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Textual Ideology, Textual Practice: A Discourse-Centered
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TEXTUAL IDEOLOGY, TEXTUAL PRACTICE: A DISCOURSE-CENTERED
APPROACH TO PROTESTANT BIBLE STUDY

By

James S. Bielo

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ABSTRACT

TEXTUAL IDEOLOGY, TEXTUAL PRACTICE: A DISCOURSE-CENTERED APPROACH TO PROTESTANT BIBLE STUDY

By

James S. Bielo

This dissertation examines the practice of small group Bible study among American Protestants. The analysis focuses on the relationship between the assumptions and expectations readers hold about the Bible (textual ideology) and their impact on various forms of discursive action (textual practice). I argue that the textual ideology surrounding the Bible acts as both a structuring mechanism in the discursive backdrop of group life, and an interactional strategy participants invoke in pursuit of specific hermeneutic and rhetorical aims.

Small group Bible study is a key ethnographic site for observing how contemporary American Protestants interact with their sacred text. Bible study is the most common type of small group in U.S. society. More than 25 million Americans gather each week to read and discuss Biblical texts and related commentaries. Small groups play a unique and vital role as sites of knowledge production within Protestant communities. Unlike other congregational activities, Bible study is a site of open, critical dialogue where members engage in an active, reflective negotiation of their faith. Categories of belief, tradition, identity, and practice are reaffirmed and questioned in this context. How

believers understand their relationship with the Bible is the form of knowledge most evident and central to Protestant ethos.

This dissertation is the result of 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork with 19 Bible study groups in six Protestant congregations. Based on the audio recording and observation of 324 meetings, as well as several complementary data collection techniques, I argue that the textual ideology surrounding the Bible consists of six well-articulated principles that address the authority, relevance, and textuality of the Bible.

Each of the three main analytical chapters considers a distinct form of discursive practice that unfolds in dynamic relation with these principles. First, groups employ three interpretive styles when reading the Bible: finding application, establishing meaning, and explaining Biblical texts through inferencing processes. Second, groups rely on shared and idiosyncratic interpretive resources, each of which embeds ideological principles. And, lastly, I analyze how group participants recontextualize the Bible. I argue that the preferred style of recontextualization works in conjunction with the predominant interpretive concerns in each setting.

This dissertation draws from discourse-centered, interpretive, and praxis frameworks in the anthropological tradition. The arguments I present contribute to debates surrounding the production of knowledge in institutional discourse, intertextual strategies, and practices of collective reading. This research also contributes to an emerging body of work on the anthropology of Christianity.

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For John S. Bielo, my father, who first instilled in me the values of
earnest work, perseverance, and a nuanced eye

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Introduction: Bible Study, Ethnography, and Anthropology

Every week tens of millions of Americans gather in homes and churches for small group Bible study. It is, in fact, the most common type of small group in American society (Wuthnow 1994a). These groups assume a variety of forms. There are men's, women's, couples', and singles' Bible studies. They are organized by age, occupation, and maturity of faith. Some groups study directly from the Bible, while others read non-scriptural texts by Christian authors or devote discussion to a Biblical topic or theme. In any case, small groups are among the most meaningful and important practices for American Protestants.

This dissertation is about the discourse in small group Bible study. My descriptions and analyses are based on 19 months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted among six Protestant congregations in a Midwestern city, and in 19 groups from these churches. The central issue I address is the interaction between discourse participants and their sacred text, the Bible. How individuals and groups interact with Biblical texts is fundamental to understanding what occurs in the small group setting, and why this practice is so significant for American Protestantism.

This moment in American history is an appropriate time for this topic. As I began to write the initial section (which eventually became chapter 5) the Gospel of Judas¹ was released to the public. A few weeks later, the film version of The Da Vinci Code² was released. Both re-ignited debates about what constitutes Christian scripture and identity.

¹ The Gospel of Judas is a Gnostic text dating to the 2nd century A.D. It was first discovered in 1983 and released to the public as an English translation in April of 2006. The text portrays Judas as a confidant of Jesus Christ who obeyed a direct command from Jesus to betray him.

² The Da Vinci Code (2003) is a mystery novel written by Dan Brown. The book's plot includes suggestions that Mary Magdalene and Jesus were married and had children together. This is a heretical belief in the orthodox Christian tradition.

Midway through the year of data collection, controversy swirled around Intelligent Design theory after court cases considered whether or not this view of human origins should be taught in public schools alongside Darwinian evolution. This brought attention to Biblical themes of creation, as well as what role the Bible might play in science education in public schools. Two months before I started collecting data George W. Bush was re-elected to the U.S. Presidency. Much was (and is) made about the political capital of 'Christian Right' voters, and the use of Biblical rhetoric to attract this audience. The earliest stages of this project came on the heels of Mel Gibson's film The Passion of the Christ. This too raised questions about the accuracy, consistency, and authority of the Bible. Biblically oriented books like The Prayer of Jabez (2000), The Purpose Driven Life (2003), and Your Best Life Now (2004) appeared on religious and secular best-seller lists prior to and throughout the research. Sales reached to tens of millions, and in some cases entire industries of products and programs ensued.

Christianity clearly pervades private and public life in America. As a native anthropologist³, I believe ethnographic attention to the lives of Christian believers – what they do, what they say, and what they care about – should reflect this presence. Meeting together in small groups is only one thing that American Protestants do. But, it is among the most significant things they do. Their discursive relation with the Bible is not the only thing they talk about, or care about. But, it is something they spend much of their time talking about, and care a great deal about.

³ I consider myself a native anthropologist in this research in two regards. 1) I am a native-born United States citizen studying a cultural practice by US citizens in the United States of America. 2) I am a Christian believer studying other Christian believers, although many adhere to significantly different theological, social, and political beliefs than I do.

Before presenting the analyses that support these claims, it is important to place my research among other scholarly work. It is equally important to explain how the data for these analyses were collected. First, I discuss the relevant theoretical frameworks to my research. I then review my methodology.

Theoretical Frameworks

I situate my research within two theoretical frameworks, the study of discourse and the study of Christianity. My goal is to demonstrate how these two intellectual traditions made my work possible and how my work contributes to them both.

The Anthropology of Discourse

One of my key theoretical decisions was to view Bible study as a discourse event, and not simply as a general form of cultural practice. This focused my analysis on the linguistic, interactive, and textual features of group meetings. This orientation to studying cultural life has a rich history in anthropology. The inception of the ethnography of speaking in the early 1960s marked a turning point in how anthropologists interested in language approached their object of study.

The ethnography of speaking emerged in conjunction with socio-linguistics (Hymes 1964). Both sought to broaden their field of inquiry to include new questions about the relationship between language, language use, and social action. Linguistic anthropologists were interested in research outside the Whorfian tradition of linguistic relativity, and the grammatical description and classification of non-Indo European languages. The shift toward speech as an object of analysis also occurred in response to structural linguistics, where scholars in the Chomskyan tradition were favoring issues of “competence” over issues of “performance” (ibid). Sociolinguists were interested in

research that went beyond the linking of social and linguistic variables (Duranti 2003). The result was a shift in interest from the structuralist preoccupation with language as a system to the actualization of that system by real people in real situations.

Research in the ethnography of speaking proceeded from the assumption that speech is not a completely individualized phenomenon, but is patterned and shared much like any other form of social practice. As a methodological tool, ethnographers of speaking became interested in speech events and speech communities. For the former, certain types of speech activities were considered central to the (re)production of cultural meaning. And, analysis of how speech is organized in these events can capture the cultural work being accomplished (e.g., Frake 1964). The concept of speech communities clarified the problematic assumption that sharing a language system also meant sharing ways of speaking. In short, not all potential speakers are legitimate speakers for every setting where speech occurs. Two analytical interests developed from these methodological developments. Interest arose about different types of speech, primarily how groups of speakers differentiated among genres (e.g., joking, gossip, storytelling). Interest also arose about how speaking roles were reserved for certain social actors, and the communicative competence needed to adequately fulfill those roles (Bauman and Sherzer 1975).

The outcome of these developments was an interest in the concept of discourse (i.e., language-in-use). Much like researchers in other disciplines, anthropologists have attributed a variety of meanings to “discourse.” There are at least three overlapping and mutually reinforcing areas of theoretical concern where the concept of discourse has been found useful (cf., Abu-Lughod and Lutz 1990). Discourse has been conceptualized as the

signifying and communicative behavior that occurs within a single type of bounded event. This approach focuses on what features typify a particular discourse event. It is generally concerned with questions of conversational structure (e.g., Goodwin and Heritage 1990), speaking roles (e.g., Keenan 1974), interactive norms (e.g., Tannen and Waiet 1987), and the incorporation of linguistic devices into speech (e.g., Puckett 2000). In several sections of this dissertation I analyze Bible study as a speech event. For example, chapter 1 illustrates the varying, and at times competing, interactive frames that structure what participants expect from Bible study.

Discourse has also been conceptualized as the ongoing signifying and communicative behavior that occurs in relation to particular social activities. This approach focuses on what discourse is about. It is generally concerned with questions about the dialogical construction of ethos (e.g., Bowen 1992), identities (e.g., Mould 2003), and social relations (e.g., Lutz 1988). This is my primary approach to discourse in this study. For example, the discursive practices analyzed in chapters 3 through 5 are involved in the ongoing articulation of the textual ideology described in chapter 2.

Lastly, discourse has been conceptualized as a society-wide, historical force that weighs heavily on the formation of cultural attitudes and practices. This approach focuses on the impact of discourse in structuring social life. It is generally concerned with questions about the formation of ideological complexes, such as madness, truth, or science (e.g., Foucault 1981). This dissertation is least oriented toward this approach because of the ethnographic (but not necessarily historical) nature of the data, and my lack of overt interest in issues of power⁴. Indeed, the work presented here is probably

⁴ A central assumption in this line of research is that power is a productive force (not necessarily a restrictive one) that is pervasive throughout all of social life. The practice of group Bible study is not

more a product of such discourse than an analysis of it. For example, I accept and employ many scholarly categories (e.g., “discourse,” “Protestant,” “interpretation,” “conservative,” “belief,” etc.) rather than attempt to deconstruct and situate them within power-laden processes of knowledge production.

All three approaches understand discourse as a process of linguistic production (i.e., as producers of texts). Thus, the analysis of discourse begins with the analysis of texts in order to understand the processes of production. This is the basis for what Sherzer (1987) and Urban (1991) have termed a “discourse-centered approach” to language and culture. They argue that discourse should not be treated as a means toward pursuing other questions, but should itself be the subject of analysis. This argument presumes that discourse is where cultural life unfolds, not simply a reflection of culture. As a result, a ‘discourse-centered approach’ focuses on formal, stylistic, organizational, and structural features, not solely the semantic content of talk. I do not restrict my analyses to issues of discursive form, but I do emphasize close and detailed attention to discursive practice, and do not just look “through talk” at what it describes, but look at discursive (inter)action.

I also draw heavily upon the Bakhtinian tradition of intertextuality: “the relational orientation of a text to other texts” (Bauman 2004: 4). This term originates with Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1934) concept of dialogism, wherein all utterances are produced and received in relation to their previous and expected uses. Julia Kristeva (1986) coined the term ‘intertextuality’ as part of her literary analyses, intending to capture the way a single text is the result of, carries the imprint of, and incorporates multiple texts. To understand

exempt from this claim, particularly when we consider processes of text availability, text selection, and facilitator-participant and participant-participant dynamics. However, my interest in the relationship between textual ideology and textual practice shifts the focus away from these issues.

texts as intertextual productions has consequences for meaning, narrativity, authorship, audience reception, and textual appropriation. Anthropologists interested in discourse analysis have found the concept useful for several reasons. Studies of performance, reported speech, genre switching, and recontextualization presume that texts are rarely first time productions, and that all texts enter social life connected to other texts (Bauman 2004).

The intertextual character of small group discourse is important in two ways. As a discourse event, small groups involve the presence of multiple textual artifacts and a litany of intertextual references. Discourse participants consult and read from Bibles (often multiple translations and study Bibles with extensive footnotes), devotional materials, journals and study texts to consult and read from. Participants draw on television and movie segments, recent media stories, radio broadcasts, hymn and praise song lines, favorite Christian authors, recent sermons, poems, books, devotionals, Biblical commentaries, and (of course) Biblical texts. Small group discourse draws upon an intricate, dynamic, and thoroughly intertextual matrix of interpretive resources (cf., Chapter 4).

The intertextual practices of decontextualization and recontextualization – “the process of rendering discourse extractable...[and lifting text] out of its interactional setting” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 73) – also play a key role in small group discourse. Participants constantly invoke Biblical texts for a variety of purposes. Cross-cultural research has emphasized the importance of recontextualization for garnering social authority and obfuscating social responsibility. For example, Joel Kuipers (1990) examined how Weyewa ritual specialists invoke ancestors’ words to repair social

relations damaged by unfulfilled obligations. The appropriation of ancestral words provides them with an indisputable authority, and their repair work ensures that future relations with ancestors are prosperous. Judith Irvine (1996) showed how responsibility in speech is blurred using the Wolof genre of “xaxaar,” the insult poem. Speakers understand these poems as dialogically formulated (i.e., not of their own creation), creating social distance between themselves and xaxaar performances. Due to this recontextualized nature, responsibility shifts from the speaker to a shared body of tradition, and culpability remains indeterminate. Webb Keane (2004) has observed recontextualization as a particularly potent strategy in religious discourse because it plays with categories of authorship and authority. In chapter 5, I present an extended analysis of how participants recontextualize Biblical texts in small group discourse.

This research emerges from three other fields of inquiry: the ethnography of reading, praxis theory, and interpretive anthropology. The ethnography of reading emphasizes the relationship between orality and textuality in contexts where reading is performed collectively (Boyarin, ed. 1992). These studies have argued that the interactions between reader-text and reader-reader must account for previous readings and the social processes of multiple readers interacting with texts together. For example, Jonathan Boyarin analyzed how participants in a Jewish yeshiva used their collective reading of Torah and midrashic texts to communicate notions of personhood and Hebraic tradition (Boyarin 1992). My dissertation applies the crucial insight from this framework that texts are not simply records of dialogue, but occasions for joining dialogue. Bible study participants do not just read Biblical texts; they place themselves in relations of parallel and dissonance to Biblical narratives and characters.

This study has been significantly informed by two theoretical traditions linked with the study of discourse. The first are theories of social praxis, articulated most clearly by Pierre Bourdieu (1977). Praxis theory understands cultural life to be the result of dialectical relations between institutional structures and the predispositions that social actors inherit. Individual and collective actors are understood as products of their cultural history and active (re)producers of that cultural universe. Institutions are not immutable structures, but resources that can be appropriated or ignored, accepted as is or endowed with new meaning.

Studies of discourse have applied a praxis approach to numerous research questions. The actor-oriented nature of praxis theory has been useful for understanding variation within discourse, the link between discourse and identity, strategies for textual interpretation, and discourse as a site for power struggles (cf., Fairclough 1989). The analyses that follow demonstrate the structured and structuring relations that participants have with group discourse. Chapter 4 illustrates how individuals and groups use the interpretive resources that are meaningful in their lives.

Discourse studies also are tied closely to the hermeneutic tradition in the social sciences. This seems almost inevitable, given their shared interests in texts, interpretation, and meaning. The anthropology of discourse and interpretive anthropology have roots in hermeneutic philosophy and the philosophy of language, particularly in the work of Paul Ricoeur. Ricoeur (1971) articulated best the similarities between interpreting textual artifacts and viewing social action as a textual form. Ricoeur and others were occupied with what constitutes a text, the interaction between text and interlocutors, and the interplay of different interpretive styles. Interpretive anthropology applied these

perspectives to cultural life, asking how actors understand their relation to the surrounding social universe, how they make sense of that universe, how they make it meaningful, and how all these are made public (e.g., Geertz 1973).

Anthropologists interested in discourse share with this tradition the notion that human action is fundamentally symbolic action (Sherzer 1987). The most developed symbol systems, of course, are verbal and non-verbal forms of communicative behavior. They also intersect as enterprises that represent practices of signifying meaning. And, whereas interpretive anthropology analogized action to text, studies of discourse are directly involved in demarcating spoken texts. From its inception, this dissertation has been firmly situated within the interpretive tradition of anthropology. Through this brand of discourse analysis, I hope to make clear what is so meaningful about participating in small groups and what participants mean by certain forms of talk. I also hope this dissertation will provide a window into how these groups view themselves, make sense of their world, understand their relationship with it, and make these sentiments public via small group discourse.

In the following chapters, I employ these frameworks to understand the discourse of small group Bible study. I attend to the content, ways of speaking, formal properties, intertextual strategies, collective reading practices, and hermeneutic features that characterize how group participants interact with one another and with Biblical texts. The small group setting is an ideal venue for applying these frameworks because of its quality as an organized, bounded speech event that incorporates textual, interactive, and interpretive dynamics.

The Anthropology of Christianity

This dissertation also emerges from social science research on Protestant Christianity. Interestingly, sociologists are responsible for the most coherent body of research in the study of American Protestantism. The ethnographic study of congregational life is most relevant. Local congregations have been described as the “bedrock of American religion” (Warner 1994). They have been studied as “local cultures,” institutions that provide a sense of identity and belonging (Becker 1999; Roberts 2005; Wind and Lewis 1994); bearers of denominational traditions (Bass 1994; Roberts 2005); arenas for organizing strategies and resources for community action (Ammerman 1997); and institutions integrated into local religious ecologies (Eiesland 2000). Each of these approaches understands congregational life to be central to the lives of individual believers and to the structure of American Protestantism.

Congregational studies have consistently identified Bible study as vital to the cultural work accomplished by congregations. Robert Wuthnow described the significance of small groups in the broader context of American society, arguing that a small group movement is reshaping Americans’ sense of community. His large-scale survey effort identified Bible study⁵ as the most prolific form of small group, with an estimated 30-40 million weekly participants (1994a). Jody Davie, an anthropologist, carried out ethnographic research with one women’s Bible study group in a New England Presbyterian church. She described Bible study as unique among all congregational activities because it provides participants with the opportunity for “dialogue [and] active personal negotiation of meaning” (1995:1). Yet, small group Bible study has not received

⁵ Wuthnow distinguished between “Sunday school” and “Bible study,” but for the purposes of this dissertation, they are similar enough activities to be included in the same category.

the research attention to match these claims of personal and collective significance. This dissertation responds to this lack of research by providing in-depth ethnographic and discursive analyses of Bible study in numerous small group settings.

The study of Christianity has been far less popular among anthropologists than among sociologists of religion. Harding (1991) argues this is because Christianity, particularly Fundamentalist Christianity, represents a “repugnant” cultural Other – an Other seen as diametrically opposed to an anthropological Self. Alternatively, Robbins (2004) explains that anthropological studies of Christianity in non-Western societies have de-emphasized Christianity for several reasons. He suggests that such work has traditionally viewed Christianity as either the harbinger of cultural erosion (e.g., Harkin 1997), a syncretized form that has transformed into something other than Christianity (e.g., Burt 1994), or as the bearer of other epistemologies, such as modernity or capitalism (e.g., Comaroff and Comaroff 1991). Robbins includes his own study of the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea as part of a growing body of research taking Christianity seriously, as something that is itself fully culturally and fully worthy of study (cf., Cannell 2006). My research is part of this growing body of work. In particular, I engage Biblicism as an anthropological issue within the study of Christianity.

Simply defined, Biblicism refers to how the Bible is understood and the relation of those understandings to Bible use. Susan Harding (2000) described how the sermonic discourse of Fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell aligns with Biblical themes of sin, redemption, salvation and righteousness. Falwell’s narrative practices invite listeners to hear and interpret his words as though they were reading the Bible. Vincent Crapanzano (2000) examines American Fundamentalists’ claims of interpreting the Bible literally,

and how their hermeneutic approach results in practices (e.g., biblical counseling) and ethos (e.g., conceptualizing time and history). Brian Malley (2004) outlines the epistemological structure of Evangelical Biblicism based on ethnographic observations of a Baptist congregation in the American Midwest. I discuss his framework in detail in chapter 2.

Matthew Engelke (2004) explains the absence of Bible use among Masowe apostolics in Zimbabwe as the shifting of authority in religious knowledge from written texts to performed spoken texts. The emphasis on a “live and direct” experience with the divine leads them to “privilege the spoken word because of its immediacy and its intimacy” (ibid: 87; cf., Pulis 1999 regarding Jamaican Rastafarians). Eva Keller’s ethnography of Seven Day Adventists in Madagascar suggests that individual and group Bible study is the most important part of their religious practice and identity. It is not a means to an end; Bible study (with its associated intellectual inquiry) attracts adherents. “The Bible is not regarded as a fetish that has intrinsic power, rather it is thought of as a collection of wise and truthful words that need to be read, analyzed, and understood” (2005: 92). Most recently, Erika Muse (2005) explained Bible use as integral to the ethno-Christian identity of Chinese Evangelicals in America. They use the Bible as a textual resource to construct a sense of self that counters the stereotype of the model minority.

The thread connecting each of these studies is an interest in exploring the interaction that occurs between Christian communities and their sacred text, the Bible. In chapter 2, I introduce the concept of textual ideology, an organizing framework that guides Bible use among believers. Chapters 3, 4, and 5 demonstrate how the discursive

practices of small group Bible study relate to this textual ideology. Thus, this dissertation contributes to the anthropology of Christianity, and particularly the issue of Biblicism.

To critically test these theoretical ideas about discourse and the anthropology of Christianity, I developed a systematic methodology for data collection and analysis. The next section explains the research design, as well as the types of data collection, and analysis I employed. I begin with my rationale for choosing the six congregations that comprise the project sample.

Research Methodology

Sampling

When the year of data collection ended in December 2005, I had attended 324 Bible study meetings among the 19 project groups (see chapter 1 for a description of these groups). I tape-recorded 167 meetings, though many had yet to be transcribed. To borrow from Robert Frost, I was “overtired of the great harvest I myself desired⁶.”

The data are the result of fieldwork that began during late May of 2004. I began by compiling a list of Protestant congregations within a 30-minute car ride of the city center. The research site is a Midwestern city with a population between 100,000 and 150,000. The surrounding cities and townships increase the total population to between 200,000 and 250,000. Using up-to-date telephone and Internet listings, I located 354 Protestant churches in the city and surrounding areas. The primary variable for reducing this was to only focus on congregations that offered extensive Bible study programs⁷.

⁶ This quote comes from Robert Frost’s 1914 poem, “After Apple-Picking.”

⁷ This sampling rationale produced at least one inherent bias in the resulting data. By focusing on congregations with extensive small group opportunities, I most likely missed congregations that were

This ensured that the eventual project churches would provide ample, non-conflicting opportunities for data collection. I narrowed the sampling pool to 48 by examining church websites, talking to regional denominational representatives, and placing phone calls to churches.

Next, I visited these 48 churches and presented the project to the senior pastor. These introductory visits ended in one of three scenarios: 1) the pastor declined participation on behalf of the church, usually because the congregation was in the midst of some type of struggle or controversy. 2) I learned that the small group opportunities were not as abundant as I had thought, which meant removal from the sample. 3) The pastor expressed interest in having their church participate. In these cases, I left a packet of materials describing the project with the pastor for he/she to present to the church board, elders, or other decision-making body. By late September of 2004, I had narrowed the list of 48 to 10. These ten were deemed appropriate for the project based on their small group programs, and had also granted me permission to approach individual groups and request their consent for inclusion in the project.

For the remainder of the fall I visited individual groups to solicit their consent, as well as get a sense for different group environments. This allowed me to further narrow the list of 10 to the six congregations that constituted the final sample. From the beginning of the sampling process, my intention was to divide the final six into three mainline churches and three non-mainline churches. The three mainline churches were all affiliated with the United Methodist denomination. The three non-mainline congregations

struggling with membership numbers. In turn, small group discourse that addressed local church struggles was not a part of my data.

were from the Lutheran-Church Missouri Synod, Restoration Movement, and Vineyard Fellowship denominations. (See chapter 1 for descriptions of these Protestant traditions.)

Data Collection

I relied on five techniques for collecting data: audio-recording group meetings; field notes; ethnographic interviewing; a text archive; and a questionnaire. 1) This data derive primarily from the audio recording and transcription of Bible study meetings (see below for a discussion of the transcription process). Discourse analysts use audio-recordings to capture language-in-use and recreate speech events through transcription (cf., Bernard 2006, Johnstone 2000). Tape-recording has several advantages over handwritten notes to represent discourse. It allows for verbatim records of speech events, providing a more accurate and reliable corpus of data. It frees the ethnographer to focus on other interactive and contextual features in his or her fieldnotes (see below for a discussion of field notes). Once the recorder becomes an accepted presence in the group, it gradually becomes less distracting to participants than an ethnographer who is constantly scribbling notes. And, in group situations where I was expected to participate, as a speaker or as a reader, tape recording allowed me to do this without losing valuable data.

As I mentioned above, 167 of the 324 meetings were tape-recorded, including all of those for the eight groups used in the analyses for chapters 2 through 5. The recordings started at the beginning of each discussion, and were stopped when discussion ended. This excluded opening and closing prayers, as well as the interactions that occur before and after the study proper. The informed consent agreement granted individuals the right to request at any point for the tape to be stopped.

I did not record the remaining 157 meetings because the group involved refused to be recorded, or I decided that the length and/or quality of the discussions did not merit recording. These meetings were confined to seven of the project groups. In hindsight, the decision not to record was a poor choice for three of the groups. A Sunday school class in one of the United Methodist churches read through the New Testament book of Romans. A Lenten study in another United Methodist church did a book study that ended up focusing extensively on issues of Biblical accuracy and authenticity. And, a Sunday school class in the third United Methodist church began with a book study, but then switched to a study of the Sermon on the Mount in the Gospel of Matthew.

2) Three types of field notes are an integral part of my data: (a) those taken while recording; (b) those taken while not recording; and (c) those taken before and after meetings. When the tape recorder was running, my field notes focused on three things. First, I noted non-verbal and interactive cues that accompany talk. This encompassed a wide range of behaviors, including: facial gestures, bodily gestures, and deictic references (e.g., the “she” in “as she was saying earlier”). Second, I described behavior of non-speakers during discussions. This included a range of features as well, including: indications of agreement or disagreement; indications of confusion or ambiguity; and locating readings in a Bible or other text. Lastly, I wrote down theoretical questions and ideas that occurred to me during discussions. These included analytical questions about the group I was observing, comparisons with the discourse and interactive features of other groups, and issues applicable to the entire sample. The first two types of notes are what Bernard calls “descriptive notes...the meat and potatoes of fieldwork” (2006: 397).

The third type of notes included both “methodological” and “analytic” notes (ibid: 395-8).

In unrecorded group situations, the goal of my field notes was to sketch the discussion. Capturing the entire conversation verbatim was not possible, so I focused on keeping track of who spoke and in what order. For each speaker’s contribution, I indicated his or her central point. Whenever possible, I filled in conversational details and included exact quotations. I also returned to these sketches as soon as possible after the meeting to fill in any details I could recall from memory.

I also have fieldnotes from before and after meetings. These include my interactions with participants and interactions I observed. These notes provided a rich source of information about each group. They include information on who socialized together, what types of conversations they had outside the meeting proper, and recommendations of reading materials. It was common for participants to use this time to loan and recommend different texts to each other.

Field notes were recorded on site in paper notebooks. I reserved one notebook for each congregation. I transcribed these notes as soon as possible following the meetings, usually the same day or in some cases, the day after. Separate files were maintained for descriptive, methodological, and analytic field notes.

3) I employed informal and formal ethnographic interviewing. Bernard describes informal interviewing as “conversations heard during the course of a day in the field” (2006: 211). These happened almost exclusively before and after meetings. This was convenient because all of the participants were in one place, and because the interview topic was also the purpose of being together. In my field notes, I often recorded specific

questions to ask individuals regarding a comment they made during discussion, a text they referenced, or a discursive tendency I was observing about the group as a whole. I also used informal interviewing to gather much of the introductory information about each group: how long they had been meeting, how long individuals had been coming, other studies they have done, and studies they liked best and least. The information gleaned from this mode of informal interviewing proved invaluable when conducting analyses and writing descriptions of the churches and groups.

The semi-structured interviews were intended for group facilitators only. Bernard describes this type of ethnographic interviewing as “freewheeling...[but] based on the use of an interview guide...a list of questions and topics that need to be covered in a particular order” (ibid: 212). My plan was to conduct at least one of these with each facilitator regarding group history, decisions about text selection, idiosyncratic questions pertaining to each group, the participation order, and leadership style. For groups where I observed multiple studies, I hoped to conduct multiple interviews. Ultimately, I conducted these interviews with nine of the 15 facilitators, though not all in the format I planned. In several cases, I conducted the interview via telephone or email, as opposed to the ideal of face-to-face interaction. For these interviews I did not use a tape recorder because hand-written notes were adequate to capture the desired information.

4) I assembled a text archive for each group. Due to my theoretical focus on intertextuality, I devoted methodological attention to a systematic collection of the textual materials I discovered during research. The archive included texts I encountered during Bible study discussions, before and after meetings, and during interviews. By the end of the fieldwork, this archive included texts used for study and those recommended amongst

participants. It also consisted of texts cited during group discourse, including: fiction and non-fiction books, movie and TV references, hymns and praise songs, Bible commentaries, congregational newsletters, Internet printouts, devotional materials, newspaper articles, and periodical articles. I collected bibliographic information about each text and, whenever possible, obtained a copy.

5) I distributed a questionnaire consisting of 10 sections (cf., Appendix 2). There were closed and open-ended questions in each of the following areas: personal background, religious background, church attendance and participation, Bible study participation, media preferences, experience with Christian texts and authors, Bible reading habits, Bible translation preferences, help sources for Bible reading, and attitudes towards the Bible. The sections dealing with the Bible were particularly helpful for gaining insight into the issue of Biblicism; in particular the textual ideology described in chapter 2 and the analysis of Bible interpretation in chapter 3. The questionnaire was distributed toward the end of the fieldwork year and was collected through the spring of 2006. In total, I submitted the questionnaire to 91 group participants with a return rate of 74% (N=67).

Before moving on to the final section of this introduction, some reflexive comments are necessary about my role as a participant observer. The ethnographic descriptions in chapter 1 include a discussion of how I perceived my role in each of the project groups, as well as the potential consequences of my involvement. However, a more general statement is in order here. I made clear to each group when I first requested its participation that I preferred to be a silent observer, but would make whatever adjustments necessary to put them at ease. For some, this meant I could be completely

silent. For others, it meant I would need to be an active participant. I also made clear to each group that they were always welcome to approach me individually about any aspect of my personal, academic or religious background. Participants from each group did so, and I had the benefit of engaging in detailed, intellectual, and emotional conversations. I came to consider many of them as friends and spiritual mentors. In short, I was primarily a silent observer, but in no case was I a distant, unknown observer.

Data Analysis

Transcription is the first step in any discourse-based analysis. Tape-recording ensures a more accurate and reliable corpus of data, but issues of selectivity and representation remain. Transcription is a process laden with the researcher's theoretical, methodological, and analytical interests (Ochs 1979). In accounting for this decision-making process, the transcripts I produced include certain features of talk and interaction, but not others. Due to my theoretical interest in intertextuality, and particularly recontextualization, the transcripts mark any form of intertextual reference. I used a special indication for recontextualizations of the Bible. Paralinguistic features that impact meaning were marked, such as: heightened stress on utterances, changes in intonation, and voice imitation. I also indicated certain interactive features, such as: interruptions, pauses, and laughs. On the other hand, since this is not a linguistic analysis, other features were excluded, such as: phonology, crutch phrases, or breathing and other habits that break up talk (see Appendix 1 for a sample transcript)⁸.

⁸ The transcription process began in January of 2005, and ended in February of 2006. The time gap between recording and transcribing meant there was potential for me to lose track of key observations and insights in evaluating the data. To balance this, I compiled monthly reports beginning in January that reflected the previous month of data collection. Each report included sections on the following: summary of the data for each group; theoretical frameworks appearing relevant in my analytic field notes; methodological possibilities; and fieldwork difficulties. Reports were created every month from January through May, and every other month through December. These eight reports – and my guidance

The analyses for chapters 2 through 5 was carried out separately, but all followed the same six-step process⁹. 1) I constructed an inductive list of questions based on the monthly reports, field notes, and transcripts. These questions addressed the descriptive (what, when, who) and explanatory (how, why) qualities of each chapter topic. Questions were posed about the topic on the level of the entire sample, individual groups and individual speakers. In the analysis of chapter 3, for example, the compiled list included questions about what interpretive styles I observed, their function in group discourse, the discourse strategies they incorporated, and the groups and individuals that used them.

2) A round of “open coding” (Bernard 2006) was conducted. Here, I read and coded for themes and patterns relevant to the chapter topic. Any observation about the topic, be it anomalous or recurring, was included in this codebook. Note that this was the fourth complete experience of each meeting: recording, transcription, the initial read, and the open coding read.

3) I compared results of the open coding for each group. These results were viewed both qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitatively, I used *AtlasTi*¹⁰ to view the coded sections side-by-side. This allowed me to consider recurring discursive features for each theme, as well as the conversational contexts of occurrence. The code results were also quantified to identify the distribution of codes throughout the sample. I recorded my observations about the presence and absence of patterns in each group, as well as the isolation of patterns in particular groups and speakers. In the example of chapter 3, again,

committee’s responses to them – were an invaluable starting point for organizing analysis and writing plans. After reviewing the collection of monthly reports, and as I was completing transcription, I read my field notes and the completed transcripts. Using the notes I took during this review of the data, I selected the eight groups that appear in the analyses for chapters 2 through 5.

⁹ These six steps were derived partly from my proposed plan of work and partly from the analysis process.

¹⁰ *AtlasTi* is a computer program designed for qualitative and textual analysis. For more information, see www.atlasti.com.

this stage identified the very different interpretive environments between particular groups due to their reliance on different interpretive styles.

4) The open coding results were matched against the original set of inductive questions. My goal was to check whether the initial observations for the chapter topics were confirmed by the coding procedure. In cases where the question was not addressed, new questions were derived. This allowed me to reflect on why a question seemed appropriate during fieldwork, but was not important during analysis. In the case of chapter 3, I had a number of questions regarding participants' use of different interpretive styles when interacting with different genres in the Bible. This line of questioning proved uninformative for analysis.

5) A final reading of the transcripts was done to confirm the revised list of questions for each topic. In addition to confirming the relevant themes and patterns, exceptions and exemplary cases were identified. In the chapters to follow, the examples I use are primarily from these listings of clear exemplars. At this stage in the analysis process, the transcripts reflected each of the previous readings. The use of different color notations distinguished which codes and comments occurred at what point in the process. One benefit of working with the same copy is that it allows unmarked sections in the transcripts to be reconsidered. Large sections of talk had not been included in any of the analyses, and this provided a chance to consider why that was.

6) The final stage of analysis was also the first stage of the writing process. A report based on the first five steps was created to summarize the relevant questions, the patterns around individual themes, potential exceptions, and the location of the exemplary cases. This was the first step in constructing a writing outline for each chapter.

The Dissertation's Structure

This introductory chapter has presented the dissertation's topic, the theoretical frameworks that have shaped its development, and the methodological framework in which it was conducted. Chapter 1 is primarily descriptive, providing information about the six congregations, focusing on what currently defines the life of the congregation and how the small group program is structured. Ethnographic portraits of the eight groups used for the remaining analyses are then given. This chapter also summarizes the interactive features of group discourse that characterized the entire sample: interactive frames, participation structure, text selection, and Bible use. This chapter provides the ethnographic backdrop for reading the remaining chapters, particularly my use of discourse examples from the project groups.

Chapter 2 explains this dissertation's main analytic theme – the interaction between the textual ideology surrounding the Bible and the discursive uses of the Bible in small groups. I begin this chapter with an introduction to the concept of textual ideology, which I define as the constellation of ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations readers bring to particular texts. The main goal of this chapter is to outline the specific principles that form the core of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible for the project groups. In total, I identify six organizing principles that deal with the authority, relevance, and textuality of the Bible. This chapter provides the analytical backdrop for interpreting my claims in chapters 2 through 5 about the relationship between discursive practices and this textual ideology.

Chapter 3 deals with the issue of Bible interpretation. My analysis of group discourse revealed three interpretive styles used by participants: finding application,

establishing meaning, and explaining Biblical passages through textual inferencing. Each of these styles embeds principles of the textual ideology, as does its use in group discourse. The common practices and functions in how participants invoke these styles are sufficient to consider small groups as interpretive communities. This chapter highlights the importance of Bible interpretation to small group life, as well as its central role in reproducing textual ideology principles.

Chapter 4 addresses the issue of how interpretive resources are drawn on in group discourse. I analyze textual and cultural resources that are shared throughout the entire sample, resources that receive greater emphasis in particular groups, and resources invoked only by specific individuals. Participants' uses of these resources contribute to the notion of small groups as interpretive communities, and further demonstrate how textual ideology helps structure group discourse. This chapter helps connect what occurs in Bible study discourse to the lives of participants outside the group setting.

Chapter 5 analyzes the practice of recontextualizing Biblical texts. My argument in this chapter is twofold: the prevailing patterns of recontextualization are impacted by the nature of group discourse, and the nature of group discourse is impacted by acts of recontextualization. For the former, I argue that the predominant recontextualization style of a group reflects the predominant interpretive concerns of that group. For the latter, I argue that recontextualizing Biblical texts contributes to the articulation of textual ideology principles, larger discourses operative in American Protestantism, and the guiding interactive norms of small group life. This chapter indexes the significance of intertextual strategies for the study of speech events.

Chapter 6 reviews the issues addressed in this dissertation, and argues for further research on the relationship between textual ideology and textual practice. This chapter also describes the relevance of this dissertation for those not interested in anthropologies of discourse or Christianity.

Anthropologists often use particular events to show how macro-level meanings, social relations, identities, and historical processes are evident in the practices of social actors. Indeed, this is a hallmark of the discipline. Analysis of these events shows how individuals and groups enact as well as reflect upon cultural categories. In this dissertation I devote in-depth attention to the practice of small group Bible study because it is a key event in the culture of contemporary American Protestantism. It provides participants an opportunity to engage in dialogue surrounding what it means to be a Christian, and the variety of beliefs and practices encompassed by this identity. At the heart of small group life is the ongoing relationship between believers and their sacred text, the Bible. My aim in the chapters that follow is to articulate the nature of this relationship, and its role in Bible study discourse.

Chapter 1: Small Groups as Cultural Practice

The previous chapter outlined the cultural significance of small group Bible study, and the need for an in-depth ethnographic perspective on the practice. It highlighted the sheer number of small groups in America, as well as their uniqueness as sites for dialogue and the production of knowledge. This chapter is more descriptive. It begins by introducing the six churches from which the sample of small groups was drawn. Next, I describe the project groups, and provide a sense of what makes these groups attractive to members. Lastly, I illustrate how small group Bible study works by exploring the themes that emerged from my fieldwork experience. This includes the prevailing interactive frames (Tannen and Waller 1979), participation structure, text selection practices, and use of the Bible. Through these analyses, I consider the following questions: why is the small group experience so meaningful? Why do participants find time to meet every week in spite of hectic schedules, foul weather, competing appointments, sick children, and a host of other reasons *not* to meet?

The Project Sample: a congregational perspective

During the 12 months of data collection, I acted as a participant observer in 19 small groups. They were distributed among six congregations from four Protestant denominations. A sketch of these local churches provides a useful and necessary introduction to the individual groups. The description of each church is based on the issues that occupied its attention during my year of research. Each church placed particular emphasis on the small group experience. To capture this, I address the structure of the small group program in each church, and the role of small groups within the life of the congregation. Table 1 presents some basic information about the project churches.

	<u>Reported Membership/ Avg. Sun. Worship</u>	<u>Year Est.</u>	<u>~ No. of Small Groups¹¹</u>
Suburban UMC	700+/400+	1866	19
Downtown UMC	400+/200+	1851	9
Inner-City UMC	250+/150+	1912	11
LC-MS	700+/350+	1984	22
Restoration	600+/450+	1952	27
Vineyard	200+/100+	1986	6

Table 1: Data for Six Project Congregations

Suburban United Methodist (SUMC): This congregation is located in a previously rural-farm community that began transforming into a residential suburb in the early 1990s. A drive in and around the town limits features a barrage of new and half-finished housing developments. The prevailing demographic is the young married couple with young children. Pastor Rod has made a continual effort to tailor the church to these surroundings. As a result, the church has become a local success story for numerical growth and attracting young families.

The church has been a part of the community for 140 years. When Pastor Rod arrived in 1988 the membership had plummeted to 40, and his assignment was to assess whether the church should permanently close. The changing demographic struck Rod immediately, and he began making adjustments to meet the community's changing needs. The building of two additions – one wing for an expanded children's Sunday school program and one for a nursery – were milestones in this transformation. Currently, membership exceeds 700 and is comprised of working to upper-middle class, white families and retirees. Most live within a five-mile radius of the church building, though a small minority resides in the city.

¹¹ These totals reflect the number of small groups active in each congregation during the fieldwork year. They are not necessarily the number of groups offered when I began the research or when I concluded the research.

Congregational life at SUMC revolves around its mission of being “family-oriented.” In addition to the large nursery and Sunday school wings, a game room and gymnasium have recently been added. Separate leadership positions have been created for a children’s and a student minister, whereas most churches combine these roles into one. The student ministry is popular enough to require separate junior high and high school programs. Special events bringing parents and children together are continually offered (e.g., story hours for younger children, parent-child sports for teenagers). Young married couples – with and without children – are encouraged to attend marriage seminars offered by the church several weekends during the year. These are organized around a professional speaker who conducts the entire weekend. This dynamic of catering to young families and experiencing growth has been a common trend among suburban (primarily Evangelical) churches over the past two decades (cf., Ammerman 1997, Eiesland 2000, Elisha 2004).

The current small group program at the church focuses on a set of ~15 home groups. This began in 2002 when SUMC participated in the popular church campaign “40 Days of Purpose¹².” A central component of the Purpose Driven campaign is the formation of a small group network, where every group reads and discusses the same set of materials each week. Following the six-week program, these groups of six to ten members continued meeting, alternating between studies of their own choice and ones chosen by the small group director and pastor.

¹² This program, and its follow-up “40 Days of Community,” result from the best-selling The Purpose Driven Life (2003) by Evangelical pastor and author Rick Warren. “40 Days of Purpose” and “40 Days of Community” have been widely popular among Protestant (and even some Catholic) congregations. For a scholarly review of this movement see (Balmer, 2006).

Part of any newcomer's socialization into SUMC is an attempt to place them in the home group that "best meets their spiritual and practical needs." These groups meet at various times of day on various days, some every week and some every other week. They are divided by demographic differences. These classifications include young couples, couples with children, couples with young children, couples with older children living at home, women, elderly adults, and middle-aged empty nesters. These groups have become increasingly important in the life of the congregation, coordinating on outreach and fundraising efforts. Additionally, there are four other groups connected with the church, all of which were well established when the home groups began: a women's Bible study, two men's Bible studies, and a Sunday school class.

Downtown United Methodist (DUMC): This church has been a fixture in the city's downtown for 155 years. The state capital is directly adjacent to the south corner of the building, and Capitol Avenue lies just a few feet from the main entrance. Although the church's physical presence has been constant, the climate of the congregation has been in constant flux. Most everything that characterized DUMC a few decades ago is now being contested, or is already on the wane. In the following I provide a few examples of these changes.

In the mid-1970s DUMC was considered among the city's most affluent churches. Now, the membership includes individuals and families from every socio-economic stratum. DUMC is also the most racially mixed church in the sample, with a significant portion of its membership comprised of African-Americans. As part of the socio-economic change, the church has foregrounded its identity of being open to the downtown community via its "Open Door Ministry." This program keeps the building

open 24 hours a day, and its mission is to “provide sustenance, counseling, assistance and love to those of God's children who find themselves in difficult circumstances and with few places to which they can turn.” This mission effort is mainly a product of the church’s location in downtown, which is surrounded by several neighborhoods characterized by poverty-level income, crime, and fluid residency.

The brick and stone architecture of the building has become as much a source of consternation as a source of aesthetic interest. Age and deterioration have prompted a “Restoration Task Force,” which estimates the total cost of revamping the building to be near a half million dollars. However, the primary source of aesthetic pride remains intact – a series of shining organ pipes that run the length of the pulpit and tower 30 feet against the back wall. The massive organ system has also been symbolic, signifying the identity of the church as a home for traditional, “high” hymnal music. This, too, is changing. Sunday morning worship services now alternate between centuries old hymns that ring from the organ and contemporary praise music that rarely incorporates the instrument.

The prevailing theological attitude has been the congregation’s most contested feature in recent years. Like many United Methodist churches across the United States, DUMC experienced significant theological and political changes during the civil rights movement of the 1960s. Keeping with national trends, the last decade has been one of increasing Evangelicalism and heightened internal oppositions, mirroring the struggles at regional and district levels (Kirby, et al. 1998). The theological clashes at DUMC have taken place on numerous fronts, including homosexuality and the Iraq War. Most recently, the use of feminine and gender-neutral references to God during worship services sparked public and private reactions of support and dissent. Leaders and laity

recognize these divisions as a source of some ambivalence, generating anxiety over tension and pride in diversity.

The small group setting, because of its value as a potential site for open dialogue, is an exemplary place to observe the debates that surround these congregational changes. DUMC has not adopted a network of home groups, or relied on church-wide curricula. In the past DUMC has offered “Disciple” courses, a series of four 32-week Bible studies produced by the United Methodist Church¹³. These were considered moderately successful by members, and have not been offered in recent years. Instead, small group life at the church consists of several independent groups, as well as an established adult Sunday school program.

At any given time, between four and six adult classes are offered on Sunday morning. These are divided by topic as opposed to age or gender, and usually last for 6-8 weeks. Recent subjects include Bible studies of Proverbs and Ecclesiastes and a video study by Evangelical apologist Ravi Zacharias. There are three ongoing groups: a men’s Bible study, a women’s reading group, and a Sunday evening class. Ad hoc groups also arise in accordance with seasons in the religious calendar, or an individual’s interest in a particular topic. During the Lenten season of 2005, for example, a class was co-taught on a recent book by a United Methodist pastor, Journey to the Center of the Faith (2001). Leadership and participation in these groups vary, and they too last between six and eight weeks.

Inner-City United Methodist (ICUMC): ICUMC began as a sister church of DUMC in 1912. It is located at two high-traffic cross-streets, several miles from downtown, in the midst of several of the city’s worst neighborhoods for crime and

¹³ For an ethnographic description of a group using Disciple materials see Olson (1994).

poverty. The last six years have absorbed the social memory of the congregation, with five different pastors being appointed since 1999. The arrival in 2000 of the church's first female, first African-American, and most controversy-minded pastor prompted a series of schisms. Conflicts arose about the church's role in the local community, as well as socio-political issues not previously of explicit concern to the church, including: racial tensions, same-sex relations, and right-to-life issues. Much of the membership left for more stable church environments. A refrain I heard from a variety of Bible study participants was that this pastor's brief tenure "brought the church to its knees." When Pastor Ted arrived in 2002, permanently closing the church was still an option.

Despite the unenviable circumstances, Ted's enthusiasm has led to resurgence in the church. The membership is above 300, and the worshiping community on Sunday mornings is approaching 200. The socio-economic composition of the church is primarily lower to middle-middle class, though there are several very wealthy families who have been active in the church across several generations. Much like DUMC, ICUMC is a multi-racial church, including a substantial population of foreign refugees (see below).

As Ted's tenure matures, two changes are shaping the life of the congregation. In 2003, the arrival of the first foreign refugee foreshadowed a turning point in the church's identity. The city has a substantial refugee population, mostly from Middle Eastern (e.g., Iran and Afghanistan) and African countries (e.g., Ivory Coast, Sudan). Some are Christian and in search of a place to worship. Many others are Muslim and are attracted to the hospitality and material assistance offered by the congregation. The active evangelism of the first wave of refugees has led to a group of 30 adults and children who now attend worship services at ICUMC regularly. As the number of refugees has grown

over the past three years, their relationship with the congregation has evolved. Language barriers, cultural differences, and theological misunderstandings have spurred a relationship of mutual frustration, trust, and appreciation. The presence of the refugees has also prompted the church to be more active in the surrounding neighborhoods, where many refugees have been placed to live. (See chapter 4 for additional information about the relationship between ICUMC and the refugee population).

The other change in the life of the church began midway through the research year. Following his arrival, Ted instituted a second, contemporary worship service on Sunday mornings. He hoped this would attract more teenagers and young adults. The contemporary service experienced only mild success and in the summer of 2005, it was brought to a temporary end. ICUMC then began consulting with the pastor of the fastest growing UMC congregation in the city. Weekly planning sessions were devoted to the launch of a new contemporary service, as well as a new “culture of outreach,” for the fall of 2006¹⁴. Ted’s thinking in this regard has been structured greatly by his experience with the “emerging church movement.” This particular segment of the church growth institutional network emphasizes a “return to first century Christianity” using the “technologies and methods relevant in today’s culture” (see chapter 5 for further explanation). The “new launch,” as it is known around the church, has received widespread support. In addition to the open planning sessions, Ted has given updates before sermons and made repeat visits to Sunday school classes to discuss potential changes.

One of the first tasks Ted assigned himself was to increase the small group activity at the church. Historically, the church has emphasized its Sunday school

¹⁴ As of the mid-summer of 2006, ICUMC had moved the launch of the new service to January of 2007.

program, which Ted has sustained. Five classes are offered: two for elderly adults, one for twenty and thirty-somethings, one for middle-aged members, and one for the refugees. All but the refugees' class have been meeting together for numerous years. Newcomers to the church are encouraged to join one of these classes, which invariably correspond with their age. The significance of the Sunday school community highlights the importance of Ted using that time to advocate for the "new launch."

Ted has also introduced the use of several structured small group programs. This began with the UMC Disciple classes. Unlike DUMC, ICUMC has responded well to these lengthy, intensive Bible study courses. Three of the four have been taught at the church, and every fall at least one of them is started anew. Ted has also organized other programs, including ALPHA¹⁵, Becoming a Contagious Christian¹⁶, and both Purpose Driven campaigns. These efforts have been consistently well received by the congregation, but have not been successful in establishing an ongoing network of home groups. Groups that form for these programs disband once the curriculum ends. In fact, there is also one ongoing group at the church, a men's Bible study that meets weekly on Tuesday mornings.

Lutheran-Church Missouri Synod (LCMS): All of the project churches can be described as "healthy," in that their membership is experiencing growth rather than decline. More than the others, though, LCMS had the feel of excitement and enthusiasm at every event I attended. They have experienced continual growth in membership and worship attendance over the past three years. The arrival of a new pastor in 2003

¹⁵ ALPHA is a worldwide program. It began in the United Kingdom within the charismatic tradition. It is designed as an introduction to the "basics of the Christian faith," and is intended as an evangelizing tool for churches. Members are encouraged to bring a non-believer with them to the weekly video talks.

¹⁶ This program is produced by the Willow Creek institutional network and is co-authored by the founder of Willow Creek, Bill Hybels. It is an eight-session course designed to cultivate evangelism skills.

accounts for a great deal of this fervor. He is relatively young (mid 40s) and is extremely well liked throughout the congregation. The recent growth has led to the planning of a new building, and groundbreaking scheduled for the summer of 2006¹⁷. Their success is an anomaly within the national context of the denomination. LCMS churches across the U.S., including the Midwest where they are most numerous, have been declining steadily for decades (Jones, et al. 2002).

The church is located in a suburban community east of the city. Its membership, like SUMC, derives primarily from a five-mile radius around the church. However, the struggles of LCMS churches in other parts of the city have attracted new members from neighborhoods further away. The membership is primarily white collar, but there is some representation of the working class. A wide spectrum of ages is present in the life of the church, including a burgeoning population of young families. LCMS was the most ethnically homogenous, with nearly the entire membership being of Western European descent (many from German and Scandinavian Lutheran heritages).

The Lutheran Church in the United States consists of three major Synods: Missouri (LCMS), Wisconsin (WELS), and the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA). Their institutional separation is a result of doctrinal and theological schisms during the past half century (Noll 1992). The ELCA Synod is the largest of the three, a member of the National Council of Churches¹⁸, and is typically understood as the most liberal of the three Synods. The Wisconsin Synod is the smallest and is generally viewed as the least flexible on doctrinal points of orthodoxy. The Missouri Synod occupies the

¹⁷ LCMS continued as planned with the groundbreaking schedule. As I write this in the fall of 2006, excavation of the site is underway.

¹⁸ The National Council of Churches is an institutional body whose membership is recognized as the "mainline" churches in the United States.

middle ground between these two. The pastorate is drawn from two seminaries: one in Ft. Wayne, Indiana, and one in St. Louis, Missouri. These are recognized within the denomination as, respectively, “traditional” and “moderate” on doctrinal and socio-political issues (e.g., the proper role of women in church life). As a result, there is variety among Missouri Synod churches; though all remain firmly a part of the conservative Christian sub-culture in America. The project LCMS congregation offers a representative cross-section of this national context.

The structure of small groups in the congregation is diverse. Structured programs are not as likely here as with SUMC and ICUMC, but they have participated in both of the Purpose Driven campaigns. There is a network of home groups that were established soon after Pastor Daniel began his tenure in 2003. The number of these fluctuates between 10 and 15, as leadership responsibilities shift and time commitments change. These groups meet for four to six week sessions throughout the year, broken up by sabbaticals of several weeks to a month. Groups are encouraged, and uniformly agree, to use study materials designed by either the pastor or a senior member in the congregation. These studies are Biblically based, and use a series of handouts that consist of Bible readings, followed by commentary and questions from the study’s author. In the spring of 2005, for instance, Pastor Daniel wrote a four-week study of prayer based on four Old Testament examples. The pastor also coordinates his Sunday sermons with the small group study topic. Groups are no bigger than 10-12 members, and are organized by personal preference. As people join or express a desire to get involved with the church, they are encouraged to find a group that suits their “schedule and comfort level.”

There are also five ongoing groups. Three are women's Bible studies: one meets on a weekday evening, one for young mothers on Friday mornings, and one for older adults and seniors on Thursday mornings. A men's Bible study led by the pastor meets on Thursday mornings at a local restaurant. And, there is a class for new members that meets on Thursday evenings. Leadership for this class alternates between the pastor and an experienced teacher of Lutheran doctrine. The class is designed as an overview of LCMS theology for "new members," but it has attracted existing members who did not grow up in the Lutheran tradition as well as lifelong Lutherans interested in a "refresher course." All of these groups are well attended, and recognized within the congregation as being quite popular. The remaining small group program consists of two Sunday school classes offered between the two worship services. Pastor Daniel leads one class, which attracts several dozen participants. The other class is led by a church elder, and has roughly a dozen participants. Both work through eight to ten week topical studies, often based on a Biblical text.

Restoration Movement (RMC): Theologically, RMC is a typical Evangelical congregation. The Restoration Movement identifies itself through idioms like "Bible-based" and "New Testament Christianity." RMC advertises itself in similar ways, emphasizing a Triune and personalized God, Jesus Christ as individual and collective "Lord and Savior," the Second Coming of Christ, an active Holy Spirit, an "infallible" and "inspired" Bible, and the necessity of baptism by immersion. In the United States there are over 6,000 Restoration churches with more than 4 million members, as well as an affiliated network of Bible colleges (Jones, et al. 2002). In the research city, there are six Restoration churches and one of the denomination's colleges. RMC is the largest in

the area, with over 600 members. The church moved into its current facility in 2003, after its old building proved inadequate for its growing worship service attendance.

The life of the congregation thrives on a network of “ministries.” These ministries cover a wide range of spiritual and practical functions, from building decorations to prayer to discipleship. Several are devoted to developing the Christian education of children and young adults in the church. Some are based on nationwide programs, such as the Women’s First Place ministry, which connects bodily and spiritual health through diet, exercise, prayer, and Bible study. Some ministries plan congregational events throughout the year. The prayer ministry organizes several 24-hour prayer campaigns where the church’s prayer room has at least one person praying from midnight to midnight. Along with small group opportunities, these ministries are a principal means for members and newcomers to become active in the life of the congregation.

RMC offers a wide variety of small groups. The Sunday school program is more robust than that of any of the other project churches. At any given time, there are between eight and ten classes offered on Sunday morning prior to the worship service. Some are divided and identified by age (e.g., “seniors”, “college age”). Others are divided by subject matter, including book and Bible studies. These classes are well attended, attracting roughly one third of those attending worship service.

There are several ongoing classes during the week. Two of these are women’s Bible study programs. The first meets at the church on Wednesday afternoons, and consists primarily of older adults. The second is a series of groups who meet as part of the First Place Ministry. There is a four-part series called “Building U” designed by the pastor and other church leaders. “Christianity 101, 201, 301, and 401” are intended as an

introduction to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. Past topics have included “understanding the Bible,” “the Book of Genesis,” “the Holy Spirit,” and “Tales of Truth from Jesus.” Every fall the classes start over again, with each section lasting several weeks. In the spring of the following year, anyone who attends all four sections receives a “diploma of completion.” All members of the church are encouraged to “graduate” at least once.

The home group program at RMC is also robust, though not as well organized as at the other project churches. The small group director also serves as the assistant pastor, youth minister, and worship leader. This load of responsibilities made keeping an up-to-date list of small groups a more difficult task than usual. The number of groups and list of facilitators shifted often. At any given time, between 10 and 16 home groups were meeting. Groups vacillated between study topics of their own choice and congregation-wide studies. The latter included structured programs, like the Purpose Driven campaigns, and Bible studies designed by the pastor. In 2005, for example, groups chose their own topics for the first half of the year. In July, they were asked to complete a six-week study of 1 Peter written by the pastor. Following two months on their own schedule, groups were asked in late October to participate in the second Purpose Driven campaign.

Vineyard Fellowship (VFC): In several ways, VFC was unique in the research sample. It was the smallest in membership number and in average worship attendance. It was the only church where the current pastor is also the founding pastor. It was the only place on Sunday morning where nearly everyone remained after service to socialize. Theologically, it is the only church that institutionally recognizes the continuing

availability of charismatic gifts. But, like the other project churches, VFC has also experienced growth in recent years.

When the church began in 1986, it met on the nearby university campus. Eight years later it moved into its current building – a two-story warehouse structure designed to look like an “old red barn.” In 2004, the church purchased the entire building, which it is now renovating. VFC is a good example of the “new paradigm” churches described by Donald Miller (1997), whose research included a Vineyard church in southern California. Most of the defining features observed by Miller are evident at VFC: contemporary worship, informal and self-revealing preaching style, casual dress code, bodily expression in worship, acceptance of Biblical authority, and an emphasis on small group participation (ibid: 20). VFC is also a typical Vineyard congregation within the American context. The pastor of the church was mentored by a co-founder of the movement, John Wimber. And, in terms of theology, mission focus, and institutional organization, VFC is close to the Vineyard model articulated by Wimber in the early 1980s (cf., Jackson 1999).

The small group structure at VFC was more limited than the other churches because of its smaller size, but it involved a higher percentage of the overall church membership (nearly 2/3). VFC does not offer Sunday morning classes, and there was only one ongoing (women’s) group during the week. VFC has used three structured programs: ALPHA, which they offer once a year, and both Purpose Driven campaigns. The primary small group opportunity came via home group meetings. There were five of these groups; though, one met at a local coffee shop instead of the facilitator’s home. This emphasis on home groups is also consistent within the Vineyard tradition, whose

“church planting” model originates with home group meetings (Miller 1997). VFC home groups were unique because of their meeting structure and the consistency of different groups in replicating the format.

The VFC home groups began with a period of worship singing that lasted 25-35 minutes. In cases where an able musician was present, (s)he played guitar while others followed along on a printed lyric sheet. In other groups, a DVD of praise songs produced by the Vineyard denomination was used. Following the worship, the worship leader or facilitator led a brief prayer. A 30-60 minute study period came next. The study topic shifted from week to week, rather than lasting for multiple sessions. The role of the facilitator also shifted; another characteristic feature of Vineyard small groups. The intent behind rotating leadership is to cultivate a sense of ownership and involvement in every participant, as opposed to limiting the responsibility and benefit of leading to one person. Topics included Bible study lessons, personal testimonies, discussion of a Vineyard or charismatic periodical article (e.g., [Charisma](#), [ElijahList.com](#)), viewing videotapes and listening to audiotapes by Christian speakers. Meetings were concluded by a 20-30 period of prayer requests and group prayer. This always held the potential to be an emotional experience for members. Prayer requests could be very intimate, and often dealt with serious personal and family struggles. Individuals shared these concerns openly, and they were addressed in specific detail during the actual prayer.

For the remainder of this dissertation, I do not draw on the data collected from the Vineyard small groups. My reasoning is threefold. First, given the structure of their weekly meetings, relatively little time was devoted to study discussion. Secondly, all of the home groups met on the same night of the week, which meant my data for all of them

is discontinuous. In hindsight, it would have been more beneficial to choose one of the groups and attend only its meetings. Lastly, for the arguments I make in this dissertation, the data I do have from the Vineyard is consistent with the conclusions I draw based on the other project groups.

Similarities in Small Group Life

This review of the project churches reveals some similar approaches to providing small group opportunities. In each of these churches small groups are emphasized as an essential component in the health of the individual Christian life and the local congregation. Small groups are advertised as places for developing “fellowship” with other believers, growing in one’s “relationship with Christ,” organizing congregational and community activities, and becoming “stronger in God’s Word.” Though the number, format, and organization of small groups varied, the high value placed on the small group experience did not.

Based on the above descriptions, small groups can be organized into four overlapping types: Sunday school classes, home groups, ongoing classes and groups, and groups linked with structured programs. This latter category is particularly interesting. All six churches during the research year, or in the recent past, participated in a congregation-wide study curriculum. The most common were Rick Warren’s tandem campaigns. In any case – be it a Purpose Driven campaign, ALPHA, Disciple, or a locally designed study – they rely on the formation of a small group network. Part of these programs’ attraction is their potential for establishing small groups that will continue meeting after the program has concluded. As evident from these churches, though, this promise is not always fulfilled.

The intentions underlying these four types also have reappearing themes. Several churches offered groups that address the “basics” of the Christian faith and/or the affiliated denomination. The audience in these cases was not only newcomers to the church. Congregations also encouraged longstanding members to participate in these studies. Developing methods and skills for evangelism was another common goal. In most cases, the group itself was viewed as an opportunity for evangelism. Members were continually prompted to invite unchurched and non-believing friends and family to the group; or, at the very least, to solicit prayer requests from them¹⁹. Lastly, all six small group programs persistently stressed Bible study. Some groups read directly from a Biblical text, while others consulted a variety of texts to develop a Biblical theme. In any case, strengthening its knowledge of, and relation with, the Bible was a principal intent for every group. And, as the following chapters make clear, how groups interact with the Bible is the key theme explored in this dissertation.

The Project Sample: eight ethnographic portraits

The six project churches provided ample opportunities for conducting ethnographic research. I visited 25 groups during the sampling process in the fall of 2004, and I collected data from 19 groups. Table 2 summarizes how these were distributed amongst the churches.

	Groups Attended	Sun. Schools	Home-Based	Ongoing	Ad Hoc
Suburban UMC	5	1	2	2	-
Downtown UMC	3	-	-	2	1
Inner-City UMC	3	1	-	1	1
LC-MS	3	-	1	2	-
Restoration	3	1	2	-	-
Vineyard	2	-	2	-	-

Table 2: Small groups attended in six project congregations

¹⁹ Group members frequently reported encounters where they invited new people to the group, but there were only a handful of occasions when people from outside the congregation attended.

My tenure in these groups ranged from one meeting to 48 meetings. Clearly, this produces an imbalance in the corpus of data, and in turn, my understanding of the 19 groups. This requires a methodological decision: on which groups do I concentrate for the discourse-centered analyses? The final third of this chapter draws on my experience with the entire sample, but chapters two, three, four, and five rely on those groups from whom I collected the most consistent and reliable data²⁰. Tables 3 and 4 identify some basic information about these eight groups; followed by an ethnographic introduction to each.

<u>Group Name</u>	<u>Congregation</u>	<u>Meeting Time</u>	<u>Frequency</u>	<u># Meetings</u>	<u>Year Est.</u>
"Iconoclasts"	Suburban UMC	Sun, 6-8pm	Weekly	31	2002
McGee Men	Downtown UMC	Tues, 9-10am	Bi-weekly	18	1985
Tuesday Men	Inner-City UMC	Tues, 7:30-8:30am	Weekly	29	1992
LCMS Women	LC-MS	Thurs, 7-8am	Weekly	34	1990
LCMS Men	LC-MS	Thurs, 10-11:30am	Weekly	48	1994
Prayer Circle	Restoration	Thurs, 7-9pm	Bi-weekly	14	2003
"Mind of Christ"	Restoration	Sun, 9-10am	Weekly	11	2005
Monday Group	Restoration	Mon, 7-8pm	Weekly	8	2003

Table 3: Data for eight groups used for discourse analysis (1)

	<u>Total Members</u>	<u>Regular Members²¹</u>	<u>Male/Female (Regulars)</u>	<u>Ages (Regulars)</u>
"Iconoclasts"	14	11	5/6	31-65
McGee Men	14	7	7/0	55-70
Tuesday Men	8	7	7/0	49-75
LCMS Women	28	10	0/10	55-79
LCMS Men	43	27	27/0	40-80

²⁰ I used several criteria to make this decision. 1) Only groups that were tape-recorded were included. 2) Only groups where I observed at least one complete study were included. 3) Only groups where discussions remained germane to the study text or topic were included (i.e., groups that met mainly for fellowship were not included).

²¹ This designates the number of participants who attended at least half of the observed meetings for the group.

Prayer Circle	14	9	3/6	28-49
“Mind of Christ”	18	6	2/4	18-51
Monday Group	6	3	2/1	49-53

Table 4: Data for eight groups used for discourse analysis (2)

Suburban United Methodist Church

“Iconoclasts”: Once a month the small group director at SUMC, Janet, held a “huddle” following Sunday worship service. Her goal was to gather the facilitators so they could exchange updates on the progress of their groups, and ideas on how to improve. As a researcher, it provided a convenient way to monitor what each group was doing. More important, it was an opportunity to hear reflective comments from the facilitators of the SUMC project groups. I was especially interested in what Charlie would say. He was among the most outspoken and energetic facilitators I had encountered. I realized early in the fieldwork with this group that Charlie spoke his mind freely. And, from our conversations before and after meetings, I knew he was perfectly willing to evaluate the other participants. Most of the facilitators at the huddle were reluctant, or unable, to offer much about the dynamics of their group. However, Charlie’s first sentences met Janet’s inquiries about the group’s progress head on:

“Really, the group is a collection of pseudo-rebels and iconoclasts. They are extremely studious, and intense. They don’t want anything to do with popular culture, and they love to nibble on controversial topics. Right now we’re reading Philip Yancey’s The Jesus I Never Knew, which we love. We did the Ortberg and Warren studies before that, which none of us could stand.”

The “Ortberg and Warren studies” Charlie refers to were both congregation-wide programs selected by Janet and the pastor. This type of straightforward comment is vintage Charlie. Despite the Iconoclasts’ aversion to her taste in study materials, Janet was quick to recommend them during our first meeting together in the early fall of 2004.

She suspected they would be eager participants in the research, which they were. I remember my first explanation of the project and the absence of any skeptical or tentative eyes. Their initial reaction, in fact, was to be “the best small group in the project.” They laughed and warned me of their competitive streak. As usual, Charlie found a way to synthesize everyone’s comments: “If all the other groups [at SUMC] bring in fifty cans of beans [to the food drive], we’ll bring a hundred.” They put me at ease immediately.

The Iconoclasts are a collection of early-30s to early-50s married couples, as well as two single women, one in her 30s and one in her 60s. The group meets in Charlie and Diane’s living room: an open space, always immaculately clean, with tall ceilings and neatly arranged furniture. The seats for group were arranged in a circle, with a sofa, armchairs, and dining chairs. The group was familiar with one another when I began my work. They had been meeting since 2002, and half of them had been in a Sunday school class taught by Charlie in prior years.

Lively discussions were part of every meeting. Charlie’s leadership style combined with the eager participation of several members to make long silences rare. Brief bouts of intellectual sparring, often around controversial topics, were reliable as well. During the course of reading The Jesus I Never Knew, the group devoted extended discussion to historical and textual proofs for the veracity of the Bible, the problem of theodicy regarding the Asian tsunami, the ideals of purity and holiness, historically condemnable Biblical justifications, the New Testament attitude towards women, the delicate balance of faith and good works, and the relation between science and religious faith.

My role in the group was primarily that of a quiet observer, but I was never forgotten. In the first several meetings Charlie addressed questions directly to me, usually after others had given a response. This happened progressively less throughout the fieldwork, but never disappeared. I was quickly given the moniker of “resident anthropologist,” and the accompanying line that “every group needs one.” I never felt as though responses were restrained or offered on my account alone. At no point was I asked to pause the tape recorder, and the participation order remained constant throughout the fieldwork. They were in favor of the research, often commenting that it was a “good thing” and that they “look forward to what [I] come up [with].” In short, the group did its best to downplay my presence while still making me feel welcome. Their hospitable attitude was most evident in their willingness to include me in their banter. One evening, during a lighter moment in a discussion about “making it to heaven,” one of the men quipped: “Even heaven needs an anthropologist.”

Downtown United Methodist Church

McGee Men: This men’s Bible study is representative of the discord within DUMC. In particular, two sources of division characterized the group. The first is the congregation’s theological divide. Of the seven regular participants, four were decidedly liberal in theology, while the other three were much more conservative. The authority of the Bible on all matters spiritual, moral and practical was the premier ground on which they confronted this difference. Discussion transitioned into debate regarding the precision of Biblical language, the accuracy of Biblical analogies, and the contemporary relevance of verses. A second tension revolved around the purpose of meeting as a small group. Several members gravitated toward an analytical approach to group study. Others

believed the emphasis should be on their personal situations, applying Biblical principles to their daily lives, and sharing testimonies about their struggles.

Both approaches were recognized by the group as reasons why some members stopped coming, as well as why the group remains lively and enjoyable. Maintaining the balance between analysis and intimacy was a continued source of disquiet, frustrating several regular members that people are put off either way. Their decision to change study materials indexes this tension. The group has been meeting for nearly 20 years, and much of that time they used Bible commentaries by the Scottish theologian William Barclay. Barclay termed himself a “liberal evangelical,” perhaps because he maintained opinions that typically do not co-exist. He cast serious doubt on the virgin birth of Jesus, as well as the miraculous nature of his miracles. Yet, he insisted on the actuality of Jesus’ resurrection, and that Gospel authorship belonged to the four books’ namesakes (Jackson 2003). In his approach, Barclay consistently presented his Bible commentary in a scholarly manner, tightly argued and well-documented. Just prior to my arrival, the group agreed to a stylistic change. They chose a noted Fundamentalist commentator, J. Vernon McGee, to study the book of James. McGee’s “Thru the Bible” series is based on his 1967-1972 radio addresses, and their tone is conversational and informal. The switch of study material did not alleviate the tension. For reasons stylistic and theological, the book attracted some and repelled others.

The use of Barclay and McGee, both older resources, reflects the age of the group. The pastor is the youngest participant, midway through his 50s, and the only member still active in his career. The other men are in their 60s and early 70s. They are very well educated, with several retired teachers, a Methodist pastor, an engineer, a

surgeon, and a journalist. Many are life-long Methodists, and all have a lengthy history in the congregation, making them very familiar with one another. The pastor was not the facilitator, though he was a regular member. This role belonged to one of the lifelong members in the church.

Unlike the Iconoclasts, I was never directly invited into discussion. They were accustomed to academic endeavors, and were more than happy to treat me as a silent observer. From all I could tell, the nature of their conversations did not change as my time with them progressed. Several of the men were overtly pleased with my being there. The pastor was enthusiastic about the research, and the others enjoyed having someone younger at the table. Unfortunately, my presence proved difficult for one of the regular members. The retired Methodist pastor informed the other participants several months into my research that he was uncomfortable being taped and would not return until my work had concluded. He did not approach me directly, and the regular participants never brought it to my attention. My knowledge of his decision came only from a later e-mail exchange with another group member.

Inner-City United Methodist Church

Tuesday Men: I have always been unsure about the difference between consistency and predictability. The latter has such a negative connotation to me, but it is only possible because of the virtues of the former. The Tuesday Men's Bible study draws me back to this musing. By late October 2005, I had been observing them for seven months. Near the end of discussing Acts 7, Pastor Ted read the study question, "What implications is Stephen making about where God can be worshiped in Acts 7:44-50?" As was typical with the group, a lengthy pause ensued as the men reviewed the answers they

had written on their study sheets. During the silence I ran through my mind the type of response to expect from each person. This was my 24th recording and prediction was a tactic for remaining attentive. I was amazed when Ted began fielding responses. The tone and theme of the contributions, not to mention the order of their occurrence, were nearly identical to my forecast.

One conclusion is that there was a resulting staleness to being with this group. Nothing could be further from my experience. The group began in 1992, including four of the current members. The pastor at the time was experiencing personal difficulties, and started the group as much for support as for study. When Ted arrived in 2002 he took over facilitating. With the addition of two members, the group has remained as is. Every Tuesday at 7:30am, so long as they are not sick or traveling, they gather in the church's second floor classroom, assume their usual seats, and engage the day's reading and questions with measured eagerness.

The Tuesday Men are very similar to the McGee Men in terms of age. The pastor (in his 40s) is the youngest participant, and the rest are between 65 and 75. However, the age difference was more evident here. In particular, Ted's knowledge base in the "emerging church movement" was a challenge to some. The Tuesday Men also took a different approach to studying the Bible. Instead of using a commentary, they used a series of study questions – the "Life Guide" series published by InterVarsity Press. Each sheet covers a chapter of Bible reading, followed by 10-12 questions (cf., Appendix 3). Pastor Ted has been using this series in various settings for 15 years, and the men reacted positively when he introduced it to them. Two to three meetings were usually required to complete each sheet. Ted always passed out the next sheet the week before starting it,

giving the men a chance to complete it ahead of time. Without fail, they showed up the following week with responses, often multiple paragraphs worth, for each question.

My role in this group varied because several participants perceived me in different ways. Pastor Ted sought my insight on questions about “changing the culture of the church.” I attributed this as much to my age, being in the demographic the church wants to attract, as my burgeoning status as an “expert” on congregational life. When he did this, I did my best to offer an honest, but brief response in hopes of not redirecting the discussion. Several men treated me with the same kind of welcoming indifference as the McGee men. Others were less comfortable with the silent observer role and wanted me to contribute more to discussion. They were never anxious about it, but eventually did start addressing me directly.

Lutheran-Church Missouri Synod

LCMS Women: I approached seven women’s groups about being part of this research. Three denied my request. One agreed, but denied my request to tape record. One agreed to be tape-recorded, but it disbanded due to lack of attendance after one meeting. One met for only a single six-week study during my fieldwork. The LCMS women were a sharp contrast to these other opportunities. I attended my first meeting with them in November of 2004 to explain the project. When I finished, the group facilitator, Sandy, went around the table in the church library and asked each woman if they had any questions or objections. One by one, all smiling, they repeated a willingness to participate: “I think it’ll be fun,” “Sure, it’s good to mix things up,” “Sounds interesting,” “I don’t mind,” “If he can stand being around us old ladies every week.”

These women are much more than study partners; they are close friends. Many were charter members who helped plant the church almost 20 years ago. Some vacation together; others baby-sit grandchildren together. The first 15 to 20 minutes of every meeting was spent talking and laughing. And, the last five minutes was spent deciding on where to eat lunch that day. Their discussions reflected this familiarity and closeness. They transitioned seamlessly among the intimate, the supportive, the scholarly, the jovial, and the controversial.

The group was unique for its variety of distinctive personalities. Sandy's role as facilitator was unquestioned. The other ladies thought very highly of her in this regard. They appreciated her desire to involve everyone, and her efforts to consult multiple commentaries for explicating the study lessons. Sandy valued her responsibilities and met them with diligence, though she was sometimes anxious about meeting the women's expectations. Many of our conversations before and after group meetings centered on the pros and cons of the current study material, potential study resources, and different styles of leadership.

Joy, a lifelong LCMS member but a recent arrival to this church, contributed in ways that were anticipated for being insightful, articulate, straightforward, and for providing the "standard Lutheran answer." On the few occasions when Sandy needed to be out of town, she relied on Joy to assume the role of facilitator. In late January of 2005, the week prior to Sandy leaving on a two-week mission trip to Tanzania, the following concluded a discussion of spiritual mentoring:

Joy: Jesus didn't whitewash it at all. The rich, young man left after Jesus told him to sell all he had. So, if somebody goes out our door because they don't like hearing about sin, let them go. That's better. Maybe they'll go and think about it. It's better than letting them think that sin is of no consequence and, "Yeah, salvation is a gift and that's the end of it. You can do what you want." Well, you can. But, they should know the work of the

Holy Spirit. That's why we have classes so that people know what the Bible says and that the Holy Spirit sanctifies us and it's gradual, you know, makes us more Christ-like as we study His Word.

Sandy: Aren't you glad she's going to be teaching us next week? Very good. I could have written that down.

Linda was reliable as well, but for a different reason. With a mix of seriousness and humor, her conservative political leanings added a shade of controversy and current interest to the discussions. In response to a study guide question asking for examples of when "God has freed you to leave [a situation] or freed you to stay," Linda was the first to respond:

"This isn't my experience, but I'm thinking of somebody like Dr. Bernard Masonson, who himself did or presided at tens of thousands of abortions. And, then, suddenly found that they were wrong when he came into a relationship with Jesus Christ. Now, you talk about guilt. He has to know that his guilt can be taken away, that it's absolutely covered by the Blood. But, can you imagine, as a human being, knowing you were responsible for tens of thousands of deaths of people? I mean, that would be a pretty tough thing to take. He's written books. He's probably pretty old, now. But, he was on television. He was on debating everybody. And, also, when the law was changed, he was part of the persons to make sure that it got changed. He did testifying to people so that the Supreme Court decision was what it was. So, he was responsible for that, as well as having blood on his hands. Totally changed."

Barbara also brought an unmistakable presence to the group. Her laugh was constant and infectious. She was often late and rarely failed to bring an apology and a mildly adventurous explanation of her delay. Behind this, though, was a proclivity for incisive questions, just as discussions seemed spent. Following a study guide question asking for an example of "God using you at a time when you felt weak," one of the women used the example of a confrontation with her Baptist sister-in-law. The use of Baptists as a theological Other was a commonplace occurrence within the group, but Barbara used the opportunity to pose a question: "Well, what does she, what do Baptists believe then if something should happen to that child before they are old enough to

decide for themselves?” This prompted a lengthy, stimulating discussion about the Biblical justification for baptism.

My role in the group was a (nearly) silent observer. I was included in the turn-taking style of reading assigned study texts and Biblical passages. Several women joked how they often forgot I was there. Sandy’s response to a rare quip of mine gives a sense of this:

Sandy: Can you think of other leaders who have kind of a charisma, a way about them that draw people to themselves?

Jocelyn: Clinton.

Linda: Ronald Reagan. Or, even Abraham Lincoln.

Sandy: They say that Martin Luther was...

Margie: I heard he was a good teacher of young people. They flocked to his place. So, he must have had some special draw.

Sandy: He lived in a castle and filled it with people.

Jocelyn: Michael Jackson.

[[Laughs]]

James: I’m guessing that’s the first, last and only time Martin Luther has been compared to Michael Jackson.

[[Laughs]]

Sandy: We FINALLY got a rise out of James. He has not said a WORD in months. I can’t believe it!

[[Laughs]]

LCMS Men: The idea that ethnography is an unbiased, unprivileging endeavor is a taken-for-granted fiction in anthropology. The most we can hope for is to stay mindful of how we may be affecting our research, and do our best to temper it and factor it into our analysis. One of my ongoing struggles is with the LCMS Men. They were the group I enjoyed being with the most. Every Thursday I was out of bed at 6am, eager to be on time at 7am. In analyzing transcripts and deciding which interactions to use as representative examples, I am constantly drawn to this group.

My affinity for the group is not exceptional. The LCMS Men’s Bible study was the largest group in my sample, with 27 regular members. About 20 of these men are there without fail nearly every week. The group has been meeting for ten years. They

gather every Thursday morning at a local restaurant, where they have a large room filled with circular tables reserved. When Pastor Daniel arrived in 2003, he took over the role of facilitator from Aaron, a lifelong LCMS member who still attends every week.

The group has grown steadily since Daniel took over. Daniel's acumen as a facilitator is one reason for this success. Daniel is hardly an imposing figure, standing five foot five with a bookish demeanor. He has an inviting manner, and is extremely well liked by his congregation. His wry sense of humor is equally a part of his affability. I liked him immediately. He plays the role of facilitator to near perfection. The men raise their hands to speak, and Daniel notifies them when the floor is theirs. He keeps primarily to open-ended questions. He tacks a brief comment onto the end of their contributions, offering a means for others to pick up the conversational thread. He has a way of softening dogmatic comments, and sharpening the more benign ones. He steers clear of long, preachy exhortations. And, he manages to raise potentially controversial and divisive issues without being controversial or divisive.

Daniel is cognizant of his skill in this area, and is most grateful for it. He thinks it important because of the group's make-up, and their ability to foster engaging discussions. He commented to me during an interview that he "eats breakfast with the leadership of the church every Thursday." Nearly the entire building committee, the youth minister, the church administrator, several ministry directors, and most of the church elders are faithful participants. They are a highly educated group. Among others, there is a University of Chicago lawyer, education consultants for the state, engineers, college professors, and physicians. The occupational diversity is mirrored by theological diversity. The resulting discourse is lively, and a certain reason why many incorporate the

group into their weekly routine. A steady stream of humor runs through discussions that are detailed, frank, and open for debate (see chapters 3 and 5 for examples of such interactions).

As the largest group, it was also the easiest for me to remain silent in. There were no objections to my presence, my use of a tape recorder, or my lack of participation. The men showed interest in the project, as well as my personal background. Throughout the research year, and still today, Daniel has been one of the biggest advocates of my work. His enthusiasm was apparent in our first meeting, and has not waned.

Restoration Movement

Prayer Circle: The Prayer Circle met in the home of Darren and Beverly. It is a modest, one-story house nestled in an affluent neighborhood. Beverly is a dental assistant at a local practice, and Darren is the executive director of an international ministry organization he founded in 1995. The group began meeting in 2003 when Darren volunteered to facilitate one of the 40 Days of Purpose home groups. The group bonded immediately and easily decided to continue meeting. They have capped the group at nine members to safeguard the cultivation of intimacy and trust. The Prayer Circle is the youngest of all the project groups. In addition to Darren and Beverly there is another married couple in their late 40s, a married couple in their late 20s, and three single women in their late 20s.

Darren is very much an authoritative voice in the group. His position in the ministry, as well as being a spiritual mentor to several of the younger group members, allows for a group dynamic that reveres his contributions. Darren is a soft-spoken

individual, and is not necessarily the first to respond to a question. But, when speaking, the other participants listen intently.

Darren also decides on the study format, a structure unique to this group within the project sample. After their 40 Days experience, Darren chose the topic for each meeting based on what “God had been speaking to [him] about” that week. More often than not, the topic was a spiritual lesson intended to increase one’s “relationship with God.” In addition to some thoughts of his own, Darren selected Biblical texts to demonstrate the lessons. This was usually a text Darren “felt led to” during the week.

Beginning with the fourth tape-recording, and continuing for the remainder of my fieldwork, Darren altered the format. Based on a book he read, Darren suggested a new approach where the group read a book of the Bible during the week then gathered to discuss “what God had been teaching [them].” The goal was to read the same book as many times as possible between meetings, ideally once a day. When they came together, the group went around the circle and individually “shared,” pointing out specific verses that “spoke to” them. The group greatly enjoyed the method, continuing with it for 10 other Biblical texts (see chapter 3 for an extended discussion of this practice).

Following the last person’s reflections on the reading, each individual shared his or her prayer requests and praise reports. They spent more time doing this than any of my other groups, devoting as much as an hour to prayer. Beginning with their ninth reading, Darren altered things again. Following the first person’s sharing, he asked if they could connect what God had taught them in their Bible reading with their prayer requests. The group adapted effortlessly. Observing this prompted a minor epiphany about the group. For the remainder of the night, as well as the subsequent meetings, each member spent

less and less time sharing reflections from the reading and more time on prayer requests. It was common for a single Bible verse and a few sentences to be followed by five minutes of prayer requests. This inclination toward prayer highlights the purpose of the group. Prayer requests are a way to invite others into your personal life. And, more so than any other group, extremely private information was spoken aloud in confident trust. Biblical analysis was clearly secondary to intensifying the atmosphere of shared intimacy.

Two groups accepted my presence as a researcher on a conditional basis. One women's Bible study requested that I not tape record. The other, the Prayer Circle, welcomed me into the group, but insisted that I be an active participant; silence was not an option. As the role of speaker moved around the circle to reflect on the Bible reading, I was expected to share, and did. Because of the nature of this format, I feel as though my contributions were of little consequence to what others shared. As explained above, the participation order was not interactive, but operated on a turn-by-turn basis. The time reserved for my sharing was no different than any of the other participants. And, there was no norm within the group that discouraged different individuals from talking about the same Biblical text(s) in their sharing.

“Mind of Christ”: The room was affectionately called “the dungeon” by the RMC staff. The double doors to the side of the worship stage led to a small, rectangular room with concrete walls, slab floors, and no windows. Foldout chairs were arranged in several rows of five. A dry erase board covered the entire front wall, always bearing the remains of last week's lesson. The Sunday school class began at 9am, and by 8:55 most of the seven members were in their seats with their Bibles, notepads, and pens at the

ready. Rick had a knack for being punctual. He breezed in week after week, promptly at nine, excited and somewhat hurried. He carried his worn, leather briefcase in one hand, and his energy drink in the other.

Rick is a dynamic speaker. He commands the front of the room with an energetic, but not frenetic, presence. He stays mobile, but does not pace. He is clear, articulate, and forceful when emphasizing key points. He laughs, smiles, and gestures when enjoying a lighter moment. He makes proficient use of the board, jotting down words and phrases and sketching diagrams. He uses different color markers to signify a change in purpose. He stays faithful to the day's lesson, but clearly improvises; watchful for where existing ideas can be improved and new ideas inserted. He moves efficiently through each lesson, but does not rush.

The goal of "The Mind of Christ" is to "rid believers of the mindset they receive from the World, and equip them with a Christ-like way of thinking." He developed the course following a lecture he heard by an ex-Congressman on "understanding the mind of non-believers." He approached the speaker afterwards and requested a copy so he could develop a class around the ideas. He has been cultivating it ever since, incorporating new thoughts and adjusting the order and structure of the lessons. Currently, it is designed as an eight-week class. It progresses from describing the nature of the "Worldly mind" to describing the nature of "Christ's mind" to explaining the transition from the former to the latter. Every class member is given a 13-page course packet that includes an outline of each lesson, diagrams to fill in as Rick presents them on the board, and a list of his favorite quotations. The quotes come from a range of sources, including: Biblical texts,

Christian lecturers, Christian authors, sports figures, former U.S. Presidents, and literary figures.

The group consisted of little discussion because it is framed as a “class” that Rick “teaches.” In each one-hour meeting, Rick talked the majority of the time. Participants’ questions were brief and usually requests for further explication. This helped me as a silent observer. My use of a notepad, which was obvious in other groups, blended in with the class members’ note taking.

Monday Group: Rick also served as the facilitator for the Monday evening Bible study hosted by he and his wife. Their group dynamic was much different than “The Mind of Christ.” There were three regular members, and three other occasional participants. The regular participants were Rick, his wife Janice, and their close friend Tim. Each week the group gathered around the dining room table, everyone was within a few feet of each other. Our Bibles were spread out in front of us, and we alternated reading through the study text. Rick instructed us on how much to read, typically between five and ten verses, after which we stopped for discussion. Rick alternated between offering his comments immediately and beginning with asking what others thought of the text. Once the discussion had run its course – signified by silence or joking tangents – we moved on to the next reading.

Like the Prayer Circle, the Monday group began as one of the 40 Days home groups. Following the Warren study, the group has studied directly from the Bible. They began with the Gospels, and then moved to Paul’s letters. During my research, they worked through Hebrews, 1, 2, and 3 John. The three regular members have been the

only ones attending for the entire two years. I still do not know why the remainder of the group membership has been fluid and unpredictable.

My roles as a participant and an observer were more crucial with the Monday Group than with any other group because of its size and intimate setting. My presence would have been far more obtrusive were I to remain silent, concentrating on note taking. As a result, I contributed more to this group's discussions than in any of the others. At times this meant I unwittingly shifted the direction of the conversation. On one occasion in particular, during a discussion of Gnosticism in the first century Church, I asked what they thought the biggest threat to the modern Church was. Fifteen minutes later we moved on to the next Bible reading. In the analyses that follow, I have restricted my use of examples from this group to occasions where I was marginal or absent in the discussion.

How Small Groups Work

Earlier in this chapter, I emphasized the groups' diversity. In the final section I describe sample-wide patterns. I focus on issues that are integral to questions of group discourse, particularly those integral to the remaining chapters: interactive frames, participation structure, text selection, and Bible use.

Interactive Frames

Small groups cultivate expectations about their central purpose. Participants join groups, remain in groups, and change groups partly depending on whether their expectations about the group are being met. This is not unique to small group Bible study, but a characteristic of any discourse event. Some of the earliest work in the ethnography of speaking focused on how speech events are defined, the norms of

interaction, and how social actors learn to function in them appropriately (e.g., Bauman and Sherzer 1974, eds.) Socio-linguists doing interaction analysis have focused on the way differing structures of expectations help distinguish between interactive types. Ultimately, appropriate conduct and successful communication rely on participants correctly discerning what “interactive frames” are operative and predominant (e.g., Tannen and Wallerstein 1987). Any analysis of small group Bible study, then, requires an analysis of what participants’ expectations are for group life.

Two distinct sets of expectations emerged for defining what groups perceive to be their primary purposes. First, there is the expectation of intimacy and personal “sharing.” The emphasis here is on keeping the discussion connected to the lives of group members: emotional problems they are facing, efforts they are making at spiritual growth, work and relational situations they are struggling with. The hope is that as groups spend more time together, and as members come to know one another better, they will be increasingly willing to share the intimate details of their lives. For some, no matter the topic or text of study, this is the central purpose of small groups. The Prayer Circle best embodies this approach. Its strict adherence to this expectation became clear once Darren altered the format, and prayer and commentary occurred side-by-side.

The other set of expectations involves engaging in analytical discussions. The subject could be moral, historical, theological, political, Biblical, or virtually any other area. No matter the topic, the emphasis remains on ferreting out different ideas and their consequences surrounding a particular issue. At times, this consisted of a single individual asserting his position, the group agreeing, and the discussion moving on. And, in other cases, it was a lengthy exchange involving multiple participants and conflicting

opinions. The group that gravitated toward this approach most was the LCMS men. Their intricate exchanges made little reference to their personal lives, except as an occasional knowledge source invoked to pursue an analytical argument.

Very rarely did individual groups restrict themselves to one or the other of these interactive frames. More often, groups made the conscious attempt to balance these approaches, to devote discussion time to both. The case of the McGee men is an excellent example of how this can be a struggle. Participants stayed committed to and withdrew from this group based on the fulfillment of expectations. In the words of one member, “some left because they think we’re too ‘out there,’ and some won’t come back because we’re ‘not out there enough!’” In other groups, satisfying both sets of expectations is precisely what members desire. The ability to move back and forth in the course of a single meeting can be a major source of attraction.

These two interactive frames, despite vastly different aims, are united by an underlying expectation. All groups – no matter the type, topic of study, demographic make-up, denominational affiliation, or size – share the common expectation of seeking to grow spiritually. A variety of terms are used to capture this – “being fed,” “growing in relation with the Lord,” “fellowship” – but the most common is “edification.” Leaders, regular members, marginal participants all spoke of coming to small groups because they want to be “edified.” They want to advance in their spiritual lives. They come to support each other, learn from each other, and share in a mutual maturation of faith. Equally important is what this expectation removes. If spiritual growth ranks above all else, then certain dynamics will be avoided at all cost; most notably, ongoing tension, hostile debate, and belligerence. And, indeed, groups work to eliminate these. This also has a

number of consequences, including: individuals choose groups not attended by people they are at odds with, controversial topics become taboo, and leaders work to achieve consensus rather than create division. All of these can be complicated discursive processes, but they all support the same goal – keep small groups edifying.

Participation Structure

One of the first things you realize when doing an ethnography of small groups is who talks and who does not. This may be partly reflexive. Your attention is drawn to those who are eager to speak. Then, you catch yourself ignoring those who are not. This may produce biases in the research, or at least the researcher, but it underlines a central topic for the study of discourse: participation structures. Accounting for available roles has been integral to the study of social institutions broadly, and the division of speaking roles has been particularly important for understanding speech events (cf., Goffman 1959). As a social institution, small group Bible study contains (at least) three definable role structures: facilitator, core participant, and reserved participant.

Facilitators – like Charlie, Ted, Sandy, Daniel and Rick – were the ones who organized the meetings. They decided when to begin, when to end, when to move on to the next reading, and when to pause to consider a question in depth. The central discursive task of the facilitator, though, is to generate participation. All of the project groups, besides the “Mind of Christ,” understand themselves as discussion-based. Thus, all of those who “led” did so with the intent of involving as many members as possible as often as possible, and to avoid lecturing. Given the reticence of some to contribute, and the ever-present potential for divisive topics, this can be a difficult accomplishment. To fulfill this role structure, facilitators made use of numerous discursive and interactive

strategies. These men and women would often spark discussion by asserting their own opinion in concise terms, and then ask for reactions from members. Other possibilities include posing questions to the group as a whole, posing questions specifically to individuals, and using outside textual materials to assert an idea (e.g., Bible footnotes and Bible commentaries). Individuals invariably gravitated toward one or more of these strategies, but all were resources in the ongoing attempt to keep as many participants as possible active in the discussion.

Earlier in this chapter, when comparing the total number of members in each group, I distinguished between occasional and “regular” members. Regular members, those who attended at least half of the recorded meetings, are not always the most active participants. And, more important, they are not always the core participants: those whose contributions carry greater authority, and who other members look to when discussions go stale or especially difficult questions arise. Facilitators were always part of this category, but the overall number of core participants varied from three to six in each group. Core participants were very much responsible for carrying the discussion. They were not always the most talkative, but their talk reliably added a needed comment at the necessary time. This is true in the context of both interactive frames described above. In intimacy-oriented situations, core participants could be counted on to keep the discussion focused on personal detail. And, they were the first to increase the intimacy level by sharing deeper personal stories or inquiring further into what another member shares. The same is true for analytical situations. Core participants ensured discussions remained provocative and intriguing, moving the discussion along when it became frivolous.

Every group also had its more reserved members. The motivations for this were numerous. Some seldom spoke because they were new to the group. Others felt they learned more by listening to those with more “mature” faiths. And, still others told me they were “just shy” by nature. Complete silence was reserved for the larger groups. In the Monday Group, with only three regular members, everyone contributed if only sporadically. The LCMS men, with two dozen members present each week, had several participants who went several meetings in a row without contributing a word.

The resulting participation structure of facilitator-core participant-reserved participant was consistent throughout the entire sample. From the perspective of discourse and institutional analysis, this is predictable. Social institutions are comprised partly by the established roles that generate expectations (cf., Bourdieu 1977), and speech events are known for having definable participation structures (e.g., Philips 1974). Thus, the prevailing participation structure does not mark small group life as a particularly Christian practice. This participation structure does, however, buttress other interactive features of small groups as a discourse event; in particular, the maintenance of interactive frames and, as will be shown below, the process of text selection.

Text Selection

Its choice of study texts is an integral component to the life of every small group. Books, Biblical texts, videos, periodical articles, email testimonies, and audiotapes were all used as the basis for discussion. These texts were chosen for a variety of reasons. The Iconoclasts chose The Jesus I Never Knew because the facilitator and his wife had read it, enjoyed it, and thought it suited the group. The McGee Men chose J. Vernon McGee’s study guide because they wanted a change from their previous commentator. They hoped

a new style would attract new members. They also liked the idea of using McGee's Fundamentalism as a ground for disagreement, which would ideally force them to make their own thoughts more explicit. Other groups chose texts based on national popularity, recommendations from other groups, familiarity with an author, and an author's affiliation with recognized institutions.

In her ethnography of Houston area book clubs, Elizabeth Long (2003) analyzed their text selection practices. Some preferred a democratic ethic, while others relied on the wisdom of the leader and still others circulated the responsibility among everyone. The process of text selection in small group Bible study was similar, but not identical. Decision-making responsibility virtually never moved from member to member. The Vineyard groups came closest to that dynamic, opening the role of facilitator to everyone, and encouraging different leadership each week. However, this did not always involve selecting a text. Individuals could devote the meeting to a topical discussion, or the sharing of a personal testimony. A method not applicable in Long's research on book clubs is the use of congregation-wide studies, where the pastor or small group director chose the text.

The democratic approach (usually an informal vote following a suggestion) and reliance on the facilitator were represented equally in my sample. Some groups, like the Iconoclasts, alternated between these two approaches from study to study. Sandy attempted a democratic approach with the LCMS Women, but the group quickly tired of the resulting indifference and was content to place the full responsibility on Sandy. For the LCMS men, Daniel takes suggestions toward the end of each study, and then makes an executive decision based on the possibilities he receives. For the Prayer Circle, though

the idea for Bible reading came from Darren, the choice of individual books was more democratic. In the meetings following Darren's initial choice, he would ask the group what they wanted to do next. There was little in the way of voting, though. The first suggestion put forth predictably became the one accepted by everyone else.

Text selection is not always such an agreeable process. It can also be divisive. Given how meaningful these groups are to their members, and the importance of the text for structuring discussion, individuals can hold strong opinions on what they wish to study. And, they can be equally vehement about what they do not want to study. Such divisiveness usually indexes larger points of divergence within groups. The clearest example of this was the DUMC women's Bible study.

The seven women, all regular members, took turns at the role of facilitator, and they chose texts by unanimous agreement. The interactive frame was more oriented toward analysis, but was not devoid of cultivating intimacy. Their discussion of issues often became contentious, at times threatening the goal of edification. The reason was a conflict between a theologically conservative member, Wanda, and the rest of the group. Wanda grew up in the United Methodist Church, but spent her adult life in the charismatic tradition. She returned several years ago because she missed the hymnal music, and she liked the community outreach at DUMC. The other women were decidedly liberal in theology: resisting masculine references to God, dismissing the doctrine of original sin, and freely questioning the authority of the Bible on a variety of matters.

Socially, the tension was not so readily apparent. Wanda was not excluded, and did not exclude herself, from fellowship before or after meetings. During my initial visits,

before the theological conflict escalated, everyone appeared to enjoy each other's company. As my research progressed, though, the tension between the women during discussions heightened from week to week. When I began data collection, the group had just finished its previous book study. There was no consensus on the next text, so the women spent a few weeks watching movies while they decided: one on Martin Luther, one on Joseph Campbell, and one criticizing The Da Vinci Code.

For weeks, Wanda had been advocating for Bart Ehrman's The Lost Christianities (2003), a scholarly study of the Gnostic scriptures. She was sensitive to her position as the "lone conservative." She thought this a good compromise, and was confident the historical and textual evidence would convince the others of the Gnostic scriptures' lack of authenticity. In turn, Wanda hoped this would move the women to reconsider the authority of the orthodox canon. The other women were leaning toward a (very) different text: Deepak Chopra's How to Know God (2001). Chopra is a well-known spiritual author well outside the orthodox Christian tradition. He does make reference to the Christian Bible in his books, but his conception of "God" draws on other faith traditions as well, including Eastern and Native American epistemologies. Despite Wanda's strong opposition, the other women decided on Chopra's book for their next study text. The week they announced this was the last week Wanda attended the group. Between this meeting and the next, Wanda sent a lengthy email to the group. It informed them of, among other things, her decision to leave, her disgust with the Chopra decision, and her concern for their salvation.

This example also illustrates how text selection provides a stage for communicating identity. Groups and individuals favor texts they identify with. Very

rarely did groups choose texts that were at odds with their theological position or texts that otherwise conflicted with their moral and spiritual sensibilities. This is not to say that groups (like the Iconoclasts) never chose challenging texts, or texts that called into question certain taken-for-granted beliefs. Groups often reflected at the end of a study how a text was “not what they expected” or how it “made them think.” This element of surprise is part of the attraction of small groups, and the enjoyment of encountering new texts. But, still, their subsequent choices of texts remained faithful to their comfort zones of identity.

Using the Bible

All of these small groups are about Bible study to some extent. Five of the project groups read directly from a Biblical text: McGee Men, Tuesday Men, LCMS Men, Prayer Circle, and Monday Group. In numerous others, a Biblical theme or character was the topic of study: the life of Jesus, how God speaks in the Bible, prayer in the Old Testament, the life of Paul, how God shows love in the Bible, and Bible prophecy, to list a few. For those who read non-scriptural texts unconcerned with a single Biblical theme, the Bible was still incorporated, sometimes at length, throughout the book. Authors often asked readers to consult the Biblical texts being referenced. For groups like the Vineyard, where the topic may be a personal testimony, Biblical texts were woven into songs, prayers, testimonies, and responses. In a sense, then, all small groups are Bible-centered. It is a shared text, and a shared body of knowledge that groups rely on and return to in discourse.

Bibles were physically present as well. In certain groups, including some not directly studying from scriptural texts, participants arrived with Bibles in hand. On the

rare occasion that a Bible was forgotten or misplaced, facilitators were sure to have an extra copy. Some individuals arrived each week with numerous translations, privileging one and using the others for alternative readings (see chapter 2 for further discussion). In other cases, facilitators took it upon themselves to place a stack of Bibles in the study space.

When a book of scripture was not the topic of study, Biblical texts were still frequently consulted in cases of curiosity, clarification, and comparison. If the details of a particular story were fuzzy, it was located and read. If the discussion of one text prompted reference to another, it was read. Other Biblical texts were searched for their aesthetic appeal. The mere mention of certain Biblical texts, Psalm 23 being a popular one, resulted in reflections on the “beauty of scripture.” These were not read and appreciated for interpretive purposes, but for their poetic qualities. Biblical texts were also read for their connection to specific memories, pointing out the dialogic quality of scripture (Bahktin 1981). Previous readings of the text for comfort or council, linked to times of joy and suffering, led to rereadings and recollections in the midst of group discourse.

Since the practice of small groups is, in some measure, always about the Bible, the remainder of this dissertation concentrates on this quality of group discourse. An analysis of how the Bible is perceived, used, read, interpreted, and incorporated is central to any understanding of small group discourse. The next chapter opens this analysis by exploring the system of assumptions that participants make about the Bible. These assumptions exist prior to any, and guide every, particular instance of Bible reading.

This chapter has described and analyzed small groups as a form of cultural practice. The following summarizes my major observations about my sample of small groups:

- All six project congregations emphasized the development of a small group program. Small groups were advertised as both a means of numerical growth in the church and of spiritual growth for individuals.
- Small groups gravitate toward or balance between two interactive frames, one emphasizing the cultivation of intimacy and one emphasizing analytical discussion. These two frames are united by an underlying expectation of small group life – to ensure that small groups are a setting where individuals feel they are strengthening their faith.
- The participation structure of small group life is consistent among the project groups. It consists of three established roles and their accompanying expectations: facilitators, core participants, and reserved participants.
- The process of text selection provides an arena for the communication of group identity. Groups chose texts that promised to affirm and/or reconsider their self-perceptions regarding who they are as Christian believers.
- All of the project groups stress Bible study. For groups that read directly from Biblical texts, and those who do not, a primary goal of meeting together in small groups is to “become stronger in the Word.”

I present these claims of pattern and organization against the backdrop of a seemingly diverse sample of groups. Indeed, these groups appear to vary on every demographic and sociological dimension. They represent multiple Protestant traditions, different types of

study, men and women, working to upper middle class members, and a variety of ages. However, structurally and interactively, these groups prove to be very consistent. And, yet, I have also taken this chapter as an opportunity to demonstrate the uniqueness of individual group environments. Despite the consistency that exists amid diversity, one group always has the potential to ‘feel’ very different from another. The experience of being a participant observer, and of hearing members talk about their own experiences as group participants, is quite different in the Iconoclasts, the McGee Men, the Tuesday Men, the LCMS women and men, the Mind of Christ, and the Prayer Circle. This unique feeling combines with the other features presented in this chapter to make these groups meaningful to members. As I stated at the outset, members have deep emotional connections to their groups. They love them. And, they find time, week after week, in spite of all else they might be responsible for, to take part in the small group experience.

Chapter 2: Textual Ideology and the Bible

“The Bible is first of all...a mosaic: a pattern of commandments, aphorisms, epigrams, proverbs, parables, riddles, pericopes, parallel couplets, formulaic phrases, folktales, oracles, epiphanies, *Gattungen*, *Logia*, bits of occasional verse, marginal glosses, legends, snippets from historical documents, laws, letters, sermons, hymns, ecstatic visions, rituals, fables, genealogical lists, and so on almost indefinitely” (Frye 1981: 206).

This quotation from Northrup Frye, the eminent literary critic, aptly captures the complexity of the Judeo-Christian scriptures. If you consider it for a moment, the task of reading (not to mention understanding) the Bible is overwhelming. Take, for example, the problem of translation.

The vast majority of Bible readers in America engage the text in English. The 39 books of the Old Testament were originally written in Hebrew (except a few brief sections in Aramaic). The 27 books of the New Testament were originally written in “koine” Greek. These languages have little in common, structurally or semantically, with English (Dewey 2004). Aside from the purely linguistic problems, the process of translation involves a myriad of decisions, from the stylistic to the theological. We might also consider issues of manuscript transmission. Historical discoveries have never unearthed an autograph Biblical text²². Only a handful of copies exist in complete form. And, the oldest available manuscripts lack important, meaning-contingent features like capitalization, spaces between words, and punctuation (ibid).

Or, take the problem of historical and cultural distance. The social worlds of the Bible’s authors were very different from those of modern American readers. Customs, habits, scenes, and locations are not the same. The prevailing knowledge structures differ substantially, from science to theology, competing philosophies, demography, and so on. These all find expression in language, posing further difficulties. The cultural worlds of

²² Autographs refer to the original written versions of Biblical texts.

the Bible lent themselves to idioms, metaphors, and analogies that are difficult to translate and often difficult to render intelligible to modern sensibilities (Dewey 2004).

Bible reading could be seen as the height of futility, or perhaps daring, reserved for those in love with the impossible. This conclusion is perfectly logical; yet millions of people do it everyday throughout the United States. Millions gather on a weekly basis to do it together. People with and without formal training in languages, hermeneutics, theology, and history read this text with confidence and great joy. In doing so they find meaning, comfort, security, inspiration, council, strength, and conviction. They are surprised and reassured, troubled and encouraged. All this begs an important question. How? How do readers interact with the Bible? In the chapters to follow, I analyze how the Bible is read, interpreted, and incorporated into small group discourse. This chapter provides a necessary first step en route to these other issues. Before asking how the Bible is used, we must ask how the Bible is understood. What do readers bring to their interaction with this text? And, what does this interaction look like when performed collectively? The answer is what I call the “textual ideology” surrounding the Bible.

What is Textual Ideology?

By textual ideology I mean the set of ideas, assumptions, and beliefs readers bring to their reading of a text²³. Textual ideologies exist prior to any given instance of reading, and they orchestrate how readings unfold. This concept resonates with three others in the

²³ In his survey of the term, John Thompson observes two distinct conceptions of “ideology” in the social science tradition: descriptive and evaluative (1990). The latter understands ideology as meaning implicated in the reproduction of unequal power relations (cf., Fairclough 1989). The descriptive conception is “neutral,” concerned with identifying systems of thought and belief. This is the sense of “ideology” I employ. However, the evaluative sense is not altogether disconnected from the Bible’s textual ideology. As we will see, parts of its make-up are the inspired and absolute qualities of Biblical authority. This includes a closed scriptural canon. This is ideological in the evaluative sense when we consider attempts to add to or take away from what is understood as part of the Bible. For example, the rejection of Gnostic texts – most recently the “Gospel of Judas” – is ideological in this sense.

hermeneutic tradition of the social sciences: genre, conversational inference, and the hermeneutic circle. The concept of genre has raised similar issues among linguistic anthropologists and discourse analysts. Bauman defines a speech genre as a “style oriented to the production and reception of a particular kind of text” (2004: 3-4). This latter aspect of genre, its ability to impact how texts are received, is the closest area of overlap with what I am presenting as textual ideology. The key difference lies in the reason for impact. Genres are distinguished by stylistic, formal features of textual structure; whereas the concept I am developing here rests on ideological differences. The two do share the Bahktinian quality of being dialogical. Our interaction with a text is not isolated, but cumulative. No reception is fully detached from the experience of previous receptions or the expectations of future receptions (cf., Bahktin 1981).

Second, the field of conversation analysis has had an ongoing interest in the background knowledge that participants bring to face-to-face interactions. Grice (1975) developed the notion of “conversational implicature” to address how processes of implication are required for successful communication. Gumperz (1977) suggested that conversational interpretation is a situational and culturally bound process where participants gauge their response by their evaluation of others’ intentions. Fairclough (1989) has contributed the significant observation that background knowledge – in spoken and written discourse – is also involved in the reproduction of dominant meanings and unequal social relations. This tradition informs the concept of textual ideology by its emphasis on what social actors bring to their experience with texts.

Lastly, those acquainted with principles of the hermeneutic circle will find textual ideology familiar. Part of this tradition is the recognition that readers approach texts with

biases and prejudices that condition how texts are understood. Included in these biases and prejudices are the “presuppositions about the nature and creative source of the text itself” (Bartkowski 1996: 262). These allow texts to generate multiple interpretations. The concept of textual ideology casts a broader net than deciphering textual polysemy, or from above, aiding effective communication and reproducing cultural forms. Textual ideologies can impact what readers expect from a text, how they evaluate different (and, divergent) interpretations, what they read, when they read, where they read, who has the access and legitimacy to read, and the method(s) of reading. The repetitiveness of a strict hermeneutic circle also belies the dialectic potential of textual ideologies. Readers’ experience with a text, with cultural resources, and with social roles and relations can alter their understanding of a textual ideology, which can then shape future readings.

Textual ideology is an ecumenical concept, not restricted to any particular category of text. As readers, we are the bearers of textual ideologies for virtually every text imaginable. Even the most mundane, superfluous, or trivial text is not exempt. Indeed, once it has been judged as mundane, the work of generating expectations and assumptions has already begun. We then go about interacting with the text in a way that reflects this attitude and understanding. When I read a new cookbook recipe, I expect to be guided, perhaps very gently, from beginning to end. When I read a comic strip, I expect to be amused in some way. And, just as certain expectations are generated, others are eliminated. My cookbook will not be the source of financial guidance, and my comic strip will sorely disappoint if it causes melancholy. These processes become increasingly complex as we encounter texts held in greater esteem. Take the following as an example.

In his ethnography of American karaoke, Rob Drew (2001) observes that songs are texts that performers encounter. In the interaction between text and performer, Drew describes the faithfulness performers habitually ascribe to original texts. “The very absence of the familiar star’s voice seems to summon you to fill it in. You find yourself instinctively reproducing the most convoluted cadenzas and subtle sighs of the original recordings without any prompting from the lyric monitor” (ibid: 39). He goes on to argue: “The songs that undergo the least modification in karaoke bars are, generally, the ones performers and audiences feel most passionate about” (ibid: 57). He uses a performance of his own in a working-class bar – Bon Jovi’s “Livin’ on a Prayer” – to demonstrate. “Many in the audience sing along with spirit. They know their Bon Jovi, as can be expected from the club’s bridge-and-tunnel crowd. That means if I botch it, I’ll be twice as culpable – I’ll have sullied a canonical text” (ibid: 6). In terms of textual ideology, Drew identifies a responsibility, a precision, and a seriousness performers approach certain texts with – those deemed “canonical”²⁴.

Cookbooks, comic strips, and karaoke are a clue to the inclusiveness of textual ideology as a concept. The karaoke example introduces the category of text I am concerned with: sacred texts. Drew’s work suggests that ‘sacredness’ is partly constituted by the link forged between the text and the socially constructed value of its reception by an audience. Within this category of ‘sacred,’ texts tied to religious practice hold a

²⁴ A valid question to ask of textual ideology is why it is not an issue of habitus (Bourdieu 1977). After all, textual ideology and habitus seem to have several things in common. Both are structuring mechanisms. Both are comprised of predispositions. Both operate on individual and collective levels. Both carry a dialectic sense. Why, then, am I not presenting an analysis of ‘textual habitus?’ The primary reason why textual ideology is not a sub-category of habitus is its self-conscious quality. In Bourdieu’s framework, habitus is a system of predispositions existing mostly outside the conscious reach of its inheritors. It is an issue of “learned ignorance” (ibid). This is not the case with textual ideology. Each of the individual principles I describe is well known and well articulated by believers. Indeed, their articulation in small group discourse is largely what enables this analysis.

special place in the genre because of their institutional basis (Kort 1996, Malley 2004). Few genres are as universally powerful in constituting belief and practice, or in garnering authority (Briggs and Bauman 1992). In turn, there is greater potency to textual ideologies surrounding religious texts. Given this significance of religious texts and the centrality of textual ideologies to the social life of texts, the relation between the two deserves scholarly attention.

Research in the anthropology of religion has identified the concept of “scripturalism,” the epistemological basis for conceptualizing scriptures (Malley 2004). My analysis of textual ideology also emerges from this work. Through his ethnographic research on a Midwestern Baptist congregation, Brian Malley developed a working model of Evangelical Biblicism. This cognitive-oriented model emphasizes two aspects of how Evangelicals typically think about the Bible. First, the Bible is attributed a sense of absolute authority that derives from the doctrine of divine inspiration. And, secondly, this authority is maintained by an interpretive tradition: “a species of belief tradition in which a set of beliefs is transmitted along with the attribution of those beliefs to a text” (ibid: 146). Malley’s observations are largely borne out in the chapters that follow, but I approach this phenomenon from a different angle.

My research shifts the focus of inquiry to the interaction between the epistemological structure surrounding the Bible and its evidence in discursive practice. In other words, I am interested in how attitudes towards the Bible interact with actual, collective practices of reading and using scripture. This requires formulating a concept of textual ideology that explicates the individual principles of assumption, expectation, and belief. John Bartkowski’s (1996) work on Bible interpretation provides a second source

of insight for this research. He uses the example of divergent theological legitimations for child discipline in the work of two conservative Protestant writers. The authors differed in their understanding of the Bible's "overall message." One author emphasized the imperative of unconditional love, while the other focused on the theme of sin and punishment. Their interpretations of individual passages (e.g., "spare the rod") took shape in accordance with the respective emphases of love and punishment (ibid). Bartkowski concludes his article by stating the need for a similar inquiry to be done ethnographically. This dissertation provides a response to his call. I begin with an outline of the principles that comprise the textual ideology surrounding the Bible.

Textual Ideology and the Bible: six core principles

Textual ideologies can be as simple as a single presupposition, or as complex as an interconnected system of assumptions and beliefs. Through my ethnographic research, I have identified six principles that comprise the core of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible²⁵. All were present in group discourse, as well as in the less structured interactions before and after meetings. Multiple participants in each group, men and women, young and old, the spiritually mature and the young in faith, core and marginal participants all expressed these principles. In short, an adequate account of this textual ideology (as well as of group discourse generally) relies on explicating these six principles. They vary in kind, dealing with the authority of the text, the relevance of the

²⁵ I had a defined decision-making process for classing principles as either "core" or "non-core." This included two factors. First, meta-commentary statements about the Bible that appeared on only a few occasions and/or only among a specific group or individual were not included as "core" principles. Second, meta-commentary statements about the Bible that demonstrated no discernible manifestation in textual practice were not included as "core" principles. "Non-core" principles consisted of only a few types of statements (e.g., "You can tell the difference between Paul's writing and other New Testament writers").

text, and the Bible's textuality. Each raises a distinct set of expectations about Bible reading and possibilities for interacting with the text.

Biblical Authority

1) *The Bible is the Word of God*. The importance of this principle cannot be overstated. It encompasses many of the stock phrases and doctrines commonly heard about the Bible, such as: inerrancy, infallibility, inspiration, and literal truth. These terms are indexical, a discursive shorthand signifying a foundational (albeit, complicated and contested) understanding. They describe the absolute authority that is attributed to the Bible. It is absolute because it prevails over any other source of instruction, in matters ranging from the practical to the moral to the spiritual²⁶. Malley (2004) observes that this authority derives from the Bible's presumed inspired character. It is not simply a human product, but God's revelation to humanity. For these readers, the Bible is the only text that, in its entirety, bears the co-authorship of the divine. In this way, it is unique among all texts for them. In turn, they revere and read the Bible unlike any other text.

This principle guided the LCMS Men in their text selections. Before the group started Proverbs, I asked Pastor Daniel why this was their first study of the Bible in over a year. He explained that he preferred reading non-scriptural texts with the group because there is greater freedom to disagree with these books. He thought this resulted in better, more active discussions. The following exchange came at the end of the first meeting in the Proverbs study:

Daniel: As we read through this let's keep in mind that all this stuff [is] true. I think we should tell ourselves that every once in a while when we pick up the Bible. Now, I might not be able to figure out the whole Truth. I might not be able to figure out how to apply

²⁶ In his analysis of Biblicism, Malley observes that there is often a disjuncture between the principle of Biblical authority and the way believers act on that authority (2004). The practice of Biblical authority is a separate process that allows for "selectivity and ad hoc hermeneutics" (ibid: 144).

all of that Truth in all of the ways in all of my life. But, we should at least approach this from the standpoint, "This is right. And, this is more right than anything I would have in mind if I'm thinking differently." This is the wisdom of the ages that comes to us from on high, as opposed to the newspaper [where we] say, "Well, maybe that's right, maybe it's not."

Pierce: Yeah. As much as I've enjoyed the books you've picked out, and the great discussions, this is Truth. This is the highest form of Truth.

Daniel: I do think it's good for us to be doing just what Pierce would say, reading the text. One of the things I think happens when we read the books that's helpful is that I believe we're more free to disagree with the books because we know it's not God's word from beginning to end. And, we often feel intimidated understanding the Scripture and sharing the Scripture, and we're afraid we're going to get something wrong. But, when we're reading a book, I think we have a little greater freedom of, "Well, I think I can have an opinion on that."

The contrast between the textual ideology surrounding the Bible and that surrounding non-scriptural texts is clear: books are debated, whereas the Bible is discerned. This also illustrates the dissonance between the divine authorship of the Bible and the human audience. As fallible human beings, we are unable to always, in the fullest manner possible, understand the message of Biblical texts. What revelation does occur happens through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and then only partially. This ensures that Bible reading is done continually, and also highlights the importance of reading as a social activity. Interacting with the Bible as a group, as part of a shared community of believers, makes this process of discernment more beneficial.

Recontextualizations of Biblical texts are used to testify to the Bible's absolute authority. II Timothy 3:16-17 is commonly used for this purpose: *All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.* The inspiration and authority of the Bible also results in the view that the Biblical canon is finalized, closed off from addition or subtraction. This too is understood as a scriptural mandate. Revelation 22, for example, warns about *taking away* or *adding to* prophetic words. For these believers, God's involvement in His Word extends beyond the writing of Biblical

texts to the permanent canonization of certain texts (i.e., the 66 books of the Protestant Bible) and the exclusion of others (e.g., Gnostic texts, Apocryphal texts).

As I mentioned above, this principle is both complicated and contested. Among other reasons, it is complicated for the nuances it entails. For example, anytime I inquired further about the Bible's "infallibility" or "inerrancy," group participants qualified that this is only true for the autograph texts. This addition tacitly recognizes the difficulties of translation and transmission, while still upholding the quality of absolute authority. Insistence on a "literal" approach to the Bible presents a similar issue. As Malley (2004) argued, "literalism" is not proof of a hermeneutic tradition but a symbolic term denoting the veracity of the Bible. One might translate the claim "The Bible should be read literally" as something akin to "The Bible should be read as True, and human wisdom or reason should never be taken as proof against the Truth of God." What is being signified via "literalism" is a submission to and acceptance of authority, not a consistent interpretive style.

Like most of the principles I review here, understanding the Bible as "the Word of God" does not uniformly hold the same meaning for all groups and individuals. The LCMS Men provided an example of an inability to challenge the Bible. Or, as Daniel phrased it earlier in the same meeting, "If the Bible has one opinion and you have another, by definition, you're wrong." The McGee Men represent a different vantage point on this principle. On several occasions during their study of the book of James, Roland, the pastor of DUMC, stated that certain scriptures are "not always helpful" because scripture is "so absolute" and life is "all this in-between stuff." These two pastors are clearly making different pedagogical efforts in their groups regarding what freedom

there is to disagree with the Bible. However, participants like Roland still refer to the Bible as “the Word of God.” And, more importantly, they still approach the Bible with the same expectations of being taught, counseled, convicted, comforted, and so on. In short, Biblical authority is conceived in different ways, but the consequences of expectation remain, as does the uniqueness of interacting with the Bible compared to other texts.

2) *The Bible is the same today as it was when it was written.* The authority of the Bible also derives from the constancy of its message. The Bible is understood to be eternal, just as true tomorrow as it is today as it always has been. One manifestation of this timelessness is the view that the Bible reveals the nature of humanity. Historically in Protestant theology, this has been captured as the doctrine of original sin. People are born into this world as sinful beings, separated from the righteousness found in a relationship with God. This nature has remained unchanged through time, and is only completely alterable in the individual life through the decision to follow Jesus.

The groups I studied emphasized how the sinfulness of humanity is revealed in the Bible through the moral depictions of characters and events. The Old and New Testaments are replete with portraits of individual lives, demonstrating the natural susceptibility to evil and the ability to overcome evil with God’s help (e.g., David, Solomon, Peter, and Paul). This principle results in the discursive practice of constructing associations with Biblical characters. Susan Harding (2000) observed a particular form of this phenomenon in the discourse of the Fundamentalist preacher Jerry Falwell. His narrative practices invited audiences to listen to his words in the same way they might read the Bible, thus treating him in a typological manner. The participants in my research

followed this principle to a somewhat different discursive end. They identified themselves, their tendencies, and their actions with those of characters portrayed in the Bible. This was not done toward self-effacing or self-promoting ends, but rather to highlight an enduring characteristic of God: his desire to use imperfect people to accomplish divine purposes. This practice was particularly apparent in the Iconoclasts' discourse.

In their study of Philip Yancey's The Jesus I Never Knew they often returned to this principle of 'if God can use them, he can use us.' Charlie was fond of referring to the 12 disciples as the "Keystone Cops"²⁷, calling attention to their failures to accept or apply Jesus' teachings. Yancey poses the following question about the disciples' triumphs as evangelists after making this same argument: "What else [besides the Resurrection of Jesus] explains the whiplash change in men known for their cowardice and instability?" (1995: 216). In response, Charlie reminds the group that the twelve men responsible for spreading Christianity were the same ones who "fell asleep in the garden," "argued about who was second in line," and "who were not the intellectuals or leaders of their day." They then drew the link between themselves and the disciples, and their own ability to "be disciples in today's world despite all [their] shortcomings." The same discursive process of constructing parallels occurred with various Old Testament characters revered for their weaknesses and failings, as much as their acts of righteousness.

Understanding the Bible as unchanging also results in the belief that "all truth is God's truth," quoting again from the LCMS pastor. Anything accepted as true because of human wisdom can ultimately be confirmed by the Bible. And, if not, its veracity should

²⁷ The Keystone Cops was a series of silent film comedies between 1912 and 1917 featuring an incompetent group of policemen.

be doubted. In short, every established truth is, in fact, a Biblical concept. The epistemology of Western science was a popular example for many of the group participants who engaged this topic. The assumption at work here is that whatever we discover through human agency has already been stated, in some measure, in the Bible. In discussing Proverbs 15:30 (*A cheerful look brings joy to the heart, and good news gives health to the bones*), Daniel offers the following:

“There might be more literal truth to that than we would guess. If you’ve listened to or read anything by Ken Hamm, a big creationist, one of his statements is that he’ll stick with God’s Word over science every time because science continues to change. That, as time goes on, in a lot of ways it corroborates what Scripture already says. I think it’s interesting how there can be these little nuggets that, you read through this and this is a proverbial saying by a long dead king. And, that just might prove out to be true scientifically at a level the likes of which we might have never thought. That, this might be a much more profound or true statement, a statement true on more levels than we might have anticipated.”

Finally, the ideological principle of the Bible’s timelessness also prompts a view of the Bible as a sourcebook and guide for everyday life, and every situation. If sinfulness has not changed, neither have the predicaments people put themselves in. In equal measure, the wisdom of the Bible is the consummate guide for managing these problems. Aaron from the LCMS men and Rick from the Monday group both suggested – in the midst of discussions about experience being the best teacher – that the purpose of the Bible is for every generation to learn anew from the mistakes it portrays. A sizeable segment of the Evangelical literature industry includes books aligning Biblical texts as responses to life’s ‘most difficult questions.’ Titles such as God’s Answers to Life’s Difficult Questions, The Greatest Questions of the Bible and of Life, and Checklist for Life for Men (and for Women) restate that Biblical answers persist in their validity because the message of the Bible is an unwavering Truth.

Biblical Relevance

3) *The Bible speaks to you in new and different ways every time you read from it.*

More so than the other five principles, this expectation provided a constant refrain throughout every group's discourse. There is a certainty that the Bible has the unique capacity to always be relevant and appropriate in the life of the individual, and in ways that keep pace with the uncertainty of life. There is the expectation when reading Biblical texts that the experience will not be the same as last time, nor will the consequences of doing so. The reader is assured of coming away with something new to consider or apply, something not present in previous readings.

No group embodied this more than the Prayer Circle. Indeed, this principle structured their method of organizing meetings. In his instructions, Darren challenged the group to read the same text every day during the intervening two weeks before the next meeting. Certainly, not everyone did this each meeting, while some did achieve the ideal. But, the reality of what individual readers did matters less than the expectation motivating the challenge itself. The significance lies in the assumption that the same Biblical text can be read every day for 14 days and, upon the final reading, still be the bearer of new insight. As the group began their discussion of Philippians, the third Biblical text they read together, Marcy prefaces her sharing:

Marcy: There's so much in each chapter, I feel like if I read straight through that I'm almost reading it too lightly.

Van: You think you're missing something.

Marcy: Oh yeah.

Beverly: Mhmm.

Marcy: I tried to read one chapter a day, and I underlined and starred. And, then, you know, the next time you go through you find some more and you go, "Well, that's good too."

Jennifer: Yeah, I know. I found stuff over and over again too.

Prayer Circle members, and participants from other groups, sometimes explained this dynamic as a consequence of accumulated background knowledge and/or life experience. In short, the effect of the text changes because the reader has changed (cf., Fish 1980). The explanation heard more often, at times in tandem with the above, was the nature of the text itself as the Word of God. And, while the message and purpose of the Word is unchanging as described in the second principle, it carries this concomitant ability to speak in new ways.

This principle reinforces two aspects of Bible reading. First, it ensures continual use. If the Bible holds the ever-present potential to be new, then it can never be old, antiquated, or exhausted. No matter one's age, maturity in faith, or experience with the Bible he or she can always expect something new to be (re)discovered. This helps explain why the same group can meet for decades, returning in various ways to the same texts. This principle also highlights the primary purpose of engaging the Bible in the first place. Individuals read their Bibles every day, sometimes on multiple occasions, sometimes for hours at a time, with the expectation of being taught, inspired, and convicted. They do not do so for the strict purpose of deriving textual meaning. This does occur, but it is secondary to believers' hopes of being affected in some way. Chapter 3 deals at length with how this balance unfolds in group discourse.

4) *The Bible speaks directly to lives and situations.* Similar to the third principle, this is rooted in the ongoing relevance of the Bible to the lives of readers. Not only does the Bible hold the potential to be different each reading, it holds the potential to be precise in its application. There is no contradiction here for believers because the same process is at work: the Holy Spirit is revealing what is needed when it is needed from the

absolute truth that is the Word of God. Individuals and collectivities (e.g., small groups, congregations) expect Biblical texts to have application to their own, personal lives and particular circumstances. The application is not vague, but specific; not general, but amazingly exact in how it aligns with readers' lives. While discussing James 4:17 – *Anyone, then, who knows the good he ought to do and doesn't do it, sins* – Vincent from the McGee Men relates a story of his own:

“I went into an Office Max a couple of weeks ago. And, right there in the foyer there was a wooden filing cabinet for ten dollars. Normally, it's eight dollars. This is one of the things you put together. Well, it was already put together. It was the last one and they were getting rid of it. I said to myself, 'I don't need a cabinet, but maybe I could use it some time. Ten dollars is really good.' It was plain, but it looked decent. Weighed a ton. So, I bought it. When I was checking out this lady comes over and says, [[Southern accent]] 'Oh, where'd you get that. I would like one of those.' I was impressed to say, 'I don't need it, you can have it. You can buy it. Here. Take it off me.' But, I didn't. I was impressed to, but I didn't. I sinned. And, one reason I know I sinned is I had a chance to give this thing somebody who wanted to use it right now. And, what was I gonna do with it? I don't know. I was gonna leave it in a box. And, it's still sitting there in a box. It's a burden. It weighs a ton. I left that store. I was looking all over the parking lot for her.”

Group participants also found Biblical evidence for this principle. Hebrews 4:12 is a commonly cited proof-text: *For the word of God is living and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.* The Bible judges not only the thoughts and attitudes of some hearts, but of your heart, of my heart, of all our hearts. In his analysis of Evangelical Biblicism, Malley (2004) identifies this same principle at work in the Baptist congregation with whom he conducted research. He described this as a “dual context communication event” that ensures delivery of “the expected relevance” (ibid: 107). The initial context is a typical hermeneutic practice. Readers recognize the humanity of Biblical authors, “and that the human author's intent fixed the Bible's meaning once and for all” (ibid: 111). One of his informants used Song of Solomon as an

example. He considered it a love song because interpreters generally agree that was the author's original intention. However, the second context is where this principle emerges. In addition to the intended meaning, "God, in the person of the Holy Spirit, may speak to an individual, in the particular circumstances of that individual's life, through some passage of the Bible" (ibid: 111). Malley notes that this dual structure renders critiques of 'taking verses out of context' erroneous. It is quite impossible to read out of context when the life of the reader is the context.

The assumption that the Bible is suited to individual circumstances helps explain a variety of products and practices. One genre of Study Bibles – Life Application Bibles – provides an example. These appear in most every mass published translation. The aim of footnotes and study questions is to prompt readers to connect individual texts with the details of their life. Devotional materials, which are widespread in congregational life, are also a product of this principle. Organized around daily prayers and Bible readings, these materials are organized around the practice of personal, intimate applications of Biblical texts. "Bible dipping," the practice of opening the Bible randomly (though, prayerfully), hoping to be edified, is rooted in this principle as well (Malley 2004). Including Bible verses with gifts, and buying Christian greeting cards containing verses, provides further examples. All of these are made possible by this principle of direct application.

Biblical Textuality

5) *The Bible tells a coherent story from beginning to end.* The Bible is not understood as a group of disparate texts, or as a single book lacking a unifying theme. The Bible is understood as a collection of texts that tell a coherent story through their intertextual relations. The story the Bible tells is about the nature of God and humanity,

and God's plan for the unfolding of time. Individual verses, chapters, and books are read within the context of this unifying narrative. Knowing what the Bible is about provides an interpretive frame in which to position and discuss any given Biblical text. In my first recording with the McGee Men, they pause for a moment on the meaning of James 1:22 – *Do not merely listen to the word, and so deceive yourselves. Do what it says:*

Joel: What are you asked to do? I'm reminded of the verse in Matthew where it says, *Not all who say to me, 'Lord, Lord' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven, but only those who do the will of my Father.* And he says, *many will come and preach in my name and they will cast out demons and they will do mighty miracles, and I will say to them, 'Depart from me I never knew you'.* So, maybe those aren't the actions that he wants.

Dennis: Yeah. And you wonder what he's saying? What's the basis of that? It's the motivation that counts. Where does your action come from? What's the basis for your action?

Joel: And, I always think of the so-called Great White Throne Judgment. Remember when the *separation of the sheep and the goats* come. What's the basis? *Did you feed the hungry? Did you give water to the thirsty? Did you visit the prisoner? Did you help the sick?* "Come on in." I mean, it's so simple in a way.

Ryan: So simple, yet so difficult.

Joel: But, it's like Jesus says, *the loving the Lord your God with all your heart and all your mind, your neighbor as yourself is the fulfillment of all the Law and all the ages.* So, love is, where does John say, *God is Love.* And I said, "Oh, come on." That's his definition?

Frederic: Well, he went so far as to say *Love is the fulfilling of the Law,* yeah.

Dennis: Maybe love is the basis out of which our action is supposed to come.

Joel: God, grace, and like Micah says, and Jesus, both, *you neglect justice, mercy, and the love of God, walking humbly with God.*

Frederic: Does it say, it says *love kindness*, or is it *do kindness*?

Joel: I think it's love, well I think *mercy* is in the Bible, but it can be kindness. But, it's *love mercy*. Don't just do it, *LOVE* to do it.

Frederic: Well, it's kind of the apex of the book, isn't? In other words, if you were to pick any one passage from the letter of James that's representative of what he's saying, this could be one of them.

Dennis: Sure.

Joel: Yeah.

The men begin with a question about what is meant by *doing* what *the word* says. On Joel's cue, they use other scriptural texts to articulate the Biblical theme of love, and thus the proper way to read this verse from James. This particular interaction is reminiscent of the example John Bartkowski (1996) gives in his analysis of two conservative Christian

writers, where one author filtered his Bible interpretation through an understanding of the Bible's "overall message" as one of "unconditional love."

In the groups I studied, one of the most consistent strategies for succinctly characterizing the nature of God is to posit a division between the Old and New Testaments. In their final meeting for studying Proverbs, the LCMS Men identified having a "fear of the Lord" as a theme throughout the book. Daniel asked the group how they understood this concept of fear:

Bill: I think if I were to only read the Old Testament, I would interpret *fear of the Lord* as real fear. But, having read that and then read the New Testament. With that fear there comes more respect and understanding of love. The Old Testament, there's a lot of God lays the rules down and here's a story of how nobody could really stick with the rules. And, the New Testament is the story of Christ and His resurrection. So, it kind of changes your perspective on God of being dominating to a loving God.

Daniel: Do we need to remember more of the Old Testament than we do?

Bill: I think if we can remember the Old Testament as putting the New Testament in perspective. This is why the New Testament occurred, because of what happened in the Old Testament.

Aaron: I happened to be reading the prophet Joel. He wrote about 780 or so BC, some time in there. *He used the occasion of the locusts coming like an army, wiping out everything they had, saying this is God telling us to wake up.* And, thinking about what happened in New Orleans. And, I know we foo-foo that kind of stuff. But, I think God's given us a wake-up call.

Daniel: Do we sometimes fall too much into all New Testament kind of thinking? Do we lose sight of, "Now, don't mess with God?" He's a God of grace and compassion, but don't mess with him. Can we even think in those terms? Ought we think in those terms?

Andrew: I don't want to think in those terms. I don't want to think in these terms that Bill's describing, because I find a lot of grace in the Old Testament. I find a lot of Jesus. I just flipped back to Psalm 116, because it was close. *Graciousness, glory and righteous, yes, our God is merciful. The Lord preserves the simple. I was brought low and he saved me.* And, so, to somehow suggest that there must be a balance between Old and New, I don't think so. I think there's a balance, perhaps, between God's grace on one hand and his judgment on the other. And, there will be judgment, I understand. I also think that the fear aspect involves understanding what God's character is and what His capabilities are and what consequences might be. But, if we get too caught up in this terror business, is that works-righteousness? Are we, at that point, saying, "Oh, boy, I better be good because otherwise I'm gonna get hammered." And, that's not the way it works.

Aaron: I think I agree with both of you. But, I like what Bill said earlier. Christ shows God's love in a way that, even though the Old Testament is the love of God presented, it doesn't present itself like Christ dying on the cross.

Daniel: The greatest clarity of [God's love] is seen in Christ.

The Old Testament reveals God's justice; what happens when he deals with people in wrath and judgment. The New Testament reveals God's love in the person of Jesus Christ; what happens when he deals with people in grace and mercy. When this straw man gets articulated in group discourse, as Bill does above, a predictable dissent follows. Opponents, like Andrew, point to instances of love and grace in the Old Testament, and of judgment and stridency in the New. In the end, though, the notion of the two canons working together to present a complete picture of God – both wrath and mercy – is upheld.

Taken as a whole, the Bible tells a coherent story about the nature of God: loving and wrathful, creative and destructive, forgiving and judgmental. The publication of The Story (2005) exemplifies what can emerge from this principle. Based on the TNIV translation, The Story replaces the traditional book-chapter-verse organization of the Bible with a novel-like chapter structure. The book's description on the back cover reads like this:

"At its most basic level, Christianity is a story about God and the remarkable lengths he goes to in order to rescue lost and hurting people. *The Story* gives you just that – the story of Scripture. Condensed into thirty accessible chapters, it reads more like a novel than your typical religious text. And like any good story, *The Story* is filled with intrigue, drama, conflict, romance, and redemption."

The Bible is also understood to reveal God's plan for history. For Christians, this revolves around the person of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the central figure of the Bible, and the reason for his life is the focal point of the narrative. In this sense, the Bible is also read as a book of prophecy. Predictions, foreshadowings, and foretellings of Jesus are pointed to throughout the Old Testament. The birth of Jesus is understood as a turning point in history, a fundamental alteration in how God can be known by human beings. As a depiction of history's unfolding, Jesus' presence in the Old Testament is crucial to its

continuity. The New Testament is also part prophecy. The birth of Jesus signifies both a new beginning and the beginning of an end. It marks the beginning of the final age before the end of time. Different understandings of the nature of eschatology abound in Protestant theology, but there is agreement in the orthodox tradition that time will eventually have an end. New Testament prophecy, then, includes a description of how to recognize the arrival of the end. For some, the Bible's continuity is even more precise in its representation of history's unfolding. Genesis tells of creation, the beginning of all things, and Revelation describes the Second Coming, the end of all things. For others, the Bible is not as exact, but still contains the message of who God is and what this means for the purpose of the human life.

This sense of coherence and continuity extends to an appreciation of Biblical consistency for consistency's sake. The authority of the Bible is supported by its uniformity. The textual tool of a concordance is one manifestation of this. Biblical concordances offer readers lexical and thematic trails that run throughout scripture; usually in the form of page number listings beside individual names, words, and phrases. The LCMS women provide an ethnographic example of how this can play out in group discourse. The following interaction began with a reading of Colossians 2:6-7, which includes the phrase, *rooted and built up in [Jesus]*. Part of Sandy's preparation involved the use of a concordance:

Sandy: What psalm do you think of when you think of rootedness?

[[No response from group]]

Sandy: Psalm 1. I think it's kind of a special meaning. Beautiful imagery in this text. Cindy, would you please read Psalm 1?

Cindy: *Blessed is the man who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked or stand in the way of sinners or sit in the seat of mockers. But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in season and whose leaf does not wither. Whatever he does prospers. Not so the wicked! They are like chaff that the wind blows away. Therefore the*

wicked will not stand in the judgment, not sinners in the assembly of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Sandy: Okay. What is this psalm teaching us about rootedness?

Jane: God always takes care of us.

Rebecca: Fullness of life.

Margie: That God is the *living water*.

Sandy: Yeah. It's interesting; sometimes you can almost encapsulate the entire meaning of the Bible by tracing certain elements of style, certain analogies, certain word pictures. How about Psalm 80:8-11? Margie.

Margie: *You brought a vine out of Egypt; you drove out the nations and planted it. You cleared the ground for it, and it took root and filled the land. The mountains were covered with its shade, the mighty cedars with its branches. It sent out its boughs to the Sea, its shoots as far as the River.*

Sandy: Okay. To what time in the life of the Hebrew nation is this referring?

Margie: The exodus out of Egypt.

Joy: God also brought Jesus, as a baby, out of Egypt. When they fled there because of Herod.

Sandy: Isn't the Bible an amazing thing? Just an amazing book. Proverbs 12:3 and 12:12. Frita.

Frita: *A man cannot be established through wickedness, but the righteous cannot be uprooted. The wicked desire the plunder of evil men, but the root of the righteous flourishes.*

Sandy: Very consistent imagery here. Rebecca, could you read Isaiah 5:24?

Rebecca: *Therefore, as tongues of fire lick up straw and as dry grass sinks down in the flames, so*

their roots will decay and their flowers blow away like dust; for they have rejected the Law of the Lord Almighty and spurned the word of the Holy One of Israel.

Sandy: Okay. *Decaying roots*, how does that speak to us?

Joy: It says *you have rejected the instruction of the Lord*. So, the decay depends upon us, if we stay in the Word. Because if you've rejected the instruction and despised the Word, you dry up.

Sandy: Well put. And, Joy, could you read Matthew 13:6 for us?

Joy: *But when the sun came up, the plants were scorched, and they withered because they had no root.*

Sandy: Very consistent. Revelation 22:16. Elinor.

Elinor: *"I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star.*

Sandy: ...Okay. Let's look at Ezekial 47. Joy.

Joy: *[[Reads Ezekial 47:1-12]]* Sounds like heaven.

Sandy: Isn't that a beautiful passage? It truly is. And, one more, Revelation 22:1. James.

Me: *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb down the middle of the great city street.*

Sandy: What a beautiful picture. I guess the only point I've been trying to make here is the beauty itself of the scripture as it develops itself through this imagery; especially in this imagery of being rooted, being built up.

As Sandy says repeatedly, part of the Bible's power lies in its continuity. She uses the example of how a particular spiritual theme – *rootedness* – can reappear in various texts, demonstrating the coherence of the Bible.

This ideology around the Bible's textuality also places certain traits, such as contradiction, in opposition to the inherent nature of the Bible. By its very nature, the Bible cannot be at odds with itself. Its texts cannot be conflicting, or contrary with one another. Any suggestion of the sort is dismissed in favor of the Bible's uniformity. This continuity also gives rise to the interpretive principle that the Bible is 'its own best interpreter.' Because the entire Bible is the inspired Word of God, confusion around one text is best resolved by consulting another Biblical text. (See chapter 5, page 169, for an example of these two outcomes).

6) *The Bible is written perfectly.* How readers understand the language of the Bible is also woven into the textual ideology. It is viewed as amazingly precise and accurate in how it captures thoughts, emotions, and dialogue. This is less a commentary on the structural and formal qualities of Biblical texts as it is on their aesthetic potential and appeal. When participants allude to the Bible's "perfection," they are making a statement about the beauty of Biblical language and its close alignment with experience. This principle was articulated only a third as much as the others, but it was integrated occasionally in small group discourse. The LCMS men provide the clearest articulation of this in their reading of Proverbs.

The topic for the day's discussion was Proverbs 8, 9, and 10. In his transition to chapter ten, Daniel listed a few of his favorite verses. The last one he read was Proverbs 10:26: *As vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes, so is a sluggard to those who send*

him. He then asked the group which proverbs they “underlined” or thought were “interesting.” Andrew was among the first to respond to Daniel’s question. He is a core participant in the group, best known for his tendency to introduce new layers of complexity to any topic. Andrew is a retired lawyer, a background made obvious by his habit of homing in on individual words and phrases for critique, clarification, and exposition. He said this about Proverbs 10:26:

“What always strikes me is the precision of the language. Just the way that things are framed. I mean, this is pretty well thought out. Just the verse you were talking about. *Vinegar to the teeth*. It’s not something that’s going to hurt you. But, it’s just irritating. And, *it’s like smoke in your eyes*. It’s just irritating. It doesn’t harm you. But, it’s IRRITATING when that happens, when you send a lazy guy out and it doesn’t get done. It’s just IRRITATING. But, my point is that the language is just right, it’s always on the mark. It’s just perfectly descriptive of what’s going on. And, I don’t think that’s an accident.”

Andrew’s appreciation for the language of scripture is indicative of a sentiment I observed in many of the project groups. Participants often remarked on the perfection of proverbs, psalms, parables, prayers, and a host of other Biblical genres. Biblical language is not approached with an attitude of ‘how to say it better,’ but one of ‘it could not have been said better.’

This may strike the reader as an odd principle given that there are dozens of different English Bible translations readily available. Does the suggestion that the language of the Bible is perfect refer to a particular translation? If not, how can all translations be perfect, particularly when they often read very differently? The variety of translations does not pose a serious challenge to this principle because they are treated as resources, not as mutually exclusive alternatives. Multiple translations were consulted less for proof of one translation’s accuracy over another, but more to find the best expression for particular verses. The McGee Men were particularly apt to do this, as

demonstrated in their discussion of James 4:11. Their initial reading came from McGee's study guide, which uses the King James Version²⁸. Dennis, the group facilitator, then read the text in the New English Translation²⁹. Following several minutes of discussion, Vincent reads from both The Message and the New Living Translation³⁰. Throughout this exchange, the validity of the translations was never broached. Instead, the focus remained on what the text of James 4:11 is stating, using the various translations to help this effort.

Translations are not placed in competition, but are used cooperatively to locate the best reading possible. Individuals will argue for the supremacy of certain translations, as well as for the illegitimacy of others. But, this was never the policy of groups. In the context of group discourse, translations are treated as resources to be drawn on as necessary, not as choices to be ranked. This view of translations allows the understanding of Biblical language as perfect to persist.

Textual Ideology: Responses to Four Probable Questions

1) Taken together, these six principles form the core of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible in the groups I studied. They are a system of ideas, beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and expectations about the authority, relevance, and textuality of scripture. And, like any system, these principles are not islands unto themselves. Indeed,

²⁸ *Speak not evil one of another, brethren. He that speaketh evil of his brother, and judgeth his brother, speaketh evil of the law, and judgeth the law: but if thou judge the law, thou art not a doer of the law, but a judge.*

²⁹ *Do not speak against one another, brothers and sisters. He who speaks against a fellow believer or judges a fellow believer speaks against the law and judges the law. But if you judge the law, you are not a doer of the law but its judge.*

³⁰ *Message: Don't bad-mouth each other, friends. It's God's Word, his Message, his Royal Rule, that takes a beating in that kind of talk. You're supposed to be honoring the Message, not writing graffiti all over it. New Living: Don't speak evil against each other, dear brothers and sisters. If you criticize and judge each other, then you are criticizing and judging God's law. But your job is to obey the law, not to judge whether it applies to you.*

you may have already asked yourselves, don't these principles rely on each other to make sense? Aren't they interconnected?

These principles are indeed mutually dependent. For example, the authority of the Bible as the Word of God underlies the understanding of Biblical language as perfect; in fact, only the Word of God could attain such an expectation. It is because of its divinely inspired quality that the language is taken to be so accurate, so precise, and so descriptive. The two principles of relevance are closely linked. Because the Bible can speak in new ways with each reading, the Bible also speaks in ways specific to individual circumstances. If its relevance were restricted to a given period, it would cease to have the quality of ongoing personal application. The assumptions of relevance are also tied to the Bible's status as unchanging. The Bible continues to be relevant for modern believers, and promises to be for succeeding generations, because it contains eternally valid information; for instance, the nature of humanity and the answers to life's fundamental questions. The textual ideology surrounding the Bible is very much a system, with principles that are both distinct and inter-related. I suspect that any potential additions to this system could not be diametrically opposed to the existing principles. If the principles exist in a supportive relationship, there is no room for contrary notions that might threaten the stability of the relations.

2) The textual ideology surrounding the Bible is a historical phenomenon, like any other belief system. What, then, can be said about the genealogy of these six principles?

Aspects of this ideology extend to the Biblical period, as evidenced by the use of scripture to articulate various principles. Principles of this textual ideology also have

roots in the earliest expressions of Protestantism. Viewing the Bible as its own best interpreter is a distinctly Reformation concept, most apparent in the writings of Martin Luther (Hagen, et al. 1985). Wesley Kort (1996), however, assigns the first defined theory of Bible reading to John Calvin. The current form of this textual ideology owes at least two debts to the way Calvin approached scripture. First, Calvin placed aims such as the accumulation of knowledge secondary to reading the Bible for its power for personal conviction. The ability of scripture to affect the life of the reader takes precedence over the strict search for textual meaning or becoming especially learned of Biblical texts. Second, Calvin widened the sphere of the Bible's application. He insisted that the knowledge of salvation and an understanding of the texts themselves were only the start of the Bible's value. He emphasized the Bible's relation to the "whole of life" (ibid: 30). The Wesleyan tradition picks up this notion, emphasizing that the Bible must be confirmed in personal experience (Metts 1995). The modern practice of linking Biblical texts to every detail of one's life testifies to the lasting significance of Biblical relevancy.

The role of the Bible in the history of American Christianity also impacts the current form of this textual ideology. Assumptions of plenary inspiration and absolute authority were being championed by English Puritans when they arrived in the 17th century, and have been reproduced through Protestant institutions, including: Anabaptists, Wesleyans, Lutherans, Calvinists, Pentecostals, Fundamentalists, and Evangelicals (Noll 1992). The publication of The Fundamentals between 1910 and 1915, a series of pamphlets defending the complete authority of the Bible, are one modern milepost in reproducing the centrality of these doctrines (ibid). The popularity of related

notions, such as Biblical inerrancy, were still in their infancy when the pamphlets were published, coming into vogue only after the Civil War (Noll 1982).

Understanding the Bible as a unified narrative has been a consistent dividing line among American Protestants. Peter Thuesen (1999) observes how this issue of narrative coherence posed continual translation difficulties for the ecumenical RSV translation committee. Language ideologies concerning the Bible's perfection are rich in the King James tradition (McGrath 2002), and have become increasingly widespread with the explosion of English language translations in America beginning with the RSV in 1952 (Thuesen 1999).

3) An essential question confronting any textual ideology, or any belief system, is the question of sharedness. Clearly, everyone I encountered in my fieldwork did not uphold all of the principles in identical ways. What, then, can be said about the extent to which this textual ideology is a shared set of expectations? After all, statements on the Bible's authority, relevance, and textuality have ignited schisms at the denominational, congregational, and small group levels for centuries (e.g., Noll 1992). Although some conflict did arise among group participants around particular principles, the overall level of agreement around these principles remained remarkably high.

Three sources of evidence support this claim: group discourse explicitly about the textual ideology, informal interviews with group members, and questionnaire results. I coded transcripts and field notes to identify when textual ideology statements were made, and who made them, in each group. Verbal and non-verbal reactions to these statements were also analyzed for agreement, disagreement, and ambiguity. I also coded fieldnotes of informal interviews conducted with group members before and after meetings for these

types of statements. These data were certainly not as numerous or rich as those from discussion transcripts. But, it did provide an opportunity for the voices of marginal participants, and of those not comfortable voicing dissent publicly, to be heard. Lastly, the final section of the research questionnaire (cf., Appendix 2) consisted of a 42-statement list about the Bible, 18 of which directly reflected selected principles³¹.

Triangulation of these data supports three claims about the sharedness of the textual ideology. 1) An overwhelming majority of participants upheld these six principles in all groups. And, in no case was the same individual the dissenter for more than two principles. 2) The six principles are unequal in both their presence and the extent to which they are disputed. Principles of authority and relevance were far more likely to be articulated. However, Biblical relevance and textuality were rarely the location of disagreement; unlike Biblical authority, which marshaled a wider range of opinions. 3) Most important, the textual ideology was prominent enough (on both the individual and group levels) to create a climate of recognition. Everyone, whether they agreed completely or not, was aware of the principles and aware that their participation in discourse took place against this ideological backdrop. And, in several cases, where there was little or no disagreement, the textual ideology functioned as a taken-for-granted reality within the group. This was the case in Malley's (2004) Baptist congregation, where the principle of Biblical authority was required knowledge for appropriate participation in the group.

Disagreement, dispute, and tension were all still observed despite this high level of sharedness. Three of the project groups had recurring disagreements in their

³¹ These statements were presented to group participants on a Likert-type scale: strongly disagree, disagree, no opinion, agree, and strongly agree.

discussions. Disputes arose over various principles of the textual ideology in the McGee Men, the LCMS Women, and the LCMS Men. As described in the previous chapter, these disagreements were most prominent with the McGee Men. In the following chapters, I present analyses from all three groups.

There was almost uniform agreement on the principles of relevance and textuality. One of two things happened when those principles arose in group discourse. The notion was affirmed and discussion moved to the next topic. Or, the notion was affirmed at length by numerous examples from numerous participants. The two principles of Biblical authority presented a different scenario. Differences arose over the degree to which the Bible is authoritative. For example, the questionnaire statements receiving the highest levels of agreement and the highest levels of dissent addressed principles of authority.

Consider the responses to these six statements:

Principle	Statement	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree
1	I believe the Bible is divinely inspired.	0%	0%	100%
1	I believe God guided the formation of the Bible as it now appears.	0%	6%	94%
1	I believe the Bible is authoritative over any other text.	0%	3%	97%
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1	I believe the Bible is the only text inspired by God.	32%	10%	58%
1	I believe the Bible contains NO inconsistencies.	22%	13%	65%
2	I believe parts of the Bible are NOT applicable in today's world.	61%	6%	33%

Table 5: Questionnaire data for textual ideology (1)

The agreement around the first three statements is astounding. However, the second set of statements reveals a marked tension surrounding the nuances of Biblical authority. This contrast suggests that participants disagree with each other most over the principles of authority.

Finally, individuals expressed ambiguity toward certain principles. During informal interviews, individuals described an assurance of the inerrancy of original texts, but also an acceptance of possible alterations via translation and manuscript transmission. In group discourse, individuals found occasion to express support for the Bible as a coherent narrative, but also confusion as to why some events seemed at odds with the storyline. In certain questionnaire responses, individuals agreed and disagreed with statements upholding principles of authority and relevance. In short, just as group discourse can be the site of conflicting ideologies, so can the mind and heart of an individual.

4) One final question may be raised about my use of the category of “the Bible.” Despite the use of this gloss by participants, the historical fact remains that the Bible is not one text, but a collection of many texts. Moreover, it is not a collection of equally used texts. For instance, any given reader in my sample would be more familiar with the Sermon on the Mount than they are with the genealogies of Leviticus. In regard to the textual ideology, do these principles apply to the whole of scripture or only selected texts?

Unlike the other questions, the answer to this one is quite simple. The textual ideology surrounds the entire Bible. It is not restricted to commonly cited, commonly debated, or well-known texts. Kort’s analysis of Calvin’s theory of reading is again

useful: “Although the knowledge of who God is and that God is one who saves as well as one who creates is clearer in some parts of the Bible than in others, it is available anywhere and everywhere [in the Bible]” (1996: 30). This describes well the sentiment among the project groups. Selected Biblical texts were associated with special memories, admired for poetic qualities, seen as indexical for whole doctrines, and favored for use in different settings. Nevertheless, no Biblical text was exempt from inclusion in the textual ideology.

One clear point of separation was between the Old and New Testaments. I described above how they are understood as a composite portrait of God’s character. However, readers did react differently to the two canons in some other ways. The Old Testament was considered “more distant,” “harder to understand,” and “less significant for evangelizing.” In regard to Biblical authority, questionnaire responses reveal a dissonance between the two canons in terms of a willingness to disagree. Table 6 shows the results for three statements presented in sequence:

<u>Statement</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>No Opinion</u>	<u>Agree</u>
I feel free to disagree with things I read in the Old Testament.	68%	13%	19%
I feel free to disagree with things I read in the Gospels.	78%	19%	3%
I feel free to disagree with things I read in the rest of the New Testament.	78%	19%	3%

Table 6: Questionnaire data for textual ideology (2)

The difference needs little explanation. Participants do not feel the same burden of adherence when reading the Old Testament. Even still, specific texts in the Old Testament (e.g., Job, Psalms, Proverbs, and Isaiah) are revered and treated on par with the whole of the New Testament.

This chapter has analyzed the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. This ideology is a constellation of beliefs, ideas, assumptions, and expectations that guide readers' interaction with Biblical texts. My goal has been to sketch the outlines of the ideology itself, focusing only on the first half of the interaction. This textual ideology does indeed exist in relationship with a variety of textual and discursive practices. The remainder of this dissertation is devoted to completing a sketch of this interaction. In the next three chapters, I demonstrate how this ideology works in various forms of practice. Chapter 3 considers practices of reading and interpretation. Chapters 4 and 5 consider the practice of incorporating the Bible into group discourse. In chapter 4, this is observed in the interpretive resources members invoke to engage in discussion. In chapter 5, it is observed in the practice of recontextualizing Biblical texts in the midst of group discourse. Through these analyses, I argue for an ongoing, dynamic and mutually reinforcing relationship between textual ideology and discursive practice.

Chapter 3: Interpreting the Bible in Small Group Discourse

“If you really keep the royal law found in Scripture, ‘Love your neighbor as yourself,’ you are doing right. But if you show favoritism, you sin and are convicted by the law as lawbreakers. For whoever keeps the whole law and yet stumbles at just one point is guilty of breaking all of it.” (James 2:8-10, NIV)

The McGee Men began a mid-February meeting by reading these verses. Five of the group participants were there that morning. The facilitator for the day, Vincent, started the discussion: “Joel. *If you show favoritism, you sin*. Do you have a sense of what that is?” Joel responds: “Yeah, that if you judge people in terms of, ‘he’s okay, you’re not okay.’” Vincent agrees, and elaborates. Frederic is next to join the discussion: “Well, my reaction is that James is very harsh here. I think it’s not so much a metaphor as much as a, you call it an exaggeration. It’s a literary device. You exaggerate in your writing to make a point.” He continues, explaining this reaction to the text, and several others join in considering the possibility. Frederic then moves the discussion forward: “I think the key thought in this passage is two words, *whole law*. I think that’s the one maybe we should debate.” And, they do, at length.

Roland makes his first entrée into the discussion following a series of back-and-forth comments about the meaning of *whole law*. He returns to Frederic’s original assertion: “I want to push, Frederic, do you think it’s a good technique to do it the way James is doing it here? Do you think it misleads people?” This prompts Frederic to discuss at greater length the choice of rhetorical technique, as well as the veracity of the text. Joel changes the direction of the discussion by posing a new line of questioning: “Wasn’t James kind of in between the Gospel and the Law? He goes back and forth, because he’s blended. They had a sense of grace, but not in Paul’s fullness.” Joel attempts to present a

historical explanation for why James reads like it does. The group considers this briefly, but returns to debating the meaning of *whole law*.

Roland disrupts this again by turning the question of meaning into a question of application, summarizing the position of several participants: “So, the conclusion is that in God’s eyesight, if you commit adultery, you don’t have to be as uptight as you would if you had murdered somebody. Is that what you mean?” Joel follows Roland’s attempt to apply the verse with his own, cross-cultural, example: “I wonder how they look at this where somebody has a number of wives? You know, like some Arab and African countries, and even here in America with the Mormons.” Ultimately, Frederic concludes the discussion, and turns to the next reading: “Well, the rest of the chapter kind of bails us out, I think.” Vincent takes the cue and asks Frederic to begin reading the next set of verses.

This chapter is about how the Bible is read and discussed in small groups. I explore the styles participants use to interpret Biblical texts, how these styles unfold discursively, and how they are positioned in relation to one another. The interaction I described above illustrates how groups go about reading and interpreting Biblical texts. This particular exchange gives a glimpse of how complex and how dynamic this aspect of group discourse can be.

My descriptions and analyses are rooted in two explanatory frames: textual ideology and interpretive community. The interpretive styles participants employ carry the imprint of the textual ideology principles explained in chapter 2. Moreover, the ways in which interpretive styles are employed demonstrate differing orientations to these

principles. Throughout this chapter I show how the role of Bible interpretation in group discourse is inextricably linked to the set of assumptions and expectations believers hold about the Bible.

I conclude that small groups can be understood as “interpretive communities.” This concept was developed in literary analysis, but there is great potential for its ethnographic application (cf., Forstorp 1990, Radway 1984, Svensson 1990). It emerged from reader response theory, particularly the work of Stanley Fish (1980), who stressed the active role of the reader in establishing meaning, as opposed to an emphasis on meaning being already present in the textual artifact. Fish insisted that this was not a completely subjective phenomenon, and that interpretations arise from communities of readers who share assumptions about texts, methods of reading, and strategies for interpretation (ibid). I argue that the shared interpretive styles, reliance on textual ideology principles, and the remarkably similar interpretive processes of Bible study discourse identify small groups as a form of interpretive community. First, however, I will demonstrate how the discourse surrounding Bible interpretation unfolds in small groups.

Five Case Study Groups

The findings of this chapter are based on the five project groups who consistently read and studied Biblical texts. The remaining project groups focused on non-scriptural texts or topical studies. (See Table 7 for the five case studies and their study topics.)

<u>Group</u>	<u>Biblical Texts Studied</u>	<u>Recordings</u>	<u>Study Guide</u>
McGee Men	James	12	McGee (1955)
Tuesday Men	Acts 1-8	23	LifeGuide (InterVarsity Press)
LCMS Men	Proverbs	12	None
Prayer Circle	James, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 2	14	None

	Timothy, Habakkuk, Psalm 119, Hebrews, Acts 1-15		
Monday Group	Hebrews, 1 John, 2 John, 3 John	8	None

Table 7: Study topics for five project groups

The first three sections of this chapter are devoted to the three interpretive styles I identified as operative in group discourse: application, establishing meaning, and explanation. I emphasize the hermeneutic activity accomplished by each style; the interpretive process of each style; the relation of each style to group interactive features; and the interaction of each style with principles of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible.

Applying Biblical Texts

Participants employed the application style to establish a connection between a Biblical text and some aspect of their life or surrounding world. This style raises the question, ‘what does this Biblical text mean to...?’ instead of ‘what does this Biblical text mean?’ This style assumes that the Bible is applicable, relevant, and effective.

Application was by far the most predominant style in small group discourse. Participants read the Bible primarily for comfort, conviction, instruction, devotion, worship, and a host of other motivations not connected with an attempt to attribute meaning to a text.

This phenomenon has been observed in other ethnographic and historical contexts. Jeff Todd Titon (1988) described this style as “tropology” in his ethnographic study of a Southern Baptist congregation in Appalachia. Tropology views the events and personages of the Bible as timeless, always germane to new generations of believers. Per-Anders Forstorp (1990) identified application as the primary form of interpretive act performed among congregants of a Swedish Fundamentalist church. Jody Davie, in her

ethnography of a New England Presbyterian women's Bible study, observed a personalization of the Bible in the individual spiritualities of group members: "[It] is used to facilitate examination of the personal journey, rather than being a closed entity, a mysterious storybook, left idolized and undisturbed in the religious process" (1995: 54). Brian Malley (2004) argued that Evangelical Bible reading is driven by the continued search for relevance, as opposed to the search for semantic meaning. And, in interviews with readers of the Left Behind series, Amy Frykholm saw the reading of apocalyptic fiction as influenced by models for Bible reading. In particular, she identified the "life-application method," where "scripture must be directly and immediately applied to one's daily life" (2004: 111).

The common thread in these cases is the way the Bible is read for its meaning in the lives of readers, as opposed to its semantic meaning as a textual artifact. Wesley Kort traces this style to the Middle Ages, where an intimate relationship with the Bible was emphasized. Kort identified this as a Calvinistic practice, given John Calvin's insistence on lay Bible reading and the "diligent application of scripture to the whole of life" (1996: 23). Historian Richard Mouw includes this interpretive style as one of the four "minds" characterizing 20th century American Protestantism. He terms it the "pietistic mind," and describes it as geared toward "pious living," "devotions," and "fostering a sense of divine presence" (1982: 144). The interpretive style of application directly engages the textual ideology principles of Biblical relevance. Forstorp describes this relation aptly: "The premise for this interpretive approach is that the Bible is true, that all of the Bible is relevant for living a Christian life in any time" (1990: 164). The widely shared nature of

this ideological principle among the project groups helps makes sense of the uniform predominance of this style in group discourse.

My research confirms the prevalence of application; however, my discourse-centered framework reveals two additional characteristics, which I discuss later in this chapter. In the following, I argue that application appears in three forms in group discourse: personal, collective, and global. I use one case study to demonstrate how these iterations of the application style unfold discursively. Personal application, the most common style, is clearly illustrated by the Prayer Circle.

Personal Application

In chapter 1 I described the unique meeting format of the Prayer Circle. They were the only group to assign continuous reading of the same Biblical text, then come together and “share what God had been teaching them” through this reading. The group’s facilitator, Darren, suggested this change of format. The following quote was part of Darren’s initial presentation of the idea during the final minutes of the third meeting I recorded with the group:

“Okay. I had this thought. I’ve been reading this book called Cultivating A Life for God³², and the author talks about getting together in triads and holding one another accountable and encouraging one another. It involves prayer, confession, reading the Bible, and outreach. Then, what they do is they come together. They don’t have a leader. Each one tells what God’s been teaching them through what they’ve been reading. And, I thought, ‘we ought to try that some time.’ So, here was the thought. Read James. It’s got five chapters. I think you can read it in about 20 minutes. And, what if we attempted, between now and two weeks from tonight, to read James everyday. And, let’s say the minimum is that we do it ten times. And, that’s not sitting down and reading James ten times in one day. It’s reading James ten days or more. Now, my guess is if we spend that much time in James, God’s gonna teach us something.”

Darren emphasizes three things, all of which emerge from principles of the textual ideology: constant Bible reading, continued reading of the same text, and the confident

³² Cole (1999)

expectation that God will teach something to each participant through his or her reading. Two weeks later, nine of us met with Bibles in hand and teachings to share. Darren went first, and we moved around the circle clockwise. The following are a few examples of what was shared that evening. Three women in their early 30s shared a verse that “convicted” them. These examples also illustrate elements of the ideological principle of relevance:

Melinda: “For me, it’s kind of going along with my life right now, of course. And, that happens a lot. About the *trials and temptations, having perseverance, and then having the faith*. I’m having a lot of trials come up, at least in the last couple of weeks...And, when I pray about it, this section kind of correlated with a verse in Matthew too, about *praying as if you’ve already received what you’ve been praying for*. So, praying to God with enough faith that it’s almost as if you’ve already overcome this trial. So, I guess that’s what’s sticking out to me; just having that complete faith.”

Jessica: “Yeah. *The wages you failed to pay the workman who mowed your fields are crying out against you*. I was home by myself and I was reading and I got to that. And, I had read it, however many times before, and it was right after work. And, I thought of my boss right away. As soon as I read that, I started writing him a letter. It just popped into my mind, ‘what am I supposed to do with this?’ Because you know me, I’m not confrontational. I can’t go to him and say, “Read that” [[pointing to open Bible]].”

Jennifer: “It says *we give blessings to the Lord and then we curse from the same mouth*. It really convicted me on my interactions with other people that I show grace and compassion and that I not be judgmental. And, one example was this snowstorm we got within the last two weeks. I woke up the next morning and there was all this snow. And, my sister and I live in a duplex. I have this shovel that I bought two years ago. I leave it out front and prop it against my door. I don’t care if she uses it. But, oftentimes when it snows she uses it and then she leaves it way on the other side of her house. So, in the morning when I’m trying to get ready for work and I’ve got my work clothes on I have to trek through a ton of snow and go searching for it. I’ve asked her time and time again, “Will you please put the shovel back?” And, I’ve been really thinking about my sister and wanting to show her love, but also kind of convicted in some ways that I was being an enabler. So, that morning when I woke up and there was all this snow and I was running late for work, the shovel wasn’t there. So, I had to go get it from her side of the house. My pants were wet. My shoes were soaked. So, I shoveled my drive. And, I put my shovel in the house and left for work. Well, she called me at work and said, “Do you have the shovel?” I said, “Yes. It’s in my house.” She was very upset and she hung up. I was really convicted. I realized I didn’t handle that in the best way. I was really praying about, you know, “You need to humble yourself here and show her grace and show her compassion.”

This sequence of reading, sharing, and moving on to the next participant continued until everyone had shared something. Each participant read at least one, but more often several, verses from James. Following the verse, they shared an example from their life – sometimes generic, but usually specific – to demonstrate the text’s veracity and applicability. On some occasions, the truth was one they were living out, showing how the text confirmed them. At other times, like the examples above, the truth was one they were failing to live out, showing how the text convicted them. As a collective reading event, these processes of confirmation and conviction became shared. The principle of relevance extends the reaction beyond the speaker, as listeners imagine their own experience of confirmation or conviction, bringing them closer to one another and to the Bible. Discussions rarely ensued about the shared nature of the application. Instead, participants listened intently and allowed one another to speak uninterrupted³³. This structure was followed in each of the remaining eleven meetings.

The Prayer Circle most clearly demonstrated the link between textual ideology and discursive practice. The organization of their meetings and the order of participation proceed directly from their expectations of Bible reading, particularly its relevance and its precise application to individuals. The variety of Biblical texts they chose reinforced the understanding of the Bible as a unified whole. They read from both the Old and New Testaments. They read a variety of genres, including: letters, prophecy, poetry, and history. These texts had purposes as diverse as theological instruction, prayer, and encouragement. Yet, the type of text they read never altered their approach.

³³ During the whole fieldwork period, I never once observed a participant challenge the appropriateness of another participant’s application of a Biblical text during group discussion.

The mode of reading the same text repeatedly over a two-week period was also unique. This confirms that they should not treat the Bible like they do other texts, and it underscores the ability to always find new application. The personal application style also alleviates requirements of adhering to textual progression and sequence. These processes, such as following paragraphs from sentence-to-sentence, are taken-for-granted in most of our everyday reading activities. Yet, participants moved effortlessly among Biblical texts. They connected passages separated by multiple verses. They combined verses from different chapters of the same book to articulate common themes, as though they occurred back-to-back. This is not problematic for them in the case of Bible reading because these texts are bound together by a common search: how is God speaking to me through His Word?

Collective Application

This style of applying the Bible extends beyond the personal to other levels of social involvement; for example, situations of collective belonging. The primary target of this in group discourse is the life of their local congregation. The same expectation of relevance applied to individuals is equally present when framed for a community of believers. The Tuesday Men provide an exemplary case of how this can shape the nature of a group's discourse.

The following example comes from their first meeting in studying the book of Acts. The study guide question asked them to, "Put yourself in the shoes of the apostles. How would you feel if you were the first to be given the task described in verse eight³⁴?"

³⁴ "You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth." (NIV)

Following a few brief contributions by other participants, Ted proceeds to contrast the ideal presented in scripture and the life of their local congregation:

“Well, certainly a part of our Jewish apostles is a question of, “What in the world are you talking about? What do you mean? I mean, the *Jerusalem* and *Judea* are okay. But, when you get to *Samaria and all the world*, what are you talking about? Why in the world would we go there? Those are not God’s people.” I was talking with someone in some setting the other day about outreach. It was at church, but I don’t remember what the setting was. I was actually sharing that I really felt like I needed to find ways to get out of the church more. One of the problems for us, those that have been around the church for a long time and for me, as somebody who works here, is that we don’t run into people who are not a part of the church. We don’t spend time, I mean, our friends are here. Our connections are here. And, so we’re not in places where we’re influencing for the Gospel, and we have to be. And, so, we need to find ways to do that intentionally. And, someone’s response was, kind of joking, “Well, I hope we don’t find you in the bars.” And, my response to that was, “I hope you do.” See, I think some of us have ideas of *Samaria and the ends of the earth* still that are off limits to us.

This case illustrates their interpretive preoccupation to continually engage in this form of collective application. They repeatedly established specific points where their congregation (as well as the modern Church in America) falls short of Church life as presented in the opening chapters of Acts. Given its position in scripture, its proximity to Jesus, and its involvement of Jesus’ disciples, the first century Church is held up as the pinnacle and the standard of what the Church could and should be. Over the course of the remaining 22 sessions, their reading of Acts became a running comparison between the two states of the Church. Even when study guide questions prompted the group to consider features internal to the text, as in the above example, they managed to return to the collective application style³⁵.

As with the personalized style, collective application involves principles of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. In this example from the Tuesday Men, assumptions of Biblical relevance are clearly at work. The historical and cultural distance between the Church of Acts and congregational life in contemporary America is

³⁵ For more on the Tuesday Men and their reliance on collective application, see chapter 5.

subordinate to the Bible's (divinely sanctioned) ability to offer guidance, insight, and exemplars. *Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and the ends of the earth* are not restricted to the first century. They are read as symbols that signify locations in the world of the reader; in this case, bars. The assumption of Biblical authority is also embedded in this style. Texts are applicable because they carry the weight of being the Word of God. They are not simply useful and instructive, but prescriptive and convicting.

Global Application

The Bible also is deemed relevant to societal and global affairs. This was the least common form of application, but it did appear occasionally in each of the case study groups. The McGee Men provide a brief example. During my third recording they paused on James 2:6: *But you have insulted the poor. Is it not the rich who are exploiting you? Are they not the ones who are dragging you into Court?* Joel, a core participant, connects this to a recent corporate scandal:

“I couldn't help but think of Enron, WorldCom, places [where] fabulously rich people ripped off thousands of shareholders, thousands of pensioners. And, boy, when I read that that's the first thing, it said all the perfect stuff. [That] is still going on and people are still walking around.”

The Bible's ability to remain relevant in the modern world is foregrounded again. The ability to apply the verse testifies to the Bible's continued and context-independent veracity. Joel's application of the text to corporate corruption also carries a hint of the ideological principle of textuality. The words from James are not simply fitting, approximate, or 'kind of the same thing.' They say “all the perfect stuff.”

Taken together, these three forms of application constitute the predominant style of interpreting the Bible in group discourse. They all assume that the Bible applies to the situations of modern living in the same way it did when it was written. As I have

indicated, this style is upheld by several principles of the textual ideology, most notably: a relevance that transcends time, place, and people; a veracity that transcends similarly; and an authority that compels believers to consult the text and take seriously the application they find.

This style of application may be having a “colonizing” effect among American Protestants. Fairclough (1989) describes how certain discourse types, such as the discourse of therapy, have become models on which other, unrelated discourses pattern themselves (ibid: 198). Such ‘colonization’ may be at work with the interpretive style of application. First of all, we know this style traverses some theological and social divisions within Protestantism, as it does in this sample of three denominational settings. However, the question remains: does this style dominate within less mainstream Christianities (e.g., Native Christians, Jehovah’s Witnesses, the Mormon Church)? Secondly, Amy Frykholm’s (2004) analysis of Left Behind readers showed how this style has colonized the reading of Christian fiction genres.³⁶ A second question is: what other genres this style of reading extends? Is it restricted to religious reading, or has it colonized other forms of reading as well? Lastly, has this style of reading colonized other modes of “reading?” Crapanzano (2000) and Harding (2000) both argue that Fundamentalist hermeneutics bleed into their interpretation of everyday and current events. For example, Middle East conflicts are initially framed in apocalyptic terms, and only subsequently in political terms, if at all. Is the interpretive style of application also colonizing the understanding of everyday and current events?

³⁶ Frykholm focuses on “apocalyptic fiction” as a specialized sub-genre within the broader category of Christian fiction.

Establishing Textual Meaning

The Bible is not treated primarily as a textual artifact containing a semantic meaning, nor is it read to decipher such meaning. However, individuals and groups do interact with the Bible in an attempt to establish meaning; though, significantly less frequently than they do for application. And, my analysis of these searches for meaning provides significant lessons regarding textual ideology, interactive norms, and the interpretive process.

Four groups sought to establish the meaning of Biblical texts: McGee Men, Tuesday Men, LC-MS Men, and Monday Group. These groups used several means of identifying a lack of clarity in textual meaning. At times, this revolved around the definition of a single word or phrase. The McGee Men puzzled over the semantic ranges of *total law* (James 2:8-10); *double-minded* (James 4:8); and *speak evil of the law* (James 4:11). Establishing meaning also involved questions of genre and intention. The LC-MS Men had several extended debates about whether a text should be understood as a divine promise or simply a general statement of truth. Their lengthy debate over Proverbs 31:6-7³⁷ included framings of satire, hyperbole, and historiography. Several groups referenced the emic category of “literal,” and its alternative possibilities. For example, the Monday Group’s discussion of Hebrews 12:12-13³⁸ wrestled with the opposition between literal and spiritual *lameness*. Ambiguity sometimes involved situating a text as a theme running

³⁷ “Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more” (NIV).

³⁸ “Therefore, strengthen your feeble arms and weak knees. ‘Make level paths for your feet,’ (Proverbs 4:26) so that the lame may not be disabled, but rather healed” (NIV).

throughout the Bible. For the LC-MS Men, an attempt to resolve Proverbs 28:2-3³⁹ meant discussing what other Biblical texts said about the concept of democracy.

However, regardless of what textual feature caused the ambiguity or disagreement, the interpretive process by which this style unfolded was consistent. In 16 of 19 sample interactions, the attempt to clarify the meaning of a Biblical text was characterized by a lingering uncertainty within the group about the most accurate reading. Group facilitators and participants were continually willing to accept this lack of consensus. The interpretive process typically progressed as following: an assertion of confusion -> an offering of multiple interpretive possibilities by multiple participants -> the likelihood of some, if not all, of these possibilities was considered -> a coda that evaded settling on one of the possibilities was stated -> a segue to the next conversational topic was given. The LC-MS Men employed this style most often, and the following example was among the most entertaining to observe.

Whoever flatters his neighbor is spreading a net for his feet (Proverbs 29:5).

When Pastor Daniel opened the discussion for questions and comments, Jeff raised his doubt about what exactly this pithy proverb meant. Others echoed Jeff's sentiment. The interaction lasted just shy of ten minutes, but the group managed to consider five different possibilities of the verse's meaning. Daniel began by asserting that the *net* must belong to the *neighbor*. Dan raised the first possibility: "[the verse means] you will catch more flies with honey." Jeff challenged him on the premise that *spreading a net* does not sound positive. Andrew affirms Jeff, adding: "flattery suggests a little bit of color, a little deceit, a little hyperbole." Andrew proceeded to challenge Daniel's attribution of the *net*

³⁹ "When a country is rebellious, it has many rulers, but a man of understanding and knowledge maintains order. A ruler who oppresses the poor is like a driving rain that leaves no crops" (NIV).

to the *neighbor*, asserting that the *net* more likely belongs to the one doing the flattering. Daniel rejoins the discussion, directing the group to Proverbs 29:18⁴⁰. His intent was to show how agency in the Bible is not always clear due to differences between Hebrew and English grammar. Bill joins the exchange next, affirming Dan's original assertion that the verse is positive. Daniel uses this as an opportunity to suggest that the positive/negative juxtaposition is a common strategy in Proverbs. Jeff then articulates a fourth possibility: the verse is meant as a warning against dishonesty and luring people into false self-perceptions. Daniel adds the related possibility that the verse is equivalent to "the old one-minute manager...you say something positive to someone, then you nail them, and then you end with something positive." This conjured a round of laughter. Dan then provides an example from his business interactions to demonstrate his original assertion. The exchange closes with Daniel restating the strategy of juxtaposition, using it as a link to the next proverb to be discussed.

I remember enjoying how the men worked through this interpretive process. They appeared so intent on 'figuring it out.' Yet, in the analysis of this transcript, as well as the examples of this style in other groups, the determination to establish meaning was not the most striking feature of the interaction. That was, instead, the seeming acceptance of polysemy, and the lack of a definite resolution. Several implications arise from this distinctive interpretive process. In regard to the norms of group discourse, it aids the expectation of mutual edification. The purpose of small groups would be challenged if the interpretive process were defined by either a stubborn insistence on one's correctness, or a derision of others' suggestions. Allowing multiple possibilities to linger also relieves the group of settling on one meaning (and, perhaps, the subsequent pressure of defending

⁴⁰ "Where there is no revelation, the people cast off restraint; but blessed is he who keeps the law" (NIV).

it). The textual ideology is also at work in this process. The operative principle is the commitment and necessity of continually reading the Bible. Leaving the meaning unclear encourages this, and promises future debate. Lastly, this interpretive style supports the predominant style of application. If meaning is understood as flexible, one is reassured that imagining forms of relevance is not only acceptable, but perfectly appropriate.

Explaining Biblical Texts

The third style of interpreting the Bible is also involved in the search for meaning. However, its explanatory style is distinct from the strict establishment of meaning in its aim and requirements. When groups attempt to explain a Biblical text they are identifying why a text says what it does. It is not a question of ‘what,’ as with establishing meaning, but of ‘why’ and ‘how.’ This style encompasses a variety of hermeneutic activities, including: specifying the intentions of the author; attributing motivations and emotions to Biblical characters; describing details absent from the text; and appealing to issues of historical and cultural context.

The key process in explaining Biblical texts is textual inferencing. The interpretive work accomplished in this style requires participants to assert meaning not explicitly stated in the text. Groups encounter questions, from study guides and of their own formulation, that ask them to fill in information and rationales not provided by Biblical texts. This process of inferencing also accomplishes epistemological work by requiring readers to access background knowledge, predispositions, and fundamental beliefs (Fairclough 1989). In performing this function of knowledge production, explanation is central to the interpretive work of group discourse. In the following example, I use the McGee Men to demonstrate the importance of this style.

The second chapter of James closes with two Old Testament examples of faithfulness to God⁴¹. The first is Abraham, the iconic figure of Genesis who earned the title of *God's friend* by his willingness to sacrifice his own son on God's command. The second example is the prostitute Rahab, who James singled out for aiding Joshua's spies and deceiving the king of Jericho. The McGee Men paused on this second example. After reading the story from Joshua 2:1-21, Dennis objects to its use as a demonstration of faithfulness. He suggests that Rahab's actions resulted from an altogether different motivation:

"I don't think it was as clear cut a case as the Abraham thing. To me, Abraham's thing was really faith. He would have sacrificed his son if God hadn't intervened. I think with Rahab there was a whole lot of self-preservation involved there. She could see where the bread was buttered and what was going to happen, and she wanted to be on the right side of them when they came in."

Vincent defends the example, arguing at length that Rahab did indeed act out of faith. In an attempt to support his position, Vincent draws a parallel between Rahab and the well-known example of Daniel and the lion's den:

"Ultimately, what's the difference between [Rahab] and Daniel, who was supposed to have quit praying to God, didn't, went into the lion's den and decided that was his better recourse than giving up his relationship to God?"

Dennis persisted in his assertion:

"For me, that's a better illustration of faith than the Rahab thing because Daniel, despite knowing that the king might kill him or do whatever, he was going to pray to God anyway."

The inference at work in this example comes from the Bible. The passage from Joshua never equates Rahab's reaction with faithfulness. This motivation is presented in the book of James. The inference of faithfulness is dismissed by Dennis and supported by Vincent. This example exemplifies how the style of explanation is involved in the

⁴¹ James 2:20-26.

production of knowledge. In particular, the two men are expressing different orientations to the textual ideology principle of authority. By replacing faithfulness with self-preservation, Dennis is asserting that the book of James is, at best, misguided, and at worst, wrong. At one point, he accuses James of “stretching a point.” Dennis’s position implies a freedom to disagree with the Bible, and thus a challenge to the absolute authority of scripture. In defending James, Vincent is insisting on the authority of the Bible, and refuses to challenge it. The group knows that Vincent adheres to the Bible’s absolute authority, and that Dennis eschews such doctrines. These differing relationships to the textual ideology become enacted through the style of explanation and the process of inferencing. Their disagreement, in fact, has much more to do with the nature of Biblical authority than it does the faith of a prostitute.

Inter-Relation among Interpretive Styles

The three styles of interpreting the Bible employed by group participants – application, establishing meaning, and explanation – exist in dynamic relationship to one another. Rarely, if ever, do groups construct this interpretive process as a tightly bound sequence progressing from explanation to interpretation to application. These styles exist more as discursive resources utilized by participants and drawn into group discourse on a text-by-text basis. For some, like the Prayer Circle, application was the only style employed, primarily in the personal form. For others, like the McGee Men, attention was divided fairly evenly among the three styles.

This balance of styles among the McGee Men might appear to be a foundation for accord within the group. It is reasonable to suspect that a shared willingness to move among the three interpretive styles implies a shared orientation toward Biblical texts. But,

this is not the case. As chapter 1 described (and, as I argue in chapter 5) the group's discourse is defined by opposing orientations to the Bible. The example in this chapter of Dennis and Vincent sparring over scriptural authority provided a glimpse into this disjuncture. The use of these styles is clearly a locale for exercising such ideological tensions. What, then, can we say about the co-mingling of styles? How does their interrelation intersect with these divisions? The participant roles of Vincent and Roland are instructive.

Recall the adherence to Biblical authority displayed by Vincent in his reaction to the Rahab example. He sustained his loyalty to this principle of the textual ideology throughout the group's study of James. With Vincent's loyalty in mind, consider the following statements made by Roland, both of which followed lengthy debates about textual meaning:

"James [is] a little difficult for us because he sounds so absolute. And, I think if you put the love ethic on it, you don't want to be so absolute in everything you say. I don't know whether he's trying to make everybody feel guilty or what."

"People think [the Bible] is a yes or no, black or white, kind of thing. And, it isn't. It's all this in between and we've gotta make sense out of it...I can go to scripture, but it won't help me with this because I've got all this in between stuff that's going on."

Roland's statements reveal a fundamentally different attitude toward Biblical authority than that of Vincent. The freedom to disagree, challenge, and criticize Biblical texts diverges from Vincent's unwavering commitment to confirm scripture. Vincent's fidelity to Biblical authority, however, was on par with his commitment to the style of personal application. In every meeting, he found at least one verse from James to prompt a detailed retelling of a recent event exhibiting his own personal triumphs or failures at "living Biblically." Consider, then, the following statements made by Roland:

"I think we want to believe that the Word of God is new everyday. It's not lost in history,

but it's new everyday. So, when you read, it's like reading it for the first time."

"I bring this up not to expose the church. I'm really bringing it up because we really got to keep thinking this thing through, and see how it applies in our real, actual lives."

Two principles of the textual ideology are being articulated in these examples:

authority and relevance. Clearly, Vincent and Roland are much closer in their understanding of relevance. As the group's study of James progressed, the primary emphasis shifted from establishing meaning to finding application. The lengthy debates over establishing meaning gave way to lengthy exchanges where participants shared the mirroring of their own lives in Biblical texts. This shift in group discourse can partially be explained by the greater capital of application as an interpretive style (cf., pp:135-6). However, other factors contribute to the group's distinct shift from one to the other. Roland's position as pastor of the congregation is part of this dynamic. His recognized authority made his appeals to application more convincing for others to do the same. Also, for Vincent and others like him in the group, it was far better to exploit the shared understanding of relevance and personal application with the pastor than to continually struggle over textual meaning and Biblical authority. And, because these two interpretive styles foreground different ideological principles, the shared ground of relevance won the day.

Compared to the McGee Men, the Tuesday Men's study guide played a much larger role in orchestrating how they managed the co-mingling of interpretive styles. The McGee Men's use of a Fundamentalist commentator had more to do with providing a foil to spark discussion than it did with aiding their understanding and appreciation for the book of James. In contrast, the Tuesday Men appreciated the direct and open-ended style of the Life Guide study questions. These questions fit the categorization of interpretive

styles I identified in group discourse. Table 8 shows the distribution of these questions for the sheets they used during my fieldwork⁴².

	Personal Application	Collective Application	Meaning	Explanation
Acts 1	6	-	-	3
Acts 2	1	3	1	4
Acts 3	5	-	-	3
Acts 4:1-31	2	2	-	4
Acts 4:32-5:16	3	3	1	4
Acts 5:17-6:7	3	3	-	3
Acts 6:8-7:60	4	-	1	3
Acts 8:1-40	3	-	-	4
Total	27	11	3	28

Table 8: Tuesday Men Study Guide Analysis

The group addressed each study question in sequence. Therefore, Table 8 also provides a cursory view of the group's interpretive styles. Consistent with the other project groups, the style of application, particularly personal application, was predominant. The few attempts to establish meaning, as well as the relatively high number of attempts at explanation, are both striking. How the group handled the explanation questions is even more striking. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, Pastor Ted and the other participants often used questions internal to the text as opportunities to contrast the life of the Church in Acts with the faith and church life of modern believers. For the Tuesday Men, then, the co-mingling of styles led to collective application and the accompanying principles of relevance and authority.

In the case of the LCMS Men, the inter-relation of styles takes place within a defined participation structure. Daniel began each meeting with a summary of the day's chapters, usually identifying themes that characterized the majority of verses in each

⁴² An example of these study guides can be found in Appendix 3. In addition to the styles described in this chapter, the study guide questions ask two other types of questions. "Role playing" questions asked the group members to put themselves in the position of a Biblical character and discuss how they would have reacted. This is distinct from explanation because it is not asking the group to explain why the characters acted as they did. "Descriptive" questions were very straightforward, asking the group to recount from a text what happened, i.e., to paraphrase and summarize the events.

chapter (e.g., truthfulness, laziness, adultery, foolishness, social justice). Daniel then opened the discussion to the group, asking which verses “stuck out to them” or that they “[had] questions on.” Midway through the meeting (~30 minutes) Daniel read off the Proverbs that “struck him.” Depending on how much these overlapped with the verses already discussed, Daniel sometimes returned to asking the group which verses they highlighted. Daniel was always prompt in transitioning to the prayer time at or near the eight o’clock hour.

The co-mingling of styles in the men’s discourse centered on personal application and establishing meaning. As I described above, the LC-MS Men attempted to establish meaning more than any other group. Therefore, the disjuncture between application and meaning was less apparent with them. The distribution of these two styles amongst the participants, however, was far less balanced. When Daniel opened the discussion to the entire group, the men raised issues of meaning or veracity, questioning the verse or pointing out just how true a particular verse is. Daniel assumed a much different role. He was virtually the only participant to raise questions of personal application. This happened at every stage of the meeting structure, from his introduction to his sharing what verses he highlighted.

One explanation for this is that the other participants do not accept textual ideology principles regarding Biblical relevance. This is quite wrong, as evidenced by the results of the questionnaire. Five different statements were posed about this aspect of the textual ideology. In each case, there was nearly 100% agreement affirming the ongoing relevance and veracity of the Bible for every generation. Additionally, the willingness,

ease, and detail of their responses to Daniel's eliciting of personal application belie any separation of men from this principle of relevance.

Instead, I understand this distribution of interpretive styles to be a product of Daniel's attempt to balance the interactive frames of 'sharing' and 'analytical discussion' described in chapter 1. Much of the church growth literature posits a link between intimate small group environments and expansive small group programs. This ever-present goal of bolstering one's congregational activities and members has prompted Daniel to make personal application a more explicit component of group discourse. The attempt to increase 'sharing' is also apparent in Daniel's alteration of the group's prayer time. Prior to his arrival, the group members prayed silently following the discussion. Now, the men gather in groups of three to five and pray aloud individually. Thus, Daniel's attempt to place more emphasis on personal application is part of a broader goal of creating more intimacy in the life of the group. Interestingly, he is ever cognizant of his progress in this effort. Just prior to their second book study, Daniel shared a text with me that he was considering suggesting to the group: Every Man's Battle⁴³. The book deals with sexual temptations, such as pornography, and promised to raise topics and levels of intimacy foreign to the group's inclination toward analytical discourse. I asked him during an interview why he never suggested the book. He replied, "I don't think they're quite ready for that yet."

These three examples demonstrate how the inter-relation among the three interpretive styles unfolds in different group settings, often intersecting with other aspects of group dynamics. In each case, the application style predominates, though groups achieve this in unique ways. In introducing application, I hinted to an argument about the

⁴³ (Arterburn, et al. 2000)

relation between application and the other styles. The co-mingling of styles is not simply a matter of numeric comparison. As I demonstrated above, these styles exist in substantive relations with one another. My second argument about these relationships is raised by this question: how does the nature of appeals to the style of application demonstrate its predominance in group discourse? The following two interactions help provide an answer.

The first comes from the McGee Men. It occurs directly after Vincent and Dennis's debate about the use of Rahab as an example of faithfulness. Following the back-and-forth disagreement, Dennis abruptly changes direction:

Dennis: A current illustration of just what we're talking about, to me, was this woman in Atlanta who was involved with this murderer⁴⁴.

Jason: Oh, yeah.

Dennis: What a dramatic story. This woman took this guy in and instead of just taking the first crack she could to get out of there and turn him in she went with him, took this truck somewhere, came back to the house, cooked him breakfast, talked with him for hours. That was an act of God. He said, "God has sent you to me," or something to that effect, and, "I am your brother and you are my sister." I thought, 'Wow. What a powerful witness.' And, I don't know what her faith situation is, but to me, God was active there. Saved from many more killing and, ultimately, the guy gave up without a struggle. She was one cool lady, I thought, who went through a lot and handled it in an amazing way.

Vincent: I haven't heard that story, although I've heard just a little bit of an allusion to it. I heard that she made breakfast for him and stuff, and that he said, "I don't want to hurt you."

Dennis: Mhmm.

Vincent: Of course, you hear that a lot, from people like that. But, I'm very interested in reading that story because I agree with you. I read a first person story from a woman who was kidnapped, pushed into her car. She was driving. But, basically, kidnapped by this guy who was running from the law and had just killed a bunch of people, and had a long record of it. And, she didn't know who he was. She had to drive around a roadblock and do all this kind of stuff, and many hours later she dropped him off somewhere. Her husband, you know, didn't know where she was. The police were looking for her, because she didn't come home when she was supposed to and they concluded that the worst probably happened. And, he was shortly thereafter caught. But, he had a string of killings and it made absolutely no sense that he did not kill this woman. And, she talked

⁴⁴ Dennis' illustration refers to an event in March of 2005. A man, Brian Nichols, killed several people before taking a woman, Ashley Smith, hostage. Smith, a self-avowed Evangelical, was able to persuade Nichols to turn himself over to the police by talking to him about her faith and reading excerpts from *The Purpose Driven Life* (2002). The story received widespread media coverage in the subsequent months, and ultimately led to Smith co-authoring her spiritual memoir.

to him like a regular person. And, she kept praying, "Keep me calm. Keep me focused." She didn't know who he was. It was only afterwards did she, and she said, "I'm really glad I didn't, because he was such a horrendous killer." That could have frightened her so much that she would have acted irrationally or out of frustration, [and he] would have killed her. And, she consoled him and she listened to him and, step-by-step, his fear and his rage just calmed right down. So, he had no desire to harm her.

The second interaction is from the Tuesday Men. It begins as a case of explanation, as raised by the style of the study question. The group had just read Acts 8:9-25 – the story of the sorcerer, Simon, who was converted by Peter and John after he witnessed their power through the Holy Spirit:

Ted: *How does he attempt to get spiritual power and what is his motivation for wanting the power?* Pretty straightforward. What's he trying to do?

{2.0}

Larry: Tried to buy it with money.

Ted: Yeah. That's what he wants. He sees this healing that Peter and John bring about as they pray. And, what's his motivation?

Larry: So he could lay hands on the people.

Ted: Right. And, I think probably by implication, given what he had done before, he liked being important. He liked having power. He liked having people coming to him. He had a following of folks. He liked people to be impressed by him.

Eddie: Maybe just to take the other side, I can see adding to his repertoire. But, for myself, I'm seeing that maybe he saw what he was doing before was more trickery and now he saw he could really do something good. You know, "I'm really gonna help God now." And, he had this picture. He had really been affected by the disciples and now he wanted to be top man at being a good disciple.

Ted: Well, that's a possibility if we only read through 19. But, if we keep going and read what Peter says about him, I think Peter saw something else in his motivation. He seems to be all about himself. He seems to be all about looking good and impressing people and those kinds of things.

Eddie: I was thinking we can just kind of push him to the side, 'He's a bad guy. We're good guys. This doesn't have an application to us.'

Ted: Oh, okay.

Eddie: This is what I'm getting at. And, I think my conversion involved realizing that my job wasn't to help God, that I needed his help. I always wanted to help God out and I thought that's what it meant to be a Christian is to help God out. Well, no, it's something entirely different.

Ted: Sure. Yeah, our need is deep and great isn't it?

Eddie: Yeah. So, I sort of think we need to look at Simon in a different way than as the bad guy.

Ted: Yeah, I think you're right. I think we understand Simon. I wasn't suggesting at all that we just cast him aside as the bad guy. Yeah, I think it's very applicable to our lives.

Eddie: And, I think the other application would be the very idea that the condemnation that Peter had about buying is our temptation to find short cuts.

Ted: Sure. 'We're gonna get this done. Oh, I can just do this,' not really looking that God is to do it and we have to do it God's way. We flip the switch and then get on with other

things. That happens all throughout the scriptures. The classic case that comes immediately to mind is Abraham [and God telling him he would have a child.] He [went right to Hagar and] didn't check with God about it. He just figured out what was the quickest way to get God's work done rather than waiting and listening and following what God had in mind. So, sure. I think we do that all the time.

These two interactions share three important features. First, they involve competing explanations. Vincent and Dennis disagreed about how to account for Rahab's action and motivation. Ted and Eddie disagreed about how to account for Simon the Sorcerer's action and motivation. Secondly, the disagreement is defused, but it is not resolved. And, lastly, this defusing is made possible by an appeal to the style of application. In the McGee Men, after Vincent's insistent attempt to convince Dennis of his assertion, he transitions without objection to a recent example of faithfulness he recalled from the news. In the Tuesday Men, Ted dismisses Eddie's inference until he frames it as an application of the text to their own everyday spiritual life. Ted immediately accepts this, supporting Eddie with the scriptural example of Abraham.

This sequence of application superseding another style was present throughout these case studies. This can be understood in terms of "cultural capital" (Bourdieu 1977). In any given cultural situation different resources, strategies, and actions will differ in how they are valued by social actors and institutions. In short, they will have unequal worth, and their worth will always be contextually dependent. In the case of group Bible study, application is the interpretive style with the most capital. As the above examples demonstrate, appeals to how a text applies in the life of an individual or group often came at the expense of struggles over meaning and explanation. Application worked to defuse, mediate, circumvent, and even ignore interpretive dilemmas arising from the other styles.

Small Groups as “Interpretive Communities”

This chapter has presented several arguments about how the Bible is interpreted within small groups:

- Bible interpretation in small group discourse is characterized by three styles: application, establishing meaning, and explanation.
- Application occurs in three forms: personal, congregation, and global.
- These three forms of application are united by textual ideology principles emphasizing the ever-relevant nature of scripture, its atemporal veracity, and its consistency as a coherent narrative.
- Application may be exerting a colonizing influence within American Protestant culture, affecting how believers experience other texts and everyday events.
- The primary characteristic of establishing meaning is the willingness of groups to offer multiple interpretive possibilities without any need to achieve consensus. This interpretive process reinforces group expectations to be edified, textual ideology principles, and the predominance of application.
- The key feature of explanation is the process of textual inferencing. This process contributes to the production of knowledge, particularly as it relates to the textual ideology surrounding the Bible.
- These styles are mutually dependent. These relations are upheld by interactive features operative within individual groups.
- The greater capital of the application style is evident in its numerical prevalence, but also in its ability to defuse conflict arising from competing possibilities over meaning and explanation.

The consistency of these characteristics throughout the project sample are sufficient reason to view small groups as a form of “interpretive community” (Fish 1980). Stanley Fish theorized that just as speakers of a language share a structural system, readers internalize similar systems that make possible shared methods of interacting with texts. Interpretive strategies are not to be found in the internal structure of texts, or in the subjective preoccupations of readers. Rather, interpretive processes are collective products of a community of interpreters, and their shared system of strategies, styles, and assumptions. In concluding this chapter, I present five propositions for viewing small groups as interpretive communities.

Proposition #1: The unfolding of these styles in group discourse is inextricably tied to the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. The notion that one’s beliefs about a text will impact his or her reading of that text takes on new life in the context of small groups. For the Prayer Circle, the structure of the group’s meeting and the interactive order are both rooted in a strict adherence to the ideological principles of relevance. In regard to the role of establishing meaning, the interpretive process of leaving meaning unresolved reflects an emphasis on continual interaction with the Bible. In cases of inferencing, assumptions about the nature of the text, such as its authority, are a primary form of background knowledge. Therefore, the use of a particular style necessarily assumes principles of the textual ideology. This helps ensure that the textual ideology is an ever-present figure in the backdrop of small group discourse, and often the hidden ground of confusion, agreement, and disagreement.

Proposition #2: The use of these three styles is central to the production of knowledge. Primarily, the Bible is approached as a text useful for making sense of the

individual life and the surrounding world. Bible reading is open to questions of meaning and explanation, but these are subordinate to the style of application. Foregrounding application also ensures a dialogical quality of the Bible (cf., Bahktin 1981). If a verse or passage can be approached ‘new everyday,’ and is expected to speak directly and individually, then interpreting the Bible accrues the weight of past experiences with the text. Certain Biblical texts are regarded as particularly meaningful because of their impact at an earlier period in one’s life, be it joyful or tragic. Yet, they are not restricted to that specific time. The epistemological work involved in the style of explanation has already been discussed. The process of textual inferencing requires readers to access forms of background knowledge to fill in gaps of meaning left open by the text. In the case of Bible reading, and the examples used in this chapter, participants often draw on textual ideology principles. However, as groups have differing interpretive preoccupations and emphasize different ideological principles, this process is open to other forms of epistemological work.

Proposition #3: In addition to being an epistemological tool, the Bible is also a tool for communication. For the style of personal application, the placement of the Bible in one’s own life provides participants an opportunity to talk about and share their experiences. The Prayer Circle, again, is the consummate example. Participants are able to share their lives with the group through linking personal struggles and victories to the authoritative text of the Bible. The Bible is a means to present their life for affirmation and advice. In regard to meaning, participants communicate their desire to ‘know the Bible better,’ their preferred interpretive styles, and their willingness to posit an interpretive possibility. For explanation, the Bible provides a ground for communicating

one's understanding of the nature of scripture, as well as familiarity with Biblical narratives via the imagining of characters' emotions, intentions, and rationales. In short, the Bible is used as a device for communicating notions of personal, interpretive, and group identity.

Proposition #4: The reliance on only these three interpretive styles highlights the boundaries of Bible interpretation in group discourse. Application, establishing meaning, and explanation are not the only styles we might reasonably expect to find in Christian communities. For example, typological⁴⁵ readings have been pervasive in historical and contemporary African-American Bible use (Noll 1982, Wimbush 2000). Native American Christians have often deployed the Exodus narrative as a type for their own removal and return to native lands (Treaty 1996). In her study of 7th Day Adventists in Madagascar, Eva Keller (2005) observes this as a regularly employed interpretive style. And, typological interpretation has been observed as a rhetorical strategy used by preachers to connect themselves, and their audience, closer to Biblical characters (Harding 2000). Yet, this historically significant style is absent in these Bible study groups.

This quality of downplaying and foregrounding particular styles is consistent with Fish's understanding of what interpretive communities accomplish. The use of certain interpretive strategies and not others must be traced to the community, not to the text itself or to the individual reader. This uniformity in Bible interpretation reflects the

⁴⁵ A typological approach to the Bible envisions it as consisting of a series of 'types' and 'anti-types.' 'Types' prefigure 'anti-types,' so that the anti-type can be read as a fulfillment of the type. Historically, Old Testament characters have been understood as 'types' of Christ, such as Adam, Noah, or Moses. They partially reveal the nature of Christ, and point toward the need for Christ, but they are not Christ. Christ, as the anti-type, fulfills what was only anticipated by the Old Testament types (cf., Frye 1981). As Harding (2000) notes, what I have termed "application" is a form of typological reading. However, it is distinct from the historically-oriented style of typological reading that is evidenced among African and Native Americans.

uniformity of this interpretive community, primarily around the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. While alternative styles may be known by participants, they are avoided because they are outside the bounds of the interpretive community, and therefore outside the bounds of group discourse.

Proposition #5: The importance of the application style has been discussed at length. There are other implications, however, for the model of the interpretive community. Reading the Bible for its relevance allows groups to circumvent divisive theological issues raised by scripture. Moving from ‘what does the Bible mean’ to ‘what does the Bible mean to...’ enables groups to avoid positioning themselves within a doctrinal camp that could be at odds with other participants and/or the denomination. Gravitating toward the application style also allows group discourse to be more inclusive. The socialization of newcomers into the life of the group is not as daunting in an environment where application is the preferred style. New participants can arrive and immediately contribute when the textual ideology of the Bible’s relevance is being emphasized. A much less inviting situation would be constant and, at times, contentious attempts to establish meaning.

This chapter has demonstrated how the Bible is interpreted in group discourse. In addition to describing the individual styles, the chapter defined the discursive features of these styles, their distribution within the groups, and their inter-relation among each other. Ultimately, this portrait of interpreting the Bible is simultaneously a portrait of textual ideology-in-practice, and the nature of small groups as interpretive communities. Chapter 4 continues this effort by shifting the attention from the interpretive style

employed in small groups to the interpretive resources participants rely on to engage in group discourse.

Chapter 4: The Interpretive Matrix of Small Group Discourse

I picked Rick up from his house at 7:30 in the evening. The event began at 8, but Rick wanted to be early so he could talk to the featured speaker – a personal friend of his. The event was a “business seminar,” the type Rick attended at least once a month to gain insights for bolstering his own “independent business.”

Attending the event with Rick was a case of ethnographic misunderstanding, and ethnographic faith. I was four months into the fieldwork, and Rick was the only person who facilitated two different small groups: the Mind of Christ and the Monday Group. Rick consistently wove experiences from his relationship with a network of “Christian businessmen” into his participation with each group. The link between faith and financial success is an established part of Evangelical culture⁴⁶. This prompted me to arrange an interview with Rick. When I arrived at his house for lunch, I had to rearrange my expectations.

As the interview progressed, I realized two things. First, the “Christian businessmen” of Rick’s discourse were not part of any nominally Christian organization, but simply businessmen that were Christians. Secondly, Rick understood my interest as an expression of interest in wanting to become involved in the business. I was familiar with the pyramid scheme approach that was the basis of his business’s operation, but had no interest in it. The interview eventually turned into Rick presenting his practiced pitch for the business. Eventually, he invited me to join him at a business seminar the

⁴⁶ The primary example is John Maxwell, a best-selling Christian author. His books deal almost exclusively with strategies for improving “leadership,” “financial success,” and “business growth” through an increased emphasis on Christian faith. His best sellers include The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership (1998) and Today Matters: 12 Daily Practices to Guarantee Tomorrow’s Success (2004). He also has an annotated Bible emphasizing leadership, The Maxwell Leadership Bible: Lessons in Leadership from the Word of God (2003).

following night at the Holiday Inn. I was determined to find application where Rick saw application, so I promised to accompany him.

The hotel conference room was arranged simply: chairs lined ten-deep in five rows, an aisle dividing two sets of seats, and a podium at the front. When Rick and I arrived the room was nearly full. I followed him to the front of the room where we took two front row seats. Rick then directed me to the back of the room where Jay, the night's featured speaker, was greeting people. Rick's start as an "independent business owner" came via Taylor, another member of the Monday Group. Jay recruited Taylor into the business, which made Rick and Jay part of the same "network." Jay's success in the business has made him a model for success, as well as a sought after speaker for seminars. Jay greeted me enthusiastically, pleased to know that Rick had brought someone new.

The talk was lively, and Jay maintained an air of spontaneity throughout. After the first 30 minutes, though, my faith in seeing application to Bible study was fading. Up to that point, he talked only of business details. Following his lecture, Jay moved into a period of recognizing individual sales achievements. My patience was nearly exhausted as Jay concluded:

"My advice to any of you who want to achieve these kinds of goals is simple. Go home and read The Prayer of Jabez⁴⁷. You can't do anything without divine help. You can do anything you're doing ten times more if you're praying about it. My advice is to get God involved. The reason I'm successful, the reason these other guys are successful, is because we have a powerful partner. The reason I went diamond⁴⁸ is the Lord. If I have Jesus sitting next to me you think I'm afraid to pick up the phone? The guy on the other end doesn't stand a chance!"

⁴⁷ *The Prayer of Jabez* (2000) was authored by the popular Evangelical author Bruce Wilkerson, and spent considerable time on Christian and secular best-seller lists. Wilkerson bases the book on an Old Testament prayer, and emphasizes how Christians ought to pray for security and prosperity, claiming at times that if the prayer is prayed faithfully and regularly, then success will be achieved.

⁴⁸ As one achieves certain levels of income in the business, they progress through different demarcations. The "diamond club" is the second highest level.

The remaining hour of Jay's talk included sporadic, but sustained testimonies like the one above. Though not explicitly Christian, the seminar bared the imprint of Evangelicalism. This mingling of discourses helped contextualize Rick's small group participation, as well as his blended identities of "independent business owner" and "Bible-believing Christian."

My evening at the Holiday Inn indexes a central issue in small group discourse. The discussion of any text, topic, subject, or question takes place against a backdrop of textual and experiential resources⁴⁹. Just as Rick incorporated his life as a businessman into his role as group facilitator, other Bible study members found other sources of application. Participants marshal these resources in the service of clarity and understanding, for getting their point across, for making sense of others' contributions, and for interpreting texts. This chapter addresses three questions: what resources do group participants rely on, and toward what ends do they use them? How do these resources differ in terms of the degree to which they are shared within and across groups? And, how does the use of resources contribute to the work of textual ideology that underlies small group discourse?

Chapter 3 argued that small groups are interpretive communities, with a focus on common styles of Bible reading. However, even those groups who studied directly from the Bible talked about more than just scripture. In turn, a portrait of small groups as interpretive communities requires closer attention. And, in any interpretive community, the role of discursive resources is an integral component.

⁴⁹ I owe my original interest in the role of knowledge sources in Bible study discourse to Dr. Fredric Roberts, who included such questions in his four-year ethnographic study of 12 churches (Roberts 2005).

The work of William Hanks (1989) on how texts are defined and understood provides a useful framework for this task. Hanks suggests that for any text to move beyond potential meaning(s) to concrete meaning(s) it must be “centered” in an “interpretive matrix” (ibid: 106). Hanks identifies this matrix as the “social context” of the discourse event, and calls for anthropological approaches to text that account for “norms of interpretation, institutions, and habitual orientations to discourse” (ibid: 107). The bodies of knowledge participants draw on as resources are a significant element in all three categories identified by Hanks. Jody Davie (1995) recognized the importance of the interpretive matrix in her ethnography of a Presbyterian women’s Bible study group. Davie demonstrated how extensively the background in Jungian psychology of the group leader informed the group’s conversations. The assumptions and insights of Jung’s theory were a filter through which the group’s discourse continually passed.

The goal of this chapter is to describe the resources that define the interpretive matrix for these groups, and identify how they are integrated with the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. The entire interpretive matrix is much broader than what will be identified in this chapter. Certainly, participants rely on their experiences as parents, employers, employees, volunteers, siblings, leaders, conscientious citizens, and so forth in group discourse⁵⁰. However, I will concentrate on the resources that define and exert a persistent influence in specific groups. My discussion of the interpretive matrix is divided into three sections: resources present throughout the entire sample of groups, resources with a heightened emphasis in particular groups, and resources with a heightened emphasis for individuals.

⁵⁰ Cf., Roberts 2005:45-48 for a discussion of how non-religious knowledge sources impact congregational life.

Shared Resources

Few resources were present throughout the entire sample. I will discuss the two that were most influential, using one group for each to demonstrate how the resource was used. Both are involved in the work of identity formation, but at different levels of belonging. One body of knowledge groups relied on was the evolving situation of their local congregation. Each of the project groups was affiliated with a church body, which provided a shared filter for engaging texts and topics of discussion. The second resource was denominational identity, where groups identified Selves and Others within and outside the Protestant tradition⁵¹. To begin, I use the Tuesday Men as a case study for how local congregations are used as interpretive resources.

Congregations as Resources

I described in chapter 1 a recent change in the demography of ICUMC – a growing population of foreign refugees from Africa and the Middle East that began in the fall of 2003. The first refugee, Muhammad, came from Afghanistan. He was a middle-aged man, already a Christian, and delighted to find a church near the home where he was placed. The warm welcome from the congregation prompted Muhammad to become an active evangelist for ICUMC. His frequent visits to the local Refugee Services office provided an opportunity for him to invite other refugees and their families to Sunday worship services. At present, there are nearly 30 refugees (including children) who attend the church regularly.

In the late spring of 2004, the refugee presence was large, and unorganized – enough that Eddie volunteered to act as an unofficial conduit between the refugees and

⁵¹ Throughout this chapter I employ the nomenclature of “Self” and “Other” to signify conceptualizations of collective identity. For an extended discussion of how congregations employ denominational identity in this manner, see Roberts 2005:59-77.

the church. Pastor Ted was excited about their presence, but unsure of how to make the best adjustments in the life of the congregation. He eagerly accepted the offer, primarily because Eddie had spent three decades as a Christian missionary in India. Eddie's job was to introduce the local church to the life of the refugees, introduce the refugees to the life of the local church, and provide instruction for those unacquainted with Christian (read: United Methodist) theology. At present, Eddie is the personal contact for the refugees, ICUMC's representative at Refugee Services, and the leader of a Sunday school class designed specifically for the refugees.

Given Eddie and Ted's positions as core participants in the Tuesday Men, it makes sense for the congregation's ever-evolving relationship with the refugee population to be a key feature in the group's interpretive matrix. The group's use of this resource coincides with their typical style of interpreting the Bible – finding examples of collective application. Consider the following interaction. The group had just finished reading Acts 2:42-47, which describes the fellowship among the early church believers:

Ted: *How does the life and purpose of your church or Christian fellowship group compare to this group?*

{11.0}

George: Peter just kept preaching the same thing, it seems like here. You read throughout, he kept preaching salvation, which I'm very thankful for. But, I look at the group, the church, I talked a little bit about this last week that they weren't, this was a new group. They're just starting up. They weren't focused on what the carpet was [and] didn't have the distractions that we get into today.

Ted: Yeah. Excellent word. I've been thinking a lot about that as we're working on starting the new service and kind of looking at it from the concept of a new church. I wonder about the average of how long it takes for a new church to move from the level of excitement that you see in many new churches to, and it's a bad word but I'm gonna use it anyway, to the institutional church? I don't think it takes long. And, I think you have to constantly fight against it. I think you have to talk about it all the time, because it's SO easy for us, all of us. And, my thing might not be the carpet, but we've all got our things that are part of, and it takes us back to that Wesleyan statement⁵². You know, what are the

⁵² The statement Ted is referring to here is a quotation he attributes to John Wesley and cites often: "In essentials unity, in non-essentials freedom, and in all things love." The statement actually originated with St. Augustine.

essentials? What are the things that we must have? And, what are the non-essentials that are negotiable for the sake of Christ, and for the sake of ministry?

Eddie: I could tell a story. Muhammad called me last night. And, he was disturbed by this. He said, he wanted to talk to me about something that happened on Sunday. He said that, he's bringing people to the church. And, he always tells them, "If you have needs, the church will help you." And, "Do you need anything for your house?" And, a lot of them do because they're just trying to get settled. So, he's been taking people down to the basement and giving them things out of the household bank. And, he said to me, look, "If I give away a pillow and someone comes to Christ. Isn't that a cheap thing to do? But, Robert [[the church maintenance engineer]] saw me giving away a dollar pillow and he scolded me in front of these other people." We can say these aren't essentials and we shouldn't think about them and we should keep focused. The fact is there are conflicting things that are concerns here, that the things that we are concerned about may be significant. And, maybe they aren't.

Ted: Well, and, I think it's an important one. And, I think there just needs to be ways in which that gets done, just needs to be communicated. But, yeah, that's great.

Eddie: Tied in with this was the cultural thing of not showing respect to someone. He felt Robert was disrespectful because he told him he shouldn't do that in front of other people who were new in the church, coming for the first time.

There are several things about this interaction that typify the way the Tuesday Men incorporated the refugees into their discussions. 1) Eddie's closing statement is one that appeared in various forms in his comments and in those of others: an incident involving the refugees is explained by "cultural" differences. In this case, Muhammad's annoyance is attributed to Robert's unwitting violation of the cultural norm of respect. 2) The seemingly transgressive acts of the refugees are not presented negatively, but in a productive fashion. The refugees were viewed as demonstrating a valuable lesson to the rest of the church. The above example is framed by Eddie as one of valuing faith conversion over mundane items (e.g., a pillow), placing Muhammad in fulfillment of Wesley's guiding dictum to focus on the "essentials" of the Christian faith. 3) The lessons being taught by the refugees parallel the ideal presented in the book of Acts. In this example, the conflict between Muhammad and Robert is positioned as a mirror image of the contrast between the early Church of Acts and the modern church. As presented in chapter 3, this group's discourse continually asserted a dissonance between

the Church in Acts and contemporary congregations. The use of the refugee experience as a resource, then, is done in alignment and support of the group's primary interpretive relation with the Bible.

From the group's opening session, Ted, Eddie, and the other participants found ways to incorporate their experiences with refugee in this manner. Table 9 indicates the number of occasions during the 23 recorded meetings the refugees were invoked as a resource compared to the most common alternatives:

<u>Refugees</u>	<u>Denomination</u>	<u>History</u>	<u>Current Events</u>	<u>Business</u>
9	6	5	6	4

Table 9: Tuesday Men Interpretive Resources

As well as being the most numerous, ICUMC's relation with the refugees was the only resource to be invoked by four different group participants. The individual refugee being used as an example changed, as did the foil - a role often occupied by the speaker. On one occasion, Eddie lamented about a prayer of his that focused on solving a problem instead of how God might use the problem. He presented this in contrast to a prayer by Muhammad that focused on heavenly rewards, which paralleled a prayer from Acts that they had just read.

The local congregation was a shared resource in each of the project groups. In the McGee Men, for example, the changing financial fortunes of the church – from being notably affluent to representing a wide range of socio-economic tiers – proved a valuable resource for reading texts regarding “riches” and “favoritism” in the book of James. In the LC-MS Men, the impending start of a new church building project was a target for sayings of wisdom in the book of Proverbs. This involvement of the congregational situation into the interpretive matrix testifies to the notion of congregations as “local

cultures,” providing shared and readily accessible stocks of knowledge to members (cf., Ammerman 1997, Becker 1999). Viewing congregations as “local cultures” was originally done to demonstrate how churches provide resources for everyday and interpersonal needs. My argument here is that the local congregation is also an interpretive resource, a body of knowledge that serves as a filter for discursive interests.

Denominations as Resources

A second resource shared across the entire sample was denominational identity.

Table 10 shows how many times this resource was invoked in each of the project groups⁵³:

<u>Iconoclasts</u>	<u>McGee Men</u>	<u>Tuesday Men</u>	<u>LCMS Women</u>	<u>LCMS Men</u>	<u>Prayer Circle</u>	<u>Monday Group</u>
17	6	6	24	10	2	2

Table 10: Interpretive Resources of seven project groups

I use two contrasting cases of this resource to illustrate its variable function in the interpretive matrix. The first example comes from the Iconoclasts, where the facilitator’s Baptist background played a prominent role in establishing what constitutes a Christian Other. The second example comes from the LC-MS Women, where the texture of a Lutheran Self was constantly re-evaluated. For both, the proper relationship with the Bible anchors their conceptualization of denominational identity.

Denomination as Other

The Iconoclasts were the very first group whose meetings I began to attend and record. Janet, the small group director at SUMC, connected me to them. In our first meeting together, Janet and I reviewed all of the small groups in the church. Immediately, she highlighted the name of the Iconoclasts in yellow, guaranteeing their excitement

⁵³ The lack of references among Prayer Circle and the Monday Group are primarily a reflection of the de-emphasis placed on “denominations” as a category of identification in the Restoration Movement tradition.

about being included in the research. She was quite right, though perhaps not for the reasons she suspected. During my initial visits in the fall of 2004 they were finishing a book-video study that was a church-wide initiative. Aside from ridiculing the “corny” setting, the group found little enjoyment in the text. This was the second consecutive time they had disliked Janet’s choice of study material. The group members unanimously decided that they would choose the next book themselves. Charlie, the group facilitator, already had a suggestion in mind. His wife, Diane, had read and recommended Philip Yancey’s The Jesus I Never Knew, which I henceforth refer to as Jesus. Charlie had read the book twice and was convinced the group would enjoy it. In early November they began Jesus, a study that lasted until the end of May.

Yancey is a best-selling Evangelical author, and Jesus won the Gold Medallion Christian Book of the Year Award in 1996. The following quote from the book’s introduction provides a sense for its premise:

“That...is the problem with most of our writing and thinking about Jesus. We read the Gospels through the flash-forward lenses of church councils like Nicea and Chalcedon, through the church’s studied attempts to make sense of [Jesus]...In this book I hope to go back beyond those formulations. I hope, as far as is possible, to look at Jesus’ life ‘from below,’ as a spectator, one of the many who followed him around. If I were a Japanese filmmaker, given \$50 million and no script but the Gospels’ text, what kind of film would I make?” (1996: 24)

Yancey divides the book into 14 chapters and three sections: “Who He Was,” “Why He Came,” and “What He Left Behind.” Yancey presents a highly intertextual work, incorporating excerpts from the four canonical Gospels and lengthy quotations from Christian writers and thinkers.

The group loved the book, much as Charlie and Diane predicted. They met weekly on Sunday evenings, eager to discuss the chapter they had read during the week. On several occasions, they decided to extend a single chapter over several weeks. To

organize the meetings, Charlie passed out a list of (6-14) questions for each chapter. Each question was accompanied by a (1-3 paragraph) reading from Jesus. The group was never strict about covering all of the questions, and Charlie took the lead in deciding which ones they addressed.

The group's discourse revolved around one theme, one very reminiscent of the Tuesday Men's focus: the Jesus of the Gospels is very different from our contemporary understanding. This is an intended theme of the book, but not the only theme. Yet, it is the only theme the group latched itself to. They observed this separation at several locations: the modern Church in the United States, the local congregation the group belonged to, and the religious background of the participants. This latter category is where Charlie's denominational history became a resource for himself, and eventually for the rest of the group.

Compared to many of the project groups, the religious and social identity of their denomination was of little concern to the Iconoclasts. But, from the very first meeting, Charlie's youth and early adult years in an Independent Baptist church became a baseline for 'how not to be Christian.' This example emerges from a reading out of Jesus discussing the unfathomable extent of God's grace:

Charlie: I know in my own personal case I think the Lord has really worked on me over the last ten to twenty years and every shred of self-righteousness that I have, one piece by one piece, has been taken away. And, fortunately, for me, I think I now see me for what I am; good, bad, and ugly. The piece that I'm working on now is that God actually accepts who I am, regardless of the shape that we come in. It's a revolutionary thought. Didn't you find that interesting where it says the two principles of Jesus' life, the first thing he does is he shows us all our sin in glorious Technicolor, but yet, he freely forgives us. This is a very tough thing for a Baptist guy like me to understand because I want to get out my little Boy Scout notches and do the right thing by the Lord. I'm much more comfortable with a performance-oriented God. That's kind of where I would like to live, actually. Because I think, at least in terms of a show, I could do as good a job as anybody. When I was in high school I was in my self-aware, self-righteous phase. And, I used to drag a Bible to school. Now, I never read it. But, I would drag it to school and I would put it on top of my books.

Lauren: As an accessory?

Charlie: As an accessory, a fashion accessory. And I'd drag it around and everybody would say, "What's that?" And I'd say, [[switch to deep, resonating tone]] "That's a Bible."

[[Laughs]]

Diane: Nobody ever said to you, "Open it and read it?"

Charlie: No. You didn't worry about that. So, I find this whole concept absolutely revolutionary, that God would look at me with all my sins and, you ever sat down and done a sin inventory in your life?

[[No response]]

Charlie: Exactly. I could, five minutes; I think I could fill up a spreadsheet. I really could. I'll never forget this, there's a verse in the Bible that says, *and the Lord takes our sins and places them as far as the East is from the West*. One of the greatest, the reason I wanted to stop and talk about this for a while is, at least in my church growing up, here's one of the greatest tools that I've seen pastors really use, pastors and other people including self-righteous Nazi Christian types, is the whole thing of guilt.

No Sunday evening passed without a few exchanges like this, initiated by Charlie or by someone else. The Baptist tradition served as a reliable representative of a Christian Other – the type of Christian not to be aspired to. The face of this antagonist was prone to shift. The above Baptist Other emphasized performance and guilt over grace. On other occasions, "Baptists" were used to illustrate a stress on fear over love, determinism over free will⁵⁴, and denial over forgiveness. Charlie drew on a seemingly endless set of anecdotes and idioms, and the rest of the group appropriated Charlie's experience when searching for their own Christian Other. The effectiveness of this resource intensified once the group realized that Yancey, like Charlie, grew up in the Baptist tradition and used his experiences as a foil for presenting Jesus in the book⁵⁵.

The fundamental assertion at work in the group's discourse is that the Jesus (and, by extension, the Christian life) advertised in the modern era is becoming further adrift

⁵⁴ This is a historic and ongoing theological difference, and one that often assumes new nuances from the discursive environment it is carried out in. In this group, theological determinism was associated with the popular notion that God has a plan and a purpose for everything that happens in the lives of believers and in the world at large. They often linked this to the best-selling book *The Purpose Driven Life* (2003), which the group studied (and disliked) as part of a church-wide curriculum.

⁵⁵ It is worth noting here that "Baptists" encompasses a large, heterogeneous group of Protestants in the United States, with multiple sub-denominational affiliations. Charlie's point of reference is an Independent Baptist Church, not affiliated with any of the sub-groupings of "Baptists."

from the Jesus of the Gospels. The underlying claim, then, is an issue of dissonance with the Bible as a historical text, not just the personality of the historical Jesus. This casts the group's reliance on denominational identity as a resource not only for engaging Yancey, but also for engaging the Bible. "Baptists" serve as an embodiment of a Christian Other, which in turn serves as a Biblical Other. "Baptists" were often used as a narrative equivalent for Jesus' encounters with the religious Others of the canonical Gospels, as in the following:

Charlie: Tell you another story from my days in the Baptist Church. And, this was actually taught. I listened to this in sermons. "Well, you know, behavior ultimately doesn't matter because you get your fire insurance policy going. And, you get into heaven. But, in heaven, there are degrees of rewards." This is taught. So, I thought, years later, I thought, okay. You don't need it to get in. But, you really need it because you don't want to be living in the shack down by the railroad tracks.

Lauren: And, you want those rewards.

Charlie: That's right.

[[Jokes about Charlie's competitive streak]]

Charlie: But, you know, so I, in these latter years I've chalked that up to a propensity to want to rank everything and put ranks and social levels on everybody and everything. It's just something we like to do as humans. And, indeed, this stuff made, this whole grace thing, if you read the Scriptures, made the Pharisees and the Sadducees absolutely nuts. They went nuts, because it threatened their religious order and threatened their little religious house of cards. And, indeed, for a person who's, what I call, hyper-religious, someone who's completely hung up on how you ought to behave, that is their chief measure.

Just as the Pharisees and Sadducees are seen as failing to grasp Jesus' teachings,

Charlie's "days in the Baptist Church" reveal a similar failure. Clearly, then, the position of this resource in the interpretive matrix is involved in the work of textual ideology.

Much like the Tuesday Men, the task for the Iconoclasts is to construct a Biblical Other in order to establish what is separate from the ideal presented in scripture. This contrast relies on both the absolute authority of the Bible, and its timeless relevance.

Denomination as Self

The LC-MS women met every Thursday morning at 10am in the church library. The regular group of 10-15 women fit snugly around the large rectangular table in the middle of the small room. Shelves packed with books, videos and Bibles sat only a few feet behind our heads, giving the room a cozy and somewhat scholarly feel. The youngest woman was in her early 50s, but most were in their mid-60s and older. The facilitator of the group, Sandy, was a life-long LC-MS member (like most in the group). She had a marvelous rapport with the other women. And, despite her self-deprecating manner, she was thought of as a highly competent facilitator.

When I made my initial visits to the group in the late fall of 2004, they had just begun a new study. To Live is Christ: the life and ministry of Paul is an interactive, “in-depth women’s Bible study” by the popular Evangelical author and speaker Beth Moore. The study guides the reader through Paul’s ministry in the book of Acts, while splicing in readings from the Pauline Epistles. The study is designed to last 10 weeks. In between weekly group meetings, there are five days of reading and questions. For each group session, there is a video that supplements the week’s teachings. However, Sandy worried that assigning “homework” might discourage some from attending. So, they adopted a different method of working through one day’s reading and questions at each meeting, turning the 10-week study into a 50+-week study. When I began recording in January of 2005, they were into the third week of the study (Acts 14).

The women met at 10am, but never started until 10:30. The first half hour was reserved for socializing, coffee and tea, sampling culinary creations, and (much to Sandy’s chagrin) women arriving late with an apology and a story. One morning, early in

the fieldwork, the interpretive matrix allowed for a bit of laughter. Sandy confirmed with several women that they were enjoying the study. wryly pointed out that she liked the study despite Moore being a Baptist, and not Lutheran. A few women laughed off the comment, but several others turned to Sandy for a response. Ever aware of her leadership position, Sandy turned to me and quipped, “I won’t tell if James won’t.” Trying to match her sharp wit, I replied, “They won’t like hearing about this in St. Louis⁵⁶.” Without missing a beat, Sandy rejoined, “I didn’t know you knew about St. Louis.” I wondered afterwards if our laughter disturbed the office managers across the hall.

My jovial exchange with Sandy indexes the central feature of the interpretive matrix for the LC-MS Women: a reliance on ‘being Lutheran’ as a discursive resource. Unlike Charlie of the Iconoclasts, the group members did not employ denomination as an Other, but as a resource for an ongoing negotiation of their religious Self. The marking of textual materials alone was remarkable. The denominational affiliation of Bible commentators, authors, speakers, hymnals, and Bible translations were constantly being identified; a quality unique to this group. The group members also frequently defined their denominational Self in terms of how it contrasted or conflicted with the traditions of Christian Others. Invoking denominational identity most often preceded or followed mention of how “Lutheran” contrasts with “Catholics,” “Reformed churches,” “New Churches,” “megachurches,” and a host of other Protestant categories. The following is a typical example from the group. They had just finished reading Beth Moore’s explication of Paul and Barnabas’s trip from Derbe to Antioch (Acts 14:21-28):

“Before we penetrate the heart of our lesson today, note the obedience of Paul and Barnabas to the great commission (see Mat. 28:19-20). Acts 14:21 tells us they ministered to the people in Derbe in two vital ways. They preached, which means ‘to

⁵⁶ St. Louis, Missouri is the denominational headquarters for the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod.

evangelize,' and they taught or *matheteuo*, which means "to instruct with the purpose of making a disciple.' Paul and Barnabas were careful not to neglect evangelism or discipleship. Both are vital, life-giving elements in any New Testament church." (1997: 64-5)

Sandy stopped the reading there and opened the topic for discussion:

Sandy: One commentator I read suggested that Matthew 28 had the sense of not just teaching, but also discipling. Setting up churches, discipling, setting up an order in the church, a way of continuing.

Linda: See, I don't think that order is here today either. I think a lot of churches, new churches that are popping up, I don't think they're orderly. You know, they're fun, but I don't think there's order.

Sandy: Do people get baptized? Evangelized?

Joy: Adults do.

Sandy: Taught in a relatively stabilized fashion.

Lynn: But, taught, [[sighs]] I mean you would oft, oft, oft times never hear a word of Law in months. It's much more Gospel and feel good, and how to be good people.

Frita: Yeah. And, sometimes I don't think they, I mean we call it structure. Just to learn what our church stands for when you're first going. I think some churches, people just join and they don't really know what the basic beliefs are in that denomination.

Lynn: Well, the word of Gospel is not nearly so sweet unless you realize the, the Law and the sin, and then you realize the sweetness of Gospel.

Sandy: It's interesting that the kinds of churches you might be talking about have very, kind of fairly strict lifestyles, or covenants. If you want to join that Assembly church across town, you'll covenant with them not to do certain things.

Linda: Yeah. I'm thinking of the much more casual churches.

Sandy: Like the Vineyard churches?

Linda: Yeah. Mhmm. And, we have one, in fact I went to a travelogue and I looked down and there was a bulletin. So, I was, during the intermission I was looking at the bulletin for this [local church]. And, you know, it was a lot of nice. And, grace is important, oh my. But, that word of Law should still be there.

Sandy: Remember when members of Zion came over, we had the green hymnal, that's the ELCA hymnal... The order of service was such that the confession of sins is separate from the service. And, you can have it or not. A number of times our pastors, they didn't choose to have a confession of sins.

Frita: Well, I have a friend who will not say the confession of sins because she says she is not a poor, miserable sinner. She said, [[defiant tone]] "I'm not."

[[Laughs]]

The group's reaction to Moore's explanation immediately centered on the resource of denominational identity. Linda begins with the juxtaposition of "order" and "fun," with "new churches" occupying the latter designation. Frita joins in, noting the lack of "structure" in "new churches" and the centrality of this to the LC-MS tradition.

Sandy and Frita both highlight the aversion to the “confession of sins” in the ELCA⁵⁷ liturgy. The use of local representatives for these categories, such as Linda’s reference to the “[local church]” and Sandy’s reference to “Vineyard churches,” was common in other interactions of this type. Of all the oppositional categories to “Lutheran,” “new churches” (or, the semantic equivalent of “megachurches”) was presented most often. Judging from the group’s discourse surrounding this category, its recurrence is a result of new churches’ success in the American religious economy. The implicit question is twofold: how different are we from growing churches? How much of that difference is key to Lutheran identity, and how much is negotiable for the sake of membership growth?

A second example crystallizes this Self/Other relationship, and introduces the link with textual ideology. This interaction follows the group’s reading of 1 Corinthians 16:19⁵⁸, which Moore suggests to contextualize Paul’s ministry in the city of Ephesus:

Sandy: So, what does that tell you is going on there? What are Aquila and Priscilla doing?

Mary: They were hosting meetings.

Sandy: House church, just like home groups.

Mary: They would probably have had communion at theirs, wouldn’t they?

Sandy: Mhmm.

Mary: Didn’t they always sit down and break bread together?

Sandy: Almost never without. We don’t do that here because of our rule about ordination, and the way we treat the sacrament. It has to be blessed by an ordained pastor. At our previous church, the elders were allowed to take the communion around to the shut-ins. But, the pastor would consecrate the elements first, and then they could take them out. We’d have communion with these shut-ins, which was really very nice.

Mary: Mhmm. It is.

Sandy: So, here we are, people of house churches, just like our home groups. And, in fact, in the home group concept, because it started in an evangelical background, it’s not as sacramental as we are. Home groups and say, the Assembly church, I imagine that they have them. Or, Trinity, they would have communion in the home groups, because they don’t consider that you need to have that sacrament. It is a sacrament, but it’s not as regulated.

⁵⁷ Evangelical Lutheran Church in America. See chapter 1 for a discussion of the relation between the LC-MS and the ELCA.

⁵⁸ “The churches in the province of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Priscilla greet you warmly in the Lord, and so does the church that meets at their house.” (NIV)

Linda: I don't think it is a sacrament. They call it "public communion." But, they don't call it, like, we talk about "Word and Sacrament."

Sandy: Mhmm.

Linda: They do have baptism, but they're adults. But, I don't think they call it the sacrament of baptism.

Cindy: I think the big thing with those churches, and I speak for the Assembly church, is having people profess that they believe Christ is their Lord and Savior, and that they are born-again or whatever. You have to profess this. I know with the motorcycle group that my daughter is involved with now. They get them to come to church and they take off their patches that say all these horrible things. But, to be part of this group you have to do this. You have to believe that Christ died for your sins. This is what they are really wanting these people to do. Whether they just say they do and then they ride off into the sunset, I don't know.

Linda: But, it's "what I did." "I came to you." And, we say, "We were called BY the Holy Spirit." And, I think that's the difference. It wasn't what I did to come. It was that "the Holy Spirit called me by the Gospel, enlightened me with His gifts, sanctified in"...
[[overlapping]]

Sandy: "In the one true faith."

Again they draw the comparison with "evangelical" churches, using the local representatives of "the Assembly church" and "Trinity," the two largest congregations in the area. Here, the juxtaposition centers on the "Lutheran" concept of "sacrament"⁵⁹ and the lack thereof in these Other traditions. Denominational identity is used to make sense of a Biblical text, affirming the legitimacy of the Lutheran position. What I find most striking about this interaction compared to the first one I presented are the contrasting means by which they construe the proper relation to the Bible.

In the first example, the group's use of denominational identity automatically places them in accordance with the Biblical text: the "order" evident in Matthew 28 and Acts is comparable to the "structure" of Lutheran theological training. This is a notably different approach to the Bible than that of the Iconoclasts and the Tuesday Men, which emphasizes dissonance. The textual practice here is to identify where the LC-MS

⁵⁹ The LC-MS tradition considers itself sacramental because it views particular rituals, such as baptism and communion, as mediations of God's grace. Other Protestant traditions consider these rituals as symbolic acts that merely signify God's grace. The sacramental quality of rituals is a point of contention in the Lutheran traditions in America. See Roberts (2005) for a discussion of how these interpretations in two different Lutheran churches from the same denomination are largely a reflection of each congregation's local history.

tradition aligns with the Bible, not where there are inconsistencies. In the second example the conclusion is the same, but it begins quite differently. The Biblical example suggests that first century home groups practiced communion, which Sandy identifies as different from standard Lutheran practice. In addition to the dissonance on the Lutheran side, the “evangelical” Other appears consistent with the Biblical example. This seemingly favorable position of the “evangelical” approach is quickly dismissed. Cindy and Linda emphasize, respectively, the tenuous and misplaced motivation of the “evangelical” approach. The closing recital of Lutheran creed by Linda and Sandy restores the Lutheran approach to its elevated position, reasserting the parallel between the Bible and their denomination.

These two examples illustrate the ideal relationship with the Bible articulated by the group through their use of denominational identity: establishing consistency between scripture and the LC-MS tradition. However, to present such a uniform portrait would be incomplete. The humor behind the opening anecdote, and the repair work in the second example, belie the ongoing and negotiable nature of the group’s conceptualization of LC-MS identity. On several occasions, the ambivalence surrounding their sense of Self was drawn into sharp focus. Consider the following exchange, which led to a lengthy discussion:

Barbara: Beth Moore asks us, *upon whom did God say He would pour out His spirit in Acts 2:18?*

Jane: Well, women.

Barbara: If that happened so long ago, why does, for example the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, not let women read or let women do anything?

Rebecca: Well, there is another verse, though, that says *the women should not be teaching over the men*. It doesn’t mean, and personally I always thought there’s plenty for the women to do.

Barbara: Oh yeah.

Rebecca: We have so much we can do we don't have to lead men's Bible studies. But, I think men and women are equal, God made us differently and I think the men think and process in different ways, most of them. And, it's an advantage.

Barbara: I love that description, "They process differently."

Jane: They do.

Rebecca: And, we do too. Dr. Dobson's⁶⁰ thing, you know, when you're shopping. Have you heard that one? "Women shop." [[elongated stress on the [o]]]

[[Laughs]]

Rebecca: And, he describes going shopping with his wife and he says, "When are we gonna find this blouse?" She wanted to stop and have lunch. He couldn't have lunch until they got the blouse. He was on a mission.

[[Laughs]]

Rebecca: You gotta have a goal and go right to it, and you can just stay focused on like one thing. Where, we're made differently because we might have lots of children around or grandchildren or we have 20 things to do at one time.

Barbara: That's right.

Judith: Men are able to compartmentalize their thoughts.

Rebecca: I'm more than halfway through life and I think they're different.

Sherry: I think in ways they're certain things. But, I think sometimes that that's just the way our life, whatever we've chosen, that we are like this. So, you agree with the Missouri Synod, that women shouldn't be involved in, you agree with that? I mean, you really think that that's what God meant, that women are not to be preachers?

This discussion continued on amiably, back and forth, primarily between Rebecca and Sherry, for nearly ten minutes. Barbara is quick to place Acts 2:18⁶¹ into the interpretive matrix of denominational identity. Unlike the other examples, the LC-MS relation with the Bible is not agreed upon. The proof-texting continued briefly, but the discussion soon turned from discerning "what God meant" to what the women "feel comfortable with," relieving them of any resolution or consensus. The lesson of this example is twofold. First, the resource of denominational identity is invoked at times with a certain ambivalence, indexing the contestable nature of the interpretive matrix. And, secondly, sustaining a consistent relationship to the Bible (in this case, establishing

⁶⁰ Dr. James Dobson is an iconic figure of the conservative Christian movement in America. He is best known for his institutional structure "Focus on the Family."

⁶¹ "Even on my servants, both men and women, I will pour out my Spirit in those days, and they will prophesy." (NIV) This particular text is a recontextualization from the Old Testament prophet Joel (Joel 2:28-29).

parallels) takes precedence over resolving particular debates or extra-Biblical epistemologies (e.g., women as preachers and accompanying gender ideologies).

This opening section presented two resources that were part of the interpretive matrix in each of the project groups. Conceptualizing identity in terms of the local congregation and the denomination played an important role in how groups evaluated texts and engaged topics of discussion. In both case studies, I showed how these resources unfolded in group discourse, as well as how they were implicated in the core issue of textual ideology. This theme continues in the second and third examples of how the interpretive matrix operates.

Group-Specific Resources

In each of the project groups certain resources took precedence, and played a more active role in their interpretive discourse. Here I focus on one case study, the Iconoclasts. Charlie frequently appealed to his Baptist background as a resource, and the other members appropriated it. However, denominational identity was not their most consistent, widely shared resource. Table 11 shows the variety of interpretive resources the group relied on, the number of occasions they were invoked during the 16 recorded meetings, and (in parentheses) how many of the group participants made use of each resource⁶²:

Congregation	Denomination	History	Televangelists	Christian Authors
5 (2)	17 (5)	30 (7)	10 (3)	9 (2)

Table 11: Iconoclasts' Interpretive Resources

As Table 11 indicates, the interpretive matrix for this group is best characterized as historically oriented. The members shared a common passion for employing examples

⁶² Table 11 excludes a number of resources that were invoked only once or twice, such as “business experience” and “current events.”

from modern and ancient history; though, the specific topics and periods varied. This is not a total anomaly in the project sample, and certainly not in American society generally. A walk through any Barnes&Noble Bookstore shows that the “History” section is always among the best stocked and up-to-date⁶³. Prior to the start of each Sunday’s meeting, the group often traded titles of the latest books they had read from this genre. Charlie and Danny often joked that heaven would be akin to “perpetual History Channel and Band of Brothers movie night.” Their choice of study after Yancey speaks to this inclination as well: a video study based on archeological sites from the Old Testament. Contributions to group discussion were more likely to include reference to the latest history book they read than a Christian motivational or theological text.

The influence of history as a knowledge source was most evident when the group faced ambiguous questions, or cases where an answer was unclear. In such cases, the reasoning and explanatory mechanism used was the epistemological category of history. The following example comes from the group’s first meeting. Prior to reading the first chapter of Jesus, Charlie devoted the initial meeting to a series of questions meant to elicit members’ conceptions of “who Jesus is.” One question dealt with the physical appearance of Jesus:

Dwight: One thing that always seemed to bother my mom was all the pictures of Jesus, he’s never smiling he was always serious.

Charlie: That’s the sixties Jesus, though. That was what I called the heroine, drug addict Jesus, you know.

[[Laughs]]

Charlie: You know, like that popular image of movies during that time. Jesus always looks like he hadn’t had sleep for about ten days and he’s got this kind of half-crazed look. And that’s kind of a popular image that you don’t see except in that genre, like the whole issue of Jesus being in “The Passion” as we see him. If you think back to the movies in the sixties and the seventies that portrayed Jesus like, you wouldn’t have seen that, you know.

⁶³ I owe this observation to Dr. Fredric Roberts, my advisor. He pointed this out to me several years prior to this project, and I continue to find it accurate.

Lisa: “Jesus Christ Superstar.”

Charlie: Yeah, yeah. So, you know, it’s really interesting how our pictures of Jesus, Yancey will say that, our pictures of Jesus are so colored by our culture and the world that we live in, kind of stage that we live in, it’s really tough to see the actual Jesus, you know.

Terry: I always thought of him as being very muscular, strong, and athletic with the idea that he would have been a carpenter at a time when there wouldn’t have been...

[[overlapping]]

Christine: Right.

Terry: You know, the tools that are available now. So, I thought he had to have been very strong to do that, plus with all the walking that they would do from place to place and as much traveling as he did. I just always pictured him as being, I’ll say almost an athletic type of build in order to be able to do the things that he did.

Charlie and Terry both gravitate toward history in their responses. Terry’s especially is typical for the group. His way of contextualizing and piecing together a scenario based on historical probabilities was very much the norm when members were faced with such questions. A second example demonstrates this strategy as shared amongst the other group members. The following interaction comes from the second meeting of the Yancey study. It is particularly interesting because it is the only case where the group expressed a collective disagreement with Yancey, perhaps indexing the authoritative character of this resource:

Charlie: *Nine months of awkward explanations, the lingering scent of scandal – it seems that God arranged the most humiliating circumstances possible for his entrance, as if to avoid any charge of favoritism. I am impressed that when the Son of God became a human being he played by the rules, harsh rules: small towns do not treat kindly young boys who grow up with questionable paternity...Often a work of God comes with two edges, great joy and great pain, and in that matter-of-fact response Mary embraced both. She was the first person to accept Jesus on his own terms, regardless of the personal cost.*

Lisa: I think he’s losing a lot of Joseph’s role in this whole dynamic because Joseph was pledged to Mary, at least Mary was betrothed to Joseph. So, it was already pre-planned that they were to be married. And, he stood up for her and said, “I will accept you as you are,” once she told him she was pregnant.

Charlie: Yeah, once he was told in a dream by the Lord. He was actually going to put her away quietly.

Lisa: Okay, so he had the intervention from the Lord to say, “Hey, she’s on the up and up level, she is carrying my child.” So, then he had that extra role of standing up to the community to say, “This is my betrothed, this is my wife. This is my child. He is my son.”

Charlie: Yeah, it’s real interesting, Joseph and Mary, these were not people of high social status.

Lisa: And when did he, when did they finally get back to their home community. Because, okay they go off to Bethlehem because of the census, so he's leaving his home community then. And, then they go off to Egypt for a couple of years. So, I mean, so it's got time for the scandal to really die down by the time they would have circulated back to their home territory.

Lauren: Yeah. And, not only that, they're moving back to Nazareth. And Nazareth was like the South side of Chicago, like the slums.

Lisa: But, he was a skilled craftsman. So, at least he could provide for his family. He had the means; I mean it wasn't that it was all poverty. He had a good income for the community that he lived in.

Jill: He had to move so people wouldn't kill him.

Lisa: And actually, to have the baby born in the stable was the cleanest place he could have been born. Because it was clean straw and I mean, like with all this ingathering of all these people that have been spread out for this census purpose. It would have been a filthy dirty place inside the inn. The stable was actually the cleanest place to be.

Lauren: But, what was the society like then? Would it have really been that big a deal if, I mean, you kind of assume that everyone thinks this is Joseph's kid.

Terry: Right.

Lauren: This is something so, the only two people that have to know anything different about it are Mary and Joseph. Everyone else is going to think it's Joseph's. So, I mean, you really only had two people that had to really know what it was. So, I'm not sure it was even all that big a deal. I mean, how many young girls became pregnant back then? I imagine it was very similar like it is today.

Charlie: Yeah.

Lauren: So, they were poor and they were a lot of things. But, whether it was, she was going to get put off in a loony bin I guess would depend on, you know, did she go around saying this or was it just, other than Elizabeth?

Lisa: And, even betrothal at that time was a much deeper commitment than just being engaged is in today's society.

Here, Lisa and Lauren lead the historical critique of Yancey. Much like Terry's reliance on historical context to fill in a portrait of Jesus, they do so to understand the circumstances surrounding the birth of Jesus. They cite historical explanations of betrothal, being a carpenter, stable sanitation, and teen pregnancy as proof against Yancey's assertions. This constant reference to history made this resource a current that ran through the group's discourse. This second example is also instructive in regard to the relationship between history as a resource and its implication in the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. The link is embedded in Lauren's statement towards the end of the interaction: "I imagine it was very similar like it is today."

The group's interest in history works in conjunction with the belief that human nature – and, by extension, human action and motivation – is constant across time. This also was a refrain in their discussions. In this respect, the use of history as an interpretive resource incorporates textual ideology principles regarding the authority and relevance of scripture: the Bible reveals the moral nature of humanity, and so is continually instructive for making sense of human problems. The following are two brief examples from the group's reading of Yancey. The first deals with the issue of purity, and the second with miracles:

#1

Charlie: Impurity is not only sexual. Purity is other things. Purity is our attitude towards money. It's our attitude towards others. There's lots of ways to be impure. We just think about sex all the time because that's what we do in the United States. But, it's many ways, having a pure heart. It's like if you obsess on anything else. Maybe this is a good working definition, if you have an obsession you can't see God clearly because you're thinking about that other thing.

Lauren: But, part of the problem with that is mankind was built with that innate urge to continue to multiply the whole thing.

Charlie: Mhmm.

Lauren: It's not something that's just now. If you look back in history to the things that went on, we maybe didn't have the media, but there were a lot of other things that went...[[interrupted]]

Charlie: That's Diane's point. Diane tells me that all the time.

Lauren: You go back and you read, or even, what did we watch, the Vikings or something when they came in. What were they going to do? Rape and pillage.

Christine: *It's nothing new under the sun.*

Diane: Man and evil and temptation and all those things that have been around forever.

#2

Charlie: Jesus consistently refused to tell people, "You gotta do this or I'll," you know. And he could have. He was God. If God really wanted people to behave, all he'd have to do is line up a demonstration.

Dwight: What would it have mattered? I mean, what did, people got freed from Egypt.

Lauren: Wouldn't have mattered.

Dwight: Out in the middle of nowhere, they got food out of nothing. And, they are still casting rams and stuff to worship.

Lauren: Right. And, the miracles that Christ did. Some people it was odd and moved them, and others just wanted to know what kind of trickery and who, you know, it was done by the devil.

Charlie: Yeah. Ravi Zacharias, on the radio the other day, said exactly the same thing. He quoted a Scripture of, I think it was John, where Jesus said, *I sent you the prophets. You didn't listen to them. I sent you John the Baptist. You wouldn't listen to them. So,*

what makes you think you're going to listen to me? Because we always want to do what we always want to do, and we always want to get what we always want to get. We want to believe what we want to believe.

Lauren: Even after having proof right in front of you. I mean, how many times have you tried to prove to someone that what, whether it's wrong, and you have undeniable, it's proof, and they still won't believe you. It doesn't matter to some.

Charlie: Years ago we had a family member staying with us and they had a little boy named Jack. Jack was at the house, and he was not obeying his mom. And, his mom said, *[[angered tone]]* "Okay. That's it. I'm taking you up the stairs." And, all the way up the stairs he goes, *[[defiant, obnoxious tone]]* "No. You're not in charge of me. I'm in charge of myself. You're not in charge of me." And, I looked at him going up the stairs and said, "That's us. That's all of us."

[[Laughs]]

Charlie: I had just finished reading something in the Old Testament about God calling the Israelites *a stiff-necked person*. If you ever want to read what you are like as a human being, what we're all like as a human being, read the Old Testament. Read the New Testament. It's all there. Every little trick, every little devious evil thing, we can all do it.

The textual ideology regarding the nature of humanity is evident in both of these interactions. Lauren introduces the notion that the problem of impurity is not an 'American' phenomenon, but a result of mankind's "innate urge." Charlie and Diane affirm her assertion, as does Christine via the proof-text from the book of Ecclesiastes. This particular verse was a common, shorthand way of getting this notion across. Interestingly, given this group's unique reliance on history, it was also the only group where this particular Biblical text was recontextualized. In the second example, Dwight posits a commonality between the Old Testament exodus and the modern reaction to miracles. Lauren agrees, and Charlie suggests a parallel between "stiff-necked Israelites" and a ranting adolescent. Charlie concludes the discussion by making an explicit statement about the mirror image of Biblical characters and human nature. These discursive constructions reveal the group's orientation to history as tightly bound to the ongoing work of textual ideology. In this case, history as a resource embeds the ideological principle that the Bible exposes the moral nature of humanity. Ultimately, this

makes historical reference an authoritative means for framing discussion because it echoes the lessons of scripture.

In the course of their time together, groups come to rely on a set of resources that comprise their interpretive matrix. Some are predictable no matter the type of group, text of study, or make-up of participants, such as congregational or denominational life. In other cases, resources that are marginal or absent in some groups are an essential lens through which discourse passes in other groups. For the Iconoclasts, that resource is the use of examples from various historical periods. To complete this sketch of the interpretive matrix, one type of resource remains to be discussed.

Individual Resources

Interpretive matrices also include resources that are unique to individuals. Such resources are not shared throughout groups, but participants remain willing to invoke the resources, other members are willing to receive the resources, and (most importantly) the connection between the resource and the ongoing work of textual ideology persists.

Here, we return to Rick and his experience as an “independent business owner.” Since 1999, Rick has been involved in the business: buying and selling products, recruiting new members, and attending seminars. As I stated in the opening of the chapter, Rick was the only person to facilitate two different classes that I observed and recorded. He designed and taught one as part of RMC’s Sunday school curriculum. The second was a home group he and his wife hosted on Monday evenings. During my research tenure, this latter group worked through Hebrews, 1 John, 2 John, and 3 John. Rick incorporated his business experience in different fashions with each group.

Rick's Sunday school class is entitled "The Mind of Christ." As described in chapter 1, Rick created the class following a speech on "understanding the mind of non-believers" by an ex-congressman. Rick also cites an audiotape series by Earl Nightingale, "The Strangest Secret," as a major influence. Nightingale was an ex-insurance agent who became a leading figure in the self-help movement of the 1940s and 50s. The strangest secret is that "you become what you think about." Rick identified this as a Biblical concept and, by the end of the research, had heard the "secret" 153 times. Currently, the class is designed for eight weeks. Rick has developed a 13-page course packet that class members are expected to complete.

Rick has incorporated his business experience into the class as a resource through various means. I focus here on the two most extended linkages. The first can be found on several pages in the course packet. To help demonstrate various lessons, Rick uses his favorite quotes from business speakers. Rick matches each quote with a Bible verse that he understands as stating the same principle. The following are only a few examples:

"The only reason people fail is Broken Focus!" – (name of business associate)
Philippians 3:20

"Success is just a decision." – (name of business associate) *Ephesians 5:8-17*

"Anything worth doing well is worth doing poorly, until you can do it well." (name of business associate) *Philippians 4:9*

Respectively, these quotes lined up with teachings on the disciples' failing Jesus, the decision of salvation, and evangelism. Rick posits a relationship of semantic equivalence, where the quotes and the Biblical texts share a common meaning. The textual ideology work being accomplished here is discussed below.

The second example from the class involves the appropriation of a model for financial earning. The model is called "The Cash Flow Quadrant" and it comes from Robert Kiyoski's (1998) book of the same title. When presenting this lesson, Rick drew a

circular diagram on the board and divided into four sections. In each “quadrant” he wrote a principle that dictates how people earn money. The model is progressive, with the ideal of moving through the four quadrants as stages. After a brief explanation Rick erased the title and the principles, but not the diagram. He then proceeded to fill in the model again.

The revamped model is titled the “Christ Flow Quadrant.” Rick replaces each of the financial principles with one of his four principles for “achieving the mind of Christ:” “receiving” the Gospel; “growing” in knowledge of the Bible; “discipling” other believers by leading a Christ-like life; and “equipping.” This final principle is positioned as an ideal of faith, where you guide others through this same process of spiritual growth. Throughout his description, Rick wove in other discursive resources. To introduce the model he used Nightingale’s “strangest secret” to describe how this evolution of Christian identity takes place. The lesson was also brimming with Biblical proof-texts, as well as doctrinal requirements of “immersion⁶⁴” and being “born-again⁶⁵.” These examples illustrate Rick’s intricate blending of the discourses of business and Evangelical Christianity. Rick’s participation in the Monday Group demonstrates an alternative means of combining these two discourses.

The Monday Group used a unique method for Bible reading. Rick would ask participants to read a selected number of verses, usually between five and ten. Following each reading was a period of discussion, followed by the next set of texts. In the course of these discussions Rick drew on his business as an interpretive resource. Table 12 shows

⁶⁴ This refers to the baptismal practice of immersing someone completely underwater, as opposed to simply sprinkling him or her with water. Rick emphasized this as a Biblical necessity, as does RMC and the Restoration Movement.

⁶⁵ This refers to the spiritual change that takes place when someone professes a belief in Christ. It is based on the text of John 3 where this phrase appears as Jesus is speaking to the doubting Pharisee Nicodemus. For an extended discussion of “born-again” as a discursive construction see Bielo (2004).

how this resource compares to others invoked during my eight recorded meetings with the group⁶⁶:

Bible Footnote	Business	History	Visions/Dreams	Denomination
15	8	4	3	2

Table 12: Monday Group Interpretive Resources

The following interaction comes from my first recording of the Monday Group, and is a representative example of how Rick incorporated his business experience. It begins with Jonathan reading Hebrews 4:6-8:

Jonathan: *It still remains that some will enter that rest, and those who formerly had the gospel preached to them did not go in, because of their obedience. Therefore God again set a certain day, calling it Today, when a long time later he spoke through David as was said before: "Today, if you hear his voice, do not harden your hearts." For if Joshua had given them rest, God would not have spoken later about another day.*

Rick: Yeah, he capitalized "Today" there because it encompasses until the time he returns again.

Taylor: The beginning of the kingdom, basically.

Me: Sort of, "Today" is every day?

Rick: Yeah.

Taylor: The beginning of the kingdom.

Rick: Yeah. The beginning of the kingdom until he comes again. So, that really denotes his authority over all history, too, that he still calls this day today. He'll come tomorrow today if tomorrow comes.

Jonathan: Yesterday's today. Tomorrow's today.

Rick: Yeah. And, so, I heard an example this past weekend at a function. I thought about this scripture. Frank Feather is a leading futurist in the world who was talking about where business is going. But, this scripture just popped out for some reason. And, somebody asked Frank Feather why he decided to study the future. And, he said, "A professor of mine told me something that stuck in my head. He said the past is the past and there's nothing you can do about it. You blew it, so you can't manage the past. Today, the present, is only here for a nanosecond and then it's the past. So, you can't manage the present. The only thing you can manage is the future." So, once he learned that the future is the only thing you could manage, he focused on the future. And, every decision he made was based upon his future. And, as you look at this, it's like, we have a future. Today is here and half of it's gone, and what I just said is gone. And, so, the idea of "Today," is SO awesome because it, if tomorrow does come there are still people who can come into the kingdom. And, his grace is sufficient for those people to obey.

⁶⁶ Even though Bible footnotes were used most often, the participants' use of this resource was not very significant. Typically, footnotes were consulted briefly prior to or following the group's discussion of Biblical texts. They did not treat these notes as authoritative or absolute in any fashion.

The group homes in on one particular aspect of Hebrews 4:6-8, the reference to “Today.” The group establishes quickly what the capitalization of “Today” means. But, to expound on the significance of the concept, Rick recontextualizes Frank Feather’s statement on the future. Rick connects the verse to the immanence of Christ’s Second Coming (“if tomorrow does come...”), the practice of evangelism (“there are still people who can come into the kingdom...”), and the expansiveness of God’s grace (“his grace is sufficient for those people to obey”). Rick uses the resource of business to extract multiple forms of resonance and relevance from the Biblical text.

Rick’s reliance on his business experience comes across somewhat differently in these two groups, but both are equally implicated in textual ideology work. Two particular linkages are most evident. First, the ideological principle that the Bible is as true today as when it was written runs throughout Rick’s blending of discourses. This happens most clearly when he equates the meaning of Bible verses to quotes from contemporary business gurus. In doing this, he asserts both the authority of the speakers and the ongoing evidence of Biblical messages in the modern age. This also has an open-ended quality, as the list of quotes Rick includes in the course packet is always up for revision. Rick finds new examples of Biblical messages as he attends new seminars and listens to new speakers. The ability to continually find new examples re-iterates the timeless quality of scripture.

Secondly, the textual ideology work of is present in Rick’s affinity for quotes. During one Sunday school class, Rick was asked why he liked quotes so much. He responded:

“Because they are easy to remember. Just look at scripture. It’s organized into chapters and verses. Translators did that. I believe God worked through history to do that. But, it’s like that because that’s how we remember things.”

For Rick, quotes are a divine mandate. This notion is rooted in the textual ideology that the Bible is the authoritative Word of God. It begins with the actual writing of Biblical texts. It extends to everything that has happened to the Bible through history: canonization, translation, and even the division into chapter and verse. God's control over his book dates to the earliest writings and continues through "Today." And, for Rick, designing the lessons for the Mind of Christ occurs in step with textual ideology principles.

The Significance of the Interpretive Matrix

In this chapter I have sketched the composition of the interpretive matrix in small group discourse. I have outlined the three types of resources used within groups, and showcased a variety of specific resources that are invoked. I have also analyzed how these resources function in discourse, how resources impact the unfolding of discussions, and how the same resource can be employed for different purposes. In conclusion, I now turn to broader questions. What is the theoretical significance of the interpretive matrix? Why devote so much attention to this issue of resources?

The first point of significance is the theme that has extended across all of the resources discussed: their role in the ongoing work of textual ideology. As participants find ways to integrate their favored resources into discussions, they also enact their relationship with the Bible. Different cases demonstrated how the use of a given resource carried with it the imprint of one or more principles of the textual ideology. In some cases, like the Tuesday Men and the Iconoclasts, resources were invoked in a way that aligned with the group's primary interpretive orientation to the Bible. In other cases, like Rick's groups, the resource indexed the continuing goal of demonstrating the relevance

of the Bible. In short, the resources of the interpretive matrix are closely connected to the work of affirming ideologies and establishing the proper relationship with the Bible.

A focus on the interpretive matrix also highlights a mechanism that I have not emphasized in other chapters. It ensures that Bible study is not treated in some form of experiential vacuum. Earlier chapters emphasized what unfolds and what is cultivated during Bible study, whereas this chapter shifted the emphasis to what participants bring to Bible study. The lives of members outside of Bible study, and the incorporation of those lives into group discourse, are integral to this chapter. Thus, attention to the interpretive matrix provides a crucial perspective for the analysis of small group Bible study, recognizing the dialogical relation between group discourse and experiences outside of the group. This is what Roberts (2005) calls, “lived Christianity: the types of knowledge, beliefs, practices, experiences, and feelings that members of Christian congregations bring to their religious lives” (4).

Chapter 3 argued that small groups are interpretive communities. Every act of scripture reading in the small group setting relies on a common set of styles for interpreting the Bible, and a common textual ideology. This chapter’s depiction of the interpretive matrix further supports my claim that small groups function as interpretive communities by delineating the types of resources participants rely on to participate in group discourse. This chapter also qualifies the unity and sharedness implicit in chapter three’s presentation of interpretive communities. Indeed, the basis there was defined by a commonality of method and textual ideology. However, the interpretive matrix introduces a sense of variety and idiosyncrasy amidst this commonality. Interpretive communities, much like speech or linguistic communities, can be expected to have

important axes of diversity. Illustrating the range of resources used, and the differing strategies for employing them, ensures the notion of small groups as interpretive communities encompasses this variation.

Lastly, understanding the interpretive matrix of small groups allows for comparative studies. Any type of discourse event will rely on a set of interpretive resources through which its participants filter their contributions. This chapter has shown that small groups are a fine example of how complex any given matrix might be. Perhaps my analyses here will provoke others to ask what constellation of resources defines other discursive situations. How do participants weave these resources into conversation? Are the resources shared or idiosyncratic? Are there any larger structures of meaning or practice that are attached to the use of resources? This type of comparative questioning can lead to better understandings of interpretive matrix as an analytical tool, and the nature of group discourse as a social activity.

The central themes of this analysis – interpretive practice and textual ideology – are continued in the next chapter. At various points in my discussion of the interpretive matrix I identified instances where participants “recontextualized” words of speakers and units of text. Hanks also recognized the intrinsic link between interpretive matrices and the recontextualization of text (1989: 107). In chapter 5 I argue that the central forms of recontextualization in small group discourse – recontextualizations of Biblical texts – are also implicated in the work of Bible interpretation and textual ideology.

Chapter 5: Recontextualizing the Bible in Small Group Discourse

"All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags; we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away."

(Isaiah 64:6, NIV)

Charlie: Jesus talked about personal responsibility, and that is SO Christian. But, there's also a set of weightier matters: justice, love, seeing people as God sees them. We work so hard to do the opposite.

Christine: Who are we to say somebody is going to hell?

Charlie: Well, you know, I use to think I knew. I use to think I knew exactly what the score was. I've discovered in these latter years that that was self-righteousness, and it was wrong. I've discovered that, like the prophet Isaiah said, *my righteousness is as filthy rags*. At this point in my life, I'm feeling like I'm lucky just to get in the door. If the castle door's going to be closing, I'm going to be sliding underneath. I'll settle for the cheap seats, the nosebleeds, as long as I get in. I don't necessarily need to live in the mansion. I can live in a pup tent. I'll be fine.

Vincent: If I choose to do something in my own volition, from my head I guess, to make it more understandable, it's good. But, it may not be what God wants me to do. If my heart's not engaged, my spirit's not engaged, and if He's not talking to me, or I'm not listening to Him, then, I'm going "I think this ought to be done." In a sense, I'm playing God. And, so, here's a little god. There's a little god. And, it says, *your own works are rags to God*.

Daniel: The ninth and tenth commandments are not disconnected with some of the 40 Days of Community stuff, in terms of the accent of not looking after our own affairs only, but also those of others. Maybe take a quick look at Philippians 2, where Paul says: *If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion*. As we think about living a better life, which is what the 10 Commandments would be speaking to us about, that always only grows out from his love for us. In and of ourselves, *all of our righteousness is like filthy rags*, but in Christ and through Christ and because of Christ our hearts are changed. Our lives are made strong and we're better able to live this out.

In the three excerpts above, three speakers from three different groups used the same Biblical text to aid their respective explanations. In this chapter I examine this practice of invoking Biblical texts. In particular, this chapter considers the interpretive, textual ideological, and interactive implications of incorporating the Bible into small group discourse. To frame this analysis I begin with a theoretical and methodological introduction.

Recontextualization as a Discourse Strategy

The practice of invoking Biblical texts exemplifies what Bauman and Briggs call decontextualization and recontextualization: “the process of rendering discourse extractable, of making a stretch of linguistic production into a unit – a text – that can be lifted out of its interactional setting” (1990: 73). In the examples that opened this chapter, *my righteousness is as filthy rags* was extracted from its original contexts of production – a verse, a chapter, and a book in the Bible – and placed into a new discursive setting – group discourse. At first glance, the concept of recontextualization may seem like academic hubris for what is simply a particular form of citation or quotation. However, that claim misunderstands this intertextual process. Acts of recontextualization ultimately provide a meta-commentary on the original context, the extracted textual unit, and the new context. The text is treated as a discrete, objectifiable unit. Its potential for circulation and applicability in new settings is recognized. And, its semantic range and properties are positioned for change (Bauman 2004).

Recontextualization is a concept that was originally developed for the analysis of spoken discourse, particularly performative contexts. But, scholars have also recognized the utility of extending its application across semiotic mediums (cf., Davie 1995; Silverstein and Urban 1996). In the present case, written texts from the Bible are recontextualized as spoken texts in group discourse. Recontextualization is a particularly potent strategy in religious discourse generally because of its transcendent and fluid character (Keane 2004). Others have observed the practice of Biblical recontextualization outside the small group setting. Anna Meigs (1995) argued that the everyday language of conservative Christians was imbued with scriptural references, embedding notions of

obedience and temporal relations between the Biblical past and the present. Robin Shoaps (2002) argued that the verbal genres of prayer and praise songs in Pentecostal church worship draw on Biblical texts in a way that highlights spontaneity and speaker creativity, both valued ideals in the charismatic tradition⁶⁷.

In this chapter I emphasize the significant impact of Biblical recontextualization in the interpretive and interactive qualities of group discourse. I argue that Biblical recontextualization is patterned by the interpretive orientation within the group. I also argue that the style and pattern of Biblical recontextualization indexes principles of the textual ideology, larger discourses operative in American Protestantism, and key interactive norms of the small group setting. I organize these claims in relation to two questions. What does Bible study discourse tell us about Biblical recontextualization? And, what does Biblical recontextualization tell us about Bible study discourse?

To answer these questions, I need to address three issues. The first is methodological in nature: why did I choose the practices of particular speakers as the subjects of my analysis of recontextualization? The second issue is analytical: toward what functional and interpretive ends did participants recontextualize the Bible? The third issue is theoretical: are there any relevant formal properties of recontextualization?

Sampling the Group Participants

Participants from seven of the eight Bible study groups are represented in this chapter⁶⁸. I draw from the recontextualization work of 14 participants. Each was chosen on the basis of two criteria: the number of Biblical recontextualizations made and the

⁶⁷ Cf., Crapanzano (2000), Csordas (1997), Engelke (2004), Harding (2000), Malley (2004), Muse (2005), and Stromberg (1993) for related discussions of how Christians employ Biblical texts.

⁶⁸ The Mind of Christ was not included because multiple meetings were not tape-recorded. However, Rick, who is represented by his participation in the Monday Group, would have been the only participant to be included in the analysis.

individual's role in group discourse. For groups like the Iconoclasts and the Tuesday Men only one the facilitator recontextualized the Bible enough for me to perform an adequate analysis. In the remaining five groups, multiple participants are included. This allows the variety of roles occupied in group discourse to be represented. For example, with the LC-MS women, Joy is not the facilitator, but she was among the most active members, and her contributions were highly valued within the group.

Any form of reference to the Bible was included as an instance of recontextualization. This includes direct quotation, paraphrasing, and invoking the name of a Biblical character, story or event (see below for a discussion of these distinctions). Table 13 identifies the participants I chose from each group, the number of meetings they attended, and their total number of Biblical recontextualizations.

<u>Group</u>	<u>Speaker(s)</u>	<u>Meetin</u>	<u>Recontext.</u>	<u>Avg. Recontext. Per Meeting</u>
Iconoclasts	Charlie	16	120	7.5
McGee Men	Joel, Roland,	12	25, 19, 18	2, 1.6, 1.5
Tuesday Men	Ted	23	79	3.4
LC-MS	Sandy, Joy	26	24, 25	1, 1
LC-MS Men	Daniel, Aaron, Ned	18	73, 57, 20	4, 3.1, 1
Prayer Circle	Darren, Jennifer	14	30, 24	2, 1.7
Monday	Rick, Taylor	8	42, 18	5.2, 2.2

Table 13: Recontextualizations for 14 Bible study participants

Functional and Interpretive Qualities of Recontextualization

Each instance of Biblical recontextualization was analyzed and coded for its usage in group discourse. I developed six codes, which can be divided into three mutually exclusive categories. The table below presents these codes and a brief definition of their function.

<u>Recontext. Style</u>	<u>Definition</u>
Interactive Support	Bible text used to support the contributions of other participants.
Interactive Challenge	Bible text used to challenge the contributions of other participants.
Text Linking	Bible text posited as connected to another Bible text.

Text Interpretation	Bible text posited as informative for interpreting another Bible text.
Critique	Bible text used as the basis for critiquing individuals and groups.
Parallel	Bible text used to establish similarity with individuals or groups.

Table 14: Definitions for recontextualization styles

Recontextualization and Interactive Function

Group members recontextualized the Bible toward two interactive ends: supporting and challenging other group participants. Given the textual ideology principles of authority, this can be understood as the ultimate form of agreement and disagreement. Joy from the LC-MS women offers representative cases of each. The example of support comes from a contrast that had been drawn between the LCMS tradition and “megachurches.” The group firmly agreed that even though they boast impressive memberships, megachurches are too lax on their members:

Sandy: The traditional churches, in their 1940s, 50s style, have lost the ability to attract outside people. Clearly they’re shrinking. Our church body is shrinking.

Joy: So, they’re in the pews. But, what are they hearing, fluff that isn’t doing them any good?

Katherine: That’s what the pastor started preaching, because that’s what they wanted to hear. And, that’s what kept bringing them in, kept bringing the dollars in so they could put it into building the statues and the fountains and everything else.

[[Multiple women agree]]

Joy: Yeah, Jesus did not make it palatable. When the rich, young man wanted to know what he could do to be saved, Jesus didn’t say, “Well, come and follow me for a while, just kind of listen in.” He said, *sell all you have and give it to the poor*. He set it right out, this is what it is and the guy couldn’t do it and he turned and left and Jesus didn’t follow after him and try to make it sound appealing. And, I think there’s too much of trying to make it sound appealing and entertaining. It goes on it a lot of churches. They’re there, but what good is it?

In this example, Joy uses the story of Jesus and “the rich, young man” to support what Sandy, Katherine and others were saying about the growing trend of megachurches. In contrast, Biblical texts can be recontextualized to challenge another participant’s contribution. During one of my final recordings, the topic of tithing arose in response to a study guide question:

Sandy: *What dangers await Christians who submit to legalistic rules and regulations?*

Elinor: Well, even saying you have to tithe can become legalistic.

Sandy: Uh huh. Yeah.

Jane: Yeah. A lot of churches do that.

Sandy: Do we do that?

Sherry: They suggest that that's what God's wants you to do because that's what it says in the Bible. But, you know, you're not forced to. I don't think anybody's pushed out of the church if they don't do it. It's just that, I think that what the church does is try to show you what actually God's blessings are. And, when you do tithe what you're doing it for and why and how it helps you in the long run and what God says he will do for you if you do that. But I don't think that if you don't, I don't know. It's really, actually, a rule that He's made. Don't you think? That's what it is in the Bible. That's what he's asked us to do. And, if we can't do it, if we don't have the money to do it that's one thing.

Sandy: You can't take ten percent of what you don't have.

Frita: It doesn't say in the New Testament to tithe. It says to *be a cheerful giver*. In the Old Testament they did tithe, but in the New Testament it doesn't SAY, because we had a pastor that used to really, "It doesn't say anything about tithing." He said, "You should, because tithing means, if you have a lot of money you shouldn't just be giving a tenth, you should be giving more." You're supposed to give from the heart.

Joy: But, Jesus tells the Pharisees, *I don't want you to just tithe, I want you to bring your offerings*. They were making a big to do about tithing their cumin and whatever their spices were.

In this example, Joy uses Jesus' words to the Pharisees as a means of arguing against Frita's stance toward tithing. These two styles of Biblical recontextualization occurred in all seven groups. The strategy of support was far more common for each of the 14 participants. In the final section of this chapter, I consider the larger resonance of this trend.

Recontextualization as Meta-Commentary

The second style of recontextualization encompasses the use of scriptural texts to provide a meta-commentary on the Bible. I divide this style into two distinct types: (1) linking scriptures together and (2) interpreting another Biblical text. To demonstrate these I use Rick's participation in the Monday Group.

They had just read Hebrews 8:10-13. They puzzled for a moment over whether the time of the *new covenant* described in these three verses has arrived.

Janice: So, has this time come yet?

Rick: Uh, yeah. Because he has just got done talking about what Jesus' ministry is. So, people who, what's that say...[[trails off]]

{9.0}

Janice: Just that not everybody *knows Him from the least to the greatest.*

Rick: Right. Not everybody knows him.

Janice: So, how can it be now?

Rick: You're thinking it's some time in the future when Christ comes back and heaven is a reality?

Janice: I'm not really thinking, just making an observation.

[[Laughs]]

Janice: Like, you mentioned that girl [earlier]. She didn't know anything about the Bible or God and she's right here in the midst of all of us.

Taylor: I wonder what that Hebrew word translates, though, as "know"? Knowledge of?

Rick: Yeah.

Taylor: You know, there's a lot of real, very relational definitions of that word.

Janice: Mhmm. But, we're still supposed to be teaching our neighbors.

Taylor: Oh, exactly.

Janice: And, it says, *no longer will a man teach his neighbor.*

Taylor: That's right.

Rick: That sounds like the, yeah, the total promise right there. But, I think it's all intertwined together. It's like, Romans 11:27 says, *and this is my covenant with them when I take away their sins.*

The use of recontextualization to link Biblical texts together was the most consistent strategy across the sample. It was the most common in four groups (LCMS Men and Women, Prayer Circle, Monday Group) and the second most common in two others (Iconoclasts and McGee Men). When participants engaged in this strategy they posited that two Biblical texts share semantic, rhetorical, and/or functional properties. Linking embeds the assumption that the linked Biblical texts mean or imply the same thing and/or are applicable to the same issue. In the above example, Rick uses this strategy to make sense of the confusion surrounding Hebrews 8:10-13 by paralleling it to Romans 11:27.

In a related fashion, Biblical texts were used to interpret other Biblical texts. During the following week's meeting, Rick asks the group to reconcile a seeming tension between Hebrews 10:19 (*Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus*) and Philippians 2:12 (*Therefore, my dear friends, as you have always obeyed – not only in my presence, but now much more in my absence – continue to work out your salvation with fear and trembling*). The tension is between

salvation attitudes of *confidence* and *fear and trembling*. Rick responds to his rhetorical question:

“What God wants is our obedience. Yeah, there is a fear of God. But, it’s a righteous fear, a Godly fear of who He is. Says in, what we’ll read later on, it says *our God is a consuming fire*. And, it also says *it is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God*. You know. So, but, we can have confidence as well. How do we do that? Well, how do you combine those two? Well, God wants a relationship with us. That’s the whole context of this, really, is He wants a relationship with His people. Many people get the idea that He’s a guy up there with a white beard ready to pound people down to the ground. Jesus said, *if you have seen me, you have seen the father*. How can we expect God to react to what we do when we sin? I would look at Jesus. How did he treat sin? He didn’t accept excuses. He loved the people, but he said, like the woman caught in adultery. He defended her. Then, he said, *go, don’t sin anymore. Don’t get caught in a place where this could happen. Just don’t even get near it*. Quite often, we find ourselves in that same situation. What do we do? Give in to it. But, God even has grace over that. *My little children if any of you do sin*, John goes on to say.”

In this example, Rick uses the words of Jesus and John to resolve the seeming tension between the texts from Hebrews and Philippians. The use of Biblical recontextualization as an interpretive tool embeds the commentary that scriptural texts can (and should) be used to interpret other scriptures. When one text is unclear, the best way to clarify it is to consult another Biblical passage. This style of recontextualization was less common than linking, but still had an active presence in most groups. The only exception was the Iconoclasts, who did not read directly from a Biblical text. The styles of linking and interpretation are connected in that they both operate internal to the Bible, providing commentary on the nature of the Bible.

Recontextualization as Application

The third style of recontextualizing the Bible encompasses two types of text-external strategies, where the premise is that the Bible can be applied to contemporary life. The first strategy uses the Bible as a tool for critique. The object of this critique varied from the modern Church in America to the life of the speaker to non-Christians. The second strategy uses the Bible as a source of commonality. Parallels were drawn

between Biblical characters and events and contemporary personages and events. The Iconoclasts facilitator, Charlie, provides examples of these strategies, all of which occurred during their first meeting for The Jesus I Never Knew.

Charlie employed the strategy of critique far more than he did any of the other recontextualization styles. This partially reflects the text that was the focus of the discussion, The Jesus I Never Knew. The book thoroughly critiques how modern believers conceptualize Jesus. However, Charlie's participation in group discourse was more inclusive. He used a Biblical text to critique an earlier phase of his own spiritual development:

"Baptist Christianity fit me to a tee – performance orientation, hypocrisy. I was a hypocrite and nobody had to know about it. I could out perform anybody in terms of the vocabulary and the outward lifestyle. It took me a long time to realize that God is a judge of a man's inward heart, and that *my righteousness is as filthy rags*."

Charlie placed contemporary American Christianity, the object of the book's critique, at odds with scripture:

"We've taken Jesus and we've compartmentalized and put him in a spot that we're comfortable with. And, when you look at what Jesus says about himself, and the things he does in the Gospels, many times in the church we do exactly the reverse. Jesus said, *Judge not lest you be judged*. And, we judge people EVERY single day that go wandering into our lives and into the church. That's why I was just so blown away when I read the Gospels this last time around, because the reverse culture, the upside down world that Jesus talks about we don't do. We put together our little systems, our orders, and we go about our business."

The "we" in this example could be construed as a localized critique, perhaps of the group or the local congregation. But, it is clear from Charlie's other remarks that "we" includes the broader category of American Christians. Lastly, Charlie distances contemporary American society from scripture:

"The thing that it's all about, at the end of the day, is what's presented in the Gospels. The Gospels are so revolutionary compared to how we live in our society. Give you an example: *the last shall be first and the first shall be last*. That's out of the Beatitudes. In our society, the first shall be first. Those who die with the most toys win. In God's

economy, those who have died with the most toys have a lot of toys on earth, but you ain't got nothing when you get to heaven.”

In these examples, Charlie uses the Bible as the basis for criticizing various targets: himself, American Christians, and American society. This style of recontextulization contrasts deficient beliefs or practices to Biblical authority, timelessness, and ideals. It implicitly asserts a separation between what should be and what is happening.

Biblical texts were also recontextualized to suggest a parallel between the Bible and modern life. The Iconoclasts’ second meeting opened with a question from Charlie: “What was your first image of Jesus?” Several participants affirmed that they could relate to the image described by the book’s author. Charlie then related a strategy he uses for reading the Bible:

“I always try to analogize these situations into modern equivalents so we can understand them. I thought of the story when Jesus, when *he threw the moneychangers out of the temple. You read that he threw the moneychangers out of the temple because they were selling {one word unclear}*. And, I thought, alright, they were making profits. I thought what would be a modern example of that? I thought, I got it. Jesus comes in and he goes into {our church} and he takes the cash register out of the bookstore and pitches it into the parking lot. I thought that wouldn’t be a bad, kind of working analogy.”

In this example, Charlie draws the analogy between the story of Jesus and the moneychangers and the bookstore that operates out of the group’s local church. This style of recontextualization sets up parallels between Bible events and personages and their contemporary equivalents. The implication is that modern life operates in much the same way as the world of the Bible. The example above is used as a form of critique, but this style was also employed as a demonstration of how individuals and groups were meeting the standard set forth by the Bible.

Formal Properties of Biblical Recontextualization

This chapter highlights forms of recontextualization that are not usually emphasized by other scholars in the field of discourse analysis. The latter group typically focus on the formal and stylistic features of discourse. For example, in her analysis of recontextualization in prayer and praise songs, Shoaps (2002) pays particular attention to marked prosody, meta-pragmatic devices, evidentiality, deictics, locutives, and specialized registers. This emphasis is consistent with the pioneering “discourse-centered approach” articulated by Sherzer (1987) and Urban (1991). This work proceeds from the notion that meaning is not only (or, in many cases, primarily) constructed referentially. Communicative events also embed meaning through stylistic, structural, and other formal properties of discourse. That rich stream of research suggests a valid question for this study: are there any significant formal properties of Biblical recontextualization?

Earlier I noted that I included all forms of reference as instances of recontextualization, clearly combining types of reference that differ in formal terms. For example, direct quotation accesses the original context of the Bible differently than simply making mention of a Biblical character, story, or event. We can distinguish this latter type of recontextualization as a form of “metonymy,” a metaphorical device in which a part is enabled to stand for a whole, and vice versa (Lakoff and Johnson 1980). In their original discussion of recontextualization, Bauman and Briggs highlight the practice of metonymic substitution as a potentially important process (1990:77). They cite Keith Basso’s (1990) work among the Western Apache as an exemplary account of how a single textual unit – a place name – can be imbued with rich, powerful, and cumulative cultural meaning (e.g., moral narratives). Metonymic substitution was a less

common style of recontextualization, but it did occur with some frequency. Table 15 lists the percentage of each speaker's recontextualization work that occurred as metonymy.

Speaker	% Metonymy	Total #
Charlie	20	13
Joel	12	3
Roland	5	1
Vincent	38	5
Ted	20	16
Sandy	46	11
Joy	8	2
Aaron	14	17
Daniel	30	10
Ned	20	4
Darren	17	5
Jennifer	-	-
Rick	12	5
Taylor	6	1

Table 15: Metonymic recontextualizations for 14 Bible study participants

Metonymic reference is striking because of the dialogical construction of meaning underlying the ability to forego more direct quotation. Certain texts can communicate entire narratives and lessons using a single word or phrase. Participants were apt to invoke a particular range of Biblical texts metonymically. In particular, Old Testament character stories, the parables of Jesus, and Gospel accounts of Jesus' interactions were approached in this way, as the following examples demonstrate.

The following exchange is from the Tuesday Men. It took place at the opening of their discussion of Acts 4:23-27, and begins with the reading of the first study guide question: "What does their prayer tell us about their faith in the character, power and faithfulness of God?"

Eddie: I wrote down persecution, opposition, trouble can be seen as from God's hand and plan...
To expect trouble. But, in the midst of this, God provides boldness and healing and signs and wonders. One of the amazing things is that we're saved out of trouble. In fact, we get in trouble. And, this, I think, is a hard thing to face. As long as we don't have it too hard to think that our Christianity's getting us in trouble.

Ted: Well, and I think even that we tend to think of that in the opposite way. Much like the Jewish theological thought in *Job*'s day. The thought was that Job must have done something wrong, or else he wouldn't have the trouble.

The story of Job is among the most common Old Testament texts that were recontextualized metonymically in small group discourse. The book of Job, some 42 chapters long, has been distilled to represent an ideal: faithfulness in the face of hardship. The social circulation of this text and the accompanying distillation of meaning have made it amenable to metonymic substitution. Indeed, simply saying the name "Job," as Ted does above, inserts this particular script – faithfulness in the face of hardship – into group discourse. The same process occurs with the genre of the parable.

As the Iconoclasts neared the end of the night's meeting, their reading from The Jesus I Never Knew included this statement on the concept of grace: "In God's economy, there are no undesirables." Charlie picks up this thread to begin the discussion:

Charlie: In Jesus, in God's Economy, there are no undesirables. If you have a heart for the Lord, and you are willing to say in your mind and in your spirit, "Dear God, I'm a sinner. I've got no hope, except for you," you're in. You've made it to the varsity. Not only did you make it to the varsity, you get to start.

Diane: Right, which makes going back to that original question all the harder. How is it our churches turned into these places where you have to have certain expectations in order to go through the door?

Lauren: Because that's not fair. God's way's not fair.

Jill: Yeah. You think of the murderer who's been committing all those, the last thing he does...[[Overlaps with LB]]

Lauren: "It's not right. How can you do all this rotten thing, and right before, you repent and you do it. It's just not right." We want fairness.

Charlie: I'm reminded of that *Parable of the Laborer*.

Lauren: Of the laborer, right.

Christine: Exactly.

Monday Group provides a similar example. As they neared the end of John 1, Rick responds to a footnote he read from his Bible:

"I would agree with the former part of this, saying that he's speaking directly against Gnostic teaching and that people who are Christians and go into that type of teaching and leave the Word, they're in REAL danger, spiritual danger. That's what I learned, from many different people, and it makes sense. It's like a choice of severing the relationship.

You have a relationship with God and now you go back into those things, which God has saved you from. I believe a person could come back from that if they repented. I mean, we have the example of *The Prodigal Son*. But, if a person continues to just deny the power of God, and chooses to live his life that way, I think they're in real danger."

In both examples, parables are invoked iconically, representing particular claims:

"fairness" and 'coming back to God.' The efficacy of the metonymic property is evidenced in Charlie's use of the *Parable of the Laborer*, as two other participants were quick to affirm his reference.

Metonymy, then, occupies a particular position within the practice of recontextualization. The need for direct quotation is alleviated. The lives of characters and the unfolding of narratives are distilled for a core meaning that can be efficiently deployed with the substitution of a name. Through their circulation in small groups, other congregational settings, and other institutions this meaning has been sedimented in their memory as the most appropriate reading and interpretation.

The foregoing accounts for a number of theoretical and methodological issues involved in the practice of recontextualizing the Bible and sets the stage for the main concerns of this chapter. I begin with an analysis of how the interpretive environment of small group discourse impacts the style of recontextualization.

What does Bible study discourse tell us about Biblical recontextualization?

In this section I argue that the style of recontextualization employed by participants indexes the interpretive orientation of the group. In some groups, the interpretive orientation is shared, and the recontextualization style is consistent among all participants. In other groups, the interpretive orientation is contested, and multiple recontextualization styles operate.

This dynamic between interpretive orientation and recontextualization style has been observed in other institutional settings. James Collins (1996) has argued that in primary school classrooms the recontextualization of lesson texts aligns with one of two orientations: pragmatic or semantic. The former is concerned with pronunciation and the latter with establishing meaning. Elizabeth Mertz (1996) argued that in the discourse of law school classrooms legal texts are recontextualized in a manner consistent with the dominant ideology toward these texts cultivated through socialization into law school. Richard Bauman (1996), in his work with Mexican nativity plays, argued that differing relationships to the play script led to differing levels of faithfulness during recontextualizations. In each of these cases, the relation between interpretive orientation and recontextualization style is upheld.

Three case studies demonstrate this argument in the context of small group Bible study: the Tuesday Men, the LCMS men, and the McGee Men. In the Tuesday Men and LC-MS Men the group facilitators' contrasting recontextualization styles are indicative of the entire group. The McGee Men offer an example of multiple recontextualization styles due to competing interpretive orientations.

The Tuesday Men were described at length in chapter 1. They met weekly to read and discuss the New Testament book of Acts. The 23 sessions I recorded cover the first eight chapters. They used the LifeGuide series as a study guide to structure their discussions (see Appendix 3). The size of the group ranged from four to eight participants, with the same six men present on a weekly basis. The facilitator, Ted, is the church pastor and accounted for the vast majority of Biblical recontextualizations.

The interpretive orientation of the Tuesday Men was distinct within the project sample. The following interaction occurred during the group's reading of Acts 5:1-11, in which Ananais and Sapphira lie to the apostles about how much money the former received for selling their land. The study guide question asks, "What have Ananais and Sappharia done that is not consistent with the Christian community?" The men easily identify the sin as lying. This leads Ted to pose his own question: "I think a big question that people have that just read this is why did they die?"

This question returns us to the interpretive style of explanation and the process of textual inferencing. In this case, Acts 5 does not explicitly announce the reason for, or cause of, Ananais and Sapphira's death. Ted's question requires the men to infer from their background knowledge the reason for the couple's death (cf., Fairclough 1989). The most frequent explanation inferred from the text is asserted by George, who cites a footnote from his study Bible:

"I was thinking they'd want to nip it in the bud. I'll read you what this says. 'This act was judged harshly because dishonesty, greed, and covetousness are destructive in a church, preventing the Holy Spirit from working effectively. All lying is bad, but when we lie to try to deceive God and his people about our relationship with him we destroy our testimony for Christ.'"

This inference, that their death was the result of God's judgment, draws on a theological form of background knowledge emphasizing God's judicial character. Ted immediately offers an alternative inference:

"I don't think God zapped them. I think the Church was so committed to this kind of lifestyle that when they realized what they'd done, I mean, there's such a sensibility. There's that great line in the hymn 'Take Time to Be Holy.' And, there's a number of things that are asked for by the writer of that hymn, but one of them is a sensibility to sin. A sensing, an ability to sense and to be clear when sin comes. And, I think that was so much a part of this community. And, when Ananais and Sappharia realized what they'd done it just took them out. And, that's pretty hard. I think one of the reasons why that's hard for us to believe is because we tend to be so far from it. I think we're a long ways from that."

Ted's inference, that their death was the result of overwhelming guilt, draws on background knowledge: the ideal of the first century Church and the contemporary church's distance from that ideal state.

The group instantly, and positively, responded to this inference, which indexes the interpretive orientation of the group described in chapter 3. They read Acts as a running comparison between the Church of Acts and the modern American Church. They inevitably concluded that the current Church is at odds with or deficiently represents the standard set by the Church of Acts. This mode of approaching the Bible is not inevitable. Like any text it is polysemous, and can be engaged from multiple interpretive orientations. Considering the abundance of potential proof-texts for charismatic expressions in the first eight chapters of Acts, a likely alternative might be a running discussion on the availability of the gifts of tongues and healing for modern believers.

Given this interpretive orientation, what should be expected from Ted's recontextualization style? Consider the following three examples. The first comes from a discussion of how the group understands the role of the Holy Spirit in their lives. After a lengthy pause, Ted interrupts the silence.

"I like David Siemens, who was our pastor when we were at seminary. He's a very practical guy. And, I like practical theologians. And, he said, "I get up every morning and I pray, Holy Spirit, lead me today. And, then, I trust that the Holy Spirit's leading me, until the Spirit comes and checks me and either stops me or leads me in a different direction." And, I like that. I think that's surprising. I think we waste a lot of time. I think folks spend a whole lot of time waiting for signs and wonders and miracles, when what they mostly need to do is say, "Holy Spirit lead me today," and then go in the direction that makes sense and trust that that's the way it is. When we get later on here in the book of Acts you see Paul saying, *the Holy Spirit stopped us, kept us from going into Macedonia*. We don't know how that happened. But, I suspect, it may have been something very practical."

Second, during a discussion of the relational concept of accountability, Ted comments:

"Well, the practice of confession and going to another person who represents God, I think we misinterpret Luther sometimes when we talk about the priesthood of all believers,

saying that means I can just go to God myself. Luther's point was that anybody can be a priest to another, wasn't that we can just do it on our own. I think in our zeal to move away from what may have been, what was some negative things around the hierarchy of the Church, we have lost some of the importance of confession and accountability and some of the things that are gifts. I mean, scripture talks to us about *the gifts of confessing to one another*, and really being in that level. It's a whole other level of relationship."

The final example comes from the group's reading of Stephen's speech in Acts 7, where he defends his proclamation of Jesus as Christ to the Jewish Sanhedrin.

"I think Stephen is a guy filled with grace and love, filled with the Holy Spirit. He didn't want to just beat them. I think sometimes we just want to win. And, if you just want to win then I think it's anger and those kinds of things that come out. If I just want to be right and point out where you're wrong, that's a whole different attitude. I mean, it's what Paul talks about when he talks about *speaking the truth in love*. Stephen is speaking the truth."

These three recontextualizations coalesce around a single interpretive feature.

Ted's recontextualization style posits a disconnect between the actions and motivations of Biblical characters and that of modern believers. Paul's words in regard to the Holy Spirit, the scriptural call to confession, and Paul's directive about speaking the truth are all drawn into the group's discourse in ways that imply dissonance. Ted's recontextualizations work to support the group's interpretive orientation, to demonstrate where the modern Church falls short of the example provided by Acts. This relationship between textual orientation and recontextualization style is evident in the other project groups as well. A contrasting case comes from the LCMS Men.

The LC-MS Men met weekly at a local restaurant. They spent 12 meetings studying the Old Testament book of Proverbs. The group did not use a study guide, preferring to discuss "what verses struck them" from an assigned number of chapters. The size of the group was considerably larger and more variable than the Tuesday Men, with between 10 and 27 participants from week-to-week. The group typically had 18 and

25 men present. The facilitator, Daniel, was the church pastor and the most apt to recontextualize the Bible in group discourse.

As with the Tuesday Men, the group had a distinctive interpretive orientation. Consider the following example. During their discussion of Proverbs 31, for example, one of the participants inquired about verses six and seven: *Give beer to those who are perishing, wine to those who are in anguish; let them drink and forget their poverty and remember their misery no more:*

...

Daniel: Here's what I've looked at with this. Will I spend my days in drunkenness when I have been made rich by the Kingdom of God? I'm not sure it's really arguing in favor of keeping poor people drunk. I don't think that's really the intention. I think the accent's on verse 4: *It's not for kings, O Lemuel – not for kings to drink wine, nor for rulers to crave beer.* I think it's a statement about, if you've got important stuff you need to keep your wits about you. Let people that don't have important stuff, let them get hammered all day; but, not if you're going to be a king. You need your wits about you. And, to think about our own lives as people of God. We are not the poor. We are not the impoverished. And, it's good for us to keep our wits about us.

...

Aaron: I think it is tongue-in-cheek. It's almost backwards. It's almost, doesn't really mean what it says. It means just the opposite. It's not good to be drunk. So, the fools that are drunk probably are poor. Those that are bitter at heart probably got that way because they've been drinking too much wine.

...

Daniel: What do you make of this? Is this prescriptive? Are we supposed to go out and encourage poor people to get hammered?

Ned: Well, isn't four like what we talked about earlier, all the stuff about riches aren't necessarily millions of dollars, but *more than conquerors through the Gospel* type of thing? How come it changes when it talks about alcohol? For those who are poor, maybe a couple of drinks will loosen them up.

Andy: Well, it says *give beer to those who are perishing*. Does that mean dying?

Man: Or, does that mean going to hell?

Andy: Or, does that mean going to hell? Right. Which one does it mean? If it means they're dying and they're miserable...[[interrupted]]

Daniel: Is it just early form of hospice?

Andy: Right. Is it like a drug so you don't have to suffer? You won't realize the pain you have or the suffering you're going through, because it will keep you in a comatose state. They didn't have morphine back then, but they had beer and wine.

{2.0}

Aaron: Because of what it says just prior to that, like you mentioned, in positions of authority that don't drink, keep a clear head. Then, what follows is kind of satire. Who gets drunk? The fool. Those that are bitter. I think it's kind of backwards, like you said.

Daniel: Saying, if you're gonna be a leader you need your wits about you. Let people that aren't going anywhere in life, if they want to waste their life in poverty and drinking.

Andy: Or, is there a danger saying that's satirical, and really don't take its true meaning. Then, other people who go to other passages of the Bible and say the same thing. So, now we're picking it apart. So, you'll interpret it the way you want it and I'll interpret it the way I want it to fit my needs and my beliefs. There's a danger there.

Daniel: We make a statement; I think I talked a little bit about this. Understanding the Bible literally and understanding the Bible literalistically. We want to understand the Bible literally, which means we take the pieces and parts as they're intended to be. That, an historical passage we understand as history. A poetical thing we understand as poetry. A figure of speech we understand to be a figure of speech. A, what's that called, a hyperbole. We say, "I could eat a thousand horses." Well, we aren't asking for a thousand horses. And, the trick is, though, to figure out what kind of literature is this? Is this a satirical statement? Is there a poetical statement? Is this a command? Literalistically would be to take everything and just say, "oh, yeah. Let's get a Budweiser truck and go start passing it out." But, what we might do is come in to a question about: well, what kind of literature is this?

This example characterizes the interpretive orientation of the group quite well.

Throughout their study of Proverbs, the LC-MS men wrestled with interpretive dilemmas. Here the dilemma is assigning the text to the proper genre. What is striking is their inclination to wrestle with questions of meaning internal to the text. This contrasts sharply with the text-external focus of the Tuesday Men.

One of the recurring interpretive dilemmas the group faced was the seeming contradiction between promises from Proverbs and other examples, from the Bible and from the everyday lives of participants. The question arose on several occasions whether or not a text should be considered as a promise from God at all. Their first encounter with this came in their reading of Proverbs 3 and 4. Pierce, a non-LCMS member but the son of a lifelong member, challenged the group:

"As your non-denom brother, I feel obligated that we don't skip over seven through ten, which reads like this: *Do not be wise in your own eyes; fear the Lord and shun evil. This will bring health to your body and nourishment to your bones. Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.* And, you know, *the Word became flesh and dwelt among us.* Jesus became flesh as the Word, and the Word we believe in has right there healing and prosperity. It's in there like Prego. I mean, it's in there."

Daniel's deftly dulls Pierce's edgy delivery: "Yeah. That's one of the issues that you have to deal with Proverbs. How much of this is promise? How much of this is just generally the case?" Several participants then traded examples from the Old Testament that supported and challenged the reading of the verse as a promise.

Pierce's denominational and theological distance from the group fueled this particular interaction. But, the pursuit of this ongoing interpretive dilemma also came from Daniel and other longtime LC-MS members. The following example comes from their study of Proverbs 20, 21, and 22. Sam, an early adult convert from the Baptist tradition, now in his early 50s, posed a question: "Twenty-two, verse six, *Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not turn from it*. I guess my question is, how much of that can you hang on to?" After competing examples were offered, Daniel responded:

"I think this is one of those words, like I suppose all the words, that we need to understand in terms of letting Scripture interpret Scripture. You always have to see this in the context of everything else that's said. For instance, *train up a child in the way he should go and when he's old he won't depart*. 'Oh, my kid turned out to be this wayward ner-do-well, good-for-nothing. Maybe I failed. It's my fault.' Well, but then we balance that out with another verse that says, *the soul that sins shall die*. There's a personal culpability, and so we balance it out."

As with the Tuesday Men, the interpretive orientation of the group's discourse is mirrored in the facilitator's recontextualization style. Consider the following three examples. The first is a concluding statement Daniel gives after the group's discussion of Proverbs 14, 15, and 16:

"I wanted to cross-reference Proverbs 16:4 that we were talking about for a while: *The Lord works out everything for his own ends, even the wicked for a day of disaster*. I wonder if that one's somewhat connected to the Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat where Jesus tells this story about, *no, let the weeds grow up with the wheat. At the right time, God works it out; He'll take the harvest*. And, if it's not just another word about, hang on, God's watching. God's gonna work things out. And, if you trust in Him it's all gonna come out in the wash."

Second, Daniel frames the group's discussion of Proverbs 17 with an introduction that ended as follows:

"In a number of the verses we're looking at today I think there's an accent on truthfulness. And, maybe John 8:43 would be a good one to focus some of those verses we're looking at. Jesus is kind of squawking with these, some of the Jews. Some of whom, it looks like, believed in Him, but some of them continue to give him a hard time. And, they were talking about, *we're Abraham's children*. And, Jesus said, *I don't think that's who your dad really is*. There's a number of accents on, in the chapters we're looking at today, on truth. And, this is a thing I hammer on for the catechism kids. When they're lying, they're speaking Satan's language. It's not unlike what Jesus says about adultery. He said: *Okay, that's your goal not to commit adultery. I'm gonna up the stakes. Whoever looks on a woman has already committed adultery.*"

Lastly, from the group's reading of Proverbs 26 and 27, one participant raises Proverbs 26:12 for discussion: *Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him*. Daniel responds:

"What's the thing in the New Testament about the Pharisee praying and then the other guy goes in and says: *Be merciful to me a sinner*. But, about the Pharisee it says: *the Pharisee praying to himself*. And, the accent was on *himself*, rather than real prayer. And, this is *wise in my own mind*."

Clearly this is not the same style of recontextualization practiced by Ted with the Tuesday Men. The interpretive work accomplished in recontextualization is not a matter of defining the relation between the Bible and the modern believer. Daniel's recontextualizations are involved in establishing parallels, but parallels among scriptures. More specifically, they are parallels between the Old and New Testaments. The Parable of the Weeds and the Wheat, Jesus' words about adultery, and the prayer of a Pharisee are introduced in order to posit a commonality in principle between the two testaments. Daniel is embedding an interpretation that links the Old and New Testaments. It is an interpretation that these two testaments do indeed speak to one another, inform one another, and combine to present a single, cohesive narrative. The text-internal emphasis of the group's discourse, particularly their dealings with the category of 'God's

promises,' presents a tension that problematizes the Bible's consistency and clarity.

Daniel's recontextualizations mediate this. Linking Old and New Testament texts affirms the Bible's continuity, balancing the ongoing interpretive dilemmas encountered by the group.

Not every group is as uniform in its interpretive concerns as the Tuesday Men and the LCMS Men. Small group discourse can be characterized by a co-mingling of interests. In these cases, the link between textual orientation and recontextualization results in a variety of styles for incorporating Biblical texts into group discourse. I use two participants from the McGee Men as a case study.

Unlike the other two groups, the McGee Men met every other week. The group is closer in size to the Tuesday Men, with five core participants and nine total members. I have 12 recorded meetings that cover their study of the New Testament book of James. They used a verse-by-verse commentary by the Fundamentalist commentator J. Vernon McGee (1955). The two participants I consider, Joel and Vincent, approached the Bible study experience in markedly different ways. In turn, their recontextualization styles diverge. The following example demonstrates this difference. This interaction comes from their response to James 4:9: *Be afflicted and mourn and weep. Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to heaviness*:

Jason: I have a little problem with this. I mean, being a follower of God and having God in your life should be a joyful experience.

Dennis: Yep. Definitely.

Joel: But, there's a time to mourn. For instance, right after the Tsunami, with dead people all over the place. There's a time not to celebrate and be joyful, but a time to have a feeling of massive heaviness and mourning. It's just like in the first chapter of James. Now, how do you reconcile this? He says, *my brothers, count it all a joy when you fall into all kinds of temptations*. In all things that happen to you that are bad, count it a joy. And, so, now he says *weep and mourn*. They're both part of human existence, aren't they?

...

Vincent: This is the way The Message says verse nine: *quit playing the field. Hit bottom and cry your eyes out. The fun and games are over. Get serious. Really serious. Get down on your knees before the Master. It's the only way you'll get on your feet.* Kind of interesting. I went through a period of time when I was being broken. And, a lot of things happened and I was a Christian, but a couple of people came into my life uninvited. My girlfriend went and bought me a Living Bible. Not because she was a Christian, but because she knew I wanted one and I wasn't going to go into a Bible store and get one. You know, that would indicate that I had some needs and didn't have it all together. And, I started reading it and I got into a Bible study through one of these individuals, and was just really accepted... I was being broken out of my circumstances. My heart was being opened as I was reading and studying and being disciplined, if you will. And, then, as I started getting on my feet, very slowly, month after month, year after year, I was able to do more again and got more involved. And, the balance started changing. And, I started being less broken and I started, I was starting to, my attention was, and pretty soon my devotions were getting shorter and shorter. My attention was getting on whatever was interesting at the time, excited and enthusiastic and so on. And, then I, only more recently again, have as circumstances kind of broken me again and the balance has gone back. So that I'm now going in, I'm receiving a lot more instruction and training and preaching in unexpected ways. And, my heart is starting to open up again. So, when I read any of these... I hang on every word because it's so meaningful to me, because my heart is more open and less guarded.

What contrast do the two men enact? What types of interpretive work are they pursuing? In Vincent's case, the focus is clear. How does the Bible speak to *my* life? How does it apply to *me*? Where do I see *myself* in this text? Joel's focus is much closer to the LCMS Men's emphasis. He is concerned with an issue internal to the text, specifically a potential tension between Biblical texts. This co-mingling of interests characterizes the group's discourse as a whole, with several members following in Vincent's stead and several others favoring Joel's approach to reading and interacting with the Bible.

The struggle to balance these interpretive styles proved a difficult one for the group (cf., Chapter 3). Several participants commented to me in private that members have joined and left based on their evaluation of the group's emphasis. One member stopped coming because the group was "not intellectual enough," desiring more text-internal discussion. Yet, another member stopped coming because the group was "too

intellectual,” frustrated with the lack of personal application. Clearly, both men were correct in their evaluations given the back and forth movement of the group’s discourse.

As with the Tuesday and LC-MS Men, the interpretive orientations of Vincent and Joel are reflected in their recontextualization practice. My analyses show 34 text-external recontextualizations by Vincent, compared to only 10 involved with linking or interpretation. On the other hand, Joel employed 45 text-internal recontextualizations and only four cases of critique or parallel. One example from each will suffice. In response to James 2:11-13, Joel links his reading of the text to another Biblical text:

Joel: I like that last thing I think, everything’s summed up in that: *Mercy trumps judgment*. That’s what I think. It trumps judgment. And, then, they might have said the same thing Jesus said. He said, then *which does the Pharisee neglect? Justice. Mercy. Love of God*. Micah says, *what does God require of you? Justice, mercy, and to walk humbly*.

In contrast, Vincent looks to scripture for a parallel when discussing the issue of tithing:

Vincent: It’s giving back to God ten percent of what he gives me type of thing. And, so there’s teaching there. It’s not a begging, but it’s kind of like informing people of what their, well think about Paul and when he asked for money. I mean, he was pretty direct and almost relentless. But, he, in the letters we have, he says, *Give but do not give grudgingly. Don’t give beyond your means. Give from your ability to give*.

In sum, there is a distinctive interaction taking place in the discourse of small group Bible study. This interaction is between the interpretive orientation of the group and the preferred recontextualization style of its participants. This interaction is not unique to Bible study. As described earlier, the same dynamic has been observed in legal (Mertz 1996), educational (Collins 1996), and theatrical (Bauman 1996) institutions.

What does Biblical recontextualization tell us about Bible study discourse?

I have just illustrated how the practice of recontextualization can be read in light of group discourse. The remainder of this chapter asks what can be observed about group

discourse based on recontextualization. I argue there are (at least) three larger discourses evident in the way participants recontextualize the Bible.

Textual Ideology

I described in chapter 2 the nature of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible amongst the individuals and groups individuals involved in this research. Textual ideology refers to the constellation of beliefs, attitudes, assumptions, and expectations believers hold about the Bible. Six principles form the core of this ideology. The first two principles deal with the Bible's authoritative character as the Word of God and as a timeless textual artifact. The second set of principles encompasses the relevancy of the Bible to modern believers. It is a text that always promises application, and it can be precisely applied to individual circumstances. The final two principles deal with the Bible's textuality, namely its character as a cohesive narrative and the aesthetic perfection of its language. The central claim of this dissertation is that small group discourse occurs against the backdrop of this ideology, creating situations of interaction between textual ideology and textual practice. Recontextualization is one area where this relationship unfolds.

Each of the recontextualization strategies I have described – linking, interpretation, critique, and parallel – are imbued with principles of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible. Linking is closely tied to the principle of the Bible as a cohesive narrative. To suggest that discrete Biblical texts have the same meaning, implication, or application assumes the entire operates as a whole, as opposed to as a collection of disparate texts. The practice of bringing together scriptures – often from different books, testaments, authors, genres, and time periods – accomplishes this ideological work quite

well. The textuality of the Bible is embedded in this style and is restated each time it happens. This principle of textuality is also part of the recontextualization strategy of interpretation. The meta-commentary evident here goes back to the Reformation maxim that scripture should be used to interpret scripture (Hagen et al. 1985). This assumes the ideological principle of authority. Scripture should be used to interpret scripture because no other text or means of interpretation carries the absolute authority and divine sanction that the Bible does. In short, scripture is its own best interpreter because it is the text best qualified to do so. Thus, whenever this style of recontextualization occurs multiple principles of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible are reproduced.

The two text-external strategies are equally infused with ideological principles. The use of Biblical texts for critique and parallel are primarily implicated in the relevance of scripture. This is an appropriate (and, at times, necessary) strategy because the Bible does carry the promise of direct and precise application. These strategies are also bearers of authority principles. The use of Biblical texts to convict or affirm can be read as the ultimate form of conviction and affirmation. As the Word of God, this resource trumps all others for establishing dissonance or commonality. The Bible's timelessness is also embedded in these strategies. Indeed, this is what enables these texts to be used as bases of critique and parallel. Because the Bible is the same today as it was when it was written, it can serve as the source of ideals and standards that are or are not being met. Similarly, this sense of timelessness allows individuals to assert that they and others have the same experiences as Biblical characters and events.

Protestant Discourses

The practice of recontextualization also indexes larger discourses operative among contemporary American Protestants. Ted from the Tuesday Men exemplified the interaction between textual orientation and recontextualization style by continually critiquing the modern Church, on the basis of the Church portrayed in the book of Acts. Ted's approach to recontextualization also indexes the discourse of church growth within American Protestant culture.

ICUMC has been at its present locale since 1914. The arrival of a controversial pastor in 2000 sparked a series of internal disputes. According to several church members, the church almost closed permanently. In July of 2002 new hope arrived when Ted assumed the role of senior pastor. A seasoned pastor of 20 years, Ted approached the problems at the church as a challenge and an opportunity. The restructuring efforts continue, as Ted orchestrated the launch of a new worship service in late 2006.

Ted's approach to altering the life of the congregation is closely tied to the network of "church growth." Comprised of (mostly non-denominational) institutions, the church growth world of publishers, books, authors, and consultants offers a seemingly endless set of resources for advice and strategy on 'how to have a growing church.' In short, the goal is to (re)plan, (re)organize, and (re)structure your congregation in a way that will attract new people. A relatively recent addition to this broad range of institutions is the "emerging church movement." Ted is quite familiar with the variety of church growth resources, but he is particularly well versed in this sub-genre.

"The 'bible,'" as Ted classed it, "of the emerging church movement" is Dan Kimball's (2003) The Emerging Church: Vintage Christianity for New Generations. The

author includes a chapter entitled “What is ‘Church?’” On the opening page he responds to this question: “...the church is not the building, nor is it the movement. The church is the people of God who gather together with a sense of mission (Acts 14:27⁶⁹)” (ibid: 91). Kimball recontextualizes sections from Acts six more times in this chapter. The central message of the book is a call to return to “vintage Christianity.” Throughout the book Kimball cites the first century Church of Acts as the model to be recreated. Ted’s choice of Acts as the group’s book of study is likely a product of his familiarity and interest in cultivating an “emerging church” at ICUMC. Moreover, the interpretive orientation of the group, and by extension Ted’s recontextualization style, can be situated within this larger discourse. The constant establishment of dissonance makes a great deal of sense in light of the discursive connection with this movement.

Interactive Norms

A third type of larger discourse that can be observed through recontextualization are the interactive norms that characterize small groups. As described in chapter 1, small groups de-emphasize conflict, opposition, and sustained disagreement. The norm for group discourse is not to argue, not to be contentious. This aligns with the prevailing norm in small group discourse, the desire for spiritual growth. Behind the variety of interpretive orientations presented in this chapter is an expectation of spiritual edification common to all of the project groups. Participants come to small groups “to be

⁶⁹ “On arriving there, they gathered the church together and reported that all that God had done through them and how he had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles.” (NIV)

(spiritually) fed,” “to grow in their relationship with the Lord,” and “to grow in fellowship with one another.” The result is a congenial, encouraging environment⁷⁰.

With this normative context in mind, consider Table 16:

	Charlie	Joel	Roland	Vincent	Ted	Sandy	Joy
Support	20	18	4	5	16	4	9
Challenge	3	3	2	3	5	2	2
	Aaron	Daniel	Ned	Darren	Jennifer	Rick	Taylor
Support	9	12	4	1	1	4	9
Challenge	3	-	5	-	-	1	-

Table 16: Recontextualization as interactive support and challenge

These numbers indicate the recontextualizations employed toward two contrasting interactive ends. The imbalance is striking. The top row is consistently, and often markedly, higher. This row represents recontextualizations used to support the contributions of another participant. The second row indicates recontextualizations used to challenge the contributions of a fellow group member. The pattern of recontextualization appears to be involved in the larger discourse of maintaining group norms of mutual edification and spiritual growth. What, then, do we make of Ned, the anomaly in the table?

Ned first began coming to the LC-MS Men on June 2nd, 2005, two meetings prior to their study of Proverbs. At the time, Ned was the newly appointed youth minister s at the church. He had recently graduated from Concordia University, and was 25 years younger than the next youngest group member. Given this position, I was surprised by the role Ned assumed in group discourse.

Despite their enjoyment of debate, the LCMS Men were consistent with the rest of the sample in terms of sustaining an expectation of spiritual growth. None of the

⁷⁰ The reality of the edification norm is not tantamount to an absence of disagreement. Indeed, all of the project groups disagreed about an issue at some point. For some groups, like the LCMS Men, the promise of provocative discussion was a major part of why members found the group attractive.

participants took himself to be the group's devil's advocate, always challenging, always disruptive. Pierce, the non-denominational participant who appeared earlier in the chapter, is a good example. In each of the first three meetings in the Proverbs study, Pierce charged that the group was ignoring the "promises of scripture." After a particularly heated disagreement in the third session, Pierce withdrew from the group and did not return. It struck me, then, when Ned gravitated toward a contentious role. He was quick to correct the contributions of other participants, including those whose contributions were highly valued within the group. The following rebuttal is typical. It followed a comment by a long-time member of the congregation who opposed homosexuals that "call themselves Christians:"

"I think we gotta be careful of some, when we first brought, I believe you said, "They say homosexuality is okay, but yet they call themselves Christians.' Yes, I believe that very scripturally homosexuality is wrong...[But] I'd have a tough time saying no one in the ELCA church is gonna be in heaven because they agree with homosexuality. They profess Jesus as Lord and *it's by grace they've been saved*. I would agree that the things that have all been said on abortion and homosexuality and absolute truth, with Biblical principles and all these things, is absolutely correct. But, I get kind of shaky when we start calling into question people's salvation because of things they do or things they believe, aside from *Christ alone*.

Although Ned hedges his statement, the disagreement and the challenge are explicit. A closer look at Ned's recontextualizations, however, show that all of the challenges come at the beginning of his tenure with the group. His participation in discussion drops off rather suddenly after the first few meetings. When he eventually returned to being more talkative, the lack of challenges and the increase in supports via recontextualization are obvious. This seeming exception, then, turns out to further support the argument I am making. Ned's example provides us a case of socialization into group discourse, and subsequently, into a more appropriate style of recontextualization. In particular, it is a mode of recontextualization that buttresses an

underlying interactive norm of group discourse – keep things encouraging, helpful, edifying.

Concluding Remarks

I have presented three basic arguments in this chapter.

- Biblical recontextualization occurs as both direct quotation and as metonymic substitution. In the latter form, narratives are distilled for a core meaning so that only a single name or term is required for recontextualization. References such as “Job” or “The Parable of the...” represent entire lessons and stories.
- The pattern and style of recontextualization align with a group’s textual orientation to the Bible. This is true in cases of uniform orientations, as with the Tuesday Men and LCMS Men, and cases of competing orientations, as with the McGee Men.
- Biblical recontextualization draws attention to larger discourses operative in small groups; for example, textual ideology, culturally salient discourses of American Protestantism, and the interactive norms of group discourse.

My overall goal has been to demonstrate how recontextualization within small groups is consistent with recontextualization work in other institutional settings. The data also speak to macro-level claims about recontextualization. Bauman and Briggs originally noted that this intertextual process contributes to the work of traditionalization, or “the symbolic construction of discursive continuity with a meaningful past” (1990:78). Similarly, Silverstein and Urban remark that recontextualization is a “building block of culture” (1996: 1).

These claims are supported by the significant cultural work accomplished by the recontextualization practice of small group participants. The constitutive features of group discourse – interpretive, ideological, and interactive – are all indexed by and embedded in the various styles of recontextualization. Moreover, the continual invocation of Biblical texts anchors small group discourse as a distinctively Christian practice. As an institutional setting, small groups rely on these micro-level strategies to communicate a shared religious identity, as well as a shared commitment to being rooted in their foundational text.

Chapter 6: Conclusions, Contributions and Further Questions

In this dissertation I have described and analyzed the discourse of small group Bible study. The central theme has been the ways in which participants use various forms of discursive practice to articulate and reflect on the textual ideology they surround the Bible with. My goal has been to demonstrate that this textual ideology is at the center of group discourse, even when it is not the explicit subject of conversation. Through the course of this dissertation, I hope the reader has also gained an appreciation for the complexity, dynamism, and meaningfulness that characterizes small group life. Group members understand this practice to be among the most significant and enjoyable activities they engage collectively as adherents to the same faith. I have attempted to communicate a sense of this importance.

To conclude this dissertation, I address several issues. I begin with a brief review of the previous chapters. I then move to some larger consequences my arguments present for the current shape of American Protestantism. And, I close with a commentary on the broader significance of the central theoretical construct of textual ideology-textual practice.

Chapter Summaries

In the introductory chapter I outlined the theoretical and methodological frameworks that organized my research. The two theoretical frameworks are the anthropology of discourse and the anthropology of Christianity. This study exemplifies how an individual discourse event – small group Bible study – can be analyzed to understand macro-sociological issues – Bible interpretation among American Protestants. I engage the anthropology of Christianity primarily through my analysis of Protestant

Biblicism. This work also contributes the first in-depth, comparative analysis of small group Bible study to the extensive scholarship among anthropologists and sociologists of American religion. I conclude this chapter with a review of the methodology I used to sample, collect, and analyze the project data.

Chapter One describes the six project congregations and the eight Bible study groups that are the focus of my analyses in chapters two through five. The ethnographic portraits of the six churches focus on the issues and events that defined the life of each congregation during the research year. The ethnographic portraits of the eight project groups communicate a sense of the experience of being present in each setting. This chapter also addresses several themes fundamental to small group life: interactive frames, participation structure, text selection, and Bible use.

Chapter Two introduces the theoretical construct of textual ideology. I explicate textual ideology as a concept, then present the six core principles that constitute this ideology for the project groups. These principles signify the qualities of absolute authority, ongoing relevance, and purposeful textuality that believers attribute to the Bible. I also address the inter-relatedness, historicity, sharedness, and canonical indexicality of these principles.

Chapter Three analyzes the discourse of Bible interpretation in the small group setting. I argue that the project groups relied solely on three styles of Bible interpretation: finding application, establishing meaning, and explaining Biblical texts. I review each style, and then discuss their inter-relation in group discourse. Ultimately, I argue that the consistent use of each style, and their intricate relation to textual ideology principles, identifies small groups as interpretive communities.

Chapter Four addresses the textual and experiential resources that Bible study participants bring to this event. The organization of these resources in each group setting form an interpretive matrix that provides a discursive filter for interacting with the chosen texts of study. The use of individual resources in group discourse is shown to embed and (re)articulate textual ideology principles.

Chapter Five examines the practice of recontextualizing the Bible in small group discourse. I address the formal properties of recontextualization, the function of Biblical recontextualization in group discourse, and how this practice reflects wider cultural concerns among American Protestants. The central argument of this chapter is that the interpretive preoccupations in each group are reproduced through the favored style of Biblical recontextualization employed by participants. And, the particular styles of Biblical recontextualization reflect textual ideology principles.

Further Consequences of Textual Ideology, Textual Practice

The dissertation has taken a discourse-centered approach to the analysis of group Bible study, and in particular, the dynamic between textual ideology and textual practice. By its nature, this approach entails detailed attention to the micro-sociological features of conversation and interaction. However, this dissertation also draws out larger issues significant for the study of American Protestantism. These appear in the dissertation – e.g., the link between recontextualization and the priorities of the church growth movement – but I would like to provide a more explicit consideration of such issues here. I present three areas where the arguments of this dissertation reveal larger consequences: the interpretive imagination of American Protestantism; the structuring influence of Protestant traditions; and the importance of small groups as a site of dialogue.

The Interpretive Imagination of American Protestantism

Bible interpretation in America has been examined in theological, historical, demographic, literary, hermeneutic, and epistemological terms within the social sciences (e.g., Crapanzano 2000; Harding 2000; Malley 2004; Wimbush 2000). This dissertation contributes to the ongoing understanding of the interpretive imagination among American Protestants by employing a discourse-centered analysis. In particular, the arguments I present provide a clear statement on how the discourse of Bible interpretation unfolds among *actual* social actors in *actual* social practice – what a colleague of mine terms “actually, existing Christianity⁷¹.”

One lesson of this dissertation is that scholars must move past clichés in depicting how Christian believers interpret the Bible. Understanding this practice in terms of textual ideology and textual practice is far more productive than relying on received categories of ‘literalism,’ ‘inerrancy,’ and ‘Bible-believing.’ As Malley (2004) observes, literalism is not so much a hermeneutic tradition as it is a symbol of identity, a signifier of community membership. Such clichés gloss over the intricate, meaningful, and contested interpretive processes that occur among American Protestants. This dissertation allows for a more nuanced, exacting view of Bible interpretation by identifying specific principles (e.g., authority, relevance, textuality) and styles (e.g., application, establishing meaning, explanation). In short, the interpretive imagination among American Protestants requires attention to the inter-subjective discourse occurring around the issue of Bible interpretation.

Similarly, the data I present clearly illustrate that these believers are active Bible readers. In other words, they do not passively employ methods and strategies received

⁷¹ I am grateful to Jon Bialecki for this phrase.

from the pulpit, Christian media, or the hermeneutic instruction of denominational tradition. Rather, these influences are integrated into group-specific modes and individuals' concerns for Bible interpretation. Yet, this dissertation simultaneously reveals a bounded, restricted interpretive environment being cultivated by small group discourse. These groups of readers are creative, but limited in the range of interpretive procedures they employ. Recall the strict adherence among the Prayer Circle to the style of application, and a similar strictness among the LCMS Men for keeping to issues of establishing meaning. Moreover, recall the predictability of the structure that defines the interpretive process when groups attempt to establish meaning. In short, the interpretive imagination of American Protestants is both creative and restrictive, actively engaged and limited in scope.

Lastly, my analysis of the interpretive matrix demonstrates the important point that processes of individual and collective interpretation do not take place in a cultural vacuum. They take place against the backdrop of a myriad of knowledge forms, texts, and experiences that individuals bring to their respective groups. Bible interpretation is shown to be a practice defined by who readers are, the multiple forms of identity that constitute this sense of Self, and the organization of these Selves in cohesive group environments. This echoes the lessons from scholars interested in "lived religion" (see Hall 1996; Roberts 2005). Scholars give much attention to the forms of Christian media believers consume – what radio programs they listen to, who they watch on television, which websites are visited, and whose books are purchased. This dissertation suggests that attention to these resources must be complemented by what interests Bible readers (e.g., the Iconoclasts and 'history'), how they define themselves (e.g., the LCMS Women

and denominational identity), and what they do beyond their religious lives (e.g., Rick and his experience as an Independent Business Owner). In short, the interpretive imagination of American Protestants emerges from the Protean Self of the modern subject.

The Structuring Influence of Protestant Traditions

The practice of small group Bible study is also shaped by the Protestant traditions that groups are bearers of. The unfolding of group discourse, then, must be situated within the trends and concerns occupying the attention of American Protestantism. The example of the Emerging Church movement being an explanatory context for Pastor Ted's recontextualization practice is a prime demonstration of this dynamic. I consider three other such cases below.

Scholars of American Religion have observed a colonizing effect of contemporary Evangelicalism on other Protestant forms in the United States (e.g., Wuthnow 1988). In short, due to the success of Evangelical institutions in attracting members, other Protestant institutions are adopting the emphases and practices associated with the Evangelical movement. This dissertation demonstrates this trend in two important ways.

First, the predominance and greater cultural capital of 'application' as a style of Bible interpretation is consistent with the Evangelical emphasis on a "personal relationship with Jesus Christ" (i.e., the favoring of individual faith over institutionalized forms of Christianity). As described in Chapter Three, this interpretive style is not only more numerous among the project groups, it also functions as a trump in group discourse. Its capital is revealed by its ability to defuse problematic situations arising from other interpretive styles. This illustrates a greater importance placed on using the Bible as a

medium to establish relevance for the faith of the individual than for engaging in meaning-defining hermeneutic activities.

Second, this same emphasis on increasing faith through increasing the strength of relationships is reflected in the interactive frames of small group Bible study. As described in Chapter Two, the two interactive frames that predominate in this setting are the cultivation of intimacy and the pursuit of analysis. The over-representation of the former within the project sample speaks to the larger cultural trend of Evangelicalism as a colonizing force. Though most groups balanced both frames, greater attention was given in all but a few cases (e.g., LCMS Men) to the frame of intimacy. The McGee Men are an emblematic case of this shift, as the participation of Russell and Vincent continually direct the group toward a greater emphasis on intimacy. The focus on personal relationships distinctive of contemporary Evangelicalism, it seems, extends to the structures of expectation that characterize small group Bible study.

Individual Bible study environments also reflect emphases in denominational history. The LCMS Men provide a clear case of this. The Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod prides itself on being well educated in Biblical history, textuality, and hermeneutics (Noll 1992). This has many manifestations in local congregational life, most notably the requirements of youth catechism classes and new member classes for adult converts. Many of the LCMS Men participants are lifelong Lutherans, and the adult converts have adopted this stress on denominational identity. Unlike the above example involving contemporary Evangelicalism, this dynamic belies what many scholars say about American Religion. The importance they place on denominational identity runs

counter to the majority position that contemporary American Protestantism exists in a “post-denominational” world (see Wuthnow 1988).

Lastly, this dissertation bears out the observation among scholars of American religion that congregations are “local cultures” (e.g., Ammerman 1997). Congregations are said to consist of local stocks of knowledge and activities, which members invoke to satisfy practical needs, establish a sense of identity, adapt to changing community environments, and deal with intra-group conflicts (cf., Becker 1999; Eiesland 2000). This dissertation, particularly the analysis in Chapter Four regarding the interpretive matrix, illustrates how the ‘local culture’ of congregations is also an interpretive resource. Bible study participants look to the life of the local congregation as they read and discuss Biblical texts, and the issues of belief and practice those texts present. Congregations do indeed contribute to how its members go about making sense of the world and the situations they encounter.

Small Groups as a Site of Dialogue

This dissertation represents the first thorough examination of small group Bible study as a cultural practice. Other scholars (Crapanzano 2000; Davie 1995; Lehtinen 2005; Malley 2004; Roberts 2005; Wuthnow 1994b) have presented a focused analysis of group Bible study, but none can claim to be systematic, comparative, and in-depth. The arguments I present confirm and extend the central claim of this previous research – that small group Bible study is unique in congregational life as a potential site of open, critical, and reflexive dialogue.

I demonstrate in my analyses that small group Bible study is integral to the formation, affirmation, and negotiation of belief and identity among American

Protestants. The small group experience allows participants to engage issues central to their faith, and to do so collectively. What occurs in small group Bible study has direct consequence for individual faith and local congregational life, and ultimately reflects issues of macro-sociological concern (e.g., the colonizing force of American Evangelicalism, the status of Bible interpretation among American Protestants).

I emphasize throughout this dissertation that small group Bible study is a structured and a structuring institution, central to the meaning making processes whereby American Protestants publicly communicate who they are, who they are not, and what they care about. Using a comparative ethnographic approach, I have argued that much of small group discourse is organized around the textual ideology that surrounds the Bible. How groups read, understand, use, interpret, and talk about scripture is central to understanding the nature of small group life, as well as the current shape of American Protestantism. Thus, this dissertation is a call for further research into a complex institutional form significant to the changing shape of Protestantism in the United States.

Broader Significance

This dissertation is primarily of interest to scholars concerned with questions regarding discourse and Christianity. However, I believe the arguments I have presented are relevant beyond these particular domains. I conclude, then, with some observations and suggestions for how my analyses could provide insight for other social scientists. Several concepts employed in this dissertation are already well-developed in the anthropological and social science literature, for example: “discourse,” “interpretive communities,” “interpretive resources,” and “recontextualization.” I hope my application of them will aid other scholars to find further uses for these analytical tools, other ways

of directing them toward research questions, and unexpected nuances for integrating them into analyses. For other concepts, however, I believe this research offers a source of creative insight. The primary example is the issue of textual ideology.

Textual Ideology

The central concept employed in this dissertation – textual ideology – is also the aspect of this work that should be of most interest to other scholars. I have used the relationship between American Protestants and their sacred text, the Bible, as a case study to demonstrate the importance of this concept. Below, I identify three possibilities for a broader application of textual ideology, although I suspect there are numerous other areas where this would be fruitful.

1) Comparative Scripturalism. In his ethnography of Evangelical Biblicism, Brian Malley (2004) suggests the need for an anthropology of comparative scripturalism. That is, anthropologists should devote ethnographic and theoretical attention to the ways in which different religious traditions construct relationships with their respective sacred texts. I argue that the concept of textual ideology is one axis point at which such research could be conducted.

In this dissertation, I have demonstrated multiple ways that American Protestants rely on and integrate the textual ideology surrounding the Bible into their religious discourse. A comparative framework would consider how these issues apply to other Christian and non-Christian traditions. I propose the following as other useful research cases: Progressive Christians and the Bible; Native Christians and the Bible; Immigrant Christians and the Bible; the Latter Day Saints and the Book of Mormon (and the Bible); Orthodox and Reformed Jews and the Old Testament; Muslims and the Quran; varieties

of Buddhism and the Tripitaka; and varieties of Hinduism and the Vedas, Upanishads, and Bhagavad-Gita.

Research in comparative scripturalism would allow for greater understanding of the role of sacred texts in the hermeneutic and practical imaginations of different religious traditions, and how adherents from those traditions use scriptures in processes of social practice. Textual ideology is a concept that can be assessed in each of the traditions listed above to pursue these relationships. Understanding the assumptions, beliefs, and expectations religious readers bring to their respective texts also opens up a space in which to consider the points of intersection and divergence among different religious traditions. The dynamic of textual ideology and textual practice can be used to explore questions of discourse (as I have done in this dissertation); the relation between text and action; the link between religion and literacy; intertextual acts of performance; and narrative constructions of reality. The analysis of textual ideology may be the ideal place to initiate a comparative scripturalism given the foundational role that scriptural texts (and their accompanying ideologies) play in many religious communities.

Of course, it is important to note that I am not advocating the simple exportation of my analysis in this dissertation to the study of the Bible and other scriptures in other religious contexts. The Bible as a text has experienced a particular trajectory in the history of Protestantism, and American Protestantism specifically (Noll 1992). Malley (2004) also observes this, noting that the Bible as an object of interpretation is indicative of Protestantism but not other traditions, which may place greater emphasis on artifactual and ritualistic uses of sacred texts. This history allows for a current situation where readers do carry a defined set of well-articulated ideological principles. One cannot

assume this is the case in other settings. For example, a study of the textual ideology surrounding the Bible is likely to look very different among American Catholics, whose Christian tradition has had a fundamentally different relationship with the Bible (Noll 1992). This is equally true for the study of scriptures in other religious traditions. Yet, some form of textual ideology will exist and this dissertation provides an example of why such analysis is useful. I suspect the primary task in using textual ideology as a structuring concept for a comparative scripturalism is to identify the theoretical foundation underlying particular ideological principles (e.g., ‘Authority’ underlies “the Bible is the Word of God” and “the Bible is the same today as when it was written”). Once elaborated, these theoretical bases could then be used to address how textual ideology is operative in a particular cultural setting.

2) *Legal Anthropology*. Textual ideology is also applicable to anthropological studies of text-based legal institutions. Like religious readers, legal readers in Western and non-Western settings operate in a highly intertextual universe. They constantly interact with national Constitutions, state and local Constitutions, law books, and other judicial statements. Understanding the expectations, beliefs, and assumptions readers have about these texts are fundamental to understanding how they interact with and deploy them in legal decision-making processes.

Elizabeth Mertz (1996), Vincent Crapanzano (2000) and others (e.g., Philips 1998) have conducted research on related questions regarding the role of texts in legal institutions. An analysis of the ideologies surrounding legal texts would aid further research into questions of hermeneutic practices, intertextual processes of reasoning and meaning construction, and the relationship between legal reading and legal practice. As

with comparative scripturalism, a crucial task is to identify the extent to which communities of readers share ideological principles, and to what extent such ideologies are actively contested. Such points of divisiveness are tremendously productive for observing cultural assumptions and reasoning processes in action.

3) *Anthropology of Education*. A third area where textual ideology promises to be a useful concept is for anthropological studies of educational institutions. Primary, secondary, and post-secondary pedagogies are often organized around textbooks. Different types of social actors (e.g., administrators, teachers, and students) may read these texts in quite different manners. This can be true for certain genres of texts as well as specific texts. An analysis of the relationship between textual ideology and textual practice for different social actors in educational institutions would provide key insights into pedagogical techniques and problems, learning styles and difficulties, and sources of tension between different educational roles.

Cross-cultural research on literacy is a particular area where textual ideology is applicable. Anthropologists have devoted extensive attention to the processes and practices of literacy development in predominantly non-literate cultural settings (e.g., Street, ed. 1991). Textual ideology has a distinct contribution to make to this important research. It raises a fundamental question: what set of expectations and beliefs do individuals and groups bring to particular genres and specific texts. Attention to the issue of textual ideology can shed light on the decision-making processes behind what texts are chosen to teach reading, and what texts are pursued after a functional literacy has been achieved. Anthropological studies of literacy have repeatedly demonstrated that learning to read means learning other cultural attitudes and assumptions as well, in particular those

that are ideological in nature. Again, understanding the textual ideologies surrounding genres and specific texts aids the anthropological attempt to explore what else readers learn besides the ability to read.

In this dissertation, I have used the Bible as a case study to demonstrate the usefulness of textual ideology in conjunction with a discourse-centered framework. In the previous six chapters I have presented arguments that may be applied by scholars to other areas of inquiry, including studies in comparative scripturalism, legal anthropology, and the anthropology of education. And, undoubtedly, ethnographic work in these areas will raise new questions and insights in regard to the utility of textual ideology for anthropological research.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Sample Transcript Page

Transcription Conventions

Italics: Recontextualization

Bold: Interpretive Resource

=//: Interruption/overlap

{ }: Pause

((laughs)): Laughs

[...]: Contextual information

{...}: Words unclear

CAPS: Emphasis

Underline: Reported speech

TRANSCRIPT: T001.2c.010405

LOCATION: Second Floor Lounge – Church Name

PARTICIPANTS: Name (BH); Name (DS); Name (FA); Name (JP); James Bielo (JSB)

TOPIC: *Thru the Bible Series: James* – Week 1 (James 1:23-25)

DS: *[[Reads James 1:23-25]]* **[James 1:23-25]** He has several pages of comments on this.

{5.0}

DS: I think he makes a, he makes an interesting little comment on page 41 concerning the fact that in many cases we are the only Bible that some people read. He says, *we need a new translation of the Bible that will be known as the Doers Translation. That's a good translation, the Doers Translation* **[McGee]**, he says, alluding to the fact that in the things we do we often reflect our faith and other people see that in us whether we want them to or not. It's kind of a two-edged sword I think. If we profess to being Christian and those that we contact through work or socially or whatever know that we profess this faith, then they come to some judgment about how effective we are at it in terms of their perception, at least, of how they see Christians living out their life. The little poem at the bottom of the page is sort of interesting, *The Gospel is written a chapter a day, by deeds that you do and by words that you say. Mean read what you say, whether faithless or true, say, what is the Gospel according to you?* **[McGee]** You have comments?

BH: Well, I just have my usual comment on what they call the Pauline paradox. If Paul were writing that he'd probably say *be ye hearers of the word, and not doers only* **[Paul]**.

DS: Oh.

J: Well, I think it might be well to look at a little history of James. See James didn't get into the canon until the third century, and neither did Revelation. The canon was formed, I think it was at, what, the Council of Nicea? And=

BH: //Yeah.

J: =Then, in the second century, other books were added. But, James and Revelation did not come along until the third century as accepted. And, I think part of the reason was the dilemma that you mentioned. They felt it was a little bit counter to Paul.

BH: Mhmm.

J: You know, believe and that's all. And, James comes along and says *faith without works is dead, doesn't mean anything* **[James]**. And, so I think that contradiction appeared, but really it is NOT a contradiction.

BH: Not, not as much as it appears.

APPENDIX B

Research Questionnaire

Dissertation Research on Small Group and Bible Study Life: Questionnaire

Dear Bible Study Member -

Allow me to thank you right away! I know everyone keeps a busy schedule. Your completion of this questionnaire is greatly appreciated, and will be a tremendous help to the quality of the research. There are two sections in this questionnaire, each of which should take between 15 and 20 minutes to complete.

The information you provide in Section A will be used for two purposes: to enrich my observations of your group's Bible studies; and to better understand the scope and variety of experiences that are brought to Bible study.

Section B is designed to gather information regarding your attitudes toward, and views of, the Bible. It asks you to reflect on how you understand the nature of the Bible. This information will be used to further my understanding of how the Bible is read and discussed in your group's meetings.

Your continued participation in this project is vital to its success! I'll look forward to receiving the completed questionnaire back from you. Again, my thanks are abundant!

Section A: Autobiographical Information

BACKGROUND INFORMATION:

Year you were born: _____

You are: ☐ Male ☐ Female

Current Marital Status: (place an "x" between the ☐)

☐ Never Married ☐ Divorced ☐ Widowed

☐ Married ☐ Separated ☐ Living with Partner

How many children do you have? _____

Check your **highest level** of education:

- | | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Less than 8 th grade (grammar school) | |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Through 8 th grade (grammar school) | <input type="checkbox"/> Some high school |
| <input type="checkbox"/> High school graduate | <input type="checkbox"/> Some college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Technical school | <input type="checkbox"/> Completed college |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Some graduate school | <input type="checkbox"/> Completed graduate school |

What do you do for a living? (Or, what did you do before retirement?) If you have worked in multiple occupations, please list all of these.

How many years have you worked at this occupation? _____

How many years have you lived in [location]? _____

Have you lived elsewhere? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If Yes, please list where and when?

Please indicate the political party whose candidates you most often vote for in elections:

- | | |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Republican | <input type="checkbox"/> Independent |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Democrat | <input type="checkbox"/> Other: _____ |

RELIGIOUS BACKGROUND:

How long have you been at your present church? _____

Are you an official or registered member of this church? ☐ YES ☐ NO

Have you ever been a member of (or regularly attended) a church of another denomination or a non-denominational church? ☐ YES ☐ NO

If you answered YES, which denominations or non-denominational churches?
(Check as many as apply to you)

- Baptist: ☐ Southern Baptist ☐ American Baptist ☐ Independent
☐ Catholic
☐ Episcopal
Lutheran: ☐ Missouri Synod ☐ ELCA ☐ WELS
Methodist: ☐ United Methodist ☐ Free Methodist
☐ Presbyterian
☐ United Church of Christ (UCC)
☐ Disciples of Christ
☐ Brethren
☐ Church of Christ
☐ Church of the Nazarene
☐ Wesleyan
☐ Assemblies of God
☐ Vineyard Fellowship
☐ Other(s), please list
-

With what denominations, or non-denominational churches, were your parents associated? (Check as many as apply)

- Baptist: ☐ Southern Baptist ☐ American Baptist ☐ Independent
☐ Catholic
☐ Episcopal
Lutheran: ☐ Missouri Synod ☐ ELCA ☐ WELS
Methodist: ☐ United Methodist ☐ Free Methodist
☐ Presbyterian
☐ United Church of Christ (UCC)
☐ Disciples of Christ
☐ Brethren
☐ Church of Christ
☐ Church of the Nazarene
☐ Wesleyan
☐ Assemblies of God
☐ Vineyard Fellowship

☐ Other(s), please list

On the scale below, indicate by bolding (or, circling) a number how important it is for you to be in your present denomination?

Not important Very important
1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9 ----- 10

For you, what are the three most important features of your denomination?

1.

2.

3.

CHURCH ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION:

How often do you attend Sunday worship service at your church?

- ☐ 3-4 times a month
☐ 1-2 times a month
☐ Less than once a month

Are you now a church officer (for example, elder, deacon, board member)?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

Have you ever held an elected position at your current church?

- ☐ Yes ☐ No

BIBLE STUDY PARTICIPATION:

How long have you been a member of this Bible study group?

Are you now a member of other Bible studies at your church?

- Yes ☐ No ☐

If "Yes", please describe:

Are you **now** a member of a Bible study that does not meet as part of your church? Yes ☐ No ☐

If Yes, please describe:

In general, do you prefer studying a book of the Bible, or a non-scriptural religious or spiritual book? Bible book ☐ Non-scriptural book ☐

Why do you prefer that type of book?

Are you now, or have you ever, been a leader of a Bible study?
Yes ☐ No ☐

If Yes, what do you prefer, leading a Bible study, or not leading a Bible study? Leading ☐ Not leading ☐ ☐ No preference

Why do you prefer this role?

Do you prepare for your current Bible study ahead of time by doing the assigned reading, or other related work? Yes ☐ No ☐

If Yes, how much time do you spend preparing?

On the scale below, indicate by bolding (or, circling) a number how important it is for you to be a part of this Bible study group?

Not important Very important
1 ----- 2 ----- 3 ----- 4 ----- 5 ----- 6 ----- 7 ----- 8 ----- 9 ----- 10

For you, what are the three most important qualities of this Bible study group?

1.

2.

3.

MEDIA INFORMATION:

Do you regularly watch broadcast or cable news? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please check which network(s) you usually watch.

☐ ABC

☐ NBC

☐ CBS

☐ FOX

☐ CNN

☐ MSNBC

☐ Headline News

☐ C-SPAN

☐ PBS

☐ Other, please list: _____

Do you regularly read the newspaper? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please check which newspaper you usually read.

☐ State Journal

☐ New York Times

☐ USA Today

☐ Washington Post

☐ Wall Street Journal

☐ Other, please list: _____

Do you subscribe to, or regularly read, any news publications other than newspapers? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please check all publications that apply.

☐ Time

☐ Newsweek

☐ US News and World Report

☐ Other, please list: _____

Do you listen to any news programs, or news talk shows, on the radio?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If "Yes", please list the programs you listen to: _____

Do you listen to Christian programming on the radio? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please the programs you listen to: _____

Do you watch Christian programming on television? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please list the programs you watch: _____

Do you subscribe to, or regularly read, any Christian periodicals? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please list these publications: _____

Do you regularly check any Christian websites? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", please list these websites: _____

Christian Texts and Authors:

Do you regularly read books by Christian authors (that is, ones whose religious or spiritual commitments clearly have a major influence on their writings)?

☐ Yes ☐ No

How many books by Christian authors have you read in the past year? _____

Do you have a favorite Christian author(s), who is NOT a Bible author?

☐ Yes ☐ No

Who is the author(s)?

What texts have you read by him/her?

Do you have a favorite Christian text(s), that is NOT the Bible?

☐ Yes

☐ No

What text(s) is this?

Who is the author?

Have these texts and authors been helpful for your participation in Bible study?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If Yes, how so?

Have these texts and authors been helpful for your understanding of the Bible?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If Yes, how so?

Do you have a favorite Bible commentator? (note: this may be the same or different from the author/s listed above)

☐ Yes

☐ No

If Yes, who is this commentator?

Section B: Understandings of the Bible

SPECIFIC QUESTIONS ON THE BIBLE:

How often do you read the Bible outside of church-related activities?

- ☐ Everyday
- ☐ More than once a week, but NOT everyday
- ☐ Once a week
- ☐ Twice a month
- ☐ Once a month
- ☐ Rarely

Do you usually underline or highlight your Bible when you read it?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If Yes, why do you do this?

Do you take notes or journal your thoughts when you read the Bible?

- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If Yes, why do you do this?

Which version, or translation, of the Bible do you use most often?

- ☐ Good News Bible
 - ☐ King James Version
 - ☐ New King James Version
 - ☐ Living Bible
 - ☐ New Living Translation
 - ☐ The Message
 - ☐ American Standard Version
 - ☐ New English Bible
 - ☐ New International Version
 - ☐ Today NIV
 - ☐ Revised Standard Version
 - ☐ New Revised Standard Version
 - ☐ Other, please list:
-

Why do you use this translation most often?

Have you always used this version, or translation? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "No", what did you use previously?

Why did you choose a new version or translation?

Do you usually use a Study Bible? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", which Study Bible is it and why did you choose it?

Is there a version, or translation, that you prefer never to use?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", which version or translation is that?

How often do you compare how different versions of the Bible translate the same passage(s)?

Do you have a favorite book, or section, of the Bible?

☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", which book, or section, is it?

Do you have a favorite verse in the Bible? ☐ Yes ☐ No

If "Yes", which verse is it?

Do you find some books/authors of the Bible easier to memorize than

others?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If "Yes", what books/authors?

Are there books in the Bible you struggle to believe?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If "Yes", what books?

Are there books in the Bible you struggle to understand?

☐ Yes

☐ No

If "Yes", what books?

BIBLE READING:

Section 1:

When I don't understand something in the Bible, or want to better understand something in the Bible, I do the following things. (Please check the appropriate response to each statement by placing an "x" in the box.)

	<i>Never</i>	<i>Some- times</i>	<i>Often</i>
Consult a study aid (like a concordance or Bible dictionary)			
Consult the footnotes in my annotated Bible			
Consult my favorite Christian author			
Consult a different section in the Bible			
Consult sources for the original Bible languages			
Bring up the question in Bible Study			
Go to the library			
Go to the Internet			
Ask my spouse			
Ask a friend			
Ask a family member			
Ask the pastor			
Ask a knowledgeable congregation member			
Pray for guidance			
Wait for the Holy Spirit to guide me			
Other, please describe briefly:			

--	--	--	--

Section 2:

The following section asks you to compare your experience of reading the Bible with other reading experiences. For each option, please check how similar or dissimilar you feel the experience is compared to when you read the Bible. (Please check the appropriate response to each statement by placing an "x" in the box.)

Reading the Old Testament is like...	Very Similar	Similar	No Opinion	Different	Very Different
Reading a history book					
Reading a science book					
Reading poetry					
Reading a novel					
Reading a guide for life					
Reading a law book					
Reading a newspaper					
Reading a self-help book					
Reading a biography					
Reading a theology book					
Reading a comic strip					
Reading a letter addressed to you					

Reading the New Testament is like...	Very Similar	Similar	No Opinion	Different	Very Different
Reading a history book					
Reading a science book					
Reading poetry					
Reading a novel					
Reading a guide for life					
Reading a law book					
Reading a newspaper					
Reading a self-help book					
Reading a biography					
Reading a theology book					
Reading a comic strip					
Reading a letter addressed to you					

ATTITUDES TOWARD THE BIBLE AND BIBLE READING

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements by placing an "X" in the appropriate box.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
1) When I have a problem in my life, I often turn to the Bible.					
2) When I experience great joy in my life, I often turn to the Bible.					
3) I often use the Bible to console a friend/family member in need.					
4) I rarely see any relationship between the Bible and my own life.					
5) When I read the Bible, I often feel that it mirrors my own life experience.					
6) I am reminded of particular Bible verses in the course of my daily life.					
7) I have made major life decisions based on the Bible.					
8) I often find the Bible relevant for understanding national and global issues.					
9) I only read the sections of the Bible that my study group is reading.					
10) I regularly read the Bible by reading at the first place I open it to.					
11) A devotional book guides my reading of the Bible.					

12) I use a study guide or commentary when I read the Bible.					
13) The Holy Spirit guides where I will read in the Bible.					
14) The Holy Spirit is present when our Bible study group meets.					
15) I believe the Bible is divinely inspired.					
16) I believe God guided the formation of the Bible as it now appears.					
17) I believe the Bible is the only text inspired by God.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
18) I believe the Bible is authoritative over any other text.					
19) I believe the Bible is completely without error.					
20) I believe the Bible contains NO inconsistencies.					
21) I believe parts of the Bible are NOT applicable in today's world.					
22) I believe the meaning of the Bible is the same today as it was when it was written.					
23) I believe the Bible should be used as the basis for current legal decisions.					
24) I believe the Old and New Testaments are equally important to the Christian faith.					
25) I spend equal amount of time reading and studying the Old and New Testaments.					
26) I believe the Bible is the					

best way to communicate with God.					
27) The Bible contains answers to all of life's questions.					
28) I believe the entire Bible should be read literally.					
29) I believe it is important to know who wrote the books of the Bible, and when they were written.					
30) I believe it is important to consult the original languages of Biblical texts.					
31) I believe it is important that I be the one to consult the original languages.					
32) I believe it is important to know the cultural context of the Bible's authors and audiences.					
33) I believe the ability to memorize scripture is a gift.					
34) I believe it is important to know when archaeological or historical evidence may conflict with the Bible.					
35) I believe it is important to know when archaeological or historical evidence may support the Bible.					
	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	No Opinion	Agree	Strongly Agree
36) I have experienced getting different meanings when I have read the same passage of scripture at different times.					
37) It bothers me when there is disagreement during Bible study regarding the meaning					

of a particular passage of scripture.					
38) I prefer to concentrate on one Bible verse at a time when I am reading.					
39) I prefer to consider a section of verses together when I am reading the Bible.					
40) I feel free to disagree with things I read in the Old Testament.					
41) I feel free to disagree with things I read in the Gospels.					
42) I feel free to disagree with things I read in the rest of the New Testament.					

THE END!

I'd like to extend one last thank you! Your completion of this questionnaire makes this a truly cooperative research project!

APPENDIX C

Sample Study Guide Sheet for Tuesday Men

1

You Will Be My Witnesses

Acts 1

I remember telling a friend, “If I were dying, what I would most need would be confidence that all I believed about Jesus were true. I would want you to read Scripture to me, pray with me, and talk to me about Jesus and heaven.” This confidence is not only what I need most when I am dying, but also when I am living.

During the days between his resurrection and ascension, Jesus built the confidence of his disciples. He demonstrated and spoke truth about himself. And then he left them with a clearly defined task and the promise of the power to carry out that task. Thus, Luke was able to write with confidence to Theophilus about Jesus.

1. When has your faith in Jesus Christ been encouraged by the words of others?
2. Read Acts 1:1-11. What did Luke, the author of Acts, report to Theophilus about Jesus’ last days upon earth? What gives credibility to this report?
3. How is your hope and confidence in Jesus affected by what you learn of him in this passage?
4. Put yourself in the shoes of the apostles. How would you feel if you were the first to be given the task described in verse 8?
5. How are we equipped for this task, according to the passage?
6. Imagine that you were there, looking into the sky. How do you think the followers of Jesus were affected by the promise that he would return?
7. How are you affected by that promise today?

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