



Ecclesial Belonging as Salvific Praxis: Toward a Concrete Methodist Ecclesiology

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Abstract: If the church may be described as an ‘actual communal expression of salvation,’ how do ordinary Methodists experience and articulate the significance of belonging? This paper explores the salvific dimension of belonging through a case study of a Methodist church in Cornwall, UK. Drawing on a practical theological reading of Philippians and in dialogue with Tom Greggs’ *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, I argue that belonging is a concrete ecclesiological concept which serves as a vital locus of salvation in the world today.

Keywords: *practical theology • methodist ecclesiology • individualism • loneliness • affective symbols*

Glad Tidings of Salvation...

For Protestantism¹, in a society “in which the individual rules supreme and in which there is atomisation of community,” giving a compelling account for “the church as a community with salvific purpose” becomes ever more challenging.² Most theological discourses of salvation contain at least three core movements, as Wayne Morris describes: (1) “description of the state from which it is understood salvation is necessary”; (2) “the process by which salvation is realised” (including an account of divine and human action); and (3) “an articulation of what the final state of salvation will be like.”³ The first section of this paper will address the first movement, defining the problem of loneliness in an individualistic society. The rest of this paper articulates how the process of belonging to the church, ecclesial belonging, may be conceptualised as salvific. The third movement, as the eschatological fulfilment of the previous dimension, shall be touched upon briefly by way of conclusion.

... In and Age of Loneliness

First, what is the particular state of Western societies to which Wesleyan and Methodist theologies of salvation may offer a response? We live in a time that has been variously described as the “age of loneliness”⁴ and the “age of isolation.”⁵ These are distinct but related concepts. Kim Samuel distinguishes two components of this problem: (1) loneliness, understood as “subjective, individual experience”; and (2), social isolation, understood as a structural

¹ With thanks to the Practical Theology working group at the Fifteenth Oxford Institute of Methodist Theological Studies, 2024. The theme of the institute, to which this paper was addressed, was ‘The World is My Parish: Glad Tidings of Salvation in an Age of Crisis.’

² Tom Greggs, *Dogmatic Ecclesiology: The Priestly Catholicity of the Church*, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), xxvii–xxviii.

³ Wayne Morris, *Salvation as Praxis: A Practical Theology of Salvation for a Multi-faith World* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 9; for a four-part structure see Clive Marsh, *A Cultural Theology of Salvation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 215–219.

⁴ Adam Smiley Poswolsky, *Friendship and the Age of Loneliness* (Philadelphia: Running Press, 2021).

⁵ Kim Samuel, *On Belonging: Finding Connection in an Age of Isolation* (New York: Abrams Press, 2022).

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problem in which “socioeconomic, political and cultural” processes isolate people from “systems that support belonging.”⁶ This helpfully distinguishes the experience of loneliness from the state of being alone. Samuel regards loneliness and social isolation as at the opposite end of a “continuum” with belonging. However, one might question whether loneliness is properly conceptualised as the opposite of belonging. For example, Lim et al. argue that it is possible to experience loneliness in the context of social connection. Instead, they propose that belonging and loneliness, rather than sitting on a single continuum, are better framed using a “dual continuum.”⁷ This allows for the experience of feeling “alone in the crowd.”⁸ That is, the presence of social connection itself is not sufficient as there are individual differences in the need to belong.⁹ In their highly influential article, Roy Baumeister and Mark Leary defined belonging as a fundamental human motivation. They describe the need to belong as “a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships.”¹⁰ Therefore, loneliness is distinct from the state of aloneness and is related to, but not equivalent with, the need to belong. Importantly, the determining factor is not only the quantity of social connections one maintains, but the *quality* and significance of these connections.

The experience of loneliness has been described as “one of the most widespread forms of human suffering and disease in late-modern societies.”¹¹ Though the modern era was characterised by “enhanced social interconnectivity,” Bianca Fox observes that “loneliness, isolation, anxiety and depression are on the rise.”¹² It has been observed that the social forces of modernity tend toward “the abandonment of kinship and proximity ties, favouring the disembedding of time and space.”¹³ A prominent social force to consider in this regard is individualism. Steve Wilkens and Mark Sanford define this as the “belief that the individual is the primary reality and that our understanding of the universe and lifestyle should be centred in oneself.”¹⁴ Charles Taylor describes the “dark side of individualism” which “both flattens and narrows our lives, makes them poorer in meaning, and less concerned with others or society.”¹⁵ This is coupled with what Taylor terms the “inward turn,” the belief that regards one’s inner life of feelings and intuitions as a source of identity and morality, from which individuals may define a way of being in the world (an ethic) and a purpose in life (telos).¹⁶ Thus, individualism tends toward isolating the individual from both meaningful connection by locating meaning primarily within the self.

From this social milieu has emerged the phenomenon of expressive individualism, a term first coined by Robert Bellah et al. in 1985. This is the propensity for the individual to regard all commitments “as enhancements of the sense of individual well-being rather than as moral imperatives.”¹⁷ The societal outworking of this is seen in the promotion of “individual freedom, happiness, self-definition, and self-expression”¹⁸ as the highest good. This amounts to a worldview, a “whole way of life,”¹⁹ in which other people are instrumentalised for the purpose of bolstering one’s own sense of identity and well-being. Personal authenticity is found in the “public performance” and affirmation of one’s “inward desires.”²⁰ Whilst expressive individualism rightly emphasises the value of the individual and of subjective ‘inward’ experience, there are many underlying problems. Carl Trueman cautions that expressive

⁶ Samuel, *On Belonging*, 25.

⁷ Michelle H. Lim, Kelly-Ann Allen, Michael J. Furlong, Heather Craig, and Doug C. Smith, ‘Introducing a Dual Continuum Model of Belonging and Loneliness,’ *Australian Journal of Psychology* 73, no. 1 (2021): 82.

⁸ John T. Cacioppa, James H. Fowler and Nicholas A. Christakis, ‘Alone in the Crowd: The structure and spread of loneliness in a large social network,’ *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97, no. 6 (2009): 977-991.

⁹ Mark R. Leary and Ashley Batts Allen, ‘Belonging Motivation: Establishing, maintaining, and repairing relational value,’ in David Dunning (ed.), *Social Motivation* (New York: Psychology Press, 2011), 37.

¹⁰ Roy F. Baumeister and Mark R. Leary, ‘The need to belong: Desire for interpersonal attachments as a fundamental human motivation,’ *Psychological Bulletin* 117, no. 3 (1995): 497.

¹¹ Leif Gunnar Engedal, ‘Loneliness,’ in *Dictionary of Christian Spirituality*, edited by Glen G. Scorgie (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), 584.

¹² Bianca Fox, ‘An Introduction to Emotions and Loneliness in a Networked Society,’ in Bianca Fox (ed.), *Emotions and Loneliness in a Networked Society* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 4.

¹³ Emiliana De Blasio and Donatella Selva, ‘Emotions in the Public Sphere: Networked Solidarity, Technology and Social Ties,’ in Bianca Fox (ed.), *Emotions and Loneliness in a Networked Society* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 14.

¹⁴ Steve Wilkens and Mark L. Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews: Eight cultural stories that shape our lives* (Grand Rapids: IVP Academic, 2009), 27.

¹⁵ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018), 4.

¹⁶ See Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The making of the modern identity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989), 111.

¹⁷ Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, 3rd edition (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 32.

¹⁸ Mark Sayers, *Disappearing Church: From cultural relevance to gospel resilience* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2016), 17.

¹⁹ Michael Haralambos and Martin Holborn, *Sociology Themes and Perspectives*, 7th ed. (London: Collins, 2008), 664.

²⁰ Carl Trueman, *The Rise and Triumph of the Modern Self* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 47.

individualism is built on the “untethering of what it means to be human from any kind of metaphysical framework.”²¹ Within the framework of this worldview, “family, community and society,” and I would add church, are “at best, secondary considerations.”²² Yet, to congregate, whether onsite or online (that is, digitally mediated), necessarily requires emplacement within some form of embodied community. Thus, the impulse to belong to the local “body” of Christian believers and simultaneously a “worldwide ecclesia”²³ is one that stands squarely against the individualist tide in modern Western societies.

Empirical Insights into Ecclesial Belonging in a Methodist Context

Having offered a preliminary definition of the problem, I now consider how ecclesial belonging might be a component of the glad tidings of salvation. My interest in how people are integrated into and formed within congregations has motivated me to undertake my own empirical research. My current doctoral studies are exploring the question: What does it mean to belong to a Methodist church in Cornwall? Belonging is an extremely elastic concept, as Sarah Wright describes:

“It is at once a feeling, a sense and a set of practices. It can refer to a place – ‘a place to belong’ – yet can also exist despite the absence of any specific site at all [...] it is found in relationships to humans and non-humans and things and ideas.”²⁴

This inherent flexibility makes ‘belonging’ a particularly useful conceptual lens as it operates within the “everyday”²⁵ discourse of the groups I am interested in.

Though not an overtly theological or biblical term, the concept of belonging is a salient means of exploring ordinary Methodist theology. Jeff Astley describes ordinary theology as “the theological beliefs and processes of believing that find expression in the God-talk of those believers who have received no scholarly theological education.”²⁶ This approach to identifying a British Methodist ecclesiology is distinct from Angela Shier-Jones’ account. Shier-Jones argues that the “place to find British Methodist theology is in a British Methodist *kerygma*.”²⁷ Whilst this *kerygma*, or proclamation, is given an expansive definition,²⁸ Shier-Jones’ analysis centres on the authorised liturgies and adopted reports and statements of the Methodist conference.²⁹ Whilst I regard this as an insightful means of accessing the ‘ecclesial discourse’³⁰ of the Methodist Church, conference approved documents are not necessarily expressive of ordinary Methodist theology; rather, I believe the place to find ordinary British Methodist theology is in the ‘narratives, symbols and praxis’³¹ of ordinary British Methodists. Here, praxis denotes the ‘theological and value-laden actions, habits and practices’³² of participants. Thus, this study was concerned particularly with the symbolic and narrative meanings associated with the praxis of belonging.³³

The approach of this study via participants’ ordinary theology resonates with the present concern to examine the salvific implications of belonging. This is because, despite its non-systematic and at times contradictory nature, ordinary theology incorporates the beliefs and ways of believing, that people “find to be salvific – healing, saving,

²¹ Trueman, *The Rise*, 47.

²² Wilkens and Sanford, *Hidden Worldviews*, 27.

²³ N. T. Wright, *Paul and His Recent Interpreters* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), 175.

²⁴ Sarah Wright, ‘More-than-human, emergent belongings: A weak theory approach,’ *Progress in Human Geography* 39, no.4 (2015): 391-411 (391).

²⁵ Nancy T. Ammerman, *Everyday Religion: Observing Modern Religious Lives* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

²⁶ Jeff Astley, *Ordinary Theology: Looking Listening and Learning in Theology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2002), 55-58.

²⁷ More generally, the term “kerygma” refers to the proclamation of the Christian gospel. Angela Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress: Methodists Doing Theology* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2005), 5.

²⁸ Shier-Jones, *A Work*, 5-12.

²⁹ Angela Shier-Jones, ‘Conferring as Theological Method,’ in Clive Marsh, Brian Beck, Angela Shier-Jones and Helen Wareing (eds.), *Unmasking Methodist Theology* (London: Continuum, 2004), 93.

³⁰ Mark J. Cartledge, *Testimony in the Spirit: Rescripting Ordinary Pentecostal Theology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 20.

³¹ Mark J. Cartledge, *Practical Theology: Charismatic and Empirical Perspectives* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2003), 24.

³² Cartledge, *Practical Theology*, 17.

³³ By the ‘praxis of belonging’ I mean physical participation as opposed to understanding ‘belonging’ as identifying with a particular group of people without any form of practical interaction.

making them whole.”³⁴ As Theodore Runyon explains, “Wesley recognises that many who only inadequately can express their faith in the proper dogmatic terms nevertheless live in constant fellowship with their Creator.”³⁵ Therefore, I undertook case study research of a Methodist congregation in Cornwall.³⁶ The case study data comprised three sources of evidence: participant observation within worship services and other groups and events (November 2021 to August 2022);³⁷ focus group and semi-structured interviews involving a total of eighty participants; and finally, a range of documents produced by and for the congregation.³⁸ This allowed for the triangulation of data sources whereby themes were verified and elaborated from multiple sources. The interview participants included 32 men (40%) and 48 women (60%). The age range for the whole group was 59% over 60 years (the largest subgroup was 70-79 at 36%), 25% between 50-59 years, and 16% under 50 years. The majority of participants were married (86%). The church background of the group was exclusively Methodist for the majority (86%), with relatively few (14%) also having experience of other ecclesial traditions. Despite this, one quarter of participants have been at the case study church for under five years and nearly one fifth (18%) have been attending for over forty years. Many participants (76%) attend a Sunday Service every week, and just over half (53%) participate in a midweek group on a weekly basis.

Affective Theological Symbols of Belonging

How, then, did participants describe the praxis of belonging? Participants described a variety of practices including: their entry into the church (including rites such as baptism and membership classes), the formation of close companion friendships, and serving within one or more teams within the church and participation in worship services. Similarly, a range of narratives were used to frame participation. A variety of appeals were made to Wesleyan and Methodist popular narratives to articulate the core values of belonging to the church. However, many found the *significance* of belonging itself more difficult to articulate. In bringing the meaning of belonging to expression, many reached for one or more affective symbols including: family, home, acceptance, peace, and joy. A minority also used the concept of ‘connexion’ in an analogous manner to describe belonging.³⁹ Each of these symbols were seen in some way to be expressive of the love of God. Some participants configured these symbols explicitly in relation to faith in Jesus and only two in relation to the Holy Spirit. It is important to note that participants would readily combine these symbols, such as Amy⁴⁰ who said: “I’ve always been accepted [...] it’s a sense of family, I suppose. It’s something that is unique.” It is these affective symbols which I shall examine further.

At first glance these affective symbols are not explicitly theological, beyond a general appeal to the love of God underpinning them. This is not entirely surprising. Charles Taylor contrasts how it was “virtually impossible not to believe in God” in Europe in the 16th century, yet at the turn of the millennium many found it “not only easy, but even inescapable.”⁴¹ The Wesleyan tradition, which Campbell states is itself is a “construction from the 1970s,”⁴² traces its origins to the middle of this period of turbulent social and cultural change. Campbell describes a tradition as a particular sub-culture, a distinctive “nexus of beliefs, practices and narratives.”⁴³ This sub-culture represents the dynamic transmission and interplay of “formal and popular belief”⁴⁴ over time. However, religious sub-cultures, including those of Wesleyan communities, have been under threat. Many have identified how, particularly since the 1960s in Britain, there has been a

³⁴ Jeff Astley, ‘The Analysis, Investigation and Application of Ordinary Theology,’ in Jeff Astley and Leslie J. Francis (eds.), *Exploring Ordinary Theology: Everyday Christian Believing and the Church* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2013), 1-12 (2).

³⁵ Theodore Runyon, *The New Creation: John Wesley’s Theology Today* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 148.

³⁶ Robert K. Yin, *Case Study Research and Applications: Design and Methods*, 6th edition (London: SAGE, 2018).

³⁷ Sunday gatherings included two consecutive worship services, a contemporary and a ‘traditional Methodist’ service. Groups and events included online Bible studies, a lunch club, church café and the annual general meeting.

³⁸ Amongst these documents are the church vision flyer, notices, welcome pack, bible study handouts, issues of ‘Connexion’ magazine from 2021/22 and a selection of denominational literature and flyers.

³⁹ See Nicola V. Price-Tebbutt, ‘Connexionism in Flux: In British Methodist Context,’ in Sarah Heaner Lancaster (ed.), *Thy Grace Restore, Thy Work Revive: Revival, Reform, and Revolution in Global Methodism* (Nashville: Wesley’s Foundry Books, 2022), 147-159.

⁴⁰ Pseudonyms have been used for all participants.

⁴¹ Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), 25.

⁴² Ted A. Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs: Formal and Popular Expressions of the Core Beliefs of Wesleyan Communities* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010), 263.

⁴³ Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs*, 253.

⁴⁴ Campbell, *Wesleyan Beliefs*, 10-14.

“serious weakening of the process by which the great majority of children were socialised into membership of a Christian society and in particular were given a confessional identity and a basic knowledge of Christian beliefs and practices.”⁴⁵

This is notable in the context of the present case study in Cornwall, which has a strong history of Methodism,⁴⁶ such that Cornish and Methodist identities have to some extent become intertwined.⁴⁷ As a result, the ‘God-talk’ of these communities “is no longer so straightforward – at least in the public world,” though I would add this also is true “inside the household of faith”⁴⁸ to a certain extent. The “de-traditionalization” and “de-territorialisation of the sense of belonging”⁴⁹ has meant that cultural and religious identities, including those in the Wesleyan and Methodist traditions, which have endured over generations in particular geographic areas, have now fragmented.

Breaking out from the Immanent Frame

This fragmentation has discursive as well as social implications. James Smith describes late modernity as propagating “a vision of life in which anything beyond the immanent is eclipsed.”⁵⁰ The so-called, immanent frame, is described as

“a constructed social space that frames our lives entirely within a natural (rather than supernatural) order. It is the circumscribed space of the modern social imaginary that precludes transcendence.”⁵¹

Therefore, one cannot typically expect the use of classic systematic loci when looking for the ‘theological’ within ordinary accounts of belonging. However, participants offered clues as to how their God-talk was implicated in these symbols of belonging. By clues, I have in mind something akin to Peter Berger’s notion of signals of transcendence. Berger defines these as “phenomena that are to be found within the domain of our ‘natural’ reality but that appear to point beyond that reality.”⁵² I regard the use of symbols of family, home, acceptance, peace, and joy as such phenomena. Os Guinness, a student of Berger, writes that signals of transcendence spur “a desire to search for *something* that is missing, that toward which the experience is hinting.”⁵³ With regard to these symbols, they point beyond themselves to a reality greater than the symbol itself. A particularly powerful example came in one of the focus groups, in which Lesley shared the experience of becoming a member of the church. She described being invited to the front during the service:

“I physically, my entire body shook with effect and emotion that I was being accepted by God as not being outcast, lost, not worthy of life, or anything. And it was that total acceptance that he scooped me up and placed me in this church, where I felt that I was a worthy child of God [...] I literally shook, my whole being shook. And I know that God is here because it’s happened before [...] I’ll be crying and I’ve got no idea, but to me, that’s because He’s come down and He’s landed right in here. He’s coming right out from inside me [...] it’s more about me being accepted by God and being accepted into the family, not necessarily who stood and watched, because actually I must admit I was quite embarrassed at the time. It’s not about signing a piece of paper and saying I’ll come every week and give it all because actually I can’t”.

⁴⁵ Hugh McLoed, *The Religious Crisis of the 1960s* (Oxford: Oxford University press, 2007), 2.

⁴⁶ John Wesley first preached in Cornwall in 1743 and visited a total of 32 times over his life. By the 19th century, Cornwall had a high proportion of Methodist adherents with chapels becoming central to both religious and social life. John C. C. Probert, ‘Can a Study of History Help the Recovery of Cornish Methodism?’ *The Journal of the Cornish Methodist Historical Association* 11, no. 1 (2009): 12-19.

⁴⁷ Kayleigh Milden, “Are you Church or Chapel?” Perceptions of Spatial and Spiritual Identity within Cornish Methodism,’ in Philip Payton (ed.), *Cornish Studies*, vol. 12 (University of Exeter Press, 2004), 144-165 (163); Joanie Willett, ‘Cornish Identity: Vague Notion or Social Fact?’ in Philip Payton, *Cornish Studies*, vol. 16 (University of Exeter Press, 2008), 183-205 (198).

⁴⁸ Helen Cameron et al., *Talking About God in Practice* (London: SCM, 2010), 12.

⁴⁹ Giuseppa Giordan and Enzo Pace, ‘Introduction,’ in Giuseppa Giordan and Enzo Pace (eds.), *Mapping Religion and Spirituality in a Postsecular World*, Religion and Social Order 22 (Leiden: Brill, 2022), 1.

⁵⁰ James K. A. Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular: Reading Charles Taylor* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), 20.

⁵¹ Smith, *How (Not) to be Secular*, 159.

⁵² Peter L. Berger, *A Rumour of Angels: Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural* (New York: Anchor Books, 1969), 52-53.

⁵³ Os Guinness, *Signals of Transcendence: Listening to the Promptings of Life* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2023), 3.

It was a privilege to listen to Lesley's testimony in the context of the focus group. In light of the wider argument of this paper, this testimony illuminates seven aspects of how affective theological symbols are used to account for ecclesial belonging.

First, Lesley's account illustrates how these symbols are *affective*. Robert Roberts defines emotions as "concern-based construals," that is perceptions of situations which are "coloured" in value.⁵⁴ He then defines an affect as "the way the concern-based construal *feels* to the person experiencing the emotion."⁵⁵ In this case, Lesley wrestled with the threat of being seen as an "outcast" (the concern). In the situation of the membership service, she perceived (construed) a deep sense of acceptance originating from God. This concern-based construal was given 'epistemic value' as Lesley felt (affectively) the reality of her belonging in a manner that surpassed a merely cognitive apprehension of her status as a member of the church ("signing a piece of paper").

Second, a striking feature of Lesley's account is how it is thoroughly *embodied*:⁵⁶ "my entire body shook," "my whole being shook," "I'll be crying." Lesley's body was integral to the experience. Roberts downplays the embodied dimension, writing "I don't think bodily sensations are pleasant or unpleasant enough to explain the intense positive affect of emotions like joy."⁵⁷ However, this underplays the role of the body as a site of theological knowing. As Helen Cameron et al. write, "words and actions do not sit side-by-side; they co-inhere"⁵⁸ such that Christian practices (including Lesley's confirmation and reception into the membership) are themselves "bearers of embodied theology."⁵⁹ It has been observed that Wesleyan theology more broadly has tended to downplay the role of the body.⁶⁰ However, Randy Maddox has argued that Wesley's *Primitive Physick* and efforts to provide clinics for medical treatment are aspects of his wider longing "to see the anticipation of God's salvific commitment to the flourishing of life" which involves nurturing "not only our souls but our bodies in this life."⁶¹ Therefore, a way forward might be to argue, with Lodahl, that rather than being Wesleyan in content, a renewed appreciation of embodiment might instead be found through a holistic Wesleyan approach to salvation (see point six).⁶²

Third, the *social* context of this being a Methodist membership service is significant. Gregory Clapper writes that theological affections "require a society, a community, for both their formation and expression. The church conveys the story of God's action and provides the liturgical means" – in this case, the membership service⁶³ – "for forming the affections that the story engenders."⁶⁴ Lesley's experience took place whilst becoming visible amidst the Christian congregation. Hence, the awareness which prompted Lesley to feel "quite embarrassed." However, she clarifies that it was not (primarily) the outward signs of commitment ("saying I'll come every week and give it all because actually I can't"),⁶⁵ but the experience of God's acceptance that was decisive.

Fourth, Lesley's account testified to *divine action* which was affectively mediated through the body within the social context. Though this account is largely theistic rather than Trinitarian, there is a nascent sense of God as Father in Lesley's self-description as "a worthy *child of God*." In determining a response to a claim such as this, William Abraham's reflections on inter-Christian cooperation offers a helpful comparison. He writes that we should

⁵⁴ Robert C. Roberts, *Emotions in the Moral Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 46-47.

⁵⁵ Roberts, *Emotions*, 48.

⁵⁶ Zoë Bennett, Elaine Graham, Stephen Pattison and Heather Walton, *Invitation to Research in Practical Theology* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018), 143-164.

⁵⁷ Roberts, *Emotions*, 48.

⁵⁸ Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 14.

⁵⁹ Cameron et al., *Talking About God*, 56.

⁶⁰ John Wesley 'is not of much particular help with the questions that contemporary philosophers within the Wesleyan tradition might want to engage regarding the significance of the body' Michael Lodahl, 'Was There Room in Wesley's Anthropology for Anybody, Particularly that of the Lowly Jesus?' in John Thomas Brittingham and Christina M. Smerick, *This is My Body: Philosophical Reflections on Embodiment in a Wesleyan Spirit* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock, 2016), 26.

⁶¹ Randy Maddox, 'Salvation as Flourishing for the Whole Creation,' in Dean G. Smith and Rob A. Fringer (ed.), *Wesleyan Perspectives on Human Flourishing* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2021), 1-23 (16).

⁶² Lodahl, 'Was There Room,' 32; see also, 'embodying God's reign' in Howard A. Synder and Joel Scandrett, *Salvation Means Creation Healed: The Ecology of Sin and Grace* (Eugene: Cascade, 2011), 141-144.

⁶³ Trustees for the Methodist Church Purposes, *The Methodist Worship Book* (London: Methodist Publishing, 1999), 97-102.

⁶⁴ Gregory S. Clapper, *The Renewal of the Heart is the Mission of the Church: Wesley's Heart Religion in the Twenty-First Century* (Eugene: Cascade, 2010), 88.

⁶⁵ Robin Gill has argued that during the twentieth century, there emerged a 'widening gap' between official membership rolls and communion attendance. See *The 'Empty' Church Revisited*, Explorations in Practical, Pastoral and Empirical Theology (Farnham: Ashgate, 2003), 14.

act with a “hermeneutic of generosity,” wherein we “take the claims of others” seriously and “look for the work of the Holy Spirit” in their midst.⁶⁶ By analogy, taking Lesley’s claim to divine action seriously involves an interpretive step, which leads to the next observation.

Fifth, Lesley’s embodied experience is given a (brief) theological *interpretation*: “he’s [God] landed right in here [gesturing to her chest]. He’s coming right out from inside me.” This description represents a dual-movement with God as its object. God is described as both entering inwards (toward the heart?) from without and, simultaneously, emanating outwards from within. It is not a stretch of the imagination to begin mapping the technical terms of the immanence and transcendence of God onto this description.⁶⁷ Interestingly, Lesley accounted for this experience with reference to the memory of a past experience: “I know that God is here because it’s happened before.” Interpretation draws on an authoritative record or memory of similar experiences. Gregory Clapper states that an affection is defined as Christian by the ‘object which engenders it,’ specifically of God as presented in the Bible.⁶⁸ Therefore, the extent to which ordinary theology renders an *accurate* portrayal of God is (finally) contingent upon the interpretive control of Scripture, as the authoritative record of Christian experience.

Sixth, this account portrays an experience that is, in at least some minimal sense, *salvific*. Taking Morris’ basic structure as an example,⁶⁹ Lesley describes: (1) a state of being an “outcast, lost, not worthy of life, or anything;” (2) a process wherein God “scooped me up and placed me in this church;” (3) to a new state of being “accepted into the family” and a “child of God.” Though this account lacks an explicit eschatological horizon, it nevertheless evidences how these affective symbols are used to narrate experiences of salvific divine action. Importantly, this salvific action is associated specifically with the praxis of belonging, in this case coming before the church in the liturgical context of a membership service.

Seventh, and finally, Lesley’s account touches on the question of what *responsibilities* are conferred in ecclesial belonging: “It’s not about signing a piece of paper and saying I’ll come every week and give it all because actually I can’t.” This succinct statement recognises the primacy of relationship (rather than the ‘piece of paper’) from which mutual obligations emerge. However, it leaves open the question of the extent to which belonging requires a change in behaviour and attitude (beyond the practice of regular attendance or coming ‘every week’). Offering oneself (to ‘give it all’) must necessarily be conditioned by the numerous personal factors and circumstances of each particular individual (“because actually I can’t”). Personal and corporate discernment are required for the ongoing reception of the costly gifts of family, home, acceptance, peace, and joy.

We can see then that these affective theological symbols are experienced as embodied and social expressions of salvific divine action. In surveying prominent figures in the development of sociology and psychology of religion, Neal Krause concludes that there is a “wide-spread and broad-based interdisciplinary endorsement of the social basis of religion.”⁷⁰ This insight resonates with John Wesley’s well-worn adage that “the gospel of Christ knows of no religion but social, no holiness but social holiness.”⁷¹ However, social scientific accounts, underpinned by naturalistic philosophical assumptions,⁷² tend to collapse belonging wholly into the horizontal dimension of analysis. That is, belonging is understood to be, at root, a matter of the individual and social relations, with little conceptualisation of a transcendent (vertical) dimension.⁷³ However, contained within the use of these affective symbols of belonging is an identifiably transcendent dimension. That is, these are not simply horizontal descriptions of human social connection, but they also implicate divine action. They express, in ordinary terms, something of the “the social character of salvation.”⁷⁴

⁶⁶ William J. Abraham, *Divine Agency and Divine Action: Systematic Theology*, volume III (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 191.

⁶⁷ Cf. Kenneth J. Collins, *The Theology of John Wesley: Holy Love and the Shape of Grace* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 24.

⁶⁸ Clapper, *Renewal*, 85; see also Runyon’s distinction between emotion, feeling and experience in *New Creation*, 152-153.

⁶⁹ Morris, *Salvation*, 9.

⁷⁰ Neal M. Krause, *Aging in the Church: How Social Relationships Affect Health* (West Conshohocken: Templeton Foundation Press, 2008), 24.

⁷¹ John Wesley, ‘Preface,’ *Hymns and Sacred Poems*, 1739, in *The Works of Rev. John Wesley*, ed. Thomas Jackson, 14 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1958), 14:321.

⁷² Paul G. Hiebert, *Transforming Worldviews: An anthropological understanding of how people change* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 145.

⁷³ Krause, *Aging*, 22.

⁷⁴ Randy Maddox, ‘Salvation as Flourishing for the Whole Creation: A Wesleyan trajectory,’ in Dean G. Smith and Rob A. Fringer, *Wesleyan Perspectives on Human Flourishing* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2021), 16-18.

Reading Affective Theological Symbols in Philippians

Turning to reflect on these affective theological symbols in light of Paul's letter to the Philippians, a practical theological reading can be utilised. One of the features of such an approach is that the reader consciously brings "contemporary questions and issues emerging from lived reality to the text."⁷⁵ As such, the purpose of this engagement is to allow Scripture to complexify and interrogate the empirical concepts that have emerged from ordinary Methodist theology.

The occasion of Paul's writing is his incarceration (Phil. 1:7-14), he is literally "in chains" (v.17). This provides a meaningful backdrop in light of the crisis of social isolation outlined above. Being imprisoned, Paul is in a state of separation from his "brothers and sisters" (Phil. 1:12) to whom he writes, though not in full isolation but likely being chained to a prison guard.⁷⁶ This raises an important dimension which is explored by Karin Neutel and Peter-Ben Smit. They analyse Philippians using "crisis" as an interpretive lens. Significantly, the state of separation coupled with the explicit longing to visit (Phil. 1:8; 25; 4:1) indicates that "Paul's body" may be "the starting point of his theologizing."⁷⁷ Further, Paul regards his situation as one in which "Christ will be exalted" in his "body" (Phil. 1:20). Aware of the contingent and visceral reality of his situation, Michael Bird and Nijay Gupta write that what Paul is 'trying to embody' here is how one dies in the grip of grace.⁷⁸ Therefore, this letter might appropriately be described as presenting a form of embodied theology.

Paul's longing for the Philippians is a prominent theme in this letter. Stanley Stowers was one of the first to argue Philippians is a "letter of friendship,"⁷⁹ a classification which has now become conventional.⁸⁰ However, Ben Witherington argues there are some "serious flaws" with framing Philippians as a Greco-Roman friendship letter.⁸¹ Paul "studiously avoids" the kind of "full-scale reciprocity"⁸² language characteristic of ancient friendship conventions. Witherington points to Loveday Alexander's analysis of "family letters"⁸³ as evidence that familial relationships are in view. Most strikingly, the language of friendship (*philia*, *philos*) is completely absent.⁸⁴ Reidar Aasgaard concurs, writing that sibling metaphors (*adelphoi*, Phil. 1:12; 3:1, 13, 17; 4:1) are Paul's "most frequent way of speaking of co-Christians [...] the emotionally laden use of the metaphor, particularly in direct address clearly aims at arousing a family 'feel'."⁸⁵ This "fictive kinship language"⁸⁶ is "highly emotive"⁸⁷ and affirms the affective and theological dimensions within the symbol of family as an expression of ecclesial belonging.

Perhaps the most indirect symbol to locate is that of home. However, we may consider the notion of citizenship (*politeuma*, Phil. 3:20), which denotes "a colony of foreigners or relocated veterans."⁸⁸ Philippi was a Roman colony filled with veterans who were settled there after civil wars in 42 and 31 BC. Roman citizenship did not mean that "Rome was a person's true home"⁸⁹ but instead it denoted one's fundamental allegiance. Citizenship was won through military service or by financial means. However, citizenship of heaven is realised through "faith in Christ" (Phil. 3:9), by those who "trust him to have so loved and accepted them."⁹⁰ The Philippians are "God's colony in a

⁷⁵ Cartledge, *Mediation*, 46.

⁷⁶ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians*, NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 92.

⁷⁷ Karin B. Neutel and Peter-Ben Smit, 'Paul, Imprisonment and Crisis: Crisis and its Negotiation as a Lens for Reading Philippians,' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 44, no. 1 (2021): 41.

⁷⁸ Michael F. Bird and Nijay K. Gupta, *Philippians*, NCBC (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 55.

⁷⁹ Stanley K. Stowers, 'Friends and Enemies in the Politics of Heaven: Reading Theology in Philippians,' in J. M. Bassler (ed.), *Pauline Theology, Volume 1: Thessalonians, Philippians, Galatians and Philemon* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 105-21 (107).

⁸⁰ Fee, *Philippians*, 2; for a more cautious comparison, see Stephen E. Fowl, *Philippians*, THNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2005), 8-9, 86.

⁸¹ Ben Witherington III, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 18.

⁸² Witherington, *Philippians*, 18-19.

⁸³ Loveday Alexander, 'Hellenistic Letter-Forms and the Structure of Philippians,' *Journal for the Study of the New Testament* 37 (1989): 87-101.

⁸⁴ Todd D. Still, 'More than Friends?: The Literary Classification of Philippians Revisited,' *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012), 59-60.

⁸⁵ Reidar Aasgaard, 'My Beloved Brothers and Sisters!' *Christian Siblingship in Paul*, *Journal for the Study of the New Testament Supplement Series* 265 (London: T&T Clark, 2004), 309.

⁸⁶ Still, 'More than friends?' 61.

⁸⁷ Witherington, *Philippians*, 2.

⁸⁸ BDAG, 845.

⁸⁹ Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 162.

⁹⁰ Fee, *Philippians*, 324.

pagan city” and their “government is in heaven” (rather than Rome).⁹¹ Citizens of heaven are to “colonise the earth with the life of heaven.”⁹² Home is, then, an appropriate symbol to express the eschatological, the now and not yet, dimension of being a citizen of heaven.⁹³ Being within a Roman province, Philippi would be under the *pax Romana* (the so-called ‘peace of Rome’) instituted through military conquest.⁹⁴ Given the preponderance of Roman soldiers in Philippi, Witherington highlights the rhetorically striking phrase, that the peace of God will “guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 4:7). This peace is outworked in both corporate and “personal or more emotion-centred” senses.⁹⁵ Inverting the violent logic of empire, citizens of heaven are enjoined to seek the “peace of God” (Phil. 4:7) through: standing “firm in the Lord” (Phil. 4:1); rejoicing “in the Lord always” (Phil. 4:4); in “prayer and supplication with thanksgiving” (Phil. 4:6); and continuing in what they have “learned and received and heard and seen” (Phil. 4:9).

One of the most prominent emotions expressed here is joy. Markus Bockmuehl writes how “Philippians sparkles with joy,” not as a naïve and wistful stance, but one that is “tested and refined.”⁹⁶ Joy and love frequently appear together (Phil. 2:2; 4:1). Paul designates the Philippian church as “beloved” (Phil. 1:12; 2:12; 3:13; 4:8). He longs for the Philippians “with the affection of Christ”⁹⁷ That is, these affections may be said to be Christian in that they are Christologically grounded “concern-based construals.”⁹⁸ However, Bird and Gupta note that love should not only be attributed to where the words *agapē* and *phileō* occur. In their view, the “best explication of love is found in the story of Christ,”⁹⁹ particularly as expressed in the Christ Hymn (Phil. 2:6-11). Selfish ambition and conceit (*kenodoxia*, Phil. 2:3) are rejected as the “destructive practices”¹⁰⁰ of a “highly stratified honour culture [which was] deeply embedded in patronage networks.”¹⁰¹ This is diametrically opposed to Christ’s way of humility (*tapeinophrosynē*, a “humble attitude”),¹⁰² which is characterised instead by a disposition of attending to “the needs and concerns of the other.”¹⁰³ Finally, this joy is not cheap in that it blithely ignores the realities of suffering and hardship. Rather, it is joy “in the midst” of suffering and “steadfast fidelity” which leads to “deepened communion with God and others.”¹⁰⁴

Ecclesial Belonging as Salvific Praxis

The insights gained from the empirical and biblical perspectives may now be summarised. The meaning of ecclesial belonging may be expressed through the affective theological symbols of family, home, acceptance, peace and joy. These symbols are christologically grounded concern-based construals, which express belonging as an embodied, in both individual and social dimensions, experience of salvific divine action. They are eschatological in that they represent the proleptic anticipation of the fullness of God’s salvation in Christ, whom we “eagerly wait for” (Phil 3:20). The final move of this paper involves drawing these findings into dialogue with academic Methodist ecclesiology, with particular reference to Tom Greggs’ recent *Dogmatic Ecclesiology*, a work of Protestant ecclesiology which is at home in the Methodist tradition.¹⁰⁵ Greggs’ work has ecumenical significance in that he is not seeking to offer an ideal model of the church,¹⁰⁶ or using Nicholas Healy’s term, a “blueprint ecclesiology.”¹⁰⁷ Greggs states that historical, sociological, and practical accounts of the church “all have their place.”¹⁰⁸ However, he seeks to provide

⁹¹ Witherington, *Philippians*, 216.

⁹² Tom Wright, *Surprised by Hope* (London: SPCK, 2011), 293.

⁹³ See Fee, *Philippians*, 376.

⁹⁴ Witherington, *Philippians*, 249.

⁹⁵ Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 178; Fee, *Philippians*, 412.

⁹⁶ Markus N. A. Bockmuehl, *The Epistle to the Philippians*, BNTC (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1997), 1.

⁹⁷ Karl Barth, *The Epistle to the Philippians* (London: SCM, 1962), 20.

⁹⁸ This is to suggest these symbols of belonging, as concern-based construals, may be shaped by and reflective of Christ’s own love and concern for His church, exemplifying how emotions may be rooted in and transformed by one’s relationship with Christ. Cf. Roberts, *Emotions*, 46.

⁹⁹ Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 27.

¹⁰⁰ Fowl, *Philippians*, 84.

¹⁰¹ Joseph Hellerman, *Philippians*, ECGNT (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2015), 99.

¹⁰² Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 70.

¹⁰³ Bird and Gupta, *Philippians*, 71.

¹⁰⁴ Fowl, *Philippians*, 234.

¹⁰⁵ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, xxiii.

¹⁰⁶ In the manner of Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church: A Critical Assessment of the Church in All Its Aspects* (New York: Image, 2002).

¹⁰⁷ Nicholas Healy, *Church, World and the Christian Life: Practical-Prophetic Ecclesiology*, Cambridge Studies in Christian Doctrine (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 30.

¹⁰⁸ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, xxxvi.

a “thicker, constructive, theological description” of the church in relation to the salvific work of God.¹⁰⁹ Whilst this is an essential component, I would argue that empirical description of the church in context is also required as part of a robust theological description. This is because the ecclesiological context cannot readily be separated from the church so as to be “described independently.”¹¹⁰ Rather, the concrete church “lives within and is formed by its context,” and as such, “critical theological analysis of these contexts” should be “one of the central tasks of ecclesiology.”¹¹¹

Greggs observes that, for many, ‘the church may seem on of first reading to be irrelevant’¹¹² to the saving acts of God in the Spirit.¹¹³ However, a central feature of his approach is the assertion of “pneumatology over ecclesiology.”¹¹⁴ For Greggs, the church is “an object of faith and not of sight.”¹¹⁵ That is to say that empirical description of the church, by itself, cannot get at its theological underpinning as a creation of the Spirit.¹¹⁶ Specifically, he describes the church as the abductive socio-poiesitic creation of the Spirit “turned outwards in salvation.”¹¹⁷ The abductive dimension refers to the Spirit’s work of bringing about “simultaneous mutual attraction to God and others for the believer.”¹¹⁸ Socio-poiesis denotes the “generation and shaping of relationships grounded in the divine presence and activity of the Holy Spirit.”¹¹⁹ In this manner, the church may also be said to represent a “locus of revelation and salvation.”¹²⁰ In terms of revelation, Lesley’s account vividly depicts how the body itself is a site of “mediation and encounter [...] where the human can apprehend the divine,”¹²¹ particularly within the context of corporate worship. In terms of salvation, these symbols express ecclesial belonging as a proleptic, partial and contingent expression of the fullness of God’s redemption.¹²² Therefore, on Greggs’ account, ordinary Methodists, by the gracious work of the Spirit, are enabled to see their own belonging to God and the church properly only through faith in God.¹²³

This logic may be applied to the affective theological symbols of belonging. That one might experience joy or a sense of home in relation to a congregation, does not necessitate divine action. It may be entirely at the horizontal psycho-social level. What distinguishes an affective symbol from an affective *theological* symbol is the action of the Trinitarian God of Scripture. Greggs is emphatic that no ecclesial structure or form may “condition God’s Spirit for God’s gracious divine act.”¹²⁴ By analogy, I would affirm that no embodied affective response may condition God’s gracious act. Yet, at the same time, these symbols are found to be both empirically significant and biblically appropriate descriptors through which ordinary Methodists begin to articulate the work of the Holy Spirit. In 2005, Angela Shier-Jones remarked that “there is something decidedly lacking in Methodism’s theology of the Spirit.”¹²⁵ Therefore, a key recommendation of this paper might be to consider how British Methodists are better enabled and resourced to deploy a more explicit “grammar of the Spirit”¹²⁶ in telling their experiences of divine action.

Finally, this theological account of ecclesial belonging offers a concrete response to the challenge of individualism identified at the outset. From his account of the Fall in Genesis 3, Greggs foregrounds how

¹⁰⁹ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, xx.

¹¹⁰ Healy, *Church*, 38.

¹¹¹ Healy, *Church*, 39.

¹¹² Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 30-31.

¹¹³ For a trinitarian framing on salvation and the church, see Colyer, *The Trinitarian Dimension*, 210-211.

¹¹⁴ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, lvii.

¹¹⁵ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, xlix.

¹¹⁶ See Abraham’s aphorism ‘where the Holy Spirit is, there is the church’ in *Divine Agency*, 191.

¹¹⁷ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, lvi-lvii.

¹¹⁸ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 31-32.

¹¹⁹ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 32.

¹²⁰ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 27.

¹²¹ Matthew Engelke, ‘Material Religion’ in Robert A. Orsi (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Religious Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 229.

¹²² Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 33.

¹²³ This accords with the case study findings in that participants described belonging as intimately linked to faith.

¹²⁴ Greggs, *Salvation*, 67.

¹²⁵ For a critique of Methodism’s doctrine of the Spirit, see: Shier-Jones, *A Work in Progress*, 98-126.

¹²⁶ D. Lyle Dabney, ‘Pneumatology in the Methodist Tradition’ in William J. Abraham and James E. Kirby (eds.), *The Oxford Handbook of Methodist Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 573-586 (580).

individualism has become humanity's "primary identity."¹²⁷ The ensuing problem is one of "individual and corporate egoism"¹²⁸ or, using Augustine's phrase, being *cor incurvatum in se* ("curved in on oneself").¹²⁹ This description resonates with Taylor's notion of the inward turn. Thus, for Greggs, individualism is the result of the prototypical sin which weighs heavily within his theological anthropology. This appropriately frames the Spirit's work of salvation as "turning our hearts out not only to God but simultaneously and proportionately to the given other."¹³⁰ The Trinity is the source of love,¹³¹ and so is "prior and prevenient to every aspect of creation."¹³² Accordingly, Greggs frames participation within the church in terms of divine love. Receiving love from God is the foundation of loving God and others. In a manner resonant with the account from Philipians, Greggs argues that the "concrete form of the sanctified life" is "self-giving and gracious" Christoform love. In contrast to expressive individualism's instrumentalization of others in service of the self, the church is instrumental for the purposes of love, as the context in which its members love one another simply on the basis of the love of Christ, in which (and in whom) they actively participate.¹³³

Therefore, both the horizontal and vertical dimensions of love are "innately connected"¹³⁴ and arise from the love of God in Christ by the Spirit. This theological, or dogmatic, description coheres with the accounts of ordinary Methodists, who describe their sense of belonging as underpinned by an experience of the love of God. As such, it is the argument of this paper that, in an age of loneliness, the practices associated with ecclesial belonging – as embodied, mediated and expressed using the theological symbols of family, acceptance, home, peace and joy – are forms of salvific praxis.

Where next?

What, then, is the significance of this argument for contemporary (British) Methodism? First, future studies could expand the sample to include diverse age groups, cultural contexts, and consideration of digital participation to better understand how ecclesial belonging is experienced across different settings. Second, to avoid ecclesial belonging collapsing wholly into the therapeutic, salvific praxis needs to be located in relation the concepts of conviction, repentance and forgiveness.¹³⁵ The Wesleyan and Methodist theological traditions are well resourced in this regard, with one promising starting point being the theology of discipleship instantiated in the small group accountability structures of Wesleyan Methodism.¹³⁶ Third, in addition to any pragmatic consideration of church structure, there is a need to confidently articulate a robustly theological discourse of ecclesial belonging. This is vital in the context of the (numerical) decline in British Methodism. In response to this 'crisis' of numbers, Andrew Root and Blair Bertrand observe that Protestant congregations "seek to dilute the taste of crisis with buckets and buckets of overflowing relevance and resources."¹³⁷ Whilst relevance and resource are not bad in themselves, they contend that this is to misidentify the crisis we are in. They write, "our attention has been almost completely focused on the crisis of decline" when instead we should be endeavouring together "to see and hear what's so easily blurred in our secular age [...] the real crisis is encountering a living God who is God."¹³⁸ It is the argument of this paper that such a crisis calls for disciplined theological attention toward the signals of transcendence nascent in what people (Methodist or otherwise) actually say, feel, and do in belonging to church.

¹²⁷ Tom Greggs, *The Breadth of Salvation: Rediscovering the Fullness of God's Saving Work* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2020), 34.

¹²⁸ Tom Greggs, *The Church in a World of Religions: Working Papers in Theology* (London: T&T Clark, 2022), 42.

¹²⁹ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 33.

¹³⁰ Greggs, *The Breadth*, 57.

¹³¹ Werner G. Jeanrond, *A Theology of Love* (London: T&T Clark, 2010), 239-242.

¹³² Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 404.

¹³³ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 402; cf. Jeanrond, *Love*, 215-217.

¹³⁴ Greggs, *Dogmatic*, 407.

¹³⁵ Clive Marsh, 'A Training-ground for forgiveness: Methodism and "Fellowship,"' in Jane Craske and Clive Marsh (eds.), *Methodism and the Future: Facing the Challenge* (London: Cassell, 1999), 100-114, is one such example in British Methodist context.

¹³⁶ Keven M. Watson, *Pursuing Social Holiness: The Band Meeting in Wesley's Thought and Popular Methodist Practice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 39-71.

¹³⁷ Andrew Root and Blair D. Bertrand, *When Church Stops Working: A Future for your congregation beyond more money, programs, and innovation* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2023), 88.

¹³⁸ Root and Bertrand, *Church*, 87-88.

Conclusion

I have argued for the relevance of belonging as a concrete ecclesiological concept and a vital expression of salvation in the world today. Ecclesial belonging may be conceptualised as embodied and affective salvific praxis, expressed using the eschatological symbols of family, acceptance, home, peace and joy, which is brought about through the abductive socio-poiesis¹³⁹ work of the Spirit joining the believer to Christ and others within the love of the God. In a fragmented age marked by loneliness, this thick theological account holds forth the glad tidings of ecclesial belonging as salvific praxis.

¹³⁹ Poiesis, to create or bring something into existence.

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