with others, casting me as a participant-observer. This latter facet would of course be complicated, from a traditional ethnographic viewpoint, by my seeking to make strange (as 'observer') a practice that was already very familiar to me (as 'participant'), rather than the other way round. Other aspects of the research, however, suggested another frame, alongside an ethnographic one. The central concern of the research was with meaning-making involving text and talk in a social setting. The chosen approach, discourse analysis (DA), focused attention on how social reality is constituted in discourse.

DA has offered specific contributions to the ethnographic task of reflecting on Bible-study. One has been the discipline of transcribing discourse, which was first of all an effective way of rendering it 'strange' to me. This might be described as a process of 'recontextualisation' through 'entextualisation' (Bucholtz, 2001, 179). This was of particular importance to me as a practitioner-researcher. Whereas a social scientist might approach analysis of transcription as an aspect of becoming familiar with the practice realised in discourse, for me the opposite was the case. Transcription enabled the familiar practice to become sufficiently distant for me to engage in critical reflection on the discourse.

A second, related, contribution has been the emphasis not only on what was talked into being in social interaction, but also on how it was talked into existence. Particular concerns that emerged were thus with the speech-exchange patterns of groups, and with linguistic resources deployed in their talk. The latter were discussed in the previous chapter in relation to the trajectory of the research (see especially 8.4.4, pp.253-254).

Implementing those analytical concerns has involved using techniques of transcription drawn from CA, which enabled attention to be paid to the turn-by-turn construction of conversation. This also facilitated exploration of the distinctiveness of Bible-study talk; of how it was different from mundane conversation; of how it was 'orchestrated' (Dingwall, 1980). Rooting consideration of wider contexts in this kind of fine-scale attention to talk has also directed attention to whether references to wider contexts are justified because participants actually orientate to them in conversation – so that they exhibit 'procedural consequentiality' (Arminen, 2000). This also had the effect of testing my existing practitioner's assumptions.

It needs to be underlined that this practice of research is something of a hybrid. Attention to the wider context would be regarded as unwarranted by many CA, or ethnomethodology, practitioners (see Miller, 1994; Nelson, 1994; Spencer, 1994; C. West, 1996). Nonetheless, in this thesis that hybridity has allowed for a particular dynamic to emerge, which has three main dimensions represented in the following diagram.

Wider
Context

Why?

Talk —————————————————— Text

How?

Local
Context
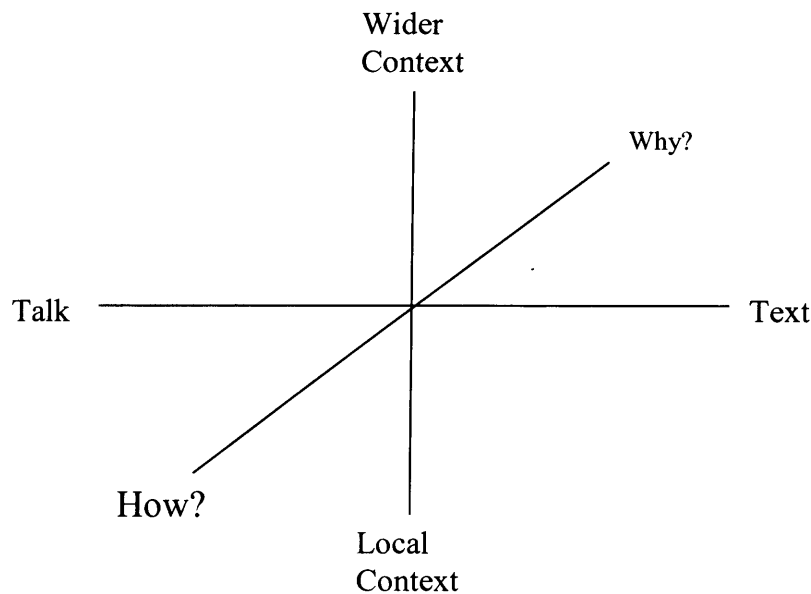
The first axis is that which holds together talk and text in dynamic tension.

Transcription, as indicated above, has enabled the talk of the groups, both 'live' and

recorded to be 'entextualised' – rendered as text[162]. This enabled the different voices

to be seen as well as heard. I would argue that the key benefit here is in the eye being

able to move backwards and forwards through transcription, and therefore to see the

juxtaposition of voices. This is distinct from listening to voices, which, even with the

possibility of rewinding recordings, proceeds with the forward flow of the

conversation. Seeing talk as text enables the researcher, including the practitioner-

researcher, to 'listen' to voices as it were 'backwards' and 'simultaneously'.

Another key aspect of this axis is the way that transcription also generates further text

– the interpretations to be found in this thesis. But, as far as is possible in written text,

transcriptions maintain a particular connection between the reader of the thesis and

the talk of the groups[163]. Transcription offers the reader of the thesis the chance

almost to 'hear' the voices of participants[164].

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[162] This represents a kind of reversal of the practice of the groups, which, as will be discussed later in this chapter, turned texts (from the Bible) into talk.

[163] This observation parallels West's view that: '...transcripts furnish exhibits of interviews and observations that can be used as the evidentiary basis of ethnographic claims. ...transcription forms a record of those interviews and observations that is arguably less "filtered" (albeit not *unfiltered*: transcribing conventions themselves impose an order on the data) than field notes.' (West, 1996, 344f)

[164] Although it has to be admitted that the technique of re-awakening the voices from the transcription takes some practice!

The detailed attention to the organisation of talk-in-interaction, enabled by holding together talk and text through transcription, forms the basis for the two other axes of the above dynamic, anticipated earlier in this section. One axis concerns the holding together of the 'how' and 'why' of analysis. In brief this is about holding in tension questions of why people talk about the Bible with attention to how they organise that talk. The other slightly more specific axis, similarly forbears from making conclusions about the relationship between participants' interpretations and the wider social context, unless they are supported by an understanding of the local context of those interpretations in a particular conversation. An example from G1 illustrates how all three axes work in practice.

The example comes from G1's discussion of Daniel 7, considered in 5.4.2 (pp.100-107) and (Todd, 2005). A significant aspect of the discussion concerned two interpretative approaches to the text. One of these was the critical historical approach, which located the meaning of the text within the historical context(s) of its writing. The other was concerned with the text's literal meaning and its being the 'word of God'. The stand-off between the two points of view indicates a tension between two ways of interpreting the text that both emerge from a modern cultural domain[165].

What is significant is that the interaction between these two perspectives generates meaning-making. This is seen first in the attempt of M1.1 to find a connection between them:

Extract 1.2.1b

24 M1.1: but if it's the word of God does it have to be (.) taken at face value can you

25   can you trust it as being the word of God (2s)

26   [and not necessarily take it at face value

27 F1.3: [can you what what trust it=

(Lines 28 to 37 involved clarifying what M1 had said for F3's benefit).

38 M1.1: which involves (3s) having the confidence (.) to handle it in a

39   different way (3s) it was interesting to begin with y'know we were

40   talking about well you F3 were talking in particular about a

41   particular way of handling Daniel i- i- in terms of I don't know well

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[165] This tension is seen elsewhere in G1's discussions, in the negotiation around the authority of the text and its humanity.

42   yes in terms of relating to Christ (.) and yet we seem to have gone round

43   and (.) we've encouraged each other to look at it in a different way and we

44   said this is in fact a different sort of writing (.) and as R has said it's

45   spread out in time and things (2s) so I think well I'm I'm just intrigued

46   (.) it- it gives us a sort uv a (.) if- if we can still believe it and trust it

47   being (.) the inspired word of God (.) we don't have to take it at face

48   value but we still get something out of it which is <u>in</u>spired (.) is that

As indicated in chapter 5, the strong response of F1.3 curtailed this exploration. But this paved the way for a different response from M1.2. The first line of this extract refers back to the question he has just touched on, of whether Isaiah was written by more than one person (a standard historico-critical question). The line represents, however, a turn to a more contingent and inclusive approach to the interpretation of Daniel.

Extract 1.2.2

1 M1.2:   …it doesn't <u>actually</u> matter

2 F1.3:   [no °no°

3 M1.2:   [because what- what I think I've- my responsibility is to look at this

4   passage nd say what what does that (.) say to me <u>now</u>

5 F1.3:   yes

6 M1.2:   and how can that help and encourage me and how can that p'raps can I use

7   that to encourage other people (.) mm and (.) I- I- I- nd knowing that it

8   that this is a word from God t- to us and t- and and to each generation and

9   and and actually trying to say what is the word what is God's word what is

10   God saying and how- how are we to respond to it that for me is the important

11   thing now no- I can't have a conversation with my family at home as I I-

12   tried last week on a couple of occasions and it almost ended up in- in- (.)

13   in- in- in tears again because they just they can't they can't come at

14   anything that's not the literal (.) absolute literal truth every verse is- is-

15   is- is true and their faith is wonderful their their their commitment to

16   God is wonderful and and that's fine I've no problem with that I can't

17   I can't go there now (.) mm (.) and I don't particularly I didn't ask to not

18   go there I didn't ask to end up seeing things in a different way but it's

19   happened it's part of the journey

20 F1.3:   hh. nn but we will all see if we read the chapter (.) because it's the

21   living word of God and we're all different (.) and no two of us s the same

22   if we want to seek the truth as the prayer said at the beginning (.) then

23   God will speak to us (.) possibly in different ways (.) varying ways to

24   each of us we haven't- it's unity in diversity we haven't necessarily

25   got to all see it exactly the same have we

26 F1.2:   no

27 F1.3:   t- to grasp the truth that's <u>in</u> it mm because otherwise (.) you get into

28   terrible trouble if for example R said now you've all got to believe

29   A B C and D about this passage we'd all go home distressed because

30   we we mightn't heh we mightn't all feel the same

These extracts indicate the value of transcription for an understanding of the practice of G1. First, this is because the transcription holds participants' talk in the analytical arena. Thus for example, rather than working with a distillation of interpretative viewpoints ('critical-historical', 'literalist', 'liberal'), we can locate views within a more human context. Thus lines 11-19 of the second extract present M1.2 speaking about how his view connects with his own personal 'journey'. The researcher is able to see how he <u>accounts</u> for his perspective, rather than just what his position is (as are those who evaluate the researcher's findings).

This focus on talk as text for analysis makes possible, in turn, the focus on how meaning is constructed. A key question, derived from existing debate about biblical interpretation, and relating to this conversation, might be why F1.3 begins by taking an 'exclusive' 'literalist' position in relation to the text, which she restates in response to M1.1, and ends by taking an 'inclusive', more 'liberal' view, in lines 20-30 of the second extract. The transcripts provide something of the '<u>how</u>' of that transition, especially: the interpretative turn which M1.2 achieves in interaction with F1.3 in lines 1-5 of the second extract; evidence in lines 20-30 that F1.3 relocates the interpretation of the text in a human context of inclusivity, occasioned by M1.2's personal account; and the lexical continuity which F1.3 constructs between 'the word of God' in the first extract and 'the living word of God' in the second.

This discussion in turn illustrates something of the dynamic that is at work, methodologically, between the local and wider contexts. In particular, the example underlines the importance of not rushing to apply labels to particular interpretative approaches that link them to a wider discussion of how the Bible is interpreted, without first paying attention to how they are situated and interact within the local context of the talk of G1. In this way the researcher does not have to decide whether F1.3 is 'literalist' or 'liberal', but can point to the indexicality (Garfinkel, 1967) of those turns of her conversation which might attract such labels. This also holds the practitioner-researcher back from applying the familiar labels relating to interpretative approaches, before hearing what participants are saying to each other.

9.3 Further reflection on the dynamics of Bible-study

The preceding discussion elucidates aspects of the methodology of this research, but also provides evidence for that method revealing the complexity of the Bible-study groups. The picture that emerges both from chapter 8 and from the specific example from G1 is of an interaction which represents no straightforward dialectic of interpretative viewpoints. Indeed, it demonstrates that the word 'dialectic' is not an appropriate term for this interaction[166].

In terms of specific research interests raised in chapter 2, these extracts (amongst many others) demonstrate a plurality of interpretive approaches, but the interaction between them is complex and subtle[167]. In addition to the role of M1.2, discussed above, that of M1.1 in the first extract is significant. He seeks to reconcile something of the historical approach with the more literal approach taken by F1.3. This is certainly in one sense 'critical', as he takes responsibility for exploring how to get a critical distance from the text. But his approach, as he stretches the more literal approach is also creative, almost playful (in keeping with his role in the group as something of a jester).

Two further aspects point to what is at the heart of the conversation which M1.1 shares with others. One is that the driver for his exploration is a desire to reconcile

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[166] See further below, footnote 168.
[167] The interaction is not for instance predictable on the basis of an understanding of interpretative strategies derived from the world of biblical studies, as imagined in appendix 1, reflection 2.

not only approaches, but also people, especially F1.3 and other participants, as is indicated by lines 40-45. This drive to find unity in diversity amongst <u>people</u> as much as interpretations is shared by F1.3, as lines 20-30 of the second extract make clear. Indeed, as chapter five demonstrated this element of 'contingency' is a hallmark of G1.

The second aspect of the group that is reflected in M1.1's turns can be identified in line 48 of the first extract. Mirroring what participants said on other occasions, there is a purpose to their inclusive approach to Bible-study, which lies beyond holding diversity together. The aim is to 'get something out of it which is <u>in</u>spired'. The most obvious way in which this aspiration was realised in G1.2, was in the ensuing, inclusive discussion of how God spoke to members (especially the women) in dreams.

The expected polarities of practical theology (Woodward & Pattison, 2000, 15f) are to some extent present: past religious tradition and present religious experience; written texts and life 'texts'; the church and wider society (which has offered them a sense of the value of diversity). But what is apparent is how in G1, such polarities are embedded in a practice which is driven by their valuing each other. This practice is indeed a kind of theory building, but one that not only incorporates critical and creative approaches to different viewpoints, but has, as its goal, something which lies beyond the abstract – something which inspires[168].

This is perhaps a richer picture than that of Hall (2003), where the focus on post-practice interviews and a typology of participants resulted in a picture of group practice that majored rather more on the conflict between approaches. This thesis highlights what groups achieve together in interaction.

One further example, from G2, develops understanding of the kind of dialogue found in these groups. The extract (2.4.3), shown and discussed in 6.4.4 (pp.148-156),

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[168] This confirms the inappropriateness of the word dialectic as a description of this practice. The relational emphasis of Bible-study groups on reconciliation significantly constrains moves to explore contradiction, or negation. Further, their search for 'insight' transcends rational argument. This answers the question raised in chapter 2 (2.3.1, pp.19-22) in relation to the work of Pattison and Woodward (Woodward & Pattison, 2000, 15f) about whether practical theology is 'dialectical'. 'Dialectic' does not describe at least the practical theology in which the Bible-study groups studied here engage.

illustrates first how an episode of conversation is opened by a question from the study-guide: 'Jesus says if you do not believe that I am the one I claim to be, you will indeed die in your sins. What is the response of our contemporary culture to that claim?' This question, informed by an historical perspective, and deferential to the text, is a confessional one – it seeks to apply the text to respondents' contemporary situation, but also projects something of an identity for them.

The extract shows that, having explored possible understandings of what 'contemporary culture' might mean, participants arrive at an understanding that the question invites them to distinguish between those who respond to Jesus' words as Christians, and those who respond otherwise, because they are non-Christians. In other words, they understand 'contemporary culture', in the study-guide's question, to mean something external to the church community, in which Christians do not participate.

This, however, sits uncomfortably with group members – it 'positions' (Davies & Harré, 2001; Edley, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998) them in a place they would not choose to occupy. Their response is to negotiate an alternative understanding which positions them rather alongside other members of society: very good Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims, and members of their own families. This is a distinctly inclusive response, incorporating a multi-cultural understanding on the one hand, and a criterion of loving behaviour by which people's behaviour is judged on the other. This dissolves, or at least reduces, the distinction between Christian and non-Christian. Here there is a real dialogue between understandings which emerge from members' participation in a contemporary domain and confessional ones that the study guide projects into their conversation.

This was sufficient to provoke a further ten minutes of discussion about the interpretation of the text, in which the literal meaning of the biblical text was in the end upheld, but its significance was substantially narrowed. This had the effect of maintaining, rather than resolving the tension between people being judged by their belief in Jesus and an inclusive approach which valued other beliefs (see further, the discussion in 5.4.4). The dynamic constrains the text, therefore, in the interests of a

desire, not dissimilar to that of G1, to include people who do not belong either to the group, or to the church community.

It should be noted that the dynamic is rooted in a sophisticated awareness of culture. Earlier in G2.4 they have distinguished between first-century culture and contemporary culture. But in these extracts they also explore their involvement as Christians in the latter culture. They resist undue separation of church from culture, in the interests of including others; yet they retain a sense of what the text demands from them as Christians. This contextual theology resists easy typification, according to the models proposed by Bevans (1992; 2002), although it has something in common with his portmanteau model, which he labels 'synthetic'.

The above analysis offers an complementary picture to Guest's (2002) study of the large evangelical church of St Michael-le-Belfrey in York. G1 in particular offers a close parallel to Guest's observation of a subjectivisation (which valued spiritual diversity) which did not 'display the fragmentation and individualism that one might associate with a "spiritual homelessness"' (2002, 210), but which was at the same time 'diversifying' and 'unifying' (2002, 211). On the other hand, G1 and G2 together offer a contrasting perspective to Guest's analysis of 'liberalisation'. In his study he perceived a liberalisation of worldview, 'characterised by diversity and a general tolerance towards difference' (2002, 167). Guest concludes that dissonance arising in the interaction between 'liberalised' and more 'traditional' viewpoints was avoided in public discourse (2002, 167), and 'suppressed' in house groups (2002, 282-296). G1 and G2 indicate how these groups, at least, work with such dissonance, as part of their identity-forming interpretative activity. They also show that 'liberalisation' need not be a one-way process; there can be a dynamic between 'traditional' and 'liberal' perspectives. For G1 this was not only part of their shared practice in the group, but was also seen as supporting the nurturing of others through 'canonical' and 'contingent' aspects of preaching (see the discussion of G1.6, 5.4.8, pp.118-128).

9.4 The dynamics of Bible-study within a wider account of practice

The work in this chapter on the dynamics of Bible study, building in turn on earlier analysis, prepares the ground for an account of the practice of 'Bible-study' as found

in G1, G2 and G3. This account is in the nature of a sketch, or series of sketches, designed to project a picture of common features, within the provisionality of the artist's pencil-strokes. It is arranged under heuristic headings and synthesises data/analysis from every stage of the engagement with groups and their practice.

9.4.1 A sensual practice

The primary sensual dimension of 'Bible-study', already apparent, was the aural/oral. This began consistently with the speaking and hearing of the Bible passage as it was read aloud. Every meeting with the groups for 'Bible-study' involved participants reading aloud. Most usually, this was of the next section of the passage to be discussed, although sometimes a longer section would be read, with discussion in a number of subsequent episodes. All participants were involved in reading aloud, either taking turns to read different sections of text, or even reading a few verses at a time within one section.

The aurality/orality continued as the primary mode of engagement with the text. groups (with varying degrees of asymmetry between participants) created space for all members to participate in discussion, and other people (within the local community present or past, within the wider experience of participants, or commentators of various kinds) were also referred to, quoted, and even read aloud. Perhaps because of the importance of this mode, deafness received some comment in both G1 and G3, generating some humour in the former on more than one occasion.

A key participant in this conversation was the biblical text itself. Sometimes this voice was heard directly as a verse(s) was/were quoted, particularly in the form, 'my Bible says...' This underlines the plural nature of the Bible's voices, as different participants brought, referred to and quoted different translations, or versions. More often than being heard directly, the Bible's voices were reflected back to the groups as what different people heard it say to them.

The textual voices were characterised broadly in two ways. Most often, especially in G2 and G3 the voice is that presented <u>by the text</u> as the one speaking, that of the identified author of an Epistle, or the voice of Jesus or other characters speaking in the narrative of the Gospel. On other occasions, and especially in G1, the voice is that of

the passage as product of human history – the potentially flawed voice of the historical author or editor of the text. The dynamic between these two appears to relate to two inter-connected factors. One is the extent to which the textual voice (however characterised) interacts with other voices in the group's negotiation with the text; the second is the attitude of participants to the Bible and its authority.

For example, extrapolating from previous discussion, in G3 the biblical voice (mediated by the priest's modern interpretation) is dominant. Other voices are present, especially narrative voices of lay participants. But these align their experience with the voice of the text, rather than (with rare exceptions) challenging it. In this group the voice of the text is most closely identified as the voice of God (within a modern frame), with which other revelations of God (through the experience of retreat, for example) must be aligned.

In G2, alternative voices are to be heard, such as rational voices in relation to miracles. However, although aware of cultural differences between the world of the text and their own, members exhibited a high degree of deference to the text, and the voice of Jesus within the Gospel studied (John). This contributed to a particular interaction between the textual voice and sceptical voices. The latter might modify the former within certain limits. A rational explanation of the feeding of the 5000 was possible, but still a description of a miracle – that of 'changing people's hearts and minds (see 6.4.2, pp.138-146). Or a contemporary understanding of God might be introduced – for example, concerning God's attitude to those who belonged to other world faiths than Christianity. But their possible inclusion in heaven had still to be justified by a close reading of the passage under discussion (see 9.3 above). The voice of God in the text is still very much the touchstone of conversation involving other voices. These latter are voices of God, contributing to the groups theological interpretation of the text, and having the power to interact with and modify textual voices. But the contemporary voices are covert; implicitly, rather than explicitly, sources of revelation.

G1, of these groups, had the widest explicit understanding of where God's voice might be heard (through the text, through members, through other people, in dreams). And their understanding that these were God speaking was explicit. Correspondingly,

they had the most highly developed hermeneutic of suspicion of the biblical text (although without discarding all sense of its authority)[169]. They therefore felt able to disagree with the voice of the text, and on occasion to disassociate it from that of God, locating God's voice elsewhere (see the discussion of 'the God of Jacob' in G1.5, above in 5.4.5, pp.115-116, and below in 9.4.4).

This sharing of what is being heard is in part about what the text says <u>about</u> God, or us, or some particular issue. But more important within all groups is what the text says <u>to</u> participants. This latter reflected-back voice of the text was characteristically heard speaking affectively, or in relation to personal experience, rather than cognitively or intellectually. This is in keeping both with the valuing of 'insight', or 'inspiration', over detailed understanding, and the secondary nature of close study of the text, both discussed in the previous chapter (8.3.3, pp.239-241).

To an extent the above description confirms something of Dickson's findings (2003, discussed above in 2.4.2, pp.32-36), that use of the Bible in local churches involves primarily verbal structures, which resource rational, imaginative, affective and ethical responses. Yet the interaction mapped in this thesis is richer than that portrayed by Dickson, given that the verbal structures are not solely derived from the Bible, and the way they interact is correspondingly richer here.

A tactile dimension was little in evidence in group meetings. That said touching, or holding, the Bible seemed to have some importance. Characteristically, each group member would bring their own Bible, and keep it, usually open, on their knee or chair arm, reading from it as others read aloud, or as verses were referred to. The choice of Bible seemed mostly driven by concerns about the 'voice' it might offer: familiar and well-loved (perhaps the *Authorised Version*), clear and understandable (*The Good News*), a paraphrase and therefore an aid to understanding (often *The Message*). However, all Bibles were handled as familiar objects, not carelessly, but in a way that suggested this was a tool rather than an object of great reverence. Size or condition of the Bibles seemed unimportant, or at least not usually worthy of comment (unless, as

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[169] For a discussion of their approach to the text as human product see 5.4.1 (pp.91-100)

in one case, the Bible was actually falling to pieces!) Nor was there much touching by participants of each other, except a handshake, or hug, in greeting or farewell.

A visual dimension was also not high profile. Visual images within the text were discussed positively. G1 responded to the striking image of John the Baptist in G1.3 (5.4.3, pp.108-112); G2 were struck by images of water flowing (and their Old Testament counterparts) in G2.4 (6.4.4, pp.148-156); while the image of Jesus' transfiguration stimulated a visual dimension within the 'second stories' told by lay participants in G3.3 (7.4.4, pp.202-209). But these visual images are mediated through discussion and what is spoken or heard. Nobody sought to draw their response to any text. That said, both G1 and G3 recounted how, on other occasions, they had explored artworks of various kinds, evaluating these meetings as out of the ordinary but stimulating.

It should not be thought, however, that the physical setting of the aurality/orality was unimportant. The next section, on the ritual dimension of the groups' practice, will show that creating a particular kind of space was integral to what took place.

9.4.2 A ritual practice

Some aspects of the ritual dimension of groups' practice emerge from study of speech-exchange patterns. For all three groups meetings began and ended with prayer[170]. In G1 and G2, the opening prayer characteristically asked God to work through, or guide, or bless the meeting just starting. Sections of the meeting began with the reading aloud of the Biblical text, as described above. Within those sections, episodes of conversation almost invariably were initiated with a question (or a discussable point of view) from someone present, about some aspect of the text, or people's response to it. This would be followed by various contributions, until the closure of the episode, either through the direct introduction of another question, or commonly through a formulation of the conversation offered by the questioner, or another participant. These open structures were maintained in all groups by some kind of leadership, dominant and constraining in G3, established but negotiable in G2

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[170] Although G3 expressed this liturgically through the Eucharist in church beforehand, as well as sometimes having a formal prayer and liturgical greeting at the beginning of the meeting; and their closing prayer took the form of saying the service of Compline in the priest's study at the end of the meeting.

and egalitarian in G1 (involving my facilitation, but also the potential for any participant to introduce a question or offer a formulation, which they regularly did). Discussion included a range of responses about the text, or other people's perspectives or aspects of contemporary life. Participants might be puzzled, or pessimistic; interested or excited; reassured or just a bit bored. But the emotional range of their interaction was not wide. People disagreed but were never angry with each other; they shared feelings and personal experiences but never cried with each other. The most noticeable emotional response was laughter, including in response to conversation around 'delicate objects' (Jefferson et al., 1987).

The above, and more particularly the data-analysis that lies behind it, might begin to delineate the 'activity-type' (Levinson, 1992; Sarangi, 2000) labelled 'group Bible-study'. It becomes apparent how this may be differentiated from related activity types such as the tutorial, or AA group, the resemblance to which has been discussed previously (not least in the light of Arminen, 2004; Mehan, 1979). The part played by some 'discourse types' (Sarangi, 2000) in the 'activity type', especially question and answer, or 'second story' would seem to coincide with other types. But the particular ritual dimension discussed here delineates a distinct practice.

To develop this further, there is one aspect of the groups' physical space that still needs exploration. In all these groups, as well as in every other 'Bible-study' group of which I have had knowledge, the activity takes place around an open space. In the three groups chairs of a reasonably comfortable kind were arranged in something approaching a circle or a square, within the room of someone's house[171]. In one sense this is the most practical arrangement for any discussion group – people can see and hear each other. This facilitates maximum interaction within other constraints. In another sense, it could be argued that the arrangement and the space have a part to play in the ritual of 'Bible-study'.

Entering and leaving the circle around the space is part of that ritual, marked by prayer. In G2 this was preceded and sometimes succeeded by a different kind of interaction in the kitchen. In G3, entering the space came after the Eucharist in

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[171] As discussed in 7.3, pp.181-183, G3's room was different, in being the priest's study, rather than a participant's sitting room, and to some extent in layout – but still provided a space in the middle.

church, and leaving it was signified by the dismissal at the end of the short service of
Compline. My being a part of each group was marked by my being received into the
circle around the space and being given one of the chairs. And perhaps, as in other
kinds of discussion group where the outcome of conversation is not known at the
start, the openness of the space in the middle is symbolically a performance space.

I want to suggest that this provides a powerful image of the practice of 'Bible-study'.
It is as if, after the prologue of prayer, the voices of the biblical text are spoken into
the space (by being read aloud). Those voices remain there until they are replaced by
a new set of textual voices (and possibly beyond that). That the voices remain present
(metaphorically) is clear. Rarely, if ever, in these groups is the text simply a pretext
for discussing unrelated matters. And even when conversation ranges far and wide,
part of the ritual is to relate it back to the text being discussed, or to identify that
members have gone of on a tangent and need to return to the textual voices. The
textual voices, awakened by being spoken, frame the conversation.

But the textual voices are not intended to occupy the space on their own. This is not
an audience listening to a play, even one performed in the round. Implicit in the
ritual, and explicit in the discourse of the groups, is the invitation to introduce other
voices into the space, occasioned by the questions that initiate discussion. These
include: participants' voices re-stating or reflecting back the voices of the passage;
participants' voices responding to, disagreeing with, and playing with, the
implications of the textual voices; and other voices – of commentators, authority
figures, friends and others. Importantly, as implied by discussion in 9.3, many of the
voices are human ones, in the sense that they articulate the experience of participants
and those known to them.

There are parallels here with Tusting's (2000) study of a Roman Catholic Parish and
the part played by key written texts in identity work. The texts considered there
included a first communion preparation text book, those used with adult enquirers and
the parish bulletin. Tusting identified an intertextuality, in which, 'all these texts
contribute to the construction and maintenance of identity through the *creative
recombination* of other texts both spoken and written, a process that takes place as
part of social practice' (2000, 202). 'Creative recombination of texts' would act as a

partial description of the groups studied in this project. What the study of G1, G2 and G3 reveal, however, is an intertextuality that relies on the vocalisation of texts. Further, the discourse analytic approach used here provides an understanding of how such recombination takes place[172].

That the intertextuality is an oral/aural practice is underlined by the position of the Bible in the spatial arrangement. In each group the Bibles sit with participants in the circle, on people's knees, or the arm of a chair, or in their hands. The Bible is not placed in the middle of the circle, as a mark of reverence; rather it takes its place symbolically as a participant. It only enters the central space as spoken voice.

That this is significant is suggested by G1. In 5.4.4 (pp.112-115) it was noted that the group distinguished between 'being church' in the group, which involved everyone contributing, and the experience of what took place in church on Sunday, where 'it's all very much focused at the front'. Similarly in 5.4.8 (pp.118-128) there was discussion about the difference (and similarities) between what happened in the group and the act of preaching, again described as an activity 'from the front', or that happens 'in front'.

This is a reminder that in the Anglican churches, with which all three groups were associated, a significant aspect of what happens up front is the symbolic placing of the Bible, or at least the readings for the day, on a lectern (and possibly also on an altar or pulpit). Even if, as might happen in some of the churches, people also had Bibles in the pews, the space at the front, from which the Bible is read and preached upon to the congregation, and to which their attention is directed, is marked as a locus of the written, as well as the spoken word. In contrast, the central space of the Bible-study group is populated only with spoken voices and not with the written text. I suggest that this contributes to the distinctiveness of this performance space.

The image which develops the metaphor of performance space is a musical one. The voice, or voices, of the text offer something akin to a musical subject, or motif, or theme, stated in the reading aloud of a passage. This gives rise to a variety of images

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[172] This is absent from Tusting's approach, rooted as it is in ethnography and field notes.

of participants' responses – of the voices they introduce. The group leader offers a later orchestration of the theme, by an authoritative commentator; participants sing the tune back, as they reflect the voice of the text; they offer a chorus or complementary tune, as they connect the text with their experience; in more developed discussion, a second subject is voiced which interacts with that of the text; or group members improvise around the theme or motif, which voices the music in a new and perhaps strange way. This latter might draw a parallel between conversations that introduce the voice of inclusivity as a response to a classical theme of judgement, and the saxophone of Jan Garbarek weaving jazz improvisation into the medieval and renaissance music sung by the Hilliard Ensemble on the CD *Officium* (ECM, 1994). Of course the combination of voices can be simple or complex, as it were harmonious, discordant or banal, offering the resolution of a perfect cadence, or no resolution at all. But the voice of the text is unavoidably the starting point for the music-making. The responding and developing voices offer music which is at least some kind of *hommage* to the text – even if it is an *hommage* of disagreement. And together the textual and human voices are woven into polyphony, together they can weave a coherent whole[173]. The question this raises, to which we will return in section 9.4.4, is whether the music acts as a metaphor for the relationship between groups and God, and for the place of God in the practice of Bible-study.

9.4.3 A relational practice

The interaction of voices and the metaphor of music-making both act as a reminder that another dimension of the 'Bible-study' practice of the groups is relational. This is a participatory ritual, much more so, as G1 would point out, than the up-front ritual that happens in church on Sunday. Much of the relationality is apparent from the above description. But the effect on groups' understandings of knowledge and learning is worth restating. In the previous chapter consideration was given to relationship with the Bible and how groups negotiated their way around the poles of authority, close study and personal experience. The argument was made that this negotiation caught fire for participants on those occasions when 'insight' emerged for them. In each group such 'insight' was inextricably linked with the experience of learning from each other. There are some signs here of the theology of the groups

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[173] Craig Gardiner, in his unpublished PhD thesis (2005), explores polyphony as a metaphor for a christologically oriented theology of community, in which Christ is the *cantus firmus*.

being inherently about shared practice; and about a kind of wisdom that is not knowing that, nor knowing how, but knowing each other and knowing the text through each other. Perhaps, in the bringing of their own experience into dialogue with the text, there is even a sense of being known by the Bible, which participates in the circle with them[174].

This practice rooted in relational knowing, or at least the hope and potential of such knowing, may offer a clue as to how we may begin to characterise the part that God plays in the practice. Clive Marsh (2005, 170-177) holds that any sense of the continuing incarnation of Christ must involve grappling with the idea that Christ is embodied in relationships (although not in all relationships), involving real people/bodies. This is particularly the case if we are to avoid individualism on the one hand, and transcendentalism on the other. It might be suggested that in the interaction between different voices (understood by participants as in some sense God's voices, mediated through the text and through people's experience) that relationships come into being that incarnate the word of God. It is of significance here that the medium is talk-in-interaction. Not only the voices of experience and commentary, but the voice(s) of the text must be incarnated in this space by being spoken. As the plural words of God are spoken, the Word is enfleshed in the relationship of human conversation. That this is also a ritual practice suggests an aural/oral sacramentality – the voices both signify and realise the presence of the Word.
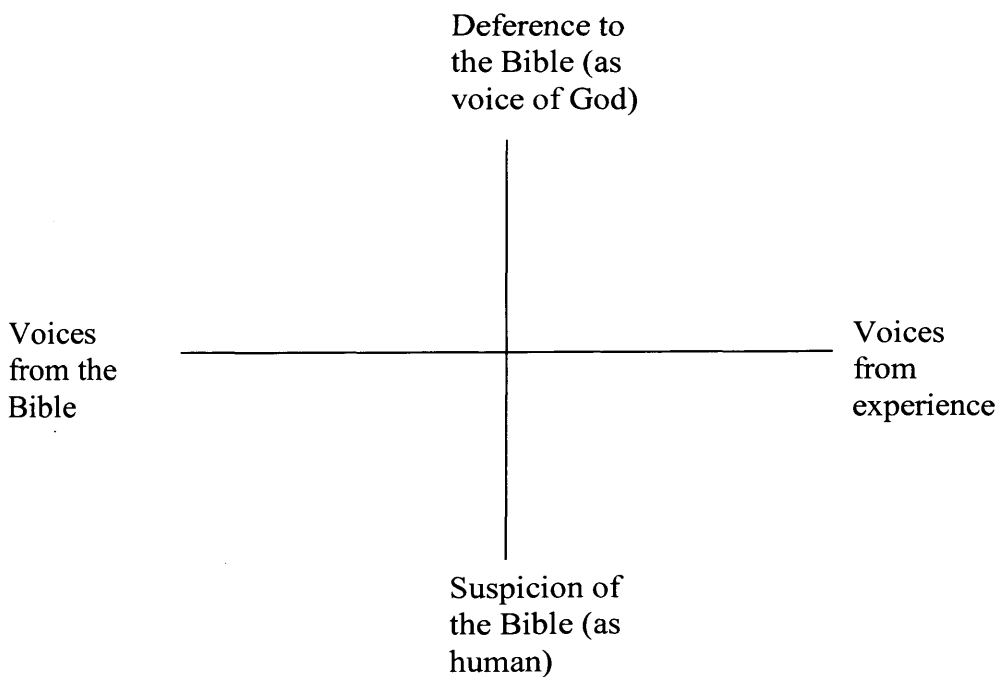
Although this theology is interpolated into the practice of the groups, it is not so very distant from their own thinking. G1 exhibited both an understanding of God speaking through different people and an understanding, as those who had received the Spirit, of being Christ's body. They did not, however, connect these two in the way

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[174] Walter (1995) suggests that house groups in churches can function as a form of mutual surveillance, but surveillance that is welcomed, arising out of the desire to be known, as a reaction against the isolation of an increasing emphasis on privacy. This provides an interesting sidelight on the groups studied here. However, they confound Walter's suggestion that such groups cannot happen in rural locations, and that such mutual surveillance 'tends to push [church groups] more toward the sectarian type of religious organisation' (1995, 124). Although G1, G2 and G3 all exist within a changing rural setting, yet village life (with its greater prevalence of other kinds of being known than in sub-urban settings) is still a reality for them. And all of them integrate their group practice with their participation in the local and wider church.

suggested here. Nonetheless, the image of incarnation provides a starting point for consideration of the theological practice of the groups, which follows, because it raises important questions. First, is it possible to say more about the relationship and dynamic between the voices of Bible-study and the God to whom participants orientate? Secondly, if God is in some sense incarnate in the voices, does this research also suggest a complementary, transcendent dimension to participants' relationship with God?

9.4.4 A theological practice

Section 9.4.1 offered some important initial analysis relating to the question of the voices in the groups and participants' orientation towards God. The conclusion of that discussion might give rise to the following diagram:

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                    Deference to
                    the Bible (as
                    voice of God)
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Voices                   │                   Voices
from the ─────────────────┼───────────────── from
Bible                    │                   experience
                         │
                         │
                         │
                         │
                    Suspicion of
                    the Bible (as
                    human)
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The diagram points to the interaction between two dynamics. The first is between an attitude of deference to the biblical text (thus heard as offering a voice(s) of God) and suspicion of the text (therefore perceived as a human voice(s)). The second is between attention to textual voices (however perceived) and to contemporary voices from participants' experience. Each of the three groups found a different balance in relation to each axis, and in terms of the interaction between them. But the analysis suggested that a tendency to be suspicious of the text corresponded, to some extent, to participants' experience playing an active critical role in interpretation.

That conclusion provokes a more detailed consideration of the question of how different voices were recruited in conversation and what light this casts on where God was located for participants. The test cases arise from situations in which there was no simple alignment between participants' perception of what the biblical text was saying, and their interpretation of their own experience.

The first of these comes from G3.2 (discussed in 7.4.3, pp.193-202, see especially extract 3.2.1). In the particular episode of conversation, F3.7 offers a 'dis-preferred' (Heritage, 1988; Wooffitt, 2001) response to the priest's invitation to reflect on Paul's approach portrayed in 1 Cor. 9.16-23, of 'becoming all things to all men or all things to all people...' The issue that F3.7 raises is whether Paul, in being all things to all people, is being 'hypocritical', 'not... truthful', 'two-faced', 'creeping up to people'. This critical voice appears to be rooted in her experience, as she refers to different groups intermingling and comparing Paul's approaches. This idea is not something which features in the text, and is projected, therefore, from F3.7's imagination, rooted in her own experience of what happens when people try to be all things to all people – and get found out!

F3.7 herself has a sense that this approach to the humanity of Paul is inappropriate in the group. And indeed, as discussed more fully in 7.4.3, the group works together to talk her into a 'preferred' response (with limited success). Key to this is the attitude of the priest. For him, it is very important that Paul is heard speaking God's voice – 'God's truth'. Within the modern frame of interpretation, with which M3.1 operates, Paul must be aligned with God, if the 'determinate' reading (Fowl, 1998) of the passage is to be found. For F3.7, however, interpretation is subject, here at least, to a different frame. However, that frame is not anti-theological and her critique of the text is aimed at Paul, not God. It is a piece of practical theological reasoning. For her, I would suggest, God's truth cannot be expressed through someone who is 'not being truthful'. This would be out of keeping with her principles, amongst which honesty is clearly very important. Her later participation in this meeting, which involved lengthy anecdotes about children being included in church life, indicates a strongly Christian approach to life. One might conclude that, not unreasonably, honesty is part of her Christianity.

The point of this argument is that F3.7 is recruiting a wider practical theological frame, as she engages with the text. And for her, at this moment, that frame has precedence over any received interpretation, which portrays Paul as a heroic figure within Christianity. For F3.7, Paul cannot be such a hero if he is dishonest.

A not dissimilar engagement took place in G1.5, already mentioned in 9.4.1. The interaction was occasioned by the phrase 'The God of Jacob' in Ps.24.6, and the deceit which had accompanied Jacob's rise to patriarchal status. F1.2 expressed discomfort with this. Her critique of the biblical text is rooted explicitly in a wider understanding of God than that offered by this verse, and particularly in the belief that God is not deceitful and cannot be responsible for deceit. As discussed in 5.4.5 (pp.115-116), the group explored different ways to resolve this tension between a particular text and their wider theology. Resolution was sought within the text. But significantly, viewpoints that arose involved identifying the human nature of the text, suggesting that the Bible bore the 'very firm imprint of man (*sic*)', and reflected rather more the voice of the author, than of God.

Once again, a theology that is wider than the text drives interpretation. But more precisely, a 'voice' of God (which speaks against deceit) is recruited to critique the Bible. As with F3.7's search for truthfulness in G3.2, the recruited voice is independent of any biblical text. Rather it appears to be that which is self-evident for those who regard themselves as Christian.

It could, of course, be argued that such voices are part of a wider 'biblical theology' derived from the Canon of Scripture as a whole[175]. Two things suggest that the working theology of the groups is not solely dependent on Scripture. One is that the voices recruited by F3.7 and F1.2 are put to work to uncover the humanness of the Bible. The second is that some of the contemporary voices recruited in groups are clearly at odds with the substance and culture of the Bible. This is most clearly demonstrated in G2.4, discussed in 9.3, where the interaction is between a first-century New Testament perspective on judgement and a very contemporary multi-faith perspective.

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[175] This would be in keeping with the approach of canonical criticism, see e.g. (Childs, 1993)

There is a significant conclusion to be drawn here about the hermeneutical theology of these groups. As I argued in 9.3, concern for a people can play a strong role in shaping a text's interpretation, especially in G1 and G2. An additional dimension of the hermeneutic at work, as this section has demonstrated, is a theological frame that has some independence from the Bible, and may critique particular texts. Relational principles rooted in experience, especially honesty and truthfulness, exemplify such a theology. The example from G2.4, mentioned above and discussed in 9.3, brings these elements together. A relational principle – inclusivity – acts as a critique of a text which is otherwise perceived as working against those whom members of G2 care about.

A determining criterion of interpretation is, then, whether a passage is in accord with participants' concern for people. If a passage does speak to members in this way, then it may be heard as the voice of God. For example, in G1.4 (see 5.4.4, pp.112-115) 1 Corinthians 12.1-11 was recruited as a voice against church leaders who did not value people's gifts. Similarly, in G3.3 (see 7.4.4, pp.202-209) the account of Jesus' transfiguration in Mark 9.2-9 enabled a conversation about how relationships with a neighbour and a work colleague had been 'transfigured'. If on the other hand, as discussed here, the text is heard as excluding people, or infringing relational values, then it is likely to be heard as a more human voice and another 'voice' from God may be sought to re-shape the interpretation.

Two things follow from this. One is that God is the consistent source of affirmation for a person-centred theology and of critique for those seen as not working this way. People's voices and the Bible's voices may be criticised for their inhumanity, but if that is the case they are both perceived as being of human origin. God is never, within this data, criticised for being uncaring. Therefore secondly, God transcends the voices and offers a frame for all the humane voices recruited by groups in their conversation. In the discussion of G3.2, it was suggested that the priest's wish to locate Paul in relation to the 'culture of God', had the effect of identifying Paul as integral to the 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) offered by the text. Within the corpus of data as a whole, the 'sacred canopy' is wider than the Bible (and may exclude particular texts). It also includes, and is wider than, non-textual perspectives; but it is consistently provided by God.

This conclusion holds good even for G3. Although the dominant interpretations of M3.1 and the definite speech-exchange patterns inhibit critique of the Bible, human perspectives are nonetheless important. As is the case with the 'second stories' (Arminen, 2004; Lehtinen, 2005) provided by lay participants (see especially 7.4.4, pp.202-209), God does speak through experience. Alignment between those 'voices' and that of the text has to be achieved in the Bible-study; and on occasion negotiation with the text is necessary for that to be accomplished.

The conclusion reinforces the understanding derived from (Marsh, 2005) that in the relationality of Bible-study conversation, and interaction of textual and non-textual voices, God is incarnate in the interpretative, identity-shaping activity of these groups. But it also makes a case for God transcending, and locating, the 'voices'. This would be in keeping with the ritual practice of the groups discussed in 9.4.2. Whereas the Bibles sit alongside participants in the circle, God might be said to constitute and hold the circle in being. Entering and leaving the circle is marked by prayer. As the following example from G2 illustrates, that prayer locates the group and its practice under the 'sacred canopy' (see especially lines 7-9).

Extract 2.3.3

1 F2.1:	O K hh (2s) let's just begin with a (.) an opening prayer (8s) heavenly
2	father we thank you er once more for this (.) opportunity to come
3	together (1s) and we do thank you for the (.) fellowship that does exist
4	between us (.) we pray for those who are not (.) here tonight ((details
5	of who they are and what they are doing instead)) we think of them and
6	(.) lift them up to you lord whatever (.) blessings and concerns they
7	may have we know you hear them too and we ask you to look down on
8	us this evening as we seek to understand more (.) of (.) your living
9	word (.) who is our saviour Jesus Christ (.) amen

Two further points need to be made. The first is about the relative status of the 'voices' which incarnate God in groups. Clearly, the 'voices' of the text and of participants have in common that they may reveal God, or may be mistaken about God, clouded by human fallibility. They are not different in kind. Rather they are different in degree of authority. The Bible is the senior member of the circle of the Bible-study group. As members of G2 put it in G2.1 (6.4.1, pp.132-138), the Bible is

'central', the 'trigger', the 'bedrock', the 'reason for meeting'. It is therefore the real convenor of the group, with the right to 'trigger' conversation, to be always consulted and referred back to. But there are limits to the text's authority: it is not infallible; it may be questioned; and it must make room for the 'voices' of experience. Like other participants in the circle, the Bible sits under God. In hermeneutical terms, although the text is to be interpreted, it is itself a (not infallible) interpretation of God. All 'voices' which speak of God contribute to a central hermeneutic – an interpretation, not of the text, but of the relationship between God and people[176].

The second point to be made is about the relationship between the incarnational and transcendent dimensions of groups' experience. The 'voices' which incarnate God are manifest in conversation. They are recognisable to analyst and other participants alike, capable of explicit identification during groups' interpretative work. The transcendent dimension of Bible-study is rather less tangible. The consistent experiential pointers to its existence, however, are: fellowship; learning from each other; and the 'insight' or 'inspiration' that results from being together.

The metaphor of music extends the above picture a little. Frances Young (1990) explores the analogy of performance in order to explore plurality of interpretation. In particular she offers the cadenza as an image of contemporary biblical interpretation. This is a picture of contemporary improvisation on a classical theme within the boundaries of the original composition. Within the life of the groups studied here, a different image is required. That of Jan Garbarek improvising in amongst the voices of the Hilliard Ensemble in *Officium* (referred to above in 9.4.2), takes us beyond the prescribed limits of the improvisation of a cadenza at the end of a concerto. But, at the risk of dissolving it, the metaphor needs to be developed slightly further. In the polyphony of Bible-study voices, the interaction of classical and contemporary voices is about more than performance; it is even about more than a jazz player's improvisation on classical themes. Rather classical and contemporary themes (some of which are unknown within the classical repertoire) are incorporated in a new

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[176] This is underlined by the critique of authoritarian leaders, who claim too much for the text, and exclude others thereby from the opportunity of that relationship.

composition[177]. Yet the composer is not the group, but God. And the piece's shared performance draws people into relationship with the composer and can enable 'insight' which transcends the individual themes of the music, but relates to the unity of the performance[178].

9.5 The practical theology of Bible-study groups

This chapter has identified, through analysis of empirical data, the parameters of the practical theology that arises from the three Bible-study groups studied within this research. This is a theology rooted in dialogue and negotiation. As part of the theology, the Bible is held in high esteem. But the voices of God arising from contemporary experience are the Bible's partner, and sometime adversary. Both Bible and other perspectives can be called to account as part of the primary hermeneutic at work – that it is the relationship between God and people that is being interpreted. This in turn determines which of the voices are privileged at any one point within the dynamics of discussion.

The dialogue is critical, and often self-consciously so, as different viewpoints are recruited to the argument. But the practice is also performative, enabling an outcome which reaches beyond the rational, offering the possibility of transcendent 'insight'. *Pace* Forrester (2000), the theorising that takes place here is, therefore, both practical <u>and</u> contemplative[179]. Undue reification of theory, particularly in the authoritarian use of Scripture by some church leaders, is resisted. Correspondingly, verification is an important component of this theology – the verification of relationship enhanced by the interpretative process.

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[177] The second venture by Garbarek and the Hilliard Ensemble, *Mnemosyne* (ECM, 1999), has something of this character, as all parties, including the singers, engage in improvisation. This was drawn to my attention by my colleague, Stephen Roberts, to whom I am grateful for the insight.

[178] This picture is in keeping with the articulation by Birgit Meyer of how the transcendent is mediated within religious practice: '... the transcendental is not a self-revealing entity, but on the contrary, always 'affected' or 'formed' by mediation processes, in that media and practices of mediation invoke the transcendental via particular sensational forms.' (2006, 14) It also extends that description, in that these groups suggest mediation via voices which are known as revelatory incarnations of aspects of the transcendent God.

[179] This insight owes something to a conversation with Stephen Pattison, in which he suggested that Forrester had overemphasised the distinction between the practical and contemplative in his evaluation of Plato and Aristotle.

Interpretative strategies adopted as part of Bible-study are plural; necessarily so, because, as G1 would put it, 'we're all different'. Yet one cannot conclude with (Guest, 2002) that this represents a 'liberalisation'[180]. For this is not 'a general tolerance towards difference' (Guest, 2002, 167) but rather inclusion of difference within a confessional frame, often because of a desire to reconcile people under God.

The plurality of interpretative approaches in these groups has other consequences, especially for a practical theological understanding of hermeneutics. The thesis demonstrates that, just as the guiding hermeneutical principle for groups is whether it builds relationships, so the use of particular reading strategies is pragmatic and occasioned. This has implications for connections that might be made between Bible-study and, for example, narrative approaches to the Bible (discussed above in 2.3.4, pp.26-31). Two very different uses of story illustrate the need to locate these within specific social interaction, in order to understand them. Neither approach, incidentally, is concerned with either a thematic approach to the 'narrative' of the Bible, nor to establish such a thing as the grand story of Scripture[181]!

In G1.3 (see 5.4.3, pp.108-112) the demanding character of John the Baptist is illuminated by comparison with contemporary demanding characters, such as Ian Paisley. This does indeed appear to be an example of contemporary stories illuminating a character in a New Testament narrative. But the key point is what participants accomplish in this 'narrative' approach – namely a distancing of themselves from the demands of such figures in every age. The second example, already referred to in this chapter, is the 'second stories' told by lay members of G3 in G3.3 (see 7.4.4, pp.202-209). Here, a narrative response is offered to the historical critical interpretation offered by M3.1. It is occasioned, however, not so much by the introductory interpretation of the text, as by the priest's specific invitation to participants to share 'mountain-top' experiences, or experience of any kind of 'revelation of God'.

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[180] See 9.3 above.
[181] See the discussion in chapter 2 (2.3.4, pp.26-31) of the place of narrative in pastoral and practical theology, which concluded that both these tendencies were present in this literature.

These two examples have implications for consideration of 'interpretative communities', as discussed by Village (2007, ch.7, discussed above, in 2.4.2, pp.32-36). They illustrate the drawback with seeking to make any over-simplistic connection between a particular reading strategy and a particular group or community. The implication for practical theology is clear. Understanding Bible-study groups as 'interpretative communities' involves an understanding of the complexity of social dynamic as well as of interpretative approach. It requires, to adapt a phrase from conversation analysis, an understanding of interpretation-in-interaction[182].

Working towards such an understanding has been a guiding principle of this investigation. The results discussed in this chapter justify, at least to some extent, the modification of the action research approach, discussed in ch.4 (4.2.3, pp.82-83). They demonstrate the value of understanding the 'how?' and 'why?' of Bible-study, in order to understand how best to facilitate it. They justify the considerable attention paid to the observation and analysis of Bible-study in particular groups; but also the decision to pay less attention to planning and implementing new approaches to that practice. This approach has had two particular benefits. First, it has enabled me to move from an initial position, shared with other practical theologians, of being driven by the concerns of other disciplines (especially hermeneutics and biblical studies), to discover a thoroughly practice-based understanding of Bible-study groups. Secondly, this study has therefore contributed a rich picture of Bible-study, which has been little explored hitherto as a faith practice. Both those outcomes justify the careful examination of the complexity of the practice as a vital part of action research. Nonetheless the conclusion to the thesis will offer some suggestions about how Bible-study groups can be resourced, which grow out of the understanding of its dynamics.

Two facets of the practice of Bible-study act as jumping-off points for suggestions for its future. One is suggested by Pattison (2000, 130), who points to the importance, in understanding the use of the Bible in pastoral practice, of examining its formational role within the Christian community. This thesis has offered a picture of Bible-study as just such a community formational process, contributing to participants' identity; and their understanding of how they live out their faith in a wider practice.

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[182] The phrase 'talk-in-interaction' is often used in CA to indicate that the dynamics of talk and social interaction are inextricably interwoven.

The second facet develops from that and is suggested by Graham (1996). In the interaction mapped in this project, there is evidence of a practical theology in which human experience and relationship provides the key to a practical hermeneutic of the 'living word of God' found in the Bible and elsewhere[183]. This is realised to a different extent and in different ways in each of the three groups studied. Yet there is something of a parallel here (especially in the practice of G1 and G2) with Graham's evaluation of the preaching of Mary Hunt.

> A public declaration of experience is therefore placed in the context of the gathering of the community for worship, and a challenge concerning the nature of belief is issued. Hunt uses an occasion of pastoral practice – the sermon – to express new perspectives and to pursue their implications for the core values of the faith community. (1996, 179)

The differences between that description and the practice of Bible-study groups are clear. They are not quite a public space, even though G1 would identify the group as a way of being 'church'. And their being to some extent not public may enable their exploration, critique and playfulness. Correspondingly, the challenges from experience exist in the groups in tension with wider authority structures of the church, especially in G3 (where the priest embodies those structures). All the groups have, however, found ways together of connecting experience, text and interpretation of God. And, on occasion, they do discover ways in which 'the disclosive imperatives of transformatory practice [can] determine the self-understanding of the community and not the other way around' (Graham, 1996, 206).

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[183] The phrase, 'living word of God', was especially used in G1 in a way which appeared to give expression to the perceived relationship between the word of God in the Bible, and the word of God in members' experience.

Chapter 10
Conclusion

10.1 Introduction

This thesis has presented a rich, in-depth picture of particular Bible-study groups, rooted in an understanding of their talk-in-interaction. This conclusion will identify key features of the investigative process and of what it revealed of the dynamics and theological practice of those groups. It will also consider what implications are suggested for a wider understanding of Bible-study.

Conclusions will also be offered about the hybrid research methodology, in particular about the interaction of an action research frame, and a linguistic ethnography approach to analysis. A particular focus will be different understandings of 'alignment' present in the discussion. Directions for future research will be identified.

Finally, suggestions will be made about how the practice of Bible-study groups can be enhanced. A musical analogy will focus attention on how groups might reflect on their interaction and interpretation of the Bible.

10.2 Investigating Bible-study groups
10.2.1 Paying attention to speech-exchange patterns and linguistic resources

The depth of this study of Bible-study talk depended on attention to the <u>detail</u> of the talk, turn-by-turn (Sacks et al., 1974), especially through the use of detailed transcriptions. Additional attention to the 'institutionality' of conversation, seen, for example, in particularities of lexicality and asymmetry of role (Drew & Heritage, 1992; Heritage, 1997), led to an understanding of its 'orchestration' (Dingwall, 1980). This enabled comparison with other 'institutional' talk, especially in educational settings (Mehan, 1979).

A particular facet of this approach focused on 'alignment' (Arminen, 2004) amongst members, and the negotiation that took place as members oriented to opening questions and prompts. So participants offering 'dis-preferred' responses (Heritage, 1988, 138; Wooffitt, 2001, 56) to such openings, provided the opportunity to consider how groups worked with voices that interrupted the expected flow of conversation.

This close study of talk generated, in turn, a wider focus on the linguistic resources that groups drew on. This aspect of the investigation had a distinct trajectory[184], as different terms for these resources were explored in relation to the three groups. The term 'voice' (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004) acted as a useful heuristic device for all three groups (in retrospect). It contributes to a picture of voices from different 'cultural domains' (Atkinson, 1995, 18), in dialogue, or interrupting each other, offering different contextualisations of the interpretation of biblical texts[185].

These results suggest parameters applicable to other Bible-study groups. It seems plausible that most groups, at least in the United Kingdom setting, could be expected to work in and with two cultural domains: a modern domain, characterised in particular by the tension between historical critical interpretation of the Bible and a more literal interpretation[186]; and a contemporary domain, characterised by preoccupations of contemporary society (e.g 'inclusivity', or 'fairness'). A further cultural dynamic ought also to be at work, between participants' membership of wider society and of the sub-culture of the church. But the part that this tension might play appears less predictable, dependent on the particular identity work done by groups, and their understanding of their social location[187].

Within the dialogue between the expected cultural domains, one would also expect to see a tension between a 'canonical' voice, speaking of the text's authority, and a

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[184] This was discussed in 8.4.4 (pp.253-254) and preceding sections of ch.8

[185] Diagrams, such as those in 8.4.2 (pp.247-250) can offer a visual representation of this portrayal. Diagrams and accompanying analysis offer a more complex and nuanced picture than the consideration of contextualisation and re-contextualisation in the American setting in (Bielo, 2007a, 2007b).

[186] This significance of this domain within Bible-study groups would seem to be connected with the influence on groups of theological education and of Biblical studies in particular. It was noticeable in the groups studied here, that in each group theological education had shaped not only the leaders of the group, but a number of other members as well, who had received training in order to exercise various roles in the life of the local church. The tension between the historical approach and a more literal interpretation of the text underlines that this is a tension that theological educators have consistently left unaddressed, not least because they have colluded in a separation between study of the Bible and the practice of interpretation. Each group in this study, on the other hand, had, of necessity, found ways of negotiating with historical study, and holding it within their practical, confessional setting.

[187] In G1, for example, members tended to identify themselves over and against the institutional church; for them church is contemporary and inclusive. For G2, identification with the church is significant, and consistent with a modern confessional approach to the Bible; but this alignment is gently subverted by contemporary 'voices'. Only in G3, where there is the lowest degree of alignment between the priest leader and the other participants, and where contemporary concerns are most heavily constrained, does church identity become a cultural domain in its own right, generating particular 'voices' which lay people may employ in the interpretative dialogue with the priest.

'contingent' voice, giving greater priority to members' human experience[188].

Findings in this area might give rise to a generic understanding of how the Bible is recruited in Bible-study conversation, articulated here in terms of argument, and the place within it of data (D), warrants (W) and claims (C) (Toulmin, 1958, ch.3). One aspect of what happens in groups is that a text (D) gives rise to a claim (C) on the basis of a particular warrant (W). For example[189], Paul speaks of being all things to all people (D); since Paul is an authoritative figure (W), Christians today should be culturally adaptable (C). What is apparent from this research, is that competing warrants can give rise to completing claims. The alternative to the example just given, working from the same data, would be: since people who try to be all things to all people are exposed for their inconsistency (W), Paul is a hypocrite and not a good example for Christians today (C). One would expect to find in other Bible-study groups alternative warrants for interpretative claims; some rooted in a 'canonical' understanding of the Bible's authority; others rooted in a 'contingent' understanding of the importance of members' experience. Sometimes such warrants will coincide, as inherited interpretation and experience pull together; at other times they will conflict, giving rise to negotiation. To understand the particular interaction, close attention needs to be paid, as in this project, to the detail of discussion.

10.2.2 Developing an understanding of Bible-study practice

The approach to the investigation of Bible-study groups outlined above, paying attention to how conversation is conducted as well as to the interpretative work done by participants, builds a picture of interpretation as social interaction. At numerous points in the thesis, it was noted that speech-exchange patterns and interpretative approaches were interwoven. Drawing on wider ethnographic attention to the setting and circumstances of Bible-study talk, in addition to the detailed DA work, the thesis provided a description of the dimensions of Bible-study practice: sensual; ritual; relational; and theological[190]. This contributes to an understanding of Bible-study groups as an 'activity-type' (Levinson, 1992; Sarangi, 2000); similar to other types, but also with distinct characteristics. In particular, one should note aspects which

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[188] In relation to these designations, compare the 'empiricist' and 'contingent' repertoires of scientists (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984). As in the case of G3, other voices may also be present.
[189] This example is derived from study of G3. See 7.4.3, pp.193-202.
[190] See sections 94.1-9.4.4, pp.266-281.

distinguish Bible-study groups from tutorial groups, and which might well characterise Bible-study groups more widely than this sample.

Each group studied here had found ways of constraining 'academic' biblical studies and locating it in a broader practice[191]. Three things enabled this. One was a balance between study and fellowship, expressed both directly, and in uncertainty about describing groups as 'Bible-study', 'home', or just 'Bible' groups[192]. The second was that learning, for members of all groups, was centrally about the possibility of 'insight', generated by learning together. 'Insight' offered not so much know-how, as inspiration for their Christian lives. Thirdly, the practice was circumscribed by prayer, which located it underneath a 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) of God's presence[193].

The above depiction of Bible-study interpretation-in-interaction, derived from the practice of groups studied in this research, has been shown to be not only a faith practice amenable to practical theological investigation, but also practical theology in its own right. The justification for this is twofold: first, the practice involves dialogue, involving biblical texts, later interpretations, views rooted in participants' experience and a variety of interpretative approaches – all of which may contribute to a dynamic which is both creative and critical; secondly, a central hermeneutic is concerned with how the different voices of Bible-study interpret and enhance the relationship between God, group members and others who are significant to them. Within this theological practice, it has further been shown that the Bible participates alongside the human members of groups, 'convening' their conversation and acting as a taken-for-granted reference point. Nonetheless it is open to critical appraisal, like

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[191] G2, for example, were clear about the secondary nature of academic study. See especially, 6.4.4, pp.148-156, and 6.4.6, pp.167-177.

[192] This accords in part with Wuthnow's location of Bible-study groups in America within the category of self-help groups (Wuthnow, 1994a), and his observation there of study and 'fellowship' working together.

[193] There are particular implications of these conclusions for the practice of theological education, especially where the field of biblical studies is recruited for the training of those who will serve as authorised ministers in the churches. The relational and trans-rational dimensions of Bible-study argue against a straightforward application of critical approaches in such training settings. This has implications for my own reflection 2, in appendix 1, but even more so for such approaches as (Fee & Stuart, 2003) which look to an 'objective' approach to the 'original meaning' of the biblical text generated by critical study. In particular, the findings of this research suggest the need for conscious and regular reflection in courses of theological education about the way in which biblical studies approaches to interpretation are recontextualised in confessional settings, including the student's own.

any other source of revelation recruited into conversation; as members seek alignment between an interpretation of the text and their own experience. And in those situations where group members judge that a Bible passage does not satisfactorily interpret the relationship between God and people, then this is likely to be attributed to the human aspect of the text, or a different interpretative angle on the text sought.

God, however, is not the object of critique, being seen as the consistent source of those voices that nurture members: in their own identity as Christians and church members (marked by qualities such as honesty and integrity); in relationship with each other and with others they encounter, including those who do not share their faith. God is therefore both incarnate within Bible-study talk, speaking through a variety of voices which contribute to the relationality of group practice, and transcendent. This transcendence is seen in the way God is located as the 'sacred canopy' (Berger, 1967) of the critical discernment of sources of revelation; and is apprehended by group members through 'insight', which they apprehend through their shared activity[194].

10.3 The value of a hybrid methodology and further research

The trajectory of the research methodology has already been a focus of attention in this thesis (in 3.2.4, pp.50-52, 4.2.3, pp.82-83 and 8.4.1 – 8.4.4, pp.246-254). Further, as part of that consideration and at other points, I have considered the significance of my involvement in the project. I have consistently argued that although the action research approach originally envisaged was modified, yet the project remained in some sense action research, despite the adoption of linguistic ethnography approaches which focused attention on the detail of existing practice. The justification of this was that it continued to be research conducted by a practitioner in the world of Bible-study (rather than a social scientist); that part of the impetus for modification was engaging with the practice of others – making the research more collaborative[195]; that there was

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[194]The practice considered here is distinct, therefore, from that referred to in relation to the pilot group (see 4.2.2, pp.76-82). The reference was to Billig's study of discussion of the Hebrew Scriptures in Orthodox Judaism, in which there was a 'culture... marked by dilemmatic argument... Even the Deity is believed to join in these discussions, as he argues with His prophets and even with Himself' (Billig et al., 1988, 18). In contrast, within the Bible-study talk of G1, G2 and G3, God appears to offer voices into the argument, but consistent, rather than conflicting voices. Further, God holds the argument, rather than promoting it.

[195] And therefore subject to the planning and approach to action of the participant groups.

good reason for extending the 'observation' phase of the action-research cycle[196], because the practice of Bible-study is under-researched; and that DA approaches specifically enabled critical reflection on my role, as a practitioner-researcher.

The interesting question is whether the use of a linguistic ethnography approach to analysis is capable of being incorporated in a more interventionist action research investigation. In section 3.3.2 (pp.54-57), I identified how progressively reducing my leadership role in groups simplified the reflexive questions needing to be addressed, into ones about my two roles as researcher and participant. The corollary of this was that questions of alignment have been considered under two separate headings in this thesis. One heading was alignment between research perspectives and those of participants[197]. The other was alignment amongst group participants, including me, during Bible-study[198]. To add, in future research, intervention by the researcher as a group leader, would draw these two areas of alignment together into a more complex discussion of reflexivity. Close attention to discourse ought still to facilitate this consideration, offering the chance to map the interaction of the different voices and roles. This would be to stretch the use of DA, and especially CA, analytical approaches somewhat, given that their intended field of inquiry is 'naturally-occurring' talk[199], rather than researcher-provoked talk. Such an approach would have been a step too far for this project, which involved learning the craft skills of linguistic ethnography from scratch and, in particular, how to recontextualise a familiar practice as something strange enough to research, especially through transcription. But, given that practitioners use DA approaches in a variety of ways already[200], it is not inconceivable that a linguistic ethnography approach could enable reflection on a researcher's multiple roles; and might lead to an interesting deconstruction of the term 'naturally-occurring' talk.

Whatever the potential of the methodology within more interventionist action research, I would argue that it has facilitated in this project a rich, layered account of the practice of Bible-study groups. Given the decision to undertake a qualitative

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[196] This refers to the 'Deakin' cycle of action research: plan, act, observe, reflect (Kemmis, 1993, 178).
[197] This was considered especially in relation to return visits to G1 and G2, sections 5.4.8 (pp.118-128) and 6.4.6 (pp.167-177), drawing on (Sarangi, 2002).
[198] This was a particular issue in consideration of G3, 7.4.5 (pp.209-219), drawing on (Arminen, 2004).
[199] See, for example, (Silverman, 2001, ch.6; Wetherell et al., 2001a, 27f)
[200] See section 3.3.4 (pp.61-63) for a discussion of practitioner approaches in the medical context.

empirical study, the account represents an in-depth study of particular groups. Although from different traditions, groups studied here are all Anglican, and are connected to churches in rural settings and there is variety of practice across the groups. This means that conclusions in this chapter about the applicability of this research to Bible-study groups more widely have been made cautiously. Both specific findings about G1, G2 and G3, and wider conclusions constitute something of an agenda for future studies, particularly given the absence of much extant research into Bible-study groups in the United Kingdom.

The coherence of the research findings, however, and the alignment (Sarangi, 2002) between my researcher's perspective and that of members of G1 and G2[201], both suggest that, at the least, the methodological approach to investigating Bible-study groups would be transferable to other settings. The approach has at its heart a number of questions that might be addressed by a researcher to the practice of Bible-study in other locations. Those questions would include a range of the following.

1. **How is the conversation of the group shaped?** How formal, or informal is it? Is the shaping (or 'orchestration') of the conversation rule-based, or role-based (Dingwall, 1980)? What other forms of talk does it resemble (Arminen, 2004; Mehan, 1979)?

2. **How is the text of the Bible recruited into the conversation?** What authority is accorded to the text? What interpretative approaches are employed? What is the relationship between the way group members participate in the conversation and the way the Bible participates? What warrants are employed to support claims about the significance of the text?

3. **What other resources are recruited into the discussion?** Do these include other authoritative perspectives? Does personal or shared experience contribute viewpoints?

4. **How might the resources thus recruited (including biblical texts) be characterised in linguistic terms?** Do the terms 'interpretative repertoire' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988); 'discursive node' (Todd, 2005); or 'voice' (Atkinson, 1992, 1995, 1999; Mishler, 1984; Sarangi, 2004) assist that characterisation?

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[201] This was demonstrated in their response to my initial findings in G1.6 (5.4.8, pp.118-128) and G2.6 (6.4.6, pp.167-177).

5. **Does it elucidate the practice to locate resources within particular 'cultural domains' (Atkinson, 1995)?** Do participants orientate to them as belonging to the discourse of the church, or contemporary society, or a modern frame of reference?

6. **What is the interaction between the resources within the conversation?** What kind of negotiation or argument might that involve? Which resources, if any, are deployed in a critical way? What are the wider dimensions of the group's practice?

7. **What hermeneutic/s drive/s the conversation?** Is/are the hermeneutic/s noticeably practical – driven by the interests or concerns of the lived experience of faith? What other sources for group hermeneutics are referred to, if any?

8. **How do participants orientate towards God in their practice?** In what ways is God involved in their dialogue? In what ways does their practice suggest that God transcends the conversation?

9. **Can the assumptions which the researcher desires to bring into the investigation be shown to have 'procedural consequentiality' (Arminen, 2000)?** Do group members orientate to them in conversation? Has the researcher accounted for their own assumptions about how Bible-study is, or ought to be practised?

These questions would form the basis for further qualitative study of a larger number of Bible-study groups, which would build up a more extensive account of the practice. Equally, many of these questions would be applicable to consideration of other theological practices involving similar kinds of oral intertextuality to that found in Bible-study groups. A particular candidate might well be the practice of theological reflection (see, e.g., Graham et al., 2005; Green, 1990). The general approach might also have some currency in investigation of wider areas of pastoral practice. Take the case of pastoral care, for example. While continuing to agree with (Pattison, 2000) that intertextuality (involving the Bible) is not a necessary aspect of the engagement between carer and cared-for, nonetheless there will be occasions when it is an aspect, at which point this model of research has something to offer[202].

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[202] Inappropriate application of the research model is safeguarded in the approach itself, in the concern to demonstrate the 'procedural consequentiality' (Arminen, 2000), not only of assumptions about how

10.4 Action research and enriching the practice of Bible-study

At the end of the last chapter, I indicated that suggestions would be offered for enhancing the practice of Bible-study, which extend a little the action research dimension of the project. These suggestions follow. While there is some overlap with the approach to further research outlined above, the concern here is not to investigate whether a practical theology approach is present. Rather, it is to assist in the development of Bible-study as an activity designed to interpret the lived experience of faith. The suggestions are expressed in terms associated with the musical metaphor already adopted as a way of envisaging Bible-study practice.

10.4.1 Developing an ear for the music

All three groups studied in this project showed themselves capable of reflecting on their own practice, if only in the first meeting I shared with them. G1 especially, but G2 as well, positively enjoyed such reflection and were happy to participate in discussion of my initial analysis of their activity, as part of my 'respondent validation' return visits. This suggests that reflection on their practice (characteristic of both theological reflection and action research) might assist groups in their shared development.

The aim of such reflection is suggested by the musical analogy. Members of choirs and orchestras benefit not only from listening to their individual performance, but also from listening to each other. The aim of reflection on Bible-study would be similar: to enable people to listen to the interaction of different voices, including their own. As a first step a number of questions listed above as research questions might provide a starting point for such reflection, allowing people to identify the dynamics and components of their conversation. Questions 1 to 3 and 6 to 8 would offer possibilities, although technical terms, such as 'hermeneutic' might need translation for those unfamiliar with them.

As in my research, gaining a critical distance might enhance participants' ability to hear and reflect in the midst of the practice, becoming aware of different voices at

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interpretation takes place in pastoral practice, but also of research questions designed to elucidate that process or dynamic.

work, and the cultural domains in which voices are located, and thus enhance their performance. It is questionable whether prompts for reflection on their own would provide this experience. Another approach would involve groups listening to recordings of their own discussions. Although this might seem a little artificial, at least some groups would warm to this approach and be stimulated by it. Both G1 and G2 responded positively to my playing back recordings of their previous discussion, as part of my return visit to each group. In the case of G1 this produced a particularly rich reflection about the kind of theology which they did[203].

10.4.2 Reflecting on orchestration

If groups worked to develop an ear for their own performative practice, that might enable them in turn to think about the orchestration of their discussion, both how it works already and how that might change. Clearly the image is a double one drawn both from DA (Dingwall, 1980) and from music. DA offers questions to groups that begin with research question 1 (in 10.2 above). Further questions would include:

1. What models of group process might be helpful in understanding the group's practice, e.g. tutorial or classroom (Mehan, 1979); or self-help group (Arminen, 2004; Lehtinen, 2005; Wuthnow, 1994a, 1994b); orchestra, or jazz band?

2. What does question 1 have to say about the role of the group leader(s)? What rights are ceded to them in the interests of an ordered discussion (Mehan, 1979)?

3. Who can initiate a new episode of conversation; draw in other members to the conversation; offer a formulation of the conversation thus far?

4. How much introduction to a particular Bible passage is helpful in opening up discussion?

5. What kinds of question generate what kinds of response[204]?

6. Is there asymmetry between the participation of those who exercise different roles (Heritage, 1997)? Does this asymmetry help, or hinder the conversation?

The musical parallel complements these questions, by encouraging members to listen to their shared performance. This might mean listening for asymmetry, rather than just thinking about it. But it would extend beyond this, encouraging reflection on the

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[203] For discussion of G1's response, see 5.4.8, pp.118-128; and of G2's response, see 6.4.6, pp.167-177.
[204] See appendix 10 (pp.347-349) for a discussion of G1's response to the initial question, 'What leaps out at you?' See also 7.4.4 (pp.202-209) for a discussion of how the priest projected openings for the telling of 'second stories' (Arminen, 2004; Lehtinen, 2005)

way different participants offered a particular voice within the polyphony of Bible-study talk, and about the balance between those voices.

10.4.3 Developing the repertoire, enhancing performance and improvisation

Developing an ear for performance might also raise questions about the repertoire of resources used, and how they contribute to the performance of Bible-study[205]. The approach would be straightforward, in one sense. It would involve reviewing interpretative approaches used in Bible-study, considering, for example, what approaches from biblical studies were recruited, or how people's experience gave rise to questions or approaches, or how particular concepts from contemporary culture (such as fairness or inclusivity) entered into the discussion.

A second stage would be to consider how the repertoire of a particular group might be broadened to develop the richness of their polyphony. Groups might decide to widen their range of questions in the light of the reflection suggested in 10.4.2, or widen the range of people posing questions to the group; in order to draw on new approaches to Bible-study. If a group was used to relying on a historical-critical approach, they might explore the use of narrative, either in relation to the text[206], or their own experience[207]. If voices from contemporary culture were implicit in conversation, a group might wish to make them an explicit part of the dialogue.

This might enable in turn a reflection on performance and improvisation. A Bible-study group might consider how far their practice was a careful replaying of a classical repertoire. They might wish to explore how new approaches might stretch the practice, and increase the creativity of discussion[208]. Groups might wish, as part of this, to reflect (like groups studied here) on past performance, in order to identify occasions when shared practice generated inspiration or insight.

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[205] Here the word 'repertoire' is chosen solely for its musical connotations and is not designed to recall earlier discussion of 'interpretative repertoires'.

[206] For example, this might involve the use of modern parallels to understand characterisation, as in G1's discussion of John the Baptist in 5.4.3 (pp.108-112).

[207] This might include learning to project into conversation openings for the telling of 'second stories' as discussed in 7.4.4 (pp.202-209).

[208] See for example the reference to G2's discussion of how considering works of art had enriched their practice, in 6.4.6 (pp.167-177).

Two things in particular would be significant for such reflection. One would be a question about how participatory group practice was. It seems clear from this research, that in parallel to the gradient of greater participation from G3, through G2 to G1, was one of greater richness of reflection and awareness of how that reflection contributed to their faith practice. The other would be a question about how far group practice should be directed by a particular interpretative approach; rather than approaches recruited being deployed to interpret and enhance the relationship between God, text and participant, and their living out of faith. Such questions would, I contend, contribute to the talk, dynamics and theological practice of Bible-study groups, and enhance the possibility of that practice being an occasion of 'insight' and an encounter with 'the living word of God'.

Appendix 1
Reflections on practice

Reflection 1 – Overlapping contexts of theology and an emerging interest
As educator, I had responsibility for some years for the teaching of biblical studies. Overlapping with that has been a responsibility, which continues to the present, for the teaching of practical theology and especially for enabling people to engage in theological reflection. The bridge between these two areas has been the teaching of hermeneutics within programmes of pastoral, contextual, or practical theology. Those people with whom I worked educationally were often concerned not only with their own individual theological reflection on practice, but also with reflection shared with others in the context of their ministry, and with their role as enablers of reflection. For some of these people such reflection was earthed in the shared practice of Bible-study activities of different kinds, which formed some of the case-studies which we examined together in classes on practical theology, and/or hermeneutics.

Interwoven with my work as 'theological educator' (working with others engaged in, or preparing for, public ministry) has been my own exercise of that ministry. In one sense the hermeneutical task was the same here as in the educational arena – to enable people to reflect theologically, in conversation with the Bible. In another sense the context re-shaped the task. Reflection took place within the life of the local church, rather than in an educational institution. Further, the context was not a programme of learning, but the wider shared experience of a church community, whose members not only learnt together, but also worshipped together, cared for each other, raised money together and met each other in a variety of other contexts. In this local church context I was also involved in different ways, as pastor, worship leader, leader of decision-making processes, and fellow-member of the local community, as well as someone who facilitated learning and reflection. Within this diverse context and network of relationships, I have had, at different times, responsibility for leading or facilitating Bible-study activities and groups.

One of those occasions illustrates something of the interaction between different layers of theological practice in which I was involved. Further, that particular experience of facilitating Bible-study groups helpfully illustrates the emergence of the area of research on which this thesis focuses. Between 1994 and 1997 I worked half-

time in theological education and half-time in two Norfolk parishes, I was involved in the setting-up and running of a number of Bible study groups. The pattern was that I worked with lay leaders, who in turn worked, in twos or threes, with groups around one of the parishes. The aim was to grow lay-led Bible study, where the leaders would eventually take responsibility for the whole process.

During the time that I worked with them, one of my key tasks was to draw on commentaries and other sources in order to offer insights from various biblical studies approaches to the particular books of the Bible that were studied. The leaders and I discussed these insights at meetings which took place about every six weeks, and which supported them in their leadership of the three, and subsequently four, groups with whom they worked. This part of the process to some extent mirrored the case-studies which I worked on with students in my other working context of theological education, in biblical studies or hermeneutics seminars.

My memory is that the leaders valued the way in which insights into the history, character, or previous interpretation of a particular text enriched their own knowledge and understanding, and equipped them to work in groups at interpreting the text themselves. Further, there is some evidence that the leaders were enabled by this work to develop their understanding of how they themselves could identify and employ biblical studies approaches. When I left the parishes in 1997, the leaders took full responsibility for the groups, using study-guides and the like to support and develop their, and the groups, understanding of the texts. I discovered subsequently from different people involved in the groups that they were not only still working, but were also still lay-led in 2008.

Although working with the leaders, and seeing their enthusiasm for working with the groups was a good experience, it carried with it a certain frustration. Because we had decided in the parish that I would not participate in the Bible-study groups themselves, in the interests of developing their lay leadership, I only learnt at second hand how my sessions with the leaders connected with the interpretative work done by groups themselves. As someone not only working in the parishes, but also teaching biblical studies and hermeneutics, I wondered at the time, and have

wondered since, what was going on in the groups. This question is a core one for the research written up in this thesis.

I would suggest that such an unfulfilled interest was, and is, driven largely by my work as educator and by the different layers of practice identified above. In short I want to know, as a practical theologian, what kind of hermeneutical theological reflection happened in the groups. And I want to know this, not least in order to more fully evaluate my role in enabling such reflection. The interest arising out of the work with Bible-study group leaders had at least three dimensions which connected with aspects of my practice.

First, my background in biblical studies, and its exploration and evaluation through the study of hermeneutics, made me curious about the way in which biblical criticism might shape the interpretation of the Bible in local churches. I was, and am, used to working with a plurality of critical approaches to studying the Bible, such as historical, narrative, rhetorical, reader-response and liberationist readings (see, for example: J. Barton, 1998; S. Barton, 1997; Court, 1997; Evans, 1999; Gillingham, 1998; Morgan & Barton, 1988; Tuckett, 1987). This shaped my work with the leaders of the groups considered here. But how did it connect with the practice of the groups? How did their meaning-making involve different approaches to the text (including those of biblical studies)? How aware of using particular approaches were they? How did the members make choices about which approach(es) enabled them to interpret the text? In what way was their practice 'critical'?

The second dimension of my interest was driven more by the concerns of practical, and particularly contextual, theology than by the agenda of Biblical studies (see, for example, Bevans, 1992, 2002). It was also a dimension that was in part directly provoked by my work with the leaders of the Bible-study groups. It was at one meeting with them that I discovered that, while the information about the texts was regarded as interesting and useful, it was not the most provocative aspect of the work that I did with them. This turned out to be the questions, designed to stimulate reflection, which I tacked onto the biblical study material. One of the group leaders painted a picture of his group approaching what they described as 'Andrew's questions' with some trepidation but also with enjoyment. These questions were

designed by me to broaden thinking about the passage being studied, and in particular to help group members relate what they were reading to their own experience. For example, in relation to the study of Mark 8.27-9.13, I suggested the question:

> How do people respond to the picture of discipleship which Jesus gives to his disciples? Mark's own community, for whom the Gospel was written, probably knew all about persecution and understood Jesus' sayings in connection with that experience; how, though, does it relate to our experience?

This and the many other questions grew out of my wanting to connect Bible study, and insights from the world of biblical studies, with the pastoral practice in which I and members of the group were engaged together, within the wider context of my role, identified above. To me the questions were interesting but relatively commonplace. But to members of the groups they seemed to represent a new dimension of Bible study, because they challenged them to interpret the Bible contextually – in relation to their own situation. This gave rise to a particular interest in how people did relate their 'study' of the Bible to their wider experience; in what it is that enables people to read the Bible contextually.

The third dimension of my interest may be rooted in a central feature of my understanding of the practice of the church (upon which much practical theology reflects). This is an assumption that the practice of the church is that of the whole church, lay and ordained together working as the body of Christ[209]. This underpinning principle for my work in local church ministry and theological education, implies that members of the church share responsibility for its practice. This was worked out in my enabling the lay leadership of Bible-study groups in a Norfolk parish. But in that context it implied in particular, shared responsibility for interpreting the Bible. As noted above, the continuing history of the groups indicates that this is precisely what took place. Nonetheless, given the lack of a full evaluation of how that happened, I continued to be interested in the question: What enables people to take responsibility for the interpretation of the Bible?

To summarise, this research arises out of layers of practice concerned with practical theological reflection and the part played in it by biblical interpretation. It further arises out of the aim of that practice, that it should serve the reflection of lay and

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[209] See (Todd, 2000, 39), which connects this assumption with the work of Edward Farley (1983)

ordained within the life of the church. Within this context, an example of my practice that appeared to be effective, but which was not fully evaluated, illustrated a gap in at least my understanding. That gap relates to what happens in practice in Bible-study groups as people bring together the Bible, their experience and various interpretative resources and engage in the task of interpreting the text. This thesis seeks to develop understandings which fill something of that gap.

Reflection 2 – Assumptions found in an educator's baggage

The different layers of my practice discussed above have given rise to a number of specific educational practices which I carry with me. One of these is a plural model of reading the Bible. This model was developed particularly in the period 2001-02 to serve the needs of a particular programme called 'Scripture in Public Ministry', designed for those who were fairly newly ordained or commissioned in public ministry, as part of their continuing professional development, to provide resources for them in their own work of doing and enabling biblical interpretation. The model is important here because it forms something of a working hypothesis, but also generates a further research interest relating to biblical interpretation in church communities.

The model was derived in part from hermeneutical thinking, but also out of informal reflection on the experience of interpreting the Bible in different contexts. The model is therefore is rooted in a 'sense' of what worked in practice in Bible-study groups and elsewhere, but could not be described as empirically grounded. All the reading strategies incorporated in the model were by the 1990s commonplace in the world of biblical studies, and are often regarded as complementary to each other, providing different dimensions of the critical task. Introductions to biblical interpretation will typically have chapters on the pros and cons of a selection of historical, literary, sociological, liberationist and sometimes other readings (see, for example: J. Barton, 1998; S. Barton, 1997; Court, 1997; Evans, 1999; Gillingham, 1998; Morgan & Barton, 1988; Tuckett, 1987).

In terms of sorting these approaches into some kind of relationship to each other, I have found the thinking of Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza helpful. She identifies the following models of biblical interpretation (1983, 4-6). She points to the 'doctrinal

approach', which is a confessional a-critical model, centering on the text as revelation and as authoritative. Her second model is that of 'positivist historical exegesis', which she sees as the 'value-neutral, detached interpretation' of historical criticism. Thirdly she posits a model of 'dialogical-hermeneutical interpretation', which reflects on 'the interaction between text and community, or text and interpreter'. This spans socio-historical criticism and literary approaches. Finally she identifies 'liberation theology' as the fourth model, and the one with which she herself works. This last approach recognises 'that all theology... is always engaged for or against the oppressed'.

I have adapted, and probably softened, these models in my own introductory teaching on biblical interpretation. I have usually worked with the following four models[210]:

(i)   The Doctrinal Model (Cf. J. Barton, 1998, ch.8; S. Barton, 1997, 12-17; Evans, 1999, ch.8; Gillingham, 1998, ch.5)
This focuses on the Bible as the word of God, as God's revealed word, received through inspiration. It emphasises the authority of the Bible, and sees the Bible as the framework for life (containing 'all things necessary to salvation'[211]).

(ii)   The Historical Model (Cf. J. Barton, 1998, ch.1; S. Barton, 1997, 17-21; Court, 1997, ch.1; Evans, 1999, ch.6; Gillingham, 1998, ch.6; Morgan & Barton, 1988, chs.2-6; Tuckett, 1987)
This is seen in historical criticism. The Bible is viewed as historical text(s). Biblical texts are set in their (original) context. This model is concerned with understanding the history reflected by the text, and the historical development of the text.

(iii)   The Narrative Model (Cf. J. Barton, 1998, ch.2; S. Barton, 1997, 17-21; Court, 1997, ch.2; Evans, 1999, ch.7; Gillingham, 1998, ch.7; Morgan & Barton, 1988, ch.7)
This recent approach within Biblical Criticism focuses on the whole text (rather than being forensic). It explores the text as story (with plot, characterisation, dialogue, action, settings). There is an interest in the way the story is told (through the use of narration, irony, references to other parts of the text and to other texts). The model

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[210] The following descriptions are adapted from lecture handouts used by me between 2001 and 2002
[211] Article six of the Church of England's thirty-nine 'Articles of Religion'

enables the reader to respond at more than an intellectual level, to get involved in the story, to use his/her imagination.

(iv)   The Dialogue Model (Cf. J. Barton, 1998, chs.5-6; S. Barton, 1997, 21-27;
          Evans, 1999, ch.9; Gillingham, 1998, 140-143; Rowland & Corner, 1990)
This is adapted from such sources as Latin American liberation theology and feminism. Those who read this way seek to be alive to the issues, concerns, or needs arising out of the readers' situation. Reading is related to experience, and there is a concern to understand the context of the reader, as well as the original context of the text. A two-way dialogue is set up – the text questions the readers, but the readers also question the text. Reading leads to action, and there is often a concern for the liberation of those who are marginalised by inherited interpretations of the Bible.

The models differ from those of Schüssler Fiorenza in a number of ways. Her models were developed as part of making the case for Feminist models, to show how liberationist readings emerge from the history of modern biblical interpretation. My models are presented as alternatives to each other for people to explore singly, or in conjunction[212]. My third model, a narrative approach, is chosen specifically because of its effect on those who use it. In my experience, it confronts people with the way in which meaning is not only to be found in the way the text came to be (as is explored in historical criticism), but also in the interaction between text and reader (often in ways that the author could not have envisaged).

Finally, there is some tension between a dialogue model and the liberationist readings from which it springs. In the contexts in which I have worked with the models, dialogical readings rarely exhibit the sharp political focus of a Latin American or feminist reading, not least because of the context of plural reading strategies. Nonetheless, drawing on liberationist interpretation can begin to stimulate a proper dialogue between the text and readers in their context, which is not supplied by other critical models such as socio-historical, narrative, or reader-response approaches. As liberationist models work as an irritant within plural approaches to interpretation, people may come to realise that the needs of their context may be at odds with the tradition of interpretation, with the 'received' reading, of the text. Only when reading

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[212] For a discussion of the plurality of interpretative approaches, see especially, (Gillingham, 1998, chs.5-9; Morgan & Barton, 1988, ch.8)

from this perspective do people find meaning in the text in a way that is driven as much by their context, as by the tradition of interpretation.

As indicated above the combination of models generates a picture of my hypothetical understanding (albeit informed by my experience) that these different reading strategies, used in conjunction with each other, can enable people to learn to read critically and contextually, taking responsibility for the text. The models generated series of questions which might be asked of a particular passage of the Bible, as the beginnings of a practical hermeneutical approach to the text. Examples of such questions, designed for use with Bible study groups are to be found in appendix 2. While untested empirically, the models provided, through the identified questions, a starting point for a discussion with leaders of possible participant groups about how we might approach sharing Bible-study together. Their use will be discussed further in subsequent chapters on research methodology and the fieldwork.

The reading strategies offered in combination also generate a further research interest. Each strategy carries with it, *inter alia*, assumptions about what is privileged in the task of interpretation, and this has been a not infrequent subject of discussion with those I have taught. The first three models all tend to privilege the text but in different ways. The Doctrinal Model privileges it as channel or repository for the revelation of God, as the source of a complete and ready-formed theology. The appropriate response for the reader is to seek understanding of what the text says, to receive this truth, and to be formed by it in behaviour and viewpoint. The historical model privileges the text as historical document, which reveals how the Christian tradition was shaped and formed. The response of the reader here is rational enquiry, to understand the text as historical evidence. This may in turn strengthen the reader's understanding of the Christian tradition and his or her participation in it. The narrative model privileges the text as literary unit. The appropriate response is to enter into the narrative imaginatively allowing the story to provoke, or evoke a response. This may in turn allow the reader to connect this to their own faith story. Only in the fourth model is the experience of the reader privileged, so that the text is expected to respond to the reader's practical questions, as well as *vice-versa*. Arguably, the reader's experience is given greater status than the text, because it

becomes the criterion by which interpretation is judged, although the text still has the potential to be a partner in liberation[213].

The models in combination give rise to further interests relating to Bible-study groups. One interest is in how the text and/or readers' experience is privileged in their practice, and in how that privilege is constructed through particular interpretative approaches. A further interest is in whether and how reading strategies which act in these different ways can be complementary to each other (including through conflict between their approaches to the relationship between text and reader). Is my assumption of the reality and value of a plurality of ways of reading justified by the practice of Bible-study groups?

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[213] It might be noted that, in theory a dialogical reading is distinguished from a devotional, or uncritical reading, by the interaction of critical questions arising from the text and the reader's context. In practice, identifying the reader's questions as the criterion of interpretation can act as a license for the reader's interests to be determinative, reducing this distinction.

Appendix 2
Questions worth asking
When approaching any passage within the Bible, there are a variety of questions that can be asked. These questions can be grouped into families, where each family has a different kind of interest in the text. The following 'family tree' illustrates this, and gives an indication of the types of question that might be helpful.

1. A theological interest
- **What does this text say about God?**
- What does the passage say about the relationship between God and humanity, or between God and creation?
- What theological themes (e.g. faith, forgiveness, mission, identity, etc.) are present in the text?
- How does the text connect with later Christian theological thinking?
- How is my/our faith affected by this passage?

2. A historical interest
- **How does the text connect with human history?**
- What situation does the passage refer to?
- What kind of situation was the text written in?
- What is the wider historical context of the passage (e.g. its religious, political, social or cultural setting)?
- What is the history of the text (of its origins, development, translation and interpretation)?
- Does it relate particularly to other texts in the Bible (e.g. to another Gospel)?
- How does looking historically help us better understand our own situation?

3. A literary interest
- **What is going on in this passage?**
- What kind of literature is the text (e.g. poetry, biography, story, letter, apocalypse, parable, miracle story, etc.)?
- How does this particular passage fit within the whole book of the Bible to which it belongs?
- What literary techniques does the writer use to catch my/our attention (e.g. rhetoric, irony, the voice of a narrator, a particular poetic style)?
- How can I/we enter imaginatively into the text (e.g. being caught up in the plot, identifying with the characters, or seeing myself/ourselves in a particular setting)?
- How does the passage touch me/us?

4. An interest in dialogue
- **How does the passage relate to everyday life?**
- What questions does the text ask of me/us?
- What questions do I/we want to ask of the passage?
- What kind of a dialogue happens between me/us and the text?
- Is the text my friend and ally, or does it weigh heavily on me? Does it make me feel comfortable or uncomfortable?
- What does reading the text make me want to do?

Please Note
This list of questions is not designed to be complete! Rather it aims to be suggestive, thought-provoking – providing some possible starting points. Further, it is not intended that questions be asked in any particular order – you can start with any of the different interests, or questions, or somewhere else entirely!

Appendix 3
Epistemologies of action research and practical theology

1. Action research

The basis for the most well-known typologies of research used to elucidate the

epistemology(ies) of action research, is the work of Jürgen Habermas. His major

thesis is that knowledge and interests are inter-dependent. Thus, even in the case of

the natural sciences, 'objective' knowledge is generated by an interest in prediction

and control. Habermas identifies three kinds of knowledge-constitutive interests:

> The approach of the empirical-analytic sciences incorporates a *technical*
> cognitive interest; that of the historical-hermeneutic sciences a *practical* one;
> and the approach of critically oriented sciences incorporates the *emancipatory*
> cognitive interest...[214] (1972, 308)

Habermas is concerned to establish an appropriate epistemology for the social

sciences. His concern is to reveal the illusion of 'objectivity' and to identify the

tendency of the historical-hermeneutic sciences to be determined by the need for

consensus. This is in order to make the case for social sciences being rooted in a

critical theory which is able to identify motivating ideologies and distorted reasoning,

and which creates the possibility of autonomous reasoning and emancipation.

Action research writers seem to be unanimous in agreeing that their discipline

represents a move beyond a technical approach to research and education. This is in

keeping with an understanding of the complexity and unpredictability of social

situations and practice[215]. The major disagreement, however, in later action research

is between those who pursue an interpretive, or 'practical-deliberative' (McKernan,

1991, 20), approach, and those who see action-research as critical, or 'critical-

emancipatory' (McKernan, 1991, 24). In the former category would be found the

work of Elliott and Ebbutt (e.g. Ebbutt, 1985; Ebbutt & Elliott, 1985; Elliott, 1991).

In the latter category would appear the likes of Kemmis and Carr (e.g. Carr, 1995;

Carr & Kemmis, 1986; Kemmis, 1993).

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[214] The italics are original.
[215] There is a slight irony here, in that the most notable originator of action research, Lewin, might well
be said to have a technical interest. McKernan makes this point. 'It is crucial to recognise Lewin as
the empirical-rational scientist that he was' (1991, 18). Lewin's action research cycle, described above,
is clearly designed to improve the instrumental effectiveness of social management, to improve the
chances of bringing about pre-determined social change.

As suggested above, such writers agree that action research represents a move away from positivism. '...action research rejects positivist notions of rationality, objectivity and truth in favour of a dialectical view of rationality' (Carr & Kemmis, 1986, 179). For Elliott such a view is rooted in an understanding of learning in which means and ends must be considered together:

> To regard learning as a process which is directed towards some fixed end-state is to distort its educational value, because what makes it educative is not its instrumental effectiveness in producing 'knowledge' outcomes that can be independently defined, but the quality of thinking realized in-process. (Elliott, 1985, 233)

Beyond this agreement, however, Carr and Kemmis maintain that action research, in addition to working with teachers' 'interpretive categories',

> Provides a means by which distorted self-understandings may be overcome by teachers analyzing the way their own practices and understandings are shaped by broader ideological conditions. (1986, 179)

Elliott (1987), on the other hand, remains unconvinced of the need for critical theory in action research, given that an interpretive approach concerns itself with the relationship between moral values and practice. Drawing on the debate between Habermas and Gadamer, he provides an effective critique of Carr and Kemmis. Elliott reminds us that Gadamer contested the need for a separate critical theory, with which one may conduct a critique of hermeneutical interpretation, in order to uncover the distortions present within the cultural tradition of interpretation. This is on at least two grounds. First, 'critical theory itself cannot escape from participation in a cultural tradition which is itself historically conditioned' (Elliott, 1987, 167). Secondly, Gadamer argues that interpretation incorporates a critical dimension, which although limited by the perspective of the interpreter, is no more, nor less, limited than is Habermas' critical theory. The separation of praxis and critical reflection is artificial and unnecessary[216].

Before comparing the epistemology of action research with that, or those, of practical theology, two more recent developments in action research need to be considered, if only for the sake of completeness. McNiff (2002) charts her own exploration, inspired by Whitehead, of the flight from positivism. In particular, she is concerned to explore the question of who has the right to generate theory in relation to practice,

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[216] For Gadamer's reply to Habermas, see 'Reply to My Critics', (Ormiston & Schrift, 1990, 273-297)

and also to reduce the gap between theorist and practitioner. This results in her espousing Whitehead's proposal that action research move from 'E-theory' (developed by external researchers) to 'I-theory'. This latter 'living theory' puts the 'living I' at the centre of our enquiries, and involves researchers facing the complexity and contradictions of their lives in relation to their research. While warming to McNiff's desire not to impose theory on those who therefore become objects of research, her particular response seems to be something of a retreat from an engagement with shared practice. Despite an expressed commitment to dialectic, McNiff's desire to encourage researchers only to research their own practices feels rather individualistic[217].

To some extent, Reason and Bradbury (2001; 2006) can be seen to be part of the same trajectory as McNiff. Commenting on their approach at a conference[218], Reason described action research, in the words of his colleague Judi Marshall, as 'a way of living – life as inquiry'. Yet their approach ends up in a different orbit, marked especially by the notion of participation. Whereas earlier action researchers might have regarded collaboration as being between researchers in universities and practitioner-researchers (e.g. Elliott, 1991), Reason and Bradbury envisage all involved in the research process as participants. There is a strong resonance here with those who are involved in the de-clericalisation of practical theology.

2. Practical Theology and the flight from positivism

The above picture of the action research family of methods and epistemologies provides the basis for a further comparison with practical theology. Common ground emerges fairly quickly. Thus Browning locates Practical Theology within the wider movement of the rediscovery of practical philosophies. As action researchers do, he looks back to Aristotle, and cites Dewey, Gadamer, Habermas and Schön (amongst others). He writes:

> With the reemergence of the practical philosophies, there has arisen a new fascination with terms such as *practical reason, practical wisdom, phronesis, practice, praxis, justice, consensus, dialogue, conversation, and communication*. This fascination suggests that Western societies are desperate to find ways to make shared and workable decisions about the common good and the common life....

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[217] The possibility of dialectic is further reduced by McNiff's suspicion of any kind of abstract thinking.
[218] Day conference on Action Research, Cardiff University, 1st November 2002

> We now have returned to the category of the practical in search of a shared praxis that will enable us to either reconstruct tradition or learn to exercise our practical wisdom without it...
>
> In this book, I am interested in how communities, and religious communities at that, exercise practical reason. In turn, I am interested in the way these communities make a difference in how practical reason works. (1991, 3f)

Such an approach, it can be argued, involves a move away from positivism, just as much as does action research. As was discussed in the chapter 2 (2.3.1, pp.19-22), this is often characterised as a move beyond seeing practical theology as <u>applied</u> theology. Practical theologians resist the notion that practical theology must issue from more scientific (*wissenschaftlich*) disciplines of theology. Rather, practical theology may now be seen as primary theology. This movement of thought resonates with Elliott's approach to education, cited above in section 3.2.2 (Elliott, 1985, 233).

The move away from theological positivism, which was rooted in a 'scientific', or historicist approach, is made clear in Pattison and Woodward's introduction to their *Reader in Pastoral and Practical Theology* (2000, 13-16). They identify as key characteristics of practical theology (amongst others) that the discipline is: 'contextual and situationally related... experiential... reflectively based... interrogative... analytical and constructive... dialectical and disciplined'. Further, practical theology is 'a *transformational activity*. That is to say, that both in terms of process and outcome it aims to make a difference to people, understandings, and situations in the contemporary world' (2000, 13). One might conclude that the discipline is characterised by a move from positivistic detachment to practical engagement.

3. Practical Theology and the Gadamer-Habermas debate.

This interest in practical engagement gives rise in turn to questions in practical theology which again parallel action research, about whether theology is 'interpretive' or 'critical-emancipatory', being concerned to identify the ideological prejudices of interpretative approaches, through the use of critical theories (be they Marxist, or Feminist). As in action research, the tension of the Gadamer-Habermas debate is also present in practical theology. The question is: to what extent does the critical edge of practical theology emerge from within the discipline as part of its lived interpretation of the Christian tradition, to what extent is it generated only by drawing on external frameworks?

That this tension is present within practical theology is underlined by two distinctive contributions to the discipline. One of these is the work of Tracy on critical correlation. Thus, for example, Tracy argues that practical theology must engage with other disciplines.

> In sum, these... collaborative steps for practical theology will be involved in disciplined reflection upon the mutually critical correlations obtaining between secular models of moral praxis with an emancipatory thrust and Christian faith praxis. (1983, 78)

The second contribution is that of Pattison (1997) as he argues that liberation theology may appropriately direct pastoral care not only in a more critical direction, but also towards a greater socio-political commitment to justice and equality.

These contributions both illustrate an interest in practical theology being, or becoming, self-consciously critical. That neither approach is regarded as the *sine qua non* of the discipline suggests an ambivalence towards the place of critical theory in the repertoire of the practical theologian. As in the world of action research, some will espouse it while others will see criticism arising in other ways, not least in the dialectic between present practice and inherited tradition.

4. Practical Theology and Action Research

It seemed clear in the early stages of this research project that practical theology and action research have a great deal in common epistemologically. They both represent a reaction against a technical rationality which is concerned with the application of pre-determined knowledge. In seeking to move beyond an instrumental positivism, they are both concerned with practical knowledge which is discovered in action, and which is participative.

Furthermore, it appeared that the two disciplines have an epistemological and methodological question in common: how to be critical. The debate about whether to pursue a Gadamerian line, which assumes that critique is integral to interpretation, or to go with Habermas, who insists on the need for an explicit critical framework, is of concern both to action researchers and practical theologians. It also appeared to be an important question for this research project, one that would need to be worked out in practice.

Appendix 4

Article in the East Anglican, April 2003

Bible Reading Research

Two key questions about reading the Bible are at the heart of some research being conducted by Canon Andrew Todd our Continuing Ministerial Education Officer. "How can we take responsibility for interpreting the Bible ourselves?" and "How can we interpret the Bible in a way that makes sense in our situation?"

He is keen to hear from groups around the Diocese, who would be interested in exploring these questions with him. "People are pioneering new approaches to Biblical interpretation in urban settings in this country," says Andrew. "Why should not we in rural Suffolk offer something fresh?"

Andrew can offer groups experience not only of biblical studies, but also of adult education, and of running parish Bible study groups. Groups can decide which biblical texts they want to consider and what questions they want to ask of them.

"I have some familiarity of working with different Bible study methods," says Andrew "But now I want to know 'do these approaches help people grapple with an understanding of the Bible in local rural churches?'"

Andrew hopes that the project will stimulate groups to go on reading the Bible together but in addition, it will be written up as a piece of research, so that insights gained in Suffolk may be offered to others in the Church and beyond.

If you are interested in participating in the project contact Andrew on 01284 706813, or at andrew.todd@stedmundsbury.anglican.org, or at 3 Crown St. Bury St. Edmunds. IP33 1QX. He says he would welcome enquiries from individuals, existing Bible study or discussion groups, or from those thinking of setting up such groups in their area.

Appendix 5
Envisaged process for the pilot group meeting

- Tea and coffee to be available at the start
- Prayer, and a 'thank you' for being willing to participate
- People to introduce themselves
- Confirmation that John 6.56-69 would be the text that we would study together
- Introduction of 'Questions worth asking'
- Reading the biblical text aloud (In practice this meant reading the whole of John 6, not least because it had provided the Gospel readings at Sunday services for the four preceding Sundays, as well as the Sunday following the meeting)
- Asking which questions people would like to pursue in relation to the text
- Looking broadly at the questions in relation to the whole of John 6
- Looking more closely at the questions in relation to John 6.56-69
- Possibly choosing further questions and repeating the previous two stages
- Taking quarter of an hour at the end of the meeting to reflect together on what had taken place (using pre-pared questions as a starting point – see appendix 2)
- A further 'thank you' for participating
- A little further explanation of my key research questions

Appendix 6
Reflection (from write-up shortly afterwards) on asymmetry in the group process of the Pilot Group

Drew and Heritage (1992, 47-51) propose that asymmetries may arise in institutional interaction from question and answer sequences, in which responses are elicited from participants other than the orchestrator; from the 'differential states of knowledge' of participants; or in relation to something that is regarded as routine by an expert/professional, but unique or special by the lay participant. The third possibility was apparent in the meeting of the Pilot Group at one particular level of conversation. This did not have to do with using different approaches to the biblical text – this particular group comprised articulate people who were used to this kind of exploratory Bible study. Rather it had to do with reflection on how people's different approaches connected with my suggested questions.

There were also some signs of the kind of asymmetry relating to differential states of knowledge. For example, as mentioned above, there was an appeal by participants to my knowledge of the Greek text of the New Testament, and an orientation to my explanation. This happened on a number of other occasions during the meeting, in relation, for instance, to questions about whether the early Church celebrated the Eucharist; about the whereabouts of the 'I am' sayings of Jesus; and about 'eternal life' as a concept in the Gospels. Orientation to my knowledge of the New Testament was active rather than passive. Participants asked follow-up questions, and drew what I said into the discourse of the group.

The major area of asymmetry, however, seemed to centre on my interventions as facilitator of the group[219]. An analysis of my interventions indicates that I engaged in the following actions:

- Summarising proceedings
- Capturing and enlarging on what I perceived to be significant points
- Posing questions to the group
- Providing information relevant to the study
- Answering questions of information posed directly to me

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[219] Cf. (Horlick-Jones et al., 2001, 158) on the role of facilitators in the context of risk management.

- Engaging in one-to-one conversations with other participants in relation to a particular point of interest

- Encouraging people to speak

- Talking over the top of people (more than at exchanges of turns of conversation)

- Being 'humorous'

With the exception of answering direct questions, and encouraging others to speak, other participants did engage in all these actions, but to a much lesser extent. A second authoritative figure (participant FP3), in particular, also summarised, captured and enlarged on significant points, posed questions to the group, offered information and was humorous. But, once again, these interventions were less extensive than mine. They were also different in character from mine, often being rounded and accomplished actions, offered carefully into the discourse and followed by a significant pause, before others spoke[220].

These asymmetries clearly relate to my role within this 'institutional' interaction, as facilitator, educator, and researcher. Seen from an action research perspective, they provide a way of evaluating my actions for future reference. The particular things that strike me are the extent of my intervention (which increased as the meeting continued), and that I felt it necessary to undertake all the actions listed above myself. I am fairly sure that this was out of a certain nervousness on my part, about whether the meeting would 'work' and whether it would be productive – in the sense of providing appropriate data. It seems to me, however, that these imperatives (and the corresponding extent and character of my actions) skewed my style of facilitating and were counterproductive in research terms.

So, in relation to my summarising proceedings, it seems clear in retrospect that I saw this (at least subconsciously) as my sole responsibility on this occasion. More usually in facilitating groups of this kind, I would regard this as a group responsibility. Similarly, I offered the pilot group much more information than I would have done in other groups, in which I would have regarded developing knowledge as a group responsibility. Further, I encouraged the group to orientate towards the particular

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[220]When someone spoke, following such interventions, it was often me – perhaps because I felt threatened by this second theologically accomplished authoritative figure!

questions which I had suggested should be asked of the text; whereas elsewhere I might have been more content to let the group develop its own line of questioning.

As I indicated above, not only did this approach constrain my facilitation of the group (and my more usual practice as an educator), but it also put limits on the research process. It is key that the research into the ways of interpreting the Bible should be as participative as possible. The more I intervene, the less participative is the group process, the interpretation, and the reflection on that interpretation. This is clearly a particular feature, not only of this research project, but of action research in general. Researching shared practice is only possible if both practice and research are actually participative[221]. This is underlined by the evaluation by FP2 of the discussion, in relation to taking responsibility for the text. This contribution followed my outline of my research questions and the positive evaluation by two participants of the 'invitational' character of the event.

Extract PG1

1 FP2:	cos the first thing you need if you are going to take responsibility for
2	interpretating the Bible is kind of permission to do that
3 FP?:	yeh=
4 FP?:	=[yeh
5 FP3:	[absolu:t[ely
6 FP2:	[yu know and- and and- nd yeh that- that a sense of safety of
7	validation ((words obscured by background noise)) that your point of
8	view is not going to be (1s) um dismissed or d- persecuted

In future engagement with groups, therefore, I will need to pay attention to the participative nature of the discourse. I believe that this might be achieved by modifying my practice in the following ways:

- By encouraging members of the group to summarise proceedings
- By seeking a group perspective on the significant points of the discussion
- By being less directive about the development of the discussion
- By being more reticent about offering information about the biblical text and its interpretation

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[221] Cf (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; 2006) on the participative nature of action research.

These modifications are, of course, a matter of establishing the right degree of intervention, rather than engaging in a complete rebuilding of the process. More specifically, they are all about adopting a more participative style of facilitation (to which I am well used), in the interests of a more participative research process.

Appendix 7
Reflection (from write-up shortly afterwards) on the discourse of the Pilot Group

The starting point for analysis of the kind of interpretation in which participants were engaging in the Pilot Group is the concept of 'interpretative repertoires'. These are identified by Potter and Wetherell as:

> ...recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating actions, events and other phenomena, through a limited range of terms used in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes). (1987, 149)[222]

The work of Potter and Wetherell was based in turn on that of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984). They identified two major repertoires in the discourse of scientists (and in particular Biochemists), an empiricist and a contingent repertoire. These, they suggested, were to be found often in different contexts; the former repertoire in scientists' formal papers; the latter in more informal discourse, such as interviews. They expanded this picture by pointing to contexts in which both repertoires were used together, for example in an asymmetrical way to account for differences in the findings of scientists[223]. They further examined how scientists dealt with conflict resulting from simultaneous use of the two repertoires, for example through the use of the 'Truth will out device' (whereby empiricism will eventually reveal the 'truth' amidst the contingent features of the research). It was the hope of Gilbert and Mulkay that this kind of analysis would be of use to others.

> We hope... that this book will be read... as a contribution to a wider analytic movement in sociology and in other disciplines concerned with the production and reproduction of social life through discourse. (1984, 191)

Certainly their work suggests some questions which might be asked of discourse in Bible study groups:

- Are there distinct discourses within the practice of interpreting the Bible?
- If so, is there conflict between these interpretative repertoires?
- What devices are employed to cope with such conflict (if it exists)?

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[222] See also (Wetherell & Potter, 1988)
[223] Crudely, the strategy appeared to be to use the empiricist repertoire of the findings of the scientist speaking and the contingent repertoire to account for the different findings of other scientists.

- If distinct repertoires are found within the discourse of a Bible study group, together with devices used to cope with conflict, then what does this say about the social context?

A small example from the Pilot Group discourse indicates the value of these questions. The immediate context is provided by FP1's wrestling with a dilemma raised by this passage (to which we will return shortly) in the first few minutes of the discussion of the text. Briefly, this arises because the text carries a strong implication that the responses of people to Jesus are pre-ordained by God. FP1 wishes to know why therefore, Jesus chose Judas to be a disciple knowing that he would betray him. Both MP3 and FP5 respond in two quite distinct ways, neither of which is pursued in the immediately subsequent discourse.

Extract PG2

1 MP3:	well of course ((clears throat)) this- all this was written after the fact
2		wasn't it so
3 P?:		um
4 R:		yeh
5 FP5:		but he knew it was his Father's will that he (.) was (.) to die

Here MP3 provides a fragment of an argument which would be common amongst those who approach the text from an historico-critical perspective[224]. In the terms provided by Toulmin (1958, ch.3), MP3 provides what appears to be a 'warrant' (W) for a particular 'claim' (C) about the feature of the passage (the 'data' - D) being discussed. One might tentatively reconstruct a possible version of the bigger argument: since the Gospel was composed 'after the fact' (W), Jesus' foreknowledge of events (D) may be interpreted as a retrospective theological reflection on events (C). FP5, however, is concerned with a counterclaim about the same 'data'. She is concerned to underline the doctrinal point that Jesus' foreknowledge of events (D) is not to be explained away as a post-hoc reflection, rather it is central to our understanding of Jesus' identity and nature (C). There would seem to be a hidden 'warrant' for this counter-claim, perhaps that the biblical text is authoritative and reliable and can be taken at face value.

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[224] For a discussion of the way in which a fragment or phrase 'evokes for listeners the relevant context of argumentation' see (Wetherell, 1998, 400f)

Both participants orientate towards the text. Neither would want to dismiss the text because they find it problematic. For both, therefore, the voice of the text is an active one in the discussion. But the repertoires used are distinct and at this point seem to conflict with each other – as the participants engage with the text in different ways. Following analytic connections suggested by Edley (2001), one might wonder whether what we see here is something of an ideological dilemma, and what kind of positioning is apparent[225]. To take the question of positioning first, MP3 would appear to adopt a position within the discourse of historical criticism, and is therefore able to begin to reposition the text – moving it from its position as problematic authoritative sacred text, to that of historical document (with a different kind of authority). FP5, on the other hand, adopts a position within a doctrinal discourse, in which she allows herself (willingly, one would assume) to be positioned by the authority of the text. Without building too much on one exchange, one might begin to perceive something of the ideological dilemma here, which is rooted in the conflict between a modernist historical approach and a confessional one.

This small exchange is located within a wider argument which is woven into the Pilot Group discussion at a number of points. This is centred on the same question, to which MP3 and FP5 were responding – that of whether our response to God is pre-ordained, or is an act of our free will. The argument began immediately after I had asked participants to give their first response to the text:

Extract PG3

1 R:	...what first things do you notice (5s)
2 MP1:	I noticed that at the end the- they were forced to make a decision (.)
3	that- (.) that's what struck me hearing it this time (.)
4 R:	yeh (.)
5 MP1:	are you for me or against me that sort of (3s)
6 FP1:	And I think Jesus was (.) deliberately (.) pushing them into (.) that
7	decision
8 FP2:	I read that differently (.) cos I- I read it says do you wish to go away
9	it's like everyone else is deserting him and these are his kind uv closest

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[225] On ideological dilemmas, see also (Billig, 1996; Billig et al., 1988). On positioning, see also (Davies & Harré, 2001; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998)

10	(.) friends and he- he's asking them (.) y' know everyone else has left
11	me are you going to go too maybe expecting them hh but just kind've
12	asking what their choice is (.) I- I don't see it so much as a forced
13	choice I guess (6s)

After a turn of conversation related to another issue, FP3 adds an insight:

Extract PG4

1 FP3:	I guess the thing that caught my attention (.) was in this translation a-
2	and I was listening so I don't know if I heard it there or read it here but
3	that it says no-one can come to me unless it is <u>granted</u> by the Father
4	somehow I hadn't <u>heard</u> it like that before (.) and then the very next
5	verse because of this (.) many of his disci- disciples turned back (.) um
6 R:	yeh yeh
7 FP3:	um um (1) um (2)

Four turns later, FP1 tentatively elaborates on her difficulty:

Extract PG5

1 FP1:	what worries me quite a lot about this- this last part is that (.) Jesus (.)
2	um chose the twelve yet he said (.) um h- he knew from the outset who
3	was going to betray him and- nd (.) then there's the other bit that no-
4	one um (.) could come to me except by well I've got the gift of the
5	Father as though there's a sort of bit of that- that it's all- all arranged
6	beforehand and it's hh um we have no- (.) no free will after all

After an intervention from me agreeing that this was a good question, and drawing the contrast between this aspect of John's Gospel and the different approach of the Synoptic Gospels, MP2 initiates an exchange, slightly more light-heartedly:

Extract PG6

1 MP2:	actually that came- I think it was in one of the Gospels recently that no
2	an shall come except the Father <u>draw</u> him I thought oh (1) so it's not
3	entirely up to me ((prolonged laughter))
4 MP1:	goodness me
5 FP3:	So it's both and isn't it or neether I mean it
6 R:	yeh

7 FP3:	it's not er one or the other it's both and (.) both and <u>yes</u> and both and
8	<u>no</u> (2s)
9 R:	yes (.) yeh=
10 FP3:	=kind've mystery (2s)
11 FP1:	why did he <u>choose</u> Judas if he knew Judas was going to betray him did
12	he (.) did he- do we need- its all- it's very very difficult (.) um (.) did
13	he- did he <u>want</u> to be betrayed did he <u>want</u> to die and- nd so on

Some turns later, FP3 provides an interesting summary:

Extract PG7

1 FP3:	It's still tea:sing arou:nd this question about (.) how do we make our
2	choices

This kind of discussion continued to appear as one of the strands of the discussion. FP1 continued to raise it, although she also pursued a number of other avenues. Her interest in the question of choice (both ours and Jesus) seemed to be another response to the voice of the text. Given her persistent interest in this particular question raised by John 6, she appeared to recognise the authority of the text, as sacred text. But, unlike FP5, she appeared unwilling to inhabit the position offered to her by the text – the position of being someone whose choices originated not in her own freewill, but in the foreknowledge of God. Throughout the discourse, she continued to 'trouble' this position (Wetherell, 1998); in the words of FP3, 'teasing around' the issue. This is reflected in FP1's evaluation of the discussion, towards the end of the meeting:

PG8

1 FP1:	I think this was a particularly challenging (.) passage ((loud general
2	laughter)) therefore I- I'm not sure you know whether (.) every other
3	um ((background gentle laughter)) Bible study (.) time would be- be
4	equally as demanding but I- I think it it's been been very exciting (.)
5	and well all the things n- nothing bored me but ((laughter)) (.) exciting
6	and bubbling and frustrating and all those things that you've put down
7	(1s)

But FP1 was not alone in wanting to 'trouble' this position. FP2 provides a particularly clear example of this kind of action fifty minutes into the discussion:

Extract PG9

1 FP2:	I want sorry
2 R:	go on
3 FP2:	wha- what I what I was thinking about is can we understand (.) the will
4	of God and th- the hh sense of being chosen or there being a greater (.)
5	a greater power that knows and that (.) influences (.) things maybe um
6	without having the sense of predetermination that makes things seem
7	too: fixed=it takes away the free will I guess it takes away choice
8	because ((continues quickly)) I really hate the idea of hh Jesus not
9	having had a choice and of us not having a choice ((more slowly)) that
10	feels wrong (4s)

This has the appearance, in part, of a counterclaim, to the claim made by the text. To apply once again the analytical framework provided by Toulmin (1958), FP2's claim is that God deciding for us (D) is wrong (C) because that takes away our choice and free will (W). This claim is not, however, made in absolute terms. The phrasing of this action suggests a degree of wanting to adopt some version of both claim and counterclaim.

This last excerpt helps to clarify that there are two positions suggested by the discourse. There is the one already identified as the position 'preferred' by the text – that in which one's following Jesus originates in God's choice of us. Then there is the second one, where our following Jesus (or Jesus' own ministry) is rooted in our (or Jesus') choice and is an act of free will. What is interesting, and revealed particularly by FP2, is the way that participants never wholeheartedly orientate towards either position. Clearly the voice of the text produces discomfort, but the response to that discomfort is not rejection of, but argument with the text. Participants continued to work with the dissonance throughout the meeting. This suggests that what we have here is an example of what Billig et al would describe as an 'ideological dilemma' between two 'contrary themes' (1988).

This raises the question of the context of the two themes, and the further question of whether they are to be found within a single 'lived ideology' (Billig et al., 1988, 25-32), or two such ideologies. In one sense, the argument to be found here replicates a longstanding theological debate, in bringing together the two 'contrary themes' of

grace and freewill. Here, in the twenty-first century is an example of Christians replaying the argument between Augustine and Pelagius. Yet, there is more to it than that, I would suggest, for two reasons.

First, orthodox Christianity has consistently espoused the position of Augustine, that grace has priority over freewill – humanity cannot respond to God, if God does not first give us the grace to respond. The strength of the counterclaim in this discourse (FP2's 'that feels wrong') and the depth of the discomfort with the perceived voice of the text (FP1's 'very, very difficult', 'challenging', 'demanding') is perhaps surprising, particularly given the level of theological literacy in the group.

Secondly the language used in the discussion of the dilemma has other elements than those traditionally found in the Augustine-Pelagius debate. Phrases such as 'they were forced to make a decision', 'so it's not up to me', 'how we make our choices', have a very contemporary feel. I would want to suggest that what we see here is a reflection of a narrative of personal autonomy which is to be found throughout our society.

Perhaps we might even take this a bit further. Billig et al, in considering individualism within 'modern capitalist society' (Billig et al., 1988, 34-42), point to several counter-themes, and argue that the theme of individualism is located within a dilemmatic lived ideology. I would want to suggest, albeit tentatively, that what we see in the Pilot Group meeting might be an overlap between two dilemmas. On the one hand, there is the theological argument about grace and freewill. On the other, there is the modern (and indeed post-modern) argument about personal autonomy and the common good. The strong voices that emerge from this overlap are that of the text, espousing the priority of God's choice, and that of contemporary society, underlining the need for individual choice.

Even if this is to push the data too hard, two things do seem clear. One is that voices are present in the discourse which have their wider context in both the Christian 'lived ideology' and in the ideology of contemporary society. The second is that the texture of the discourse is dilemmatic, or argumentative. No resolution of the dilemma was negotiated consistently by participants. But the evaluation of what had taken place

was highly positive, despite this absence of resolution. This is seen in FP1's phrases, 'very exciting', 'nothing bored me', 'exciting and bubbling and frustrating'. On this occasion, at least, the Bible study was inherently argumentative[226].

In action research terms, this raises some questions which have a bearing on future planning. If such argumentation takes place in other Bible study groups, is it possible to uncover the dilemma(s) and identify the contrary themes? And would participants find this kind of analysis helpful?

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[226] Cf. (Billig et al., 1988, 18) 'The common sense of all societies will possess contrary themes, which provide the possibility of argument and deliberation' (and the accompanying debate).

Appendix 8
Permission form for the use of data

LOCAL READINGS OF THE BIBLE

PERMISSION FOR THE USE OF DATA

I understand that recordings of the Bible Study Group to which I belong will be used as part of the research being conducted by Andrew Todd, into how groups in local churches read and interpret the Bible.

I give my permission for transcripts from those recordings to be used for the following purposes:

- In the preparation of a PhD thesis to be submitted to Cardiff University by Andrew Todd (including in discussion with supervisors and others)
- In presentations in connection with the research and its dissemination
- In publications designed to contribute to the wider understanding of Biblical interpretation, based on the research.

I understand that participants (including myself) will be anonymous in transcripts of recordings, being identified by a system of letters and numbers. I further understand that the location of the Bible Study Group to which I belong will not be identified except in the most general terms (e.g. group from a rural church or benefice in Suffolk).

Signed:

Date:

Appendix 9

Repertoires or nodes? Constructing meanings in Bible-study groups

Andrew Todd

Abstract

This paper grows out of research into the way people in local churches read and interpret the Bible. It considers a particular Bible-study group, paying attention to the kind of talk that occurs there, and the way in which meaning is achieved in the interaction between participants. Initial data extracts are taken to suggest a tension between deference to the authority of the Bible, and an alternative approach, concerned with 'what the text says to me/us'. This latter approach is inclusive of different viewpoints. This initial analysis gives rise to the hypothesis that there might exist within this Bible-study talk two 'interpretative repertoires'. In comparison with scientific talk, as considered by Gilbert and Mulkay (1984), these are labelled as 'canonical' and 'contingent' repertoires. This hypothesis is tested through examination of further data. The paper concludes that the hypothesis does highlight a distinction between more canonical and more contingent talk, and enables an examination of the construction of these 'repertoires'. However, the term 'interpretative repertoire' tends to overemphasise the boundaries round these constructions, and to downplay the lexical and other connections between them. The paper concludes that the term 'discursive node' provides for a better characterisation of these patterns of discourse.

KEYWORDS: BIBLE STUDY; DISCOURSE ANALYSIS; INTERPRETATIVE REPERTOIRE; DISCURSIVE NODE; AUTHORITY

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1 Introduction

Much discussion of biblical interpretation takes place, within the broad field of hermeneutics, with reference to the behaviour of the ideal reader of a text. In contrast, this paper is rooted in an empirical study of the way in which people in local churches read and discuss the Bible in practice. This involved in-depth examination of the talk and dynamics of a small number of existing Bible-study groups.

Such discourse-analytical approaches to the interpretation of the Bible are few and far between. Amongst the very small body of relevant literature, Forstorp's (1990; 1991) ethnographic study of Bible reading in context in Sweden stands out, therefore, as a rare example of explicit links made between hermeneutics and the discourse of actual Bible readers. Starting from the standpoint of reader-response criticism, his work discusses the response of real, rather than implied, readers of the Bible, in order to determine whether they belong to identifiable 'interpretive communities'. The limitation of Forstorp's work is that the data considered, in the two works cited, is drawn mostly from interviews. It is therefore largely talk *about* Bible-reading, rather than Bible-reading talk. Nonetheless, this paper shares with Forstorp's work an interest in 'norms and strategies for reading and interpretation... employed by people reading and interpreting the Bible' (Forstorp, 1991: 67f).

There are some studies of discourse recorded as it happens in church settings, notably involving teachers and children (Baquedano-López, 2001; Zinsser, 1986). Baquedano-López explores connections between the telling of a traditional narrative (concerning 'Our Lady of Guadalupe') and the construction of identity in both Spanish- and English-language religious instruction classes in Los Angeles. Zinsser examines Sunday Schools and Vacation Bible Schools in America, set up by self-professed 'fundamentalist' churches, as social contexts for literacy acquisition.

Closer to this paper, given both its focus on adults reading the Bible and its methodology (rooted in ethnomethodological conversation analysis) is Lehtinen's (2005) study of Seventh-Day Adventist Bible-study in Finland. Thus this paper has in common with Lehtinen's an interest in the analysis of how participants in Bible-study 'describe their experiences in specific interactional context' (2005: 341). One point of contrast with Lehtinen's work, however, lies in the speech-exchange systems at work. His data comes from highly formalised, classroom-like, interaction. The discourse considered here has a much more informal character – indeed it may be seen, in part, as a reaction against formality.

Further, Lehtinen's particular focus is on participants telling a 'second story', drawn from their own experience, as a response to the story found in the

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biblical text. This allows for a comparison with the telling of 'second stories' in ordinary conversation and in the particular setting of Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. This paper, on the other hand, draws on a different discourse-analytic resource, using the concept of the 'interpretative repertoire' (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell & Potter, 1988) as a heuristic device for understanding talk about the Bible. And the parallel explored here, stimulated especially by the work of Gilbert and Mulkay, is between Bible-study talk and scientific discourse.

Rather than stopping at the point of considering similarities between different kinds of discourse (as Lehtinen does), however, this paper pushes the implications of the discussion further. Not only does it consider ways in which discourse analysis might generate understanding of what is accomplished in a Bible-study group, but it also uses this consideration as the basis for a critique of the analytical approach used. Thus Bible-study talk provides the opportunity for testing the concept of 'interpretative repertoire', and offering a suggested refinement of the theory – the alternative device of meaning constructed around 'discursive nodes'.

2   The data – the origin and character of the discourse considered

The data on which this paper is based come from my work with a long-standing Bible-study group (with its origins in the 1970s) with up to ten members drawn from a few small Suffolk villages. Group members come from diverse backgrounds and are familiar with a wide range of church traditions, particularly those that might be described as evangelical or charismatic. The group as a whole take their responsibility for playing their part as church volunteers seriously (preaching and leading worship, being part of decision-making bodies, sharing in the pastoral care of people in their villages). Paid ministers have no involvement at present in the Bible-study group, for which members take full responsibility.

I had six meetings with the group: an introductory meeting at which I invited them to talk about what Bible study meant for them, and then outlined my research interests; four meetings for the purpose of studying particular texts from the Bible; and one to share some initial findings with the group and to explore what alignment there might be between my perspective(s), as researcher, and those of participants (Sarangi, 2002). Meetings lasted between one and a half and two hours and were recorded, producing over ten hours of audio-recording.

The first part of the first meeting with the group would fit well the description 'group interview'. Talk was initiated by my questions as to the membership, practice, interests and preferences of the group. The second part of this first

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meeting, in which I indicated my research interests, established some key landmarks for further meetings. From this point onwards group members were aware that I was generally interested in identifying different perspectives on how the Bible was interpreted, which, in the long term, might inform those who provided educational resources for Bible study. This established a pattern of conversation for the next four meetings not unlike that of a focus group.

The general topic of conversation was: how is the Bible interpreted? This topic was introduced and made more specific by focusing on an agreed passage from the Bible. Discussion was initiated, following members reading the Bible passage aloud, by a question from me along the following lines: 'what struck you about this passage?' This question, in a variety of closely related forms, was highly successful in generating conversation. Group members frequently returned to the question at different points in discussion, using it as a device for introducing a new line of conversation, beginning: 'what struck me about the passage was...' (or with similar phrases). This was in keeping with a group in which any and every member could and did introduce new questions or topics of conversation, given that there was some connection (however tangential) with the Bible passage under discussion.

This open, 'informal' discourse structure is in marked contrast to more formal interactions between a 'teacher' figure and other participants, in other examples of groups reading the Bible together, both in the wider study to which consideration of this group belongs and elsewhere (see Lehtinen, 2005). The informality of the talk of the group considered here, generated in part by their history, in part by my interaction with them, was one of the points of contact with focus group practice (Puchta & Potter, 2004: Chapter 2). Further similarity with a focus group lies in the group's willingness to disagree, given that disagreement is a key aspect of the talk of a focus group (Myers, 1998). Once again, such disagreement was facilitated by their familiarity with disagreeing with each other and those outside the group on many previous occasions! In contrast to focus group practice, I did not, however, have to limit the disagreement in the interests of continued diversity of interaction (Puchta & Potter, 2004: Chapter 6). As the data will confirm, this group had discovered ways of themselves limiting the extent of disagreement in the interests of inclusivity. This made my role as 'moderator' of the discussion a relatively easy one, although I did engage in offering and eliciting alternative viewpoints, creating openings for people to expand on expressed views and encouraging a return to the main topic.

Working with recordings of the data included both the making of transcriptions and coding. The transcriptions presented here follow the protocols of Conversation Analysis (Antaki, 2004) (see Appendix 1). However, analysis also shares the concerns of a discourse analysis approach that assumes that

paying attention to the wider context is an important component of the analysis (Miller, 1994). Thus, for example, wider understanding of particular previous church affiliations of group members, and their authority structures, cast light on the constructions centred on authority created within this group.

3   The emergence of different interpretative approaches within the Bible-study group's talk

The first signs of group members constructing in their conversation some particular approaches to interpreting the Bible began to emerge from analysis of my first meeting with the group. Between 15 and 20 minutes into the discussion members' talk turned to the importance of having the freedom to hold different viewpoints, even when holding them involves challenging those associated with the authority of the text. This first begins to emerge in the following line of talk, which follows from a brief discussion of how the group's activities sounded to be 'a lot of fun'. (In all extracts, F and M stand for female and male participants respectively.)

Extract 1

```
1  F1: We wouldn't do it if it wasn't fun (1s)

2  M2: Yeah hh (5s)

3  F1: and I think that's (.) in some ways that's (.) wul (.) I's going to say
4      that's part of our problem but I mean (.) sometimes we (.) we take a
5      very (.) ((getting quieter)) almost heretical view I would say of things
6      don't we we  [(.) really don't

7  M2:              [light hearted
8     °light hearted°=

9  F1: =we take a light hearted view we take a (4s) a sideways view (1s)
10     of things (.)

11 M1: I think [we're very

12 F1:         [we're prepared to be very honest about ((yeh in background))
13     our doubts about things ((flatter tone of voice)) I'm not sure I believe
14     that I'm not sure ((change of tone)) hence our trouble with John Stott
```

The delivery of these turns by F1 is interesting because of the hesitancy with which she leads up to the 'trouble with John Stott'. The hesitancy is seen in the following phrases or words: 'in some ways', 'sometimes', 'almost'. Potter (1997: 150–8) has described these as 'uncertainty tokens', which act, as here, to reduce the speaker's 'stake' or 'interest' in what she is expounding. These are reinforced by a drawing-back (in interaction with M2) from the description 'heretical' in

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which gentler alternatives are supplied ('light hearted', 'sideways'). F1's hesitancy is further seen in the pauses and 'repairs' (Sacks et al., 1974: 723–4) which perturb her talk (especially in lines 3 to 6 and 9 to 10).

F1's tentativeness begins to make sense as we reach line 14. A marked change of tone and direction, which were accompanied by laughter bubbling up in her speech, suggest the reason for the hesitancy – that F1 has been leading up to an uncomfortable utterance. Or, to put it another way, a change of 'footing' (Goffman, 1981: Chapter 3) leads up to the introduction of a 'delicate object' (Silverman, 1997: Chapter 4). The discomfort, or delicacy, arises because on an occasion recalled by F1, honest expression of doubts brought group members into direct disagreement with the writings of a significant figure in the world of Bible study, John Stott. Stott is a well-known evangelical commentator on the Bible, regarded in certain church circles as having considerable authority, as being a definitive voice in the 'correct' interpretation of the Bible. The expected deference towards such a commentator provides a considerable challenge for the one who would disagree.

In the turns following this extract F1 and other participants constructed an alternative approach to this deferential one. This involved honesty about doubts, honouring people's contributions, sharing and fellowship. It also involved sitting more lightly to the expectation of discovering some great truth or insight, and eschewing an information-giving approach to Bible study. Given the tentativeness of F1's turns, however, it would seem that in the above talk the alternative approach is held in tension with the more established evangelical one.

Later in the meeting F1 returned to this disagreement, confirming and expanding the above picture:

Extract 2

```
1   F1: I think that it's very often (.) wu a we pap we p'raps don't articulate
2        the question but I think my view would be that we're ask- the question
3        we're asking is (1s) <what's this> what's this passage saying to us
4        nd and I think in a sense that was our restlessness y'know as we've
5        said more than once now (.) the difficulty we had with the (.) study
6        we were u: (.) th- thing we were using with Romans >although we
7        persisted with it because it was a good catalyst< was that we didn't
8        agree with the assumptions (.) that the person made about what the
9        passage was saying so therefore we were saying actually (.)
10      ↑that verse doesn't say that to me...
```

Here it is clear that the freedom to disagree with an authoritative viewpoint (a book about the Letter to the Romans) is espoused in the interests of discovering what the text says to members of the group (whether as individuals or as a group – see lines 3 and 10).

The question of authority was discussed more directly, some 25 to 30 minutes
into my first meeting with the group, by M2, as he took the discussion from talk
about what they did together in the group to its significance for him:

Extract 3

```
 1  M2:I think I think mm (.) I think it's th- there there's an assumption
 2      around and this is my assumption now that (.) I think as a group
 3      we would say that th't the Bible has some sum authority (.)
 4      in terms of: of how we live nd and and some some answers: mm
 5      to- t- t- s- some of the deeper questions abou- so I think I think
 6      from that (.) that point of view (.) where we'd I- I- I- I would (.)
 7      hh from what I've heard people say and so on would would
 8      reckon that there's a variety of (.) views on on on and
 9      spiritualities within the group and- and- and in terms of the hh. I'd say
10      not the authority of the Bible because I don't think the authority's
11      questioned but but the interpre- how one interprets it nd nd and so on (.)
12      mm would vary (.) and we I think we work with that and we- we respect
13      that and we're able to to erm I've bin nd nd had the experience at times
14      of being put ri- y'know people trying to put me right becus I didn't quite
15      see things the way other people saw them

16   R: mmhum

17  M2:( )within the group there was kind uv an accepted (.) view of things that
18      doesn't happen here I think that's one of the things that I particularly
19      appreciate coming from the kind of background that I did come from
20      where the was a where the truth had been given to a small group of people
21      and they and if you didn't quite fit in there (.) you weren't quite right
22      whereas somehow here (.) well hh you've got your view and I've got my
23      view and none of us are completely right at the end of the day but we've
24      got- we've got some hold of some facet of (.) God and nd his love nd all
25      the rest of it and that's that's what's important…
```

In this extract the authority of the Bible is acknowledged, although in a qualified
way (see lines 3 and 4: 'some authority'; 'some answers'). Once again, however,
the authority is held in tension with the different views held by group members
and the way M2 perceives that the group works with those views. The tension
is seen not only in what he says, but also in the manner of his talk – another
example of highly disturbed speech, suggesting considerable uncertainty. In the
midst of this turn, M2 constructs a critical distance between the authority of
the Bible and what the group does, by indicating, rather ambiguously, that the
authority is 'not questioned', and by using the term 'interpretations' of members'
perspectives. An 'interpretation', in evangelical circles, is a partial, relative take
on the text, to be distinguished, perhaps, from the 'meaning' of a particular
Bible passage, which has a more absolute feel (cf. Forstorp, 1991: 68).

But for M2, this relativising of the meaning of the Bible is to be welcomed,
not least theologically, because it offers access to at least 'some facet of God'

for group members. This experience is contrasted favourably, in lines 13 to 15 and 17 to 21, with his previous experience of a more authoritarian kind of Bible study, in which there was 'an accepted view of things', 'the truth had been given to a small group of people', and in which people who disagreed were 'put right'. M2's background, revealed elsewhere in the data, was Northern Ireland Protestantism; a conservative Christian group with a very high view of the authority both of the Bible and of their church leaders. Nonetheless, despite the negative descriptions of that experience, and despite finding alternative authority structures within the group, M2, along with other group members, has not completely abandoned notions of the authority of the Bible.

Further examination of this meeting made clear that the group's desired freedom of interpretation is from the views and agendas not only of commentators on the Bible, but also of churches, of different translations from the original language and of the writers of the texts themselves (particularly as, to quote F2, 'quite a lot of [the Bible]'s written by men'). No stage of the composition, transmission or interpretation of the Bible is free from the hermeneutic of suspicion which handles authority claims with some caution. Although members do regard the Bible as authoritative, they also articulate something of the difficulty of touching that authority in the midst of the perspectives of writers and translators, commentators and churches. They want to deconstruct the dominant reading(s) (Fowl, 1998). So (to quote M1) they 'pursue' the authority, sharing their doubts and interpretations and encountering God in each other, asking the question of the text: 'What does that say to me/us now today?' And this question is both personal and corporate.

4   Identifying and establishing 'interpretative repertoires' in the discourse

While further data is needed to develop this picture, the analysis thus far gives rise to the question signalled at the beginning of the paper: Is the concept of 'interpretative repertoire' a useful heuristic device here? Potter and Wetherell identify these repertoires as:

> ...recurrently used systems of terms used for characterising and evaluating
> actions, events and other phenomena, through a limited range of terms used
> in particular stylistic and grammatical constructions. Often a repertoire
> will be organized around specific metaphors and figures of speech (tropes).
> (Potter and Wetherell, 1987: 149) (cf. Wetherell & Potter, 1988)

The work of Potter and Wetherell drew upon earlier studies by Gilbert and Mulkay, who had identified repertoires through their display of 'certain recurrent stylistic, grammatical and lexical features which appear to be coherently

connected' (1984: 55f). They had identified two major repertoires in the discourse of scientists (in particular Biochemists), an 'empiricist' and a 'contingent' repertoire. These, they suggested, were to be found often in different contexts (the former repertoire in scientists' formal papers; the latter in more informal discourse, such as interviews); sometimes together (for example in an asymmetrical way to account for differences in the findings of scientists).

Gilbert and Mulkay's work suggested at an early stage of my analysis a hypothetical parallel between the Bible-study group talk and scientists' repertoires: that talk built around 'authority' might be labelled a 'canonical' repertoire, analogous to the 'empiricist' scientific one; and the 'What does the text say to me/us?' construction, with its emphasis on freedom of interpretation, might be labelled, like the alternative scientific one, a 'contingent' repertoire. The hypothesis provides some working questions for the interpretation of remaining data, particularly: How distinctive is the preferred interpretative approach of the group in comparison with the approach(es) to which members exhibit some suspicion? To what extent, and how, do different interpretative approaches co-exist in the talk of the group?

The distinctiveness of the 'repertoires' was established in coding other sections of the data, including the four meetings in which discussion focused on particular passages from the Bible. In each of these sessions, albeit to a different degree, there was evidence of two contrasting approaches to Bible study and wider matters of faith. Often, but not invariably, this occurred in conversation which worked at the 'meta' level of reflection on how the Bible passage was being interpreted. This group, in contrast with others in the wider research study, relished this kind of conversation, perhaps because of their long experience of Bible study.

The 'canonical' repertoire was frequently used of others, particularly 'prescriptive' leaders, who had 'a corner on the truth'. Repeated facets of the approach of such leaders, and of the repertoire, included: taking the Bible 'literally', or 'at face value'; regarding it as 'inspired' and 'agenda-free' – what 'God said', not what 'the person who wrote it said'; taking great interest in the 'nitty-picky' detail – 'they would say that every verse has a meaning...'; teaching from 'up-front'; putting other people right. These facets delineate a univocal approach to the meaning of the Bible, dependent on the authority of the leader, although legitimated as the authoritative word of God. The theology that goes with such an approach is that 'God controls every step of the way' and is a 'controlling God'. And 'God's word' is singular. Although commonly used for talking about other people's perspective on reading the Bible, the lexicality of this repertoire was available to, and used by group members to articulate their own approaches, as will be seen below.

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In contrast, the 'contingent' repertoire, used by the group as part of their construction of an alternative approach to interpreting the Bible, emerged as a multi-vocal one, in which 'everyone's contributing… learning in different ways'. Again and again, group members talk about how God 'speaks to us/me'. This happens 'in all sorts of ways' – diversity of meaning is key. Necessarily, this is held in tension with the suspicion of dominant readings, which involves: identifying the use of texts as if they were 'propaganda'; recognising not only that 'a translation is only a translation', but also that the writers of the biblical texts 'also had their own agenda'. The group's own approach to the text, therefore, involves having the confidence to handle it 'in a different way', to interpret it 'in a broader way'. It also means having a 'human view' of the text, which bears 'the very firm imprint of man' and may have 'bias' or 'prejudice'. This relativizing of both the text and its meaning is what allows different perspectives to be valued – 'we haven't necessarily got to see it exactly the same…' The contextual approach is further underpinned by a stress on the *present* meaning(s) of the text, rather than on a search for a past meaning. The theology here is one in which God is expected to speak, and may do so through the text, or independently of it. But God's 'living word' is not to be determined by the text, or by any one individual, and is plural.

This analysis underlines the appropriateness of the analogy between Gilbert & Mulkay's (1984) repertoires found in scientific discourse and patterns of Bible-study talk. It becomes clear that those who use both the 'empiricist' and 'canonical' repertoires are constrained by an external authority – that of the empirical method, or of the Bible. Serving these masters can in turn endow the servants with considerable authority. This is part of the identity of those who belong in each world. The authority of empiricism, or of the Bible, establishes the boundaries of the world of the scientist, on the one hand, or of the member of the Bible study group, on the other. That this holds good in the Bible-study group is underlined by members' attachment to the text. Even when working contingently, the Bible is a key *raison d'être* of the group.

This similarity between the two worlds should not be surprising. I have argued elsewhere (Todd, 2000) that there are close similarities between the notion of transcendent deity and the 'transcendent' laws of nature, which are both claims to authority (cf. Chapman, 2002: 21–6). And in the strongest expression of the 'canonical' approach to the Bible, where 'interpretation' is shunned in favour of 'the meaning' of the text, there are close parallels with the world of science as described by Gilbert and Mulkay:

> Empiricist discourse is organised in a manner which denies its character
> as an interpretative product and which denies that its author's actions are
> relevant to its content. (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: 56)

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Further, the 'contingent' repertoire has one particular function which is common to both worlds. It is employed as a way of dealing with conflict which arises in the 'empiricist'/'canonical' arena. Gilbert and Mulkay, as already indicated, identify the use of the 'contingent' repertoire by scientists in informal settings, 'to construct accounts in which the connection between their actions and beliefs and the realm of biochemical phenomena appeared much less direct and much more dependent on other variable influences' (1984: 57). Similarly, in the discourse of the group, a 'contingent' repertoire is used in a way which decreases, and mitigates the direct way in which the Biblical text speaks to participants in the 'canonical' repertoire. In the 'contingent', the text still speaks, but, rather than being passively received by members, it is contingent on their response and context. They play an active part in interpretation, sifting and personalising different understandings of what the text might have to say to them. The next section of the paper examines, in relation to particular data, this kind of interaction, and the use of the two repertoires in relation to, *inter alia*, conflict and its resolution.

5   Detailed analysis of repertoires at work in discussion of a particular biblical text

The meeting which best illustrates the facets of talk referred to above, involved a discussion of part of the Book of Daniel. The distinctiveness of the repertoires is apparent, but in addition, a more complex relationship between them emerges. In particular, the data which follow draw attention to the flow of talk within and between repertoires. It is this discursive movement that reveals a weakness in the concept of repertoire, and points to the possibility of a different description, 'node', which accommodates distinctiveness *and* inter-connection.

Early on in this meeting I was invited to comment on the origins of the Book of Daniel. After some initial negotiation, about whether I should give an answer, I offered a typical historico-critical response to the question of the origin of Daniel, suggesting two different settings for the two halves of the book, with Chapters 1–6 coming from the period of the historical Daniel, chapter seven onwards from four centuries later. I was drawn by the question into a particular aspect of the role of the 'expert' theological educator – imparting knowledge.

This provoked a strong response from F3, in which she established her own approach, which is concerned with the literal truth of the text – what it said took place, took place. This kind of debate, or stand-off, was familiar to all present. The underlying question is about the authority of the text. F3 appears consistently in the data as the person most likely to use the 'canonical' repertoire of her own approach, most attached to taking the text 'at its face value'. For others, who contributed to the discussion, a more critical approach was not

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inconsistent with the Bible being authoritative. And the conclusions arrived at, for example that Daniel might have had two authors, did not imply that the Bible was not to be trusted.

The analytical question here is: how do group members talk their way through such a debate? How do they negotiate the disagreement about the authority of the text? Clues are seen in a number of turns in which they explore a question from M1:

Extract 4a

```
1   M1: why then do some denominations take it [Daniel] literally (2s) when
2       other denominations interpret it in a (.) in a broa:der (1s) way (4s)

3   F2: some like (.) going into all the little nitty picky bits and others like (.)
4       to concentrate on (.) sort uv practical christian living (2s)

5   M1: so would the Brethren (.) um analyse this passage in Daniel in the same
6       way as they would analyse a gospel passage

7   M2: °oh yeah°

8   M1: or and   [an- an epistle and (.) an ordinary prophet

9   F2:           [mm ((doubtfully))

10  M1: so you'd have the same [sort of process

11  M2:                        [you could I've I've I've known I've known
12      three maybe three weeks of mee- y'know evening services ( ) every night
13      f- five nights a week on (.) someone just on the Book of Daniel or even
14      on Daniel's dreams going into de- i:nfinite detail about what each one
15      and what they meant and how they related and so on (.) and and and mm
16      but at but at the end of the day the message as F1 says was the same it was
17      about encouragement it was about the fact that God is sovereign it was erm
18      but (.) if you (.) start from a position of believing that the Bible y'know the
19      th- th- is is is God-inspired and then- and literally true then it doesn't
20      matter whether it's Daniel or whether it's Leviticus or what it is
21      it is it is the word of God and and therefore to be taken at its
22      face value and therefore all the way through (.) mm ((clears throat))
23      everything will be taken at its face value
```

In these turns, the 'canonical' repertoire is used of other people's approach to the Book of Daniel. M1's question about what kind of Bible-study would have taken place within M2's previous experience of being a member of the Brethren (the conservative protestant group referred to above), initiates the exploration. M2's response provides a not-wholly positive picture of a very detailed exercise producing meagre results, before concluding with an encapsulation of this approach to biblical interpretation in lines 17 to 23. This stands as something of a 'formulation' (Heritage & Watson, 1979) – a summary of an aspect of the conversation thus far offered to other participants. Further the formulation

draws on lexical terms central to the 'canonical' repertoire – notably, 'God-inspired'; 'word of God'; 'taken at its face value'. This formulation having been achieved, however, M1 (as often, provocative) tests it.

Extract 4b

```
24 M1: but if it's the word of God does it have to be (.) taken at face value can you
25      can you trust it as being the word of God (2s)
26      [and not necessarily take it at face value

27 F3: [can you what what trust it

       (Lines 28 to 37 involved clarifying what M1 had said for F3's benefit).

38 M1: which involves (3s) having the confidence (.) to handle it in a
39      different way (3s) it was interesting to begin with y'know we were
40      talking about well you F3 were talking in particular about a
41      particular way of handling Daniel i- i- in terms of I don't know well
42      yes in terms of relating to Christ (.) and yet we seem to have gone round
43      and (.) we've encouraged each other to look at it in a different way and we
44      said this is in fact a different sort of writing (.) and as R has said it's
45      spread out in time and things (2s) so I think well I'm I'm just intrigued
46      (.) it- it gives us a sort uv a (.) if- if we can still believe it and trust it
47      being (.) the inspired word of God (.) we don't have to take it at face
48      value but we still get something out of it which is inspired (.) is that
```

Especially in lines 24 to 26 and in lines 45 to 48, M1 appears to be stretching the interpretative approach here, perhaps in order to escape from the uncompromising authority associated with taking the text 'at face value'. He does this by offering to the group a way in which some of the 'canonical' lexicality ('word of God', 'inspired') could apply to an interpretative approach which doesn't take the biblical text 'at face value'. The immediate consequence was that F3 reacted strongly against M1's suggested approach, restating the literalist position that the Book was written by the historical Daniel, and what it said took place did take place. Others in the group however orientated towards M1's position, affirming the validity of his question, holding open the possibility that Daniel need not have been written by the historical figure Daniel, but perhaps by another Daniel!

Although the interaction was precipitated by my part in it, the group appeared to be entirely used to this kind of discussion. The discussion, although spirited, was not heated, nor particularly productive for participants. Talk did not shift very far from the initial stand-off, and remained very much in the realm of what interpretation might be permitted. The key analytical point, however, is that M1, while drawing on a number of the lexical terms characteristic of the 'canonical' repertoire, tests one in particular – that which relates to taking the text 'at its face value'.

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Within the next couple of turns (after those just discussed), however, the discussion shifted into different, 'contingent' territory. Participant M2 led the discussion into this area. His point of departure was a brief discussion of the existence of more than one 'Isaiah' (in other words, more than one writer of the Book of Isaiah, presumably seen by him as a well-established parallel to the idea of there being two 'Daniels'):

Extract 5

```
1  M2:…it doesn't actually matter

2  F3:[no °no°

3  M2:[because what- what I think I've- my responsibility is to look at this
4     passage nd say what what does that (.) say to me now

5  F3:yes

6  M2:and how can that help and encourage me and how can that p'raps can I use
7     that to encourage other people (.) mm and (.) I- I- I- nd knowing that it
8     that this is a word from God t- to us and t- and and to each generation and
9     and and actually trying to say what is the word what is God's word what is
10    God saying and how- how are we to respond to it that for me is the important
11    thing now no- I can't have a conversation with my family at home as I I-
12    tried last week on a couple of occasions and it almost ended up in- in- (.)
13    in- in- in tears again because they just they can't they can't come at
14    anything that's not the literal (.) absolute literal truth every verse is- is-
15    is- is true and their faith is wonderful their their their commitment to
16    God is wonderful and and that's fine I've no problem with that I can't
17    I can't go there now (.) mm (.) and I don't particularly I didn't ask to not
18    go there I didn't ask to end up seeing things in a different way but it's
19    happened it's part of the journey

20 F3:hh. nn but we will all see if we read the chapter (.) because it's the
21    living word of God and we're all different (.) and no two of us s the same
22    if we want to seek the truth as the prayer said at the beginning (.) then
23    God will speak to us (.) possibly in different ways (.) varying ways to
24    each of us we haven't- it's unity in diversity we haven't necessarily
25    got to all see it exactly the same have we

26 F2:no

27 F3:t- to grasp the truth that's in it mm because otherwise (.) you get into
28    terrible trouble if for example R said now you've all got to believe
29    A B C and D about this passage we'd all go home distressed because
30    we we mightn't heh we mightn't all feel the same
```

In lines 3 and 4 M2 steers the group into the safe territory of 'what does [the passage] say to me now?', which is at the heart of the 'contingent' repertoire. He then expands this idea in lines 6 to 11, before identifying the personal difficulty of having arrived in this interpretative place. F3, who had previously been a forthright proponent of a literalist historical approach to the text,

next orientates strongly towards this approach in the next turn (lines 20–25), further demonstrating that it is built on an understanding that God speaks to participants in the present.

The lexicality of this turn is interesting. F3 leads into the idea that God speaks to participants by using the phrase 'the living word of God'. This picks up a phrase characteristic of the 'canonical' approach ('word of God'), but radically shifts the emphasis of it. In previous discussion, 'the word of God' for F3 has meant the singular word that God spoke in the past (through Daniel, for example) and which is held in the biblical text. 'The living word of God' appears, in contrast, to be the plural word(s) of God which are discovered by those who engage with the text, which God speaks in the present, 'in different ways, varying ways'. We shall return to this transition below.

All this illustrates the way the 'contingent' repertoire works within discussion of a Bible passage. Its distance from the 'canonical' one is indicated by a number of features of the talk. First, M2 clearly perceives the 'contingent' approach to be very different from his previous experience of the 'canonical' – so different as to divide him from other members of his family. Secondly, the move into 'contingent' talk produces a marked shift in F3's talk. Apart from the differences of content noted in the last paragraph, she also arrives at a place of positive and inclusive agreement with other participants, where previously she had been defending a position against their modification. Thirdly, the exchange between M2 and F3 unlocked the talk of the whole group, which continued to focus for most of the remainder of the meeting on 'contingent' concerns, exploring what the passage *did* say to participants. And a much wider range of participants joined in the conversation (suggesting that they felt included).

Once again, the parallel with the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) is apparent. A 'contingent' repertoire is used as a way of mitigating disagreement which arises within a different repertoire constructed around authoritative truth. Of course what then takes place within the 'contingent' repertoire differs between Bible-study talk and that of scientists. Thus in the discourse of the former, they changed repertoires in order to make space for, and affirm, divergent views, rather than resolve different views. If in scientific discourse there is a need to believe that 'the truth will out' and differences of understanding will be resolved through empirical work (Gilbert & Mulkay, 1984: Chapter 5), for the Bible-study group there appears to be no such need. This is because the 'truth' can be found in what the text says to me/us, and is multi-faceted and contextual.

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6   Discussion of the concept of 'interpretative repertoire' and conclusion

A single meaning of a passage, rooted in the past word of God, mediated through an authoritative figure, involving taking the text at face-value, or literally; *or* multiple meanings of the same passage, understood as the living word of God in the present, discovered by any member of the group, involving seeing the text in a different, or broader way; it is easy to draw the contrast between the two identified repertoires, and to link the different theologies to particular lexical terms used by the group. But this is not the whole story of the relationship between these different ways of talking.

Clearly the two repertoires are dependent on each other. The 'contingent' has every appearance of being a reaction to the 'canonical' – it is by definition 'different', a 'broader' approach. At the same time the 'canonical' is, one suspects, constructed so as to legitimate the alternative. The singularity of the 'canonical' picture, the strength of the authority claims attributed to others, the prescriptiveness of the meaning, might be said to justify the suspicion and the more comfortable plurality. For this Bible-study group, at least, it is hard to imagine the two repertoires existing independently.

Further, the movement of talk within and between the repertoires emphasises their close connection and raises again the question about whether 'repertoire' is the best, or only term which might be used to denote the kind of talk found here. In Extract 4b, M1 does some negotiating with the lexicality of the 'canonical' repertoire – testing not only a particular term, 'at face value', but also the coherence of the repertoire. One way of picturing this is to see M1 as seeking to widen the orbit of the discussion, to give the talk a trajectory which takes it away from the 'canonical' gravitational centre. In response, F3 ensures that the conversation is brought back down to ('canonical') earth.

In Extract 5, however, M2 succeeds in enabling the talk to reach escape velocity. There are elements of similarity with what M1 was attempting. In particular, in lines 7 to 11 of the extract, M2 shifts the lexicality of the 'canonical' repertoire into a different orbit, by playing with variants on 'word of God' in order to locate the work of the group as a search for present, rather than past, meaning. This paves the way for F3's phrase, already referred to, 'living word of God'. The talk of the whole group then slips into a new orbit, around the 'contingent' gravitational centre, in ways outlined above.

This kind of talk stretches the term 'repertoire'. Gilbert and Mulkay's defining statement is that repertoires display, 'certain recurrent stylistic, grammatical and lexical features which appear to be coherently connected' (1984: 55f). Potter and Wetherell's view is that an 'interpretative repertoire' consists of 'recurrently used systems of terms... organized around specific metaphors and figures of

speech (tropes)' (1987: 149). These definitions focus on the distinctiveness and coherence of a repertoire. A repertoire is defined by its boundaries. These definitions, and the term 'repertoire' itself, may therefore distract attention from the flow of discourse between, as well as within, repertoires, underplaying the connections *between* interpretative approaches found in this data.

A term that articulates the discursive flows discussed above, and also the important connections which exist between the different conversations, is 'discursive node'. A node may be a distinct, identifiable point in discourse, but exists properly in connection with other nodes. Further the node is not the boundary, but rather the focus, of a construction. I would contend that this term allows for a better description of the talk of the Bible-study group. Certain key phrases, such as taking the text 'at face value', 'what does this text say to me/us', operate as nodes around which distinctive conversations are focused. The different groups of closely related nodes (hitherto labelled as aspects of a particular repertoire) generate different types of conversation, a more 'canonical', or more 'contingent' kind of talk. Within the groups the relationship between nodes may be explored (as in Extract 4b). Further, certain nodes in each group, 'word of God', 'living word of God', also offer jumping off points which allow talk to shift from one group to another. Being able to deploy different nodes, and to move from one to another, is crucial for the identity of the group. The 'canonical' nodal points provide for the need for the group to define itself in critical relationship with the authority of the Bible and to negotiate what is permissible in their Bible talk. The 'contingent' nodes provide for conversation which establishes group members in inclusive relationship with each other and in which God speaks. The flow of talk around and between the different nodes allows for different emphases to be held in tension.

The above discussion seems to make some case for the heuristic value of the concept of 'interpretative repertoire' within the analysis of the discourse of the Bible-study group, but also to reveal its limitations. One of the values *and* limitations of the interpretative tool is the polarity which is set up between repertoires. This is certainly part of the work of Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) and it may be inherent in the model. Such polarity is of value in the interpretation of talk about the Bible. It establishes distance between 'canonical' and 'contingent' talk. However, this bi-polarity does have its limits. And it is the term 'discursive node', this paper argues, which better elucidates the flow of talk within and between 'canonical' and 'contingent' areas of talk. In providing a picture of multiple 'nodes', some grouped together, some offering links between groups, the subtlety of distinction *and* connection is more effectively portrayed.

This also casts further light on the parallel between the work of this paper and that of Gilbert and Mulkay. The use of the term 'node', and the picture to which that gives rise, underlines a particular need in relation to exploring the relation-

ship between contrasting ways of talking, sometimes labelled 'interpretative repertoires'. One of the points of commonality already noted between Gilbert and Mulkay (1984) and this paper, was the idea of a 'contingent' repertoire operating as a way of coping with disagreement or conflict. The discussion of the data presented here has shown that understanding the *movement between* 'canonical' and 'contingent' kinds of talk, and their inter-dependence, is of key importance in comprehending how disagreement is negotiated. Whether or not this is replicated in other data (religious, scientific, or other discourse), this paper makes a strong case for the methodological value of paying close attention to the transition between different patterns of talk, in any analysis of discourse. Describing such patterns in terms of 'discursive nodes' (with the corresponding stress on the inter-connection of multiple polarities), rather than opposing 'interpretative repertoires', facilitates such attention to transition.

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Acknowledgements

Appendix 1

Notation for transcriptions (adapted from Antaki, 2004)

(.)	Just noticeable pause
(1s)	Longer pause with length in seconds
↑ ↓	Start of rise, or fall in pitch
[	Start of overlapping speech (used in turns of both speakers)
.hh hh	In-breath (with .), or out-breath

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heh	Conventional indication of restrained laughter
wor-	- indicates sharp cut-off of word
wo:rd	: indicates the elongation of the preceding sound
( )	Unclear speech
word=	= indicates that there is no discernible gap between words
=word	(used at the end of the first word and the beginning of the next)
<u>word</u> WORD	Underlining indicates louder speech; capitals louder still
°word°	° indicates quieter speech between the degree signs
> < < >	Inward arrows enclose faster speech; outward arrows, slower speech
(( ))	Double brackets provide information that is difficult to show any other way

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Appendix 10
A really useful question

During the four meetings for studying particular texts, I regularly used the kind of question suggested by the Pilot Group – what struck you about this text? In meeting G1.3 members of the group oriented to the question from time to time during a considerable period of the discussion. Each time the orientation allowed them to challenge, and in some cases break free from, the immediately prior line of discussion. Initially, this worked as follows:

1 R: it's probably worth asking the question wh- yo- what what is it thats
2   that leaps out at you or (.) y'know (.) what's your first reaction wh- what are
3   the things you think ah well it be (.) good t' (.) explore that °to look at that°
4   (13s)
5 F1.3:   I think it's interesting that…

F1.3 introduced a line of thinking about Luke providing historical detail in the text under consideration (Luke 3.1-22), to which no-one orientated at this point – the turn was followed by an eight second pause. Next F1.1 introduced a thought about things which touched her:

F1.1:   there's a couple of lovely phrases in the Message (.) translation…

This turn also provoked no follow up, being followed by a 28 second pause. F1.3 took the opportunity to introduce another line of thought:

F1.3:   I've never understa- stood in verse seven…

This time a discussion ensued, which lasted some two minutes. Then after a pause of five seconds F1.2 introduced her point of interest.

F1.2:   I'd never noticed particularly before…

Within the discussion that this provoked, after a further three minutes, M1.2 picked up the initial question again, as an opportunity not to introduce a new line of thought, but rather to shift the ground of the discussion. Up to this point the discussion had treated what the text says about John the Baptist and those who came to him in a very human way. M1.2 engaged with this but then moved it on (see especially line 4):

1M1.2:   yeh but go- going out (.) is one thing out uv curiosity (.) go- coming
2   o- o- o- with a sense uv (.) of- of- of guilt and a sense uv (.) of- of the need

3   to make themselves right with God is something different and i- i- y'know

4   this is one of the things that struck me was i- because it's they don't answer

5   him it says who warned you to flee from the wrath to come well there's no

6   answer presumably a work of the spirit of God...

This initiated a discussion about whether people went to see John the Baptist because God moved them or because everyone else was going.

Five and a half minutes later M1.2 employed a similar phrase to return to something that has been said earlier:

M1.2:   I- I'm interested in the fact that [M1.1] (.) very early on um (.) i-introduced

           Ian Paisley into the conversation...

Twelve minutes after this M1.2 again made use of the initial question. M1.1 had sought to introduce another question 'what does this text say about God?' This is one of the questions worth asking which I had provided for the group, for use if desired. M1.1 referred to this question as the 'first question', meaning the first question on the sheet. M1.2 reacted in the following way:

1 M1.2:   that wasn't the first question we were asked ((background laughter))

2   we're very biddable we do exactly what we're told in this group

3   ((ironically))

4 R: feel- no feel free to use any of these at any point [M1.1] y'know I mean

5   heh heh heh (.) heh heh

6 M1.2:   we 'ere asked what were the things that sort uv occurred to us and we're

7   still occurring

M1.1 then explained his interest in his preferred question, which stemmed from a comment from me in the previous session about how the group found tackling theological questions difficult. After a brief discussion of this, the group quickly returned to the previous line of discussion.

Some fourteen minutes later at the point where a discussion of the place of the desert in Jewish tradition tails off, F1.2 returns to the initial question in order to take the conversation elsewhere (involving a comparison between John the Baptist and Jesus):

F 1.2:   That's another thing that struck me...

One thing that might be observed about this question is that it points to the discourse of G1 being, although informal, at the same time 'institutional'. Heritage (1997) provides a convenient and comprehensive list of features of talk-in-interaction which may reveal its 'institutional' character: turn-taking organisation; overall structural organisation; sequence organisation; turn design; lexical choice; and interactional asymmetries. Clearly the question and its use involves some asymmetry of action between me, the one introducing the question, and other participants who make use of it. Further, this question, introduced early on in the proceedings and used subsequently, was an element of the 'overall structural organisation' of meetings. But the question's most interesting aspect lies in its effect on turn-taking organisation.

In mundane, or 'everyday', conversation CA suggests that commonly participants orientate not only to preceding talk, but especially to the previous turn[227]. The power of the question used with G1, is that it enabled participants to ignore the previous turn, and introduce a new line of talk (albeit within the context of a discussion of a particular text). I would suggest that opening a turn with a line such as, 'I think it's interesting that...' was thus a particular turn design within the discourse of G1, and one feature of its institutionality.

A further thing to be noted is that this way of starting a discussion appears from these extracts to be a powerful one, in the sense that the question remains in the conversation, for use by any of the participants. The part it plays in the life of the Group has an egalitarian feel to it, therefore. In particular, it offers back to participants the opportunity to direct conversation, which they have otherwise ceded to the leader (Mehan, 1979). It has, therefore, the potential for acting as a resource in a wide range of discussion group settings.

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[227] Heritage himself discusses this (1997, 162), drawing on the work of Schegloff and Sacks.

Appendix 11

G1 – Some features of analysis

1. Another world

G Nigel Gilbert & Michael Mulkay (1984) *Opening Pandora's Box: A Sociological Analysis of Scientists' Discourse*, Cambridge University Press

Gilbert and Mulkay identified two major repertoires (ways of talking about the doing of science) in the discourse of scientists (and in particular Biochemists):

- An 'empiricist' and a 'contingent' repertoire
- These, they suggested, were to be found often in different contexts; the former repertoire in scientists' formal papers; the latter in more informal discourse, such as interviews.
- They expanded this picture identifying contexts in which both repertoires were used together, e.g. in an asymmetrical way to account for differences in the findings of scientists
- Crudely, the strategy appeared to be to use the 'empiricist' repertoire of the findings of the scientist speaking and the 'contingent' repertoire to account for the different findings of other scientists. (In caricature, 'I'm working deductively and objectively; you're working inductively and subjectively)

2. Some research findings

In my analysis of G1, I thought that I detected some suggestion of two similar repertoires (ways of talking about doing Bible-study)

(i)   The 'canonical' repertoire

This is characterised by a recognition of the authority of the Bible

- The text has authority
- The text ought to make a difference to us
- The text is the word of God
- We may take the text at face value as a way of understanding it as God's word
- Or we may see it more as a human text with a history that needs to be uncovered (but this is still a way of getting at God's word)
- Both these last two approaches are about understanding where the text came from

But is this one repertoire, or two?

(ii)   The 'contingent' repertoire

This provides an alternative approach to the text, characterised by

- The question – what does the text say to me/us?
- Valuing different viewpoints and interpretations
- A sense of God speaking to each person internally
- Holding within the group individual perspectives
- This goes with a strong inclusive theology within the group

There was also some suggestion that the different repertoires worked differently in different locations – e.g. in the Bible-study group and in Church on Sunday. But the repertoires also depend on each other, and are held in tension.

Appendix 12
First meeting questions

1. Basic Questions

    1. Who are the members of the group (present/absent)
    2. How long have you been meeting?
    3. How was the group set up in the first place?
    4. How often do you meet?

2. Process Questions

    i. What do you do when you meet?
        a) How long do you meet for?
        b) Who leads the group?
        c) What activities do you do?
        d) Where do you start?
        e) What resources do you use?
        f) What happens at the end of a meeting?

3. Questions about Interpretation

    i. What approach(es) do you take to reading and interpreting the Bible
        a) What different kinds of interest do you have in the text?
        b) What kind of questions do you ask about the text?

    ii. Amongst the approaches that you use...
  a) Do you think about what the text has to say about God?
  b) Do you consider the history that lies behind the text?
  c) Do you pay detailed attention to what is going on in a particular passage?
  d) Do you ask how the passage you're studying connects with everyday life?

    iii. What are the pros and cons of different approaches that you use?
        a) Which ones work (well)? Which don't work (work badly)?
        b) How do you decide which approach to use?
        c) How do they work together?
        d) Do you use them in any particular order?

4. Evaluation Questions

    i. What do you value about these group meetings?
        a) What do you most/least enjoy about group meetings?
        b) What do you find most/least challenging about what you do?
        c) What difference does belonging to this group make to you?

Appendix 13
Group comparison grid

	Group 1	Group 2	Group 3
Group identity & church	Critical of church for up-front patterns of authority; Group represents more inclusive and egalitarian alternative to church	Affirmative of church; Group is an extension of church life; some suspicion of overly exclusive church traditions/concern to be inclusive	Very churchy group; religious/church experience central to discourse and identity
Fellowship	Fellowship as group members, over and against the church	Fellowship in the group strengthening membership of the church	Fellowship through worship and formality, strengthening positive view of church today, despite concern, and nostalgia for the past
Group identity & contemporary culture	Fully developed theological discourse rooted in contemporary understandings of inclusivity; deconstructive approaches utilised in relation to text and church	Contemporary discourse of inclusivity and suspicion support gentle deconstruction, held in tension with the demands of orthodoxy; explcit awareness of this tension	Contemporary discourse supplies lexical choices, but only very occasional deconstructive forays
Leadership	Encouraged me to lead discussion, but responded warmly to open, facilitative style; most egalitarian group, suspicious of authoritarian leadership in various contexts	Three leaders alternated, but others shared leadership over time; tension between human leaders and study-guide; room to challenge human leaders and study-guide	Priest led the group consistently (unless absent); firmly shaped pattern of leadership, adjusted by negotiation; occasional transient examples of others leading conversation
My role within the Group	My role as 'leader' valued as 'facilitative'; evidence that stronger direction from me would not have been/was not welcome. My viewpoint accepted alongside that of others	Ambivalence to my role, in the earlier stages; I was increasingly welcome as participant, given that I did not challenge leadership; impropriety led to direct reference to my/tape's presence	My role largely determined by place in the room - Group 3.1 in 'The Chair'; other meetings participant. Some orientation by priest to me as expert. One example of me leading different speech-exchange pattern
Alignment amongst participants	Strong viewpoints led to debate; but whole group alignment through acceptance of difference	Some drive to alignment of newer members with leaders; but room for disagreement and questions and growing participation; tension leaders/guide contribute to openness	Strong drive, through speech-exchange pattern, to align lay participants with priest/his interpretation; little alignment amongst lay participants

Predominant interpretative approaches to the Bible	Critical historical in tension with literalist; what does the text say to me/us; modern narrative parallels; scripture interpreting scripture; interpreting from view of God's nature; insights more important than nitty-picky detail	Working with study-guide questions (selectively); understanding the text better; applying the text today; suspicion within an orthodox framework; academic knowledge secondary; gaining insights key	Modernist historical approach as (priest's) overall frame; the text/chosen interpretation have to make sense (together); 'second stories' help to relate text-interpretation to church/religious experience of lay members; priest relates back to text
Authority of text/alignment with text	Text has 'some' authority, but has to be appropriated through full engagement and negotiation of alignment (with awareness of the agendas at work in interpretation)	Text reflects the authority of Christ; but authority may be gently subverted by suspicion, given an overall orthodox interpretation (the real miracle is...) aligned to contemporary culture	The authority of the text is mediated by the priest/framework for discussion; lay participants cede right of interpretation to priest; strong drive to align participants to the interpretation
God and alignment with text	Text has to reflect understanding of/experience of God in participants' lives for alignment with text to take place; strong theology of the Spirit at work/speaking though people; interpretation about getting hold of 'some facet of God'	Highly deferential theology of Christ; explicit theology of learning about God through the text; rationalist modification of the historical meaning (& therefore theology) smuggled into this theological arena	Text, mediated by authoritative interpretation, offers the opportunity for alignment between participants' religious experience and text; text as legitimation/'sacred canopy'
Speech-exchange patterns	Useful question - what strikes you about this text? Became pretext for any participant introducing new direction for study; low degree of assymetry between leader (me) and other participants	Classroom-like pattern; tension between study-guide's (rule-centred) and human leaders' (role-centred) leadership; some assymetry between leaders and other participants (number of turns)	Directive classroom-like pattern (shaped by priest's interpretative intro., redirection and closing formulation; marked assymetry therefore between priest and lay participants (in nature of interactions and knowledge)
Cultural domains of discourse	Two distinct domains: modern domain, with historical and confessional foci; contemporary deconstructive domain, with positive emphasis on inclusion. Demonstrable movement between domains	Overlapping domains: modern, with confessional perspective taking the lead and subsidiary historical focus; contemporary deconstructive, permeating modern domain, but contained by confessional framework.	Dominant domain: modernist theological (priest); frames lay participation in churchy domain (to some extent shared with priest). Contemporary deconstructive domain severely limited by speech-exchange pattern
Disagreement	Disagreement between participants noticeable in modern domain; personal preferences as to viewpoints legitimated by inclusive perspective in contemporary domain	Some evidence of group negotiation away from dis-preferred interpretations, but potentially more challenging viewpoints may be introduced given sufficient authority (e.g. of long-standing group members)	One very obvious example of dis-preferred interpretation (from deconstructive domain) being corporately talked out. Some negotiation with dominant framework

Characterisation of linguistic resources	Interpretative repertoires/nodes - used to denote interaction in and between distinct domains	Voices: Jesus/text; lifeworld - used to explore interruption and re-contextualisation. Further developed into a range of voices - conservative, modern, contemporary, other people	Voices: modern and connecting - used to denote interaction of modern priestly voice and lay narrative voices in relation to the churchy domain. Another deconstructive voice notable mostly by its absence
Gilbert & Mulkay parallel	Canonical and contingent repertoires (nodes). Some distinct lexicality, but also lexical transition points	Contingent voices operating in a predominatly canonical arena. Continuum of lexicality with somme distinction between points on the continuum	Canonical voice (priest); connecting voice (lay); contingent concerns/voice severely constrained in discourse of this group. Perhaps distinct lexicality, but notable shared contemporary lexicality not developed into contemporary discourse

Appendix 14
Group interaction, behaviour and identity – the role of silence

The comparative work on alignment amongst group members, which looked at G1, G2 and G3 side-by-side, generated particular insights, not noticed in previous analysis, in connection with the part silence played in group conversations. Distinctively long silences were noted in both G2 and G3. In discussion of G2.5 (6.4.5, pp.156-157) note was made of an eight second pause following the leader's introduction. This length of pause (up to about 10 seconds) was not untypical in the speech-exchange of the group after a leader introduced a question for discussion. Special note was made, in the same meeting, of an exceptionally long pause of 21 seconds. This followed a question which provoked a marked change of direction in the conversation, as participants were required to empathise with the Pharisees over and against whom they had previously been identifying. Sacks et al (Sacks et al., 1974) suggest that in mundane conversation gaps in conversation are characteristically short, and that longer pauses are found as 'lapses' between episodes of conversation. In the case of G2 the long silences cannot be identified as lapses. They do need to be regarded as gaps between question and response – appearing as a pause for thought, or a pause before committing to a response, which may perhaps be particularly marked following questions which significantly shift the ground of the discussion.

This phenomenon of silences between turns was even more marked in G3. Gaps before participants' responses of three or four seconds were common after the priest's questions, but also occurred between participants' contributions. The conversation of this group also included much longer silences of twenty or thirty seconds, or more. For example, these occurred in G3.4 after a couple of the priest's formulations. Three such lengthy pauses occurred in G3.5, after the reading aloud of a complex passage from the Apocrypha.

It is plausible, particularly given the absence of such pauses in G1, that the silences are connected with the careful way in which the speech-exchange of Groups two and three was structured, and with the drive to alignment present in the talk of each group. It is also interesting that the longest silences occurred in the group with the strongest

such drive. There are those who would connect silence with issues of power and powerlessness. However, as Tannen (2001) argues in her consideration of linguistic strategies in relation to power and gender, 'silence alone... is not a self-evident sign of powerlessness'. In Groups 2 and 3, with both male and female leaders and participants, if there is a power imbalance it is between leaders and participants. But the silences are ambiguous. They may speak of the power of the leader to direct through introductions, questions and formulations, and/or of the power of participants to withhold a response. Most interesting, in this respect, are the silences <u>after</u> the priest's formulations in G3. Here, the silence and lack of response leaves him with no option but to continue. This suggests that the closure of the episode, while precipitated by his formulation, is not solely achieved by him.

Lukes (1974), in his critique of overly-individualistic conceptions of power, assists with developing this a little further. He directs us to look beyond individual behaviour, overt exercise of power and explicit grievances, and to see power in terms of 'the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviour of groups' (1974, 22). Partly this underlines that silence, which is neither overt expression of a grievance nor an articulated decision not to cooperate with the group leader, is nonetheless an exercise of power, indicative of a power imbalance – particularly given that it is a recurrent feature of group practice. But more than this, Lukes reminds us that the power imbalance points to a conflict of interests – in which power relations are rooted (Lukes, 1974, 26-33). Silences in G2 and G3 speak: of leaders (especially in the latter) working with different interests than participants; of the overt power (over participants) of the leader to initiate and close episodes of conversation; but also of the covert power which participants exercise over the leader through their extended silences. These silences speak of the seriousness of the alignment work that takes place in these groups, which exists not as a one-way process, but rather as a dynamic tension.

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