A Doctor of Ministry Project:

An Investigation into the Process of Conversion of a Select Sample of New Christians in the Greater Victoria Region during the period of 2017-2022

ACTS SEMINARIES

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April 23, 2025

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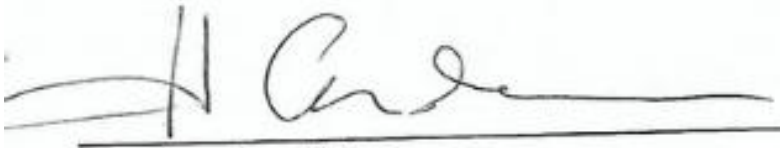

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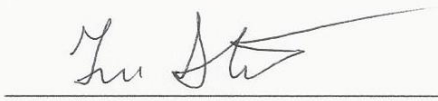

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February 25, 2025

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All Scripture quotations, unless otherwise indicated,

are taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version (NIV), 2016.

Abstract

An Investigation into the Process of Conversion of a Select Sample of New Christians in the Greater Victoria Region during the period of 2017-2022

Name: Stewart, Timothy Ray

This project explores how and why people have been recently adopting the Christian faith in the region of Victoria, BC. In light of the statistical decline of Christianity in Canada and in response to the great amount of literature on that topic, this study highlights "what is currently working" in one particular place and time. Specifically, through personal interviews, it asks: *How do adult evangelical converts from the period of 2017-2022 in greater Victoria understand and articulate their reasons for becoming a Christian? Why is the Christian gospel good news for them?* By investigating this topic, this project is designed to offer valuable insight to Christian ministers and all who seek to share their faith.

After exploring Biblical expressions and theological interpretations of the Christian gospel, this study also draws insight from missiologists about the ways in which faith is transmitted. Then, from sociologists, psychologists and historians, this project adds perspective on the varied processes of conversion. Finally, adopting a "narrative approach" toward this topic, this project offers its own contribution of original research by gathering the personal accounts of twenty recent converts. In these stories, this study explores the social, conceptual, and experiential aspects of conversion – and the order in which they occur during that process. Moreover, this project identifies salient themes which emerge from over 190,000 words of transcript – including the prominence of personal crises in these conversion narratives, and the diversity of vocabulary used to express the gospel.

Preface

In a time when plenty is said about people leaving Christianity,

and from a place where this trend is more visible than most cities in Canada,

I wish to offer another perspective.

From my own experience as a small-church pastor,

I have witnessed conversions up-close and personal,

I have heard testimonies from a diverse sampling of new believers,

and I wish to share with others some news of what is actually working, today.

Learning from Biblical, Theological and Missiological sources,

drawing from Sociological, Psychological and Historical perspectives,

I have explored diverse expressions of the gospel

and investigated the process of conversion.

To this important and ongoing discussion, I add

the stories of twenty new believers from my own community.

From them, we can learn:

Who is still coming to faith? Why are they converting?

How is it happening? And what is the result?

Despite the negative trends we see,

may this study offer a ray of hope and valuable insight

to all disciples of Jesus and ministers of the Gospel.

Dedication

To Earl

Celebrating 8 years of New Life

Acknowledgements

With gratitude to:

1. *My congregation – whose warm fellowship, genuine worship, and love for God's Word provided an ideal context for conversion.*
2. *Our converts – whose stories began my process of discovery and inspired the work for this project.*
3. *Pastors of CityReach Victoria – from whom I have drawn more stories and with whom I have shared my findings.*
4. *Faculty of ACTS Seminaries – whose teaching, mentoring, prodding and encouraging of me contributed to the broadening, deepening, and refining of this learning journey.*
5. *My Family – whose patient endurance over these past seven years has hopefully returned to them a husband and father who is a little bit wiser.*
6. *My parents and grandparents – whose example of servanthood and dedication have shaped my imagination of what is possible.*
7. *God – Who's leading I followed in entering this program, Who alone can bring fruit from these efforts, and to Whom belongs all glory and honor.*

Oh, the depth of the riches of the wisdom and knowledge of God!
How unsearchable his judgments,
and his paths beyond tracing out!
"Who has known the mind of the Lord?
Or who has been his counselor?"
"Who has ever given to God,
that God should repay them?"
For from him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen.

Romans 11:33-36

Contents

List of Graphs, Figures & Tables

1. Introduction

a. Background and Rationale

As a Christian in the Western world, I hear a lot about people leaving Christianity. As a part of the millennial generation, I have seen this trend among my friends. And as a pastor in Victoria, I have felt the effects of this reality. Congregations experience turnover, families become distanced, and the culture turns away from its Creator. Census data is shared, prophetic warnings are issued, and prescriptive instructions are handed out to the faithful.

To me, there seems to be no shortage of words spoken and written about bad news. It grabs the attention and sells well. There also seems to be no shortage of words spoken and written which tell people what to do. Perhaps the appeal is in their simplicity – that instructions only require obedience, rather than careful reflection. But I have noticed there to be a shortage of words written and spoken about *what is actually working*. Yes, there is bad news, and that must be known. But, before we rush to reactionary instructions and prescriptions, I think it could be helpful to offer a *description* of current successes and positive trends. *What can be learned from those who are actually coming to faith, these days?*

This project arises from my pastoral ministry at Parkdale Evangelical Free Church and my various connections to other local ministries in the region of Victoria, BC. As a solo pastor in a small church, I spend a relatively large amount of time with newcomers to the congregation and individuals who are seeking for spiritual answers. Rather than managing a large staff or team of leaders, many of my duties involve direct contact with small groups and individuals in the congregation and community. Our church also runs a full-time Daycare in its basement, serving

over forty families from the community at any given time – many of whom have met me at year-end events. We also host various other groups from the community in our building, including an AA group, two church plants, a quilting group and Girl Guides. In addition to these connections, I have developed many relationships with other churches and ministries through serving on the district board of the Lower Pacific District of the Evangelical Free Church of Canada for seven years and the leadership team of CityReach Victoria for six years.

Within this ministry context, a topic of interest emerged for my doctoral project. During my first few years of pastoring at Parkdale, I had witnessed a steady trend: while leaders and established families moved away, newcomers from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds joined our fellowship and put their faith in Christ. More and more, the church was feeling like a church plant – more outreach-oriented and less established than before. As each new believer is baptized and each new member is welcomed into the family, we ask them to share their testimony with us: how they became a follower of Christ, and what difference that has made in their lives. Over time, as these stories of faith accumulated, I started to notice how diverse the ways that people come to faith can be. While all these new converts arrived at the same decision to believe the gospel of Jesus Christ, they each told a unique story about how that came about. Viewing this growing collection of testimonies, I began to marvel at the variety of ways that the gospel could be conveyed to people, that it could connect with them personally, and transform their lives.

Considering that my most basic vocational function was (and still is) to be a "minister of the gospel,"[1] I decided to explore this topic further. Drawing from my various ministry and

[1] My title on my ordination certificate.

community connections, I sought to hear more stories from people who have recently come to faith in Christ. By examining the process of conversion undertaken by each of them, I hoped to learn how the gospel can be best communicated in my ministry context today.

b. Problem Statement

I once met a locally based missionary who had returned home after serving for two decades overseas. As he shared with a group of local ministers, he expressed shock at the changes he observed in the Canadian church. According to him, it was losing ground relative to the population, and its giving to missions had declined sharply. While these shifts would certainly come as a shock to someone who had been absent for decades, many who have served in North America during that period have come to terms with this new reality. As Daniel L. Guder declared in his book, *Missional Church* in 1998, "it is by now a truism to speak of North America as a mission field."[2] The relative decline of Christianity in the west must be recognized as the church considers its role in this new era.

This general trend can also be observed in specific contexts. As I mentioned in the previous section, turnover is an inevitable part of church ministry. Families move away, people pass away, and for various reasons, some leave church, altogether. Personally, I have witnessed many friends and family members of my generation drift away from church and the Christian faith of their childhood. According to some, Christianity did not deliver what they expected; for others, their personal priorities have shifted away from what Christianity offers. Sadly, these observations illustrate a national trend of disaffiliation from religion which has

[2] Daniel L. Guder, *Missional Church: A Vision for the Sending of the Church in North America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 2.

consistently been stronger in British Columbia than any other province in the country. As of 2019, 32% of Canadians reported no religious affiliation, and 53% reported no participation in personal or group religious activities.[3] However, in BC the numbers are higher: 40% of its population identified as non-religious – a figure that jumps to 53% for its residents who were born in 1980 or later.

Remarkably, this has not been accredited to immigration, as those born outside of Canada are more likely to be religious than those born within the country.[4] This factor likely explains why, according to the 2011 census data, Vancouver has a much lower proportion of non-religious residents (41%) than Victoria (51%), even though Victoria has a slightly higher proportion of Christians (44% vs. 42%).[5] Overall, these data make it clear that I live and minister in the most non-religious metropolitan area in the most non-religious province of a country that is trending away from religious affiliation.

However, this problem is not unique to this time and place; this theme of "rejecting the faith" also figures prominently in classical works of fiction. For instance, the characters in *Pilgrim's Progress* and *The Great Divorce* vividly illustrate the myriad of reasons why a majority of people seem to turn away from the Christian faith. In view of this, C. S. Lewis concludes, "there are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, "Thy will be done."'[6]

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[3] Louis Cornelissen, "Religiosity in Canada and its Evolution from 1985 to 2019," *Statistics Canada*, October 28, 2021. Accessed online https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/75-006-x/2021001/article/00010-eng.htm

[4] Ibid.

[5] Statistics Canada. 2013. *Vancouver, CMA, British Columbia (Code 933)* (table). *National Household Survey (NHS) Profile*. 2011 National Household Survey. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 99-004-XWE. Ottawa. Released September 11, 2013. Accessed online http://www12.statcan.gc.ca/nhs-enm/2011/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

[6] C. S. Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (San Francisco: HarperOne, 1946).

In recent times, various writers have sought to analyze this trend. For example, in response to *Faith Today's* report "Hemorrhaging Faith," Karen Stiller identifies four different categories of young people who were raised Christian: there are the engagers, fence sitters, wanderers and rejecters.[7] While this description falls short of providing reasons, Skye Jethani makes an attempt. Noticing many "wanderers" and "rejecters" among students in his college ministry, he argues that, rather than experiencing a real relationship with God, these individuals have first adopted a misguided posture toward God, and then found it lacking.[8] Furthermore, within the setting of the church, Michael Lawrence attributes the problem to leadership; even when a church's theology of conversion is correct, their ministry practice may mislead young people into thinking that they are Christians when they are not.[9]

In light of these insights, one might rightly question whether conversions are even being counted properly. *Is census data really the best way to measure a phenomenon that Christians consider to be a spiritual reality?* Though North America has experienced a statistical decline in "religious affiliation," Christians would be wise to ask whether fostering "religious affiliation" is even their primary objective. Moreover, in some cases, it appears that ministries simply aim to produce "decisions" that can be concretely quantified by raising a hand, walking forward, filling out a card, praying a prayer, or spontaneously getting baptized.[10] This approach can be observed in reports of mission trips, summer camp experiences, large "crusade" or "revival"

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[7] Karen Stiller, "Why They're…" in *Faith Today, September/October 2012*, p.18-26.

[8] Incorrect postures that he names: "Over God, under God, from God, and for God."
Skye Jethani, *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2011), 10-13.

[9] Michael Lawrence, *Conversion: How God Creates a People* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2017), 13-15.

[10] Jonathon K. Dodson mentions a mega-church whose mass-baptisms had little ongoing effect, and another mega-church that fosters spontaneous baptisms by planting actors in the crowd.
Jonathon K. Dodson, *The Unbelievable Gospel: Say Something Worth Believing* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), 11.

events, or even in churches and denominations.[11] But, in such cases, when faith is measured merely in terms of "affiliations" or "point-in-time decisions," then perhaps the "hemorrhaging" of such faith is less of a concern than it initially sounds. "Easy come, easy go."

Reflecting on his own observations of this problem, Gordon T. Smith asserts in his book, *Beginning Well*, that "the practice of evangelism is undermined by an inconsistent or flawed notion of conversion."[12] In other words, if the church's understanding of conversion is too shallow or narrow, then its gospel message may fail to call people to a true and lasting faith. Conversely, it could also be said that a deficient gospel message will produce deficient converts – who fail to truly transform and persevere in the faith. Such a dilemma calls for the church to develop a robust and Biblically accurate understanding of both the gospel and conversion.

Despite the bleak picture that these demographic studies and analyses have provided, the recognition of North America as a "mission field" also offers a way forward. If the western church can perceive itself to be surrounded by needs and opportunities, perhaps it can embrace the challenge to re-evangelize its own culture. This is the approach that Lesslie Newbigin took when he returned to England after serving in India. Having learned to apply the gospel to a foreign culture, he saw the need to do it again in his home country that had drastically changed during his absence.

So, following Newbigin's example, this study will now turn from these problems to explore potential solutions. Whether the blame for the church's decline belongs to Christians who miscommunicate the gospel, churches that misunderstand conversion, or unbelievers who

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[11] Personally, I experienced this mentality in a church planting assessment.

[12] Gordon T. Smith, *Beginning Well: Christian Conversion & Authentic Transformation* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2001), 10.

simply reject the faith, the problem is clear. If North American churches can expect regular turnover and "hemorrhaging" at this moment in history, then only those who effectively evangelize their culture will avoid becoming history. As generations pass, as cultures shift, and as demographics transform, there will always be new needs and questions for the gospel to address. In order to survive and thrive, the church will need to constantly reflect on how to convey the gospel in a way that connects with its culture and facilitates genuine conversion.

c. Research Purpose and Goals

According to the Scriptures, the Christian Gospel is an exclusive message[13] with universal application – it is the story of Jesus Christ[14] that brings salvation to all who believe.[15] But, while the message might sound simple and straightforward, the path to believing may be more complex. Though Jesus offers the one and only way for a person to be saved, there may be many ways for a person to recognize their need for salvation through Christ. *As people come from diverse backgrounds, with unique needs and specific questions, how does the gospel apply specifically to each of them?*

While planting a church in New York City, Tim Keller regularly wrestled with this question. Knowing that conventional ways of communicating the gospel may not take root in his cosmopolitan context, he sought to discover new ways to carry out his task. Rather than viewing the gospel's message as a static barrier or a limiting factor in his evangelism, he came to see its great breadth and depth of application:

[13] John 14:6, Acts 4:12.
[14] 1 Corinthians 15:3-4.
[15] Romans 1:16.

> The gospel is not a simple thing. We know this because its expression in the themes of the Bible is inexhaustibly deep and rich. But a second reason we know it is that humanity, both its perfect design and fallen nature, is also complex and varied. The gospel has supernatural versatility to address the particular hopes, fears, and idols of every culture and every person. This points us to the need for contextualization.[16]

Keller's words offer both a ray of hope and a sobering challenge. While the gospel contains all the resources necessary to address a listener's needs, it remains the responsibility of an evangelist to effectively communicate it in a given context.

As the second chapter of this project will demonstrate, many have struggled with mainstream evangelical presentations of the gospel, claiming that they fail to express the fullness of the apostolic message found in Scripture. For instance, some argue that when a gospel presentation rigidly follows a traditional formula or focuses on a particular atonement metaphor, it may not always sound like good news to every listener. Based on his experience as a church planter in Austin, Texas, pastor Jonathon K. Dodson has observed a "considerable gap between the gospel communicator and the receptor culture." He adds,

> That gap is filled with all sorts of things that prevent gospel witness, including theological misunderstandings and unbelievable forms of evangelism. How can we turn down our evangelistic noise and cut through the cultural confusion in order to communicate a clear, winsome gospel message?[17]

In response to this problem, some theologians call for the use of different Biblical metaphors of the atonement to present a fuller expression of the gospel and to offer a more contextualized message. Others add elements that they observe to be lacking to the gospel message – such as its call to personal discipleship or the church's participation in God's

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[16] Tim Keller, *Center Church: Doing Balanced Gospel-Centered Ministry in Your City* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012), 44.

[17] Dodson, *Unbelievable Gospel*, 12.

kingdom. Finally, still other evangelists insist that the gospel's manner of presentation matters as much as its content. In other words, whatever message is shared, it must be accompanied by genuine dialogue and authentic community. These various approaches to gospel communication, summarized here, are more fully explored in the Literature Review of this project (chapter 2).

However, while these efforts to define the gospel accurately and express it effectively are worthwhile, they remain only theoretical. Without personal experience and empirical observation, a reader may wonder, "*what is actually working in my context, today? How is the gospel being conveyed to others, effectively? How does its message connect with them, personally? What does a conversion response mean for them, practically?*

Questions like these can be explored by listening to people's stories of conversion, as Sharon Gallagher demonstrates in her book, *Finding Faith: Life Changing Encounters with Christ.*[18] For my part, I have devoted this project to examining the personal experiences of a sample of new adult believers who have been recently baptized in evangelical churches in the region of greater Victoria. By conducting open-ended interviews, I have sought to let the subjects express, in their own words, their motivations for conversion – *why, in light of their unique backgrounds, felt needs and specific questions, they concluded that Christianity had the answer they were looking for*.

This dynamic between text and context is essentially captured in Dr. Mark Naylor's term "resonance," which he uses to describe "the way in which a person perceives and responds to the relevance of a passage of Scripture" and "the impact of the passage on the faith of the

[18] Sharon Gallagher, *Finding Faith: Life-Changing Encounters with Christ* (Berkeley, CA: Page Mill Press, 2001).

reader or hearer."[19] Yet, in searching for points of resonance between the gospel and the stories of these new believers, an indirect approach can be helpful. While I have used a few pointed interview questions to invite people to directly address this topic, most of the interview was open-ended storytelling. Though these long and unstructured accounts do not produce neat and tidy answers with preferred terminology, they offer a great breadth and depth of data to supplement the more direct answers. I have found that these stories offer insight into discovering *why* people have converted (motivations), *how* people converted (method, means), and *what* that ultimately means for them (meaning, message). Each of these insights can help fill out a greater picture of how the message of Christianity has resonated with the lives of new believers.

My hope is that this small but thorough piece of research will contribute something new and unique to the field of evangelism[20] – a contemporary perspective of how the gospel is intersecting with and impacting people's lives in this particular context.

To be more specific, my research question will be: *How do adult evangelical converts from the period of 2017-2022 in greater Victoria understand and articulate their reasons for becoming a Christian? Why is the Christian gospel good news for them?*

d. Assumptions & Definitions

For the purposes of this project, I assume some basic beliefs held by evangelical Christians – such as those found in the Statement of Faith of the Evangelical Fellowship of

[19] Mark Naylor, "Mapping Theological Trajectories that Emerge in Response to a Bible Translation" (University of South Africa, 2013), 180.

[20] John W. Creswell and J. David Creswell, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, 5th ed.* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2018). 25.

Canada.[21] Essentially, I assume that the Christian gospel represents true information that should be believed. Moreover, this assumption is based on another assumption – that the testimony of Scripture, as the inspired, authoritative word of God, is a trustworthy source of information.

Moreover, as I conducted the interviews, I have also assumed the existence of a Trinitarian God who intervenes in this world and interacts with individuals. Consequently, I have also assumed that conversion is a real phenomenon – that a person may experience a fundamentally reoriented life through a heartfelt response to God's revelation of truth.

Based on these assumptions, I believe there is a solid epistemological basis for my interviews – namely, that each subjects' account of what God has said and done in their lives can be accepted as valid.

i. "Convert"

But, before identifying potential interview subjects, I first needed to define who I was looking for. In exploring the phenomenon of conversion to Christianity, one must certainly define the term, "convert." Biblically, conversion refers to the "turning or returning of a person to God." Theologically, it refers to the initiation of the process of a person's salvation: "a decisive turning from sin to faith in Jesus Christ…a once-for-all unrepeatable and decisive act."[22] Practically speaking, Sharon Gallagher refers to conversion as "the period of time – long or short

[21] "Statement of Faith," *Evangelical Fellowship of Canada*, Accessed online: https://www.evangelicalfellowship.ca/About-us/Statement-of-faith

[22] Daniel L. Akin, "Conversion," ed. Chad Brand et al., *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 335.

– when a man or woman consciously decides to become a Christian."[23] So, in view of these definitions, I have considered a "convert" to be anyone who has made this decision.

However, for the purposes of this project, further nuance is needed for this definition. While the notion of "conversion" might be clear enough from a Christian point of view, the same word has many uses in the English language. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, the verb "convert" can refer changes in a person's beliefs, in an object's chemical composition, or in the score of a sports game.[24] Therefore, parameters must be established to define what makes a conversion "Christian," and to identify what tangible or verbal markers signify when a decision to convert has taken place.

ii. "Christian"

In his book, *Beginning Well*, Gordon T. Smith recognizes the necessity of such distinctions. He asserts that "the very heart of conversion is encounter with Christ, and without this conscious encounter a conversion is not, properly speaking, Christian conversion."[25] Also, he adds that if "conversion is the act of believing in Jesus, choosing to follow Jesus as Lord and Savior" then the purpose of conversion is to be "transformed into the image of Christ Jesus."[26] Moreover, Smith seeks to distinguish the notion of "conversion" from "salvation" in the following way:

> Conversion is the human response to the saving work of God through Christ. Conversion is the initial encounter with God's saving grace – the steps or the means by which we enter into a redemptive

[23] Gallagher, *Finding Faith*, xv.
[24] "Convert," *Merriam Webster Dictionary.* Accessed online: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/convert
[25] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 16.
[26] Ibid., 16.

> relationship with God. Salvation is God's work and God's work alone, unequivocally…
>
> Subsequently, conversion is the means by which we appropriate and experience God's saving grace.[27]

Gordon Smith's theological distinctions are quite helpful – they clarify what my project can and cannot accomplish. In exploring conversion stories, my interviews are highlighting the *response of twenty humans* to the saving grace of God. The thoughts, actions, and intentions of God are left undetermined by my research.

Smith's theological distinctions are also in line with Biblical portrayals of what it means to be a Christian. The Lexham Bible Dictionary defines a Christian as "one who worships Jesus of Nazareth as the Messiah and Son of the God of Israel."[28] In the context of the New Testament, the term is used to refer to disciples of Jesus in Antioch and by Peter to refer to those who bear Christ's name.[29] But, most notably, "a Christian" is what Herod Agrippa understands that he would become if he were to believe Paul's gospel message: that the words of the prophets had been fulfilled in the death and resurrection of Jesus.[30] So, while the decision to become a Christian involves an outward association with Jesus, it certainly also requires an inward belief about who He is. Elsewhere, Paul describes the gospel message in a similar way[31] and insists that it is by believing this message that a person is saved.[32] To become a Christian is to believe the gospel message about Jesus and publicly declare Him as Lord.[33]

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[27] Ibid., 16.
[28] C. Meeks, "Christian" In J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, … W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).
[29] Acts 11:26; 1 Peter 4:16.
[30] Acts 26:22-28.
[31] 2 Timothy 2:8; Romans 1:1-17; 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.
[32] D. Mathis, "Gospel," In C. Brand, C. Draper, A. England, S. Bond, E. R. Clendenen, & T. C. Butler (Eds.), *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 672.
[33] Romans 10:9-10.

Despite the clarity of this definition, I faced a problem in its application. As I prepared to interview people to hear their stories of faith, I wondered how I would determine if a subject qualified as a "Christian convert." *Would merely their word to me be sufficient? Which words?* Because I could not judge the authenticity of a person's belief or the truthfulness of their account, I needed to establish some objective criteria for a person to qualify as an interview subject.

In general, conversion refers to a "change of mind" that involves "a turning from old ways to the practices of a new faith;" but in Christianity, it carries another layer of meaning: "initiation into the Church of Christ, especially by baptism."[34] Certainly, the Scriptures indicate that a person can experience salvation by faith, alone;[35] yet, the Scriptures also indicate that outward evidence of this faith is to be expected – including works and baptism.[36] In fact, in every reference to conversion in the book of Acts, baptism is also mentioned – with the latter serving as an outward expression of the former.[37] Though baptism does not guarantee the authenticity of a person's faith, its purpose is to provide the individual with an opportunity to publicly declare their faith and for the Christian community to officially recognize it. Therefore, as a concrete action initiated by the subject and affirmed by the church, baptism offered a useful criterion for me to identify recent Christian converts with relative objectivity.

Gordon T. Smith strengthens this idea with his comments on conversion:

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[34] B. Espinoza, "Conversion" in J. D. Barry, D. Bomar, D. R. Brown, R. Klippenstein, D. Mangum, C. Sinclair Wolcott, … W. Widder (Eds.), *The Lexham Bible Dictionary*. Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2016).

[35] John 1:12; John 3:16; Ephesians 2:8-9.

[36] James 2:17; Acts 2:37-38

[37] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 115. See also Acts 8:13, 18:8; Romans 6:3-4.

> In a genuine Christian conversion, through an encounter with Christ we become part of the community of those who are called and who, in response to that call, become one in Christ. There is no such thing as an isolated Christian; a conversion to be properly Christian includes incorporation into a community of faith.[38]

With such a view of conversion in mind, one need not hesitate to use baptism as a measure of conversion. Indeed, there may be no other physical, quantifiable option available. While my goal is not to judge the authenticity of people's conversions, I can at least say that my research is limited to conversions that have been concretely, voluntarily, and publicly expressed through baptism.

iii. Evangelical

In my research question, I also indicate that I am looking for "evangelical" converts – another term that will need clarification. This word is lexically rooted in the Greek word *euangelion,* which is typically translated as "gospel" in the New Testament. However, according to some observers, "the obvious link between 'gospel' and 'evangelical' has been largely obscured" by the historical development of evangelicalism.[39] What began as a "class of Protestants that emerged distinctively in the early modern period, endured for three centuries, and spread to five continents"[40] has now become a multi-faceted movement. Today, the word "evangelical" might refer to a politically conservative American, a charismatic believer in Latin America, or an anti-institutional sectarian in Europe.

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[38] Ibid., 34.
[39] Daniel J. Treier and Walter A Elwell, "Evangelicalism" in *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (Baker Academic, 2017), 543.
[40] Ibid. 544.

Despite this breadth of connotations for the word, David Bebbington's definition still offers a reliable standard of its actual meaning. He argues that "evangelical" describes a type of Christianity characterized by a four special marks:

> *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross. Together they form a quadrilateral of priorities that is the basis of Evangelicalism.[41]

In short, an "evangelical" is someone who locates the "gospel" in Scripture, defines it as the work of Christ, and considers it necessary to personally believe and share.

However, applying this definition to potential interview subjects introduces a new problem. It is beyond the scope of my project to investigate whether each person fit into the evangelical mold. Moreover, the goal of my interviews has been to hear from people, rather than evaluate them. I have sought to let people freely share their experiences and beliefs without exterior categories and concepts being imposed on them. If I asked them to sign a statement of faith before proceeding with the interview, that might have influenced their answers which followed. Moreover, if I eliminated certain interview transcripts based on their theological statements, that would have decreased the richness and diversity of data produced. Essentially, I would have been determining the answers to many questions before asking them. Therefore, I chose to let the subject's church affiliation serve as the determining factor. If they were baptized in a church which self-identified[42] as evangelical, then they, too, would be considered "evangelical."

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[41] Mark A. Noll, David W. Bebbington, et al., *Evangelicals: Who They Have Been, Are Now, and Could Be* (Eerdmans, 2019), 27.

[42] Through their denomination, their name, their statement of faith, or some other obvious way.

In summary, *for the purposes of this project*, I define an "evangelical Christian convert" as someone who has been baptized in a church that identifies as evangelical. This definition does not, in any way, imply that *only* people who meet this definition are "evangelical Christian converts." Rather, acknowledging my inability to judge individuals in this matter, this definition pragmatically has set some objective criteria for the selection of interview subjects.

e. Delineation of Research

As this definition implies, any research project must work within certain parameters. In order to search for interviewees, I needed to know who would qualify. Moreover, to express any conclusions from the data, I needed to define exactly who or what I was talking about. Thus, the nature of this research required the establishment of certain delimitations.

Moreover, because I conducted qualitative research through interviews instead of quantitative research through questionnaires, my sources of data were necessarily limited. Given the quantity of data that interviews produce, and the tedious nature transcription and coding, I needed to focus my research on the testimonies of twenty respondents. As a result, while a survey might have produced simplistic data that is broadly applicable, my interviews produced richly detailed data that focuses on a narrow target.

First, with an interest in learning more about "Christian evangelical converts," I limited my research to individuals who had been baptized in self-identifying evangelical churches. While this delimitation does not perfectly match the definition,[43] it at least clearly identified the segment of the population that I would be addressing in my research. Baptism offered an

[43] There could be genuine "Christian evangelical converts" who have not yet been baptized in such a church, and there could be people who have been baptized in an evangelical church who are not genuinely Christian.

objective and concrete criterion in the selection of interviewees – and evangelical churches offered me a well-defined pool from which I could draw. Together, these delimitations made it clear to everyone what this project was all about.

Still, these delimitations needed further refinement. Early in the process of designing this research process, I decided to focus my efforts on the metropolitan area of Victoria – where I live. Though I have contacts in Vancouver and nationally through my denomination, I determined that Victoria would provide a sufficient number of interviewees. Moreover, though broadening the scope of my research might sound attractive, its result would be harmful to the purposes of this project. I would end up saying less about more instead of *more about less.*

For similar reasons, age had to be considered as well. With so much already written about the importance of evangelism to children and youth, I was interested in exploring how people come to faith at a later age. This narrower topic could prove to be an interesting niche for my project. Moreover, involving minors in a research project introduces unwanted ethical complications that are best to be avoided. Thus, the project was limited to adult converts.

Still, in a metropolitan area of 400,000, "adult evangelical converts" represent too large a portion of the population to be fully represented by my twenty. So, to make my interview subjects more properly representative of a particular group of people, I added a final characteristic that would be required of them. *Interview subjects must have expressed their faith through baptism in an evangelical church in Victoria between 2017 and 2022*. By limiting the scope of my research to this specific timeframe, I would be able to offer a "snapshot" of what was happening in a particular place at a particular time with a particular group of people. With these delimitations in place, I hoped that my thorough treatment of this narrow demographic would produce useful insight for fellow evangelical ministers in my region.

I also expected that these delimitations would improve the *quality* of my data collection. For example, limiting my sources to people in greater Victoria ensured that I would be able to interact with them in-person, allowing me the opportunity to clarify and revisit a person's response if necessary. Moreover, interviewing only recent converts provides me with accounts that were fresher in people's memories and more relevant to their present context. Finally, by limiting my field to converts from evangelical churches, I also limited the potential for misunderstandings to occur during the interview process.[44] In summary, my goal was to draw from this small, focused sample a richness of data that would provide clear insight on this crucial topic.

In addition to these chosen delimitations, my research was also limited by factors that were beyond my control. Though I endeavored to draw honest and accurate information from the respondents, my efforts were dependent on their ability and willingness to communicate the data. For example, interviewees may have struggled to express what they think and feel; due to personal embarrassment, they might have concealed important information. Or, due to language limitations, some may have simply appropriated the terminology that they have heard from others in their community. Moreover, a respondent might have found it challenging to remember key details about their conversion; they may not have thought or shared about it for a while. Finally, an interviewee may have significantly changed since the time of their conversion; life circumstances may have altered their perception, and their attitudes may have shifted. Ultimately, as the interviewer, I cannot judge such matters. I simply made every effort to draw out their best answers and then worked with the data that they provided.

[44] For instance, in the usage of terminology.

f. Outline of Study

Literature Review

- Theological Foundations: I begin with an exploration of the various ways in which the Gospel is expressed in Scripture. Then I examine the different ways that theologians have drawn out implications of the gospel. From there, I turn to the writings of missiologists, who explain how to communicate and embody the gospel in everyday life.
- Theoretical Foundations: I share insights from sociologists about the group dynamics of conversion and then turn to psychological analyses of the internal process of change associated with conversion. I also draw from historians who glean insight from ancient accounts and integrative methods that explore various modes of conversion. Ultimately, I land on a narrative approach which respects the uniqueness of each person's story.

Field Research

- Research Design: I describe this endeavor as "constructing a local theology," in which I attempt to learn about what is happening in a particular time and place with a particular group of people. By interviewing them, transcribing the recording, and codifying the data, my goal is to produce some useful insights.
- Findings: First, I share extensive demographic data revealing the diversity of the interview subjects. Yet, as their background stories indicated, many of them have experienced life crises including immigration, trauma, and addiction. At some point, through various social influences, conceptual inputs and impactful experiences, their needs were met through Christianity, and they converted. Lastly, some reflections are offered on the enduring impact of their conversion and the sequence of its process.

2. Literature Review – Conceptual Framework

As I have stated above (see Basic Assumptions), I am assuming the truth of the Gospel as it is expressed in Scripture, and I am defining a Christian as someone who believes it (see Definitions). Yet, as I have also stated above (see Purpose), each person's path to belief is unique. While taking seriously Jesus's words that He is the Way to salvation,[45] my research has explored the *way* in which a number of people have come to this belief. I have investigated how Christianity was *presented* to them, how it particularly *connected* with them in their context, and ultimately why they *chose* to become a Christian.

But first, before processing this data, I conducted a broad exploration of literature on this topic. Drawing from relevant theological material as well as perspectives from the social sciences, I have developed a theoretical framework with which I can consider the unique data produced by my field research. In the following section, I share some highlights from my initial foray into these topics of gospel expression, gospel transmission, and personal conversion.

a. Theological Foundations

"Because the gospel is endlessly rich,

it can handle the burden of being the one 'main thing' of a church."[46]

i. Biblical Expressions of the Gospel

On one hand, the Christian gospel is quite simple. It is first introduced in the New Testament when Jesus breaks onto the scene, announcing that "the time is fulfilled, and the

[45] John 14:6; Acts 4:12.
[46] Keller, *Center Church*, 36.

kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel."[47] At the start of His earthly ministry, Jesus proclaims the good news of the coming of God's kingdom. Then, for the remainder of the four "gospel accounts,"[48] the writers flesh out how the story of Jesus's life, death and resurrection fulfills this announcement. Similar content can be observed in Peter's first sermon at Pentecost,[49] and in Paul's summary of the gospel in his letter to Timothy: "Remember Jesus Christ, raised from the dead, descended from David. This is my gospel."[50] Likewise, in 1 Corinthians, Paul more thoroughly summarizes the gospel in this way:

> Now, brothers and sisters, I want to remind you of the gospel I preached to you, which you received and on which you have taken your stand. 2 By this gospel you are saved, if you hold firmly to the word I preached to you. Otherwise, you have believed in vain. 3 For what I received I passed on to you as of first importance: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, 4 that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, 5 and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve.[51]

In addition, from Paul's words here, the purpose of the gospel is also plain to see: it offers personal salvation. As mentioned earlier in Research Purpose and Goals, this offer is both exclusive and universal. While the gospel is "the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes,"[52] the Scriptures are also clear that "salvation is found in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given to mankind by which we must be saved."[53]

On the other hand, even within the Scriptures, one can find different expressions of the gospel which carry different implications and applications. For example, to the church in

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[47] Mark 1:14-15. NKJV
[48] Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John.
[49] Acts 2:22-38.
[50] 2 Timothy 2:8.
[51] 1 Corinthians 15:1-5.
[52] Romans 1:16.
[53] Acts 4:12.

Colossae, Paul portrays the gospel as God's method of reconciliation with humanity.[54] Meanwhile, to the church in Ephesus, Paul presents the gospel as the means of reconciliation and unity between people groups.[55] Additionally, in his letter to the Galatian church, Paul asserts that the gospel is the fulfillment of God's promise to Abraham,[56] while to the Thessalonian church, the gospel is their source of sanctification.[57] To be sure, none of these messages are contradictory. Each one relates to some aspect of personal salvation, and all of them stem from the work of Christ. Yet, to different audiences in different contexts, Paul expresses and applies the gospel in unique ways. This can be observed even more clearly when comparing the content of his different sermons on his missionary trips. When preaching to "fellow children of Abraham and God-fearing Gentiles" at a synagogue in Pisidian Antioch, Paul presented Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promises to the Jewish people.[58] However, to pagan audiences in Lystra and Athens, Paul preached about the "living God," their unknown Creator, who would one day judge the world.[59]

Given the diversity of gospel expressions that are already apparent within Scripture, I expected to find a similar variety within the accounts of the people I would interview. Surely, if Paul preached the gospel differently in different contexts, then I should anticipate hearing diverse expressions of the gospel from people of diverse backgrounds. Yet, to ensure that I was not guiding their answers with overly restrictive questions, I opted to take an indirect approach. Before directly asking the interviewees to define the gospel or its relevance to their lives, I

[54] Colossians 1:21-23.
[55] Ephesians 3:6.
[56] Galatians 3:8.
[57] 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14.
[58] Acts 13:16-41.
[59] Acts 14:15-17; 17:22-31.

would invite each of them to freely share about their personal journey of faith. Then, based on their own accounts, I would offer more pointed questions to help them clarify their answers and ensure that they cover the desired topic. Finally, while reviewing the transcripts, I would search for points of connection between the gospel and people's stories. In order to prepare for this, my interview questions and interpretation of their responses would need to be informed by some foundational knowledge about the gospel's message and meaning.

Therefore, I have explored the breadth of ways in which evangelicals attempt to identify the Christian gospel by locating it in the Scriptures. For example, Greg Gilbert locates a clear, "deliberate, step-by-step expression" of the gospel in the book of Romans,[60] which he presents as bad news followed by good news: "God is your Judge, and you have sinned against him. And then the gospel: but Jesus has died so that sinners may be forgiven of their sins if they will repent and believe in him."[61] However, Scot McKnight claims that Gilbert's presentation is not the "apostolic gospel" found in Scripture; rather, it is a "plan of salvation" that answers people's questions about how to be saved from their sins.[62] Though that might sound like the gospel to some, McKnight contends (from 1 Corinthians 15:3-4 and elsewhere) that it is the "story of the crucial events in the life of Jesus Christ" whose "intended result" is our salvation.[63] By drawing this distinction, McKnight expresses the need for Christians to believe in and identify themselves with the person and work of Jesus Christ – not just simply pray a formulaic prayer.

Further clarifications are also added by other authors. John Piper insists that the gospel is not about getting anything from God, but about having "the glory of God [revealed] in the

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[60] In particular, Romans 1-4.
[61] Greg Gilbert, *What is the Gospel?* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 27, 36.
[62] Scot McKnight, *The King Jesus Gospel: The Original Good News Revisited* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2011), 59.
[63] Ibid., 49, 51.

face of Christ."[64] According to Him, believing the Gospel involves coming to know and cherish God through seeing Jesus Christ. Yet others, like George Eldon Ladd, would look more to the words of Jesus for a definition of the gospel. Considering Jesus's own message,[65] Ladd explains that "the gospel of the kingdom" is that "God is now acting among men to deliver them from bondage to Satan."[66] This implies that, in addition to a personal relationship with God, we are given the opportunity to participate in His work on earth. Similarly, David Fitch tries to differentiate apostolic proclamation of the gospel from the regular teaching of the church. He asserts that the gospel is "much bigger" than personal salvation: that "God has come in Christ, who has been made Lord, and a whole new world (the kingdom of God) has begun."[67]

These authors, mentioned above, represent a brief sampling of the views expressed by evangelical writers. Yet, even in this small sample, one can observe a remarkable fact: while there is a basic unity to these gospel presentations, there is also a diversity of expression. Such perspective lays some helpful groundwork for my later research, in which I identify a variety of gospel expressions in the stories of new believers.

ii. Theological Implications of the Gospel

Next, crossing from Biblical studies into the realm of theology, this section explores how people understand the *effects* or *significance* of the gospel. *How does the Gospel fit into the overall framework of Christian belief? What does God plan to accomplish in and through those who believe? Why and how does the gospel matter to a particular Christian, and to the world?*

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[64] 2 Corinthians 4:6. In John Piper, *God is the Gospel (*Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005).
[65] Mark 1:14-17.
[66] George Eldon Ladd, *The Gospel of the Kingdom: Scriptural Studies in the Kingdom of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1959), 47.
[67] David E. Fitch, *Faithful Presence: Seven Disciplines that Shape the Church for Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 97.

One starting point for this topic is atonement theory. During my theological studies and work in ministry, I came to notice different ways in which people explain the effects of Christ's work. While each explanation is Biblically based, each applies the gospel to solve different problems, or answer different questions. For instance, Jonathon Wilson explains how the gospel (which he defines as the story of Jesus Christ),[68] can be expressed in three main forms: through His life, death, and resurrection, Jesus serves as prophet, priest, and king – providing us with an example to follow, a sacrifice for sin, and victory over evil and death.[69] Similarly, as an example of "active gospel contextualization," Tim Keller lists five different "atonement grammars" by which the gospel can be related to different contexts: "the battlefield, the marketplace, exile, the temple, and the law court."[70] Likewise, church planter Jonathon K. Dodson lists five "gospel metaphors" by which the good news of Jesus can apply to a person's life: "justification, union with Christ, redemption, adoption, and new creation."[71] Clearly, these diverse descriptions imply that different people may receive the same gospel for different reasons. For example, the gospel could be embraced as the solution to a person's guilt from the past, their present aimlessness, or their fears of the future. This diversity will be explored further in my own research findings.

While atonement theories can offer a helpful framework for grasping the breadth of the gospel's effects, other authors have chosen more contemporary and practical terms to express what the gospel offers. For example, Dallas Willard argues that "the really good news for

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[68] Jonathan R. Wilson, *God So Loved the World: A Christology for Disciples* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2001), 20.
[69] Ibid., 83, 99, 136.
[70] Keller, *Center Church*, 130.
[71] Dodson, *Unbelievable Gospel*, 14.

humanity is that Jesus is now taking students in the master class of life."[72] In contrast to "gospels of sin management," which either focus on personal forgiveness or societal reform, he presents the gospel as a call to discipleship and personal transformation.[73] Similarly, N.T. Wright rejects the "social gospel" on the "left" and the dualistic, escapist, message of salvation on the "right." Rather, he argues that the point of the Biblical gospels is that Christ's resurrection marks the beginning of God's new creation, and that His followers get to participate in His work on earth.[74] So, while both Willard and Wright seek to find a middle ground between extreme views, their expressions of the gospel offer different nuances. Both describe their gospel in terms of participating in God's kingdom on earth – but Willard focuses more on personal transformation while Wright emphasizes outward mission.

Many other authors have echoed these views in one way or another while trying to work out their practical implications. For example, Gary Moon and James Chuong have explored what present-day discipleship looks like,[75] while Jeff Vanderstelt and Richard Stearns have articulated how the church can participate in Christ's mission.[76] Yet, others are careful to not let any practical applications of the gospel to replace its core message. For instance, Michael Green reminds his readers that the apostles did not promote a system or morals or a philosophy of life; they proclaimed the Person of Jesus. He then adds, "most religions tell you of something you must do. This religion tells of something God has done through Jesus on the cross…God

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[72] Dallas Willard, *The Divine Conspiracy: Rediscovering our Hidden Life in God* (San Francisco, CA: HarperCollins, 1997), xvii.
[73] Ibid., 28, 41.
[74] N.T. Wright, *Surprised by Hope: Rethinking Heaven, the Resurrection, and the Mission of the Church* (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2008), 83, 90, 293.
[75] Gary Moon, *Apprenticeship with Jesus: Learning to Live Like the Master* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2009). James Chuong, *True Story: A Christianity Worth Believing In* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008).
[76] Jeff Vanderstelt, *Saturate: Being Disciples of Jesus in the Everyday Stuff of Life* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2015). Richard Stearns, *The Hole in our Gospel* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2009).

proffers us another gift, the Holy Spirit .[77] Similarly, Tim Keller clarifies that "the gospel is good news, not good advice," and that we should not confuse it ("what has been done by Jesus Christ to put right our relationship with God") with its intended result ("a life of love").[78]

Like Keller, others have expressed the ultimate purpose of the gospel in relational terms. Though it also implies personal salvation[79] and participation in God's purposes,[80] these stem from a reconciled relationship with God. Following John Piper's lead, Skye Jethani argues that God's greatest desire is to be "with us," and that our greatest desire should be for Him. In contrast to other expressions of the gospel that view God as a means to an end, Jethani argues that the work of Christ was all for the sake of restoring our relationship with God.[81] Similarly, J.I. Packer argues that, while justification is the primary blessing of the gospel, the highest privilege it offers is adoption into a relationship with God.[82]

Building on this, John Barclay attempts to work out the gospel's effect on human relationships as well. After exploring the meaning and usage of "gift" and "grace" in Paul's letter to the Galatians, he concludes that Paul's "good news" announces "God's recognition of worth solely on the basis of the Christ event….but the meaning of that event, and its quality as unconditional gift, is discovered only in its social embodiment."[83] Thus, for Barclay, the primary effect of the gospel is the creation of a community that embodies and shares with each other the love and acceptance that they have received in Christ. Michael Green adds, "It is at this

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[77] Michael Green, *Evangelism Now and Then* (Leicester, England, IVP, 1979), 69, 73.
[78] Keller, *Center Church*, 29-31.
[79] Gilbert, *Gospel*, 28-32, Romans 1:16.
[80] N. T. Wright, *The Day the Revolution Began: Reconsidering the Meaning of Jesus' Crucifixion* (New York: HarperOne, 2016), 74.
[81] Jethani, *Reimagining*, 101, 110.
[82] J. I. Packer, *Knowing God* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1973), 177, 186-187.
[83] John M. G. Barclay, *Paul and the Gift* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2015, Kindle Edition), 439-440.

point that the uniqueness of Christian conversion stands out. They called Jews as well as Gentiles to put their faith in God's Messiah and join the company of his people."[84]

Though the Christian gospel stems from one simple story in Scripture, its message and meaning can be expressed in various ways. Even among evangelical interpreters, one can observe great diversity. As they emphasize different Scripture verses, they highlight particular implications for the gospel ranging from personal to cosmic, from present transformation to future glory. While this breadth of perspective may produce more questions than answers, it also provides a solid basis for further exploration of the personal stories of new believers.

iii. Gospel Transmission: Missiology & Contextualization

Given that the Biblical message of the Gospel offers such diverse theological implications, a question arises for missiologists and evangelists: *how can the gospel be transmitted from person to person?* While one person, with their own unique questions and concerns, may find helpful "points of salience" in the gospel message, someone in another context may connect with the gospel in a different way. In exploring the conversion process of my own interview subjects, I have sought to discover how this gap was bridged for them. Missiologists and evangelists have also explored this process of gospel transmission, offering insights into how the gospel can be effectively conveyed from one context to another. For many, this requires a process of contextualization – of presenting concepts in a way that may be best received.

An important part of contextualization is to understand how the ideas of Christianity interact with a person's previously held beliefs. After observing how vastly different Christianity

[84] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church* (Grand Rapids, Mi: Eerdmans, 1970), 147.

has appeared in different times and places, missiologist Andrew Walls asserts that the gospel needed to be translated and "indigenized" each time it was transmitted to a new culture or generation. For example, one can even observe a shift in the first century from Jewish terms like "Son of Man" and "the Kingdom of God" to Greek terms like "logos" and "pleroma."[85] Similarly, when considering the evangelistic method used by the early apostles, Michael Green comments, "

> There was nothing rigid or unimaginative about their approach. They set out to discover the spiritual location of those to whom they spoke, and once they had assessed their need, they related Jesus to that. They were, as we must be, bridges: rooted in the Scriptures and also in the contemporary situation and the needs of the particular individual or group with whom they were dealing.[86]

Reflecting on Paul's words in 1 Corinthians 9:19-23, Tim Keller recognizes the need to show courtesy, love and unselfishness in the practice of cultural contextualization. Yet, he also warns that, in adapting to the culture, one must not capitulate to it – while one can avoid causing any unnecessary scandal, "proper contextualization means causing the right scandal."[87]

Regarding missiology today, Dr. Joanne Pepper describes how different worldviews (beliefs about one's origin, purpose, and destiny) can influence people's reception of the gospel. Pointing out general differences between eastern and western culture, she calls for missionaries to "find the kernel of truth in each view" as an opportunity to share the gospel. Likewise, she calls for missional church leaders "to adapt their worship and discipleship to the different worldviews" held by the multiple generations they will find in their congregations: traditionalist,

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[85] Andrew F. Walls, *The Missionary Movement in Christian History: Studies in the Transmission of Faith* (Marykknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), xv-xvii, 8.
[86] Green, *Evangelism Now and Then*, 66.
[87] Keller, *Center Church*, 111.

modernist, postmodern, and transmodern.[88] In response to this situation, Dr. Naylor calls for "contextualized communication" so that "the gospel can be communicated in a way that is authentic and makes sense to your audience living in another place and time and cultural setting than the audience of the Scriptures."[89]

These missiologists touch on a fundamental motivation for my project: the desire to discover how to translate and transmit the gospel to an ever-diversifying, ever-changing culture. After years of pursuing this same goal in his church plant in Austin Texas, Jonathon K. Dodson urges his readers to ask, "how is the gospel good news to those we evangelize?" He continues,

> "For some reason we find it difficult to bridge the gospel into everyday life and everyday unbelief. If we are to overcome our obstacles to evangelism, we must be able to answer this question: 'What does the death and resurrection of a first-century Jewish messiah have to do with twenty-first-century people?"

Considering such questions, I have sought to learn how the gospel of Jesus Christ is connecting with new believers in my own context. My hope is that, by learning from people's stories and exploring the factors leading to their conversion, my readers and I will become better equipped to express the gospel today – or, as Paul Little puts it, "to scratch people where they itch in the name of Jesus."[90]

In response to this need, some authors look for ways to present the gospel more clearly and winsomely. Rather than bringing the content of the gospel message into question, they focus on trying to help their listeners grasp its significance and relevance. For example, while Paul Little defines the gospel as simply the story of Jesus, his emphasis is on what Christ's death

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[88] Joanne Pepper, "Worldview Tendencies in the Global Church," (Lecture delivered at ACTS Seminaries, Langley, BC, Canada on September 18, 2019).

[89] Mark Naylor, "Contextualized Communication and the *Missio Dei,*" (Lecture delivered at ACTS Seminaries, Langley, BC, Canada on September 17, 2019).

[90] Paul E. Little, *How to Give Away Your Faith* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1966), 12.

and resurrection offer the one who believes: forgiveness and a living relationship.[91] Likewise, though Greg Laurie offers a similar definition of the gospel, he insists that it must be presented against the backdrop of the "bad news…to show us just how good the good news is."[92] Finally, novelist Frederick Buechner presents the Gospel as a story "which is first sad news before it is glad news." According to him, it progresses from the tragedy of God's silence, to the "comedy" of God's grace" to a "fairy tale ending."[93] In these cases, rather than disputing the content of the gospel message, the evangelistic writers focus on its presentation; essentially, they seek to create a demand for the gospel by displaying its benefits and connecting it to people's felt needs.

Others, responding to the particularities of their given context, have further adapted the gospel message in order to connect with their audience. Bruce Hindmarsh offers a classic example from 18th century England, when many early evangelical preachers developed their messages of penal substitution while ministering to criminals on death row: "the experience of law was literally the backdrop for their evangelistic message."[94] In contrast, Jackson Wu, serving in an East Asian setting, calls for a closer look at Paul's Letter to the Romans, where "Paul's honor-shame language equips the church to meaningfully communicate the message of salvation" by employing "culture's most relevant terms, stories and idioms."[95] In light of his findings there, he suggests making a shift from a guilt-based mentality to an "honor-shame perspective of salvation [which] concerns both what we're saved from and what we're saved

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[91] Ibid., 60-64.
[92] Greg Laurie, *How to Share Your Faith*, (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 1999), 49.
[93] Frederick Buechner, *Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 23.
[94] D. Bruce Hindmarsh, *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism: True Religion in a Modern World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 204-210.
[95] Jackson Wu, *Reading Romans with Eastern Eyes*, (Westmont, IL: IVP Academic, 2019), 125.

for."[96] Using a similar method in his church plant in Illinois, David Fitch speaks of finding ways to proclaim the Lordship of Christ to those outside of the church who are suffering from fear, anger, depression, addiction, and any other form of brokenness. He explains that "the gospel will not be the old standby we've known through the small booklets or tracts handed out at church. It will be contextualized in this space that is opened up in the neighborhood. There is no one, set gospel starting point. There are numerous entry points."[97]

At the same time, others caution against over-contextualizing the gospel message. Byron Forrest Yawn warns of the "formidable idolatry of the suburbs" that views the gospel simply as a method of self-improvement, rather than a confrontation of culture and a call to repentance.[98] Furthermore, Lesslie Newbigin argues that "the church as the bearer of the gospel, inhabits a plausibility structure which is at variance with, and which calls in question, those that govern all human cultures without exception."[99] These authors both point to the limits of contextualization – that a gospel bent too far toward the demands of the surrounding culture will lose its distinction from it. Instead, the gospel must be recognized as a completely different worldview that calls the world not only to belief, but repentance.

Considering this, some seek to open doors for people to receive the gospel by first addressing their audience's worldview. Noticing the millennial generation's lack of interest in the gospel, as well as certain cultures' inability to understand it, Ken Ham looks to the book of Acts for guidance. There, he observes that the apostles presented different gospel messages to the Jews and to the Gentiles. While the early evangelists could build on the Jews' foundational

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[96] Ibid., 126.
[97] Fitch, *Faithful Presence*, 105.
[98] Byron Forrest Yawn, *Suburbianity: What Have We Done to the Gospel? Can We Find Our Way Back to Biblical Christianity?* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2013), 25-26.
[99] Leslie Newbigin, *The Gospel in a Pluralist Society* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1989), 9.

knowledge of God and sin, they had to start at the beginning (Genesis) with the Greeks. Therefore, he concludes, "you can't really understand the good news of the gospel unless you first understand the bad news found in Genesis."[100] Also reflecting on the topic of worldviews, Francis Schaeffer instructs evangelists to first identify a tension point between a person's presuppositions and their external reality. Then, if one "gently but firmly" pushes a person to follow their own presuppositions toward their logical end, they may come out of denial and discover their need for the gospel.[101]

Similarly, Tim Keller applies this idea to late modern culture, which lacks a "shared set of beliefs about a sacred order"[102] that earlier evangelists could build on. Following the example of Augustine, he contends that "before we can explain the gospel to a culture, we need to analyze that culture with the gospel," so that we can offer a critique of the assumptions and forms of secular modernity."[103] By doing so, Keller argues that we will be able to offer a combination of bad news and good news that will be both compelling and attractive.[104] Yet, other missiologists like Timothy Tennent point out how the practice of cultural critique must adapt with changing times. No longer does the gospel simply translate from one cultural center to another – now, Christians who occupy a peripheral place in their culture must learn to engage with others who are at the periphery of their own culture. No longer do Christians simply need to deal with apathetic, nominal religion; now they face new challenges of

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[100] Ken Ham, *Gospel Reset: Salvation Made Relevant* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2018), 38, 50, 62.
[101] Francis Schaeffer, *The God Who is There* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1968), 120-127.
[102] Tim Keller, *How to Reach the West Again*: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter. New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), 7.
[103] Ibid., 14-16.
[104] Ibid., 22.

"postmodern relativistic secularism, Islamic fundamentalism, aggressive atheism, and the seeping pluralism of Hinduism, to name a few."[105]

In light of these various forms of gospel delivery in different contexts, I have paid careful attention to the ways in which new believers have received and understood the gospel in their own contexts.

iv. Gospel Transmission: Ecclesiology & Embodiment

Nevertheless, while the gospel connects with individuals in unique ways, it also points toward an objective reality that carries real-life consequences. Along with other evangelicals, Lesslie Newbigin identifies the "content of the gospel" as "Jesus Christ in the fullness of his ministry, death and resurrection" and "not anything else."[106] However, he adds that this should not simply be presented as a matter of "personal inward experience." Unless the story of Jesus is presented as a historical reality and factual truth, then Christians have no basis to seek the conversion of others.[107] Moreover, he argues, "the gospel cannot be accommodated as one element in a society which has pluralism as its reigning ideology…the Church has to claim the high ground of public truth."[108] The gospel should, according to Alan Noble, provide a witness that unsettles its "buffered" hearers, and disrupts their comfort.[109] Or, as Newbigin puts it, when the gospel is truly shared, "it will involve contradiction, and call for conversion, for a radical metanoia, a U-turn of the mind."[110] So, according to Newbigin, in the modern pluralistic

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[105] Timothy C. Tennent, *Invitation to World Missions: A Trinitarian Missiology for the Twenty-first Century* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2010), 23-24.
[106] Newbigin, *Pluralist*, 153.
[107] Ibid., 25.
[108] Ibid., 222.
[109] Alan Noble, *Disruptive Witness: Speaking the Truth in a Distracted Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2018), 174.
[110] Lesslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks: The Gospel and Western Culture* (London: SPCK, 1986), 5-6.

society of the west, the gospel must be presented as objective truth that carries practical implications rather than yet another path to subjective experience.

According to Stanley Grenz, some have sought to present the gospel to their culture through correlation (using it to answer commonly held philosophical questions) or through contextualization (expressing it in terms that a culture will understand).[111] As Ray Bakke demonstrates, the latter was a common practice of the apostle Paul as he travelled from city to city.[112] Moreover, Andrew Walls comments that, because theology "springs out of practical situations, it is therefore local and occasional in character."[113] Therefore, though the content of the gospel story remains the same, its implications and applications will vary according to the context of both speaker and audience.

Considering this, Grenz argues that the gospel is best expressed through embodiment and dialogue – by a community of Christ who develop their own culture while engaging in conversation with the culture around them.[114] Similarly, Newbigin argues that such grand claims to truth must be embodied as well as told. He adds that Jesus did not leave a book to bear witness, but created a community that would "carry the secret into the life of the world, always reappropriating and reinterpreting it in the light of new circumstances."[115] Because of this, "the gospel does not come as a disembodied message, but as the message of a community which claims to live by it and which invites others to adhere to it."[116] Thus, the gospel is always contextualized by the living community of the church, which bears witness and practically lives

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[111] Stanley J. Grenz, "Culture and Spirit: The Role of Cultural Context in Theological Reflection," *Asbury Theological Journal* 55, No. 2 (Fall 2000): 41-42.
[112] Ray Bakke, *A Theology as Big as the City* (Downers Grove, IVP, 1997), 154.
[113] Walls, *Missionary*, 10.
[114] Grenz, *Culture*, 47-48.
[115] Newbigin, *Pluralist*, 95.
[116] Ibid., 141.

in response to the truth in every new time and place. In doing so, the church does not adjust the actual gospel message, but witnesses to its truth through its actions in its given context. As sociologist Paul Hiebert puts it, the gospel is not expressed by a prophet, but by a "community of committed Christians who are willing not only to hear the gospel together but also to pay the price that obedience to the gospel will demand."[117]

v. Summary: Gospel Fluency

This exploration of the gospel's message, meaning and methods of transmission has produced a helpful foundation on which further investigation can be built. Being aware of the diverse Scriptural expressions of the gospel can prepare someone to recognize them in the vocabulary of others. Similarly, knowing the theological breadth and various applications of the gospel, a person can more easily relate to others' stories. Finally, by learning the ways in which the gospel can be transmitted through word and deed, one can better understand those processes in the personal narratives of other believers. Overall, this literature review has provided a sort of "fluency" on the topic of the gospel which forms a basis of understanding for the interviews.

b. Theoretical Foundations

"Only with a proper understanding of conversion can we truly appreciate the character of our religious heritage and what it means to be evangelical."[118]

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[117] Paul G. Hiebert, "The Gospel in Our Culture: Methods of Social and Cultural Analysis," In *Church Between Gospel and Culture*, ed. George R. Hunsberger and Craig Van Gelder, 139-57 (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996), 156.
[118] Smith, *Beginning Well,* 9-10.

Arriving at newfound belief requires more than hearing a message; certain processes are at work beforehand and behind the scenes. Regardless of the efforts of the speaker to contextualize and embody the message, its hearers will need to weigh various factors before arriving at a decision. Thus, while Biblical, Theological and Missiological voices are helpful at illuminating the methods of evangelists, other voices may be needed to explain the perspective of the evangelized. Therefore, in the following sections, I explore the topic of religious conversion through the lens of various social sciences. By doing so, I hope to build a basis of knowledge to understand not only *what* people believe, but *how* and *why* they came to that point of conversion.

Though much has been said about the contents and presentation of the Christian gospel, some attention must also be given to its recipients and their context. While conversion typically involves the adoption of a new "system of cognitive meaning"[119] through the agency of an "advocate" of that system, the convert is far from a passive participant in this process.[120] Rather, as various studies in the social sciences have shown, the motivation, method, and manner of conversion is largely shaped by social, psychological, and other personal factors on the part of the convert.

i. Conversion: Sociological Factors

For example, Rodney Stark, a social historian, offers some perspective of the early church's rapid spread across the Roman Empire. Summarizing his findings, he claims that "conversion is primarily about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of

[119] Aaron C. T. Smith and Bob Stewart, "Becoming Believers: Studying the Conversion Process from Within," in *Zygon*, v.46, n.4, 2011, p. 809.
[120] Lewis R. Rambo, *Understanding Religious Conversion*, (New Haven, CO: Yale University, 1993), 66-67.

one's friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines.[121] Thus, Stark stresses the importance of social networks[122] more than "dramatic events and persuasive preachers" at spreading religious movements.[123] Similarly, theologian Michael Green estimates that 80% of evangelism in the early church was done by "ordinary Christians explaining themselves to their *oikos*, or household.[124] Moreover, sociologist Ronald L. Johnstone points to other social factors such as major life transitions, the breaking or forging of social bonds and the experience of tension that contribute to a slow and gradual process of internalizing a new religious identity within a given group.[125] For these authors, conversion to Christianity is more about social conformity than intellectual persuasion; the power of relationships trumps the power of rhetoric.

Another sociologist, Herve Huntzinger, examines the conversion of barbarians to Christianity in late antiquity. Noting the difference between Tertullian's anti-Roman rhetoric in the third century and the "Christianization of political structure of the Roman Empire" in the fourth century,[126] Huntzinger considers it "self-evident that conversion to Christianity should carry a stronger social and political connotation in Late Antiquity."[127] Moreover, he adds that due to lack of available information on the subjective and personal aspects of conversion of subjects from this time period, his study only considers "external causes and social aspects"

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[121] Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*, (San Francisco, CA: HarperOne, 2012), 68.

[122] Such as the Jewish diaspora in the Roman empire.

[123] Stark, *Triumph*, 70.

[124] Michael Green, *Evangelism in the Early* Church (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004) in Tim Keller, *How to Reach the West Again: Six Essential Elements of a Missionary Encounter*, New York: Redeemer City to City, 2020), 18.

[125] Ronald L. Johnstone, "The Sources of Religion," and "Becoming Religious," In *Religion in Society: A Sociology of Religion* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education 2000), 74-75.

[126] From the reign of Constantine to the Edict of Thessalonica in 380

[127] Herve Huntzinger, "Becoming Christian, Becoming Roman: Conversion to Christianity and Ethical Identification Process in Late Antiquity," in *Papers presented at the Seventeenth International Conference on Patristic Studies* (Oxford, 2015), 103-104.

such as "membership status and nominal adhesion."[128] Therefore, in response to his question, "does becoming Christian mean becoming Roman," he concludes that "people from the outside use Christianity as a means to become part of the empire…faith is not a mere matter of inner consciousness; …the conversion of barbarians to Christianity is not above all a religious matter, but a social and political transformation."[129] However, given the author's own description of his chosen research method, his conclusions have limited applicability. While nominal adherence to a state religion may be a matter of political expediency in some contexts, others like Stark and Green have shown the importance of other social factors, as well.

In a study of more recent times, Abby Day explores the phenomenon of nominalism in the UK, which she believes to be "the largest form of Christianity today and the least understood." Noting that 72% of its residents self-identified as Christian in their 2001 census, Day asserts that "many people without a faith in God, Jesus, or Christian doctrine self-identify as 'Christian' in certain social contexts."[130] As she interviewed people to find out what this identity meant to them, she came to an understanding of Christian nominalism as a "social, performative act, bringing into being a specific kind of Christian identity."[131] She defines it as having an anthropocentric, rather than theocentric belief orientation; beliefs are performed in response to social context, rather than pre-formed in one's consciousness.[132] In contrast to a common sociological view that many people privately believe without publicly practicing their religion, Abby Day follows social anthropologist Emile Durkheim in claiming that one can

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[128] Ibid., 105.
[129] Ibid., 114-115.
[130] Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief & Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011), 174.
[131] Ibid., 174.
[132] Ibid., 188-191.

"explain belief in functional rather than substantive terms." She argues that many of her interview subjects "believe in belonging" and behave in such a way to add "religious identifications to complement other social and emotional experiences of belonging."[133] Yet, in contrast to this notion of "performative Christianity" for social gain, Joseph Drexler-Dreis offers a case study of Nat Turner, who led a slave rebellion in 1830. He argues that for Turner, his conversion process culminated in "being a salvific presence in his community," even if it ran against "conventional ethical norms" and "mainstream theology" of his time.[134]

Thus, while Day may certainly be correct that "performative Christianity" is a significant social phenomenon, other authors have highlighted other social dynamics that can contribute to Christian conversion. Though some may nominally convert for political expediency, others may convert as an expression of solidarity with a smaller community that is at odds with the mainstream culture. Yet, in either case, the act of conversion is viewed as an act of social conformity. In fact, in personally observing such social dynamics, Gordon T. Smith has wondered whether personal conversion is actually a derivative of Christian community – rather than vice versa.[135] If the church is truly a midwife of "new birth," the channel through which the gospel is communicated in word and deed, then it must be "the very means by which this grace is known and experienced."[136] To put it another way, he argues that if "conversion is largely an experience of learning and appropriating a faith language," then it involves "not only trusting in Jesus but trusting in the community that mediates Jesus through the language of faith."[137]

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[133] Ibid., 191-192.
[134] Joseph Drexler-Dreis, "Nat Turner's Rebellion as a Process of Conversion: Towards a Deeper Understanding of the Christian Conversion Process," in *Black Theology*, Vol. 12, No. 3, November 2014, p.244, 247.
[135] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 34.
[136] Ibid., 35-36.
[137] Ibid., 42.

But, despite the importance of this perspective, it does not show the full picture. While its treatment of demographic statistics and broad social trends can shed light on the role that community plays in religious experience, its treatment of conversion remains superficial. In attempting to remain objective, it excludes more subjective and internal factors like personal testimony and psychological processes. Yet, some authors call for the consideration of these factors as well. They insist that conversion is more than a pragmatic decision in response to external factors; it is a process that involves internal deliberations. Belief is not simply decided but also developed; it not only serves a function but also changes lives. If sociologists can prove that the community of faith is "the *context* in which [conversion] takes place," this still leaves the *content* of a conversion experience to be explored. Likewise, if the community serves as "the *mediator* of religious experience,"[138] one might still ask what *message* is being mediated.

ii. Conversion & Process Theory

In 1965, sociologists John Lofland and Rodney Stark published their findings from a study that became a landmark in the field of religious conversion theory. By closely observing the conversion of individuals to a small millenarian cult as it happened, they were able to recognize the role that internally held beliefs play in a person's conversion. As a result, they came to view conversion as more than a simple transfer of affiliation from one group to another; rather, it involved a complete shift in a person's worldview. Moreover, they recognized that the changing a person's set of ultimate values and philosophy of life was more than a simple decision; it followed a multi-stage process.[139] Based on what they observed in their limited study, Lofland

[138] Ibid., 35.

[139] John Lofland and Rodney Stark, "Becoming a World-Saver: A Theory of Conversion to a Deviant Perspective" in *American Sociological Review*, Vol 30, No. 6 (Dec 1965), 862.

and Stark summarized what they believed to be three necessary "predisposing conditions" for a person to convert, followed by four "situational contingencies:" a potential convert must experience personal tension, adopt a propensity to solve the problem religiously, identify themselves as a seeker, encounter a religious advocate at a key turning point in life, form an affective bond with other converts, experience a lack of attachment outside of the religious group, and engage in intensive interaction with members of the group.[140] While Lofland and Stark recognized that the specific results of their limited study were not necessarily generalizable for other situations, many authors continue to use their description of the conversion process as a reference point for their own studies.

Years later, Alan R. Tippett addressed this topic from a very different angle. While Lofland and Stark offered first-hand observations of the conversion of individuals into a deviant cult, Tippett sought to interpret and organize existing data to identify the pattern and structure of "total group movements into Christianity" among the peoples of Oceania.[141] Yet, despite using such a different set of data, he observed "remarkable regularities" in different groups' process of conversion "from one conceptual and behavioral context to another." To him, this process appeared to be composed of three separate periods, punctuated by two transition points: the period of awareness, the point of realization, the period of decision, the point of encounter, and the period of incorporation.[142] Like Lofland and Stark, Tippett also recognized limitations in his model, and admitted that it fails to account for people's ongoing experiences

[140] Ibid., 864-874.
[141] Alan R. Tippett, "Conversion as a Dynamic Process in Christian Mission," in *Missiology, An International Review,* Vol V, No.2, April 1977, 203-204.
[142] Ibid., 205-207.

after conversion. Nevertheless, it reinforced Lofland and Stark's view of conversion as a dynamic process.[143]

In a subsequent study of the conversion of Western Europeans to Islam, Lewis R. Rambo considered various theories of religious conversion. Describing these theories as people's attempt to make sense of phenomena that would be otherwise inexplicable in their worldview, he was quick to point out their potential biases. While surveying theories centered on globalization, feminism, religion, intellect, narrative, identity, ritual, psychoanalytics, archetyping, attribution and attachment, Rambo posits that such theories "often say more about the one making the attribution than the person that was converted."[144] Likewise, in his ensuing book on the topic, he compares the "multiplicity of [available] approaches" to different people viewing an elephant in a dark room from different doorways, each with only a penlight in hand.[145] In response, he proposes a way to integrate "these accurate, helpful, but fragmentary efforts at explanation:"

> More light and more distance may both be helpful, and a heuristic model which maintains that conversion takes place in stages may provide a framework for integrating research within the various disciplines, offering deeper, more complex understanding of the multilayered processes involved in conversion.[146]

The solution proposed by Rambo, building on the work of Lofland, Stark, and Tippett, is a "process theory of conversion consisting of seven stages:" context, crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. Recognizing that no theory is completely right or wrong, and that no theory is universally applicable, Rambo argues that such a process theory

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[143] Ibid, 219.
[144] Lewis R. Rambo, "Theories of Conversion: Understanding and Interpreting Religious Change" in *Social Compass, 46 (3), 1999*, 259-261.
[145] Rambo, *Understanding*, 16.
[146] Ibid., 16.

would be "inclusive of a variety of factors or forces operative in religious change."[147] Rambo later refers to this as a "sequential stage model" that accounts for the change that a convert experiences over time – both forward and backward – along the sequence of stages."[148] Fleshing out these stages in his book, Rambo uses this model to explain how external factors (context), internal factors (crisis), personal initiative (quest), religious advocates (encounter), relationships (interaction), rituals and rites of passage (commitment), and transformation (consequences) can all play a part in a person's process of conversion.[149] As a result of his work, Rambo has been called "the leading expert on conversion today."[150]

This understanding of conversion as a process offers important insights for my research and implications for the local church. Philip Fellows, who recognizes conversion to be a "decisive yet not necessarily datable…reorientation of the seeker's allegiance towards Christ in a way that gives rise to new ritual and ethical practices, a new theological and moral framework, and induction into a new community," [151] calls for the church to respond appropriately:

> The way in which we communicate the gospel must take account of the differing ways in which individuals experience their need for it. Thus, for example, someone who wrestles with guilt may need assurance of the possibility of forgiveness while someone experiencing shame may need to know that their life can be restored and made coherent. To do so, the church must employ all the different scriptural metaphors for the work of Christ…Advocates therefore need to understand the process of conversion in order to be able to discern which aspect of Christ's work is most appropriate for that seeker in their context."[152]

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[147] Rambo, *Theories*, 267.
[148] Rambo, *Understanding*, 16-17.
[149] Ibid., 165-170.
[150] Erin Dufault-Hunter, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 53.
[151] Philip Fellows, "U-Turn if You Want to: Missional Implications of Viewing Conversion as a Process," *European Journal of Theology,* Vol.28, no. 2, 2020,
[152] Ibid., 174.

iii. Conversion & Psychological Development

This understanding of conversion as a process has led other researchers to emphasize its internal, psychological aspects over and above its external, social dynamics. For example, when Aaron C. T. Smith and Bob Stewart "interrogated" the process theory proposed by Rambo by closely observing five new members of a spiritualist group for eighteen months,[153] they found their data to be consistent with Rambo's claims. While acknowledging that "emotional and doctrinal variables play significant roles in the conversion process," they conclude that conversion is "a multifaceted and dynamic process of cognitive transition mediated by structural and contextual forces."[154] Further exploring the stages of this cognitive transition, Smith and Stewart claim that most of the "hard work toward conversion occurs before an advocate arrives;" converts often cycle through the early stages of "context, catalyst and quest" until their beliefs are aligned, priming them for conversion at the interaction-commitment stage.[155]

Moreover, based on this view of conversion as a multi-stage cognitive process, James W. Fowler relates it to the stages of psychological development. Starting with Rambo's definition of conversion, he adds that "conversion is a significant recentering of one's previous conscious or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action."[156] Yet, for Fowler, this does not refer to a one-way sequence or a terminal process; rather, it can be a repeated experience that corresponds with phases of personal development.

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[153] Smith and Stewart, *Becoming*, 806.
[154] Ibid., 809, 829-830.
[155] Ibid., 830.
[156] James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York, NY: HarperCollins, 1981), 281-282.

Building on ideas from Levinson's "Eras of the Life Cycle" and Erikson's "Psychological Stages," Fowler proposes that people also progress through multiple "Faith Stages" as they grow from infancy to childhood, through school years to adolescence, and from young adulthood to maturity.[157] Through these life phases, a person's faith can develop from being undifferentiated from parents to being imitative of them, from a mythic-literal understanding of truth to a synthetic application of it among peers, and from a commitment in the present to an integration of one's past and future."[158] In summary, if faith is can be defined not simply as "belief in a creedal statement," but rather "to trust in another and as loyalty to a transcendent center of value and power," then it can look different at different times in life.[159]

Using Fowler's insights as a lens of interpretation, Steven Tighe explored the phenomenon of adolescents making multiple commitments to Christ. Noting that his twenty interview subjects reported making thirty-seven such commitments, he explains that for these teenagers, "conversion…is seen as a long process containing multiple spiritually significant commitment events."[160] Moreover, Tighe argues that there seems to be some ambiguity about when or how conversion takes place; just as the church has historically held different views about water baptism and the baptism of the Spirit, so modern researchers disagree about whether to focus on children or adolescents.[161]

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[157] Ibid., 111-113.
[158] Ibid., 121, 133, 149, 172, 182, 197-198, 200.
[159] Ibid., 14.
[160] Similarly, he mentions a study by Dave Rahn where, of 369 college students, 63% reported that they first trusted in Jesus as a child, and 80% reported having a crucial spiritual encounter during adolescence.
Steven Tighe, "Born Again, Again: Conversion in Christian Families as a Process Punctuated by Grace" in *Christian Education Journal* v. 12, n. 1. p. 58-80, Spr 2015, 58.
[161] Ibid., 60-62.

Rather than trying to solve these age-old problems, Tighe looks to Fowler and Rambo for insight, both of whom indicate that it may be necessary for a person's faith to change over the course of their life as new situations arise.[162] From his own research, Tighe found that compared to children, the cognitive development of adolescents enables them to

> understand faith, the cost of following Jesus, and even themselves, at a completely different level. The commitment of the child's total being to the Lord might be rethought, because his or her total being has radically changed. Even if as children they committed all of themselves that they understood to all of God that they knew, by the time of their adolescence, both they themselves and their understanding of God will have grown dramatically. From their point of view, there is now more of them with which they can follow God, and more of God to whom they can pledge themselves.[163]

In light of this, Tighe argues that because "the phenomenon of multiple faith commitments might be a consequence of faith development," both evangelism and discipleship should be practiced together as an ongoing process. Despite any theological misgivings, he concludes that "conversion in young people from Christian homes might be best seen as a long process punctuated by spiritually significant commitment events."[164]

Viewing these psychological factors in the conversion process, Gordon T. Smith asserts, "Conversion arises out of a personal longing for change or transformation. As often as not, conversion is occasioned by some stress or turmoil, some inner conflict that seeks resolution."[165] Having previously referred to the community of faith as the necessary context of conversion, here Smith recognizes the crucial nature of internal motivations. Getting more specific, he explains that conversion could serve as the "means by which a persistent sense of

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[162] Ibid., 62.
[163] Ibid., 71-72.
[164] Ibid., 75-77.
[165] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 47-48.

guilt is resolved or an individual finds peace in life circumstances that have been filled with fear and anxiety. But ultimately a conversion experience taps into the human longing for significance, meaning, integration and purpose."[166] According to Smith, then, conversion represents a moment of psychological resolution, when a person discovers that "the gospel promises the fulfilment of our deepest longings in Christ Jesus."[167]

iv. Conversion: Historical Perspectives

With such contrary approaches to conversion presented by varying disciplines of social science, one might wonder how to reconcile their differences. While sociologists examine broad social trends to shed light on the external context of conversion, psychologists investigate the internal processes at work in converts which motivate them to change. Yet, a third approach – a historical one – adds the crucial element of personal testimony to this study. Though using such sources may instantly raise concerns about bias and inaccuracy, a proper historical approach can broaden one's perspective by combining historical facts from multiple sources.

To illustrate the tension between academic disciplines, I offer this quotation from the sociologist-historian, Rodney Stark:

> For generations it was assumed that religious conversions were the result of doctrinal appeal – that people embraced a new faith because they found its teachings particularly appealing, especially if these teachings seemed to solve serious problems or dissatisfactions that affected them. If so, then to convert the Vikings might have been accomplished by preaching to mass audiences. But, surprisingly, when sociologists took the trouble to go out and actually watch conversions take place, they discovered that doctrines are of secondary importance in the initial decision to convert. One must, of course, leave room for those rare

[166] Ibid., 48.
[167] Ibid., 49.

> conversions resulting from mystical experiences such as Paul's on the road to Damascus. But such instances aside, conversion is primarily about bringing one's religious behavior into alignment with that of one's friends and relatives, not about encountering attractive doctrines. Put more formally: people tend to convert to a religious group when their social ties to members outweigh their ties to outsiders who might oppose the conversion, and this often occurs before a convert knows much about what the group believes.[168]

Here, Stark clearly engages in an "either-or" argument; he asserts that conversion is a social phenomenon and leaves no room for psychological persuasion. While acknowledging the rare exception of individual mystical experiences, he basically claims conversion in the name of sociology – to the exclusion of other approaches. Using the single example of the mass conversion of Vikings (at swordpoint), he dismisses the potential influence of doctrinal appeal, preaching, and the ability of the gospel to solve personal problems.

It is shocking to see such a narrow view expressed – when additional evidence could easily have prevented this unnecessary exclusivism. Certainly, Stark has researched and written widely about the historical spread of Christianity. But, he should be the first to admit that no modern observer can discount the influence of psychological persuasion and mystical experience on ancient converts. An argument from silence is not a solid basis for excluding such factors. Moreover, while researchers of a given discipline may be skilled at finding evidence which relates to their particular approach, there is always the possibility of engaging in "search bias." In this case, perhaps varying historical accounts and personal testimonies were ignored because of their potential for bias. Yet it is the very inclusion of these diverse accounts which can guard against the prejudice of the researcher.

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[168] Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (Wilmingdon, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014), 61-62.

For example, in cases where ample documentary evidence is available, a historian can thoroughly investigate the influence of ideas on people's thinking. D. Bruce Hindmarsh, in his book *The Spirit of Early Evangelicalism*, has pored over sermon transcripts, journal entries, personal letters, and news reports relating to the spread of evangelicalism in 18th century England. Observing how preachers applied the "analogy of legal condemnation" in the courthouse to the individual consciences and contexts of their listeners, Hindmarsh draws a direct line between doctrine and the conversion of these crowds.[169] Moreover, in sharing the personal reflections of Charles and John Wesley about the conversion of their listeners, he illuminates how clearly these historical figures viewed it as a process of changing one's beliefs. If these historical figures portrayed Christian conversion as a progression from striving, to despair, to repentance to hope,[170] this should give pause to any reductionistic sociological views.

Even if Stark bases his conclusions on "dozens of close-up studies of conversion, all of which confirm that social networks are the basic mechanism through which conversion takes place,"[171] this does not tell the whole story. For instance, if social networks provide the external context in which conversion occurs, this says nothing about the internal motivations involved in the process. Likewise, if relationships provide a conduit for the passage of information, this says nothing about the actual content of belief. In short, referring to social networks as a "mechanism" of conversion does not preclude the contribution of other factors in this multi-faceted process.

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[169] Hindmarsh, *Early Evangelicalism*, 213.
[170] Ibid., 218-225.
[171] Stark, *West Won*, 63.

In fact, balancing Stark's view are others who point to the social challenges of conversion to Christianity from a pagan context. As Biblical scholar Michael Green contends, "conversion, then, in our sense of an exclusive change of faith, of ethic and of cult, was indeed utterly foreign to the mentality of the Graeco-Roman world. That is why the Jews excited such interest, hatred and fascination."[172] So, no matter how helpful early Christian communities were in facilitating conversion, a new believer would still have faced significant *social challenges* when converting from a pagan context. To overcome these challenges, other motivating factors must have been at play in the conversion process. Thus, one might view social conformity as the *product* of conversion, rather than its primary motive. Or, at least, if the social aspect of conversion to Christianity involved both gains and losses, one might consider its net effect to be neutral. In summary, rather than viewing social factors to be the sole motivation in a person's decision process, one can recognize the contribution of *both messenger and message*.

One historian who recognizes the complexity of this issue is Alan Kreider, who wrote *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom.* Beginning with Jesus's own words about conversion, Kreider then proceeds to explore other ancient material on this topic. By compiling and carefully examining the accounts of several leaders of the early church, Kreider could observe and comment on the early church's practice of and approach to conversion. Noting that "Jesus's friendship was demanding," Kreider summarizes its effect in this way: "it led to upheavals in people's beliefs, in their sense of belonging, and in their behavior."[173]

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[172] Green, *Evangelism in the Early Church*, 146.

[173] Alan Kreider, *The Change of Conversion and the Origin of Christendom* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1999), 1.

For Kreider, this three-fold effect of conversion served as a lens through which he viewed the stories of various historical figures. For instance, in summarizing the account of Justin, he asserts, "for Justin, conversion involved a change of belief." Yet, this newfound "Christian belief led to discerning areas of demonic power…liberated people…and led to distinctive forms of behavior. It also led to a unique sense of belonging."[174] While Justin's story showed a clear progression from belief to behavior to belonging, Cyprian's account offered a different emphasis. For him, "his struggle was not to believe what Christians believed; rather it was to live as they taught." Impressed by the lifestyle of Christians, Cyprian struggled to follow suit until he was baptized – then "his behavior, like his beliefs and his sense of belonging, had been conformed to those of the Christian community."[175]

Likewise, Tertullian comments on being impressed by the "marginal…yet intriguingly attractive" Christian communities. Kreider explains that as the early Christians lived as "resident aliens" in their culture, they succeeded in offering both "comprehensibility and critique." By offering "news that was new" and enculturating their message, "the early Christians seem to have expressed themselves well – verbally, socially, ritually, and visually – to communicate to their cultures and to critique them, expressing insights and approaches that were attractive in their plausibility and relevance."[176] Kreider adds that other early stories also "emphasize the intellectual element" of Christian belief, while early apologists spread the new faith by demonstrating its "theoretical resilience."[177]

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[174] Ibid., 2, 5.
[175] Ibid., 8, 9.
[176] Ibid., 13-16.
[177] Ibid, 16.

Yet, Christian beliefs were not just attractive for their logical coherence; their truth and power were recognized through healings and exorcisms carried out by believers. According to the accounts of Origen and Irenaeus, such miracles led to conversions, as "believing and belonging [came about when] people apprehended the superior power of the Christian God." Moreover, Kreider comments, "without a doubt, an important element in early Christianity's success was the Christian belief that because Christ had conquered death Christians need not fear death…movements animated by this belief can withstand persecution."[178]

Other ancient accounts point to the "beauty of life" and "care for the poor" as a greater attraction than preaching. Yet, as Kreider points out, "the behavior of the Christians was the product of careful pre-baptismal catechizing by church leaders." While the behavior of Christians attracted outsiders, "instruction and baptism [were] the means of entry into the Christian community [and] the instruments by which conversion was completed."[179] Examining a 3rd century source called the "Apostolic Tradition," Kreider identifies four stages of conversion:

1. Informal evangelization through contact with Christians;
2. Application for instruction (catechechumenate) and changing of behavior
3. Enlightenment, orthodox teaching, exorcism and baptism (belong)
4. Mystagogy – further explanation[180]

While it may appear strange for the early church to require a change of behavior to those who do not yet belong, Kreider comments that

[178] Ibid., 16-17.
[179] Ibid., 17-20.
[180] Ibid., 21-22.

> early Christian catechists were attempting not so much to impart concepts as to nurture communities whose values would be different from those of conventional society. Christian leaders assumed that people did not think their way into a new life; they lived their way into a new kind of thinking.[181]

Remarkably, early church leaders would rigorously judge the suitability of a catechumen's lifestyle (behavior) before offering them full Biblical and theological instruction (belief). Then, only after both were completed (catechumen), would baptism signify their belonging in the community.[182]

In summary, Kreider asserts that "the early Christians lead us to reconsider the balance of ingredients in conversion." While few wrote about interior experience before Augustine, and some like Justin and Irenaeus wrote about belief, "the emphasis in the early Christian liturgies of a radical shift in the believers' sense of belonging – their affinity and allegiance – seems extreme to us. Even stranger to us is the Apostolic Tradition's focus upon transformed behavior as the heart of catechism."[183] Yet, perhaps, argues Kreider, therein lies the secret of the early church's success: they taught for transformation; their approach to conversion resulted in changed lives.

Historical accounts can provide excellent material for testing one's theories. By comparing one's ideas to real-life examples, one can protect against personal bias in the research process and broaden one's perspective of the topic. Moreover, perhaps the aspects of conversion highlighted by these historical accounts can be located in modern day narratives.

v. Conversion: Integrative Approaches

Having an awareness of these various theories of conversion has proven useful to me in my field research. Gaining a sense of the external and internal factors involved in conversion, as

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[181] Ibid., 23.
[182] Ibid., 23-26.
[183] Ibid., 103.

well as the typical stages of its process, prepared me to ask relevant questions and to listen with understanding. However, after collecting a wide variety of conversion stories, I also needed an overall strategy to make sense of the data. *How can it be organized and presented in a helpful, intelligible manner?*

In response to the growing diversity of conversion theories, John Lofland and Norman Skonovd offer an integrative approach that has become a landmark in the field. Noticing how sociological, psychological, and other theories present themselves as mutually exclusive, Lofland and Skonovd propose that "the differences among conversion experiences…are not simply a matter of the 'theoretical goggles' worn by the researchers…rather, such differences are inherent in the central or key features of the conversions themselves."[184] So, while some theorists try to find a central factor behind conversion, and others assign different factors to different stages of the conversion process, Lofland and Skonovd simply claim that there are different types of conversions.

In an attempt to identify these types, they isolate "key, critical, orienting, defining, or 'motif' experiences as they vary across conversions" and arrange them into six "conversion motifs:" intellectual, mystical, experimental, affectional, revivalist, and coercive.[185] While the authors acknowledge that other variables or processes may factor into each type, they contend that these six motifs can help us to describe how the phenomenon of conversion can be experienced differently between individuals, societies, and even historical epochs.[186] So, rather than viewing all factors in a person's conversion as sequential parts of a social or psychological

[184] John Lofland and Norman Skonovd, "Conversion Motifs," in *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* (December 1, 1981), 373-374.
[185] Ibid., 375.
[186] Ibid., 385.

process that is commonly experienced by all, Lofland and Skonovd would argue that the conversion process can take on completely different forms in different contexts.

With this in mind, one might ask how academics are to make any sense of the matter. How can such complex and diverse experiences be expressed intelligibly to others, and how may they be interpreted in a way that can offer helpful insight? In response to this need, Erin Dufault-Hunter proposes a new methodology for the study of conversion. Avoiding the tendency of academic literature to "reduce conversion to some unconscious force, either internal or external," she turns to William James for guidance.[187] Unlike numerous more recent writers, James considers personal accounts of religious phenomena to be legitimate in their own right. Moreover, he recognizes conversion to be more than social conformity or doctrinal agreement; for him, it represents a "change in the very center of one's being" that "manifests itself in a person's life and life choices."[188]

While affirming aspects of other theories that emphasize how conversion involves a shift in rhetoric, rational choice, and sequential stages, Dufault-Hunter argues that a more intuitive, "central metaphor" is needed to incorporate the insights of a variety of disciplines.[189] Following James's "holistic and respectful view of religious conversion that takes the individual's experience seriously," she proposes a "narrative approach" that offers researchers a multi-dimensional view of the convert.[190] For Dufault-Hunter, religious conversion essentially means

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[187] Erin Dufault-Hunter, *The Transformative Power of Faith: A Narrative Approach to Conversion* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012), 31. Accessed Online: May 7, 2022. https://search-ebscohost-com.twu.idm.oclc.org/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=466774&site=eds-live&scope=site

[188] Ibid., 31-32.

William James, *Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature* (London, Longmans Green & Co, 1902), 189.

[189] Dufault-Hunter, *Transformative*, 41, 49, 55-56.

[190] Ibid., 56-57.

to link one's life with a new metanarrative. For converts, this involves participating in "a complex hermeneutical task" of rewriting one's life story in a religious light, assigning new meaning to that story, and embodying the story in one's practices, character and community."[191] Therefore, by using a "narrative lens for reading conversion," a researcher can empathetically engage with converts by entering their world to discover how disparate elements of their life hold together in a single story.[192]

vi. Summary: A Narrative Approach

This survey of the available literature on the topic of conversion has offered a helpful background for my research to follow. First, it has become clear that both external (social) and internal (psychological) factors contribute to the process of conversion, which can be said to occur in a sequence of stages. At times, these disciplines often seem to be presented at-odds with each other. Sociologists may present conversion as *merely* a social experience, while psychologists may focus *exclusively* on individual factors. Yet, this narrow-mindedness is completely unnecessary – as a historical approach can demonstrate, the experience of personal conversion can be multi-faceted. When one removes their academic filters and actually considers ancient and modern accounts of events, it is plain to see that conversion involves *both* social and personal factors. While community may provide the *context* of conversion, concepts and experiences may contribute to the *content* of belief. Moreover, the relationship between these factors can be *reciprocal*: while a community may convey content to a person, content may convince them to change their community.

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[191] Ibid., 88, 131.
[192] Ibid., 89, 130.

Given the variety of factors and motifs involved in a religious conversion, it may be best to describe it in terms of personal story, or narrative. While every person's experience includes some combination of all factors mentioned – it cannot be reduced to any particular theory of social science. Attempts to do so seem more harmful than helpful – and may stem from a fundamental understanding of conversion. After all, as Gordon T. Smith comments, "Religious experience can be properly interpreted only by the person who has the experience. This implies that religious experience, by its very nature, cannot be analyzed by someone who has not had a comparable experience."[193] With such a view of personal conversion, I really had no choice but to adopt the method of interviews for my field research. In order to show proper respect for the individuality of each person's experience, I had to let them speak for themselves. Yet, bringing an awareness of the various factors contributing to conversion, processes and stages of conversion, and historical examples of conversion, I had some idea of what to expect.

[193] Smith, Beginning Well, 18.

3. Research Design

> *Our understanding of the meaning of conversion, while informed by Scripture, will be shaped by the actual experience of the church – the religious experience (especially conversion experiences) of Christians. We cannot examine religious experience adequately without acknowledging the uniqueness of each person and the distinctive character of each person's experience.*[194]

a. Purpose: Constructing a Local Theology

As stated above, I have sought to make a personal contribution to this topic by conducting interviews with recent adult converts who live in the region of Victoria, BC. Having considered various theories on conversion and the factors which may contribute to its process, I have concluded that the best way forward would be to hear directly from recent converts. Given the very personal nature of conversion and the uniqueness of each person's experience, the best way to test these theories and compare various factors is to examine the detailed accounts of individuals who have been recently converted.

As my research question has essentially stated, I have sought to discover people's reasons for becoming Christian, and to understand what that process involved. I have also investigated how the questions and needs people had prior conversion were answered and addressed after their turning to faith. In other words, I have attempted to identify points of resonance between the gospel story and people's personal stories, to discover *why the gospel is good news for them*. Moreover, part of this process involves asking *how* – to determine which factors served

[194] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 17.

as the means of transmitting the faith to these individuals. Finally, this interview process also involved asking *so what* – investigating the ongoing effects and personal significance of this conversion experience in the lives of these new believers.

Because of the nature of such interviews, my research has been of a *qualitative* nature, rather than quantitative. The data is necessarily *personal and subjective*, rather than empirical and objective. Instead of drawing a few specific pieces of data from a large sample of people, *my research draws a large amount of data from fewer specific people*. Therefore, the research is also *synchronic*, rather than diachronic[195] – a phenomenological[196] study of a particular experience (Christian conversion expressed through baptism) as it occurs in a unique context (evangelical churches in the Victoria region over a period the last five years). In summary, such a study of a select sample of new Christians from a specific time and place could compare to what Robert J. Schreiter calls "constructing a local theology."

Defining theology as the "reflection of Christians upon the gospel in light of their own circumstances," Schreiter notices how recently, more attention has been given to "how those circumstances shape the response to the gospel."[197] In a post-colonial, post Vatican II world, as new questions are being asked and old theological answers are not working; old paternalistic methods are being replaced by efforts to indigenize, contextualize, and localize theology.[198] Schreiter describes a few models for constructing a local theology: the *translation* of the gospel into local expressions and forms, the *adaptation* of the Christian message to engage with the

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[195] Paul G. Hiebert, *Missiological Implications of Epistemological Shifts: Affirming Truth in a Modern/Postmodern World* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1991), 15.
[196] Howard Anderson, "Research and Statistics," in DMN 974 at ACTS Seminaries, Langley BC. Delivered April 16, 2019.
[197] Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 1.
[198] Ibid., 1-4.

local philosophy, or *contextualization*, which "begins with the needs of a people in a concrete place, and from there moves to the traditions of faith."[199]

While the first two models represent methods of importing truth into a context, the third model more closely represents what I have attempted in my project. Like an ethnographic study, I began by identifying the questions and concerns of a people group in a locality.[200] From there, I organized and presented the findings of my project to help inform appropriate evangelistic responses by myself as well as my readers. As Stephen B. Bevans insists, gospel, church, and culture all contribute to a local theology; the good news of Jesus Christ "is always incarnate…[in] that concrete community of Christians" in "the concrete context" of culture.[201]

According to Bevans, "there is no such thing as 'theology;' there is only contextual theology." While classical theologians once viewed theology as an objective science based on Scripture and tradition, the later recognition of human experience as another "locus theologicus" has made it clear that "every authentic theology has been very much rooted in a particular context in some implicit or real way."[202] Moreover, acknowledging that there is no ideal culture but rather a variety of its expressions, he calls for "a theology for every culture and period of history." He concludes, "if the message, through our agency, is to continue to touch people, we have somehow ourselves to continue the incarnation process…by becoming contextual."[203]

In light of this, Bevans names several methods for engaging in contextual theology, with each being more or less appropriate in different contexts: a "translation" model to preserve

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[199] Ibid., 7-13.
[200] Ibid., 14.
[201] Ibid., 20-21.
[202] Stephen B. Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology, Revised & Expanded* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 3-7.
[203] Ibid., 11-12.

tradition; an "anthropological" model to preserve local identity; a "praxis" model to guide social change; a "synthetic" model to balance diverse identities; a "transcendental" model to focus on personal experience; and a "countercultural" model to critique the surrounding culture.[204] For the purposes of my project, the transcendental model seems most relevant; rather than trying to import a theological message into a context or lead people to change, I am trying to draw out truth from people's own experiences. Following a quote from Carl Rogers that "the most personal is the most general," Bevans argues that commonalities can be found between different people's authentic expressions of their own experiences. Just as he found this model to work well in class of diverse students, I hope that my collection of various personal accounts will offer some insights that are useful to others in a general sense.[205]

To begin to construct a "local theology" based on the experiences of recent converts in my region, I had to find appropriate people who meet the criteria. While it would have been easier to find interview subjects if I did not restrict my search to recently baptized evangelicals in Victoria, those very restrictions are what make my study "local" and relevant to a specific context. Fortunately, as a leader of a local fellowship of ministry leaders (CityReach Victoria), I had a readily available network from which to draw appropriate participants for my project, and a relevant context in which my conclusions could be shared and applied.

b. Terminology: Subjective

Though my literature review about the gospel and conversion hints at various reasons why people would come to faith, I stopped short of pre-establishing categories into which my

[204] Ibid., 37, 54, 70, 88, 104, 117.
[205] Ibid., 105, 140.

subjects must fit. The phenomenon of conversion is a personal experience, and as Clandinin and Connelly assert, "narrative is the best way of representing and understanding experience."[206] So, rather than using a survey to associate respondents with established theories of the atonement or predetermined causes of conversion, I have sought to let the interview subjects speak for themselves. To put it another way, my research method has been *emic*, not etic – with the goal of producing terminology and categories that emerge from the subjects' own words, rather than imposing my preconceived terms and categories on them.[207]

While these efforts are certainly aimed at removing my own personal bias from the interview process, they cannot guarantee the removal of bias from the personal accounts of the interviewees. As I have conducted my research, I have necessarily relied on my subjects to provide full and honest accounts of their own experience. Yet, while the conversion narratives of these may be fraught with biases of their own, that must be accepted as part of the nature of qualitative research of this phenomenon. Reflecting on the conversion process, Gordon T. Smith asserts, "experience is always mediated by a community governed and sustained by the Scriptures. Yet in the end the experience is nevertheless interpreted from within.[208] Despite the inherent subjectivity of this topic, I believe that my research methods have helped to mitigate any potential bias. By gathering data from twenty different conversion narratives, I

[206] D. Jean Clandinin and F. Michael Connelly, *Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 18.
[207] Howard Anderson, "Research and Statistics," in DMN 974 at ACTS Seminaries, Langley BC. Delivered April 16, 2019.
[208] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 19.

have produced a reasonably broad perspective of the occurrence of conversion during a specific time in a specific region.

c. Methodology: Interviews

Because I did not have the opportunity to fully observe the process of conversion in a set number of subjects, interviews provided the best way for me to obtain the necessary data for this study.[209] While the clear goal of such interviews was to authentically draw out the unique story of each person, the interview process still needed to adhere to a particular structure. In order to ensure that each conversion account produced data that could be compared to the data of other accounts, I needed to guide each interviewee to cover certain topics. Thus, I designed and employed the use of an *Interview Guide*.

According to this guide, I began each interview by offering some words of introduction about the purpose of the interview and obtaining their consent to proceed. I then proceeded with some "ice breaker questions" to put them at ease, to transition the discussion towards them, and to convey an atmosphere of acceptance.[210] Often, the effect of such questions was that the interviewee would begin to share an extended account of their early life. These accounts ranged anywhere from a five minute "testimony" to a ninety minute "life story." From this time of unstructured storytelling, many topics and themes emerged, which I could further explore with clarifying questions. Rather than introducing my own theological terminology into

[209] John W. Creswell and J. David, *Research Design: Qualitative, Quantitative, and Mixed Methods Approaches, 5th ed.* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2018), 188.
[210] Ibid., 191.

the conversation (which might influence the listener), I was able to employ the terms used by the interviewees and build on the ideas they raised.

So, having let the interviewee set the tone, and establish the salient themes of their story, I would transition toward more pointed questions. By asking them to elaborate on the content that they had already freely provided,[211] I sought to increase the depth and relevance of the data without threatening its validity. Moreover, because the scope of my research was limited to subjects with certain characteristics, I was also able to build questions based on what I knew to be true of them. For example, knowing that they were recently baptized, I was able to ask each of them to describe this specific experience. Moreover, as Dr. Mark Naylor suggested, because I was dealing with *evangelical* converts, it would be reasonable to assume that the Bible has played some part in their story. Therefore, I could ask them for verses or stories that "resonate"[212] with them and then draw out information from that with clarifying questions.

So, as I began to present more content-related questions to parse out facets of this phenomenon, I needed to hold two priorities in tension: ensuring the integrity of the data and keeping the interview on topic. To this end, I followed a carefully designed interview guide that used open-ended questions[213] to encourage the subjects to share their own ideas. At the same time, the interview guide also ensured that similar topics were covered by each person so that the data produced by the interviews could be meaningfully compared. In cases where the interviewee's content was lacking, rather than asking too specific questions, I employed probing

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[211] Tim Sensing, *Qualitative Research: A Multi-Methods Approach to Projects for Doctor of Ministry Theses* (Wipf & Stock, an Imprint of Wipf and Stock Publishers), Kindle Edition, p.91

[212] Mark Naylor, *Mapping*, 180.

[213] Dapzury Valenzuela and Pallavi Shrivastava, "Interview as a Method for Qualitative Research," *Arizona State University.* https://www.public.asu.edu/~kroel/www500/Interview%20Fri.pdf Accessed March 8, 2020.

phrases to encourage them to tell me more.[214] Overall, each interview was divided into three main sections:

1. **Background** – the story of where they came from, what struggles they faced, what questions developed within them, and which influences shaped their perceptions. Overall, this section was meant to shed light on the *motivations* of each interviewee – *why did they come to faith?*
2. **Conversion** – at some point in each interview, I asked them to describe the situation surrounding their conversion experience. In this part of the conversation, insight could be gained about the *methods* and *means* of their conversion – *how did they come to faith?*
3. **Reflections** – toward the end of the interview, I invited these new believers to describe the ongoing consequences of their conversion. I also asked a couple pointed questions related to their favorite Bible verses and their understanding of the gospel. Overall, this section shed light on the *meaning* these people assigned to their conversion, and the *message* they understood it to carry – *what is the significance of coming to faith?*

In the end, I took the time to conduct these twenty interviews – ranging from 60-150 minutes in length – in search of genuine data on this very personal topic. Believing that only personal testimonies can provide a sufficient test of existing theories on this topic, I have done my best to hear from real people within my own context. As Gordon T. Smith adds,

> When we take experience seriously, we highlight what *actually does happen* rather than insist on what should happen. This does not for a moment mean that all experiences are equally valid or equally

[214] Creswell, *Research Design*, 191.

> Christian. We seek to understand the character of an authentically Christian conversion. However, the expression or experience of each Christian conversion is unique. And the genius of a good conversion narrative is the capacity to describe what *actually happened* in the life of an individual.[215]

In this way, my narrative approach to this topic parallels the historical method: testing general theories against specific accounts and events.

d. Collection & Interpretation of Data

These interviews either took place in-person at my church, or online via Zoom. When conducted in-person, I used an audio recorder to capture the contents of the conversation. When conducted on Zoom, a similar feature was available through my subscription to this program. As I listened to each person share, I took handwritten notes on my interview guide, noting key themes and ideas that were emphasized by the interviewee. I felt that this effort was important, since simple transcripts would not capture voice inflection and facial expression.

All twenty interviews occurred over a five-month period, from October 2022 to February 2023. After completing them, I compiled my written notes into an electronic document, creating an iterative summary of the insights that I had gained as a listener. These summaries later proved very helpful as I attempted to determine the sequence in which certain aspects of their conversion took place. I also employed the services of Otter.ai, a transcription program that converted all my audio files into text. In all, the transcripts amounted to approximately 190,000 words – which needed to be reviewed, processed, and codified.

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[215] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 18.

According to John and David Creswell, the codification process of qualitative research involves: identifying major themes that emerge from the text, clustering segments of text according to topics, finding patterns in terminology, and drawing connections between categories of information.[216] For me, this took the better part of a year to complete. Beginning with Johnny Saldana's *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*, I learned some best practices that I could employ in interpreting the data from the interviews. For example, coding can be performed by "lumping" a speaker's thoughts into a summary, "splitting" out specific details from their accounts, and even "journaling" specific insights that are gained along the way.[217] Moreover, Saldana described multiple cycles of coding – in which a researcher comb through each transcript multiple times, peeling back successive layers of data. For instance, while a first cycle might be conducted in search of demographic data and concrete answers to specific research questions, a second cycle could consist of labeling, classifying and summarizing other themes that emerge from the text.[218] From there, a researcher might circle back in an exploratory manner, in search of data that confirms, contradicts, or adjusts any "hunches" they may have, or data that measures the magnitude or intensity of certain characteristics in the text.[219] Ultimately, a researcher needs to synthesize some conclusions by identifying salient themes and grouping data into theoretical constructs.[220]

Essentially, the collection of data through interviews must be followed by an inductive process of interpretation. A researcher must work with individual accounts of a phenomenon to

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[216] Creswell, *Research Design*, 196.
[217] Johnny Saldana, *Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers, 2nd ed.* (Los Angeles, CA: Sage Publications, 2013), 23, 42.
[218] Ibid., 58.
[219] Ibid., 63, 69.
[220] Ibid., 175-179.

develop generalizations about the topic. So, rather than pre-determining a framework to deductively categorize the experiences of recent converts, this project serves as a preliminary exploration of this phenomenon. Through processing interview transcripts, I have sought to discover terms and categories that will prove useful in further considerations of this topic. These are reflected in my codes and categories described in my Findings section.

e. Compilation & Presentation of Data

In order to aid in the process of codifying the transcripts, I employed the services of a software program called NVivo. On previous occasions, I have collected and classified research data by copying, pasting, and highlighting on paper or in Microsoft Word documents. But, considering the sheer volume of data for this project (190,000 words), I found NVivo to be a helpful time-saver. As Lyn Richards explains, it allows a researcher to upload documents, assign attributes to cases, and label data with customized codes.[221] From there, Richards adds, a person can perform word searches, cluster codes into more conceptual, theoretical "parent" categories, and design interpretive models for their data.[222]

For my project, I assigned twelve different attributes to each of the twenty cases. These mostly corresponded with demographic data, or other questions which had a limited number of concrete responses. Many of these attributes, in turn, were expressed visually on bar graphs in my Findings section. Moreover, in coding the transcripts, I made over 4300 references which I grouped according to common characteristics. But, because of the volume of data, many of

[221] Lyn Richards, *Using NVivo in Qualitative Research* (London: SAGE Publications, 1999) 4-6.
[222] Ibid., 19-20.

these groupings needed to be further clustered into broader themes that could be addressed more generally in the paragraphs of my Findings section.

Throughout this process, I resolved to practice reflexivity: to openly acknowledge how my personal experience can lead to biased interpretations.[223] While my literature review and interview practices have aimed at mitigating this threat, I planned to put other safeguards in place. For instance, to increase the objectivity of my conclusions, I considered involving others in the coding process. If I asked multiple people to read and summarize the contents of each interview, I could then compare these "iterative summaries" with each other and with my own preliminary findings, looking for similarities and differences. Yet, this also introduced some concerns related to confidentiality and privacy for the interviewees; ultimately, some would not give their consent for this to occur. Moreover, I also considered the option of conducting follow-up interviews with subjects to clarify any ambiguities and confirm that my findings were true representations of their experience.[224] But, ultimately, I found other options that, in combination with my literature review and interview practices, led to a satisfactory process of interpreting data.

For example, while using the Otter.ai program for transcription, I also obtained its AI-generated summaries and keyword lists for each interview. I then uploaded these into NVivo as separate cases and used the latter program to create a Word Cloud from the data. This word cloud can serve to provide some objective accountability for any conclusions that I draw about the major themes of the interviews. If such themes do not show up in the word cloud, then they should be called into question.

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[223] Creswell, *Research Design*, 184.
[224] Ibid., 200.

Moreover, to balance the data from transcript codes and word clouds, I also brought into consideration the summaries of my own hand-written interview notes. While the first two forms of data are helpful at presenting a great *quantity* of data in a useful manner, my personal notes were more concerned with *quality*. In other words, while the computer-driven data can verify the relative frequency of certain terms, my own summaries would take special note of what the interviewee seemed to emphasize. While this latter endeavor may seem subjective, I believe it is still worthwhile; insight into causal connections and sequences of life events can be captured through cues of human communication. In any case, the inferences drawn from these summaries have been summarized in a table of data and visually represented by a chart.

f. Summary: Well-Rounded Research

Altogether, these plans, resources, and safety measures have created a well-rounded research model. Built on a theoretical framework that draws from a variety of academic disciplines, the research question is designed to add helpful data on this important topic. Moreover, based on the current best practices of qualitative research, the interviews for this project were designed to collect data as objectively as possible. Using the powerful functions of the best available computer programs, the inductive process of data processing was greatly aided. Finally, using a combination of personal notes, AI software, and codification, data was interpreted, and conclusions were drawn in a well-balanced manner.

4. Findings

"We take experience seriously when we recognize its complexity."[225]

a. Overview

Though the scope of this project's research was narrowed to twenty individuals who had expressed conversion through baptism in evangelical churches over a five-year span in Victoria, the deep engagement afforded by the interview process has yielded a wealth of data. In the sections below, this data will be presented in an orderly fashion, corresponding with the three main sections of the interview format, which also formed the basis of the primary categories of codified data. These three sections will be preceded by a preliminary section on demographic data also collected through the interview process, as follows:

First, even within the sample size of twenty, the demographic data of the interview participants displays a remarkable diversity, and offers a helpful snapshot of recently baptized evangelical converts in Victoria. Second, the extensive background stories of the interviewees collectively highlights some motivating factors which have moved people toward conversion: life challenges, felt needs, burning questions, influential relationships, and religious experience. Third, by analyzing people's rich descriptions of their conversion experience and its surrounding circumstances, one can begin to identify the means and methods by which the Christian faith has been transmitted to these individuals. Finally, from the interviewees' personal reflections about "life since conversion" and from their summative statements about their newfound faith,

[225] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 18.

a careful reader can catch a glimpse of the overall meaning these people attach to their conversion, and the overarching message these people attribute to the Christian faith. In the sections that follow, these findings will be explored in greater detail.

b. Who, Where & When: Demographic Data of the Converted

As mentioned above, though the sample size for this research project was limited to twenty interview participants, its data still provides a useful representation of the scope it covered. This is because the criteria for selecting interviewees narrowed the field considerably. The research focused exclusively on new converts who expressed their newfound faith in a particular way (baptism) in a particular city (Victoria region), in a particular kind of church (evangelical) during a particular timespan (2017-2022). With such criteria in place, no further judgments were necessary – no human bias was involved in the approval of interview subjects. While some human factors were inevitably involved in the identification of qualifying subjects, (discussed in *Limitations* below) these factors were unintentional and unavoidable. Moreover, the set criteria worked as intended, proving to be a perfectly sized filter for the project. Within five to six months, twenty subjects had been identified and interviewed, and none that qualified had been turned away. The interviews were simply conducted, one at a time, "first come, first served," until enough were completed. Consequently, this sample of data represents its field of study with a high level of objectivity and offers valuable insight into the recent spread of Christianity through evangelical churches in Victoria.

The following paragraphs will present the findings of this study, topic by topic, as they pertain to demographic data. This will provide at least a preliminary indication of what kind of

people have been converting to Christianity according to the prescribed criteria of this project. After basic objective information such as gender, church type, place of birth and date of birth are covered, the subsequent paragraphs will address more subjective topics such as background experience and lifestyle. Finally, associations and correlations between these attributes will be identified and explored.

i. Objective Data: Demographics

First, it should be noted that the twenty interviewees were evenly split by gender: ten men and ten women. While this fortunate result was certainly hoped for, it was by no means intentionally forced. Initially, more men came forward to share their story; later, women interviewees outnumbered them; by the end, this discrepancy had randomly evened out. It is also noteworthy that both established churches and church plants were equally represented by men and women. Out of the twelve interviewees who were baptized in five established churches, there were six men and six women. Likewise, of the eight people who converted through the ministry of three different church plants, four were men and four were women. While these data fail to make any distinction between the genders, perhaps therein lies their value. Though previous research has clearly demonstrated the greater religiosity of women on a global scale, this particular study of recent conversions in Victoria may serve as a counterpoint.[226] As for the greater number of converts found among established churches, the sample size of this study is too small to make any definitive claim. Yet, these data may still call into question the well-publicized assumption that church plants are more likely to be

[226] "The Gender Gap in Religion around the World," *Pew Research Center*, March 22, 2016. https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2016/03/22/the-gender-gap-in-religion-around-the-world/

"conversion engines"[227] and more effective at disciple-making[228] than their established counterparts.

Secondly, the sample of interviewees showed a remarkable balance between those who were Canadian-born (11) and those who were foreign-born (9). Yet, within those categories, a great variety of locations were represented: four were from the Victoria region, seven from elsewhere in Canada, one from Ukraine, one from England, two from Iran, one from Vietnam, and four from China.[229] When viewing these data as a whole, it is perhaps most noteworthy that a full 80% of the new converts found in this study had reported moving to the Victoria region from elsewhere. The significance of relocation as a potential contributing factor in conversion will be further explored below in the section titled, "Why: Background." But for the time being, it should be noted how these figures compare with the regional census data. In 2021, it was reported that 29% of the population of the Capital Regional District had moved there from elsewhere in Canada over the previous 5 years.[230] Moreover, in 2016, that figure was 15%.[231] Therefore, it should not be surprising that 35% of the new converts interviewed in this study should have reported moving to the region from other places in the country. However, given that, as of 2021, only 19% of the residents in the Capital Regional District were

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[227] Len Tang, "Church Plants as Evangelism Laboratories," *Fuller Magazine, Issue 26*, (November 29, 2023). https://fullerstudio.fuller.edu/theology/church-plants-as-evangelism-laboratories/

[228] Lee Nelson, "Why Plant More Churches?" *Anglican Compass* (May 12, 2015). https://anglicancompass.com/why-plant-churches/

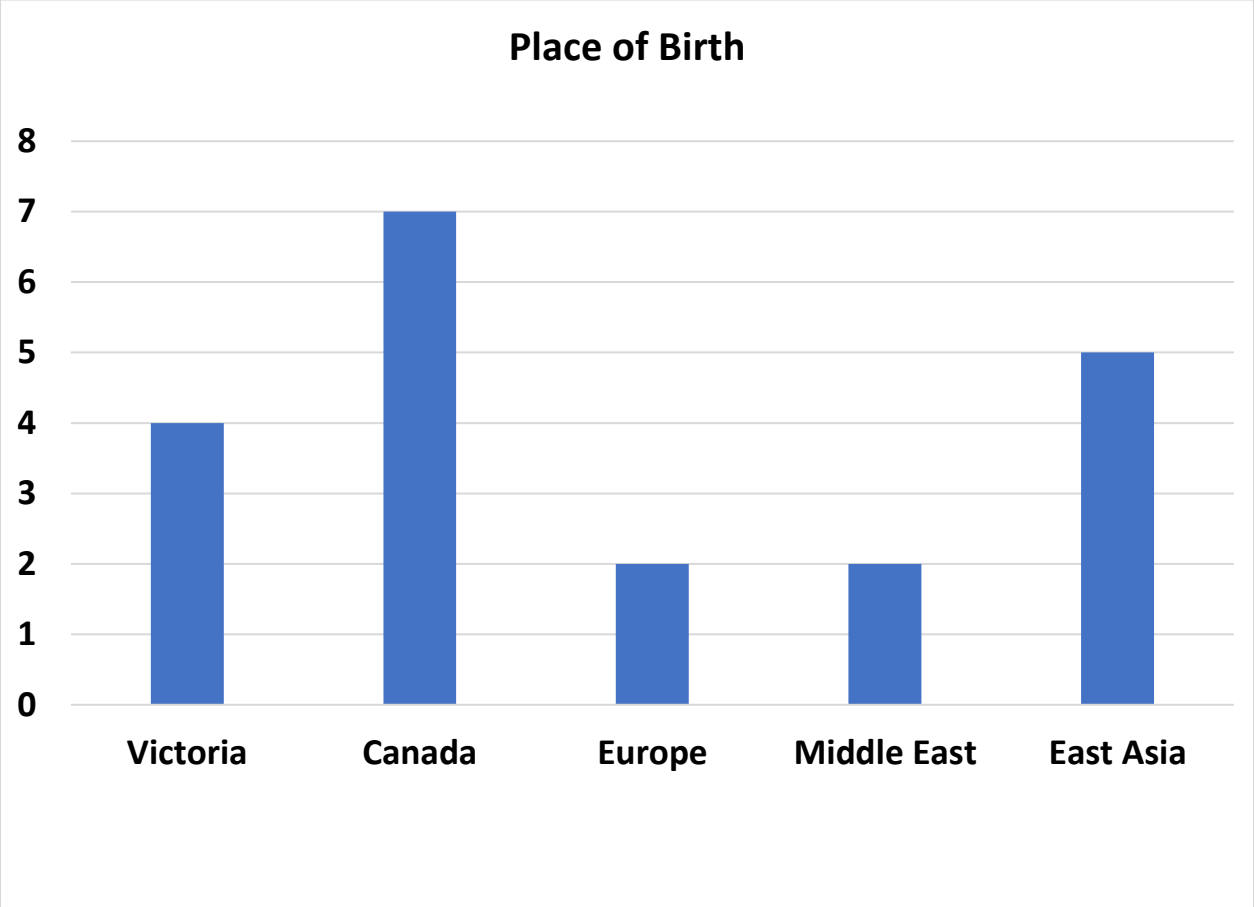
[229] See chart: "Place of Birth."

[230] Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. Accessed online https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

[231] Statistics Canada. 2017. *Victoria [Census metropolitan area], British Columbia and British Columbia [Province]* (table). *Census Profile*. 2016 Census. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2016001. Ottawa. Released November 29, 2017. Accessed online https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2016/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

born outside of Canada,[232] it is significant that 45% of new converts in this study were immigrants. Therefore, any potential connection between immigration and conversion will also be explored in a subsequent section of this report.

Graph 4.1. Place of Birth



It is also noteworthy that of the nine interviewees who had immigrated, seven were female; in contrast, eight out of ten men were born in Canada. In addition, only one-out-of-five people baptized in a larger church[233] were foreign-born, while eight-out-of-fifteen small church attendees had immigrated to Canada. The ethnic distribution was fairly similar between

[232] Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

[233] Over 200 in attendance

established and recently planted churches,[234] though three-out-of-four foreign-born converts at church plants were part of an ethnic congregation. In paragraphs below, other life attributes will be examined for correlations with these factors.

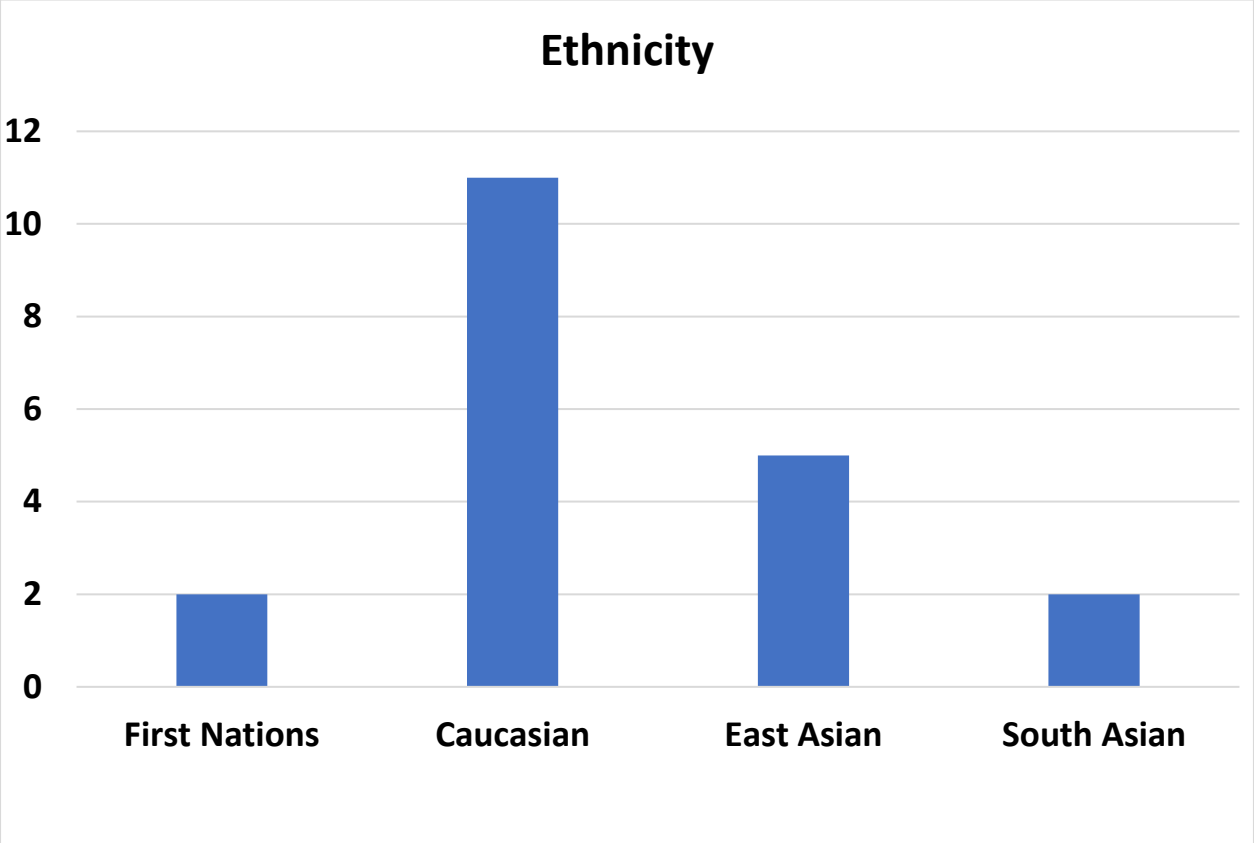
Having explored the available data on gender, church selection and country of birth, this study will now address the ethnicity of its interview subjects. On one hand, it is not surprising that the ethnicity of the nine recent immigrants closely correspond with their country of origin. Newcomers from Iran, China, Vietnam, Ukraine, and even England can be expected to represent the dominant ethnic groups of those countries. On the other hand, it may be puzzling to note that the eleven converts who were born in Canada do not fully reflect the country's cultural diversity: nine were of Caucasian descent, and two belonged to first nations. In Canada, the "visible minority population" represents 27% of all people in the country, including 19% of those who self-identify as Christian.[235] While the two interviewees who are from First Nations actually constitute 18% of the Canadian-born subjects in this study, it is surprising that other ethnic minorities are not represented among them. For instance, given that 12% of Canadian Christians are Black, Latino or Filipino, their absence from the sample in this study is notable.[236]

[234] 4/8 in Church plants; 5/12 in established churches

[235] Statistics Canada. 2022. (table). Table 98-10-0342-01. "Religion by visible minority and generation status: Canada, provinces and territories, census metropolitan areas and census agglomerations with parts." https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/t1/tbl1/en/tv.action?pid=9810034201

[236] Ibid.

Graph 4.2. Ethnicity



In part, these dynamics may be attributed to the demographics of Victoria. While different ethnic groups may cluster in different cities of Canada, Victoria's overall population of visible minorities is only 17% – well below the national (27%) or provincial (34%) averages.[237] Interestingly, though the 2021 Census classifies only 4% of Victoria's population as Metis or First Nations, 10% of the subjects of this study identified themselves as such. Overall, such over-representation or under-representation of minorities may be the inevitable and unfortunate result of using a small sample size (20 participants) in a specific, local area. Nevertheless, this data still serves as a point of interest in gauging the ethnic makeup of Christianity in Canada.

[237] Statistics Canada. 2023. (table). *Census Profile*. 2021 Census of Population. Statistics Canada Catalogue no. 98-316-X2021001. Ottawa. Released November 15, 2023. https://www12.statcan.gc.ca/census-recensement/2021/dp-pd/prof/index.cfm?Lang=E

Furthermore, it should be noted that these census data do not differentiate between Canadian-born and foreign-born residents. While most ethnic minorities are under-represented by the Canadian-born subjects of this study, the picture looks different when immigrants are taken into consideration. When including the 78% of foreign-born interviewees who belong to an ethnic minority, the overall figure for this project increases to 45%. Thus, the proportion of *recent converts* in Victoria[238] who belong to ethnic minorities is remarkably higher than the proportion of *total Christians* in both British Columbia and Canada as a whole. In the very least, this may indicate a trend toward greater ethnic diversity among Christians in Canada. While this study does not take into consideration the conversion of minors among ethnically based churches in Canada, it does indicate a strong connection between immigration and conversion of adults among these groups.

Next, the age distribution of the subjects of this project can offer valuable insight into the occurrence and process of conversion among adults in Victoria. Firstly, as the graph (below) indicates, one of the interviewees was born in the 1950s, four in the 1960s, five in the 1970s, eight in the 1980s, and two in the 1990s. Their average year of birth was 1977, indicating that their average age at baptism would be 40-45. This age range might sound surprisingly high, but it must be noted that this study excludes minors. If a large number of Christians are converted before becoming an adult,[239] this may account for the fewer number of young people who engaged with this study. Interestingly, the only two interview respondents who born in the

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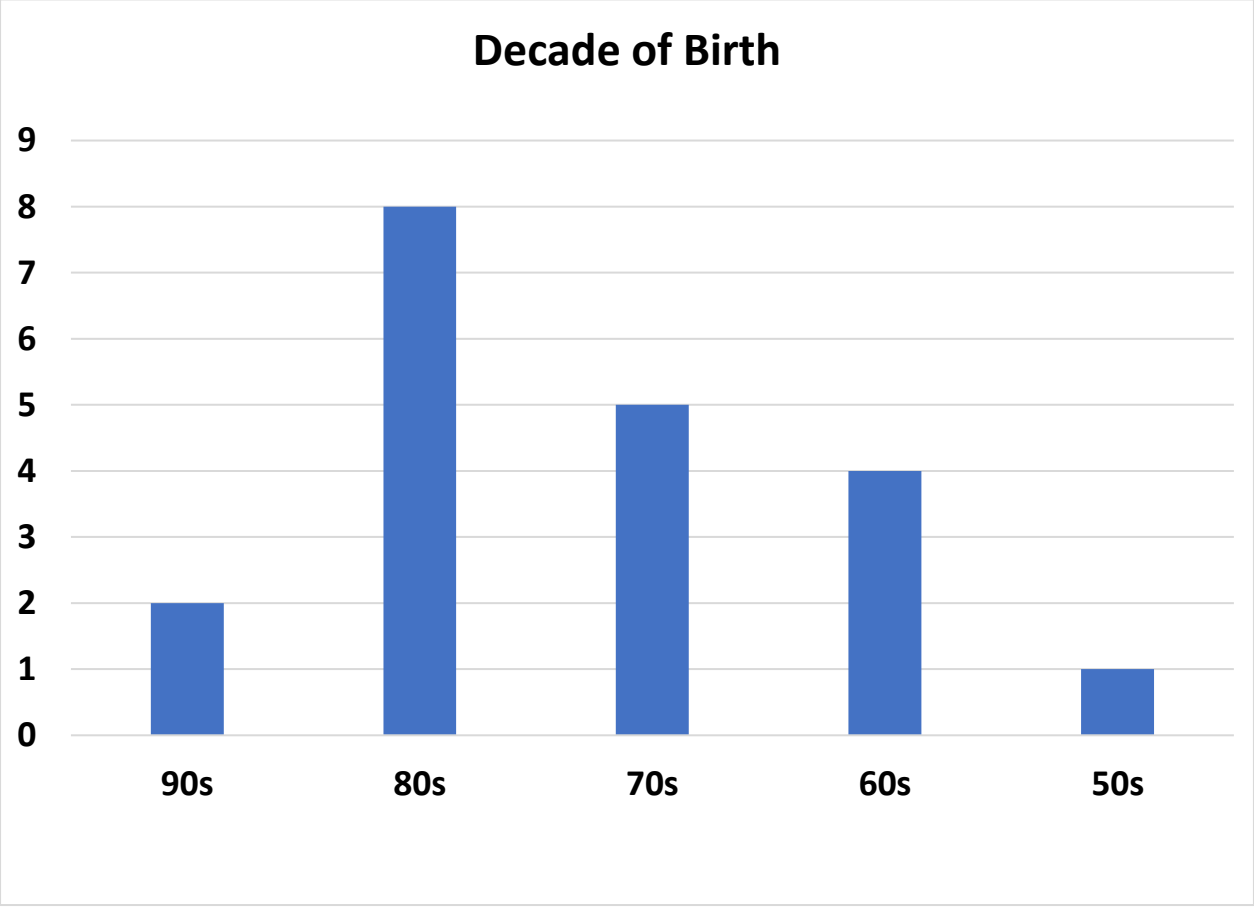
[238] Specifically, the twenty interviewed for this study.

[239] Josh Mulvihill, "When do Americans Become Christians?" *Gospel Shaped Family*, August 13, 2018. Accessed online https://gospelshapedfamily.com/discipleship/when-do-americans-become-christians/
According to a survey from the National association of Evangelicals, 63% of individuals become Christian by age 14, and 97% by age 29. While this data stands in stark contrast to the findings of this study, its definition of conversion was not cited, and may not share the same delimitations of this project.

1990s were recent immigrants (students) from China. Though taken from a small sample size, this absence of local young adults in this study may warrant further investigation. Perhaps subsequent research can examine local demographic data or compare rates of church attendance between generations to see if these factors may contribute to the age disparity noted in these findings. Yet, despite the noticeable absence of Generation Z, it was the Millennial generation that was most represented in this study: eight respondents were born in the 1980s, and seven of them were within one year of the author's own birth. Lest this should be seen as a potential skewing effect on the data, let it be noted that the author only personally baptized three of them. While age similarity may certainly factor into social aspects of the conversion process, the age of pastors is beyond the scope of this study.

Graph 4.3. Decade of Birth



The age distribution of recent converts of this study can also be compared to other demographic attributes in order to yield further insights. For example, of those born in the Victoria region, their average year of birth was 1963; for those born elsewhere in Canada, it was 1972; and for the foreign-born, it was 1982. So, in general, among adults who have been recently baptized in evangelical churches in Victoria, this study found older Canadians and younger immigrants to constitute a majority.[240] Moreover, female converts tended to be younger, with an average birth year of 1980, compared to men at 1973. Finally, age differences were also evident between types of churches: the average birth year of those in established churches was 1973, while it was 1982 in church plants; the average birth year in large churches was 1968, while it was 1979 in small churches. So, all in all, compared to converts from preceding generations, younger converts[241] were more likely to be foreign-born, female, and attending a smaller, newer churches.

ii. Subjective Data: Lifestyles

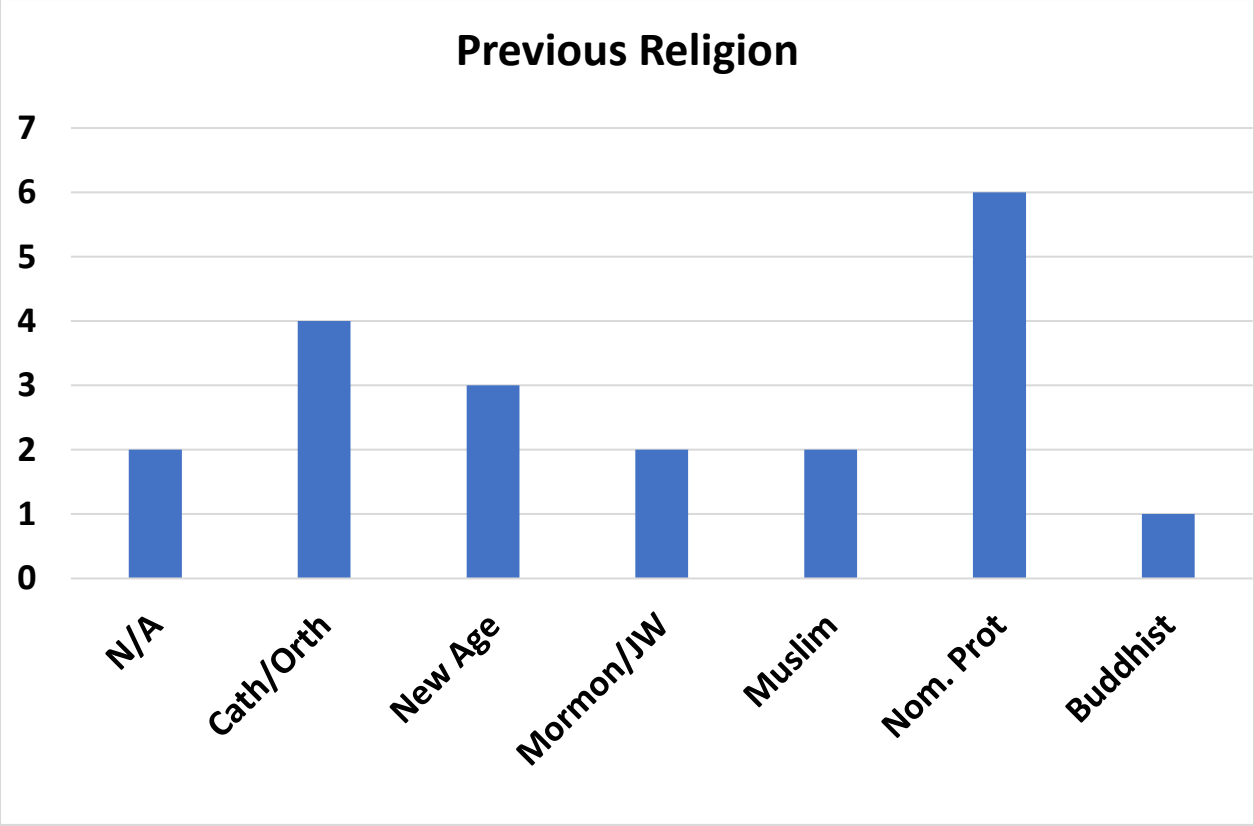
Now that the previous section has covered the more objective forms of demographic data derived from the research of this study, this next section will turn to more subjective topics pertaining to lifestyle choices and life circumstances. Building on the first section, these new attributes will be compared to previously discussed topics, in search of correlations.

First, when considering the previous religious affiliation of these new Christian converts, a wide variety of backgrounds can be observed. For instance, five recent converts had immigrated to Canada from non-Christian backgrounds: two Muslim, one nominal Buddhist, and two non-religious. Moreover, five Canadian-born interviewees also had non-Christian

[240] 60% were either Canadians born before 1980, or immigrants born after 1980.
[241] Millennial and later, born in 1980 or afterward.

upbringings: one Jehovah's Witness, one Mormon, and three were involved in New Age practices. As for the remaining ten, six referred to a Protestant upbringing or nominal affiliation, and four reported having been previously connected to the Catholic or Orthodox church. Of the 50% of respondents who had a Christian background, six were born in Canada, one in Vietnam, one in England, one in Ukraine, and one in China. This means that 55% of Canadian-born interviewees had a previous connection to Christianity, while 44% of immigrants did.

Graph 4.4. Previous Religion

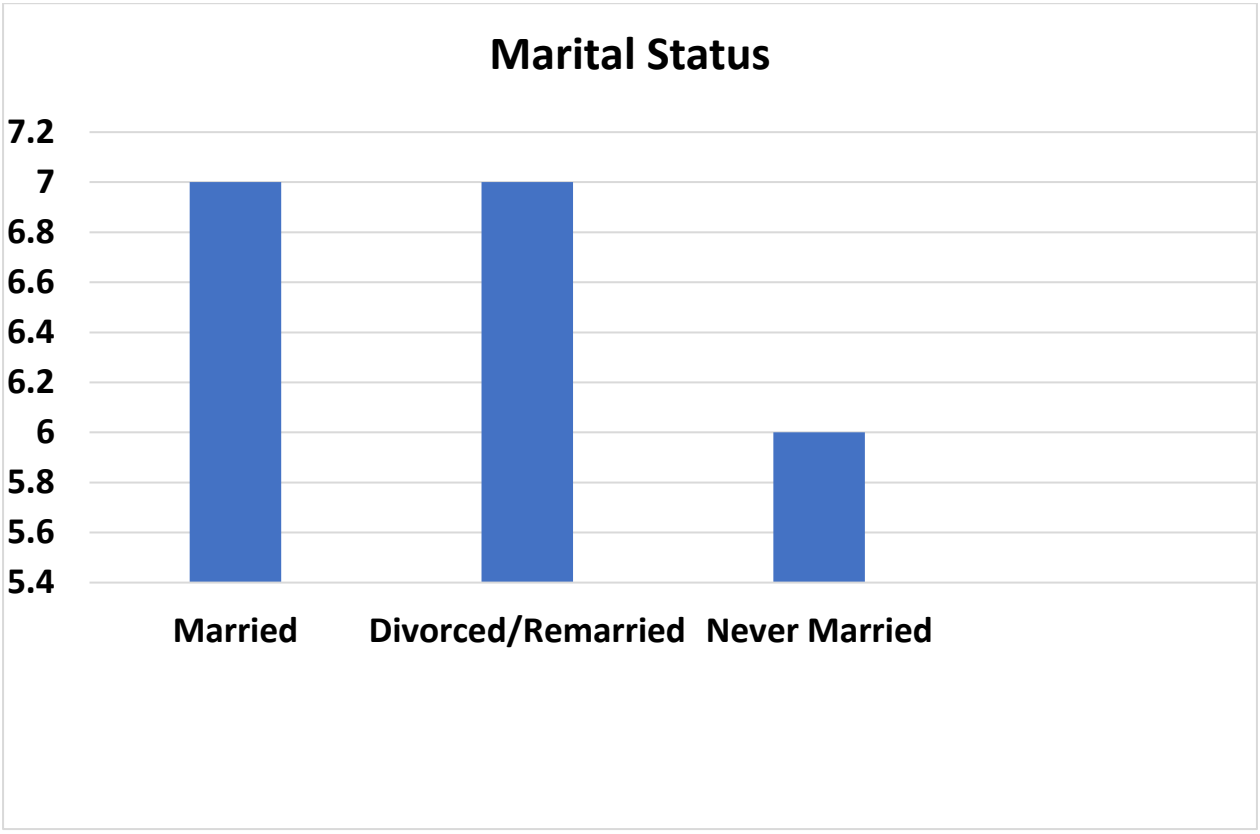


Moreover, though interviewees from differing religious backgrounds exhibited similar data pertaining to gender, their current church affiliation showed some distinctions. In fact, 5/6 of those who were nominally Protestant chose to be baptized in established evangelical churches, while 3/4 of those with a Catholic or Orthodox background were converted through

the ministry of church plants. In the next section, "Why: Background," these people's previous religious experience will be explored in greater depth to see if any connections can be drawn between their past and present affiliations. As for the remaining ten interviewees, all who formerly identified as Muslim, Buddhist, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormon ended up connecting with established churches, while 4/5 of those with New Age or no religious background joined church plants. Lastly, there was a slight but noticeable difference in age between the categories of former religious affiliation. The average year of birth for those with a Christian background was 1974, while it was 1977 for those of other religions (including JW and Mormon), and 1982 for those of no religion (including New Age). While these data correspond with well-known trends in Canada toward an increase in cultural diversity and non-religiosity, it is encouraging to note that new believers are still coming from these said categories.

Next, the interviews for this project also revealed information about the family and vocational situations of these new converts. Of the 20 respondents, six were never married, seven were divorced and/or remarried, and seven were married to their original spouses. Of those who had never married, none of them had any children, and only one was currently employed; the genders were equally represented, and their average year of birth was 1978. This group was quite diverse, with two having immigrated from China as students, two coming from First Nations in Canada, and two from elsewhere in Canada. Four had some sort of a Christian background, and two were previously non-religious. Moreover, these people represented 4/8 of those who attended church plants and only 2/12 of those in established churches. This begins to paint a picture of one portion of interviewees, and more attributes will be added to the discussion in subsequent paragraphs.

Graph 4.5. Marital Status

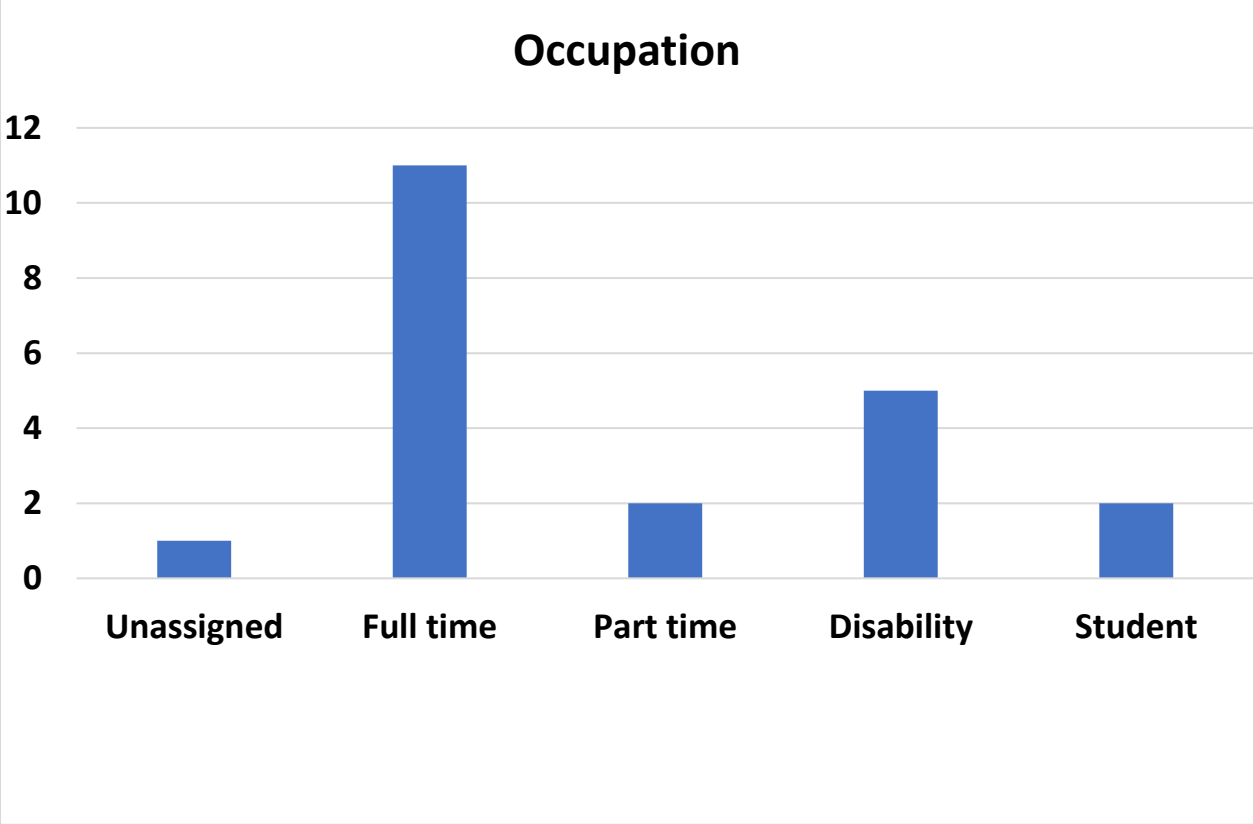


Of the seven who had experienced divorce, the genders were roughly equal and their average year of birth was 1970. Five of them had grown children and two had children at home; five of them were employed, and two were on disability. Five came from Canada, one from Vietnam, and one from England. Remarkably, five of them had a Christian background, two came from cults, and six of them now attended established churches. Certainly, some similarities can be observed in this group, and more will be analyzed in the following paragraphs, as new attributes are addressed.

Finally, those who were still married to their first spouse numbered seven; the genders and church types were similarly represented, and their average age of birth was 1982. All were currently employed, six still had children at home, and one had children who were grown up. Five were foreign-born, and only two were from Canada. Three came from other religions,

three from no religion, and one was previously Orthodox. It is remarkable that no interviewees with a nominally Protestant or Catholic background can be found in this category – yet, it must be noted that this study was limited to adult conversions. It is also noteworthy that, of the five new converts who are on disability, none are married, all are born in Canada (2 First Nations), all have a nominally Protestant or Catholic background, four are male, and four attend established churches.

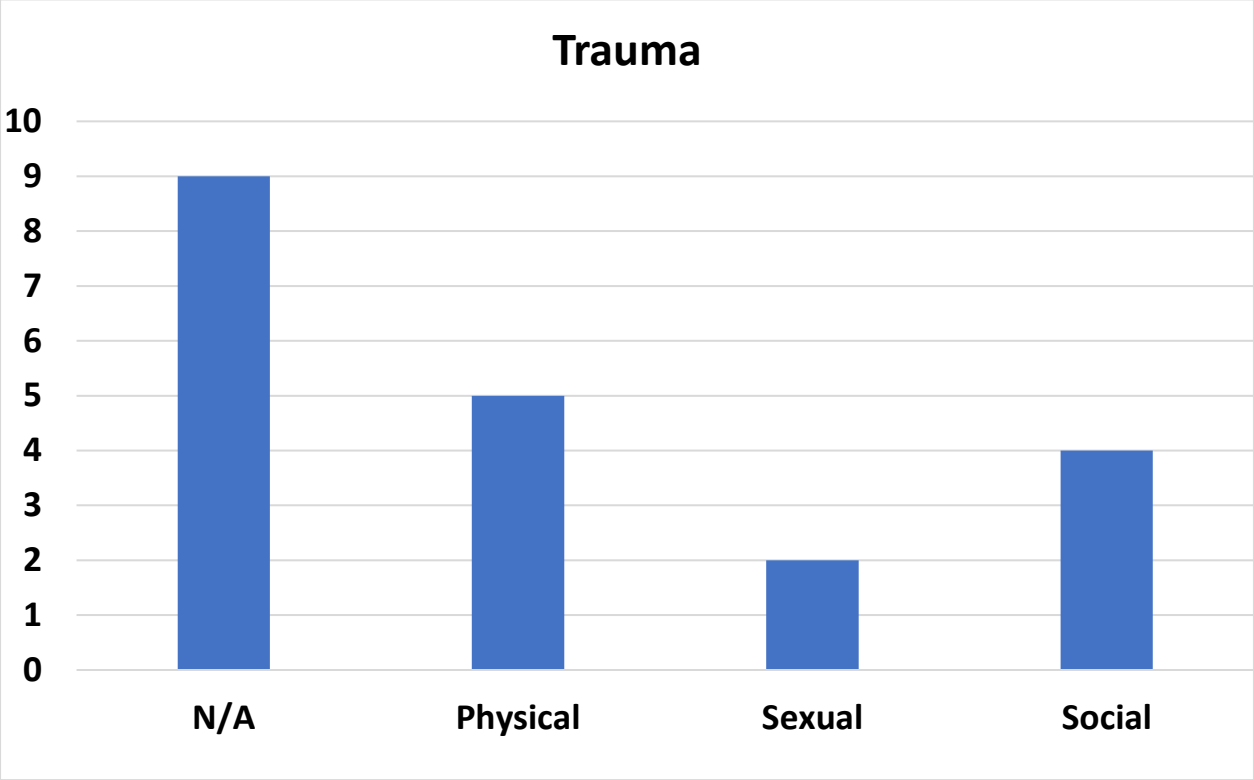
Graph 4.6. Occupation



In summary so far, it appears that a significant portion of the interviewees fall into one of three categories: married, employed immigrants (5) divorced Canadians (5), and unemployed formerly nominal Christian Canadians who have never married (5). Such data may certainly raise questions about the lifestyle differences between immigrated converts and those who are

Canadian-born. Therefore, from here, this study will address two more lifestyle attributes whose correlations to previously mentioned topics may offer some helpful insight.

Graph 4.7. Trauma by Type



Another topic that emerged from the interviews with new believers was their experience of trauma and abuse. Eleven people reported this to be part of their background, with five citing physical abuse/trauma, four referring to social/racial discrimination, and two reporting sexual abuse in their past. Eight of these were men, accounting for all instances of physical abuse, and ten of them were born in Canada – including two from First Nations. As for the single immigrant who reported trauma/abuse in her past, this referred to her childhood experience as a Vietnamese refugee. This accounted for one of the four accounts of "social trauma/abuse," with the others coming from experiences of racism (First Nations), family estrangement (ex-Mormon), and family incest. The average birth year of those who had

experienced trauma/abuse was 1973, while those who had not averaged a birth year of 1981. So far, it could be noted that trauma/abuse seems to be especially associated with Canadian men who convert later in life.

The experience of trauma/abuse also showed a stronger connection to certain other lifestyle attributes. For instance, all three interviewees with Catholic backgrounds reported physical or social abuse, and 4/6 of those with nominal Protestant backgrounds reported physical or sexual abuse. The two that did not report any abuse had immigrated from China and England. All three people with a background in New Age mentioned trauma/abuse in their past, while none of those who were Buddhist, Muslim, or non-religious reported any trauma or abuse. As for their family situation, 5/7 of those currently married to their original spouse did not report any experience of trauma or abuse. Conversely, 5/7 of those who had been divorced also described instances of trauma or abuse in their past. Of the six interviewees who had never married, all had either experienced some form of trauma/abuse in their past (4) or were recent student immigrants from China (2). Notably, both people who had experienced sexual abuse never married, while all five new converts who were on disability had also experienced trauma or abuse in their past.

Finally, the data revealed in the interviews about alcohol/drug addiction can find correlation with other attributes of these new converts. While the average birth year of those with a background of addiction barely differs from those who do not (1975 vs. 1979), there is certainly a difference between men (8) and women (3). Moreover, two of the women's reported addictions were to prescription drugs, while the other was to alcohol within the context of the Ukrainian military. This latter person also constitutes the only immigrant to have reported a problem with addiction. Conversely, the only Canadian-born interviewee to have *not*

referred to addiction in their story is a woman who grew up as a Jehovah's witness. Of the eight men who shared about this struggle, all mentioned involvement with alcohol or illicit drugs, and all were born in Canada (two First Nations). So, it appears that, just as trauma/abuse was experienced more frequently by the Canadian men who were interviewed, so it is with addiction.

Likewise, connections between trauma/abuse and addiction can be identified when examining other attributes. For instance, 8/13 of those who were divorced or never married also reported having personal experience of addiction, compared to only 3/7 of those who were currently married to their original spouse. These comparisons run nearly parallel to those of abuse/trauma, above (9/13 and 2/7). Similarly, just as all five interviewees who are on disability reported abuse/trauma in their past, all also reported struggling with addiction. Moreover, the connection between previous religious experience and addiction was nearly identical to that between religious experience and abuse/trauma, with only a Ukrainian Orthodox (addiction) replacing a Vietnamese Catholic (social trauma).

All in all, the eleven people who experienced trauma/abuse almost completely overlapped with the eleven who experienced addiction – together, they included twelve interviewees. Of the eight new converts who reported neither trauma/abuse nor addiction in their past, two were ex-Muslims from Iran, four had immigrated from China, one from England, and one was a Canadian who was raised as a Jehovah's Witness. Of the individual who experienced trauma without addiction, it can be said that her trauma was early in life and resulted in positive change (refugee status from Vietnam). Of the single person who experienced addiction without abuse/trauma, it can be noted that her addiction still came in the context of relational and vocational stress in the Ukrainian military. So, all things considered,

the connection between trauma/abuse and addiction in these twenty stories is undeniably clear.

iii. Summary: Two Clear Groupings

Now that the demographic data have been presented in their entirety, this section will highlight their salient features that call for further reflection. First, when considering certain attributes, the data revealed a high level of diversity among the interview participants. For instance, the equal representation of each gender is noteworthy – as is the nearly equal number of Canadian-born and foreign-born interviewees. In fact, if those from First Nations are given their own category, then the figures for the immigrant and non-immigrant converts are exactly the same. Moreover, the ethnicity of the interview participants showed similar variety. When taking into account the two Canadians from First Nations and the two immigrants from Europe, the overall ratio of Caucasian to non-Caucasian converts was almost even. Furthermore, the religious background of these new believers showed a comparably even distribution, with half of interviewees citing some form of Christianity in their background, and half of them referring to other religions or non-religious philosophies. In addition, the employment and marital status of the interview participants displayed similar variety, including people who were students, unemployed, on disability, working part-time, working full-time, married, divorced and never married. Therefore, rather than providing a narrow, focused picture of what recent converts in Victoria are like, the data on these attributes paint a broad landscape of diverse new believers.

Second, certain categories of attributes did reveal some tendencies among the new interview participants for this project. For example, a majority attended small churches, and a majority of the churches represented in this study were established, rather than planted. While these may call some well-known stereotypes into question, more broadly-based research would

need to be conducted to confirm or refute these preliminary findings. In addition, it is remarkable that a majority of new converts (55%) in this study were born within a ten-year window (1975-1985), with a noticeable cluster (35%) born within one year of the interviewer. Certainly, this raises the question of what this particular phase of life has to do with conversion – and this will be explored in the following sections. Yet, it must also be noted that the data in this paragraph may indicate certain limitations of the selection process or a certain bias of the interviewer (a middle-aged pastor of a small, established church). Therefore, other factors will be considered alongside these attributes in a later section titled "Limitations of Findings."

Third, when particular aspects of these new converts' past lifestyle are taken into account, two clear groupings of interviewees emerge that account for 85% of the total. First, out of the twenty new converts who were interviewed, seven were immigrants to Canada who did not report experiencing any abuse or addiction in their past. Second, among the Canadian new believers was a group of ten people who reported the presence of both abuse and addiction in their backgrounds. From the first group, 5/7 are female, 6/7 are employed,[242] 4/7 are married. Of the second group, 8/10 are male, 4/10 are employed, and 2/10 are married to their original spouse. As these data demonstrate, there is generally a stark difference of lifestyle and experience between immigrant converts and those who are born in Canada. Of the three outliers who do not fit into either of these two categories, the lone Canadian convert still experienced divorce and came out of a Jehovah's Witness background. As for the two immigrants, one experienced addiction in a military context and the other was a refugee and later went through a divorce. From these data, one could surmise that, to endure the rigors of

[242] The only exception being a young student.

immigration to Canada, one might need to have a stable and resourceful life situation. In contrast, for an unbelieving Canadian to suddenly convert later in life, one might expect a difficult upbringing or a challenging life experience to precede their acceptance of Christianity. In any case, whether it be immigration, divorce, abuse, or addiction, it can be said that every single interview participant underwent a life-changing crisis or a major shift in life circumstances before coming to faith in Christ. In the next section, this study will further explore this notion and other aspects of the interviewee's pre-conversion experience.

c. Why: Background Story & Motivations for Conversion

During the interview process, a great deal of time was allotted to let the new converts share about their pre-Christian lives. Typically, the interview would start with an open-ended invitation like, "why don't you tell me a bit about yourself." Often, in response, the interviewee would proceed to ramble for 30-60 minutes, sharing everything that came to mind about their past. These details would then provide springboards for follow-up questions to explore the themes they identified, and to search for causal connections. In other cases, when the interviewee wanted a little more guidance, they were told about the overall goals and structure of the interview and then invited to explain why and how they became a Christian. Sometimes, they would respond with a succinct, well-structured presentation of their pre-conversion story, as if it were a testimony that they had prepared to share with others. In such cases, several clarifying questions would be offered, seeking to fill in details and cover themes that were addressed by others. The intended result would be to obtain data that could be easily categorized, compared between cases, and analyzed for insights.

Essentially, the goal of this introductory section of the interview was open-ended. It provided an opportunity for the interviewees to set the agenda for most of the interview by identifying the salient features of their life story and defining their past on their own terms. As they participated in this process, their words began to shed light on the pathway behind them, revealing what motivations contributed to their journey toward Christianity, and what steps were involved in the process.

Altogether, 1819 references to people's personal backgrounds were codified – and these were divided into eight main categories: Location, Pressures, Attitudes, Behaviors, Needs, Questions, Learning and Encounters. Within each of these categories, multiple levels of sub-categories have been used to cluster and organize the new converts' references to aspects of their past. In the following paragraphs, these data will be presented in two sub-sections, Context and Quest, followed by a Summary.

i. Context: Dislocation, Pressures, Attitudes & Behavior

At some point, when describing their personal background, each interviewee identified the location of their birth or upbringing. Though this topic has already been addressed in the previous section on demographics, this section will take a deeper look at its effects on the lives of the interviewees. They were not directly questioned on this subject; rather, any mention of the effects of their location of origin was freely volunteered. For some, it was just mentioned in passing – but for others, the location of their early life held great significance for them. The place of their birth or upbringing determined which opportunities were available to them and which challenges they would face on their journey toward conversion.

For instance, four of the interview participants described their previous ignorance of Christianity in their country of origin. One person from China said that it had never entered his

mind, while another from elsewhere in China mentioned that she had heard of Jesus dying on the cross, but had no idea who he was or why he died. Moreover, one person from Iran explained how difficult it was for her to understand Christian ideas and concepts because of her cultural background, while another described how Christian content on television and the internet was censored by the government there. Two other interviewees described the active opposition to Christianity that they experienced in their place of birth. One from China mentioned that it was illegal to have Christian clubs in school, while another from Iran spoke about his hesitancy to enter a church, for fear of being harassed by the government. Yet, both described ways in which they circumvented these obstacles, in pursuit of truth: the Chinese student attended a secret club, and the Iranian convert visited churches in neighboring countries in order to obtain a pocket Bible.

As previously mentioned in the section on demographics, a significant portion of these new converts had moved to Victoria from other places. For many of them, this experience created profound difficulties in their lives that shaped their conversion process. For instance, six of those who immigrated from other countries associated this experience with great hardship. One told of marital strife while moving from China, and another Chinese immigrant reported an experience of culture shock and family disorientation upon arriving in Canada. One interviewee who moved back and forth between England and Canada struggled with school and friendships as a result, while another was a refugee from Vietnam who experienced a newfound stability and religious freedom upon arrival in her new country. Finally, the two immigrants from Iran reported various experiences: an opportunity to explore Christianity, a fear of disconnection from Muslim family members, and a warm feeling of belonging amidst the church community.

Similarly, some interviewees who were born in Canada also experienced negative effects from dislocation in their childhood. Two people moved around the country because of their father's work; one experienced disconnection from siblings as a result, and the other constantly struggled to stay in relationships or any particular place as an adult. Two people moved locally in Victoria – one was to upgrade their home, and the other was due to poverty. Finally, one interviewee was orphaned, and experienced abuse and trauma as they frequently moved within the foster system. Overall, major events of relocation were a common experience for these pre-converts – and this created a sense of displacement and disorientation in many of their lives. In a later paragraph on Turning Points, the impact of such experiences will be explored further.

Various other external pressures gave shape to the lives of these new believers. Three described chronic, debilitating health issues, three others experienced homelessness, and a total of seven mentioned financial poverty as a significant part of their story.[243] Proceeding from there, nine interviewees made thirty-six references to challenges in school – including both intellectual (two failed to graduate) and social (bullying, exclusion, racism). Similarly, as their stories carried on, eight of these new believers shared about difficulties with their workplace – such as trauma (2), lack of fulfillment (3), social tension (4), and unemployment (5). All in all, 75% of all interviewees described challenges related to their vocation and general wellbeing. Certainly, this must have created some felt needs in their lives, which this study will explore in the next section called "Quest."

[243] Five specifically mentioned financial hardship in their childhood.

Moreover, seventeen of the twenty interview respondents claimed to have experienced significant challenges within their family of origin. Three specifically mentioned their mother and five mentioned their father – referring to issues such as abandonment, being suicidal, religious tension, drinking, violence and manipulation. Three experienced a major death in the family and five became estranged through adoption, running away, or religious shunning. Six described major personal issues in the life of a parent such as divorce, fighting and infidelity, and two had siblings with significant challenges. Two experienced challenges related to their family's religious practice and six described their family's lack of religious belief as an obstacle in their path toward conversion. Finally, ten different interviewees[244] referred to their overall family experience as negative – these especially included financial hardship, strife, dysfunctionality and abuse.

Looking forward from their family of origin, these twenty people also referred to other challenging relationships in their pre-conversion life. Five mentioned experiencing hardships among peers – such as bullying and betrayal. Twelve shared about trouble with their marriages or romantic interests – which is remarkable, considering that only fourteen interviewees ever married at all. Seven of them experienced divorce, and two others had a significant breakup after a very unhealthy relationship. Two interviewees described abuse in their romantic relationships, and four were either victims or perpetrator of marital infidelity. One had teenage pregnancies resulting in abortion and adoption, two experienced infertility, and five others experienced various forms of significant tension and conflict. If such relational challenges were such a salient feature in the early lives of these new believers, one might wonder what effect

[244] In forty-two different instances

this had on their journey toward faith. In a subsequent section titled "Quest," the felt needs and desires of these pre-converts will be examined alongside their initial encounters with Christian community.

But first, another aspect of these people's background contexts will be addressed. Having experienced various difficulties in the external circumstances of their lives, these new converts also shared extensively about their internal responses to these challenges. When describing their pre-conversion state, sixteen of the interviewees made sixty-four references to negative emotions, such as aimlessness (2 people), depression (4), darkness (2), loneliness (6), mental illness (4), stress/anxiety (3), suicidal (5), and trauma (8). These feelings certainly had a profound effect on many of the interviewees, as nine of them followed up with twenty descriptions of their negative emotional responses to others – such as being closed, shy, fearful, numb, shameful and hardened. Moreover, eight of the interviewees shared how they eventually reached a point of realization: using terms such as "sickness of soul, broken, desperate, demoralized, helpless, hopeless, guilt, regret," and "inner struggle," they expressed an understanding that they were fundamentally unwell.

But, in many cases, these people did not hold their emotions in; rather, they acted out in various ways, often affecting those around them. Eight of the interviewees described themselves as prideful, which they showed through narcissism, defensiveness, judgmentalism and harshness. Moreover, nine of them made thirty references to their negative attitudes toward others – using terms like "anger, aggression, hatred, jealousy, sarcasm, viciousness, meanness, disrespect, and manipulation." In all, though almost every interview respondent

referred to external pressures and relational strife in their lives, these particular twelve[245] exhibited a keen awareness of their own contribution to their troubles. Early on in their journey of faith, they were recognizing their need to change.

However, when it came to solutions, many still showed resistance to God or Christianity. Three spoke of spiritual oppression that they experienced while partaking in drugs, alcohol, and the occult. Five interviewees claimed to be completely ignorant of God in their early life, while eight thought of Him in negative terms such as wrathful, punishing, distant, and an enemy. When it came to their attitude toward Christianity, eight people shared a wide variety of reasons they had for resisting Christianity. Some were critical in their approach: doubting the Bible, seeing Christians as closed or hypocritical, viewing Christianity as a crutch, fear-based, or scary. Others spoke of an internal resistance to faith, describing themselves as rebellious, individualistic, selfish, fearful, and untrusting. Altogether, thirteen interviewees volunteered information about the negative attitudes they held toward God and Christianity in their pre-conversion stories. Yet, as the next section will demonstrate, people's attitudes began to shift as they encountered Christians and explored various aspects of the Christian faith. But first this section will end with a description of other ways that people sought to deal with their pain.

While many of these twenty interviewees responded emotionally and mentally to stressful life circumstances with negative feelings and attitudes, most also exhibited a broad range of reactionary behaviors. When describing their pre-conversion lifestyle, certain individuals spoke of "breaking every command," engaging in "worldly stuff" or "the flesh." In particular, five interviewees made reference to their "lostness" or "idolatry," admitting that

[245] Combining the two groups previously mentioned.

they had put their hope in “worldly things” like hockey, food, money, or success at work. According to them, these pursuits represented “the easy road” or a method of escape from their pain. In addition, one individual got involved in gambling, two in smoking, and four resorted to crime. Even more frequently, individuals fell into “bad company” that influenced them toward damaging behaviors, including seven who mentioned unhealthy sexual relationships. In their own words, the interviewees typically described these behaviors as “addictive, idolatrous, or worldly,” acknowledging their negative overall effect on their state of wellbeing.

Moreover, as previously mentioned in the demographic data, addiction to alcohol and drugs featured prominently in these stories. Of the ten people who made sixty-seven references to alcoholism, they described its connection to their family background, poverty, and work influences. They spoke of the anger, anxiety, and trauma that they were trying to cope with by numbing their senses. Some shared about the health problems and consequences that ensued, the treatment they sought, and the help that they received from God. In addition, seven individuals made reference to drug use, citing the trauma, crime, social effects, and spiritual effects it had in their lives. In all, thirteen people made 145 references to unhealthy behaviors and addictions that were present in their pre-conversion lifestyles. For many, these habits held them captive until a major crisis occurred in their lives. This will be explored in a later section titled “Turning points.”

ii. Quest: Needs, Questions, Learning & Encounters

Following a rather gloomy section that examined the various problems and challenges experienced in the early lives of these new believers, this section will take a look at the brighter side of their journey toward conversion. Perhaps it could be said that the previous section

described their *original state*, their *previous trajectory*, or their *downward slide* toward despair and darkness. In contrast, this section outlines their *progress*, or their *upward swing* toward hope and salvation – the feelings, thoughts, steps and influences that changed their direction. The data provided by the interviewees has been divided accordingly into four categories – and will be presented in paragraphs that explore the felt needs, intellectual questions, pursuit of learning, and personal encounters that significantly shaped journey toward conversion.

First of all, as can be expected, many interviewees who told of challenging background experiences also shared about specific felt needs that characterized their pre-conversion stories. Whether stemming from dislocation, trauma, addiction or abuse, these people were left with unfulfilled desires that eventually led them to explore and pursue a life of faith. For instance, five interviewees expressed a felt need for love and belonging – and described how they sought it in the wrong places before coming to faith. Four others admitted to their need for help with relationships, such as how to parent properly or function in a healthy marriage. Moreover, three individuals spoke of their need to find healing from their past (guilt, pain, baggage, wounds, etc.) and four more expressed a desire for help with their future (finding guidance, purpose, fulfillment, a role model, etc.).

Regarding the present, six shared of their lack of personal wellness (infertility, imbalance, lack of joy, stress) and five expressed a desire to find a sense of personal security (financial, control, providence). Others looked deeper, admitting that they needed a reformation of character (5), or to find freedom from addictions and unhealthy bonds (4). Three interviewees found themselves in a state of ignorance, seeking understanding, and five others with religious background sought out to find a church that was true and right. Finally, five simply expressed a need for God – for a Higher Power to help and rescue them. All in all,

seventeen of the interviewees made over a hundred references to such needs and desires that they felt before becoming a Christian. Clearly, conversion does not happen in a vacuum – when people encounter the gospel for the first time, they have a backstory that it must interface with. Whether or not they knew it at the time, these background details shared in hindsight may point to motivating factors in their journey toward faith.

In addition to the felt needs and desires experienced in their pre-conversion stories, these new believers also spoke about the intellectual questions that piqued their interest in exploring matters of faith. Some (8) were very specific, describing their initial curiosity about creation, Christmas, parenting, missions, Trinity, eternal life, and overcoming temptation. Others (7) were more generic, sharing about their search for the ultimate truth – a truth that could explain their spiritual experience, a truth that could supersede their negative religious experiences, or truth already in their hearts that needed to be proven by practical experience. Moreover, eight people had questions about comparative religions – especially those whose experience with Catholicism, Islam, Jehovah's Witness, and Mormonism had left them with serious doubts. Two were generally curious about Christianity as they sought to integrate into society as new immigrants, and three looked to Christianity to answer deep questions about the meaning, purpose, and direction of their lives. But the majority of questions explored by these people centered on the most basic topics of faith: knowing God (6), the identity and work of Jesus (7), the reliability and meaning of Scripture (8), and the role of church (5). All in all, seventeen different interviewees made over one hundred references to questions of faith that they struggled with during their pre-conversion years. Certainly, this demonstrates that, in addition to their emotional and practical reasons for pursuing Christianity, these people had intellectual motivations as well.

Before exploring some of the discoveries found by these inquisitive seekers, it may be noteworthy to observe where they looked for answers to their burning questions. Ten people mentioned looking into other religions as part of their journey – some in a general exploratory way, and others responded to invitations from Mormons and Jehovah's Witnesses who came to their doors. Still others spent time deeply investigating the religion of their upbringing, which led to a deconstruction of their childhood beliefs. In particular, one ex-Mormon shared about conducting research on the internet to learn about the true nature of his family's religion. Moreover, an ex-Muslim described in detail how he diligently studied the Qu'ran and looked into the history of Mohammed and his followers before rejecting Islam as a whole. In addition, five people delved into new age, self-help, occult, and other philosophies – but were left unsatisfied. In contrast, as others' quest for truth brought them to other countries (4) and prompted them to look into historical and archaeological records (3), their pathway brought them into contact with Christianity.

Eventually, most of the interviewees began to actively search for answers through traditional Christian means. Ten made specific references to learning from the Bible – whether that be through audio, online video, or personal study. Three others sought input from Christian books, four from preaching, and four by praying directly to God – before coming to faith. Interestingly, four individuals actually claim that their journey to conversion did not include church involvement at all – for them, it was a matter of personal experience, personal research, and personal relationships. Yet, significantly, twelve others made reference to the role that others played in their learning process. Of these, three spoke of personal relationships as a source of learning, three attended Christian groups in their pursuit of answers, and nine individuals described regular church attendance as an integral part of their search for answers.

Some were hoping to observe Christian community; others came for the Biblical teaching; and still others felt directly led by God to attend as they sought to know Him personally. From this data, it is noteworthy that these inquisitive seekers sought input through means of intellectual knowledge, social connection, and spiritual experience.

Over time, and through the means described above, these pre-Christian learners began to find answers to their questions. This, in turn gradually contributed to the development of Christian ideas – the formation of a Christian mindset in many of the interviewees. For instance, in their pre-conversion quest for knowledge, eight of these people made twenty-two references to their growing belief in God. Whether it was an acknowledgement of His existence (a Creator, a Higher Power), a clarification of His character (gentle, Fatherly, loving, sinless, powerful), or an openness to relationship with Him, "God" was the most frequent topic of learning for these seekers. On the flip side, eight people also addressed various aspects of their personal need for a savior – the worldly effects of sin, the eternal consequences of sin, and the solution that Jesus offered. In all, twelve out of fourteen people who shared about their pre-conversion learning made references to these topics of spirituality.

Yet, others came to adopt a Christian mindset for more practical reasons. Seven made reference to the attractive moral framework of Christianity, which drew them in to learn more foundational truths. Interviewees spoke of their desire to forgive and reconcile, their need for guidance in parenting, and their admiration of the solutions offered by Christian teaching. Moreover, five of these pre-Christian learners came to believe that following Christian ideals could offer them a better life – including a greater life purpose, personal comfort, and emotional wellness and real passion. Finally, six people sought out Christianity as a correction to false teachings that they had received in other religious settings (Mormonism, Islam,

philosophies, nominal Christianity). In all, twelve interviewees found that Christian ideas offered practical solutions to their specific problems.

Another topic frequently raised by the interviewees circled around the concept of "truth." For instance, seven people came to see that the claims of Christianity accurately represented reality and presented a coherent intellectual framework for understanding life and the world. As to what, in particular, these seekers found so compelling, four made specific reference to "evidence" that they uncovered – through study of history, archaeology, or creation. Moreover, three spoke of how captivating and hopeful they found the Biblical story to be, and three others spoke about a deep sense in their heart of God's truth and love even before it was fully explained to them. Interestingly, three of these learners specifically shared about their process of "separating the message from sinners" – evidently, they came to believe in the truth *despite* the example of so-called Christians who they had encountered. In all, eleven interviewees mentioned how their general quest for truth brought them to gradually adopt a more Christian mindset.

So far, this section has illuminated the practical, emotional, and intellectual factors that motivated people to explore Christianity. Yet, from the interview data, it must be noted that all twenty of the stories of faith included references to pre-conversion encounters with Christians, churches, and God. This would indicate that there are also social and spiritual aspects involved in the pre-conversion journey of any given believer. The following paragraphs will highlight some salient points from what these new believers have shared.

Firstly, many individuals spoke about their early encounters with Christianity. In fact, thirteen people reported observing Christianity in their family of origin – whether it be from their mother (5), grandparents (3), homestay parents (1), adoptive parents (1), father (1), or

family in general. While four mentioned positive aspects such as the acceptance, teaching and help they received, nine shared negative stories of family trauma, parental hypocrisy, and being forced to attend church.

Curiously, even more people (17) cited childhood experiences of Christianity outside of their family setting. For instance, fifteen made references to early associations with church: Orthodox (1), Charismatic (3), Catholic (5), Anglican/United (3) and others. It is noteworthy that this figure includes all individuals who were Canadian-born, and 4/9 of those who were foreign-born.[246] When sharing about their childhood church attendance, eight interviewees recalled positive experiences of being prayed for, receiving infant baptism, and family participation in ministry. But, overwhelmingly, the early memories were negative – as twelve people mentioned experiences such as culture shock, conflict, hypocrisy, legalism, confusion, wrong teachings, and a general disinterest in faith. In a later section, these early experiences of church attendance will be compared to their later descriptions of encounters with gathered congregations.

In addition, five of these new converts mentioned attending Christian camps, schools, ministries and Sunday school during their younger years. Six also spoke about participating in Christian practices, such as volunteering and prayer. In fact, five even described having conversion experiences during their childhoods, though they were not expressed through baptism until later.[247] Overall, it is noteworthy that 65% of these adult converts had some

[246] Excluding only three born in China, and two born in Iran.

[247] Three of these relapsed from their early faith and were baptized when they returned to it later. Two would say that they stayed in the faith but waited to be baptized until they found a church community where they belonged.

connection to Christianity within their family, and 85% had some background experience that may have laid the groundwork for future steps toward faith.

While many of these new converts had acquired some familiarity with Christianity in their earlier years, the greater part of their experiences with Christianity came in the years leading up to their conversion. Perhaps such a fact should be expected of adult converts – whose childhood experiences may have been helpful, harmful, or simply insufficient to bring them to faith. Remarkably, when sharing about their adult years, all twenty interviewees made specific references to Christian individuals who influenced them toward conversion. Though a couple people described off-putting encounters with Christians at one point in their journey, this was offset by over one hundred citations of positive influences. These encounters occurred in various settings, such as the workplace,[248] school,[249] romantic relationships (3), and recovery programs that point people to seek help from God (3). Five individuals also mentioned the influence of friends – who roomed with them, gave them a Bible, went to movies with them, or engaged in personal evangelism. Eight new believers referred to the influence from family members including a father, a husband, two wives, a stepfather, an uncle, a mother, and a set of parents. Moreover, ten individuals also spoke about the influence of church groups such as Bible studies, Catechism class, youth group, and outreach groups that were sent by the church. Finally, seven people mentioned that authority figures like pastors, teachers and counselors played a role in influencing their journey.

In all of these influential encounters, the interviewees also made particular observations about Christians: five referred to the charity and hospitality that they received from them, and

[248] Through a co-worker and also a client
[249] A Christian school, a school group, and a University ministry

seven remarked at their admirable character qualities.[250] Clearly, while the significance and necessity of personal Christian influence is upheld by these pre-conversion stories, the diversity of their occurrence stands out as well. Each and every interviewee spoke of impactful personal encounters with Christians – and this happened in a wide variety of contexts.

There was one particular context in which these interviewees encountered Christians more frequently than any other: church gatherings. Though more people spoke of attending church during their childhood (15) than in their adult lives (14), the later accounts were more numerous and detailed.[251] Still, it is noteworthy that not every new convert considered church attendance to be an integral part of their journey towards conversion.[252] Also noteworthy is the fact that these individuals' later impressions of church appear to have been quite mixed – with thirteen of them making seventy-seven positive comments, and twelve of them citing 69 negative encounters. However, it is worth considering that, of the latter group, three actually referred to experiences of *persecution from unbelievers as a result of attending church*. While these experiences were certainly a negative (and potentially de-motivating) aspect of their pre-Christian journey, they would not have necessarily contributed to a negative impression *of the church*. Therefore, if these comments were factored out of the equation, then only ten individuals would have made negative comments about their experience *in* the church.

Of the positive comments, the greatest portion referred to social interactions – eleven different people described the friendliness, sweetness, openness, and closeness of the

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[250] In particular, interviewees frequently mentioned how impactful it was to observe people in prayer, and to notice their exemplary behavior.

[251] In total, eighteen interviewees mentioned church attendance – either in childhood or adulthood. Moreover, 86 references were made to childhood attendance vs. 146 references to attendance in later years.

[252] As has already been noted, certain individuals came to faith through intellectual discovery, despite their off-putting experiences of Christians and church.

congregations that they visited. In addition, four individuals specifically mentioned that meeting the pastor was significantly positive, and six expressed an appreciation for the messages that were preached and taught. Practically speaking, five people shared how they received help from church people in times of need, and six referred to positive emotional and spiritual experiences during prayer and worship in the service. Interestingly, the greatest number of negative comments also related to social interactions – the exclusivity, the feeling of marginalization, the impatience with imperfection, and the lack of connection with the pastor. Thus, some of the strengths of the social environment in certain churches were perceived to be absent in others. For example, a few individuals mentioned their attraction to churches that were more open and welcoming during the Covid years and their repulsion from others who were more restrictive and distant. Negative impressions (4) were also cited with regards to preaching style – ranging from being too fluffy, too condemning, too boring, or not Biblical enough. Problems with doctrine (4) were also raised, ranging from Modalism to Catholicism to a lack of spirituality to a hyper-spirituality. A few expressed difficulty in understanding the teachings, and four others admitted that their own past trauma prevented them from connecting well with others at church.

Overall, it appears that people's experience of Christian community was more positive in their later years than their earlier years. While many experienced conflict and witnessed hypocrisy in the religious experience of their childhood, most eventually came to find churches in their adulthood that they could appreciate. While problems still existed in their later church experiences, many of these occurred while "church shopping" before they settled in somewhere. Moreover, it is noteworthy how these impressions of church can highlight the relative values of these people in their pre-conversion journeys. While many spoke about social

interactions, others referred to more intellectual concerns or emotional/spiritual experiences. Perhaps this further illustrates the diversity of ways that people explore and come to faith.

On that note, in addition to the practical/emotional needs, the intellectual questions, and the social influences that contributed to these people's pre-conversion journeys, spiritual encounters with God also featured prominently in the stories that were shared. Of the thirteen who mentioned this topic, seven described times when God's reality and presence were made known to them through seeing visions, hearing His voice, feeling His hand, feeling overwhelmed in worship, or experiencing His love (2). One even reported having a near-death-experience in which he "saw the other side" and was "sent back."[253] Three interviewees felt that they were being pursued by Jesus, or that they were being "gradually opened by the Spirit" as they drew nearer to conversion – and four others remarked at how God was always present, protecting, and working in their distant past. In addition, seven new believers reported having their prayers directly answered as they asked Him for help and for His guidance. Four individuals reported miracles and healing experiences – including freedom from addiction and conception of a baby. Moreover, four simply "called to Jesus" and received an answer, while six interviewees made twenty-five different references to receiving guidance from God. In such cases, these people felt led to go to church (3), to quit their addictions, to turn away from false beliefs, and to follow His plan for their lives. Finally, a few interviewees had powerful experiences of God through preaching at church, and another through reading Gospel stories that spoke personally to her. In light of such testimony, one must not fail to consider how spiritual experiences factor into the process of conversion.

[253] Another individual reported how a relative's life was transformed by a similar experience.

iii. Summary: Social, Conceptual, and Experiential Factors

Overall, this section has circled around a single question: *why did these twenty people become Christians?* A great deal of data has been obtained from their background stories, in which they recount various aspects of the state of their lives before conversion. These data have been presented in two main sections: *Context* and *Quest*.

In *Context*, it was first demonstrated that most of the interviewees' younger lives were affected by major relocations of their family. This, in turn, led to a feeling of social dislocation. Secondly, it was found that virtually all these new converts (95%) experienced major pressures in their early life, with eighteen of them describing social/relational challenges on average of ten times each, and fifteen individuals mentioning vocationally related challenges.[254] Clearly, these people grew up with serious problems that needed solutions. Moreover, in terms of how they initially reacted to these challenges, eighteen of them made 217 references to negative attitudes, emotions, approaches to others, and ideas about God that were present in their early life. Finally, many of these attitudes gave rise to unhealthy behaviors – as demonstrated by the 145 references made by thirteen interviewees to lifestyles of crime, "idolatry," and addiction.

In summary, these people's pre-conversion stories were fraught with difficulties and obstacles. Early-life challenges involving their social environment, psychological state, and personal lifestyle left them feeling lonely, confused, and unwell. Yet, these hardships were not the end of the story; rather, they served as motivation for these twenty people to begin exploring matters of faith. The sense of alienation, burning questions, and deeply felt needs inherited from their upbringing gave rise to the spiritual quest that they undertook later in life.

[254] Having to do with health, poverty, school, and work.

The following section, entitled *Quest*, examined the ways in which these individuals sought address the social, conceptual, and experiential struggles that formed the context of their early lives. As time passed and these people neared the time of their conversion, they began to more frequently engage in self-diagnosis – identifying their unmet needs and desires. Seventeen of them made over one hundred specific references to various things that were lacking in their lives – including security, wellness, love, character, freedom, and help from God. Moreover, the same seventeen interviewees shared over one hundred specific questions they pondered, in their pre-conversion years, concerning basic ideas about truth, God, and religion.

In response to such diverse needs, desires, and questions, these pre-converts turned to various sources for help. From Bible study and prayer to Church gatherings and friendships, they searched for answers in a variety of places. During this period of exploration these pre-converts began to discover new ideas about morality, truth, salvation, the Bible, and other topics. Moreover, they also experienced many influential relationships that included not only friendships, romantic interests, family members, pastors and churches, but also spiritual encounters with God through prayers and particular revelations. Thus, it could be summarized that these people's *social* pursuits, *intellectual* investigation, and *spiritual* experiences during their "quest" of faith closely paralleled the challenges that they faced in their early lives.

d. How: Exploring the Means and Modes of Conversion

While the interviewees' stories of their early life were often long, winding, and non-chronological, their accounts still contained many salient themes that have been highlighted in the previous section. Yet, eventually, at some point in each interview, each new convert began

to focus on the particular events, influences, experiences and ideas that surrounded the time of their conversion. While their stories of this time period produced only half as many references as their extensive background accounts in the previous section,[255] these included remarkably rich descriptions of the phenomenon of conversion. Such accounts frequently include references to personal resolutions and changes – and this study will search for any connection or correlation between these, and the problems identified in the previous section. Moreover, by beginning to analyze changes in these converts' lives over the passage of time, this study may begin to illuminate some chronological sequences in these individuals' process of conversion.

Like the previous sections, this one will contain three sub-sections. The first, labeled "Means," will discuss two main themes: the major turning points in these people's lives that led up to their time of conversion, and the major influences who were present in their lives at that time. In each of these cases, the interviewee often assigned emphasis and weight to these events and relationships, indicating that they greatly influenced their subsequent life changes. The second sub-section, labeled "Modes," will present the particular descriptions and themes that emerged in the interviewees' personal accounts of their baptism and conversion. By allowing these new converts to speak for themselves in this way, this study hopes to illustrate the richness and diversity of Christian conversion experiences. Finally, a "summary" section will make some preliminary suggestions about the sequence of events in the conversion process, using the analogy of a hilltop to illustrate.

[255] 1030 vs. 1819

i. Means: Turning Points & Influences

This section would have been given the title, "Methods," if it were not for the plain conclusions to be drawn from the data. While "Methods" would carry a connotation that active forces are influencing the pre-convert according to a pre-conceived plan, "Means" implies that various factors are more passively contributing to the person's transformation. Though it could certainly be said that God actively guides people according to His plan, most of the citations in this sub-section refer to lesser forces that offer a more indirect influence. In cases where individuals make specific references to God's ordination of events or His personal influence in their lives, these shall be maintained, along with references to other factors.

Amid the long and detailed background stories of these new converts, certain life events stood out from the rest that were shared. Over the course of the interview, individuals would often present particular occurrences in a way that connected them to subsequent life changes. To put it simply, these people were referring to Turning Points in their lives that closely preceded their conversion to Christianity. In this study, 221 such references have been classified into this category, which have been extracted from eighteen of the twenty personal accounts. Interestingly, these personally impactful occurrences were evenly dispersed between negative crises and positive turns of events.

For instance, fifteen interviewees made 107 references to negative life crises that changed the course of their lives as they approached their time of conversion. Moreover, as with the problems described in their early lives, these later predicaments reflected a diversity of topics. Nine individuals cited relational crises in the time leading up to their conversion: friendships were broken, relatives passed away, a spouse converted from Islam, a couple divorced, and four who were dating ended their relationships. In addition, twelve people

mentioned various personal crises that brought their life to a halt: five described health challenges ranging from addiction to infertility, three cited near-death experiences, and five spoke about humiliating occurrences, such as the loss of a job, that left them feeling a greater sense of need. Furthermore, for ten of these interviewees, their language became more drastic as they referred to their situation as "broken, helpless, exhausted, falling apart," or, in four specific cases, suicidal.

There were also six individuals who shared about the sense of isolation and alienation that they felt through the Covid-19 pandemic, which motivated them to search for fellowship and help from churches that were open and available. Finally, eleven new believers shared about intellectual crises that they experienced at some point – as they became disillusioned with their nominal childhood faith, as they came to terms with the falsities of their previous religion, and as their hopes in their personal life philosophies disappointed them. Evidently, the life-changing crises that these people experienced directly before conversion closely parallel the long-term environmental, personal, and spiritual challenges in their lives. In fact, these crises could be called the culmination of those life-long challenges – marking the point when these people became ready to turn away from their past hopes and beliefs.

However, an equal number of turning points described by these individuals had a positive effect on their journeys. While negative crises may have caused them to *stop and turn away* from their previous pursuits, several fortuitous events brought resolutions to their problems that gave them an *alternative to turn toward*. For instance, six individuals referred to various life transitions (marriage, parenting, retirement, etc.) that awakened them to their needs and opened them up to new possibilities. Moreover, eight people mentioned how moving to Canada had a similar effect in offering them new exposure to Christianity and

opportunities to explore it. Another eight interviewees described more factors that opened them to change, such as stopping their addiction, the death of a controlling parent, and coming off mentally suppressive medications.

There were also seven new converts who shared that finding "the right church" made a big difference in opening them to Christianity, and seven who named specific Christians in their lives[256] who influenced them to explore the faith. Nine people mentioned other sources of input that helped them see things differently, such as counseling (3), catechism, personal Bible reading (3), AA steps (3), and online preaching (2). Moreover, six others cited miraculous experiences, answered prayers, and moments of being "saved" from danger that changed their point of view, while seven spoke of moments of revelation[257] in which God made spiritual truths clear to them. All in all, this data demonstrates that these positive resolutions identified by the interviewees contain a similar variety of circumstantial, personal, and spiritual issues that were described in the life challenges and crises that preceded them.

In addition to the various events that precipitated change in the lives of these pre-converts, several other inputs and influences also played a crucial role. Though some of these topics were mentioned in the last paragraph in connection with significant occurrences, this paragraph will offer a more summative treatment of the people and resources that were present in their lives near the time of their conversion. For instance, when speaking about the factors that contributed to their conversion, seven made reference to their family – including spouses, mothers, a father, and their childhood faith (3). Seven also named friends who influenced them toward conversion, including romantic interests and a roommate. Another

[256] Christian groups, romantic interests, spouses who converted, roommates, etc.
[257] "Spiritual awakening," "the voice of God," and realizations of Christian truth

seven individuals described how the conduct of Christians impacted their view, and thirteen interviewees made forty references to the role that Christian ministers played in influencing their budding faith. From their preaching the word to their patience in character, these Christian leaders and teachers made a significant impact on the majority of interviewees. In all, nineteen people made eighty-nine references to the influence of Christian individuals near the time of their conversion.

Beyond these personal influences, these individuals drew from other sources in their developing journey toward conversion. For instance, when describing the time leading up to their conversion, eleven people mentioned attending church gatherings in which they experienced love, healing & worship (3), attended small groups (4), felt led by God to attend (2), observed admirable character (2), responded to outreach (3), personally sought out the church (4), and benefited from its teaching (5). Evidently, these experiences addressed a wide range of emotional, spiritual, practical, social, and intellectual needs in the lives of these pre-converts. Moreover, ten individuals received input through other forms of Christian media including music (4), movies (3), Gospel messages (4), counseling (2), camp (1), art (1), and an Alpha class (1).

Thirteen people spoke of the Bible's influence on their approach to conversion – including correcting their doctrine, providing conviction of sin, fostering a connection to Jesus, and offering personal promises. Finally, nine pre-converts made references to input received directly from God – through receiving a sign, having prayers answered, hearing God's voice, and His persistent gracious work in their lives. Clearly, just as these people's past challenges and crises varied between environmental, personal, and spiritual matters, so were the influences and inputs that guided them toward conversion.

ii. Modes: Expressing the Crossover to Christianity

So far, this study has basically covered the open-ended portion of the interview process – in which the interviewee freely shared whatever was important to them about their pre-conversion years. The data collected from these accounts has shed light on *who* have been coming to faith, *where* they come from, *why* they came to faith and, in the last section, *how* they were introduced to the faith. But, at some point in every interview, each person began to specifically describe their actual experience of conversion. If the person did not arrive at this subject naturally through their storytelling, then pointed questions were offered to guide them to address this crucial topic.[258] Some individuals remembered this as a definite moment, or a conscious decision. Others recalled it as more of a process – a combination of events, feelings, and beliefs that changed their lives. But, all of them told of a time when their conversion was expressed through baptism – but even this event involved different motivations and meanings for different people. Accordingly, this section has been titled "modes"[259] instead of "moment" – to account for the diversity of expressions found within these twenty conversion narratives. Henceforth, the following paragraphs will present the unique ways in which these interviewees described their conversion and baptism.

All twenty interviewees made at least some sort of reference to their personal conversion experience. Over three hundred such references were identified in the coding process, and clustered into seven sub-categories. By far, the largest of these categories – and therefore, the most frequent way in which people described their conversion – was that they came to a realization or understanding of some point of truth. For instance, six of them came to

[258] Such as, "when would you say that you began identifying as a Christian?"
[259] Not unlike the idea of "modes" of baptism, which represent different expressions of one spiritual occurrence.

a point of believing that the Bible was true, and that its stories applied to themselves. Eight interviewees mentioned a newfound belief in God – in His reality, presence, creation of all things, providence, sovereignty, and Trinitarian nature. Moreover, nine spoke of their belief in Jesus as their Savior and Lord[260] in connection with their conversion. In addition, nine individuals described various humbling realizations of their helplessness, guilt, and its eternal consequences, while nine others shared of coming to understand that Christianity is all about love.[261] All combined, these basic topics were mentioned 100 times in 75% of the transcripts – representing a significant portion of the content of these individual conversion accounts.

Aside from their newfound belief in those frequent topics, ten new converts made various other references to new realizations of truth including: the correction of false teachings (4), finding a coherent worldview (3), finding a community where truth was lived out (1), a light turning on (1), and a gradual process of understanding (4). Finally, there were also four individuals whose conversion involved a "call to community" – in which, having personally come to faith, they felt called to outwardly express it by coming into fellowship with others. Interestingly, for two of them, coming to faith meant "learning to separate the message from the sinners" – or, in other words, to accept the church's message (despite the church's actions) before accepting the church. In all, sixteen individuals made 149 references to various realizations or new understandings of truth.

But, these conversion experiences were not only cerebral – several other themes emerged from the stories of these new believers. For example, twelve of them made twenty-five references to powerful *feelings* experienced in connection with their conversion. Their

[260] As well as His existence, His character, and the events of His life, death and resurrection.
[261] God's nature of love, His offer of love & grace, and love's effect on those who receive it.

descriptive words vary greatly – ranging from hope and relief to energy and warmth. Overall, among these twelve, there was a deep sense of satisfaction, and a strong sense of God's presence. Yet, the effect of these conversions extended beyond people's thoughts and feelings; at least for fifteen of these people, coming to faith represented a *spiritual experience* with *practical implications*. Nine described new spiritual encounters and communication with God through prayer, coming to know Jesus, receiving guidance from the Spirit, and reading Scripture. Others described their conversion in terms of its effect on them, such as inward renewal and cleansing (8), being a lost sinner who was found (5), experiencing instant freedom from addiction, vices, and self-destruction (4), and beginning a process of gradual healing (3). Clearly, the conversion experiences of these twenty people could be described as *intellectual, emotional, spiritual, and practical*.

These new believers also varied in the way they referred to their own involvement in the process of conversion. For instance, twelve made references to things that they *received* when coming to faith: healing (2), forgiveness (7), new life (4), salvation (2), understanding (2), and more. But, at the same time, fifteen interviewees spoke about *actions* that they took in coming to faith, such as: calling/coming to Jesus (6), following Jesus (3), repenting (7), surrendering (5), outwardly testifying (4), joining fellowship (2), and others. Evidently, these converts understood salvation as something to be received, not earned. Yet, as their "action words" imply, they understood the act of receiving to still require some sort of voluntary response on their behalf.

In fact, thirteen of these interviewees made references to specific times when they made a *conscious choice*, or personal decision to become a Christian.[262]

However, such definite actions and choices may actually represent the culmination of a longer process. For instance, eleven of the interviewees implied that the timing of their conversion was rather ambiguous. Five of them indicated that their adult conversion was actually a return to a faith that had been present in their earlier lives, while six referred to themselves as a sort of "anonymous Christian" who finally came out into the open. In the latter situation, some interviewees shared how they were already seeking and following Jesus, but just needed to find a proper understanding of it or a community in which to publicly express it.

In light of these diverse descriptions of conversion, it can be difficult to make any definitive conclusions about the nature of this phenomenon. *It is both intellectual and emotional, both spiritual and practical. It is a gift to be received and a decision to be made. It can happen in a moment, but unfold through a process*. Yet, despite the complexity and ambiguity of conversion, Jesus provided His followers with a clear way to announce its occurrence and express its meaning: through baptism.

As mentioned earlier, recent baptism was a primary criterion in the selection of interviewees for this project. Knowing that a researcher cannot judge the hearts of alleged converts, the researcher needed an objective and unbiased means of defining the data set. The personal, decision to be baptized as an adult provided the perfect marker: it was subject-initiated and concretely measurable. Since every interviewee shares this particular experience,

[262] Expressed variously as accepting love, changing one's mind, picking a side, committing, deciding, following, a fork in the road, Pascal's Wager, a personal choice, a posture of openness, responding to a miracle, or shifting one's alliance.

the topic was addressed in all twenty interviews. While some mentioned it over the natural course of their storytelling, others were prompted to do so by the interviewer. In all cases, they were invited to briefly describe the context of this event, their experience of it, and its significance for them, personally.

Many references have already been made to the circumstances surrounding the spiritual quest and Christian conversion of these twenty people. But as these new believers began to share about their moment of baptism, many also included details of the context of that particular event. For some of these new believers, baptism was closely connected with their conversion – an immediate expression of that inner reality. But for others, there was quite a delay; baptism did not occur until certain circumstances were in place. For instance, four individuals chose to get baptized after receiving new input from a church program or personal study. Two others simply waited till someone invited them, and two more people were driven toward baptism through the experience a personal life crisis. Moreover, for five new believers, the opportunity of baptism was not presented to them until they moved to Canada. Three others waited until Easter to be baptized, and seven waited until they found a church where they could feel at home. Finally, four individuals shared about significant delays in their baptisms due to family pressure – in one case, a person was not allowed to be baptized until they were an adult, and in three cases, people who were baptized as infants waited until their parents had passed away before getting re-baptized to express their newfound faith.

In addition to these life circumstances, there were also a number of outside influences which contributed to these twenty baptismal decisions. For instance, two people became convinced of their need to be baptized through personal Bible study, and two others through learning with others in church. Four made their decision in response to personal interactions

with God, such as experiencing a miracle, hearing a calling, or being guided by the Spirit. Three people joined their friends who were getting baptized, and eight cited the personal influence of pastors and preachers on their decision. In all, fifteen individuals mentioned various external influences that contributed to their decision. However, four also mentioned negative influences – such as opposition from family members or a cohabiting partner – which either delayed their baptism or made it more challenging to pursue.

As for these people's actual experience of baptism, their accounts varied. Ten of them took time to describe the moment in detail, with one declaring that it was the best thing she ever did. Three individuals shared about the strong, positive feelings experienced during their baptism, and another three mentioned how special it was to share this moment (and their testimony) with others. Two people claimed to have immediately gained a deeper connection with the Bible after their baptism, one expressed a conscious receiving of the Spirit, and three others cited challenges and questions that emerged in their lives following their public confession of faith.

Finally, while sharing about their experience of baptism and its surrounding context, each interviewee was also asked to explain what their baptism meant to them, personally. For at least eight of these people, this was not their first baptism.[263] Having concluded that their previous experiences were either personally meaningless or performed under misguided authorities, they chose to repeat the ordinance as an expression of their newfound faith. For four other individuals, baptism essentially represented their moment of conversion – for them, going through with this action meant that they were becoming a Christian.[264] Others were less

[263] 2 Catholic, 2 Anglican, Orthodox, JW, Pentecostal, Personal
[264] Two were Chinese and two Iranian – all from non-Christian backgrounds.

specific about the timing of conversion, and saw it more as an outward expression of an inward reality (5). In addition, four new converts saw baptism as an act of obedience – putting their existing faith into action (4) and following the calling and commands of Christ (4). Moreover, four individuals associated baptism with Christian fellowship – in terms of belonging and testifying to others, while nine new believers shared their experience in terms of a personal decision to respond to Christ.[265] Finally, six people saw their baptism as an expression of repentance from sin and rejection of things of the world, while ten emphasized that their baptism represented their desire to be born again and receive new life (10). Clearly, though all twenty interviewees were recently baptized as adults, their motivations and understandings of the experience were varied and nuanced. Still, certain salient themes emerge in their accounts that connect with the challenges, needs, questions that were present in their early lives.

iii. Summary: The Hilltop Analogy for Conversion Process

So far, this study has explored the demographic data, background stories, and conversion narratives of these twenty new believers in order to investigate *who* is coming to faith, *why* they are doing so, and *how* this occurs. In the most recent section, it became evident that many parallels exist between the early lives of these converts and the period surrounding their conversion. For instance, certain challenges and pressures which began in their childhood led to the crises and turning points that occurred just before their conversion. Moreover, as positive influences continued to add up in their lives, their cumulative effect helped many individuals come to faith. Finally, the rich descriptions of these people's conversion experiences and baptisms demonstrate that their previously felt needs had been met, and their burning

[265] Two specifically mentioned that their decision had nothing to do with the church.

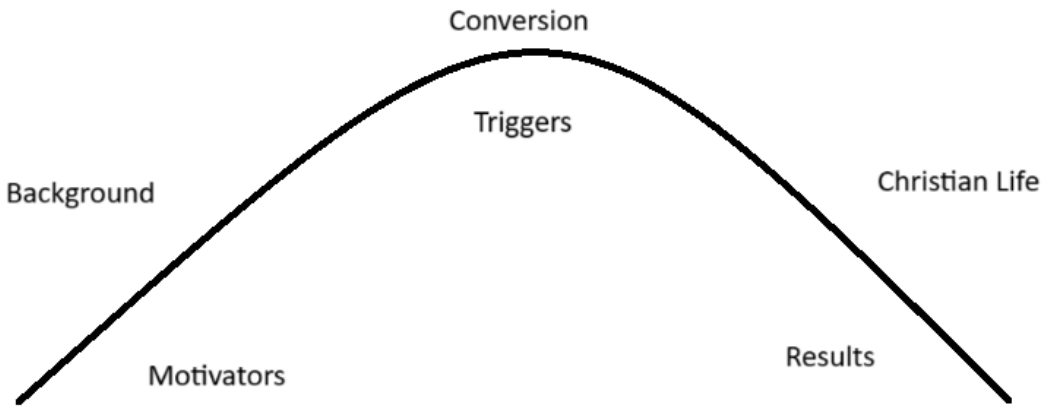
questions had been answered. Thus, a strong connection can be drawn between these people's background stories and their conversion experiences – essentially, if the former part of the story introduced various challenges and problems, the latter part of the story told of their resolution.

Having analyzed these conversion stories up to this point, new questions naturally emerge about the nature of this process. *Once these people's problems were resolved or addressed, what happened next? How did the results of their conversion relate to the earlier elements of their story?* Numerous common themes have appeared in these narratives – such as practical challenges, relational connections, emotional needs, intellectual questions, and spiritual experiences. In the last section, these were summarized into categories of *social*, *conceptual*, and *experiential* factors in the process of conversion. All of these factors were frequently mentioned in these people's early lives, and they also featured prominently around their time of conversion. Moreover, as the next section will show, these same themes show up in their accounts of their ongoing lives as Christians.

At this point, however, questions may also arise about their order: *which came first? Which elements of their story were causes and which were effects? Did social influences play a crucial factor in the development of their faith, or did a sense of belonging come as a result of their conversion? Likewise, did intellectual discovery lead to their conversion, or did deeper learning come afterwards? Finally, what role did spiritual experience play, and when did it occur in the process of conversion?*

In order to illustrate and engage with these questions, a figure has been provided:

Figure 4.8. Hilltop Analogy



A curved line has been drawn to represent the course of a typical conversion story – as portrayed by the twenty new believers interviewed for this project. Each person began with an open-ended narrative of their "Background" – whatever they considered to be memorable and impactful from their pre-conversion years. Then, at some point, they began to describe the time and circumstances surrounding their "Conversion." Finally, whether voluntarily or through guided questions, each interviewee offered a portrayal of their newfound "Christian Life" – how it had changed since conversion, and what their faith meant to them, personally.

Though the curved line may initially appear to convey a rise and decline in these people's lives, its purpose is rather to express momentum. As explained in an earlier section, various aspects of these Background stories offer reasons "Why" an individual pursued and explored Christianity. Thus, they can be called "Motivators" which were necessary to push the individual uphill, against many opposing forces, toward conversion.[266] Moreover, as the storyteller

[266] This uphill approach does not portray "salvation by works," but rather conveys the reasons why a person continued to approach Christianity, despite they presence of many opposing forces (represented by gravity).

proceeded to explain "How" their Conversion took place, special care was taken to note any key factors that were identified by the interviewee. These could be called "Triggers," which ultimately and most directly brought the new convert to rest at the hilltop and gain a new perspective of their life journey. Carrying on with the analogy, the journey takes a downward turn – again, this is not a portrayal of decline, but rather of forward momentum. While the road of their Christian Life still often included plenty friction and bumps, there were also many positive "Results" which naturally flowed from their conversion.

In the next section, after the data of these "Results" are unpacked and the summative statements of each interviewee are analyzed, a final picture will be given of the conversion process undertaken by these twenty new believers. By recording the salient aspects of each person's Background, Conversion, and Christian Life into a table that mirrors the Hilltop Analogy, a final set of data will be produced to offer insight into the process of conversion.

e. So, What: The Meaning and Message of Conversion

This final section of data analysis will examine the interviewees' personal reflections about "life since conversion" and their summative statements about their newfound faith. In total, 850 data entries were derived from these new converts' references to ways in which their conversion impacted and changed their lives. By searching these data for major themes, further connective lines can be drawn through these stories, adding further insight into their process of conversion. Moreover, 652 summative statements were identified in the interview transcripts – from the new believers' references to their understanding of the Gospel, the Bible, God, and

their life stories. Such statements carry great weight, as they represent each person's attempt to synthesize conclusions and identify personal priorities on their own terms.

Thus, by observing the ways in which these people's lives have changed since conversion, a careful reader can catch a glimpse of the overall meaning these people attach to their conversion. Moreover, through viewing the summative statements offered by these interviewees, one can begin to understand the overarching message these new converts attribute to the Christian faith. Together, these insights will provide the final elements necessary to encapsulate the process of conversion as portrayed by these 20 interviews.

i. Meaning: The Results of Conversion

In earlier sections of these conversion stories, the challenges and resolutions experienced by the new converts generally fit into three categories: *social*, *conceptual*, and *experiential*. Similarly, in these people's accounts of their post conversion experiences, the same broad categories apply. Thus, after presenting the data in this fashion, a summary chart will be provided to represent the overall conversion process of each individual.

While the post-conversion period has been portrayed as "downhill" in the sense that momentum results and life changes naturally flow from their conversion, it should first be noted that many individuals still experienced ongoing challenges in their Christian lives. Socially, eleven different people reported new difficulties arising after coming to faith – ranging from fitting in at church (4), struggling with their social group (4), marital strife (4), and experiencing tension in other relationships (7). Moreover, five individuals described intellectual challenges they faced as a new Christian – such as overcoming doubts, unlearning past teachings, and learning to share their faith. Furthermore, despite their newfound faith, sixteen people reported various difficulties in their personal experience as a Christian. These ongoing

experiential challenges included addiction (2), emotions (2), spiritual warfare (3), their relationship with God (5), healing from past trauma (6), and overcoming obstacles (3). It was notable that nine individuals explicitly described their recent spiritual journey as a "process," emphasizing its aspects that are not yet complete. Finally, combining the social, conceptual and experiential, nine people described an ongoing struggle with sin in their lives – this applied to their relationships, inward attitudes, and outward habits.

Despite the continued challenges present in these people's lives, they also reported a great deal of positive changes which resulted from their conversion. For instance, sixteen people described ways in which their relationships benefited from their newfound faith: it gave them a common purpose, freedom from unhealthy behaviors, and new positive character traits. Moreover, others found themselves able to confront problems in a new way (3), share their faith with others (2), and reconcile broken relationships (8). In addition, thirteen of the interviewees mentioned various ways in which their conversion impacted their outward behavior and attitudes. Some gained a new life purpose (7), others began to verbally share their faith with others (8), and still others reported major changes in their character (8). Four people shared how they began to financially support ministries, and ten others described various ways that they helped and served others after their conversion. Finally, seventeen of the interviewees made 129 references to Christian fellowship that they had experienced since coming to faith – small groups (5), friendships, co-workers, neighbors, and church (15). In all of these ways, conversion to Christianity had a transformative effect on their social lives.

Not only that, but, for seventeen of the interviewees, coming to faith impacted them intellectually as well. Many referred to different things they began to learn about, as new believers – such as understanding God in a new way (5), gaining a spiritual awareness (3),

learning how to properly relate to others (9), developing a new morality, and constructing a coherent worldview (4). Eleven interviewees described their learning experience as an ongoing process of transformation, while one subsequently engaged in a "deconstruction" of their faith.[267] For those who continued learning, nine described this process taking place within church services,[268] three mentioned small groups, one mentioned counseling, and seven accessed various forms of media on their own. Remarkably, fourteen people spoke of receiving guidance from the Bible, while six cited instances of learning through life experience. Previously, it was demonstrated that intellectual questions were prevalent in people's background stories, while intellectual answers figured prominently in the accounts of their conversions. Now, it is evident that this intellectual theme also carries on into the present lives of these new Christians.

In addition to the social and intellectual effects of conversion, all twenty new converts felt impacted experientially. For instance, while many people's external relationships underwent transformation as a result of their newfound faith, several converts also mentioned a significant change to their internal realities. Such cases included thirteen who described positive changes to their feelings, including renewed desires (5), gratitude (4), joy (6), peace (5), and security (7). Moreover, people also experienced a significant shift in their attitudes which resulted in non-judgmental humility (5), the determination to overcome (5), grace towards others (5), and a new perspective on life (9). Thirteen individuals also mentioned instances of

[267] After baptism, as this person processed their past trauma and interacted with different cultural ideas, he/she eventually felt the need to stand apart from "traditional Christianity." Nevertheless, it lies beyond the scope of the project to evaluate their current posture of faith. This person's recent baptism fulfils the criteria of this project, and their unique story adds to the breadth and depth of insight it can provide.

[268] Often through the pastor and preaching.

personal transformation, especially related to freedom from addiction (6) and healing from trauma (6).

Finally, beyond the internal, affective, and behavioral aspects of change experienced by these new converts, eighteen of their post-conversion accounts included references to spiritual results of their conversion. For example, twelve of them mentioned specific things that they had received from God – including His presence (3), His love, grace and acceptance (4), help with trouble and addiction (5), comfort and assurance (3) and His providence (2). Another major theme that emerged from the interviews was the ongoing guidance that people received from God – variously described by seven individuals as following Jesus, being led by the Spirit, and receiving direct instructions. For seven more new believers, their outlook on life was drastically altered by their newfound faith – resulting in greater motivation, clearer purpose, and deeper gratitude. Progress was another common theme discussed by the interviewees (8), who sensed that God was working within them to refine and improve them. Moreover, five individuals emphasized prayer as an important part of their Christian lives, and five mentioned specific spiritual experiences, including dreams, visions, and miracles.

Clearly, for these twenty individuals, coming to faith produced a *social*, *conceptual*, and *experiential* impact on their lives. Moreover, as the data has shown in previous sections, these three categories can be reasonably applied to summarize the various factors involved in background stories and conversion accounts. Yet, the data has also shown that not every category applies to every person equally – nor does it apply to each stage of a person's journey in the same manner. Thus, in order to provide a fuller picture of the conversion process, these aspects of conversion and stages of each person's story will be represented on a chart in the summary section below.

ii. Message: Varied Expressions of the Gospel

While most of the interview process involved open-ended questions and rambling narratives, there were a few pointed questions offered to each new believer. After giving each interviewee plenty of time to freely share what they considered to be important from their life stories, the interviewer then tried to encourage each of them to make some summative statements. At times, interviewees would do this by their own initiative – synthesizing general concepts and conclusions based on the body of knowledge that they had shared. At other times, people were asked very specific questions (about the Bible and the Gospel) in order to encapsulate their views into clear, concise, and easily comparable answers. When viewed as a whole, these various summary statements create a detailed picture of the overall message of Christianity – as understood by these twenty new believers.

Toward the end of the interviews, many individuals began to offer more generic insights about their overall story. For example, as they looked back on their life story, nine of them referred to new perspectives that they gained about their past – realizing how God had guided and helped them through difficulty and how misguided their former way of life turned out to be. Looking at their Christian life as a whole, fifteen made references to an ongoing process – repenting of sin, walking by faith, and experiencing renewal. Others summarized their Christian lives in terms of gaining new direction and purpose (11), living in relationship with God (9), and learning to rely on Him (9). Moreover, a similar variety of concepts emerged from the twenty new converts' references to the process of their conversion.

When describing their conversion in general terms, seven people depicted it as a process of change – often gradual. In contrast, seven others emphasized the significance of a personal choice in their conversion process – a definite response to a call or turning of direction. In

addition, six people emphasized the impact of a personal encounter with God and five others portrayed their conversion in terms of receiving something from Him. Notably, eleven new converts viewed their conversion as a time of humiliation and surrender – hitting rock bottom and being convicted of sin. Finally, six interviewees portrayed their Christian conversion as a process of learning to follow God's way, and nine described a process of gaining new understanding about various theological topics. Interestingly, these people's own summaries reflect the same categories (*social, conceptual, experiential*) that emerged from the data in the previous sections. Though the social aspect did not figure as prominently in their overall conceptions of conversion, it showed up in their descriptions of the ways their conversion was applied. This shall be further explored in the summary section below.

Beyond these summary statements about their own life stories, fifteen interviewees also shared generalizations about their image of God. Eleven emphasized God's goodness in various ways – as a Father figure (3), as gracious, (3), gentle (2), loving (6), generous and kind. Another eight new converts described God more in terms of His knowledge and power – as the One Who is in control, Who knows everything, Who guides, teaches, and provides what we need. Finally, for eight of the interviewees, God's presence and reliability were key features in their conception of His nature.

In addition to these generalized concepts that organically emerged from the personal narratives, the new believers also revealed what was most important to them by answering two pointed questions. The first question invited them to name their favorite Bible verse or story – as a method of indirectly exploring their understanding of the Christian faith. Interestingly, out of the twenty who answered this question, only two chose the same part of Scripture: Christ's feeding of the 5000. In every other case, each interviewee picked a unique verse or story.

Seven of them made references to particular characters or stories that related to their own lives – like Moses, David, Paul, and Jesus. Moreover, ten chose verses that contained principles and teaching to apply to their lives – including prophecies, proverbs, and instructions to resist sin. Finally, ten people quoted promises and comforting words from the Scriptures – assuring them of their salvation, safety, and God's presence. In all 59 references were made to particular words of Scripture, with only very slight overlaps when including people's secondary or tertiary references. Strikingly, popular verses like John 1:12, 3:16, Romans 3:23, 6:23 were absent; instead, people chose to share verses and stories that applied to their lives in unique ways.

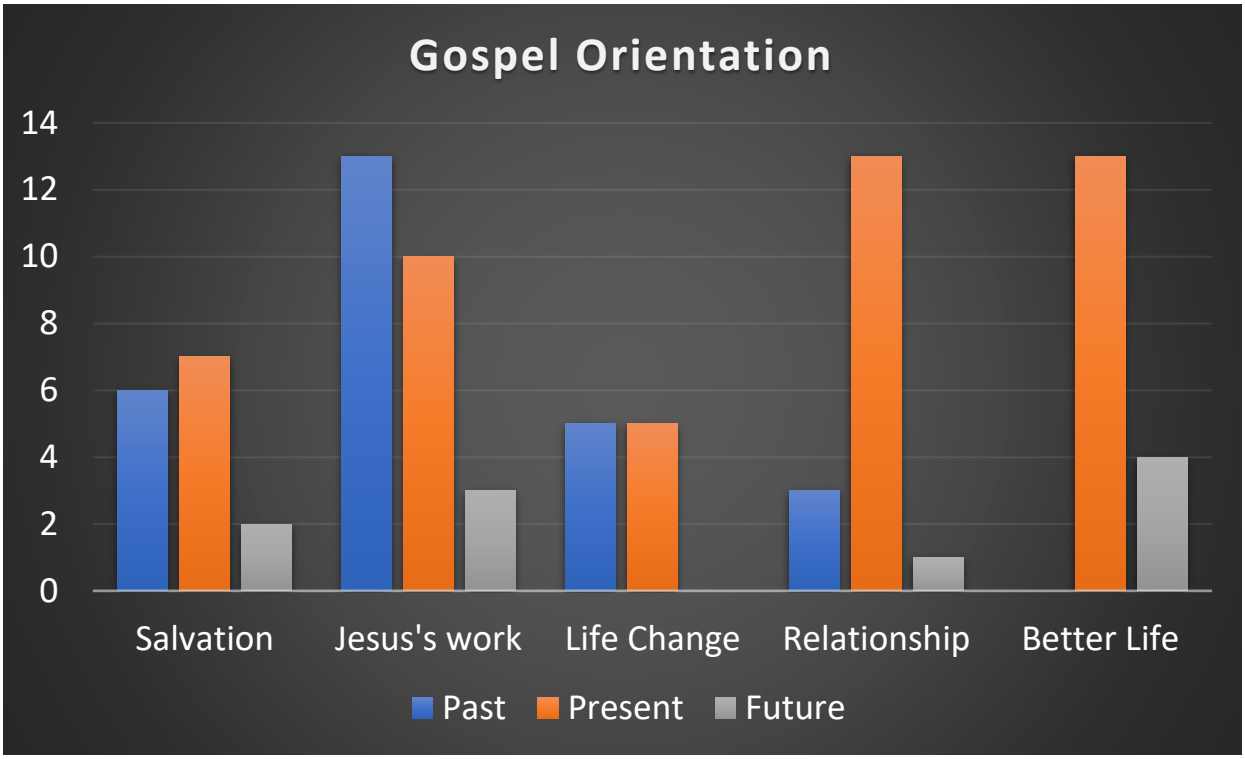
In the second pointed question, each interviewee was asked how they would explain their faith to another person "in a nutshell." In other words – "*what is the basic message of Christianity – what is it all about?*" This question was designed to help each new convert to identify their own priorities; after sharing a vast array of data over the previous 60-90 minutes, they were invited to let it crystallize into a gem. As with the last question, the answers to this one displayed a great diversity while still fitting into discernable themes. On one hand, these themes could be identified by topics and key words shared by the interviewee – such as salvation, Jesus, and personal change. On the other hand, another set of characteristics could be found within each of these topics – relating to their orientation toward the past, present, or future. While some themes clearly related to one of these time characteristics, others related to two or three.

For instance, of the eleven people who mentioned *salvation* in their summary of the Christian message, some focused on how it happens (through Jesus, not works), and others focused on its timing. In the latter cases, references to past forgiveness (6) and present freedom (7) far outweighed concerns of future wrath (1). Moreover, of the seventeen who

mentioned *Jesus* in their personal presentation of the Gospel, some gave attention to His identity (3), but most people spoke about His actions. Of these references, the greatest number were made about Christ's past actions – such as His sacrificial death (13) and resurrection (5). Moreover, ten interviewees mentioned aspects of Christ's present work (loving, presence, guiding), and only three made reference to His future return. Within these two topics, the orientation of references varied between the past, present and future.

In contrast, some topics were mostly oriented toward a single time characteristic. For example, as ten people summarized the Christian life as *a process of change*, they frequently made references to past sin that needed to be confessed. This did, however, also lead to language about present freedom and compassionate living. Moreover, as fourteen people sought to encapsulate Christianity as *having a relationship with God*, they almost exclusively spoke of this as a present reality: experiencing God's love and presence in their lives. Four others also emphasized the present in their references to Christianity as *the way* or *the truth*, as did the thirteen who described Christianity in terms of *living a better life now.* These latter references – including the experience of community, healthy relationships, and healing – greatly outnumber the references made by four people to *the afterlife.* Below, a graph illustrates the temporal orientation of certain themes discussed in this section:

Graph 4.9. Gospel Orientation



Overall, these twenty people's answers revealed some surprising insights and offered a helpful cross-check of previously proposed conclusions. First, the diversity of topics covered in these answers is quite remarkable; rather than reciting or regurgitating canned gospel presentations, each person customized their own summary to express their unique experience. Second, these attempted encapsulations of the Christian message tended to focus more on the present than the past, and more on past than the future. While the afterlife was identified by some as a crucial issue, more people were preoccupied with finding healing from their past, or a better life now. Third, these summaries of the Gospel also related fairly evenly to each of the three main aspects of conversion that have been identified in this study. While some people described the Christian life in *social* terms (community, reconciliation, compassion), and others expressed it *conceptually* (confession, justification, truth), still others emphasized *experience* (spirituality, healing, freedom).

Obviously, as the data implies, a great deal of crossover exists between these categories. Multiple people may relate to multiple aspects of the conversion process. Yet, the data from these interviews also reveal that different aspects may relate to people at different stages of their conversion process. In the summary section below, this data will be mapped out to display the general progression in each person's life.

iii. Summary: A Diversity of Conversion Narratives

In the sections above, the data from these twenty interviews have been thoroughly mined to unearth some fascinating content about conversion. These gems and nuggets have been generally classified as either *social*, *conceptual*, or *experiential.* This parallels the work of historian Alan Kreider, whose analysis of conversion narratives in the New Testament and Early Church revealed changes in people's *beliefs*, *belonging*, and *behavior*. But beyond this general classification of data, questions remain about their sequence and the existence of causal relationships between these aspects of the conversion process.

One popular attempt to summarize this process is "believe, belong, become"– a slogan with significant biblical basis.[269] Using a model like this, one might expect that a person's story of conversion would flow from Bible reading to baptism in a church to a behavioral transformation. Yet, during the interview process, it became clear that while people's conversion process involved similar aspects (*social*, *conceptual*, *experiential*), they occurred in various sequences. This may imply that, while some aspects were *causes* of conversion in one person's life, they may be *effects* of another person's conversion. Moreover, while the Bible, baptism, and changed behavior all played a part in each person's story, some of them were

[269] Priscilla Hammond, "Believe, Belong, Become," *The Wesleyan Church*, August 9, 2019. Accessed online: https://www.wesleyan.org/believe-belong-become

described with much greater emphasis than others. This indicates that some conversions primarily involved a change of allegiance or association; others represented an intellectual breakthrough or a personal transformation. In other words, one conversion narrative may tell a story of entering community; another may describe the shifting of a worldview; still another will portray an experience of freedom and healing.

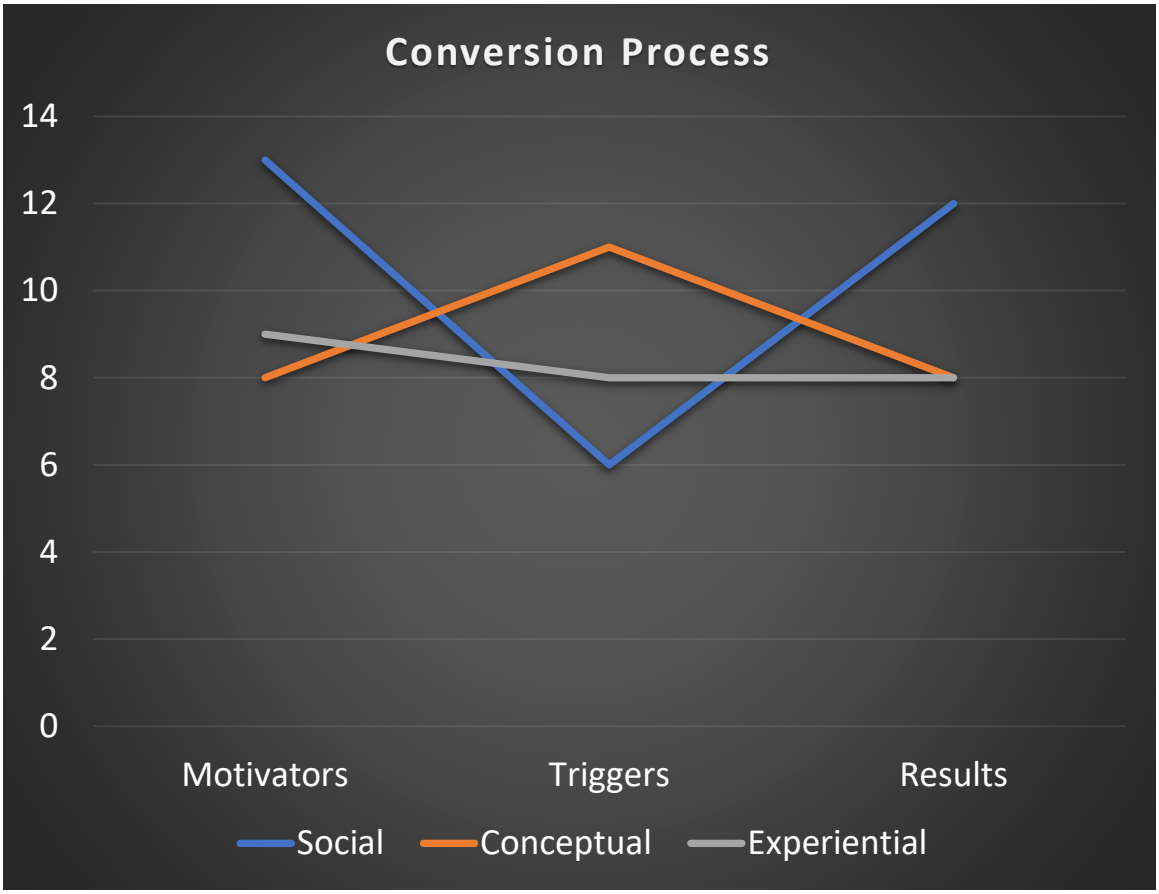
During the interview process, careful notes were taken to record when the new converts emphasized certain themes or identified causal relationships. These notes, along with the interview transcripts, were carefully reviewed and used to distill each story into as simple a sequence as possible. In this chart, below, the most salient aspects of each person's background, conversion, and Christian life (see Hilltop Analogy, above) have been displayed in this table in order to reveal their general sequence:

Table 4.10. Sequence of Themes

Int #	Background – Motivators	Conversion – Triggers	Christian Life – Results
1	**Social** – abuse **Experiential** – addiction	**Experiential** – God's voice	**Social** – outreach **Experiential** – freed
2	**Social** – alienation	**Social** – welcome church	**Conceptual** – learning
3	**Experiential** – addiction **Conceptual** – doctrine	**Conceptual** – doctrine **Social** – church example	**Social** – serve in church **Experiential** – changed
4	**Conceptual** – ignorance **Social** – family guidance	**Conceptual** – guidance at church	**Conceptual** – learning
5	**Conceptual** – skeptic	**Conceptual** – Bible	**Social** – outreach, ministry
6	**Social** – unloved, lonely	**Conceptual** – God loves **Social** – church example	**Experiential** – feel love
7	**Experiential** – addiction **Social** – brokenness	**Conceptual** – atoned	**Experiential** – security
8	**Social** – brokenness **Experiential** – health	**Experiential** – God's presence **Conceptual** – truth	**Social** – help others **Experiential** – healing **Conceptual** – writing
9	**Conceptual** – Islam	**Conceptual** – truth **Social** – pastor	**Social** – church
10	**Social** – husband **Experiential** – infertile **Conceptual** – study	**Experiential** – miracle, prayer, Scripture	**Conceptual** – study
11	**Conceptual** – JW	**Conceptual** – radio, TV	**Social** – find church
12	**Experiential** – health **Social** – abuse	**Experiential** – FS **Social** – support group	**Conceptual** – explore questions
13	**Conceptual** – meaning **Social** – lonely, group	**Experiential** – prayer, baptism, Spirit	**Conceptual** – Bible **Social** – found church
14	**Social –** Chr. family, restrictive church	**Social** – new church, country	**Social** – tension between friends, church
15	**Social** – immigrate, marital tension, church	**Experiential** – overwhelmed by Spirit	**Conceptual** – learning
16	**Experiential** – health **Conceptual** – questions	**Conceptual** – Bible truth	**Experiential** – healing **Social** – church
17	**Experiential** – health, suicidal	**Conceptual** – Gospel message	**Experiential** – healing **Social** – serving
18	**Experiential** – addiction	**Experiential** – worship	**Experiential** – healing **Social** – belong, reconcile **Conceptual** – Bible, pastors
19	**Social** – isolation, breakups	**Conceptual** – online teaching	**Social** – new church
20	**Social** – relationship	**Experiential** – Jesus real	**Conceptual** – Bible, re-learn

Laying out the general sequence of each story in this way reveals numerous insights. First, it allows for a simple numerical comparison of each aspect. As displayed on the graph below, one can observe that *social* aspect featured prominently in people's background stories (as a motivating factor toward conversion) and in their later Christian lives (as a result of conversion) but was much less frequently mentioned at the point of conversion. Thus, while it appears that the social aspect of these lives was greatly transformed by conversion, it was not the central cause (trigger) for the conversion to happen. In contrast, while the *conceptual* aspect was less common in people's background (intellectual questions) and later Christian life (ongoing learning), it featured more prominently at the point of conversion. Conceptual matters may have contributed less motivation for people explore Christianity and may have experience less transformation in these people's lives, but it appears that ideas were more likely to serve as triggers for the actual conversion to happen. Finally, *experiential* factors appear to have consistently played a significant role throughout the process. Overall figures are charted below:

Graph 4.11. Conversion Process



Next, this data table also reveals some interesting patterns. For instance, in 5 cases, there was a *common thread* throughout their story; some people's conversion process, from start to finish, was social (14), conceptual (4), or experiential (1, 8, 18). This indicates that, for some people, there is really one main issue that needs to be resolved and transformed in their lives. Yet, in five other cases, a *sequence* of three different aspects was highlighted in each of the three time periods (3, 6, 15, 17, 20). This implies that some stories are quite complex, and that conversion processes can also be multi-faceted.

In addition, in nine cases, a certain aspect was present in a person's background and later Christian life, but not prominent at conversion. This likely indicates that a certain aspect of their lives was *transformed* or *resolved* due to the influence of another. For instance, in four

cases (1, 8, 13, 19), people appear to have experienced social change due to the experience and concepts surrounding their conversion. Likewise, in four cases (3, 7, 16, 17), people's experience of life may have been transformed due to the social and (especially) conceptual influences at their conversion. Moreover, in two cases (10, 13) individuals appear to have experienced intellectual change due to experiences surrounding their conversion.

Finally, in nine cases, a certain aspect was present in the first two stages of a person's story, but not the third. This may indicate a sort of *progress* – that the resolution of one aspect led to the transformation of another. For instance, in five cases (3, 5, 9, 11, 16) it appears that a person's more conceptual conversion led to their adoption into the Christian community. Yet, in three other cases, the experiential and social aspects of people's background and conversion seem to have led to a transformation of their thinking as a Christian. In another case, a person's social conversion may have led to experiential changes later.

All this is to say that while slogans like "Believe, belong, become" have some validity and utility, they certainly do not represent every person's process of conversion. In fact, if the words of that slogan are converted into "conceptual, social, experiential," this sequence is almost entirely absent from the data in the chart above.[270] It seems likely that this slogan completely omits each person's pre-conversion story – and thus fails to offer any insight into motivating factors for conversion. Finally, while all three aspects of a conversion frequently show up in these narratives, their relative prominence can vary between stories. The implications of these conclusions will be further explored in a section below.

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[270] The conceptual-social-experiential sequence is only found in narrative #3, which had multiple factors involved in every stage. Other frequent sequences included experiential-conceptual-social (3, 17), social-conceptual-experiential (6), and social-experiential-conceptual (15, 20). In these five other sequences, the conceptual aspect was never mentioned first. Perhaps this slogan omitted a person's background and thus portrays the "trigger" of conversion as a conceptual process.

f. Limitations & Implications

Before drawing further conclusions and applications from these findings, the limitations of this research must be considered. For instance, there are some inherent and unavoidable constraints built into the process of data collection. First, by sampling from a pool of only twenty people, there is a chance that the demographic data could be unintentionally skewed. However, major conclusions were not based on minor statistical details; rather, attention has been focused on identifying trends and tendencies that show strong statistical significance.[271]

Second, one might wonder if my own demographic characteristics as the interviewer, were mirrored by those of the interviewees. *Was the sample of new believers overly represented by Caucasian Canadian-born males?* Only 30% of interviewees shared these properties. As the demographic data has demonstrated above, this study benefited from a balanced representation of cultures and genders. Yet, it was previously noted that the most frequent decade of birth for interviewees was the 1980s – the same as me. In fact, 60% of interviewees were born within a decade of my date of birth, and 35% were born within one year of it. Perhaps, this information may appear to indicate that people would be more likely to consent to an interview if they were close to my age. However, the only person who declined a direct request for an interview was a middle-aged member of my own church. Given that age does not appear to have influenced the selection of interviewees, I would suggest another reason for this cluster of mid-life converts. Based on the data about "Turning Points" in the Means section, perhaps conversion can be correlated with mid-life crises and life transitions.

[271] For example, the fact that 10% of interviewees were from First Nations was basically laid aside. While this may appear significant or interesting, it only represents two people. In contrast, larger trends to do with addiction and immigration were discussed more.

A third factor that could create bias is my previous personal connection with the interviewees. Yet, of the 30% who shared my gender, ethnicity, and country of origin, only half were previously known to me. Likewise, while I already knew six of the seven people who were born within a year of me, only three attended my church and two were baptized by me. Speaking of church attendance, five of the twenty interviewees were baptized at Parkdale Church, where I serve as pastor. Another three who were baptized elsewhere also attended my church for a while, and still another two attended our church's recovery program with my wife. In total, this amounts to 50% of interviewees; yet only three of the ten still attend Parkdale Church, and only two of them were Canadian-born males who were born within a decade of me. To put it another way, if the five people baptized by me or the ten connected to Parkdale were removed from this study, the demographic data would become significantly *less* diverse.[272]

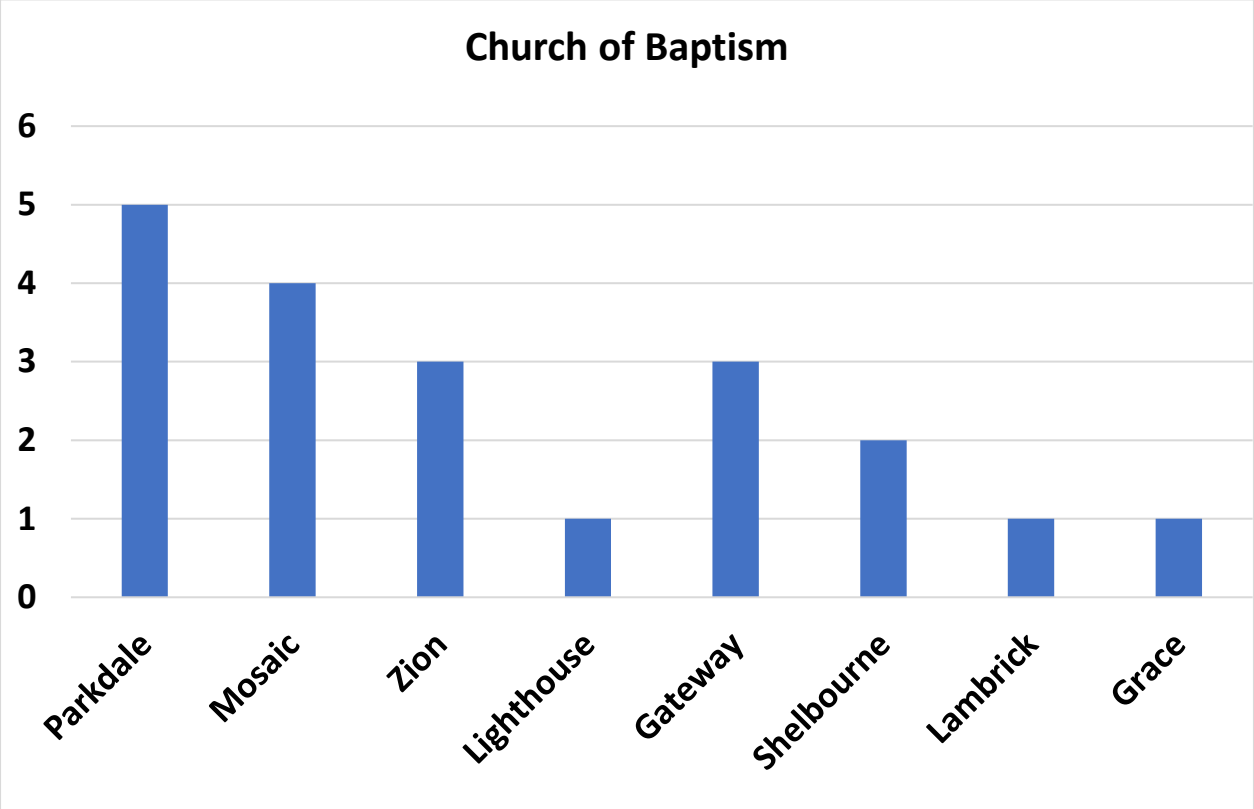
Fourth, the process of finding interviewees must also be examined. In addition to the 25% of new believers who were baptized by me at Parkdale, another 35% were baptized by two church plants that met in our building: Mosaic Church and Victoria Zion Church. While this accounts for a large portion of the interviewees, these two church plants were distinct from Parkdale with regards to their affiliations, political leaning, theological emphases and even language.[273] Moreover, while five of the new believers had previously attended Freedom Session at Parkdale, the only one who was baptized at Parkdale did not regularly attend there. Overall, 70% of all interview respondents had a connection to Parkdale's building – either through personal relationships, recovery group, or their church plant gatherings. While this

[272] Only one of those baptized by me was Caucasian, two were Canadian-born, and three were male.

[273] Victoria Zion Church is a Mandarin-speaking plant from a mother church in Beijing. Mosaic Church is a Calvary Chapel church plant.

might appear to be a potential source of bias, the data clearly demonstrates that the interviewees were diverse and came from various churches (see chart below).

Graph 4.12. Church of Baptism



Furthermore, one might rightly ask how likely it would be for anyone to share their personal story in great depth without a prior connection with the interviewer. As for the six cases in which I had no shared context with the interviewee, the connection was made by their four pastors who were my personal friends. Overall, given the nature of my research and the necessity of personal connection, I am satisfied with and grateful for the wide variety of interviewees from various churches who participated. Rather than drawing from one ethnicity group or denomination, my connection with the CityReach ministerial enabled me to ensure that Evangelical believers of my region were more fairly represented. I did not turn away any potential interviewees that fit the criteria; it was first-come, first-served.

Still, one might still wonder if certain demographic classes are over or under-represented. For instance, *did the recovery program at Parkdale Church skew the data in favor of recovering addicts?* While five of the twenty interviewees attended Freedom Session there, this accounted for less than half of those who reported experiencing addiction or trauma. Moreover, none of the other seven churches in this study were running the same program. Likewise, one might wonder if new immigrants were over-represented because a Mandarin-speaking church was included. Yet, their interviewees accounted for only one third of those who were foreign born – fewer than those from Parkdale. Clearly, despite the diversity of churches represented in this study, these new believers tended to either be recent immigrants or recovering addicts.

This point may offer some insight into the age gaps that can be observed among the twenty interviewees. Aside from two Chinese-born university students, the rest of the group could be classified as middle-aged or seniors. *Where are the young people?* While I have wondered if more could have been found in larger churches, three of the eight churches represented by this study were large and well-attended by young adults.[274] Moreover, if I had included local parachurch (i.e. university) ministries in my search, perhaps more younger converts may have been found. Yet, their conversion through these ministries would not preclude them from baptism in a local church – and without this criterion, I would need to find a new way to identify potential interviewees. Finally, the relative absence of younger converts from this study could also be explained with an obvious point: they were already baptized

[274] Gateway Church, Lambrick Park Church, and Lighthouse Church.

before adulthood. It could be the case that a great number of people are baptized as children and youth before coming to a full understanding and commitment to faith, later.[275]

Finally, the actual process of the interview could be examined for potential bias. After all, it is a completely human process. Yet, against potential pitfalls, certain guard rails were installed. For one thing, the 60–150-minute length of these interviews helped ensure that there was plenty of time for topics to be covered thoroughly. As can be seen in the transcripts, which range between 5000 and 18000 words, the depth and breadth of data from this study should alleviate any fears that topics may be neglected.

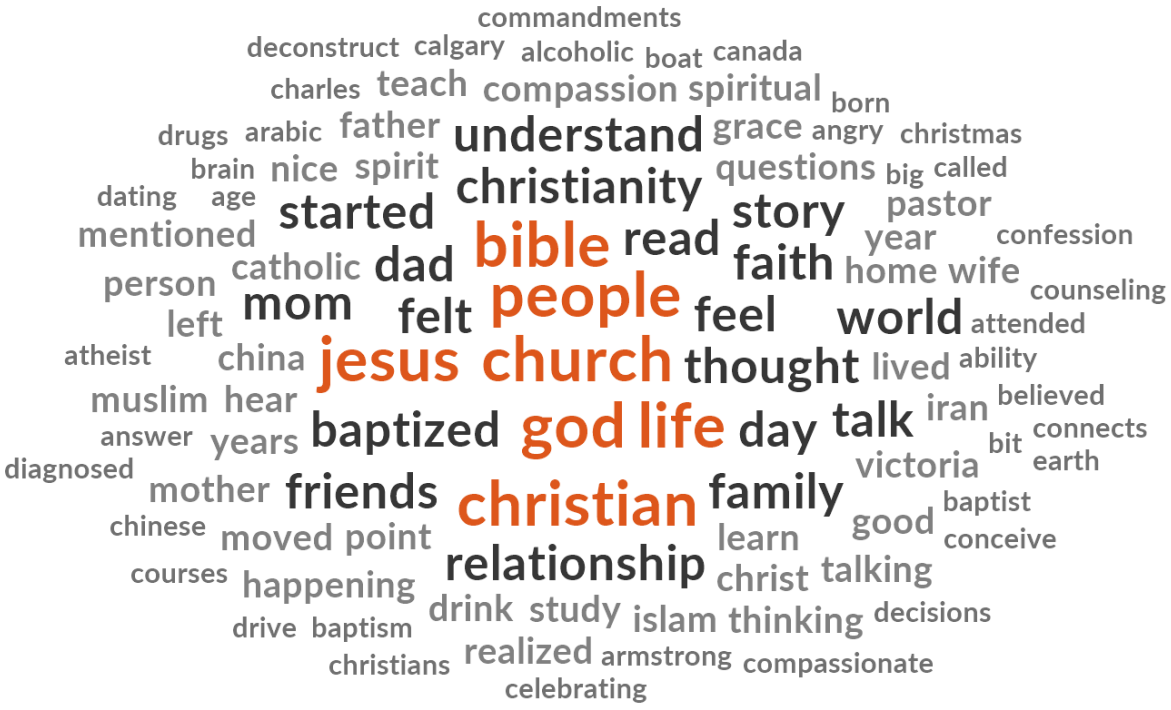
Moreover, a variety of questions were employed during the interview process for particular purposes. After open-ended invitations created space for people to highlight their own priorities through storytelling, follow-up queries were used to clarify salient themes in their narratives. While these first two methods offered a high level of objectivity, any conclusions drawn would be necessarily subjective and harder to compare. Thus, a third form of questioning was used, involving pointed questions from the interviewer. Though this method of data collection may introduced new biases through the crafting of the questions, it also offered a new level of objectivity by allowing each new convert to synthesize their own summaries and conclusions which could be easily compared to my own. Thus, when put together, my subjective interpretations and classifications of the themes in their stories could be measured against their clear and succinct answers to my pointed questions. By comparing the data

[275] For example, a Presbyterian pastor told me of a young recent convert who, having been baptized as an infant, felt no need to be re-baptized as an adult. My own denomination (Evangelical Free) allows for freedom of conscience with this issue.

obtained from both types of questions, I could see whether the interviewee confirmed or contradicted my own hypotheses.[276]

As an additional check against bias in identifying salient topics and themes, I have created a word cloud. Having used Otter.ai to produce the transcripts from the audio recordings, I also found that it automatically provided a "word summary" for each interview. I then copied this data onto a single page in NVivo, which produced this representation of word frequency in the twenty transcripts, combined. If nothing else, one should note that the most prominent words correspond with the broad aspects of the conversion process that I have previously discussed.[277]

Figure 4.13. Word Cloud



[276] For example, *if I propose that a person's process of conversion (motivators, triggers, and results) could be described as a social transformation triggered by a spiritual experience, do the new convert's own summaries, syntheses, or favorite Bible verses support my conclusion?*

[277] For instance, Church, relationships = Social, Bible, understand = conceptual, God, life, feel = experiential.

g. Assumptions, Confirmations & Corrections

Another way to examine the possibility of personal bias would be to consider if any of my presuppositions have changed. Before I conducted my research, what did I already believe about the topic? What genuine questions did I bring to this project, and what answers did I expect to emerge from the interviews?

Firstly, I think that I initially approached this topic from a missiological point of view. As a person whose vocation involves the regular preaching of the gospel, I carried the assumption that such verbal presentations have some role to play in conversion. Thus, I was interested in learning more about how the gospel can be presented effectively. Accordingly, I began to research and review literature within the subjects of Bible, Theology, and Evangelism. Yet, I was also guided to include voices from the social sciences in my literature review who would provide some perspective from the convert's side of this process. Rather than trying to identify the Gospel message or determine how it can be presented, sociologists and psychologists tend to investigate the external and internal factors that contribute to conversion. Some view conversion as an act of social conformity, while others see it as a response to personal crises. Still others (namely, historians) consider personal testimonies and written accounts on this topic – taking seriously people's claims of spiritual experiences rather than dismissing them as biased.

For me, while acknowledging the merit of sociological and psychological stances, I found the *historical* approach most helpful. It modeled for me the type of research that I was about to undertake – listening to people's accounts and taking their words seriously. After completing this task and considering the data, I discovered that all of the various views of conversion held some merit. According to the testimonies of these twenty new converts, some really were

looking for a place to belong; others were primarily searching for truth; and others were simply responding to encounters with the living God. As a pastor, this research showed me that, while some people rely heavily on preaching and personal Bible study in their conversion process, others only add these pieces to their lives after coming to faith through other means.

This discovery both confirmed and expanded another assumption that I brought to this project: that each conversion is unique. When I was interviewed by a church planting assessor fourteen years ago, this topic became a point of contention – while he equated conversion with "praying the prayer," I did not consider any scripted recitations to be essential in this process. Even back then, as a youth pastor, I had heard numerous testimonies of people who had followed another person's lead in outwardly expressing faith, without it having a meaningful effect on their lives. Often, such "converts" would turn away from Christianity only to "rediscover" it later. These genuine conversions always involved a variety of means which included relationships, learning, and experiences. But it seemed that my assessor was not considering these factors in the process of conversion.

After that assessment experience, I began serving as a lead pastor in an established church in New Westminster and then moved to another church in Victoria. During my 9 years of pastoral service prior to conducting the interviews for this project, I baptized about twenty adults and welcomed dozens of new members into my congregations. In each of these instances, the individual was invited to share their testimony of how they came to faith, and what difference their conversion had made in their lives. Over the course of those recent years, these testimonies had a cumulative effect on my view of the gospel and conversion; it seemed that each person had a different version of how the gospel applied to their lives, and a different story of how they came to faith. Thus, I hoped that my research for this project would be an

opportunity to either confirm or correct my assumptions – by drawing from conversion stories outside of my own church, I could compare them to what I had already heard from those within. I also hoped that this project would provide an occasion for me to process my findings and produce a resource that could be helpful for others who are curious about this topic.

As my "Findings" have shown, my assumption (about each conversion being unique) was confirmed – people really do come to faith through a variety of means, for a variety of reasons. Yet, at the same time, by expanding my research sufficiently, I was able to observe certain similarities between different stories. This led to the clustering of data into broader themes which can be useful to share with others.

Finally, I approached this project with curiosity about the notion of conversion as a process. Having heard people's stories of faith, I had occasionally noted that individuals would identify a clear moment of conversion which divided their life story into two chapters: "before" and "after." But I had also heard stories that portrayed conversion as more of a process. While these people did not explicitly deny the idea of there being a "before" and "after," they presented their journey of conversion as a series of steps which continues into the present.

For this project, one benefit of conducting such long and thorough interviews is that it provided a fuller picture of people's journeys. When a person shares a five-minute testimony at church, they are forced to follow certain guidelines and significantly trim their content. In contrast, my research allowed these people to share the "uncut" version of their story and to select their own topics of interest. And through this process, it became clear that people had much more to say about their background and their "life since conversion" than about the point in time when they began to identify as a Christian. For them, a great number of factors influenced their coming to faith; a complex series of events formed a process of conversion.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

What Christians need is not so much to be informed of what they should experience or have experienced as to be given means to conduct their own self-examination, theological tools that enable them to reflect on and interpret their own experience.[278]

a. Benefits of this Study to Knowledge & Practice

i. A Multi-Disciplinary Approach

The message of the gospel and the phenomenon of conversion are difficult to reduce to simple explanations. While people may mean well in crafting simplified gospel presentations and step-by-step processes to follow, such efforts can also produce harm. The gospel does need to be presented in some form – and boiling it down to its basic "kerygma" can enable its rapid transmission. But if evangelists lean too heavily on a single type of presentation, their words may fail to connect with certain hearers whose questions and concerns are left unaddressed. Similarly, while certain things do need to occur for someone to become a Christian, presenting it as "four simple steps" or "ten doctrines to believe" will inevitably create the potential for false conversions. Overly reductionistic invitations to "believe" may leave people with the mistaken notion that various areas of their life can remain untouched by this "decision." Any canned, prepared presentation of the gospel or instructions for conversion should require further translation and contextualization for its particular hearers.

[278] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 19.

Thus, approaching these topics from a multi-disciplinary perspective can guard against such narrow understandings. My own vocational context would incline me to look to the Bible, theologians, and missiologists for answers to the questions posed in this project. These sources offer help in answering the speaker's side of the equation: *what God has said, what it means, and how do we say it to others*. In my exploration of these topics, I have uncovered a diverse array of Biblical expressions of the gospel, theological implications of the gospel, missiological presentations of the gospel, and ecclesiological embodiments of the gospel. From the speaker's side, alone, there are numerous ways that the gospel can be applied to people's lives. This can prove helpful in the development of "language that fosters and enables conversion."[279]

But, on the other side of the conversion equation stands the recipient of the gospel – the convert – and it may not be helpful to merely view them as a passive recipient. As social scientists reveal, a variety of internal and external factors may contribute to a person's decision to convert. For instance, sociologists point to the influence of friends, family, and other relationships as a motivating factor in religious conversion, while psychologists highlight the importance of personal crises, development, and maturation. While either of these schools of thought would prove to be imbalanced on their own, they contribute unique insight when combined with more integrative approaches to understanding conversion.

For example, process theory tends to recognize the multi-faceted nature of conversion and the manner in which it unfolds over a lifetime. While an evangelist might point to the occasion when a person hears the gospel, and a sociologist might emphasize the time when a person began attending church, a psychologist would highlight a moment of resolution felt by

[279] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 44.

an individual who was in crisis. Process theory offers a way to integrate these factors and assemble them into a timeline, or story. Rather than quibbling about the precise time when conversion occurs, this approach recognizes it as a genuine phenomenon that includes numerous causes and effects. It invites analysts to bring the topic back to the reality from which it came: personal stories.

In this same vein, historical perspectives offer an admirable model to follow. Rather than trying to boil the topic of conversion down to preaching, social conformity, or personal crisis, historians take seriously the personal accounts that we have available to us from past times. Using stories and other documents as a window to view what actually happened in other times and places, one can then compare it to one's own experience and present-day observations.

Building on these integrative approaches to conversion, my own project has attempted to add some unique and significant data to the conversation: twenty interview transcripts from new believers in a particular contemporary context. While recognizing the value of various theological and theoretical approaches to conversion, I have sought to allow these converts actually speak for themselves. Then, by offering their stories as primary evidence, I have hoped to compare it to existing theories and assumptions. In the end, I would be glad if this effort can stimulate further reflection on the topic and contribute to the ongoing conversation.

ii. A Real-Life Snapshot

As already implied by the paragraph above, the practical research conducted for this project offers a living illustration of the process of conversion. By interviewing twenty recent converts from one metropolitan area, I have attempted to provide a real-life snapshot of how people are coming to faith in this particular context. While plenty of literature exists on the

topic of church planting and leading missional churches in North America, the great majority of it originates in the United States. Moreover, much of this material is produced by large, suburban churches, whose context differs greatly from that of evangelicals in Victoria, BC. Typically, their treatment of the gospel and the surrounding culture is reductionistic; they target a "homogenous unit" of the population with a simple message. In contrast, some admirable attempts have been made to describe missional ministry in an urban context[280] while accounting for the diverse ways in which the gospel can be delivered and received. Yet, each urban center is unique, and the church of each city could benefit from studies that emerge from their own context.

For one thing, this project provides useful demographic data that informs the reader *who* has been coming to faith recently in Evangelical Churches in the region of Victoria, BC. People might bring all kinds of assumptions to a question like this, but when it comes to the data, the answer is clear: recent adult converts in the Victoria region have typically either experienced immigration or trauma and addiction. These influential experiences in their lives may explain why they did not come to faith at an early age and might explain why they felt open to consider Christianity at a later age. These people may have initially lacked exposure to Christianity, positive examples from Christians, or plausible explanations of Christianity when they were young. Yet, these same challenges from their upbringing may have left them searching for answers as they got older, causing them to be open to change. Hopefully, such conversion stories can help local Christians to recognize the evangelistic opportunities that are before them.

[280] Such as Jonathon K. Dodson's *Unbelievable Gospel* (Austin, TX) or Timothy Keller's *Center Church* (New York, NY).

Moreover, the data from these accounts also offers a snapshot of people's church experiences in Victoria over a wide range of years. Recent converts made a great deal of references to the preaching, worship, fellowship and programs offered by the various churches of the area, describing both negative and positive experiences. They also shared in great detail about the felt needs, burning questions, and life crises that were present in their lives as they came to church. While individual stories need to remain confidential, the combined data of these accounts could offer helpful insight for local pastors and other ministers who are interested in connecting with those who are on the journey toward conversion.

Regarding the demographic data, one inherent limitation was the exclusion of minors from the research process. However, this limitation also offers a unique asset to the reader. While plenty has been written about the importance of evangelizing children, and plenty has been said on the topic of youth departing the faith, this particular study tells more of the story. By hearing the complete accounts of adults who have recently professed faith through baptism, one can observe how the various parts of their stories fit together. From the vantage point of the present, one can see that the influence and instruction of their childhood did not go to waste; the challenges and crises of their youth were not fatal. Rather, these, along with subsequent events and encounters, have formed crucial stages in their process of conversion.

If one were to think of conversion as a "once and done" decision that can be decisively defined and identified by the church, then numerous frustrations and anxieties emerge. We may feel pressure to convert children, we may feel frustrated when youth seem to turn away, and we wonder if any of it counted. But, by viewing these stories through the lens of stories from adults, one gains a fuller perspective of the process of conversion. And, with that

perspective comes a ray of hope: that many who have wandered are coming back to the faith that they first encountered as a child.

iii. A Perspective of the Process

Building on the insight gained from these twenty stories and the variety of literature on the topic, this project has also produced a model to aid further reflection and interpretation of the conversion process: the Hilltop Analogy.

Corresponding with the structure of the interviews, data was first divided into three main categories: information from a person's pre-conversion background, references to the time surrounding their conversion, and descriptions of their life since then. To be clear, each person's time of conversion was self-defined; at some point in each interview, the interviewee was invited to share about the time when they would begin to self-identify as a Christian. Thus, they provided the dividing lines for the data.

Next, to help illustrate the way that these stages of the story fit together, a simple line was drawn to represent a hill. The top represented a person's conversion, the left (uphill) side represented their background, and the right (downhill) side represented their Christian life. The uphill portion was also labeled "Motivators," indicating that events, inputs, and influences in their background story served as contributing factors toward their conversion (pushing them up the hill against various forces). At the top of the hill, the word "Triggers" was placed to signify the elements that surrounded the time when they consciously became a Christian. Finally, the word "Results" was placed on the downhill side, corresponding with consequences of their conversion that continued to play out in their post-conversion lives. Altogether, this analogy provides a framework with which people can reflect on their own stories and the process that others are undertaking.

Regarding the data that was to be inserted into these three categories, I found it helpful to summarize it with three adjectives: social, conceptual and experiential. Though drawing such distinctions can never be done perfectly, I found that these word choices closely corresponded with those mentioned by Gordon T. Smith.[281] Moreover, though such summarizing terms may appear overly reductionistic toward the data, they can greatly aid any observer who wishes to compare the data of one story to another. Furthermore, at some point, despite the uniqueness of every conversion narrative, one must also acknowledge their similarities. As Smith illustrates, "no two haiku poems are identical; no two conversions are identical. But both have some essential features that make the one haiku poem and the other a conversion."[282]

To illustrate, I created a chart which maps out the conversion process of each of the twenty interviewees. For each of the three stages of the conversion process,[283] a column was drawn, and for each of the twenty conversion stories, a row was added to the chart. Then in each box of the chart, I inserted at least one of three adjectives[284] to describe the most salient features of each stage of the conversion process. Thus, a casual observer could view the chart to gain a rough sketch of the overall shape of each story: which factors *caused* the conversion, which *characterized* the conversion, and which were *consequences* of the conversion. In addition, these summaries were quantified and expressed in a chart to compare the relative frequency of each of the three adjectives. Such information could potentially provide helpful input in discussions between sociologists, psychologists and preachers – or between those who are trying to determine the proper order of "believing, belonging and becoming."

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[281] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 106.
[282] Ibid., 137.
[283] Background / Motivators, Conversion / Triggers, Christian Life / Results.
[284] Social, Conceptual, and Experiential.

b. Practical Applications

i. The Significance of Story

As the literature review section has demonstrated, various academic disciplines approach the topic of conversion from their own particular angle. Bible scholars may try to encapsulate the gospel message and its call to response; theologians attempt to conceptualize the spiritual realities at play in this process; and missiologists consider how these truths can be communicated in ways that relate to a given culture. Yet, there is another side to the equation – namely, the recipient of this gospel message, or the person experiencing conversion. The social sciences offer a view from this human standpoint, providing a valuable perspective for anyone interested in understanding the process of conversion. Sociologists tend to present conversion as an act of social conformity, while psychologists view it as a resolution of an internal crisis or as a stage in a process of personal development. Historians give weight to personal testimonies compiled from past times, and others call for a similar approach to conversion today – a narrative approach.

For the purposes of this project, I have employed this latter method, taking seriously the personal accounts of twenty people who have recently come to faith in my region. While theological approaches to the topic of conversion can offer *prescriptive* insights, my research is decidedly *descriptive* – presenting a clear picture of what is actually happening. Moreover, while the social sciences can offer a *theoretical* understanding of the phenomenon of conversion, my interviews have involved a *personal* engagement with this topic. After all, conversion is fundamentally a personal experience – and its diversity and richness can only be understood by those who take time to listen to real stories.

Another advantage of this narrative approach is that it leaves room for the entire process of conversion to be examined. If new believers are only asked specific questions about their conversion, their answers will only reflect the knowledge and assumptions of the inquirer. Moreover, if new believers are given a very limited time to share their story of faith, it will necessarily omit many aspects of the conversion process including causes, effects and context. But, if a recent convert is given the time to tell their whole story in an unhurried manner, the listener will benefit from seeing a much fuller picture. From a person's background story, a listener may gain insight into a person's *motivations* for coming to faith; from descriptions of the events and influences surrounding a conversion, a listener may learn of the *means* by which a person became a Christian; and, by hearing a new believer's own reflections on their life of faith and personal beliefs, a listener can discover a uniquely contextualized *message* that the convert carries and currently lives by.

I must emphasize that this practice of listening to stories should be basic to the task of any minister of the gospel. It is the work of a missiologist, which every vocational minister or disciple of Jesus should embrace. Whether a person wishes to introduce an unbeliever to the faith, foster the growth of a fellow believer, or teach others to do these things, they should consider "stories of faith" to be essential reading. Prescriptive teaching and theoretical treatments will never suffice in preparing us for a task that is deeply personal, complex, and often drawn out. But hearing people's conversion accounts will illuminate several things, including:

1. *The diversity of motivating factors*. People's background stories vary greatly – and when we first encounter them, their felt needs, burning questions, life circumstances, and overall impression of Christianity might be different than we expect.

2. *The need for patience with the process*. Baptisms and professions of faith are exciting – but they are the tip of the iceberg. Understanding conversion as a process can help a Christian discern what their curious or struggling friend needs at the moment.
3. *The breadth and depth of the gospel.* Hearing people summarize their Christian journey and beliefs on their own terms can demonstrate how the Scriptures and the message of Christ can be expressed and applied to address various questions & needs.

Finally, in light of this, I would offer two more recommendations:

1. *Make "testimony sharing" commonplace* in your Christian fellowship. It is amazing what unity and learning can come from this "informal research."
2. *Let an individual's story inform and shape* the way you present the gospel to them. Be quick to listen and slow to speak.

ii. Customizing Conversions

I previously shared a story about a person who asked me to quantify my conversions. Perhaps you have seen or heard of this, too: people are asked to raise a hand, come forward, fill out a card, or pray a prayer as an indication that they have made a decision to accept or follow Christ. Numbers are then counted and reported to head office, to supporters, and beyond. This never felt right to me – to attach such weight to these practices. I do not believe that it is wrong to ask people to outwardly express their faith (even in these ways mentioned), but we must keep in mind that Jesus already set two such ordinances in place: baptism and communion. While raised hands and checked boxes on cards may offer encouragement to preachers that their words did not return void, these are hardly reliable indications of true conversion. As personal stories will tell, the effect and meaning of these practices varies greatly between people. Moreover, while water baptism is also not a fail-safe guarantee of a person's belief, at

least it involves the participation (and hopefully, discernment, instruction and accountability) of God's community. For me, counting baptisms would be the best (and least biased) way of trying to quantify conversions.[285]

However, one might question whether such a task even needs to be undertaken by the church. In his book, *Beginning Well*, Gordon Smith challenges the "boundary approach" to evangelism, and calls for Christians to think of church in terms of a "centered set."[286] In other words, the status of a Christian should be defined by one's relationship to the Center (Christ) rather than by the crossing of some arbitrary boundary. With this in mind, the church can be freed from its fixation on defining boundaries; it can be focused on its task of pointing to, and moving towards, Christ.[287] The church can conceive of itself as a people who are on a journey – who have not only converted (turned to Jesus) but are "in process" of being transformed into Christ's image. Thus, the church can be a place where people can enter that process and be helped with the stage they are currently on. Rather than pushing people towards a point-in-time decision and then turning them loose, the church can create space for people to ask questions, relate to others, express their needs, encounter Christ, and discover how the gospel resonates with their particular story.

This perspective certainly resonates with my own research findings. When producing mere outward professions of faith becomes the main goal of the church, the result can be damaging and disastrous. When sociologists try to quantify faith by mere affiliation,[288] it loses

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[285] That being said, I am speaking from a "believers' baptism" tradition, where efforts are taken to ensure that the ordinance reflects a spiritual reality. The metric of baptism would certainly work differently among paedo-baptists.

[286] Smith, *Beginning Well,* 37-38.

[287] Ibid.

[288] Abby Day, *Believing in Belonging: Belief & Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

any transcendent meaning. When historians tell of the "Christianization of Europe" through state and sword,[289] it undermines any legitimate definitions of what Christianization really means. But when a church becomes involved in a person's story, it can serve as a communicator of the gospel, the context of conversion, a mediator of religious experience, and a "midwife" through whom new birth is experienced.[290] As I have reflected on the data collected in my interviews, I have observed this to be the case. At various points in each person's story, the people of God have been present to offer their influence, support, and words to address the person's needs and to help them along their way.

Using words from my own research findings, if the church can see itself as a *motivator*, *means*, and result of *conversion*, it can engage with people's needs at their various points of their journey. Rather than trying to *quantify* conversions by fixating on one point of the process, the church can engage in *customized* discipleship that meets them where they are at. For instance, from the demographic data and background stories of my twenty interviewees, it was clear that many adult converts endured major life challenges. While these could be seen as obstacles to faith, they could also be viewed as opportunities. If immigration, trauma and addiction provide reasons why a person is not yet a believer, they also offer points of resonance with the gospel and motivation for life transformation. In response to such data, a church with a similar context to mine might consider running an ESL Bible Study or a Recovery Program.

Likewise, from people's stories of their conversion and ongoing Christian life, one can gain a sense of their priorities – what becoming a Christian really meant for them. For those

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[289] Rodney Stark, *How the West Won: The Neglected Story of the Triumph of Modernity* (Wilmington, DE: Intercollegiate Studies Institute, 2014), 65.
[290] Smith, *Beginning Well, 34-36.*

seeking a place of belonging, they found loving church community; for those seeking conceptual coherence, they found the Source of truth; and for those looking to experience transformation, they found the One Who saves. While all three of these are important, one may resonate more with a person at a given point in their journey. This calls for a nimbleness and adaptability from Christians who hope to share their faith and foster its growth in the lives of others.

iii. A Missional Message

Building on the last two sections, it can be said that the church should strive to present its message "missionally." Now, some might wonder how important it really is to think about developing a message; as the popular expression[291] goes, "preach the gospel – and if necessary, use words." Some may view conversion as a product of social influence; others may attribute its occurrence to personal experience with God. According to my research, both are common and valid factors in the various stages of the process of conversion. Yet, as the data also demonstrates, everyone deals with Christianity conceptually, at some point. Even if people would say that they "belonged" before they "believed" everything, or that they were baptized before they began studying the Bible, they all formulated some unique conception of *how Christianity works*. In my twenty interviews, I saw that each person was able to articulate some sort of message that distilled or encapsulated their understanding of the Christian faith. Fascinatingly, these messages varied greatly – which should catch the church's attention.

In the first part of this section, I explained that any vocational minister or disciple of Christ is called to the "missionary task" of listening to stories. If we are to effectively reach people with the gospel and lead them toward conversion to Christ, it is imperative that we first

[291] Its source is still in question.

understand our context. That being said, it is undeniable that the foreordained plans of God, the simple message of Christ, and the work of the Holy Spirit can accomplish the conversion of an individual apart from any of our best efforts.[292] But, this is no excuse for any willful ignorance and preventable offenses by a preacher of the gospel. As Jesus modeled in His personal conversations and Paul modeled in his contextualized preaching, the gospel can be presented in unique ways for unique contexts. In his book, *Evangelism Now and Then*, Michael Green makes this comment about the Apostles' teaching:

> There was nothing rigid or unimaginative about their approach. They set out to discover the spiritual location of those to whom they spoke, and once they had assessed their need, they related Jesus to that. They were, as we must be, bridges: rooted in the Scriptures and also in the contemporary situation and the needs of the particular individual or group with whom they were dealing.[293]

Building on Michael Green's description of apostolic preaching,[294] I might describe the gospel as one unified story with diverse expressions, implications and applications. While holding to central truths about God and His actions, it can address the unique contexts of individual lives.

So, how can people's personal stories inform our gospel preaching today? I will share a few recommendations:

1. "*Never waste a good crisis"* – this quote by Winston Churchill can apply nicely to Christian conversion when we learn from people's background stories. Often, life crises correspond with major turning points in their journey where they experience a resolution. *How can the gospel speak into and build on these moments?*

[292] See Acts 14:15-17, 1 Corinthians 1:18-31, Acts 10:44-48.
[293] Michael Green, *Evangelism Now and Then* (Leicester, England: IVP, 1979), 66.
[294] And much more material on this topic in the literature review.

2. *Inductive / discovery Bible study* – the Bible contains many messages, commands, stories, and illustrations. *Where are your "go-to" places? Why?* The twenty interviews uncovered a wide variety of "favorite verses" of these new converts, who related to characters, followed principles, and accepted promises. In his book *Unbelievable Gospel,* Jonathon K. Dodson identifies five main "gospel metaphors" within the Scriptures: justification, union with Christ, redemption, adoption, and new creation.[295] *Which Scriptures or gospel metaphors might best resonate with your audience?*
3. *Past, Present & Future* – given the wide variety of questions, needs, and crises faced by these new converts along their journey, it should not be surprising that their understanding of the Christian message would vary as well. One way to categorize their answers is to do it temporally: for some, the gospel related to their past; for others, it addressed their needs in the present; and for others, it spoke about their future. The story of Jesus and the message of the cross offers forgiveness and freedom, peace and purpose, hope and direction to all who believe. *What do your listeners need to hear?*

When a Christian is equipped with knowledge of their listener's story, with a breadth of Biblical knowledge, and with awareness of the gospel's many applications, their evangelism can work with a sort of fluency – able to pivot one's focus and respond to needs that arise.

c. Future Areas of Research Arising

While the research for this project has been deep, it has not been very broad. The natural limitations of a single researcher preclude a project like this from reaching too far and

[295] Dodson, *Unbelievable Gospel*, 14.

wide. Moreover, for the data to carry much weight, it was necessary to draw from a very localized and specific sample group. By only interviewing people who had been recently baptized in evangelical churches in Victoria, I was able to add some "intensity" to my data, enabling me to have "more to say about less." As a result, I hope to have produced a resource that will be particularly helpful to current ministers in the Victoria region – and, to a lesser extent, ministers who serve in roughly comparable contexts.

That being said, the process that I have undertaken is certainly *repeatable*:

1. A researcher in *another city* could perform a parallel study and then compare their data to mine.
2. A researcher in my own city could repeat this study *at a later date* in order to observe if any changes have transpired.
3. A researcher could add their own delimitations – by applying my methods to a specific denomination, ethnic group, gender, age bracket, or some other *group of particular interest* to them.
4. A researcher could *remove my delimitations* in order to learn about the conversion of minors, those who may have considered their childhood baptism to be sufficient, or those who were baptized more than five years ago.
5. A researcher could perform a *longitudinal* study, interviewing people before conversion, at the point of baptism, and at some point afterward. This could provide clearer data on the process of conversion than a single recitation of one's story.

Alternatively, a researcher could attempt to build on my work, using the themes and categories that emerged from my data to *survey a wider sample* of the population. I had

initially hoped to perform a quantitative study that would explore themes related to the gospel message and the character of Christian growth; but I learned that it would be preferable to establish questions and categories of thinking through inductive research before imposing my own ideas on others through a survey. Now that the first task has been completed, perhaps it can create an opportunity for quantitative follow-up studies:

1. Given the demographic diversity of the twenty new converts featured in my project, someone might like to collect similar data from a broader scope. First, based on the categories and themes which emerged from the demographic data of my interviewees, a person could craft a set of questions which offer a limited number of possible responses. This would produce fairly objective and quantifiable data. Then, with the geographical, temporal, and denominational parameters of my project removed, this survey could then be distributed far and wide.
2. Moreover, given the variety of needs, questions, concerns, and crises that were identified by the new converts, a survey could invite people to rank them in order of importance. With potential answers (content for questions) already identified by theses interviewees, these could be presented as options for others to prioritize.
3. Similarly, regarding the relative importance of social, conceptual, and experiential factors in conversion, people could be asked to give each a score between one and five, to indicate how these affected their own conversion. Or, they could be asked to put them in order of sequence, write them in a "Conversion Chart," or locate them on the Hilltop Analogy.
4. In addition, specific questions could be crafted to follow up on any point of interest from the data in this survey, such as, "*If you did not immigrate, do you think that you'd be a*

Christian today?" or, "*On a scale of one to five, rate the Bible's importance in your life at each of the three stages on the Hilltop Analogy*" or, "*Did you experience any dreams, visions or miracles prior to conversion? If so, how crucial were they in your journey?*"

5. Finally, a survey with multiple such questions could be explored for correlations. For example, the relative importance of the Bible in a person's life (scale from one to five) could be compared to their preferred gospel metaphor or preferred adjective used to describe God. Likewise, a person's impression of church before conversion (scale from one to five) could be compared to their involvement in small groups, ministries, or Sunday services afterward.

d. Final Remarks

I might say that this project began in 2010, just over fourteen years ago – with an itch that needed to be scratched. In my final year of seminary,[296] and with a dream of planting a church, I encountered a significant roadblock that was in the way of accomplishing my dream. My church planting assessor and I had very different understandings of the process of conversion. This ultimately proved to be devastating for me, as he considered my views to be unacceptable. To be honest, my views were not completely formed on that topic, and I was the first to admit that I was in need of mentoring. But, at the same time, the assessor's simplistic views did not seem to line up with my own limited knowledge and experience in life, to that point.

[296] Or so I thought…I was in the final semester of my Masters of Divinity.

From there I began my research – informal and subconscious, at first. But as I continued to serve as pastor in one church and then another, conversions happened – people were baptized, and believers became church members. And in each of these instances, the individual shared a testimony – outlining how they became a Christian, and what difference that had made in their lives. In all, over the course of my first nine years of pastoring, I probably heard fifty such testimonies. And they began to have a cumulative effect on me: as I heard such a diverse collection of people expressing their stories of faith, I began to notice how multi-faceted the gospel really is. Some people told of Jesus setting them free from addiction; others spoke of Jesus as the true revelation of the God Who they previously misunderstood; still others described Jesus as their Teacher Who gives them direction and purpose. In all cases, these people believed that Jesus was the Son of God Who died for their sins and rose again; yet, in each case, this reality was applied differently to their own personal context.

Reflecting on his own experience in the church, Gordon T. Smith observed,

> "the popular model of conversion that is preached from the pulpits, sung in hymns and assumed in Sunday school classes is not their own…the language of the pulpit and of gospel songs do not reflect their experience. They did not become Christians instantly and dramatically."[297]

This assessment certainly describes my own experience – as a Christian growing up in the church, and as a young minister being evaluated as a church planter. People's portrayals of conversion did perfectly not line up with my own experience and observations. Moreover, expressions of the gospel did not match what new believers shared in their testimonies.

As I started to notice these things, I also began this Doctoral Program at ACTS Seminaries. Certain assignments provided me with opportunities to look into topics like

[297] Smith, *Beginning Well*, 99.

atonement theory and gospel contextualization – and that research ultimately contributed to this project as well. Finally, when it was time to set this project in motion, it was 2021. Here I was, preparing to graduate again – except, this time, I had twenty more baptisms under my belt. At that time, I thought that I knew enough to create a survey with which I could produce some definitive answers on my topic of interest.

However, I was advised to test my assumptions by first broadening my pool of data. Before I could create a survey based on what I had learned from my own studies and experiences, I should first hear from others who were outside of my own context. Moreover, by collecting data through interviews rather than surveys, I could allow new converts to thoroughly and unhurriedly share about their personal experiences in their own terms. This data, in turn, could then be mined for insights, categorized, compared, and shared for the benefit of others.

Further expansion was to come. Though the initial plan was to conduct ten shorter interviews, a review of my project proposal resulted in a doubling of this number and a lengthening of the interviews. What began as an exercise that could be achieved by picking low-hanging fruit in my immediate circle had now become a task that would challenge me to go out on a limb and reach further afield. Similarly, the initial review of my proposal revealed that my Biblical, Theological and Missiological research was an insufficient base from which I could explore this topic. I would also need to delve into the social sciences, toward the end of understanding the process of conversion from the perspective of the recipient. In addition, I would need to learn about the best practices of interviewing, methods of quantitative research, and computer programs for processing data. Thus began a four-year journey of completing this project.

Looking back, I am thankful for the rigor of this experience. In the end, this project was not just an attempt at self-justification or a platform from which I could express my preconceived views. Rather, it offered a pathway to process my life experience, to test my observations, to explore topics of interest, and share what I have learned. The Literature Review greatly broadened my understanding of the gospel and conversion, and the Interviews deepened my appreciation for the process undertaken by people who come to faith as adults. None of this personal growth would have happened if it were not for the rigorous requirements and helpful guidance of those who have overseen this project.

Looking at what I have written, it seems that this research process has unearthed and packaged a tremendous resource. While recent and historical testimonies of conversion may be commonplace, this project has gathered a number of recent accounts from a particular context. Long, open-ended interviews have been conducted – and their contents have been processed, codified, categorized, visually represented, and reflected upon. While any conclusions I have drawn may be preliminary in nature and limited in scope, they at least identify salient themes and raise questions that should be relevant for future studies. For instance, the data has highlighted the diversity of background experiences which motivate conversion, the variety of means involved in the process, and the myriad results that flow from newfound faith.

Looking ahead, I hope to continually draw from the insights gained from this work. In my preaching, I hope to represent the gospel in its fullness, with its multi-faceted applications. In my personal interactions, I hope to maintain the practice of listening well – not ceasing to learn from the stories of others. In my writing, I hope to produce a shareable resource that would concisely express my findings to a broader audience – challenging them to reconsider

how evangelism and conversion happen. And with any teaching opportunities, I would love to guide people through a learning process similar to my own.

Ultimately, I wish for this work to contribute to the *equipping* of the church for its mission. Toward this end, I also hope that this research will demonstrate the *value of listening*. Yet, if this project raises more questions than it answers, I will also be grateful for that – and the continued journey of exploration and discovery that will follow this small step.

6. Appendices

a. *HREB Approval Letter*

TRINITY WESTERN UNIVERSITY

Human Research Ethics Board - Trinity Western University

Final Project Report

HREB File No.: _____

Principal/Co-Investigator: Tim Stewart **Phone:** 250-884-8869

Department: Doctor of Ministry **Email:** tim.stewart@mytwu.ca

Title of Project: An investigation into the Process of Conversion of a Select Sample of New Christians in the Greater Victoria Region during the period of 2017-2022

You are: ☐ Faculty ☐ Staff ☐ Undergraduate Student ☒ Graduate Student ☐ Research Fellow

If you are a student/research fellow:

Name of Supervisor: Dr. Jeff Kuhn **Phone:** 604-869-6492 ext.

Department: Doctor of Ministry **Email:** jeff@gbhope.com

For *Minimal Risk* studies:

☒ There were no problems encountered in interactions with human participants and/or other research materials, including issues related to confidentiality in the reanalysis of existing data.

☐ There were some problems encountered.
(Attach a detailed description of the nature of the problems, how they were dealt with, and the final outcomes.)

For *Above Minimal Risk* studies:
Provide a maximum one-page description of how the study was conducted with an emphasis on any problems that were encountered. Attach a detailed description of the nature of the problems, how they were dealt with, and the final outcomes.

SIGNATURES

DISCLAIMER: By typing your name below, you are signing this application electronically. You agree that your electronic signature on this application is equivalent to your manual signature.

Signatures indicate that this document and all supporting materials have been reviewed and that they are, to the best of your knowledge, an accurate account of the project.

Principal/Co-Investigator — Date: March 14, 2025

Student/Research Fellow's Supervisor — Date: March 16, 2025

FOR HREB USE ONLY

William Badke
HREB Chair or alternate — Date of approval: March 17, 2025

Revised February 2021

Submission instructions are found on the "Submit HREB Application" page of the HREB website at https://www.twu.ca/research/research-services/human-research-ethics/submit-hreb-application.

b. Interview Guide:

Preliminary Questions:

1. For my research project, I'm seeking to collect stories of adults who have recently converted to Christianity and been baptized in evangelical churches.
2. In this interview, I'm hoping to learn about how and why this happened for you. I want the answers to be your own, in your own words. We will have about 60-90 minutes.
3. Please let me know if any of my questions ever feel confusing, if they make unnecessary assumptions, or if they are limiting your potential responses.
4. For the purposes of my research, I will need to record and transcribe our interview, but the contents will not be shared publicly. *May I have your permission?*

Introduction:

1. *Tell me about yourself…*
2. Name, gender, age, country of birth
3. Occupation and family
4. Former faith or religious status
5. Date of baptism and current church affiliation
6. *If someone else were to introduce you, what'd they say?*

Topic 1: Approaching Conversion

1. What image or adjective would you use to describe your life before conversion?
2. What was important to you? How would you describe your sense of identity/purpose?
3. Who were some major influences in your life? Why
4. Were there any challenges, struggles, needs, or questions in your life?
5. Would you say that you were actively seeking for anything? What? How?
6. Did you have any religious background or opinions about God, Jesus & the church?

Topic 2: The Context of Conversion

1. How did you become familiar with Christianity? Were there any major influences?
2. What was your understanding of the Christian faith? What did you hear, see, perceive?
3. When did Christianity first become appealing to you? Why?
4. What was happening in your life at that time? What were you feeling or thinking?
5. Tell me about your church – how did you connect to it, and why?
6. Is there a Bible verse or story that became particularly significant to you? Why?

Topic 3: Reflecting on Conversion

1. Looking back on your conversion, how would you describe what happened?
2. What did you come to believe? What changed for you?
3. Tell me about your decision to get baptized – what did it mean to you then?
4. What image or adjective would you use to describe your life now?
5. What image or adjective would you use to describe God? Jesus? The church?
6. In your own words, what is Christianity all about? Does it have a main message?

c. Interview Permission Form

Research Project Title:

"An Investigation into the Process of Conversion of a Select Sample of New Christians in the Greater Victoria region in the Period of 2017-2022."

Research Investigator: Tim Stewart

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project. We do not anticipate any risks associated with your participation, but in order to fulfil ethical procedures for academic research, we must explain the procedure and obtain your explicit agreement. Please read the following and sign at the bottom if you agree.

- The interview will be 60-90 minutes long
- You are free to answer, not answer, or seek clarification on any question
- The interview will be recorded and a transcript will be produced
- Access to the interview transcript will be limited to the researcher and a select few research assistants

Options for Participants: Please check any that apply.

Yes	No	
		I wish to review the transcript before it is analyzed by the researcher
		I wish to have the recording destroyed after the transcript is produced
		I agree to be quoted directly and have my quotes published in the project
		Any quote, reference to, or summary of my words should be anonymized or a pseudonym should be used

By signing this form, I agree that:

- I have read this information sheet.
- I am voluntarily taking part in this project and can stop the interview at any time.
- I have fully expressed how I wish my transcript to be used in this project.
- I do not expect to receive any benefit or payment for my participation.
- I have had the opportunity to ask the researcher any questions I have, and I understand that I will be free to contact the researcher in the future about any future questions.

Participant's printed name:

Participant's Signature: Date:

Researcher's Signature: Date:

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