



Campbell, Laura (2016) *Evangelical young women, contemporary Christianity, and an empowering self- understanding*. MTh(R) thesis.

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**Evangelical Young Women, Contemporary
Christianity, and an Empowering Self-
Understanding**

A study into how contemporary young women of faith understand themselves and God in relation to the *imago Dei*, Holy Scripture and Christian mission

Laura Campbell

Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Theology
School of Theology and Religious Studies
College of Arts
University of Glasgow

August 2015

Author's Declaration

I certify that this thesis is my own work, except where indicated by referencing, in accordance with University guidelines.

Acknowledgements

With particular thanks to my supervisor Dr Charlotte Methuen for her continued investment in my research. This project is indebted to her invaluable support and wisdom. With thanks too to Dr Sean Adams and the Department of Theology and Religious Studies at the University of Glasgow. I thank my parents for the sacrifices they have made to make it possible for me to do what I love, and the encouragement of their unwavering belief. I also thank the many friends who shared the burden of every challenge. Most of all, I thank God, for inspiring and sustaining me; to Him be the glory.

Abstract

This thesis combines historical reflection with qualitative research to examine how Christian young women from Evangelical traditions are developing religious self-understanding in empowering ways. It seeks to establish connections between the ways in which historians and feminist theologians have responded to forces of restriction and limitation in Christian women's past, and the strategies of self-empowerment adopted by Evangelical young women today. This study approaches Christian history and the present condition of female self-understanding through three central questions: How do young women understand themselves in relation to the *imago Dei*? How do young women understand themselves in relation to the Bible? How do young women understand themselves in relation to Christian mission? The first chapter addresses the ways in which young women are responding to historic denials of woman as the *imago Dei* and concepts of female inferiority or especial guilt by reclaiming possession of the divine image. The next section discusses how young women are relating to the Bible in empowering ways, both by adopting similar strategies to those utilised throughout Christianity's past, and through the development of their own patterns of interpretation. Finally, this thesis draws attention to Christian mission as a space of empowerment, examining how young women develop life-enriching knowledge of God and self through involvement with mission. This thesis proposes that as young women continue to develop strategies that enable them to understand themselves and their faith in empowering ways, knowledge of their innate dignity and potential will inspire them – and those who come after them – to witness to God freely and fully in all contexts.

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Introduction

Anne Jensen opens her iconic contribution to the ongoing investigation into women's presence and influence within the history of Christianity, *God's Self-Confident Daughters*, by stating her motivation: 'I must take a position in regard to the challenge of radical feminism that regards the Christian religion as hopelessly "patriarchal", a church of men in service to a male God, which women can only flee, if they do not want to continue to live in alienation from themselves.'¹ I likewise must take a position; in my case, in opposition to those who are of the opinion that empowerment for young women cannot occur within Christianity's ranks. This thesis addresses issues surrounding women and Christianity's history specifically in relation to the self-understanding of young Christian women from mainly Evangelical backgrounds between the ages of 19-25.² It proposes that examination into the condition of their religious self-understanding and ability to approach Christian theologies, texts and behaviours in empowering ways will testify to the fact that the Christian identification need not cost young women inevitable 'alienation from themselves.'³ My research is born out of a similar motivation to that of Jensen; an unwavering belief that young women need not flee Christianity and its central gospel message, but can – and are continuing to identify with Christ, the Christian religion and Christ's missional calling in ways that are ultimately empowering.

In entering into any discussion of women and Christianity, one enters into what has been experienced as a felt absence. In attempts to rediscover and reimagine the stories of women participants in the earliest forms of Christianity, King notes that challengingly, 'often the recovery of women's stories is difficult,'⁴ while Schottroff laments a 'devastating silence' present in the absence of recorded accounts of female lives and influence.⁵ D'Angelo acknowledges an issue arising from an absence of adequate

¹ Jensen, *God's Daughters*, x.

² For analysis of the sample see the Methodological Appendix.

³ Ibid.

⁴ King, *Voices of the Spirit*, 335.

⁵ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 41.

historical record; that even in the case of women like Mary Magdalene, whose presence is remembered, ‘any version’ of this female figure constructed is ‘pieced together out of snippets.’⁶ Cloke develops this idea further, asserting that although Christian memory is dominated by images of ‘great men’: ‘these “great men” knew women deemed equally “great”...who are barely known to us’ because there is a ‘lack of authentic voice from those [women] most nearly concerned.’⁷ This thesis is inspired by the desire to see the ‘authentic voice’ of young women more effectively acknowledged and transmitted; communicating their self-determined responses to voices of restriction and limitation.

At the core of this thesis is its use of qualitative research to transmit the ‘authentic voice’ of young women in relation to their self-understanding. Each chapter however, opens with critical analysis of the history of thought surrounding the chapter’s focus, to help establish connections between the ways in which historians and feminist theologians have responded to forces of restriction and limitation in Christian women’s past, and the strategies of self-empowerment adopted by young women today. By addressing the nature of these forces and the ways in which feminist theologians have historically opposed unjustified female exclusion, it will be possible to identify the extent to which the continued influence of harmful ideas, or the construction of similarly helpful responses, emerge in the self-understanding of contemporary Christian women. It will also be possible to uncover how young women are developing and utilising new and innovative strategies of self-empowerment.

In directing historical analysis towards discussion of the present experience of young women, this project will offer a unique response to the absences surrounding the lives of historical Christian women. It will address Christian history’s androcentric representation of women’s involvement and influence by presenting the faith-lives and stories of living Christian women; stories of shared experience that shed light on the untold stories of women in Christianity’s past. By tracing the continuities present in female religious experience, the young women’s responses to particular ideas and practices become a valuable resource, offering potential insight into the self-understanding of women from Christianity’s history.

⁶ D’Angelo, ‘Reconstructing Real Women’, 125.

⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 5, 13.

Additionally, by delving into the lived experience of real women of contemporary Christianity, I hope that it will be possible to challenge Christianity's complex history of grossly mis-representing the women within its ranks. In reviewing the surviving representations of female figures in Christian history, ultimately limiting interpretations emerge at the forefront of recorded memory. Dominant interpretations of Mary Magdalene and Mary the mother of Jesus encapsulate a larger and more complex pattern of reductive commemoration of female believers' identity and significance. Thus, an 'early portrait of Mary [Magdalene] as a prominent disciple' is 'almost fully eclipsed' by a later 'portrait of Mary as the repentant prostitute'⁸ and by the 6th century a 'conflation of legends' had 'transformed Mary from the wise companion of Christ to the "woman who was a sinner."⁹ Similarly, Mary 'the virgin mother of God' becomes the 'model virgin,'¹⁰ 'representative of fallen female sexuality redeemed'¹¹ and an 'impossible' role model as the 'perfect and sinless woman.'¹² Historical women are reduced to the sum of one image and the spiritual identity of the women who follow is similarly demeaned through stereotypical identifications with their mis-represented sisters of the past: 'one might add to the list the millions of women who lived their Christian lives branded as daughters of Eve.'¹³ Furthermore, Malone identifies in the writing of Christian history a 're-formulating of women's missionary contribution ... despite contradictory factual and written evidence'; that sought to present the female participants as 'angels and guardian spirits' in order to downplay their missionary contribution and 'apostolic activity.'¹⁴ Female identity has long been mis-construed and mis-represented by Christian history, and likewise, the role of women in Christianity's mission demeaned and downplayed.

Fiorenza argues that while women remain peripheral or entirely absent in records of Christian tradition, this reality is not primarily a result of female marginality: 'women

⁸ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 30.

⁹ Streete, 'Women as Sources of Redemption', 343.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 348.

¹¹ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 30.

¹² Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 73.

¹³ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 298.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 135.

were not marginal in the earliest beginnings of Christianity; rather biblical texts and historical sources produce the marginality of women.’¹⁵ In this way, Fiorenza expresses the notion that through historical mis-representation and the oppressive power of text and memory, the idea of Christian women’s marginality and inactivity has been created and propagated, when in fact the opposite was true. This thesis derives inspiration from belief that the significance of what women did in the past far surpasses the dominant images left for us. It is also inspired by a hope for missional young women of Christianity’s future: women who understand themselves less in terms of supposed female marginality and more in terms of their own central involvement and witness. There is potential to re-imagine female nature and female participation in light of the strategies of self-empowerment contemporary Christian women are adopting as they respond to texts and teachings used to deny, restrict and exclude.

As much as it has been branded by many as an inherently oppressive force in women’s history, Christianity and its gospel have historically functioned to offer women a space of potential empowerment. Indeed, Malone discerns ‘an unbroken tradition of women attempting to seek the “more” that Christianity professed to offer its members.’¹⁶ The baptismal formula in Paul’s letter to the Galatians perhaps functions to capture the espoused theology of ‘more’ which emerged from early Christian communities; ‘there is no longer male and female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’¹⁷ This research examines this ‘unbroken tradition’ – centred around a belief in the ultimately liberating power of Christianity – and traces the ways in which it is re-expressed in the stories and self-understanding of young women belonging to contemporary expressions of Christianity.

This thesis will seek to uncover and examine the historic tension present between women’s experience of God and what they are taught about God, and themselves in relation to God, from sources of tradition and authority in their lives. In discussion of women and the Reformation, Methuen identifies an ‘accommodation between ... individual experience and received discourse’ as something that is ‘part of the experience of women.’¹⁸ Women are still having to work out differences between what

¹⁵ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, xx.

¹⁶ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 237.

¹⁷ Galatians 2:28. All biblical references are to the NRSV.

¹⁸ Methuen, *Luther*, 85.

they experience of God and what continues to function for them as ‘received discourse.’ The extent to which young women perceive disparity between what they do in missional contexts or experience as divine ‘calling’ and the teaching they’re exposed to regarding their place and potential will be examined.

This thesis approaches its core interest in the spiritual self-understanding of female Christians by asking three questions: How do young women understand themselves in relation to the *imago Dei*? How do young women understand themselves in relation to the Bible? How do young women understand themselves in relation to Christian mission? In the context of this research, the concept of self-understanding encompasses how young women view their nature, their created status, their potential, their calling and their role in God’s service. The way in which young women understand themselves in relation to these three aspects of Christianity will be explored on the context of a consideration of how women, and feminist theologians, have historically engaged with ideas and practices surrounding the *imago Dei*, the Bible as Holy Scripture and Christian mission as a space of opportunity.

The first section of my research addresses the first of these questions, exploring how young women see their likeness, and whether they view their created status and female embodiment more in relation to the idea of their creation as *imago Dei* or in relation to theological tradition surrounding representations of Eve, the Fall, and human sinfulness. Christian tradition’s development of particular facets of core theology saw femaleness distanced from the divine image; ideas of woman’s primary sin and secondary creation brandished by dominant forces of restriction. Indeed, Gryson focuses on these two ideas as those that historically carried most weight. In his view, ideas that ‘woman was created after man and that she was responsible for Original Sin’ inspired the classic ‘interdiction against women’ in 1 Timothy 2:11-12 and were then retained and propagated by later theologians.¹⁹ MacCulloch argues that these ideas alongside biblical texts such as 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 – ‘For he is the image and reflection of God, but woman is the reflection of man’ – ‘shaped the theology of Christianity that survived as mainstream’²⁰ and provided the backbone for dominant perspectives on the female

¹⁹ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, 36.

²⁰ MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, 135.

nature that would inspire hesitation when it came to understanding women as bearing God's image.

Moreover, Armstrong's polemic work *The Gospel According to Woman* alerts us to the way in which issues with femaleness and the divine image did not culminate in mere denials, but developed in certain patterns of thought towards an 'especial disgust' regarding the female body.²¹ This disgust, Armstrong argues, was strong enough to ensure that when it came to any sort of theological anthropology, woman was viewed in the eyes of men as mirroring Eve: 'in the West woman is forever Eve, luring men to their doom.'²² In this line of thought, the predominant conception of Eve was as a figure epitomising female sinfulness and propagating sin in man, rather than reflecting the creative force that made mankind *imago Dei*. By first examining the historic tension between understandings of mankind created as *imago Dei* and Christianity's early – and continuing – association of the female person with Eve and 'fallen-ness', the fact that young women are persisting in claiming possession of the divine image emerges as particularly remarkable and lies at the heart of the first chapter.

Investigation into the current condition of female self-understanding will progress from this point to a consideration of how women have related to the Bible; discussing how women are engaging positively with a collection of texts that have been traditionally used to restrict and diminish conceptions of female spiritual potential. Indeed, the second chapter of this thesis is inspired by how women have historically used this same 'Word of God' in their story of resistance. There are contemporary young women who are approaching the Bible in a similar way; reading and applying biblical texts in ways that empower themselves and enrich their self-understanding. This reality is fascinating in light of how the same collection of writings has been used to underpin a history of taking for 'granted that the subordination of women desired by the church was legitimised by divine revelation and sacred tradition.'²³

Finally, this thesis addresses Christian mission as a space of empowerment for female Christians; engagement with mission constituting a means of practically developing an

²¹ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 23.

²² *Ibid.*, 33.

²³ Kung, *Women in Christianity*, 16.

enriched understanding of God and self. By acknowledging the presence of women at climatic moments of salvation history – at the cross and as witnesses to the resurrection – and re-examining apostleship from the first female witnesses onwards, the historically significant relationship between women and mission becomes clearer. An awareness of woman's key role in missional activity from Christianity's earliest stages prompts consideration of how mission functions in the lives of contemporary young women. The final chapter of this work assesses whether missional freedom exists for Christian women, as well as whether such freedom – where it exists – affects the self-understanding of female believers enough to encourage and enable them to fully utilise their gifting in every context.

Schottroff dignifies feminist analysis of Christianity's origins as an academic sphere where 'real life is acknowledged and shaped through common labor into something new.'²⁴ It is the ultimate aim of this research to examine the lived, and ongoing, stories of young Christian women and how they understand themselves and God in empowering ways, in light of historical reflection for the formation of newly empowered women of God: Image-bearers, witnesses and missionaries. This thesis gives insight into the self-understanding of young women who are continuing to write a story of divinely-inspired resistance against harmful ideologies and restrictive practices.

²⁴ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 65.

Methodology

The Study

This thesis enters into continuing discussions of woman's place in Christianity through historical reflection and analysis, but at its heart lies a study into the religious self-understanding of contemporary Christian young women. This thesis is centred around the proposal that it is worth reflecting upon the experience of women throughout Christianity's history alongside practical theological reflection on the spiritual self-understanding of young Christian women of the 21st century; so fostering an enriched understanding of both. Through incorporating analysis of interviews and dialogue, I will endeavour to distance myself from what Brooten understood in the study of women and Christianity to be 'the usual methodology of exploring what men have said about women.'²⁵ Instead, I will make assessments in light of history, but with direct focus upon the voices and stories of contemporary young women; the 'multiplicity and diversity'²⁶ of their lives, 'their accomplishments, and their self-understanding.'²⁷

The purpose of the study undertaken was not to join with – or in any way provide further justification for – those who have denounced Christianity as 'hopelessly patriarchal', or to fixate upon women's experiences of restriction or exclusion or to somehow 'solve the problem.'²⁸ Indeed, Swinton and Mowat assert that practical theology's qualitative researcher is aware that such simplistic problem solving is impossible.²⁹ Instead, the purpose of this study was to bring to light some of the ways young women are engaging with particular facets of the Christian religion in relation to their own faith and self-understanding.

²⁵ Brooten cited by Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 67.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Jensen, *God's Daughters*, xi.

²⁸ Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 30.

²⁹ Ibid.

The Interviews

For the first stage of the research process for this study, sixteen women between the ages of 18-25 were interviewed.³⁰ The research sample was purposefully kept small in order to allow for in-depth interviews, in the hope that they would more effectively do justice to the faith-based experience of each female interviewee. I found participants from social connections already in place; interviewing acquaintances and friends from home, church and university. All the women interviewed profess personal Christian faith and they come from a variety of Christian backgrounds, mostly non-denominational evangelical churches.³¹ Their names are anonymised throughout the study.

Swinton and Mowat relate the thought of Hans-Georg Gadamer to practical theological reflection; suggesting that there is a need to acknowledge how often in qualitative research ‘subject and object ... are bound together and mediated by a common cultural and historical context.’³² As a researcher who falls neatly into the boundaries of my study’s sample, I acknowledge now my own ‘embeddedness’.³³ My interest in how young women understand themselves and their faith is deeply subjective, and my preference is for seeing young women enabled and empowered in their own understanding and witness. Rather than limiting the potential significance of this research or impacting it in any negative way, I believe this preference guides my interpretive lens and inspires and informs my understanding. I acknowledge too the sample’s limited scope, being one made up of women who – to varying degrees, and not exclusively – bear similarities in terms of age, social background and church affiliation. A larger or much more varied sample might have lacked thematic unity or overstepped the practical limitations of this project, while it was hoped that this sample’s narrowness would provide a starting point of enquiry and allow significant and generally indicative reflections to be gleaned. Mary T. Malone justifies an ‘intense focusing on women only and their concerns’ as a critical

³⁰ The acquisition of data moved through a series of stages: see methodological appendix for a full breakdown of the interview process.

³¹ For a breakdown of these backgrounds, please consult the methodological appendix.

³² Hans-Georg Gadamer cited by Swinton and Mowat, *Practical Theology*, 113.

³³ Swinton and Mowat also refer to Gadamer’s argument that as researchers ‘bound together’ with the subject of our work, we must acknowledge our own ‘embeddedness or historical situatedness’ and how it ‘influences our interpretation of the world’, *Practical Theology*, 110.

perspective ‘most feminists would argue that this task [of unearthing women’s place in Christian history involves, as an initial step.’³⁴ Likewise, for a question that attempts to tap into the vastness of the study of female religious self-understanding, I deem intentional focus on a small cross-section of contemporary female believers as a worthwhile starting point.

The interviews involved 40 questions directed towards the thesis’ three different – but overlapping – points of enquiry into the condition of female self-understanding. The interviewees were given the opportunity to consent to being interviewed and having the data recorded and stored, as well as the option of withdrawing their participation at any time.³⁵ They were informed of the research’s interest in their understanding of themselves and God,³⁶ but any motivation behind the particular questions was not defined. Although questions were designed with each chapter’s focus in mind, they were deliberately unspecific and open-ended to encourage free reflection. For example, I opened each interview by inviting the participant to talk freely about their faith: ‘Tell me about how you came to know God, and who God is to you now.’ The main objective was not to have simple and direct questions answered, but to record the women’s voices; how they chose to describe their own faith and imagining of themselves and God. Indeed, Norris argues that women’s voices have been historically absent. In relation to her work on how Eve has been characterised and remembered Norris remarks that ‘crucially, what is missing from the account, as so often with women’s history, is any witness from women themselves.’³⁷ This study’s interview method was born out of such an absence: qualitative research was the tool of choice to allow contemporary young women to speak for themselves regarding how they understand their identity and faith. This thesis draws upon the participants’ own words as an important aspect of the overall text; allowing the women’s voices to witness to their experience and validate the wider interpretation.

³⁴ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 59.

³⁵ The consent form used is available in the Methodological Appendix.

³⁶ Each participant was given a Participant Information Sheet, also available in the Methodological Appendix.

³⁷ Norris, *Eve*, 45.

1. Image of God or Image of Eve? How do young women understand themselves in relation to the *Imago Dei*?

“And do you not know that you are each an Eve? You are the devil’s gateway ... you destroyed so easily God’s image, man.”³⁸

Introduction

Young women choosing to identify with contemporary expressions of Christianity find themselves within a tradition that continues to carry complex and deeply rooted uncertainties about female status and role. Maryanne Cline Horowitz uses Tertullian’s exhortation cited above to exemplify a general ambivalence in early Christian tradition regarding female status as *Imago Dei*;³⁹ his accusation depicts women as more the destroyers of God’s image than equal sharers in it. Karen Armstrong proposes that Mary Daly’s iconic denunciation of a God she saw unfit for female self-identification and subsequent departure from the church functioned as symbolic. It nevertheless signalled a ‘widespread withdrawal by women from mainstream Christianity.’⁴⁰ And yet, 40 years on from Daly’s most infamous work, young women can still be found within Christianity’s ranks.⁴¹ The first question this thesis poses, therefore, is concerned with the history of thought surrounding the female and her creation as *imago Dei*, and the question of whether 21st-century Christian young women understand themselves more in relation to ideas and theologies of fallen-ness and inherent inferiority or a dynamic claim to possess the very image and likeness of God. The second section of this chapter will assess the extent to which young women in contemporary churches have discerned or experienced limitation in relation to any perceived or subconscious notion of their incomplete possession of the divine image.

³⁸ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, 1:i.

³⁹ Horowitz, ‘The Image of God’, 23.

⁴⁰ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 157.

⁴¹ 29% of women aged between 18-24 according to Linda Woodhead’s 2014 poll, <http://www.brin.ac.uk/news/2014/huffington-post-and-other-polls/>, accessed 15/2/15.

Historic Denials of Woman as Image

Young Christian women inherit the echoes of ancient denials that women are made in the image of God, with Horowitz highlighting that although explicitly expressed denials were ‘very rare’, certain dominant voices and works that laid theological foundations cast doubt upon female dignity as *Imago Dei*.⁴² For example, Origen proposed that woman’s creation should be related to procreation rather than God’s image: ‘male and female [are] mentioned to explain ... how mankind was to increase and multiply.’⁴³ Maclean views Augustine to be the first to clarify the existence of doubt about the question: ‘is woman made in the image of God?’⁴⁴ According to Maclean, Augustine granted woman shared possession of the image of God ‘by grace, and not by nature.’⁴⁵ Horowitz identifies how uncertainty regarding female status resonated in some of what would become ‘major texts for later exegesis of the Bible,’⁴⁶ for example, Gratian’s 4th-century work *Decretum* as a ‘founding work of canon law’⁴⁷ used 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 to claim that ‘woman is said to be in the image of man’ rather than in the image of God.⁴⁸

Another influential historical perspective on this question was that of Aquinas, whom Maclean views as following Augustine in encouraging doubt regarding the female as *imago Dei*.⁴⁹ More specifically, Maclean identifies Aristotelian ideas surrounding gender being integrated into Aquinas’s thought: for example, Aristotle’s foundational association of the male with ‘active, formative and perfected characteristics’ and understanding of the female as ‘passive, material and deprived, desiring the male in order to become complete.’⁵⁰ In this way, Maclean argues, ‘physical and ethical aspects of Aristotelianism’, and primarily the tendency to ‘produce dualities in which one element

⁴² Horowitz, ‘The Image of God’, 205.

⁴³ Origen cited by Horowitz, ‘The Image of God’, 194.

⁴⁴ Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 13.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 181.

⁴⁷ Horowitz, ‘The Image of God’, 177.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 179, 180.

⁴⁹ Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 8.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

is superior and the other inferior', became 'married to exegesis' in relation to key biblical texts in a developing theology surrounding gender and God-likeness.⁵¹ For example, Aquinas read 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 to affirm the idea that woman in her inferior state embodied an imperfect and incomplete image: 'God's image is found in man in a way it is not found in woman.'⁵²

Indeed, Cloke singles out 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 as a text that 'formed the backbone of the position' that women could only boast of a 'more tenuous link with the divine' and therefore 'lacked some essential quality that men shared with God.'⁵³ Those who wish to re-envision the image of God to include femaleness have also had to engage with ideas that woman alone cannot claim to possess the image of God. On one hand, there was the idea that 'a human being needs a spouse to fulfil the image of God,' which as Horowitz observes is a prevailing theme 'running through Jewish tradition.'⁵⁴ Additionally, there are ways in which the issue has been addressed more specifically in relation to women, and the female vessel itself, as incapable of completely representing God's image. For example, Augustine asserts in his work *On the Holy Trinity*: 'the woman herself alone, she is not the image of God.'⁵⁵ In addressing such a history of doubt and denial regarding female status as *imago Dei*, one could join others in concluding – potentially over simplistically – that the church fathers had a purely androcentric concept of the *imago Dei*. For example, Ruether holds that ultimately and inescapably, 'Augustine defines the male, as alone, the full image of God.'⁵⁶

The history of thought regarding female inferiority and incomplete representation of the *imago Dei* appears to have developed in a vicious circle. On one hand, Aristotelian perspectives on gender and female inferiority influenced, and re-emerged in, Aquinas's foundational stance on women as imperfect or incomplete in relation to the image of

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Aquinas cited by Horowitz, 'The Image of God', 178.

⁵³ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 27.

⁵⁴ Horowitz, 'The Image of God', 186.

⁵⁵ Augustine, *On the Holy Trinity*, http://biblehub.com/library/augustine/on_the_holy_trinity/chapter_7_how_man_is_the.htm, accessed 16/2/15.

⁵⁶ Ruether cited by Horowitz, 'The Image of God', 202.

God.⁵⁷ In this way, ideas of the inherent inferiority of femaleness encouraged harmful denials with regards to woman's share in the *imago Dei*. However, Cloke alerts us to the way in which negative ideas regarding women and the *imago Dei* then further propagated ideas of female inferiority, arguing that denials of woman as *imago Dei* in early Christianity both emerged from and buttressed the view of women as inferior within Christian communities: belief about their inadequacy centred 'around the notion of the imperfect participation of women in the *imago Dei*.'⁵⁸

The Order of Creation and the Imago Dei

Cloke specifically relates this notion of imperfect participation with the idea that woman was created after man according to the second account of creation in Genesis 2:4-25, and was therefore, in the eyes of the church fathers, 'an imitation of an imitation.'⁵⁹ However, woman is born of man only in this second account, and a significant tension emerged between Genesis' two rather contrasting accounts. The first account, Genesis 1-2:3, is widely utilised in reference to the creation of the world. This iconic creation narrative describes woman 'as created simultaneously with Adam and given dominion over all living things.'⁶⁰ The other creation story however, is commonly prioritised when it comes to understanding the creation of humanity. Indeed, it is often read as if it is the ending and culmination of the first narrative. Norris describes the depiction of woman's creation from man's rib in Genesis 2:4-25 as a 'rib story' with 'an element of the ridiculous' which 'lends itself to interpretations of inferiority', thus undermining any semblance of divinity for Eve.⁶¹ For many, the idea that woman had a secondary place within the order of creation would be sufficient theological foundation for undermining her resemblance to God and thus her spiritual potential. Norris outlines the way in which the Genesis' second creation account could be read to establish the male as the primary and normative human: 'it begins by reversing the natural order of

⁵⁷ Maclean, *The Renaissance Notion of Woman*, 8.

⁵⁸ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 27.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Norris, *Eve*, 3.

⁶¹ Ibid., 19.

creation: a male god speaks the universe into being and the first woman is born of man.’⁶²

Debates surrounding the existence of one or two moments of formation directly impacted perceptions of female potential to hold the divine image; as with the adopted idea of two formations arose the possibility that God made man in his image, and then, out of some sort of secondary need, woman, in man’s image. For example, Aquinas affirmed the idea that man was created first and from this perspective emerged his thinking that man therefore possesses the possibility to perfectly represent the divine image, whereas the creation of woman from man means that man, rather than God, ‘is the beginning and end of woman,’ and thus, within this view, woman cannot directly bear God’s image in the way her male counterpart can.⁶³ Through my interviews I sought to discern the extent to which the religious self-understanding of contemporary young women is affected by how they interpret and apply the Genesis creation accounts. One might suppose that with less emphasis on ideas of man’s pre-existence would come greater empowerment for his female counterpart, with the image of ‘male-female creation’ providing a ‘minimal base for an anthropology of equality.’⁶⁴ And indeed, as will be discussed in greater depth later, the women to whom I spoke gave no weight to any ideas surrounding the possibility of a secondary creation for woman. Rather, they affirmed their own ability to reflect God’s nature as proof of their full share in the status and dignity of humankind created in God’s image.

Although certain voices of influence, like that of Augustine, rejected the suggestion that the creation of woman was a ‘change of plan’ that in any way implied a lesser status,⁶⁵ ideas regarding the order of creation were used – and are still used – to affirm female exclusion from particular roles and forms of religious-expression. The pseudo-Pauline text (as we now understand it) 1Timothy 2:11-12 underpins its requirement of female silence with reference to the order of creation, and Gryson notes that the idea that specific regulations for woman were rooted in her nature as a being ‘created after man’

⁶² Norris, *Eve*, 2.

⁶³ Aquinas, *ST*, 93.5.

⁶⁴ Kimelman, ‘The Seduction of Eve’, 247.

⁶⁵ Horowitz, ‘The Image of God’, 198.

was one which was retained and reaffirmed by ‘the theologians of later centuries.’⁶⁶ Castelli draws attention to Paul’s use of the order of creation in 1 Corinthians 11:7-9 in relation to the preservation of particular gender differences in worship contexts: ‘to imagine women prophesying with their heads uncovered ... violates some essential set of differentiations ... and challenges the authority ... of the order of creation.’⁶⁷ The fact that the order of creation functions as a significant theological starting point in some Pauline texts⁶⁸ can be seen as indicative of how it generally permeated early Christian thought regarding gender and religious behaviour. Strikingly, however, the order of creation continues to function in certain expressions of Christianity as a crucial theological foundation that influences ideas of appropriate religious behaviour. For example, the Danvers Statement published in 1988, typifies how the order of creation has a significant place within the thinking and practice of contemporary evangelical complementarianism.⁶⁹ One of the statement’s ‘affirmations’ asserts that ‘distinctions in masculine and feminine roles are ordained by God as part of the created order.’⁷⁰ These divinely designed roles centre upon male headship – the expectation that men are called to ‘lead, provide for and protect’⁷¹ – and there is evidently an assumption that some sort of justification for male authority can be found in Adam’s pre-existence.

Young women in contemporary evangelical Christianity thus find themselves placed on a spectrum between complementarian responses to the order of creation, with church structures that rely upon the created order for their interpretations of biblical masculinity and femininity and appropriate roles for men and women within the church, and egalitarian responses that interpret creation and ideas of headship differently.

Christian egalitarianism is perhaps most succinctly modelled by the international organisation ‘Christians for Biblical Equality’ and their defining statement, ‘Men, Women and Biblical Equality,’ in which the argument for the full equality of men and women is

⁶⁶ Gryson, *The Ministry of Women*, xv.

⁶⁷ Castelli, ‘Paul on Women’, 229.

⁶⁸ When this thesis refers to ‘Pauline texts’, I refer to texts traditionally associated with the apostle Paul, whether commonly understood to be authored by him or not.

⁶⁹ The Danvers Statement, <http://cbmw.org/core-beliefs/>, accessed 16/02/15.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*

⁷¹ John Piper cited by Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 18.

directed towards encouraging the allocation of tasks in God's service 'by giftedness, not by gender.'⁷² The very first 'Biblical Truth' set out by this document is concerned with affirming female possession of the divine image: 'The Bible teaches that both man and woman were created in God's image'.⁷³ This foundational 'Truth' is then directly linked with what is deemed to be its appropriate application: 'In the church, spiritual gifts of women and men are to be recognized, developed and used in serving and teaching ministries at all levels of involvement'.⁷⁴ Indeed, for those of an egalitarian stance, a reassertion of female creation in the image of God has often provided a starting point in responding to the ecclesial limitations of complementarian theologies of male headship.

There has emerged an overarching determination to defend woman's creation as *imago Dei* as ultimate proof of her equal dignity. Therefore, the first creation account in establishing how, 'in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them',⁷⁵ becomes a potent and valued source. Egalitarian theologians often progress from this starting point to question the doctrine of God espoused by any who would hold to the belief that woman can be simultaneously *imago Dei* and subordinate to man's headship. For theologians such as Hull, Kroeger and Giles, the doctrine of God provides entirely sufficient rebuttal to the argument that woman's creation from man theologically sanctions his authority over her, not least because from such a perspective Paul's alignment of the order of creation to the relationship between God and Christ⁷⁶ would deem Christ to be subordinate also.⁷⁷ As far as those of an egalitarian stance are concerned, there is ample evidence that the Genesis stories can be read as supporting 'true and equal regard for all persons'.⁷⁸ Ultimately, any controversy regarding the order of human formation and resulting status sparked by Christianity's creation stories must be assessed in relation to the fact that the same accounts have been used to support both egalitarian and complementarian perspectives, and those in between. This seems

⁷² 'Men, Women and Biblical Equality', http://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/english_0.pdf, accessed 6/8/15.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁷⁵ Genesis 1:27.

⁷⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:3.

⁷⁷ Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 35.

⁷⁸ Kung, *Women in Christianity*, 252.

to be the prevalent view amongst contemporary young women: whilst two of those I interviewed made reference to the order of creation in relation to how they understand their role in God's service, references to the Genesis accounts of creation – and any notion of how creation was ordered – overwhelmingly emphasised ideas of women's equal dignity and worth.

Femaleness and Fallen-ness

Contemporary Christian women identify with a tradition that has long since defined itself in relation to, and continues to explore its own understanding of, theologies surrounding the 'fall' and human sinfulness. Historically, the place of the female in developing ideas regarding sin was an uncomfortable one; as femaleness itself became increasingly associated with sinfulness and the 'fallen-ness' of the world was taken to signal patterns of 'natural' female subjugation. Norris stresses that Christianity with its monotheistic commitments to 'an omnipotent God' was going to inevitably have to tackle the question of who or what 'was responsible for the evil in the world.'⁷⁹ In turning to the aftermath of the creation stories, key figures of early Christianity contributed to the development of a doctrine of Original Sin that attributed ultimate responsibility for evil to human 'sin committed through free will'⁸⁰ and left a legacy that would affect the collective consciousness and the individual. This doctrine had a 'profound effect on Western culture' and as this study reveals, continues to permeate the inner-most workings of young women's faith and self-understanding.

Throughout history, different theological positions on sin and the Fall have yielded different attitudes towards female spiritual potential. For example, Kienzle and Walker draw attention to how the 'mid-century American holiness theologians' belief that Original Sin was not to be regarded 'as the permanent state of humanity' led to a 'reconsideration of long-standing injunctions against women's authority in the church.'⁸¹ Likewise, Catherine Booth's attitude towards the Fall heavily influenced her empowering vision of female potential. Catherine Booth (1829-1890) co-founded the Salvation Army and is an historically renown advocate for the full spiritual equality of female believers.

⁷⁹ Norris, *Eve*, 85.

⁸⁰ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 3:23.

⁸¹ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 290.

Booth affirmed woman's share in the *imago Dei* without hesitation; the creation story for her recounting how in the beginning 'God created male and female together and gave them dominion.'⁸² For Booth, authority of man over woman was a flawed concept and a post-fall reality; 'the subordination of women occurred later, as a punishment for her transgressions.'⁸³ Without extending immediate discussion of the idea of woman's subordination as punishment, Booth's rejection of male rule as something divinely ordained in the created order leads her to consider female limitation as something undesired by God and 'neither natural or eternal.'⁸⁴ Booth believed women were presently 'bound by a social order' yet understood herself to have unlimited potential to serve God under a redemption order which was embodied by Christ and overruled the negative effects of the Fall.⁸⁵

The self-understanding of Christian young women in relation to their created status and what they can and should do as bearers of God's image similarly takes shape in response to the various manifestations of fall theology that influence the formation of their faith-based identity. The question emerges therefore as to whether the young women I spoke to exemplified how a woman's perception of her status as *imago Dei*, and subsequently her place within the Christian church, can be directly affected by what she is taught or comes to understand with regards to the Fall and its effects. As will be discussed below, many of my interviewees viewed the Fall as something that had deeply personal implications, but most chose to nevertheless focus on a hope-filled understanding of themselves – and the Fall – in light of their own salvation; rather than imagining their own potential in light of the Fall.

We cannot access the lost voices of most of earliest Christianity's women to assess how they understood themselves in relation to ideas of the *imago Dei* or theologies of the Fall. Instead, we are often faced with the reductive models of sinfulness and repentance forged for us by the early church fathers who 'saw womankind as being essentially sinful; vain ... more liable to temptation.'⁸⁶ Kienzle and Walker highlight how Mary

⁸² Booth cited by Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 291.

⁸³ Ibid.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 292.

⁸⁶ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 29.

Magdalene's identity as a 'prominent disciple was almost fully eclipsed' by her later depiction as 'Mary the repentant prostitute.'⁸⁷ Memory of her influence and any sense of her humanness or 'realness' are simultaneously shrouded by such simplistic exemplification. Indeed, Streete emphasises how by the 6th century a 'conflation of legends' had 'transformed Mary Magdalene from the wise companion of Christ to the "woman who was a sinner."' ⁸⁸ Canonical texts, or at least how they have been interpreted, have played their part in the close-minded association of the female with sin. D'Angelo focuses on Luke's note that 'seven devils had gone out of Mary' which 'follows the story of the sinful woman anointing Jesus' as what 'probably inspired the traditional identification of Mary ... earning her the status of repentant prostitute.'⁸⁹ As for the unnamed woman who anoints Jesus, 'the story of the woman is virtually forgotten; the significance of her 'prophetic sign-action' being entirely overlooked in the written text and the later 'gospel knowledge' of Christians.⁹⁰

As a last example, the way John 4 has been read shows again how reductive reading tendencies have worked in the history of women and Christianity, as most 'commentators of the past' tended to read the text in such a way as to 'denigrate the woman,' concentrating on a reading of 'her history as sinful.'⁹¹ It is too easy to identify stories of powerful female contribution that became stories of female sinfulness, and the extent to which this association of women with sin finds fresh expression in the self-understanding of contemporary young women begged examination. My interviews were interesting in this respect. Although on one hand the young women interviewed were quick to associate with ideas of the Fall and personal sinfulness, they did not explicitly relate this to their gender.

Women as Image of Eve

Historically, however, there is a sense that women have been encouraged to view themselves in light of theology and doctrine regarding sin above and beyond ideas of

⁸⁷ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 30.

⁸⁸ Streete, 'Women as Sources of Redemption', 343.

⁸⁹ D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing 'Real' Women', 117.

⁹⁰ Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her*, xxviii.

⁹¹ D'Angelo, 'Woman and the Gospels', 133.

their creation as *imago Dei*. For Malone, women have been encouraged to view themselves as sinful through forceful and binding association with Eve herself, historically sharing a negative identification with the first woman: ‘branded as sinful daughters of Eve.’⁹² Just as a need to explain the presence of evil resulted in the creation of doctrine surrounding the Fall and Original Sin; a need to ‘understand the implications’ of what happened in Eden led to the development of a definition of Eve that Norris argues ‘became the blueprint for Woman.’⁹³ If Eve has functioned for many as a ‘blueprint for Woman,’ and ‘by the time of the Early Church Fathers’ many commentators viewed ‘Eve/Everywoman’ as ‘archetypically wicked’⁹⁴; one would expect that lasting damage from how Eve has been represented and femaleness understood will consequentially be evident in the self-understanding of contemporary young women who identify with the Christian tradition. This resonates a little in how quickly a couple of interviewees spoke of themselves in relation to ideas of their own sinfulness.

Tertullian’s now iconic association of all women with Eve – ‘Don’t you know you are each an Eve?’ – was followed by his characterisation of woman as the cause of sin that would accompany the name; ‘You are the devil’s gateway ... you are she who persuaded him whom the devil was not valiant enough to attack.’⁹⁵ Woman was not only accused of causing sin through her persuasion of Adam, but as the ‘mother of all living’ she inherited in part the responsibility for the Original Sin that Augustine presented as propagated by childbirth and an inescapable birthright: ‘and thus the nature of the human race, born from the flesh of one transgressor.’⁹⁶ Armstrong discerns the characterisation of Eve as ‘the cause of the sin of the man’ to be ‘at the heart’ of each formulation of the doctrine of Original Sin, ensuring that for as long as Eve is Everywoman: ‘in the West woman is forever Eve, luring men to his doom.’⁹⁷ As Original Sin came to be understood as something transmitted by sex,⁹⁸ there emanated from this the idea of woman as seducer or temptress; the vessel of dangerous sexuality. There are

⁹² Malone, *From the Reformation*, 298.

⁹³ Norris, *Eve*, 4.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 41.

⁹⁵ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, i:i.

⁹⁶ Augustine, *On Nature and Grace*, 23.

⁹⁷ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 33.

⁹⁸ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 31.

difficulties in simplistically naming any key source or influence behind the construction of what became a damaging anthropology of the female person. Cloke notes that ‘for many, following Paul,’ woman came to be seen as the cause of man’s downfall through her sexuality,⁹⁹ and yet Armstrong is bemused at the idea that Paul or Pauline literature could have inspired such an outlook: ‘he never discusses the way that this Original Sin was passed from one generation to another ... he never discusses Eve’s part in the Fall ... and he never links ‘Original’ Sin with sex.’¹⁰⁰ Regardless of their origins, ideas of Eve as the guiltier party and root of all sin emerged and influenced how women were understood. Given that Eve became ‘synonymous with Woman’ and her characterisation was ‘assumed to be paradigmatic for her daughters,’¹⁰¹ we would expect to see some semblance of an afterlife of such thought emerging even now in the responsive self-understanding of Christian young women. Most positively, the young women I spoke to continued to relate to Eve, not as a figure of specifically female sinfulness, but as a model of what it is to be human.

Historic association of the female with Eve and all she has stood for not only stands to affect how young women understand their embodied femaleness and the relationship between this and their potential status as *imago Dei* however, but exerts power to practically affect ideas of their role and how they should be treated. Alongside female identification with a figure held up as the cause of all sin emerges the story of woman in a necessarily compensatory role. The work and witness of holy women of early Christianity was often seen under the shadow of their perceived task to ‘rectify the sin of the ancient Eve,’¹⁰² and religious life for women was often ‘designed to promote the sanctification of women’ that would gradually ‘atone for the permanent damage done to all women and the whole human race by Eve and all her daughters.’¹⁰³ To be female became equated with the need to atone for oneself, and Malone claims that this was a need externally imposed rather than the result of a correlating self-understanding; with women ‘living lives of reparation for their status as daughters of Eve ... this was not always how the women saw themselves, but the imposition of the spirituality of

⁹⁹ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 30.

¹⁰⁰ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 30.

¹⁰¹ Norris, *Eve*, 10.

¹⁰² Hippolytus cited by Jansen, ‘Maria Magdalena’, 58.

¹⁰³ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 146.

repentance and atonement for their very existence.¹⁰⁴ Malone takes the implications of this further, asserting that the excessive atonement of women ‘laid the foundation for the spirituality of femininity.’¹⁰⁵ This raises the question of how deeply embedded such ideas of femaleness and spiritual experience became, and also of whether or not young women still understand their own spirituality and self-consciously formulate their own spiritual expression from a starting point which assumes their own guilt. The women I interviewed expressed an awareness of Eve’s historic associations with especial sinfulness, yet a few subverted these ideas and the implications for their own lives by suggesting ways in which Eve’s actions were not related to her gender, but to her humanness and position within the story.

The impact of female connection with Eve throughout history can also be discerned within early Christianity’s tendency to more quickly associate women with ‘heresy’, untruth and deception; another stereotypical characterisation that would effectively serve to distance women from identification with their nature as *imago Dei*. An idea already prevalent in Greek and Jewish culture regarding ‘female weakness and permeability’¹⁰⁶ was only encouraged by a fascination with Eve’s nature as one who was deceived. D’Angelo and Kraemer lament the denigration of early Christian women’s voices and the loss of their memory due to the fact that ‘many Christian writers (all male) from the second century on aligned “heresy” with women and women with “heresy.”’¹⁰⁷ Evidently as the deceived Eve became ‘Everywoman’¹⁰⁸ an automatic distrust was applied to female thought and religious self-expression. Streete notes that ‘as women became associated with “false teaching” and “false knowledge” ... the association of women with prophecy became dangerous’; an example of how female representation of the divine was generally undermined in light of ideas surrounding Eve, rather than empowered through acknowledgement of female creation as *imago Dei*.

Beyond any connections with Eve and ideas of especial guilt, Armstrong draws attention to the detrimental impact of the Cult of Mary in strengthening feelings of guilt within

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 251.

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 247.

¹⁰⁶ Norris, *Eve*, 196.

¹⁰⁷ D’Angelo and Kraemer, *Women and Christian Origins*, 7.

¹⁰⁸ Norris, *Eve*, 4.

female self-awareness. The figurehead of woman's compensatory role emerged as the idealised virgin Mary who offered an alternative option of identification to the woman who was Eve by birth. However, the memory of Mary as one who displayed strength of character and even 'challenged the decrees of God the Father,'¹⁰⁹ was neglected in favour of the presentation of the perfect virgin mother. In this way, the powerful idea that the only way to be a 'good woman' was to be a 'sexless one' gained force, and ultimately women were left with an impossible role model; 'an ideal of womanhood that denied the physical realities of sexuality and maternity.'¹¹⁰

Maleness and the Imago Dei

Neither Eve nor Mary as polarised visions of womanhood lent themselves to any idea that women could identify with their femaleness and their created dignity as image bearers. In the absence of any true model of female embodiment of the *imago Dei*, there developed the idea that woman was to become 'male' in order to hold the image of God. For some, this sort of thinking was born out of the perceived maleness of Christianity's God; his association with maleness particularly inescapable because of the unique reliance on the doctrine of the Incarnation which involved God revealing himself in the body of a historical male. Streete argues that ideas of Jesus' maleness came to be viewed as holding weight in a faith where 'the experience of salvation ... involved a special bond of identification ... in which the gender of either [the saviour or the 'saved'] might have considerable significance.'¹¹¹ Streete draws attention to the way in which Jesus' maleness therefore came to be used as justification for the exclusion of women from certain forms of representing God in early Christian communities; the fact that Jesus was a man created some sort of gender-based barrier preventing women from identifying with God as revealed by Jesus as freely as men could. Indeed, in 1976 Pope Paul VI cited the maleness of Christ in a declaration against the idea of admitting women to priesthood: 'that is why we can never ignore the fact that Christ is a man.'¹¹² In John Paul II's apostolic letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* (1994), greatest emphasis is placed upon the maleness of the twelve apostles called by Christ. John Paul II's position is centred on

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹¹⁰ Norris, *Eve*, 237.

¹¹¹ Streete, 'Women as Sources of Redemption', 331.

¹¹² Paul VI cited by Malone, *First Thousand*, 17.

the argument that the maleness of these key followers of Christ was no accident or merely cultural consideration, but intentional, divinely ordained, and enough justification to exclude women from priesthood.¹¹³

The significance attributed to the maleness of Christ and his closest followers means it is unsurprising that some of the earliest Christian writings espoused the attainment of 'maleness' as the ultimate goal for the Christian women in their communities; with maleness almost replacing godliness as the reward for holy behaviour. Femaleness as a created state was viewed as a lowly enough reality to inspire teaching that 'the reward for being a virtuous female was ... negation of her original abject nature'; 'if sufficiently pious, women were exhorted that they' could achieve 'the self-same sex as men.'¹¹⁴ The proposed significance of attaining the semblance of 'maleness' emanates from the theological anthropology of Christian antiquity that regarded the male person as a closer resemblance of the divine image, and therefore for the female believer: 'maleness' and godliness come to be viewed as almost synonymous realities. Philo's creation of allegory that associated man with 'reason' and the female with 'the lower parts of the soul ... and a whole range of ignoble activity' typifies the sort of thought that founded ideas that femaleness itself placed an individual at a greater distance from God and thus had to be overcome to more adequately display the *imago Dei*: 'Philo saw the growing in God's image as ... "becoming a man."¹¹⁵ According to certain voices of influence, to 'become man' – and therefore Godly – a woman was essentially required to take off her femaleness; heeding the command to 'flee from all that is effeminate in the soul as if you had taken a man's body.'¹¹⁶

Once a woman had in such a quest 'forsaken all that is after the manner of women,'¹¹⁷ it seems she would have inevitably acted to alienate her spiritual self from her physical embodiment. The depiction of women who were regarded as having achieved some sort of holy 'maleness' captures rather succinctly the ambiguous alienation innate within

¹¹³ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html, accessed 08/08/15.

¹¹⁴ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 212.

¹¹⁵ Horowitz, 'Image of God', 192.

¹¹⁶ Porphyry, *Letter to Marcella* cited by Cloke, 33.

¹¹⁷ Baer, *Philo's Use of Categories* cited by Horowitz, 193.

their spiritual self-hood. For example, Palladius described Melania the Elder as ‘the female man of God ... a man in everything but body’¹¹⁸ and Gregory of Nazianzus characterised Nonna as one ‘displaying in female form the spirit of a man.’¹¹⁹ Considering this in view of Malone’s claim that ‘for most women, one of the longest journeys is the journey to the unity of body and spirit,’ it becomes paramount that any continuing formation of women to in any way understand their femaleness as a vessel that relegates them to automatic inferiority and a place of greater distance from God’s image is a problematic theology which must be exposed and eradicated. Young women must be formed instead to affirm their own femaleness and embodied experience of the world as something utterly compatible with a spiritual self-understanding rooted in full acceptance of their equal share in God’s image and likeness. Indeed, my interviews inspired hope that this task is not an impossible one. From the young women I spoke to there was no sense of maleness being viewed as something specifically dignified or Godly in itself. Rather, some placed emphasis on humanness – constituted by male and female – being distinctly special in its closeness to the divine image.

There is hope that young women are responding to all that they inherit from Christian scripture, history and tradition in such a way as to refuse harmful and limiting associations with the Eve figure that was forged to function as eternal scapegoat. Indeed, Malone argues that women are increasingly resisting association with especial guilt and distance from the divine image, asserting that ‘in women’s own self-knowledge, the traditional alignment of women and evil is coming to an end.’¹²⁰ That same hope inspires this study.

The Interview Process

The interviews I conducted for this project opened with several questions designed to gauge how the young women I spoke to understood ideas of the *imago Dei*, the figure of Eve and theologies of the Fall in relation to their own spiritual self-understanding.¹²¹ The

¹¹⁸ Palladius, *Dialogue*, 56, in Cloke, 214.

¹¹⁹ Gregory of Nazianzus, *Concerning Himself*, 116, in Cloke, 214.

¹²⁰ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 251.

¹²¹ The Methodological Appendix offers a copy of the questionnaire used, as well as information regarding its formation and the process of data collection as a whole.

questions included the following: 'Who do you think you are to God?' 'Why do you think God created women?' 'What does it mean to you that God created human beings "in his image"?' The interviews yielded a complex, but overwhelmingly positive, affirmation of female status as *Imago Dei*.¹²² From the young women's responses emerged several key themes: the idea of bearing the divine image through being a child of God, being created in a way that was superior to and distinct from other animals and therefore signifying of a greater dignity for human creatures, the ability to reflect God's nature proving one's creation in the *imago Dei* and true representation of the divine image requiring both male and female counterparts.

Bearing the Imago Dei as a Child of God

The first affirmation of female status as *imago Dei* emerged in almost every interview through the interviewees' identification as a '*child of God*.' In relation to understanding oneself as bearing the *imago Dei*, this imagery of being God's child has immediate connotations of having origin in God, intimate connection with God and bearing resemblance to God. The women I spoke to directly associated this personal identification with a particular relationship with God, that of '*a child and father relationship*,' and for many this equated easily with, and seemed to emanate from, a relationship perceived to be loving and intimate in nature: '*And there's that parent role, so that sort of relationship there, that he looks out for me and I can chat to him and be honest with him and that he loves me a lot as well.*'

For others, their vision of themselves as one of 'his children' came across as something rooted in their reading of biblical texts: '*I guess biblically speaking I know that I'm his child*', '*Well from what we read in scripture, just the knowledge that we are regarded as his children and I am a child of God.*' This identification shows women understanding their connection with the divine through the imagining of a specifically intimate relationship and highlights the absence of any ideas of the female as automatically more distant from God as 'the lower parts of the soul.'¹²³ Women defining their relationship with God in terms of a parent/child bond implies acceptance of ideas of filial connection, resemblance and creation out of his being; '*I kind of think it means there's*

¹²² 16 out of 16 women interviewed affirmed the creation of human beings 'in (God's) image', as well as male and female equality at the point of creation.

¹²³ Baer, *Philo's Use of Categories* cited by Horowitz, 'Image of God', 193.

part of him in us.' Indeed, one participant's thoughts capture the way in which several women's understanding of a child/parent relationship led into a vision of themselves as a continuation and carrier of God's nature:

So in the same way as a parent passes on traits to their children, the way I think of it is that God has imprinted something among my mess and my sinfulness; there is something of God's character to be found in me.

The confirmation of God as father figure – *'I do think of this very much as a child and a father relationship'* – carries a reminder of a void present in Christian narrative when it comes to 'feminine imagery for God'; which Pagels claims disappeared almost entirely with the establishment of the New Testament canon.¹²⁴ Malone views what she calls 'the relentless use of male language and symbol in description of ... the Christian God' as a major issue to be tackled when addressing feminine spirituality,¹²⁵ with Schottroff claiming that the 'self-alienation' of women is 'promoted by Christian generic language.'¹²⁶ The interviews did not make obvious the existence of any underlying negative or alienating effects. In fact, Rachel modelled a subversively empowering approach to what has been read as negatively androcentric language, choosing to identify with 'sonship', not as a limiting or exclusive term, but as an important signifier of equal status and inheritance:

I am his [God's] son ... and it is so good that we can be sons. And it's not that it's a bad thing that to be a daughter, but that you've been given the status that Christ was given.'

Rachel's readiness to embrace 'sonship' and identify as God's son seems to reflect ancient accounts of women 'becoming male' in their resemblance of God. For Rachel, being able to identify as a son of God is indication that she shares divine status: *'the status that Christ was given.'* Rachel's self-empowering approach to the concept of sonship encourages us to reconsider women of Christianity's history who apparently achieved spiritual 'maleness' through Godly behaviour. These women may have similarly

¹²⁴ Pagels cited by Horowitz, 'Image of God', 187.

¹²⁵ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 254.

¹²⁶ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 150.

understood their spiritual ‘maleness’ more in terms of its association with the divine image, than as any signification of ideas surrounding female nature’s inherent inferiority.

The notion of identifying as a child of God was a common thread throughout the interviews, almost without exception.¹²⁷ For the young women I spoke to, this identification was intrinsically associated with ideas of bearing God’s image and closeness of relationship. The young women related to being God’s child as something foundational and central in their Christian faith, their imagining of themselves and their understanding of God. Thus we can discern that, for these women at least, there is an acceptance of themselves as created in the *imago Dei* at the core of their spiritual self-understanding.

Humanity as a Superior Creation

To many of the women interviewed, the idea of their creation as *imago Dei* was taken to mean that they shared in a superior creation and thus possessed greater dignity than the rest of the animals.¹²⁸ Some of the interviewees thought that the nature of humanness itself centres upon its creation in God’s image and from that derives its distinction: ‘*There’s a really clear distinction between being human, we’re made in the likeness of God.*’ Female inclusion in this human distinction was taken for granted, or, in other interviews insisted upon: ‘*And that it’s only man that is made in his image ... and I mean man as in humanity.*’ The *imago Dei* is taken as the seal of distinction – ‘*I think that was God marking out humans as different*’ – that qualified humanness, rather than maleness, as a uniquely dignified creation. Claire conveyed personal knowledge of having been superiorly created from observation of human behaviour: ‘*if you look around, how we can communicate, how we can function ... how much God put into us.*’ Several women interviewed expressed confusion with regards to the order of creation, as to whether Adam was created first and if so, the perceived significance of such a reality. For example, Sophie asked: ‘*If Adam was first, is that unequal?*’ And yet, throughout the interviews, there was no sense that these young women viewed the creation of man as in any way distinct or superior to that of woman. Rather, most

¹²⁷ 12 out of 16 women explicitly identified themselves as a child of God.

¹²⁸ 6 women interviewed referred to the distinctive and superior creation of human beings.

emphasis was placed upon the belief that the creation of humanity, male and female, was something of utmost dignity and value.

None of the interviews offered any evidence of women undermining their own creation as *imago Dei* in relation to men, or indeed accrediting ideas that they were created out of man with any great significance. Rather, modern female assurance of a shared identity as image bearers seems to emerge mostly, in contrast to a view of animals as non-image bearers: *'He didn't say that they're [the animals] in his image and that just shows where we stand on earth and what our place is on earth.'* The young women I interviewed understand themselves as equally dignified creatures through mutual possession of the *imago Dei*. This is a far cry from some of the self-hatred that permeates women's history and finds acute expression in the words of medieval author Christine de Pizan: 'I wondered how such a worthy artisan could have deigned to make such an abominable work which, from what they say, is the vessel as well as the abode of every evil and vice.'¹²⁹

Bearing God's Image, Reflecting His Nature

Furthermore, for the women I spoke to, the ability to be in some way like God functioned as proof of their shared participation in the *imago Dei*. Some expressed this primarily in terms of a belief in their ability to reflect God, with no acknowledgement or perception of any barriers created by their gendered embodiment.¹³⁰ For example, Sophie remarked: *'if you're in someone's image you reflect them'*, *'we all reflect God in that way'*, *'in many ways we reflect his character.'* Others more explicitly laid out their ability to 'reflect' God as something evidenced by their potential for Godliness and the fulfilment of Godly roles and functions. There was some agreement that the potential to emulate God's goodness was a result of creation as *imago Dei*: *'It means that there is potential for goodness in all of us'*; *'he made them to be like him, good in nature'*; *'real goodness and kindness ... they all came from God.'* And yet, more conflicting ideas emerged with regards to female ability to resemble God through dominion over the rest of creation. Horowitz draws attention to how historically doubt was shed upon the created role of women: 'some rabbis denied that dominion over the

¹²⁹ Christine de Pizan (1364-1430) cited by Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 84.

¹³⁰ 4 women specifically mentioned humanity 'reflecting' God's nature.

animals was given to women as to man and viewed man alone as an exemplar of God's commanding nature.¹³¹ In discussing the ways in which they reflected God's nature through creation as *imago Dei*, these young women spoke openly of sharing in God's goodness, love and creativity – and yet only one participant mentioned the God-like task of ruling over the world: '*and it is only man [as in humanity] who has dominion over others.*' Grimke's assertion that 'male and female were created equally in the image of God and were jointly given dominion over other creatures but not over each other'¹³² finds little support in the words of my interviewees. Rather the idea of dominion was more frequently noted in relation to ideas of man's dominion over woman: '*and he was in dominion over her*', '*it suggests that women are under the dominion of man.*' The interviews implied that although young women profess their own equal share in the *imago Dei*, there may be aspects of God's character which women struggle to identify with or claim resemblance to. For example, the young women did not associate themselves with any resemblance of God's dominion or authority. Furthermore, just as women may subtly or explicitly distance themselves from particular roles or behaviours attributed to God, so too they may practically limit how they express their nature as one created in God's image by resisting particular means of earthly representation of the divine.

Female Creation and a Completed Image

A common thread through many of the interviews was the idea that man and woman together embody a completed picture of the *imago Dei*.¹³³ Whereas some schools of thought with regards to the order of creation would see femaleness envisaged as a secondary 'extraction ... from a male archetype,'¹³⁴ the young women interviewed imagined their creation as a crucial act of completion. When asked why God created women, two participants suggested that the creation of the female responded to an

¹³¹ Horowitz, 'Image of God', 189.

¹³² Grimke cited by Norris, *Eve*, 359.

¹³³ 8 women related to woman's creation as an act of completion: creating 'balance', 'wholeness', 'the whole picture', a completed 'image of God'.

¹³⁴ Lahey on the views of Paul, *Image and Glory of God*, 115.

absence, some sort of imperfect incompleteness: *'God saw that man needed a helper', 'in the bible it says to be a companion for Adam.'* Although almost every young woman asked referred in some way to the *'practical reasons'* behind woman's existence as a being necessary for humankind *'to populate the earth,'* most placed greater emphasis on the idea that woman was needed to accomplish a full representation on earth of the *imago Dei*. Indeed, many saw their creation as woman as the establishment of balance and wholeness: *'that wholeness there is in male and female combined ... I would say its a very balanced thing, women and men.'* In asserting that the creation of woman constitutes completion of God's image, and a 'balanced' representation of the divine, the young women I interviewed expressed a core belief of the complementarian position.¹³⁵ Interestingly however, this belief as used by Pope Paul VI, Pope John Paul II and figureheads of contemporary complementarianism such as John Piper¹³⁶ to exclude women from particular roles in the representation of God, was used by these women to affirm their creation as equal bearers of God's image.

Abi looked to the rest of creation as affirmation of man and woman as God's full creative intention: the fact that we can see *'all creation as male and female,'* she thought shows that *'there was a need for both male and female to reflect his [God's] nature.'* According to the self-understanding of these young women, the 'small scale narrative' of the second creation account becomes a divinely significant moment through which woman is the culmination of a creative process and an essential part of God's image. The women interviewed seemingly understood the *imago Dei* to exist only through the creation of a humanity constituted by both male and female natures. Man alone was 'not the whole picture', and Jessica explained the need for woman as well as man to 'image God' through her understanding of the incorporation of 'female' elements in the divine being:

We as one gender could never hold an image of God in a satisfactory way ... men and women ... reflect different aspects of God's character ... the word used for the Holy Spirit is quite often a female word in the Hebrew ... and so

¹³⁵ For a breakdown of the sample's denominational backgrounds, see the Methodological Appendix.

¹³⁶ John Piper models the way complementarian ideas are used in contemporary contexts for the exclusion of women. Piper summarises his complementarian view's implications for the church as establishing that 'the primary responsibility for governance and teaching in the church should be carried by spiritual men' in 'God Created Man Male and Female: What Does It Mean to Be Complementarian?', <http://www.desiringgod.org/messages/god-created-man-male-and-female-what-does-it-mean-to-be-complementarian>, accessed 19/08/15.

the compassionate, nurturing ... side of the Holy Spirit I feel like women have a lot more of.

Indeed, while key figures of contemporary complementarianism have argued that man's 'authority ... rests in his "firstness",'¹³⁷ these young women, to some extent, view their dignity as rooted in woman's created "secondness" and completion of the divine image.

The interview data thus far has illustrated that young women are continuing to identify with the *imago Dei* in empowering and spiritually enriching ways. The interview process was also directed towards assessing how young women relate to Eve, and the idea of Eve, and how any existing associations affect their self-understanding. Each interviewee was asked questions including: 'How have you been taught or how have you come to understand the idea of the Fall?' 'Where does guilt lie in the story [Genesis 3]?' 'What do you think of when you think about Eve's character?'

Understanding the Fall

The potently influential Christian doctrine of the Fall seemed to have infiltrated the self-knowledge of the women interviewed in different ways. For a few of the women I spoke to, the Fall itself constituted a lens through which their nature as *imago Dei* was viewed. The image was perceived to be something they shared, but ultimately in a flawed, broken or unfulfilled form. For Jennifer, the Fall acted to thwart the potential for godliness that was aligned with creation in God's image: '*we have that potential [to be like God] within us, but because of the Fall and how much we suck as humans, we don't fulfil that potential.*' Several participants conveyed their understanding of the Fall as something that had personal and inescapable implications: '*we have to answer to God for the sin that's in our lives, because of what happened at the Fall.*' Indeed, the young women appeared to be all too ready to associate themselves and God's knowledge of them with 'sinfulness' and error. When asked who she believed she was to God, Chloe reflected that she had realised: '*we are loved, we are cherished, that we have gone our own way and that we are sinful and that we mess up all the time.*' These women did not simply redefine ideas of their identity as image bearers in view of the Fall, however; there also emerged from some a hopeful re-imagining of the Fall in light of the salvation

¹³⁷ Bedale cited by Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 29.

story¹³⁸ and the hope gleaned from a personal relationship with Jesus that preserves the *imago Dei* and promises eventual restoration:

That is the immediate thing that comes to mind, that even in our sinfulness and fallen-ness and how far we are from God ... there is still something to be found in us of him; Jesus lives in us and God's image is revealed in that.

One could suggest therefore, that the way these women reflected on the Fall and notions of human sinfulness so quickly did not arise from any preoccupation with any sort of particular guilt or 'fallen-ness' associated with their femaleness, but rather from a particular understanding of salvation. They referred to a developed or inherited salvation story that begins with the Fall, allows for restoration of the divine image through Christ and finishes with the eventual undoing of the Fall's effects through Christ's return.

Understanding Eve

The young women interviewed for this study were overwhelmingly convinced that woman has been created in God's image or likeness.¹³⁹ Interestingly, the same women also chose not to entirely denounce association with Eve and her legacy. Rather, there appeared to be a desire among several of the women to depict Eve in more 'real' terms, to re-imagine her story creatively, to move beyond the sort of two-dimensional and derogatory characterisations that saw her nicknamed the 'devil's gateway.'¹⁴⁰ Indeed, when asked, 'What do you think of when you think of Eve's character?', several of the young women I interviewed initially expressed ideas along the lines of Tertullian's exhortation: '*You automatically think of her as foolish and one who is easily led into sin*', '*she was vulnerable and naive ... when Satan tempted her she believed what he was telling her and did it.*'¹⁴¹ And yet, most progressed to explore instead the human motivation and impulses that inspired her behaviour. Abi associated tendencies to blame Eve as weak and sinful with an absence of information about her: '*you're not told much*

¹³⁸ 5 women directly related their understanding of the Fall to their understanding of salvation through Christ.

¹³⁹ 16 out of 16 affirmed their creation as *imago Dei*.

¹⁴⁰ Tertullian, *On the Apparel of Women*, i:i.

¹⁴¹ 3 women spoke of Eve as 'weak' and 'foolish'.

about her ... you automatically think of her as foolish and one who is easily led into sin.' However, Claire chose to focus on textual silence as a source of possible commonalities with Eve's character: *'there wasn't [written down] the idea of how the tree looked really appealing to Eve. And I think that's the world to us ... it is appealing how it looks and we want to take part of it that we shouldn't.'*

The interviews also revealed an agreement of how Eve has been unfairly treated by Christian memory: *'she bears the brunt of the Fall, she is very much blamed'*; *'people use her as the scapegoat.'* Patterns emerged of young women attempting to actively displace blame from the historically burdened Eve; the woman perceived by many to be *'the cause of all that misery, all that burden of sin and evil.'*¹⁴² For some, this displacement took shape as an espoused understanding of 'sin' as an impersonal force that was the true cause of human suffering: *'but when the Fall happened, sin entered the world'*; *'sin entered the world and this meant that Adam and Eve had to die at some point.'* For others, focus centred upon the devil's alleged responsibility. The reflections of three different participants captured rather succinctly the women's relocation of blame and a larger development within Christian thought regarding the serpent's identity as the devil: *'the serpent was obviously the orchestrator of the whole thing'*; *'the ser-, the devil deceived ... the woman into doing what God had told her not to do'*; *'obviously the responsibility for the Fall lies with the devil.'*

The interviews exposed a self-awareness with regards to the reasoning most commonly employed to justify ascribing Eve – and subsequently the female – with blame. One young woman reflected upon Genesis 3: *'people use this text as "it was all women's fault" but ... we were just the first to go.'* The powerful narrative feature that Eve was first to sin was played with by another participant, who undermined any ideas that Eve's action emanated from a natural inferiority by speculating that Adam would have behaved identically had the circumstances been reversed:

I think it would be interesting, like you know the snake tempted Eve and she gave in and then presented that to Adam – it would be interesting if Adam had been in that position of being tempted by the snake, I believe he would have been equally as vulnerable ... to the temptation.

¹⁴² Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 33.

Shared Image, Shared Responsibility

In discussion of their own understandings of the Fall, many women expressed belief in the shared responsibility of Adam and Eve.¹⁴³ For some, this was embedded in the insistence that Adam was with Eve at the moment of her temptation. For example, Katie noted: *'He is with her. I think a lot of people are taught that it was woman who brought sin into the world and it's not', 'he stood by and didn't intervene ... that's why the Fall affects men and women and there's shared responsibility.'* Small but significant hermeneutical assumptions painted the picture of a passive Adam who is thus equally culpable. *'It doesn't say that Adam is elsewhere.'* Showing once again how their self-understanding is rooted in their use of biblical texts, the sense of mutual responsibility was only strengthened in Katie's perspective by the fact that punishments were narratively recorded for both: *'under God they must be viewed as equal ... he gives them the same punishment in this passage.'*

In conclusion, the young women I interviewed affirmed their own creation as *imago Dei* and engaged with inherited ideas regarding Eve, female sinfulness and the Fall in relation to such a reality. They did not perceive themselves as having a weaker link with the divine, but emphasised their equal share in humanity's superior connection to God. They did not associate themselves with any concept of bearing God's image in an imperfect way because of their gender, but spoke of humanity's imperfect reflection of God's nature as a result of the Fall. Rather than relating to ideas of the order of creation in terms of woman being created second or reflecting man as opposed to God, the young women expressed belief in woman's creation signifying the completion of God's creative act. Furthermore, the interviewees did not view their femaleness as indication of any particular guilt. The Fall had infiltrated their self-understanding but was understood in light of salvation.

It should also by now be apparent that it would be inappropriate to read the title of this chapter simplistically as an indication that for contemporary young Christian women identification with the image of God and identification with the figure of Eve are mutually exclusive options and binary opposites. The young women interviewed for this

¹⁴³ 14 of 16 women interviewed referred to shared responsibility.

project chose instead to view Eve in light of their innate assurance of their own dignified status as bearers of divine likeness; redeeming her memory in attempts to re-envisage her as a *'very good representation of what it is to be human. Because yes she was tempted but she regretted it and she still loved God and still feared him and knew his power.'*

2. Young Women and the Word: How do young women understand themselves in relation to the biblical text?

Introduction

For Karen Armstrong, Christianity as a faith and institution – and the Bible as its text and core foundation – should be unapologetically disregarded as religious entities harmfully culpable in the ‘creation of - women’s problems in the West.’¹⁴⁴ Armstrong does acknowledge however, that her perspective is not universally shared and the relevance of Christianity has not been universally dismissed: ‘it may be too soon to say that we have moved once and for all into a post-Christian era’.¹⁴⁵ And indeed, the young women encountered through this thesis indicate that there are those for whom the Bible continues to function as ‘Holy Scripture, gospel, for Christians today.’¹⁴⁶ At the same time, the very fact that the Bible has been defined by some as an instrument of evil and the primary source of support for ‘slavery, racist oppression ... anti-semitism and apartheid ... the silencing and exclusion of women’ inspired Malone to raise the question: ‘How can the bible be a saving word for women Christians?’¹⁴⁷ This chapter emerges from a similar starting point and curiosity, but has a particular interest in how young women of 21st-century expressions of Christianity are relating to this ‘saving word.’ It examines how women have engaged – and continue to wrestle – with a book that has both been brandished by oppressive forces and treasured by many as a means of self-empowerment.

¹⁴⁴ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, x.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, ix.

¹⁴⁶ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, xlv.

¹⁴⁷ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

Issues of Authority

When beginning to explore the issue of how young women understand and use the Bible, Sakenfield's assertion seems to apply: 'at the heart of the problem lies the issue of biblical authority.'¹⁴⁸ If the Bible were not perceived to hold authority, then it would have no power to oppress or enable. Crucially however, every woman interviewed for this project had ties to an effectively biblicist expression of Christianity,¹⁴⁹ and this research therefore takes for granted the perceived authority of the Bible and addresses the Bible as an authoritative collection of texts. The 1974 Lausanne Covenant produced by evangelical Christians for the promotion of worldwide mission presents the Bible as 'the only written word of God, without error in all that it affirms'; a collection of texts that constitutes 'the only infallible rule of faith and practice.'¹⁵⁰ This rather neatly captures what Noll describes as evangelicals' 'most important conviction ... that the Bible is true'; a conviction regarding the Bible that Noll believes to constitute the self-definition of evangelical Christianity.¹⁵¹ It illustrates through the lens of the evangelical Christian tradition the association of biblical text with 'Truth' that has underpinned much of Christianity's doctrine and practice.

This belief in the essential truthfulness or trustworthiness of the Bible has not always equated to a belief in its utter infallibility¹⁵² but continues to be upheld in many of the churches with which my interviewees identify and to which they belong. Hayter points to the further implications of such a stance, asserting that we must take into account not only the fact that women are handling an authoritative text but also the fact that they are engaging with authoritative readings and interpretations of that text which have themselves 'acquired a status of canonicity'.¹⁵³ Indeed, some of the women I

¹⁴⁸ Sakenfield, 'Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials', 64.

¹⁴⁹ 'Biblicists' defined by Lakey as those 'committed to the supremacy of the Bible as revelatory authority.' - Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 5.

¹⁵⁰ The Lausanne Covenant, <http://www.lausanne.org/content/covenant/lausanne-covenant>, accessed 26/06/15.

¹⁵¹ Noll, *Between Faith*, 142.

¹⁵² Noll highlights how a 'smaller group of evangelicals, both at the start of the 20th century and today, would admit that the Bible contains a few random and unimportant errors, but go on to argue that these errors do not compromise the essential truth which the Scriptures impart', *Between Faith*, 144.

¹⁵³ Hayter, *The New Eve*, 85.

interviewed seemed to understand particular extracts of biblical text very much in relation to the authoritative interpretation and teaching of their own church or church leader. Others however, while aware of the existence of authoritative or dominant readings of texts, had developed and affirmed their own understanding in contrast to them.

How the perceived authority of the Bible may have affected women's experience of the Christian faith can be gleaned in part from how it has been used throughout history. Claims of biblical authority have been wielded to justify forms of subordination, restriction and exclusion for women within the church. So much so, Kung argues that 'for a long while it was taken for granted that the subordination of women desired by the church was legitimised by divine revelation and sacred tradition.'¹⁵⁴ Methuen highlights one historical example of this reality when she notes the way in which Luther relied on the authority of the Bible as a primary source – along with 'created order and experience' – on the basis of which he believed the 'exclusion of women from the preaching ministry' could be justified.¹⁵⁵ This 16th-century instance functions as only one example amongst many of the way in which the authority of the Bible can come to the forefront in the context of female restriction and its advocacy.¹⁵⁶ Significantly, however, throughout Christianity's history the claim of biblical authority has been used by one group of people to oppose all that another group has used it to affirm. As much as the Bible has been used in the restriction of women, the authority of the Bible has also been employed by those seeking to reverse patterns of exclusion or enlarge the dimensions of female ecclesial participation.

Women Using the Bible's Authority

One insightful example of how women have historically used the authority of the Bible to encourage and enable fuller modes of participation for female Christians is that of Catherine Booth. As noted above, Booth co-founded the Salvation Army in the 19th century and was an iconic proponent of the right of female Christians to preach and

¹⁵⁴ Kung, *Women in Christianity*, 17.

¹⁵⁵ Methuen, 'Your Daughters', 88.

¹⁵⁶ Other examples include the ordination of women debate in the Church of England, ongoing disputes surrounding women's right to preach, and disagreements regarding female leadership within contemporary evangelicalism.

teach in both informal and formal ways. Her writings illustrate the way in which women sustained and upheld personal belief in the authority of the Bible alongside their decisions to dispute specific ways biblical text has been read and used. Booth did not convey her arguments in such a way as to somehow use the Bible against itself, but rather asserted her own interpretation of biblical 'truth' as a worthy and authoritative means of undermining particular readings of biblical texts, as well as the resulting practices of female restriction in her day. In her 1870 publication 'Female Ministry: Or a Woman's Right to Preach the Gospel,' she acknowledges the argument that 'female ministry is forbidden in the word of God' but responds to this claim in a way that underlines her allegiance to the ultimate authority of the Bible: 'we shall be able to show ... that the very opposite view is the truth ... that not only is the public ministry of woman unforbidden, but absolutely enjoined by both precept and example in the word of God.'¹⁵⁷ For Booth, the use of the Bible to justify limitation regarding women's service of God was not only to be challenged on the basis of any perceived absence of teaching in favour of such practices, but to be challenged as something she believed was utterly contrary to the meaning and message of biblical text.

Booth actively engaged with the Bible and developed an understanding of its text. She thus exemplifies a way of using the Bible that feminist theologians would later adopt as empowering for female readers of biblical texts, a means of using the Bible and its perceived authority that refutes its denigration as a simply oppressive resource for women. Schottroff, for example, rooted the significance of her 20th-century re-reading of the Bible in her belief that engaging with the texts in new ways equated to a 'conscious act of disempowering the male oppressor,' by 'taking away' the biblical texts she deemed to be 'his instruments of oppression.'¹⁵⁸ Mhango placed a similar level of importance upon women's use of the Bible, advocating for the continued reading of biblical text and asserting that 'it is only through the bible that women can be empowered.'¹⁵⁹ For Mhango, the potentially liberating authority of the Bible is dependent on a willingness to actively engage with Scripture and hold it up as something that can be challenged: 'we need to remove perceptions that because the bible ... has

¹⁵⁷ Booth, *Female Ministry*.

¹⁵⁸ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 58.

¹⁵⁹ Mhango, 'Reading the Bible', 6, 292.

authority ... it should be accepted without question.’¹⁶⁰ Indeed, Russell writes regarding Elizabeth Cady Stanton’s iconic *The Woman’s Bible* that the work was ‘especially noteworthy because it took the Bible seriously.’¹⁶¹ For Russell, Cady Stanton’s efforts in questioning the Bible and its teaching by undertaking an ambitious re-imagining of its texts equated to honouring its authority rather than undermining it. Thus the possibility presents itself that an understanding of the Bible as authoritative and a willingness to question it are not mutually exclusive realities. In fact, it is precisely where biblical authority is perceived to be greatest, that there is the greatest need to continue the interpretive process: ‘for those for whom scripture has the most authority, the interpretive task becomes imperative.’¹⁶² Almost without exception, the women I interviewed spoke of the Bible as something of high authority and high value, God’s self-revelation and divine Word for their lives: ‘*God speaks to us through it and guides us through it.*’ For young women who believe this, continued engagement with the interpretive task is essential.

The Bible Under Scrutiny

It could be argued that with greater critical engagement arises greater difficulty in sustaining any simplistic understanding of the Bible as perfectly authoritative or perfectly true. Indeed, its authority seems to come under most scrutiny when its most controversial or divisive aspects are brought into focus. Castelli suggests that ‘it is precisely within the context of ... contentious passages that the whole question of scriptural authority is raised with considerable urgency.’¹⁶³ There are no shortage of issues which have arisen over Christianity’s history with regards to ‘contentious’ texts or excerpts of the Bible and women.

If there are ‘difficult’ texts to be tackled, Tamez inspires reflection on the extensive reach of their most difficult or potentially harmful aspects. Tamez opposes the way in which she believes all women are affected and oftentimes unfairly restricted by particular instructions and their implications; ‘the instruction [injunction to female silence in 1 Timothy 2] extends to all women, beginning with Eve ... and encompassing all

¹⁶⁰ Ibid., 293.

¹⁶¹ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 24.

¹⁶² Farley, ‘Feminist Consciousness’, 49.

¹⁶³ Castelli, ‘Paul on Women’, 231.

women in the world and at all times.’¹⁶⁴ Wagener locates, in what she identifies as pseudo-Pauline texts, a ‘massive theologically supported misogyny,’¹⁶⁵ while Sakenfield warns readers of the New Testament to be alert for ‘explicit patriarchal bias’ as well as ‘subtle androcentrism.’¹⁶⁶ Malone likewise draws out the male-centred language of the texts with which women are attempting to relate, observing: ‘the biblical presentation of humanity privileged the male.’¹⁶⁷ Fiorenza emphasises what she views as one of the most negative implications of such linguistic privilege, arguing that androcentric language essentially ‘makes women invisible.’¹⁶⁸ Moreover, Schottroff claims, ‘androcentric language is taken literally’ in a way that means that certain dominant readings have concluded that there were ‘no women prophets, women disciples, women apostles.’¹⁶⁹ Androcentric texts and language have rendered women invisible in narrative, and by consequence, in Christian memory as well. All these scholars encourage us to consider how such language has been received, and to recognise the restrictive impact of passages that through androcentric language render women either secondary in or entirely absent from the text.

And yet, somehow young women have continued to read and re-imagine texts that others would rather immediately disregard as hopelessly flawed. One reading strategy evident in women’s engagement with what they have experienced as particularly challenging parts of the Bible is the attempt to read such texts almost against the grain, that is, to use the text in order to extract a sense of what women were actually doing regardless of the focus of the written text. For example, Fiorenza reads the instructions given to women in 1 Corinthians 11 as ‘evidence’ of the belief ‘that women as well as men share in the pneumatic gifts of Sophia Spirit, and pray and prophesy publicly.’¹⁷⁰ Davies likewise views 1 Corinthians 11 as most importantly a text that assumes ‘that

¹⁶⁴ Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 43.

¹⁶⁵ Wagener, ‘A Tamed Paul’, 830.

¹⁶⁶ Sakenfield, ‘Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials’, 56.

¹⁶⁷ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

¹⁶⁸ Fiorenza, ‘The Will to Choose or Reject’, 133.

¹⁶⁹ Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 35.

¹⁷⁰ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 227.

women prophesied and preached in public.¹⁷¹ For Schottroff, 1 Timothy is a ‘spiteful document’ which has inspired by its ‘very presence in the Christian canon’ the creation of ‘apologetic patterns of interpretation.’¹⁷² And yet, she also views 1 Timothy to be a text which ‘documents women’s liberating struggle in an unwitting but interesting manner,’ by somehow communicating the fact that Christian women were embracing freedom in ways that provoked rebuttal.¹⁷³ MacCulloch models this approach as a means of overcoming the fact that female ‘voices are lost, or concealed’: ‘When the writer to Timothy insists... “I permit no woman to teach or have authority” ... we can be sure that there were women doing precisely the opposite’.¹⁷⁴ However, the young women I spoke to did not evidence any straightforward adoption of such a strategy. They spoke of struggling to understand the relevance or implications of particular biblical texts or aspects of instruction, but most had not yet developed strategies of reading these texts against the grain in such a way as to extract valuable insight.

Some of the most common approaches to texts upheld as controversial with regards to the question of female roles and participation involve the intentional focusing of critical attention on the human aspects of the text’s production and interpretation. Lakey’s extensive analysis of 1 Corinthians 11:2-16 leads into discussion of ‘the headship dispute’; the question of whether male ‘headship’ or authority over women is theologically sanctioned by this New Testament text and others. Lakey notes that there has been a fascination with word and translation issues in readings of the 1 Timothy injunction against female ‘authority over a man’, which has inspired questions to do with its meaning and appropriate application. Specifically, he highlights the philological debate concerned with ‘whether the Greek verb designates the exercise or misuse of authority’ and ‘whether the verse extends a blanket or partial prohibition over females’.¹⁷⁵ The continuing debate over linguistic terms in biblical texts, as identified by Lakey, indicates the historic significance attributed to the meaning and translation of particular words and phrases. The young women I interviewed however, expressed little or no interest in the meaning of individual terms within texts they found most difficult.

¹⁷¹ Davies, *The Pastoral Epistles*, 83.

¹⁷² Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 71.

¹⁷³ Ibid.

¹⁷⁴ MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, 120.

¹⁷⁵ Lakey *Image and Glory of God*, 28.

Indeed, they did not exhibit any awareness of how the meaning and interpretation of particular words has been disputed. They tended to focus upon the meaning of texts in their entirety, embarking upon individual or communal investigation into what they saw as the texts' particularly confusing aspects, or not really engaging with them at all. Some responded to textual ambiguities with an assurance that they need not understand every detail to understand themselves in relation to God: *'I don't think I'm going to know the answer. I know what I live by ... I don't think we'll know the answer until the end.'*

Hayter models how new and potentially empowering readings can emanate from the identification of semantic inconsistency in certain interpretations of particular extracts of biblical narrative. Hayter highlights the confusion that can arise in the reading of biblical text, addressing 1 Corinthians 14 and centring upon what she views to be key textual issues and resulting difficulties surrounding its interpretation: 'exegetical problems arising from obscure references and uncertain vocabulary.'¹⁷⁶ Hayter draws out 'textual difficulties' and 'inconsistencies', such as those that arise between chapter 14's instructions for female silence and chapter 11's affirmation of female prophecy, and uses these examples to re-imagine 1 Corinthians 14's injunctions of female silence as a specifically contextual 'reaction against various pressures which threatened to bring disorder and disgrace to the Church.'¹⁷⁷ Hayter's reading creates an interpretive space for women to reconcile the content of 1 Corinthians 14 with the recorded reality of female believers' prophecy. She thus exemplifies an approach that has seen biblical texts re-opened and re-interpreted by women through addressing what are perceived to be textual issues created by particular hermeneutical stances.

The Pauline Corpus and the Restriction of Women

There is an evident tension in how texts are examined, which illustrates how some of the most potentially limiting texts can also be read so as to resist such limitation. Malone suggests that within Christianity's history 'there is an unbroken tradition of women attempting to seek the "more" that Christianity professed to offer its

¹⁷⁶ Hayter, *The New Eve*, 128.

¹⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 129.

members.¹⁷⁸ This striving after 'more' has long been rooted in a tension between Christianity's promise of freedom and an experienced reality of restriction, and the struggle to navigate such ambiguous religious waters is tangible both in the narrative of what is written and history of interpretation surrounding New Testament texts. It is overly reductive to claim that either Paul's teaching or the process of institutionalisation¹⁷⁹ resulted in a dramatic narrowing of female freedom in any simplistic way. And yet, from around the 4th-century onwards, at least within what Cloke sees as the 'increasingly rigid structure'¹⁸⁰ of Western 'orthodox' Christianity, texts considered to be part of the Pauline corpus would be consulted to 'define the role of women in a more restricted capacity.'¹⁸¹ Armstrong argues that Christians came to use texts considered to be Pauline to 'keep women in their place,'¹⁸² and, indeed, the intricacies of these texts have been widely contested with regards to the extent to which they sought to maintain the subordination of women as the status quo. There has been a sustained interest and academic fascination with the idea that an originally egalitarian form of early Christianity developed lasting patterns of excluding women from particular leadership roles; many questioning how a 'community structure which was originally quite different developed the way that it did.'¹⁸³ The issue that arguably emerges most significantly for young women of faith however, echoes Malone's question of whether this form of ecclesial exclusion of women 'flows from the will of God, or from male design'?¹⁸⁴ For contemporary young women who view the Bible as in some way authoritative, it is generally these texts from the Pauline corpus with which they interact when exploring questions about the will of God with regard to their post-salvation status, their status within the church and their potential for witness and for the representation of the divine.

¹⁷⁸ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 237.

¹⁷⁹ Which Cardman dates as beginning at the end of the 1st-Century and finished by the end of the 4th-century, Cardman, 'Women, Ministry and Church Order', 300.

¹⁸⁰ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 158.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 26.

¹⁸² Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 18.

¹⁸³ Kung, *Women in Christianity*, ix.

¹⁸⁴ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 252.

In engaging with the Bible – and specifically these ‘Pauline’ texts – there emerges an overarching difficulty: how is Christianity’s promise of ‘more’ for women to be reconciled with the existence and apparent affirmation of restricting practices? And yet, there are seemingly unresolved tensions within particular texts themselves. Schottroff critiques what she refers to as ‘Paul’s texts’ as ‘still powerfully effective in oppressing women’, yet she acknowledges how the same texts somehow ‘amplified the voices of women ... who were liberating themselves.’¹⁸⁵ MacCulloch reads Paul as being ‘inconsistent about the status of women’¹⁸⁶ and Cloke identifies the tension as lying between ‘what Paul apparently taught and the women he celebrated.’¹⁸⁷

Some scholars have coined the term ‘love-patriarchalism’ in an attempt to understand the way in which the possibility of full equality in Christ was preached by Paul in texts such as Galatians 3:28, in the midst of texts that seem to be more concerned with the maintenance of social balance and order, often at the cost of female exclusion or limitation. Theissen suggests that Troeltsch describes such a stance as the ‘willing acceptance of given inequalities’ in post-salvation reality; internal transformation occurs without affecting the ‘external aspect’ of one’s social status. Schutz however, identifies ‘love-patriarchalism’ as Paul’s efforts to integrate social and religious truths.¹⁸⁸ Hayter, in contrast, undermines the idea that ‘love-patriarchalism’ was Paul’s way of ‘allowing equality to remain as an abstract ideology,’ seeing it simply as ‘unjust’.¹⁸⁹ All in all, one might expect confusion to arise when Christian women attempt to glean from Paul any clear sense of their potential and place. Indeed, although a couple of the young women I interviewed approached key ‘Pauline’ texts¹⁹⁰ with relative indifference or passive acceptance, most seemed to associate Paul with biblical texts they and others had found challenging to read and understand. One interviewee captured this particularly well, responding to an enquiry about whether she had encountered ‘difficult’ texts for women to read by referring to ‘*the classic ones from Paul about women in the church.*’

¹⁸⁵ Schottroff, *Lydia’s Impatient Sisters*, 41.

¹⁸⁶ MacCulloch, *A History of Christianity*, 116.

¹⁸⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 26.

¹⁸⁸ Theissen, *The Social Setting*, 15.

¹⁸⁹ Hayter, *The New Eve*, 139.

¹⁹⁰ Participants were questioned in relation to 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-40 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15.

Difficult Texts, Disillusion and Abandonment

In this thesis, I endeavour to move forward with Pauline texts by focusing on how young women are generally resisting overly restrictive interpretations, refusing simplistically to ignore or to denounce the texts they find difficult, but seeking clarity with regards to the meaning and appropriate application of texts. However, there are others, like Cady Stanton, who envision a different future for texts that have been used in negative ways. In denouncing 1 Timothy 2:9-14, Cady Stanton goes as far as to undercut long-held notions of Scripture's divine authority; 'it cannot be admitted that Paul was inspired by infinite wisdom in this utterance.'¹⁹¹ The idea that the issues with scriptural texts may be so great as to warrant their dismissal has permeated feminist theology and left those who continue to invest in biblical study defending their position. Thus Sakenfield reports: 'As a Christian who teaches the Bible and who also calls herself a feminist, I am often asked, "How can feminists use the Bible, if at all?"'¹⁹² In response to similar challenges, Schottroff applies what Wacker terms a hermeneutic of rejection,¹⁹³ proposing the dropping of 'oppressive texts of scripture,' and instead encouraging readers to draw on texts that 'transcend their patriarchal context.'¹⁹⁴ Russell reflects on the 'rising feminist consciousness' of those approaching the Bible and the resulting issues surrounding what to reject or keep; she believes that this new lens of reading will result primarily in a call for 'discrimination between those parts of the Bible that [are] essential and those that [are] culturally relative', rather than in the excision of specific texts.¹⁹⁵

Grover indicates the sort of ideas that have already been deemed 'culturally relative' and abandoned, evoking consideration of how similar patterns could continue: 'on the slave question, these great teachers [of the New Testament] were governed by the

¹⁹¹ Cady Stanton, *The Woman's Bible*, 162.

¹⁹² Sakenfield, 'Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials', 55.

¹⁹³ One particular hermeneutical approach outlined by Wacker, *Feminist Biblical Interpretation*, 39.

¹⁹⁴ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 63.

¹⁹⁵ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 23.

practices of their time.¹⁹⁶ For Lakey too, the question of hermeneutical rejection is raised in relation to particular ideas rather than entire texts. He comments, ‘Paul effectively proposes a stance that cannot be adopted with integrity by present-day readers’.¹⁹⁷ And yet, Lakey insists that there are still ways to read Paul’s texts which construct a ‘successful hermeneutical engagement’ for here and now.¹⁹⁸ From the interviews undertaken, young women did not seem to be employing a hermeneutic of rejection in any straightforward or absolute way. There was a sense however, of more difficult texts being subtly abandoned through their presence in Scripture being ignored or purposefully overlooked: *‘it’s one of those texts you just want to ignore.’* Although many women related to challenging texts from a position of seeking greater insight into how they may be applied, others – although refusing to abandon texts in their entirety – seemed to have abandoned all hope of understanding them in relation to their own identity and faith.

Female Readers and the Refusal to Reject Biblical Text

While disillusionment has for some women inspired various forms of abandonment over time, others, like the young women I interviewed, have persisted in presenting reasons to counter any simplistic dismissal of biblical text. Arguably the fact that the Bible continues to hold authority for Christians means that content found to be disagreeable cannot simply be ignored or done away with. Thus Hayter asserts that even if the authorship of 1 Corinthians 14:33-35 can be contested, the command that women be silent cannot ‘simply be “discarded”’ as it belongs ‘to a document received by the Church as authoritative.’¹⁹⁹ Mhango argues that dismissing the Bible would in fact work to disempower women, so that they would ‘ironically accept male chauvinistic interpretations’ and support what they oppose through passivity.²⁰⁰ Russell seems to share this perspective, associating the rejection of biblical texts with a loss of personal authority: ‘in spite of the patriarchal nature of the biblical texts, I myself have no

¹⁹⁶ Grover, ‘The Bible Argument Against Women’, 15.

¹⁹⁷ Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 4.

¹⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

¹⁹⁹ Hayter, *The New Eve*, 128.

²⁰⁰ Mhango, ‘Reading the Bible’, 6.

intention of giving up the biblical basis of my authority.’²⁰¹ Spender’s introduction to *The Woman’s Bible* suggests that in the case of Cady Stanton, ‘working so hard’ on this project during the last years of her life had constituted a refusal to dismiss the Bible.²⁰² Wacker claims that feminist biblical hermeneutics thrive in response to the sort of extreme rejection heralded by critics such as Mary Daly.²⁰³ However, as will be discussed below, contemporary young women seem to be responding to the religious environments in which they find themselves, not by exercising any of these patterns of dismissal or preservation, but by choosing to create new patterns of their own.

Contemporary young women who are engaging with the Bible in empowering ways are joining with a tradition of women who have claimed an equal right to handle and interpret biblical texts. There has been a continuous cry for women to be trusted with that which is considered Scripture. Malone points out that historically this right was withheld and that ‘the bible has been the book of the few, the elite.’²⁰⁴ Sheila Birtchnell’s experience of church perhaps captures in one small way the nature of the ‘suppression’ felt by women when they are denied interpretative freedom. She speaks of the ‘intellectual dishonesty’ she discerned through the preaching of Ephesians 5 as something ‘read out undiluted’ with no explanation.²⁰⁵ Birtchnell experienced the delivery of this imposed meaning as somehow oppressive. On the other hand Wacker records that in 1837, ‘Sarah Grimke proposed the thesis that the interpretation of Scripture by man serves the suppression of women,’ calling on women to ‘learn the languages’ and ‘take the interpretation of [the texts] into their own hands.’²⁰⁶ It is clear that women can empower themselves through actively and intelligently interpreting the Bible for themselves.

Self-Empowering Reading Strategies

²⁰¹ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 138.

²⁰² Spender, intro to Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, iii.

²⁰³ Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation*, 5.

²⁰⁴ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

²⁰⁵ Birtchnell, ‘Triggers’, 19.

²⁰⁶ Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation*, 4.

Catherine Booth once again functions as a useful historical reference; this time exemplifying a particular interpretative strategy adopted by female readers of the Bible. The way she read and used the Bible to advocate for female preaching in the 19th century models a style of interpretation that relied upon the use of ‘proof texts’.²⁰⁷ This technique involves the extraction of theological truths from key texts in order to contrastingly undercut, oppose or enrich a particular interpretation of other texts. Booth ‘closely examined specific scriptural texts that addressed women’s prophecy’ and then used these as evidence for divine approval regarding women and their ability to speak, preach or teach.²⁰⁸ Her responsive piece ‘Female Ministry; or a Woman’s Right to Preach the Gospel’ centred on her use of Joel 2:28 as proof of woman’s equal dignity and spirit-led calling. King highlights how proof-texting trends emerged for women; noting the particular appeal of texts such as John 20:17-18, Joel 2:28-32, Acts 2:17-18 and 1 Corinthians 11:5.²⁰⁹

Other women have focused less on specific texts and more on identifying core theological concepts through which the rest of the Bible’s content could be read and understood. For Brunner, this took the shape of the ‘primal truth’ that God created male and female in his image; a truth which she believed was able to cut ‘away the ground from all belief in the inferior value of women.’²¹⁰ Grover by contrast identified Jesus’ command given during the sermon on the mount – ‘Whatsoever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them’²¹¹ – as ‘the Golden Rule, the very corner stone of the Christian faith,’ and something that necessitated ‘full gender equality.’²¹²

While Grover deemed one of Jesus’ teachings to be a useful ‘Golden Rule’ of interpretation, others held up Jesus himself as their key hermeneutical principle. Malone describes how in the mid-19th century female biblical exegetes ‘sought to find themselves in the text.’ To do this ‘they searched for a hermeneutical principle ... a

²⁰⁷ Sakenfield, ‘Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials’, 59.

²⁰⁸ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 292.

²⁰⁹ King, *Voices of the Spirit*, 337.

²¹⁰ Brunner cited by Hayter, *The New Eve*, 95.

²¹¹ Matthew 6:12.

²¹² Grover, ‘The Bible Argument Against Women’, 15.

central root for all they wanted to say,²¹³ which they found ‘in the liberating and inclusive message of Jesus.’²¹⁴ Sakenfield takes this idea further, defining the Bible as a collection of ‘words that bear witness to the incarnate Word of God, Jesus Christ.’²¹⁵ In her view, Jesus is not only the source of a ‘liberating and inclusive message’ through which everything else must be read, but is also the subject matter and purpose of Scripture as a whole. As far as Swidler is concerned, Jesus is a worthy foundation on which to build knowledge of biblical text: ‘Since Jesus is the “founder” of Christianity ... it is logical that the life and teaching of Jesus should determine how the teaching of the followers of Jesus should be interpreted, not the other way around.’²¹⁶ For Swidler, the teaching of Jesus should have supremacy, and New Testament texts, ideas and instructions should be read in light of and in conjunction with Jesus’ message.

For many women, Galatians 3:28 has functioned as proof-text and core theological foundation. Fiorenza calls this verse ‘the focal point and organising center’ of Paul’s theology,²¹⁷ and holds it up as the key to understanding ‘a communal Christian self-definition.’²¹⁸ Similarly, Meeks deemed the text to be one that worked as a ‘performative utterance’ that was believed to ‘enact a new reality through the very process of being spoken.’²¹⁹ Horowitz also seems to value Galatians 3:28 as a key hermeneutical tool, arguing that its nature as ‘one of the few undisputed Pauline statements on women’ should give readers a sense of confidence to dismiss other passages it would seem to contradict: she gives the example of the idea from 1 Corinthians 11:7 that ‘woman is the glory of man.’²²⁰ For Cady Stanton, Galatians 3:28 constituted Paul’s teaching on ‘equality as the very soul and essence of Christianity.’²²¹ The question remains as to whether Galatians 3:28 can or should function as a

²¹³ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

²¹⁴ Ibid.

²¹⁵ Sakenfield, ‘Feminist Uses of Biblical Materials’, 59.

²¹⁶ Swidler, *Biblical Affirmations*, 162.

²¹⁷ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 205.

²¹⁸ Ibid., 211.

²¹⁹ Wayne Meeks cited by Castelli, ‘Paul on Women’, 230.

²²⁰ Horowitz, ‘Image of God’, 205.

²²¹ Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, 20.

‘definitively egalitarian statement that relativizes the other passages,’²²² but Cady Stanton acted on the belief that it did, engaging in years of re-imagining readings of biblical text to reflect this ‘soul and essence’ more accurately. My interviews indicated that contemporary young women are engaging with the Bible by developing similarly helpful reading strategies; prioritising particular texts and theological ideas in their reading of others.

Proof-texting as a hermeneutical practice inevitably means that readers build collections of texts they rely upon to read and interpret more widely. Klyne Snodgrass called this sort of collection a ‘canon within the canon’, asserting that it is born out of the fact that ‘we are attracted to those verses in Scripture that express what we already believe.’²²³ It could perhaps be expected then that women would choose to use proof-texts most concerned with female dignity and with the most self-empowering potential, and yet, this may not always be the case. It should be acknowledged that this technique has particular limitations: Lakey claims that it can result in people of particular theological perspectives ‘getting out of’ any text ‘the same values and ideals they are bringing to it.’²²⁴ Put most extremely, if we read Scripture through the lens of the values expressed in one text, then proof-texting can mean that the interpretations of any given texts is already determined by the interpretive stance of the one that is viewed as foundational. There is a similar risk that texts are used to prove and support any sort of externally formed belief or opinion. Cady Stanton remarks that ‘the trouble is too often that instead of searching the Bible to see what is right, we form our belief, and then search for Bible texts to sustain us’.²²⁵ Proof-texting has generally led – and will continue to lead – to questions of which texts should hold ultimate authority.

In tracing women’s engagement with biblical texts, there have also been patterns of women uncovering ‘misuse’ of the Bible²²⁶ and seeking to provide readings that are superior. If women are seeking to locate or create alternative interpretations of texts, it may be because they discern inconsistencies between what they have read or have been

²²² Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

²²³ Snodgrass cited by Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

²²⁴ Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

²²⁵ Cady Stanton, *The Woman’s Bible*, 37.

²²⁶ Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation*, 4.

taught and what they know through experience of themselves and God. Farley notes that 'women have recognised the contradiction between received interpretations of our identity and function ... and our experience of ourselves and our lives on the other.'²²⁷ Women's movement away from 'received interpretations' and inherited knowledge has inspired rather radical styles of questioning. Calvert-Koyzis and Weir report how female interpreters emerged as those who 'questioned the methodologies ... questioned the translation [and] ... questioned the assumptions made ... breaking the methodological and hermeneutical boundaries others had set up'.²²⁸ The possibility was there for women to read the same texts and discover something completely different, their femaleness or their experience ensuring a different sort of encounter with the text. Schottroff asks: 'Was it the same Bible that we non-established women and the male university colleagues were reading?'²²⁹ Furthermore, in approaching texts differently there arose the possibility to provide justification for changed ideas. For example, Tribble's reading of Genesis led her to conclude that 'of the interpretations of specific verses used to support traditional views of female inferiority ... not one of them is altogether accurate and most of them are simply not present in the text itself.'²³⁰ Changed ideas could then be followed by transformed practices. Indeed, Malone asserts that 'every re-reading of the scriptures has led to a revolution in church life.'²³¹

There are notable trends of female readers working to clarify or enrich the meaning of texts through the use of context as an interpretive lens. For Tamez, the context of a particular situation becomes central in her understanding of 1 Timothy's injunctions against female authority and teaching. She imagines a specific cultural motivation to lie behind what is written: 'the author deemed the presence of rich women to be threatening.'²³² Her choice of diction in asserting that the passage 'deals' with an assembly where men and women actively participated'²³³ suggests that she is

²²⁷ Farley, *Feminist Consciousness*, 46.

²²⁸ Calvert-Koyzis and Weir, *Breaking Boundaries*, 3.

²²⁹ Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, ix.

²³⁰ Philis Tribble cited by Hayter, *The New Eve*, 85.

²³¹ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 23.

²³² Tamez, *Struggles for Power*, 36.

²³³ Ibid.

emphasising the nature of the piece as one delivered to solve a distinct issue. Indeed, Tamez argues that ‘traditional ideas’ are ‘used by the author to resolve a circumstantial problem.’²³⁴ Fiorenza demonstrates a similar approach in her reading of instruction from the Pauline corpus, focusing on the motivation behind the text’s production: ‘Paul’s interests ... are missionary, and not directed against the spiritual freedom ... of women.’ She concludes that ‘he subordinates women’s behaviour in marriage and in the worship assembly to the interests of Christian mission.’²³⁵ In this way, the specific injunctions seem to become eclipsed by the larger purpose and therefore appear themselves to be less of a critical issue. Hayter presses for particular verses to be read in the context of the passage from which they are taken, rather than as ideas in isolation: ‘it is necessary therefore, to relate these verses to the whole theme of the passage in order to ascertain whether or not they form a coherent part of Paul’s teaching on woman.’²³⁶

Lakey agrees that such a technique is an appropriate means of understanding biblical text, but takes the idea further to suggest that meaning should be ascertained in view of Scripture as a whole: ‘it is theologically and narratively consistent to justify one’s view on such matters with respect to a series of judgments regarding the basic storyline of the Bible, including the creation and fall series and the ministry of Jesus.’²³⁷ Walker notes how Catherine Booth chose to engage with exegesis in this way: ‘having considered the key passages in 1st Corinthians and 1st Timothy in the larger context of the Bible ... she concludes that these passages did not enjoin women to silence but merely forbade disorderly speech’, further supporting her position ‘by citing the prophesy from Joel ... as well as examples of biblical women prophets and preachers.’²³⁸ The interpretative technique of reading disputed biblical texts in light of Scripture as a whole encourages continued engagement with the Bible while allowing space for women to develop strategies of understanding the presence and teaching of apparently restrictive texts. Indeed, some of the women I spoke to seemed to very much read individual texts in light of a wider view of Scripture: *‘Generally I think that if you look at the whole bible women are really respected so passages like that don’t affect me*

²³⁴ Ibid., 39.

²³⁵ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 236.

²³⁶ Hayter, *The New Eve*, 122.

²³⁷ Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

²³⁸ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, 292.

much.’ Young women continue to read texts in light of other passages of Scripture, their knowledge of God, formalised teaching and Jesus as hermeneutical principle.

The Interview Process

In attempts to discern the ways in which contemporary young women are reading the Bible and understanding themselves in relation to its texts and teaching, I commenced the second section of the interviews by asking each participant to simply and openly describe their relationship with the Bible. I progressed to ask questions including: ‘Are there any biblical texts you find difficult to read as a female believer?’ and ‘Are there any parts of the Bible you find difficult to read because of what they say about women?’ After more general discussion, each interviewee was invited to read and reflect upon three texts: 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-40 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15. There were questions asked to guide their reflection: ‘What do you think this text is saying?’ ‘Is there anything you struggle to understand in this text?’ ‘What do you think these texts might mean for you?’²³⁹ The qualitative research I conducted suggested that Christian young women are continuing to engage with the Bible as a means of self-empowerment, refusing simply to abandon sources of particular challenge.

It was very quickly apparent that the Bible continued to function for many as a hugely valued ‘life-giving’ source. Thus Rachel and Chloe spoke of the text’s primacy in their lives, defining it as ‘*everything*’ and ‘*my favourite thing*’. Sarah remarked, ‘*I view it with huge importance ... I really value spending time with God and reading his word*’. Emma further elevating its personal significance through her comments: ‘*I can honestly say it’s like a life-line because it is something that gives you hope when you feel hopeless.*’ When first invited to reflect upon how they viewed the Bible, there most obviously emerged a definitive assurance of its necessity to them personally – ‘*God’s word is everything, it breathes life to me. One thing for sure is that I need it*’ – and a determination to engage with it more actively: ‘*I should be reading it everyday, I should read it more.*’

²³⁹ For a full breakdown of the questionnaire and interview process, see the Methodological Appendix.

A Relationship Forged Through Struggle

Although the young women I spoke to generally professed to hold the Bible in high esteem²⁴⁰, it became clear that for most interviewees any ongoing reliance on the text was one forged through varying degrees of struggle. Some admitted to experiencing difficulty with the act of reading itself, perhaps also inadvertently revealing an unspoken expectation of daily reading: *'I am terrible at reading daily. And it's something that I really really struggle with.'* Megan's remarks evoke consideration of whether young women are experiencing something especially difficult about reading the Bible:

There's some days I can't be bothered reading it. The majority it's the can't be bothered kind of thing. And as someone who likes reading I always thought reading the bible should be something I find easy but I don't, at all.

Nicola's thoughts reiterate the fact that for some young women the experience of reading the Bible is one of difficulty that inspires increasing detachment: *'Practically, it's difficult. I don't particularly enjoy reading it as I find it hard.'*

For many of the young women questioned, relating to the Bible had involved something of a process of coming to terms with its more challenging texts.²⁴¹ Regardless of their individual positions on claims of the infallibility or inerrancy of the Bible's text, many recounted times of questioning the nature of biblical content as something that might be potentially harmful. Claire spoke of a contemplative process surrounding the depiction of women in biblical text:

There have definitely been times I've looked at it [the Bible] and thought what is this meant to mean ... is this completely degrading women?' She went on: 'the language or something, whatever way it was used made me wonder why you would say that about women.'

²⁴⁰ 13 women spoke of the Bible's importance to them personally.

²⁴¹ 14 women referred to a process of coming to terms with aspects of the Bible they found difficult to understand.

For others, the existence of particularly ‘difficult texts’ was treated as something entirely unsurprising; a long and accepted aspect of the Bible they continued to read. When asked whether there were any texts they experienced as difficult, Abi expressed unwavering affirmation: *‘Yes. Obviously there are difficult texts.’* Jennifer light-heartedly referred to the texts she found most challenging as *‘the classic ones from Paul about women in the church’*; implying that certain texts and passages have become casually and communally identified as those most problematic for female readers.

Abi’s list of what she perceived to be difficult texts culminated in a profession of continued engagement and interpretive openness: *‘When I read passages like that, I find it difficult ... but I also find it incredibly beautiful ... I find it both encouraging and challenging.’* Abi and Rachel both spoke of struggling with the idea that difficult biblical texts were divinely inspired. Abi mentioned reading of the instance of Lot’s daughter being offered as a sacrifice, and how *‘for a long time’* she had thought it was *‘God’s idea, to give his daughter over because the men were more important.’* For Katherine, it was the violently *‘horrific’* subject matter of Judges 19 that seemed to evoke larger questions surrounding God’s nature and attitude towards women: *‘he sends his concubine out and she dies, and he cuts her up in the morning. And it’s not explicitly condemned in the text.’* Both women referred to these difficult sections of text from a retrospective position of having developed – or gathered – interpretive tools that had helped them to form an acceptable understanding of the texts’ canonical presence. Abi seemed to have learned the technique of separating God’s intent from the content: *‘it took a long time for me to realise that God thinks that sort of thing is an abomination and it shows you how far God’s people have fallen from grace that they thought it was the right thing to do.’* Rachel employed an inherited explanation, having experienced a sense of clarification following formalised teaching:

In his [one of her church’s regular preachers] sermon on it, he was showing that if you go further back in the text ... he showed how in the passage, he was in the wrong ... it would have been really nice if he had been explicitly condemned but ... it didn’t need to be explicitly said because everything was wrong.

Some of the young women I interviewed seemed relatively unfazed by the content of texts others readily identified as ‘difficult’. For Lauren, a discernible indifference towards the instructions of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 seemed to manifest itself in a rather positive and empowering way. The fact that she doesn’t *‘find it to be particularly personally challenging’* was rooted in a rich and highly esteemed imagining of her relationship with God:

I think my relationship with God goes far beyond whether I cover my head or not ... I feel like my heart and what I’m trying to live out is more important than whether I cover my head.

For others, indifference regarding challenging ideas of significant practical implication appeared to be more a case of passive and partially ignorant acceptance. Thus Katie commented:

I think it says somewhere about men ruling over women. I think that because I don’t actually know. That women should be led by men. So I don’t have a particular problem with that, and I think that’s just a personal understanding of that, like ‘Oh well’, because that’s just how it is.

From all the interviews, Katie’s apparent indifference towards potentially restrictive texts was the exception in this sample.²⁴² And yet, it did not seem to correlate with what Katie later reflected upon in terms of woman’s role and potential in the context of Christian mission: *‘I definitely learnt a lot about my role, my potential as a woman involved with mission. And how that doesn’t just have to be giving suggestions to a man to take forward, but that I can actually suggest things myself and be proactive myself.’* Katie models how some women will accept contradictions between what they have heard, or been taught, about the Bible and its teaching, and what they have experienced for themselves. Katie had led in mission, and yet affirmed the idea *‘that women should be led by men’* as *‘just how it is.’*

²⁴² Katie’s exceptional perspective is perhaps linked to her conservative evangelical background, as a member of the Free Church of Scotland. For a full breakdown of the sample’s denominational backgrounds consult the Methodological Appendix.

Individual Study and Shared Interpretation

For those who did find particular texts challenging in relation to their self-understanding, some sought to deepen their knowledge of how these texts should be applied through individual examination of the material: *'I have struggled with this text [1 Corinthians 11:1-16] ever since I was a wee girl', 'In the past I've found myself mulling that [1 Timothy 2:11-15] over and what it means ... trying to work out what it means for my life.'* Often individual struggle seemed to translate seamlessly into a shared interpretive battle. Whether or not young women's tendency to seek acceptable explanations for difficult passages communally in any way emulates Fiorenza's 'women-church' as a 'community of struggle'²⁴³ is debatable, but it seems to have been a helpful means of overcoming feelings of alienation and anxiety. The process of consulting others seemed to be instinctive for Emily: *'If I really struggled with a passage I'd often ask someone and then they're often very good at explaining if I'm struggling.'* Chloe spoke of the negative effects of certain texts upon her sense of self-worth before sharing the burden of interpretation:

I think when I first came across them ... and hadn't talked things out with people, my initial feeling was that I felt rubbish. If that's my role and that's how I'm being talked about, it certainly doesn't feel very nice.

Consulting others was certainly a major source of encouragement for Chloe: *'as I have sought other people's opinion and other people that I respect ... their view and understanding of what the text means, I have been very much encouraged'*.

In reading and responding to specific passages – 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-40 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15 – issues of female exclusion arose in potentially surprising ways. Those interviewed offered mixed responses as to the implications of these passages for the roles women may play in the context of Christian witness.²⁴⁴ 1 Timothy's injunctions regarding female silence in church assemblies and salvation through childbearing evoked for some young women a sense of exclusion on two levels. This perceived exclusion came both through an awareness of how this teaching would

²⁴³ Fiorenza cited by Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 142.

²⁴⁴ This will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

have restricted women at the time and in their feelings of personal exclusion through the sense that the text lacks relevance for their own lives. Claire focused attention upon 1 Corinthians 14:35: 'If there is anything they desire to know, let them ask their husbands at home. For it is shameful for a woman to speak in church.' She noted that with texts such as this, women like Anna the prophetess of Luke 2:36-38 would have been excluded by default: *'asking your husband ... I don't understand this. Anna was widowed. How can she go and ask her husband?'* By contrast, Sophie's feelings of alienation seemed to result in a sense of personal disillusionment:

And the way it says, if you have a question go home and ask your husband. What if you don't get married? How should you feel then as a woman? Who do we ask our questions? ... And to be saved through childbearing, what if you can't have babies?

One of Emma's responses highlights the way in which a feeling of personal exclusion fostered by the apparent irrelevance of particular excerpts of text can constitute what makes them so difficult: *'I do find all the ones about marriage and family hard to read, because when you don't have that you just wonder what your role is.'* This experience of confusion regarding individual role and purpose also emerges from Abi's reflections on the injunctions to female silence present in 1 Corinthians 14:34 and 1 Timothy 2:12: *'I find them really confusing. It makes it very difficult to understand your role as a woman in the church and it makes it very difficult to understand God's understanding of who you are, and it makes you question your own gifting.'*

Although none of the women questioned explicitly sought the removal of 'difficult texts' from the canon, a few did exhibit subtle patterns of abandonment. In some that took the shape of avoidance: *'I feel like I don't want to listen to them'; 'It is one of those passages you just want to ignore.'* For others, a willingness to assign the meaning of texts a space in the realm of knowledge that was beyond their understanding: *'I don't think I'm going to know the answer. I know what I live by ... I don't think we'll know the answer until the end.'* For Emily, there was a sadness regarding how biblical texts – specifically 1st Timothy 2:11-15 – have been read, yet a contentedness in the idea that certain verses of the Bible did not produce limitations in her own life:

It makes me sad that some women allow these verses to limit themselves ... for I know from knowing God that he has more for me than bearing children and I hope I'm right in that conviction ... but I think for women to read these verses and be limited by them is just the saddest thing ... when I read them it reminds me of people who are ... but knowing God, the God I know and the relationship I have with him, I definitely don't find them to be true in my own life.

Emily's knowledge of God necessitated the construction of alternative interpretations to texts: '*I know from knowing God that he has more for me*'. In refusing to apply particular verses directly to her own life, Emily modelled how particular biblical texts about women are not, as Tamez suggested, 'encompassing all women ... at all times.'²⁴⁵

A Divine Word and Personal Revelation

Russell asserts that when it comes to the Bible 'many women of faith ... are not willing to give up. They believe that the Bible offers a liberating word for our times.'²⁴⁶ The young women I spoke to ultimately affirmed the Bible both as something worth saving, and as a saving word in itself; one with life-enriching ability to forge and maintain connection with God.²⁴⁷ As might be expected, the idea emerged that the Bible offered valuable insight into God's nature: '*I believe that the Bible is ... somewhere to find out more about God and more about his characteristics.*' Greater emphasis however was placed on the idea that the Bible provided a means of intimately accessing the divine, a means of 'hearing God' in a personal way: '*coming to the scriptures is my way of hearing what God has to say*'; '*it's one of the ways he communicates with us*'; '*it's God's way of speaking to us*'; '*God speaks to us through it and guides us through it.*' Abi also observed that through providing a way of '*hearing what God has to say*' the Bible for her inspires personal transformation as well as specific action: '*I try to come, to read the Bible, with open eyes and open ears to hear what God wants me to do or what way he wants me to change, or how he wants me to be different.*'

²⁴⁵ Tamez. *Struggles for Power*, 43.

²⁴⁶ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, 29.

²⁴⁷ 13 women affirmed their relationship with the Bible as an ultimately positive one. 6 spoke explicitly of biblical text enabling spiritual connection and communication.

Developing Reading Strategies

The way these contemporary young women of faith understand the Bible's life-giving potential has inspired them to join in 'the task of interpretation' that, as Farley puts it, has been 'underway from the beginning.'²⁴⁸ The interview data shows how young women are translating a desire to read biblical text for greater dignity and self-empowerment into specific hermeneutical approaches. Firstly, along the lines of Snodgrass' proposed 'canon with the canon,'²⁴⁹ the women I interviewed revealed canonical preferences; texts and passages they would prioritise when it came to seeking understanding regarding their self-hood and potential. Sophie admitted to seeking out the texts that she found most easily applicable: *'I relate better to the gospels ... because they're easier to put into your life.'* Ruth professed that she relegated certain texts: *'these don't tend to be the passages I go to to understand my role in serving God.'* Claire spoke of a desire to weigh the more difficult passages about women in light of other texts: *'it makes me want to go and read other parts of the bible and see what it says about females.'* Lauren arguably shows an active employment of this sort of 'proof-texting' technique when it comes to challenging texts, reading the words of one text through the lens of others:

I don't necessarily understand it completely, at all. But I think there are other parts of the Bible that teach me that God loves me for who I am and it doesn't matter if I'm female or male and that sort of overrides my thinking.

In a couple of instances the practice of using Jesus and his 'liberating and inclusive message' as hermeneutical principle surfaced.²⁵⁰ Emma polarises her perceptions of Jesus and Paul, reflecting on Jesus' behaviour towards women in attempts to overcome her difficulties with what she considers to be Pauline literature:

Paul is very ... he can seem derogatory of women. Whereas you never see that in Jesus. You never see Jesus talking down to women and all Jesus'

²⁴⁸ Farley, *Feminist Consciousness*, 48.

²⁴⁹ Snodgrass cited by Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

²⁵⁰ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

interactions with women are encouraging and edifying and loving and building them up.

Jennifer similarly moves from issues with Paul to focus on Jesus, elevating the biblical depiction of Jesus and his relationship with women as a truer reflection of God's nature and intent:

The classic ones from Paul about women in the church about keeping quiet ... and covering your heads ... it makes me think, 'that's a shame,' but then I look at Jesus and the woman at the well and the prostitute cleaning his feet and I think that is so much more what God is and God honours and loves women just as much ... I trust the God I know to be more the Jesus of the woman at the well than anything else.

Context and Meaning

In discussions surrounding particular biblical texts, it became apparent that the women I interviewed used the application of contextual knowledge for the creation and promotion of self-empowering readings. Several acknowledged the potentially disempowering interpretations that could be gleaned through isolating verses and ignoring notions of their contextual motivation and placement. For example, Sophie reflected, *'If this [1 Corinthians 11:9] is taken out of context ... it would make us feel that we are only here for the sake of men.'* Abi made a similar observation, highlighting an awareness of context: *'it would suggest that women are to go to church and remain silent ... but that's if you take it at face value and not in the context of the books of the bible or the context of the time.'*

Abi also chooses to regard certain details of 1 Corinthians 11:1-16 as culturally bound – *'when this was written ... wearing hats and head coverings ... it's totally different to what we believe'* – and therefore detaches the meaning from the textual details, opening its application to imagine a way in which it is equally applicable to men too: *'I think its about an attitude. We shouldn't come before God irreverently. Which is whether you're a man or a woman.'*

Emily tackled typically challenging ideas regarding New Testament texts and female submission with a typological reading technique:

Sometimes you'll read a text and it'll say something like women should be in full submission. But I usually like to think about the whole bible rather than reading one verse out of context. Generally, I think that if you look at the whole bible women are really respected so generally passages like that don't affect me that much.

However, there was a general sense of apprehension which accompanied the use of context as hermeneutical tool; a number of those interviewed expressed degrees of uncertainty regarding the extent to which it could be used for a truer understanding of biblical text.²⁵¹ Sarah noted that she felt *'uncomfortable'* when deeming certain ideas to be culturally inapplicable, discerning a disconcerting inconsistency in the approach: *'how can we not take these passages but take others literally with regards to our lives?'*

Reflecting on 1 Timothy 2:11-15, Claire insisted that regardless of the fact that *'people say to look at the context behind it,'* the content should not be ignored: *'it still says that. At the end of the day it still says that, so although it says that because of what the context is, why didn't it say that to men when they were misbehaving?'* Claire's discussion of 1 Timothy's injunction for female silence and the potential cultural motivation behind it simultaneously reveals her questioning of whether the text's content should be acknowledged as misogynistic. In her persistence that irrespective of contextual points women are still unfairly addressed – *'it still says that'* – she would find an ally in Fiorenza, who argues *'that feminist interpretation must pay attention to the patriarchal texts ... and not seek to explain them away.'*²⁵² It is seemingly with a sense of hope-filled necessity that women continue to navigate what Emma described as the *'muddy water of how you decide what was contextual and what is not'*, with many rooting their most self-enabling readings in contextually-informed interpretations: *'I read verses like these [1 Timothy 2:11-15] and I'm hoping it's a cultural thing and not relevant for today.'*

²⁵¹ 5 women expressed uncertainty regarding the correct use of context in interpretation of biblical text.

²⁵² Fiorenza, *Sharing her Word*, 3.

It would appear that young women are reading the Bible in experimental and empowering ways. They enrich their understanding of biblical text in light of what they learn of themselves and God from their experience of community and those around them. When considering female Christians and the future of self-empowering exegesis, it is arguably most important that the ‘journey of interpretation’²⁵³ continues through both academic feminist theology and the personal reading of contemporary young women of faith. Lakey speaks of the ‘historical distance’ that can make biblical texts seem ‘doubly closed to present-day readers.’²⁵⁴ Yet this is embedded within the reassurance that with a ‘degree of hermeneutical caution’²⁵⁵ there is a possibility of moving forward with texts that – although difficult – are ultimately ‘open and not closed in terms of interpretation.’²⁵⁶ The process of constructing a future hermeneutic for texts will continue and in doing so continue to bring new insights. In developing a feminist hermeneutic the stakes are high, for the Bible’s status as a ‘life-giving’ source for women in the balance.

Conclusion

The young women whom I interviewed exhibited a hope-filled and enduring understanding of the Bible as a collection of texts and Holy Scripture that can still function as a potently “saving-word” for women and men alike. They perceived the Bible to be an ultimately valuable source of insight into God’s character and will for their lives. For some, it emerged that the combination of an embedded reliance on the Bible’s authority and the existence of texts experienced as negative or semantically ambiguous had resulted in unfruitful passivity. For these women, it was seemingly easier to simply accept or ignore texts and interpretations of texts that they found difficult. However, for many others, a belief in the Bible’s value equated to their refusal to abandon it or specific texts within the canon of Christian Scripture. Furthermore, this belief inspired particular young women to continue to engage with more challenging texts for the purpose of developing strategies of understanding that could then allow them to continue to cherish the book so central to their faith.

²⁵³ Russell, *Feminist Interpretation*, 18.

²⁵⁴ Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 139.

²⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 137.

3. Go and Tell: How do young women understand themselves in relation to Christian mission?

Introduction

A desire to uncover the ways in which mission functions to enrich and elevate the spiritual self-understanding of Christian young women underpins this research. Indeed, a fascination with Christian mission as a space of freedom for young women first inspired this thesis and its exploration of how women understand themselves in relation to the *imago Dei* and challenging aspects of the Bible. My own experience of mission led me to the recognition – with a certain amount of exasperation – that young women were often permitted to serve God with greater freedom and authority on the ‘mission-field’ than in their home churches. Although on one hand this sort of freedom is to be celebrated, it left me questioning whether women were being empowered through mission to understand themselves and God positively in a way that would endure. It begged the question of whether mission actually offers women tangible freedom to witness to God in the ways that best utilise personal gifting. And indeed, if such missional freedom exists, does it bestow upon young women an understanding of their spiritual potential that transforms the rest of their faith-based lives? Could mission be enough to foster in women a level of spiritual self-assurance that would encourage them to claim possession of the *imago Dei* and battle on with difficult biblical texts? Or is religious self-understanding formed overwhelmingly by the church or tradition to which young women belong, and then carried into missional contexts? As I sought answers to these questions, experience of mission emerged as a particularly – if not the most – empowering facet of a contemporary young woman’s religious or faith-based life. Moreover, the significance of mission in the history of women and Christianity shed light upon how missional contexts have persisted in offering women alternative spaces of freedom to participate, speak and lead.

Malone asserts that for her students, ‘the lives of Christian women’ from the past continued to have ‘profound relevance’ in relation to their understanding of themselves and their ‘Christian life today.’²⁵⁷ With a similar belief in the potentially enriching nature of knowledge of women from Christianity’s history, this study will once again look back before it looks forwards; offering an analysis of how mission has affected the self-understanding of contemporary young women preceded by an assessment of the extent to which mission has functioned in an empowering way for women in the past. It is worth noting that in attempting to address how women have historically engaged with mission we are limited in what we can access. Fiorenza notes that in relation to 1st-century Christian communities and the earliest expressions of missional behaviour: ‘women’s actual contribution to the early Christian missionary movement’ remains somewhat obscured because ‘of the scarcity and androcentric character of our sources.’²⁵⁸ And yet, there is arguably representative evidence that can be uncovered if we interpret the lives of women of the earliest forms of Christianity ‘not as exceptions to the rule but as representatives of early Christian women who have survived androcentric redactions and historical silence.’²⁵⁹ In her 2009 work, Robert poses the question: ‘What is distinctive about the role of women in the history of mission?’ In contrast, we approach our question in an attempt to discover what has been most distinctive about mission in the history of women: has it indeed been a potent source of empowerment?²⁶⁰

Early Christian Women and Missional Foundations

Although women were witnesses in the community based beginnings of the Jesus movement, the missional behaviour of certain women in earliest Christianity has been rather reductively remembered as something exceptional. Mary Magdalene, for example, was ‘hailed as the proclaimer of Jesus’ resurrection and the evangelizer of Gaul,’ and yet described by some as ‘the recipient of a special dispensation from the Pauline ban on women’s teaching.’²⁶¹ Conflicting views with regards to ‘the phenomenon of a

²⁵⁷ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 14.

²⁵⁸ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 116.

²⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 168.

²⁶⁰ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 119.

²⁶¹ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, xviii.

preaching woman'²⁶² inspired the idea that Mary Magdalene's actions were to be understood as out of the ordinary. Mary Magdalene's proclamation was excused as a necessary facet of woman's compensatory role, as laid out by patristic exegetes such as Hilary of Poitiers, Ambrose of Milan and Augustine of Hippo.²⁶³ Jansen notes that for early Christianity's most authoritative theologians, "woman" played a compensatory role in the history of salvation ... by bearing the news of the Resurrection [women] restored the order of creation that Original Sin and its consequences had destroyed.'²⁶⁴ And yet, feminist theologians are responding to Mary Magdalene's memory by calling for greater acknowledgement of the existence of women who would have behaved in a similarly missional way. For example, D'Angelo argues that the history of female discipleship has too often been overlooked in favour of 'the conventional view that Jesus was attended primarily by twelve male disciples appointed ... as his apostles and understood to be his deputies and heirs.'²⁶⁵ John Paul II's *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* evidences this 'conventional view' quite effectively. In this piece opposing the idea of female priesthood, John Paul II reiterates his view that 'in calling only men as his Apostles, Christ acted in a completely free and sovereign manner.'²⁶⁶ He goes on to assert that the apostleship men were called to equated to being 'specifically and intimately associated in the mission of the Incarnate Word himself' in a way that women were not.²⁶⁷ And yet, Christian memory contains the stories of women like Mary Magdalene who were called to carry out apostolic functions. I would agree with D'Angelo that individually celebrated women who engaged with missional tasks were not entirely extraordinary, but indicative of not uncommon realities.

There is evidence that the calling and participation of women as apostles in early Christianity has been purposefully undermined in the representation of history. For example, although Romans 16 features a 'tantalizing (if unique) reference to Junia who

²⁶² Ibid.

²⁶³ Jansen, 'Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola', 58.

²⁶⁴ Ibid., 59.

²⁶⁵ D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing', 113.

²⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis*, http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1994/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_19940522_ordinatio-sacerdotalis.html, accessed 10/08/15.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

is called ... an apostle'²⁶⁸, MacCulloch argues that the idea of a female apostle was 'considered such an appalling anomaly by many later readers of Romans ... that Junia's name was frequently changed to a male form in the recopying of manuscripts, or simply regarded without any justification as a male name.'²⁶⁹ Junia's apostleship has not been historically celebrated, with even those early biblical commentators who did not deny her female gender viewing her apostolic identity in light of her 'surprising femininity.'²⁷⁰ And yet, Eisen points to Junia's significant presence and role in Christianity's missional foundations: 'she and her partner Andronicus belonged to the earliest group of apostles in Jerusalem.'²⁷¹ Eisen argues that Junia is purposefully remembered as one 'actively engaged with mission'; Paul 'recalling Junia's imprisonment' and thus placing her 'in the tradition of the apostolic discipleship of the cross.'²⁷² Junia's apostleship represents a relationship between women and mission present in Christianity's earliest stages. Indeed, Eisen emphasises that the title of apostle is 'closely associated with primary missionary activity.'²⁷³

Mary Magdalene's powerful apostolic identity has been similarly shrouded. In Mary's case, a typical obsession with 'the image of Mary as prostitute converted to spiritual devotion' provoked 'centuries of pious exhortation and artistic representation,'²⁷⁴ but made of her no tangible or sustainable role model of woman's missionary potential. Warner goes so far as to argue that the figure of Mary Magdalene that Christianity has historically commemorated is that of 'the penitent whore'²⁷⁵, 'the Magdalene', who was 'brought into existence by the powerful undertow of misogyny in Christianity which associates women with the dangers and degradation of the flesh.'²⁷⁶

²⁶⁸ Castelli, 'Paul on Women', 224.

²⁶⁹ MacCulloch, *History of Christianity*, 117.

²⁷⁰ Ibid.

²⁷¹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, with reference to Galatians 1:17-19, 49.

²⁷² Ibid.

²⁷³ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 50.

²⁷⁴ D'Angelo, 'Reconstructing', 105.

²⁷⁵ Warner, *Alone of All Her Sex*, 232.

²⁷⁶ Ibid., 225.

It is perhaps unsurprising therefore, that the uncovering of Mary Magdalene's status as apostle has been a central task for feminist theologians of the last few decades. Jansen supports the reconstruction of Mary as a key female character and apostle with evidence of early affirmations of her apostolic behaviour: 'In a ... homily once attributed to Odo of Cluny ... the author places [Mary Magdalene's] mission on equal footing with that of the apostles.'²⁷⁷ Likewise, Eisen stresses that although the title of 'apostle' was not explicitly given to New Testament women besides Junia, Mary Magdalene and others were remembered to have fulfilled the same apostolic function through their missional behaviour.²⁷⁸ Indeed, Eisen notes that biblical commentary about women such as Mary Magdalene serves to 'preserve the memory that women as well as men were disciples of Jesus and among the first to proclaim the gospel.'²⁷⁹

Bosch's comprehensive study, *Transforming Mission*, features the recognition that in the New Testament, 'to some extent the terms "apostle" and "witness" are synonyms.'²⁸⁰ Bosch's assessment is paired with Gaventa's observation that in some instances, in Acts for example, "witness" becomes 'the appropriate term for "mission".'²⁸¹ We are thus encouraged to read the recorded memory of female witnesses to equate to their commemoration as apostles and ultimately key missionary figures. Indeed, Kung defends female participation and apostleship in Christianity's foundational years through remembering women as key witnesses. Seemingly, Kung likewise associates witness with missional apostleship, asserting that 'originally the twelve were not the only ones to be called "apostles",' but that apostles were 'all those who were regarded as the original witnesses and messengers: those who proclaimed the message of Christ and founded and led communities'.²⁸² Kung thus affirms the core criteria for apostleship as rooted in the idea of carrying and proclaiming a message. Likewise, D'Angelo prefaces her affirmation

²⁷⁷ Jansen, 'Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola', 60.

²⁷⁸ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 50.

²⁷⁹ Ibid.

²⁸⁰ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 115.

²⁸¹ Gaventa cited by Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 115.

²⁸² Kung, *Women in Christianity*, 2, 7.

of female apostleship by focusing upon the basic meaning of *apostolos* as ‘one who is sent.’²⁸³

D’Angelo goes on to draw specific attention to Paul’s requisites for apostleship: ‘to have seen the Lord’ and to found a community ‘by preaching the gospel.’²⁸⁴ With this in mind, it is worth noting the way in which particular female figures have been commemorated as having fulfilled this criteria. The foundational relationship between women and mission seems to find its origin in the stories of women who used their apostolic function to deliver powerful community building proclamations. D’Angelo draws our attention back to the example of Mary Magdalene, who ‘like Paul and other apostles ... is sent with a message,’ a message which ‘can itself serve as the foundational proclamation for the new community.’²⁸⁵ Elsewhere D’Angelo argues that although the Samaritan woman of John chapter 4 has been commonly denigrated by ‘commentators of the past’ who read ‘her history as sinful and her reactions as obtuse,’ she actually exemplifies the ‘autonomy of the believer,’ a key missionary figure who, in the story of her witness ‘proselytizes her neighbors without any commission.’²⁸⁶ With greater acknowledgement of these female apostles comes greater awareness of woman’s role in the missional foundations of Christianity. As will be discussed below, the young women I interviewed identified mission itself as something at the foundations of their faith; participation with mission encouraging the formation of a confident and authentic understanding of themselves and God.

Women as First Witnesses

In considering the history of women and mission, some have attributed great significance to the idea of women being called to witness first. The memory of Mary Magdalene as first to witness has been used by many to affirm and empower female participation in missional proclamation. Salvation Army Major Danielle Strickland’s first book, *The Liberating Truth; How Jesus Liberates Women* (2011), was a polemic attack against 21st-century forces of female restriction. In her advocacy of women’s unlimited spiritual

²⁸³ D’Angelo, ‘Reconstructing’, 105.

²⁸⁴ Ibid., 109.

²⁸⁵ Ibid., 111.

²⁸⁶ D’Angelo, *Women and Christian Origins*, 136.

potential, Strickland refers to how ‘Mary received the first apostolic commission from the Risen Lord’ to strengthen her argument.²⁸⁷ For Strickland, dignity is bestowed upon women through Mary’s being called to witness first, and this is foundational in the development of her egalitarian stance towards the role of women within mission and Christianity as a whole. Strickland’s reflection is a contemporary afterlife of views expressed as early as the 3rd century by Hippolytus of Rome, who explained ‘women having been the first witnesses of the resurrection’ being significant “so that women, too, would be Christ’s apostles.”²⁸⁸ For Hippolytus of Rome and subsequently Gregory of Nyssa, woman’s status as first to witness provided the ‘antithesis of Eve’s disobedience’ and was ‘antithetical to the story of the Fall.’²⁸⁹ Although a preoccupation with ideas of woman’s compensatory role developed early and seems to undermine the significance of her apostolic act, by the time of medieval Christianity Mary Magdalene was nonetheless venerated as *apostolorum apostola*, ‘apostle to the apostles’, the one who first ‘announced to the apostles that Christ had risen’.²⁹⁰ There have been attempts to undercut this identification, for example D’Angelo refers to Kathleen Corley’s article ‘Jesus, Mary Magdalene and Salome’ as exemplary of those who sought to undermine the authenticity of her encounter with Jesus by making ‘invidious comparisons between the appearances to Mary and those to the male disciples, claiming that she sees Jesus before he is “glorified”.’²⁹¹ And yet, the idea of Mary being the first witness has not faded entirely from view, and has persisted in giving her a certain authority in the eyes of many.

Mission and Female Leadership

Co-founder of the Salvation Army, Catherine Booth, read the way in which ‘Mary was ... commissioned to reveal the fact [of Jesus’ resurrection] to the apostles’ as the means by which she ‘became their teacher.’²⁹² Booth’s reflection leads us to the idea that missional activity offered women the opportunity to fulfil leadership functions: in this

²⁸⁷ Strickland, *The Liberating Truth*, 110.

²⁸⁸ Hippolytus of Rome cited by Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 51.

²⁸⁹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 51.

²⁹⁰ Jansen, ‘Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola’ , 57.

²⁹¹ D’Angelo, ‘Reconstructing Real Women’, 112.

²⁹² Booth, *On Female Ministry*.

case, a direct result of witnessing first. Not only is Mary indicative of the association of women with teaching roles through the primacy of her witness, she also models the remembrance of women witnessing to something utterly imperative and thus providing leadership through their demonstration of true discipleship. D'Angelo proposes that the function of the women in the resurrection narrative is crucially to 'show that Jesus actually died' and 'that the tomb found empty was the right one.'²⁹³ She goes on to argue that through their witness the women are modelling true discipleship in contrast to Peter's failure as he denies Jesus, and answering a 'new invitation to discipleship' by remaining faithful throughout Jesus' death.²⁹⁴ For some, the idea of women leading as examples, as the first faithful witnesses, heralded a lasting and significant association of women with mission: thus Robert suggests 'since the day when women at his tomb were the first to announce that Jesus had risen from the dead, women have participated in the spread of Christianity'.²⁹⁵

Indeed, women were particularly instrumental in the initial expansion of Christianity, Fiorenza and Harnack both emphasising their prominence and leading influence in the early missionary movement. Fiorenza notes that women 'were among the most prominent missionaries and leaders in the early Christian movement,'²⁹⁶ and Harnack agrees: 'we may safely assume, too, that women did play a leading role in the spread of this religion.'²⁹⁷ Cloke attributes such female involvement and her conception of early Christianity as a 'female environment' to a general trend surrounding women and religion: 'women were ever first with new movements.'²⁹⁸ Considering the expansion of Christianity, Robert claims that Christianity was and remains to be 'a woman's religion': 'around the globe, more women than men are practising Christians.'²⁹⁹ Most significantly, the reality of a dominant and persistent female presence in Christianity throughout history has arguably encouraged strong links to be forged between female believers and missional practices, creating a sense of ownership. Indeed, the young

²⁹³ D'Angelo, 'Women and the Gospels', 137.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., 138.

²⁹⁵ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 118.

²⁹⁶ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 183.

²⁹⁷ Harnack, *The Mission and Expansion of Christianity*, 351.

²⁹⁸ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 6.

²⁹⁹ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 118.

women I spoke to viewed mission to be integral to life and all-encompassing of their Christian identity: 'as soon as you choose Jesus you choose mission. And wherever we are, it's mission.'

Robert identifies how mission has functioned to offer women authority otherwise unavailable to them: '[the fact] that mission work often takes place on the margins, beyond the centres of ecclesiastical power, has sometimes allowed women to assume leadership roles unavailable to them in their home countries.'³⁰⁰ Robert's claim that the authority available to women through mission is authority 'on the margins, beyond the centres of ecclesiastical power' resonates with my suggestion that contemporary mission can offer young women a space in which they have freedom to serve in ways their home churches prohibit. By contrast, many work to reclaim the role of women in the earliest missionary movement of Christianity as one that was utterly central. Castelli for example, focuses upon the textual memory of Prisca as one of Paul's named 'co-workers', claiming that 'her presence among those who are called *synergoi* (co-workers) allows us to conclude that some women participated centrally in the framing and enactment of early Christian missionary activity.'³⁰¹ Kung emphasises the number of women remembered to have been involved in early missionary efforts: 'we only have to read the greetings at the end of the letter to the Romans to see how many women were actively involved in the proclamation of the gospel.'³⁰² Meanwhile Fiorenza reflects on the dignity of the terms used to describe the role of these women: 'Pauline references to women missionaries ... do not reflect on their sexual status and gender roles ... Pauline letters mention women as Paul's co-workers ... these women were not Paul's "helpers" or his "assistants".'³⁰³ This group of women esteemed by Paul is not small. These women are viewed by a significant number of feminist theologians to have been part of a 'discipleship of equals' espoused by Jesus, exercising not a 'peripheral or trivial' role but one 'at the center, and thus of utmost importance.'³⁰⁴ Their participation as 'co-workers' equated to their being 'Paul's fellow workers as evangelists and teachers.'³⁰⁵

³⁰⁰ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 119.

³⁰¹ Castelli, 'Paul on Women', 223.

³⁰² Kung, *Women in Christianity*, 10.

³⁰³ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 168.

³⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 153.

³⁰⁵ Wayne Meeks cited by Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 108.

Fiorenza and Malone call for contemporary Christian women to respond to the centrality and leadership of early missionary women's participation in the Church's mission by 'reclaiming the centre' in their own religious lives, 'by refusing their imposed marginality' and 're-imagining themselves firmly at the center of the [Christian] tradition.'³⁰⁶ And indeed, some of the interviewees' experience of mission involved them witnessing – or experiencing for themselves – women being called upon to act as equally involved participants at the centre of missional activity.

Finally, missional contexts and objectives have given women space for influence in terms of theology and its initial construction. The historical relationship between mission and theology encourages the idea that that through involvement with early Christian mission, Christian women were present and participating in the communities responsible for the creation, or renewal, of core theological ideas. Cloke argues that for too long we have looked upon the development of Christian theology as if theological ideas expressed by key patristic figures 'arose out of a vacuum'; the ideas themselves being all considered worthy of attention. Cloke seeks to redirect gaze to the environments that produced such theological foundations. She emphasises that the Christian communities in which theology was formed would have contained devoted women of faith; women who we should presume to have been actively involved in the construction of Christianity's theological self-understanding. Cloke claims that the theology expressed by individual and commemorated patristic figures was in fact formed by the earliest missional communities which were 'filled with (pious) females': 'for years ... the thought, decisions and writings of the churchmen ... have been influential ... as if their ideas arose out of a vacuum ... but no thought arises out of a vacuum ... in this case, the fathers' thought-processes were the product of a female environment'.³⁰⁷

Kahler asserts that mission is 'the mother of all theology,'³⁰⁸ and Bosch notes that in Kahler's perspective, the theology of the 1st-century church was something that was 'generated by the emergency situation in which the missionizing church found itself.'³⁰⁹ If, in this way, as Bosch argues, 'the history and the theology of early Christianity are ...

³⁰⁶ Fiorenza cited by Malone, *From the Reformation*, 253.

³⁰⁷ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 6.

³⁰⁸ Martin Kahler cited by Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 504.

³⁰⁹ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 504.

“mission history” and “mission theology”,’ the greater sex ratio and subsequently ‘superior status’ enjoyed by women in early Christianity meant that their central presence in mission-focused communities saw them share in the construction of lasting theological thought.³¹⁰ Mission and theological influence went hand in hand for women who belonged to Christian communities that configured their theology in response to their encounter with particular cultural contexts.

Mission and Freedom to Proclaim

Eisen argues that the commemoration of female apostleship through ‘a great many commentaries written in the ancient Church’ is ‘all the more significant’ because it indicates that women were remembered as ‘proclaimers of the Christian message.’³¹¹ If we take the role of apostle in early Christianity to be foundational in the history of Christian mission, its association with the act of proclamation provokes inquiry into how mission has historically provided women with means of vocal authority. The young women I interviewed spoke of having engaged with various styles of proclamation in missional settings. For the most part they affirmed their own vocal authority in mission contexts, and did not see any reason to limit the use of their voice. And yet, when asked whether their involvement with mission had involved ‘preaching’ the gospel, most were reluctant to identify their mission based speech-acts with that term. Indeed, it would appear that while mission continues to create spaces in which women feel empowered to vocally witness to God, female proclamation is still surrounded by what Kienzle and Walker call ‘issues of authority and definition.’³¹² While women have been historically excluded from particular types of speech by forms of institutional definition, they have been enabled to use their voice in contexts where their speech is not called ‘preaching’ but identified differently; for example as teaching, sharing the gospel or giving testimony. Missional contexts have provided space for such types of female proclamation, and freedom for the female voice in general, through an absence of boundaries of definition.

³¹⁰ Stark, *The Rise of Christianity*, 95.

³¹¹ Eisen, *Women Officeholders*, 49.

³¹² Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, xiii.

Women's experience of spiritual freedom through mission was available initially within the framework of embedded expectations of woman's appropriate place and work in the home. Fiorenza speaks of early Christianity's house churches as the first 'missionary centers', and attributes the missional influence early Christian women could achieve to the fact that 'traditionally the house was considered women's proper sphere.'³¹³ In this instance, the merging of the domestic sphere with the establishment of Christian fellowships meant that women were empowered participants. Addressing the patristic era of Christianity, Cloke argues that there were women present who have been historically overlooked; women who expressed spiritual power and enacted their potential as agents of conversion within the spaces society allotted to them: 'they [Christian women] took on and confounded ... religious authorities ... defied or converted their families and revolutionised their own domestic sphere.'³¹⁴ The domestic sphere has functioned as a place in which women were enabled to engage practically with missional tasks; functioning for many as a space of freedom, and offering women a potential 'missionary center'³¹⁵ of their own.

Lesley Orr Macdonald directs our attention to the home as the space in which female missionaries were initially empowered to proclaim the gospel during the 19th-century evangelical revival. Macdonald notes that as evangelicalism became the most dominant form of Scottish presbyterianism there was a 'process of change from the bleak rigour of calvinist dogma towards a Christianity which was at once more sentimental and more aggressive,'³¹⁶ accompanied by a 'growing sense of urgency about the need to preach the good news to all before God's judgement.'³¹⁷ In this context, 'mission became an obligation,'³¹⁸ and women were called to participate within the 'sphere ordained by God and nature to be the realm of female influence.'³¹⁹ Woman's work in witnessing within the home was attributed great significance. Indeed, Robert notes that in the midst of the rapid formation of new missionary societies, there was a reliance on women's

³¹³ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 178, 176.

³¹⁴ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 6.

³¹⁵ Fiorenza, *In Memory*, 178.

³¹⁶ Macdonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission*, 45.

³¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 43.

³¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

³¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

domestic influence: ‘supporters of women missionaries believed that if homes became Christianized, then entire societies would be transformed by Christianity.’³²⁰ On one hand, this belief in the power of female efforts to transform ‘entire societies’ encourages a sense of these women as esteemed missionary figures. And yet, for so long as women and their voices remained bound to the domestic sphere it could be argued that certain patterns of restriction continued relatively unchallenged and true vocal authority for women remained unattained. An 1871 Free Church magazine article entitled ‘Woman’s Work and Mission’ stated: ‘Woman’s worst enemy is he who would cruelly lift her out of her sphere, and would try to reverse the laws of God and nature on her behalf’.³²¹ The polemic fervour of such an exhortation indicates both the ideological restrictions at play for 19th-century missionary women and the fact that mission was encouraging women to act in ways that constituted a more radical departure from their appropriate sphere.

Crucially, the 19th-century saw missional empowerment within the home progress beyond its walls. Macdonald highlights how mission as ‘personal and charitable and evangelistic dealings with the poor’ came to be considered an extension of domestic work and thus the ‘Angel of the House’ was invited to become ‘Angel in the World’.³²² As evangelical mission was directed towards tackling ‘the moral and spiritual decay of the nation’, there was ‘space and opportunity’³²³ created for women outside of the home. Macdonald argues that ‘radical possibilities’ emerged through women being given the opportunity to ‘exercise purposeful activity.’³²⁴ These ‘radical possibilities’ included missionary women being led to challenge ideas that persisted in restricting their spiritual potential, for example, the ‘concept of unquestioned male leadership.’³²⁵ It would appear that as avenues were opened for women to participate as equally dignified agents in 19th-century missionary efforts, female Christians were inspired to question or – act in opposition to – the ideas and practices that continued to reinforce practical

³²⁰ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 127.

³²¹ Macdonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission*, 46.

³²² *Ibid.*, 52.

³²³ *Ibid.*

³²⁴ Macdonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission*, 53.

³²⁵ *Ibid.*

restriction elsewhere. For some female missionaries it was through public speaking that they defied conventional ideas with regards to woman's place and vocal authority.

The example of Helen Gibson (1836-1888) functions well to illustrate how in their empowerment as female missionaries women were increasingly enabled to use vocal authority in proclamation. Gibson carried out the sort of community visitation that was considered entirely appropriate woman's work, but she also 'conducted open-air meetings and evangelistic campaigns', addressing 'audiences of several hundreds' and earning the status of a 'female preacher'.³²⁶ It should perhaps be unsurprising that women like Gibson were enabled to use their voices when trusted with missional tasks. The role of apostle or missionary has been consistently and directly associated with the idea of vocal witness, and remains to be so. For example, Barth's theological understanding of mission centres upon the practice of proclamation,³²⁷ with Keller following a similar theme and identifying mission as fundamentally rooted in a task to 'preach the Word and produce disciples.'³²⁸ The task of witnessing seemingly requires women to have the authority to speak more freely. Mission does not more clearly offer to transform female self-understanding or open areas of participation for women than in the way a missionary motivation or context can affect notions of the female voice.

And yet, 'issues of authority and definition' continued to surround the 'act of preaching for women.'³²⁹ Kienzle and Walker use Virginia Cary Hudson Cleveland (1894-1954) as an example of this phenomenon: her letters illustrate how women could respond to restrictive ecclesial patterns by identifying their witness in ways that were deemed to be acceptable. For example, Hudson Cleveland described her instructive speech delivered in Calvary Episcopal Church and a Methodist church in terms of 'teaching', whereas when 'she gave instruction in another setting, the Goodwill Chapel, in downtown Louisville, she called that instruction preaching ... there she was an authorized voice.'³³⁰ King emphasises how disagreement over women's right to 'preach'

³²⁶ Macdonald, *A Unique and Glorious Mission*, 61.

³²⁷ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 64.

³²⁸ Keller cited by Ed Stetzer, 'The Mission of the Church', <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2011/december/mission-of-church--more-thoughts-from-keller-and-gospel.html>, accessed 29/05/15.

³²⁹ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, xiii.

³³⁰ *Ibid.*

can lead to limitation by definition: ‘whether women’s activity is called ‘preaching’ or given some other name can determine whether women will be included or excluded.’³³¹ Arguably, when women speak in missional contexts outside of any particular church’s regulations or denominational preferences, there is greater freedom available through a lack of institutional definition. Sophie’s interview modelled to some extent how this is working for contemporary young women, mission being a means by which she could engage freely with any kind of speech:

I have been given opportunities to speak to large groups ... to a group of girls ... I've been given opportunities to do both, to speak at the front and speak in churches and things like that.

Missional contexts seemingly offer women the sort of charismatic authority to speak that has in instances been permitted by even those most historically opposed to the idea of female ‘preaching.’ For example, Martin Luther was against the official appointment of female preachers, yet affirmed the idea that women could receive charismatic calling into what we might term missional speech-acts, so that in certain ‘limited circumstances women might be called to preach the gospel, not only in private but in public.’³³² Such a subtly convoluted perspective is generally evident in historical debate regarding female vocal authority in mission contexts as opposed to in the church; missional spaces and opportunities often providing the means by which women were seen to be ‘appropriately’ called to speak in ways they were otherwise denied.

Women in the history of Christianity first engaged with charismatically inspired speech through prophecy; a spiritual self-expression generally ‘recognized as an activity accessible to women.’³³³ Indeed, Aquinas was uncompromising in his opposition to female preaching, stating in the *Summa Theologica*: ‘publicly, addressing oneself to the whole church ... this is not permitted to women.’³³⁴ And yet, Aquinas argues in the same

³³¹ King, ‘Voices of the Spirit’, 338.

³³² *Ibid.*, 107.

³³³ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, xiv.

³³⁴ Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II-II, Q. 177, Art. 2, <http://www.egs.edu/library/thomas-aquinas/articles/summa-theologica-part-ii-ii-secunda-secundae-translated-by-fathers-of-the-english-dominican-province/treatise-on-gratuitous-graces-qq-171-182/question-177of-the-gratuitous-grace-consisting-in-words/>, accessed 13/08/15.

text in favour of female prophecy: 'prophecy is granted to women, as we read of Deborah, of Hulda the prophetess, wife of Selnor, and of the four daughters of Philip. Moreover the Apostle says: "every woman prophesying or praying"'.³³⁵ Armstrong notes that in the early church, prophets constituted a 'class of people' believed to have been 'directly inspired by the Spirit and entrusted with divine messages.'³³⁶ Armstrong also refers to Paul's affirmation of female prophecy, asserting that 'Paul fully accepted that women, like men, could be prophets and that they too ... were directly in contact with the Spirit'.³³⁷ According to Martos and Hégy, Aquinas' support of female prophecy is rooted in a strict differentiation between prophecy as a sign of charismatic authority and the sort of 'ordinary authority' only available to men and required to preach.³³⁸ For Aquinas, 'prophecy is a gift' and a sign of extraordinary authority given out of necessity.³³⁹ Aquinas' lasting theological influence encouraged the formation of confusing boundaries within which women would be permitted to speak.

However, Jensen asserts that such boundaries were blurred. Jensen suggests that prophecy and preaching or teaching would not have initially been viewed as contrasting or conflicting modes of speech: 'only when the conflicts over publicly active women multiplied and intensified were prophecy and teaching pitted against each other.'³⁴⁰ Jensen therefore identifies 1 Corinthians 11 as an affirmation of female preaching in so much as it is an affirmation of female prophecy: 'Paul attests in Corinth prophetically active women who apparently could speak in church'.³⁴¹ American revivalist and female preacher Phoebe Palmer (1807-1874) similarly utilised the phenomenon of female prophecy as justification for female preaching: 'the Scriptural idea of the terms preach and prophesy, stand so inseparably connected as one and the same thing, that we should find it difficult to get aside from the fact that women did preach, or in other words, prophesy, in the early ages of Christianity, and have continued to do so.'³⁴² And yet, a

³³⁵ Ibid.

³³⁶ Armstrong, *The Gospel According to Woman*, 55.

³³⁷ Ibid.

³³⁸ Martos and Hégy, *Equal at the Creation*, 90.

³³⁹ Ibid.

³⁴⁰ Jensen, *God's Daughters*, 192.

³⁴¹ Ibid.

³⁴² Palmer cited by Booth, *Female Ministry*, <http://webapp1.dlib.indiana.edu/vwwp/view?docId=VAB7105&doc.view=print>, accessed 21/10/14.

‘strict differentiation of charismata’ between prophesy and preaching was established and maintained.³⁴³ Rather than female preaching receiving widespread affirmation through its association with prophecy, prophecy in itself became something that was increasingly ‘found suspect.’³⁴⁴ Streete argues that this occurred especially when it was associated with women, because prophetic speech ‘was a mark of charismatic authority’ and ‘not readily susceptible to control by institutions.’³⁴⁵ While concepts of charismatic authority have empowered women to speak in certain contexts, speech-acts that are forced to remain outside official recognition risk being consistently undermined by a reception that is rooted in distrust.

Some of the young women I interviewed seemed to model similar patterns of ‘strict differentiation of charismata’; separating the way they used their voice in mission contexts from the concept of formalised preaching in church settings. Walker argues that through founding the Salvation Army as a missional institution and defending the biblical basis for female preaching, Catherine Booth ‘institutionalized women’s right to preach the gospel and provided a unique opportunity for thousands of women to preach without having an extraordinary call or inhabiting a world turned upside down.’³⁴⁶ Booth fought for female proclamation to be celebrated and utilised in any Christian context. The way in which young women are understanding and using vocal authority in mission inspires hope that the female voice may eventually be as accepted and dignified in institutional contexts as it is in spaces free of restrictive practices of definition.

The Interview Process

The final section of each interview I conducted for this project sought to address specifically how young women are participating in contemporary forms of missional behaviour, and the ways in which such involvement affects their spiritual self-understanding.³⁴⁷ Just as we have seen mission to have been empowering for women in the past, in my experience of mission I have encountered and witnessed often

³⁴³ Jensen, *God’s Daughters*, 191.

³⁴⁴ Streete, ‘Women as Sources of Redemption’, 346.

³⁴⁵ Ibid.

³⁴⁶ Walker, ‘A Chaste and Fervid Eloquence’, 298.

³⁴⁷ For a full breakdown of the questionnaire and interview process, see the Methodological Appendix.

unparalleled levels of freedom for women in the areas of spiritual gifting, vocal proclamation and leadership. My questions were therefore directed towards uncovering whether mission is indeed functioning for these young women in a similar way; offering a space of – sometimes unusual or exceptional – freedom and charismatic authority. I also sought to discern whether the experience of spiritual freedom in missional contexts had lasting impact on the women’s self-understanding and religious behaviour. Questions included: ‘Have you ever taken part in any Christian mission?’ ‘Can you describe your experience?’ ‘What did you learn about yourself through mission?’ ‘What did you learn about God?’

Although some interviewees associated mission with meeting the needs of men and women from different communities or engaging in missional behaviour among students on their university campus, participation in mission for the young women I spoke to largely meant participation in summer mission and work with children.³⁴⁸ In the women’s experience, ‘mission’ seemed to mainly take the form of holiday Bible clubs, outreach teams, mission trips abroad and summer camps. For those interviewed, the experience of mission in these various forms was an overwhelmingly empowering aspect of their faith and self-understanding.

Mission as Foundation for Faith

Many of the young women I interviewed identified missional activity as a starting point; a foundation for their faith.³⁴⁹ They emphasised how through mission they gained greater knowledge of God and themselves. This increased self-knowledge was largely to do with the knowledge of spiritual gifting and individual purpose. Several women spoke of mission providing space through which they could practically explore their own gifting and spiritual potential: ‘learning by doing’. This appeared to be for many a very positive experience, missional contexts freeing them from being told what they can or cannot do and enabling them to autonomously discover and use their own gifts: *‘I’ve been told my ideas aren’t valuable or will not be listened to ... but I definitely learnt a lot about my role, my potential as a woman involved with mission.’* Mission provided these women

³⁴⁸ 13 out of 16 women related mission to summer outreach and work with children.

³⁴⁹ 9 women spoke about mission as something foundational for their faith.

with freedom to uncover their gifting, but was also a space through which some felt divinely called into areas of leadership and vocal proclamation.

Sophie, for example, accredits her early development of faith to an experience of participating in mission at a young age: *'the first proper time I did missions was in Madrid when I was 16 ... I was quite young ... so that really helped me to develop my faith.'* Sophie's reflections also express the idea that there is something specifically empowering for young women about the act of *'going and telling people about God.'* For Sophie, there was an essential confidence to be gained by sharing foundational beliefs: *'it's a good opportunity and it makes you more confident about your faith. Like when you get back to basics and are telling other people.'* Mission in this way promotes the formation of self-assured young women of confident faith.

Mission for others developed their foundation for faith through presenting challenge. Chloe highlighted the way in which mission can challenge faith in such a way as to establish personal and authentic belief in place of ingrained knowledge:

Well you grow up in this church environment and then when you're asked to actually tell people what it is you believe ... that's been a thing challenging me on my faith, on what do I actually believe and what do I actually want to tell people about?

As missional tasks required these women to share aspects of their faith with others, they were prompted to re-examine the knowledge of God they had inherited or developed; something that generally resulted in reinforced spiritual foundations.

Alice made similar remarks to Chloe, in her experience the challenge of encountering alternative ways of thinking through mission among her peers at university necessitated a deeper intellectual exploration of what she had more simply believed throughout her childhood:

Christian Union events weeks too I've been involved with, which is very different doing that on campus where the questions you were facing from people were a lot more difficult that you would have working with children

and young people. And I think that made me think a lot about what I believed.

Chloe's reflection points to the way in which mission encourages young women to approach their faith critically and intelligently. With a missionary motivation and space to engage with 'difficult questions' or Christianity's core ambiguities, young women are enabled to exert intellectual control over their own belief-system and personal faith, understanding themselves to be autonomous believers.

For Jennifer, mission was challenging in such a way that inspired total dependence on God: *'I've been put in the position where I have had to take God at his words, without distractions or other support ... you don't realise Jesus is all you need until Jesus is all you've got.'* For others, mission constituted a crucially foundational aspect of their faith through how it functioned to actively sustain it. Emma experienced a greater connection to God through the immersive nature of a mission trip: *'knowing that when you immerse yourself in mission you are more likely to get close to God.'* In comparison, Claire spoke of mission as something of an essential life-source for her faith:

I think I used it [mission] as a chance to get right with God, to fill my cup up in the summer and then the rest of the year it would slowly drain and then the next summer I'd fill it up again ... I used it for a while to keep in touch with God. My experience of mission has been that it is one of the most beneficial things to keep your faith alive.

Mission seemed to function as foundational in the lives of these women in so much as it furthered the development of a personal faith that was informed, confidently sustained, and self-determined.

Mission and Christian Identity

Some of the women I interviewed related to missional activity as foundational to their faith in its nature as something they understood to be integral to their Christian identity.³⁵⁰ Thus Lauren spoke of mission as something she accepted to be inherent to

³⁵⁰ 9 women viewed participation in mission as part of their Christian identity.

her Christian identification and by consequence all-encompassing of her life: *'For me, it's not really a question of why did you choose mission. As soon as you choose Jesus you choose mission. And wherever we are, it's mission.'* Rachel understood mission to constitute the specific role and purpose of a specifically Christian – and thus kingdom of God focused – identity: *'we are kingdom people, and part of being in God's kingdom is to be working for that kingdom and expanding that and ... sharing that message, that is our role.'* Emma envisioned the connection between a Christian identity and the missional task as one of personal responsibility, admitting to feeling a *'sense of duty'* when it came to mission. She went on to attribute this *'sense of duty'* she felt to the fact that she viewed mission to be something humanity was made for: *'He's made us to love him and love other people. And part of loving other people is telling them about him.'* Abi re-imagines feelings of obligation positively in her depiction of mission as a natural *'outpouring of our faith'* and indeed, Sophie viewed mission as a way to autonomously express her faith; *'to put my faith into action.'*

In light of this idea of mission as integral to the Christian identity, there also emerged the idea that mission functioned for these women as an integral part of life. Jessica argued that missional activity is meant to be integrated with everyday life and be part of daily activity: mission is *'something we're meant to do every day.'* Megan challenged the construction of boundaries and the distinctions made when it comes to understanding a missionary identification or missional behaviour: *'even if you don't become a full time missionary officially, as Christians you were made to be a full time missionary whatever situation you're in.'* With this perspective, Megan understood her missionary identity and potential to be limitless. Lauren similarly argued for greater acknowledgement of mission as something that can be entirely incorporated into daily life, and not restricted by constraints of location or time, asserting that missional acts and intentions present in short mission trips or experiences should not be considered anomalous, but should rather be evident as part of our every-day routine:

[Mission] has shown me how to practically demonstrate God's love to people. But also a lot of it is what you should be doing every day ... in some senses, it's not anything special, it's just a heightened version of what you should be doing already.

A couple of the women I spoke to also seemed to experience foundational and faith enriching confirmation of who God is through mission. For example, Megan reflected on how she felt affirmed in her own faith having witnessed the missional concern and character of God through engaging with mission in her own neighbourhood: *'I guess just seeing God working in my community was amazing confirmation of who he is and confirmation in my faith.'* Jennifer by contrast specifically acquired knowledge of God's *'massive heart for justice'* through overseas mission.

The idea of mission as a starting point in the lives of these young women was also evident in how it seemed to develop an empowering knowledge of self. Jennifer and Claire gleaned knowledge of their spiritual status through mission: *'Just taking time to be with God ... showed me my potential as a co-heir and as a daughter', 'I think with doing different things like ... working with children in Canada, I think I am a child of God.'*

Sarah and Katie regarded mission as a means to gain insight into their created purpose; Katie discerning through mission, *'God has made me to serve him. In a more particular sense I believe he has created me to serve people'*. Sarah by contrast reflected that:

Being able to serve in a different country ... makes you realise a lot about yourself ... by serving, by doing mission, we gain a greater understanding of our purpose, and better understand the reason for which we were created.

Claire found mission empowering in terms of understanding her potential – *'doing Canada and stuff I saw my potential, in certain aspects I realised I could do all of it'* – as well as knowledge of her own character: *'I definitely think I've learnt through it [mission] that I'm an introvert ... and I love spending time alone with my bible and I learnt that a lot through mission.'* Chloe even felt through mission affirmation of who she is in relation to future plans for her life:

Seeing how ... God is also leading me towards where he might want me in the future – little confirmations along the way of things I maybe didn't click with and other things I absolutely felt like this is what gets my heart going.

And ... out of that, having something further to explore with God that he might take me into in years to come.

Through involvement with mission these women gained knowledge that elevated their self-understanding and increased their knowledge of God. Most significantly however, they developed what came across as an all-encompassing knowledge – of their purpose and innate dignity – with potential to empower and transform beyond the missional context.

Mission and Gifting

In terms of developing an empowering knowledge of self, mission has also functioned for many of the young women interviewed as a practical means of discovering and deepening knowledge of their spiritual gifting.³⁵¹ Lauren speaking of mission as ‘*where you find out what you’re gifted at!*’ Sophie began to locate her gifts through her first experience of mission aged 16: ‘*that was a good experience because it really helps you realise where your strengths are and how you can be used*’. From Lauren’s account, mission appeared to be something that facilitated a gradual process of acknowledgement in relation to individual strengths:

I think I have a gift of communication in talking to people and explaining things. I think I’m getting better at speaking to large groups of people and helping them get on board with an idea ... I think I have a gift of working with kids ... I’ve learnt that I’m gifted in how to communicate stuff that is understandable to kids.

The idea that mission could uniquely offer a relatively safe space to experiment and discover personal gifts emerged through Megan’s reflections:

The last two summers [on mission trips] when I was thrown into ... situations where I was asked to lead the worship or sing. I think it’s easier to do it in that sort of situation because it’s children and it’s fine because it’s kids.

³⁵¹ 13 women related mission to developing knowledge of their own gifting.

She went on to suggest that when it came to particular tasks and skills in mission contexts, *'you have to do it to a certain extent to realise you can do it.'* In this way Megan draws attention to the way mission can empower young women by offering insight into the presence of gifts through their practical expression. This process Megan describes as *'learning by doing'* in mission is evident in her experience of putting on a piece of drama, and the retrospective realisation that she had creative gifts to use to witness to God:

We devised this piece of physical theatre based on the creation right up to Jesus' death and ascension and it turned out to be a massive witness in school, a lot of people came to see it and it opened up a lot of conversations. So I guess that opened my eyes to using drama for God, directly.

For Megan, mission contexts rather uniquely presented the means of uncovering her own gifting, *'practically, as opposed to people telling me I can do it.'* Megan spoke of mission providing her with almost unavoidable opportunities to discover and use her gifts; being *'thrown into'* challenging situations of having to do certain things and subsequently coming to terms with personal potential:

In Romania it was definitely a case of discovering what I could do ... we didn't do anything until we went out, it was basically learning by doing ... it confirmed in my head that actually I was capable of doing this and being a witness through it.

Missional activity even emerged as something that offered space for women to discover the potential for unexpected or surprising gifting: *'I learnt that if I'm willing to be used, God will use me. I don't need to necessarily be in my comfort zone', 'I learnt that ... God can give me the strength to do anything, even when it's something you don't feel particularly confident doing – God can give you strength to do it.'*

The young women I spoke to directly associated mission with crucial opportunities to identify, use and develop their gifts in service of God. It inspires hope that such gifts – once acknowledged as available – would then be used more readily in every context.

Freedom to Lead

In speaking to young women about Christian mission, mission compellingly came across as a source of opportunity for leadership.³⁵² Opportunities to lead in mission often seemed in contrast to the experience of ecclesial restriction, in agreement with Robert's claim that mission provides women with space to 'assume leadership roles unavailable to them' in home contexts.³⁵³ Katie's experience of church in comparison to her experience of mission is particularly worthy of note. During the interview, she spoke of various expressions of restrictive ideas and practices she had encountered through her involvement with her own church community:

It would be encouraged that women are there in a supportive background role ... that when men would be leading a church or making decisions that women would be there not making suggestions and not having a voice in that ... through my experience I've been told my ideas aren't valuable or will not be listened to.

Katie's experience of mission, by contrast, was one of empowering possibility: openness existing for women to serve in roles that needed to be filled. For example, she referred to her experience of 'leading free church youth camps,' where, because 'it was an all-girl's camp' there was 'an all-female leadership team.' The fact that the absence of male leaders 'meant that the bible talks had to be done by females', amongst whom she was included, so that this ensured that she also took part in more formalised teaching of the sort of which her church would normally prohibit for women. In a second experience of mission, Katie was surprised to see for the first time women acting as equally involved participants at the centre of activity alongside men: 'women had a big role in community work ... which I found really interesting because it was the first time I'd seen that happening.' Furthermore, Katie noted that women were specifically called upon to serve in ways men could not:

³⁵² 7 women spoke of having the opportunity to lead in missional contexts.

³⁵³ Robert, *Christian Mission*, 119.

Because of the nature of housing schemes and the amount of women and vulnerable women that live within them, it can sometimes be seen as inappropriate for a man to be approaching certain situations which is why women were seen as really valuable in that context. Especially with one to one bible studies and group studies, that was seen as a man's no-go area.³⁵⁴

This missional environment offered her space to participate fully, and this time, despite the fact that there were men available to do the same jobs. Through being given the opportunity to speak and teach, regardless of whether men were present, Katie learnt that the empowerment of women to witness through mission transcended any simple need for them to take on tasks in the absence of men, but could be based upon a general openness for people to serve as they are skilled and called:

I wasn't treated any differently to the men. I was given the opportunity to do talks for kids and young people, even though there were men on hand. That made me think, actually it's not only when men aren't around, women do have a part to play in doing a talk or teaching the bible.

The impact of such a realisation for Katie was hugely significant in how it positively reinforced her spiritual self-understanding in a lasting way:

I definitely learnt a lot about my role, my potential as a woman involved with mission. And how that doesn't just have to mean giving suggestions to a man to take forward, but that I can actually ... be proactive myself. And also ... I understood more about men and women being equal in the sight of God.

For Sophie, opportunity to serve freely in missional contexts is something she has grown to take for granted:

³⁵⁴ Katie's experience of being especially 'valuable' in mission in 'man's no-go area' seems to resemble concepts of women's missionary efforts recorded in the 3rd-century church order, the *Didascalia Apostolorum*. The *Didascalia* prohibits female teaching and excludes women from institutionalised leadership, yet promotes female ministry in the form of deaconesses because there were cultural requirements that necessitated women's participation: 'appoint as deacons a man for the performance of the most things that are required, but a woman for the ministry of women. For there are houses whither thou canst not send a deacon to the women ... but mayest send a deaconess. Also, because in many other matters the office of a woman deacon is required.'

I guess I've always been given opportunities, even on exodus teams [overseas mission teams] and stuff there was never a 'only the boys will get up and speak in church' – it was always that I've been given the opportunity.

Sophie considered empowered participation of women in mission as utterly unsurprising. Abi reflected on her times of engaging with mission as experiences of learning about her own leadership potential as well as God's affirmation of her leadership roles through divine provision: *'I learnt that I had abilities that I never thought I had...like leadership skills. I never would have considered myself as a leader ... its funny what God will give you when you need it.'* Furthermore, Abi's leadership in a mission context was not insignificant: *'organising the team and being leader of the team that had both men who were older than myself and women older than myself.'* For Lauren, mission actually functioned to encourage and develop leadership skills: *'I guess it [Christian mission] is where you find out what you're gifted at and you get developed in leadership roles and learning how to work with other people.'* While Lauren believed that mission provided space to *'get developed in leadership roles'* that could exist more generally outside mission contexts, Sarah reflected on mission as creating situations in which leadership skills were readily given even to those who weren't naturally that way inclined:

I think that God provides us with different gifts at different times when they're needed, and there are times when I have needed to be a leader and I have been given that gift of being able to lead.

Through participating in mission these women experienced divine affirmation of their leadership potential, freedom to use leadership skills, as well as space to freely seek and develop leadership capabilities.

Freedom to Proclaim

Opportunities offered to young women in mission contexts seemed to include those for proclamation and vocal authority. Sophie identified various styles of proclamation she had freely engaged with through her different experiences of mission, perceiving no boundaries in terms of how and where she could speak:

Not necessarily always at the front ... I have been given opportunities to speak to large groups ... being at camp you're constantly, in a sense, preaching the gospel to a group of girls ... I've been given opportunities to do both, to speak at the front and speak in churches and things like that.

Jennifer was quick and confident in claiming experience of preaching the gospel through mission: *'Yeah, nearly every time actually. In South America to a church in the Amazon which was fun.'*

And yet, there was a tangible reluctance from many when it came to identifying their speech-acts as 'preaching.' When asked whether they had 'preached the gospel,' some referred primarily to the teaching of children: *'even just teaching in our cabins in the summer was definitely a way [of preaching the gospel]'*, *'never to a large audience but with a small group of 6-8 children yes'*, *'mostly to children ... from a formal point of view where you're standing at the front, giving a talk, it's mostly been to children.'* Although on one hand this could signify that women are defining this task of teaching children as part of what it is to 'preach' the gospel in mission, it seems more likely that they were subtly differentiating between their teaching of children and the sort of institutional teaching they imagined I meant by 'preaching the gospel'.

Others were even more hesitant in affirming mission-based speech acts as preaching or proclamation, exemplifying the 'issues of authority and definition that have surrounded the act of preaching for women.'³⁵⁵ Sarah openly acknowledged an ambiguity surrounding female preaching and mission contexts, and differentiated between how she spoke during mission, and what she viewed to be 'preaching' that occurs in formalised church settings: *'Well it depends what preaching the gospel means. Not preaching, but sharing the gospel. I think that's the heart of mission – sharing the good news of Christ with others. But I have not preached it, from a pulpit.'* Sarah's reflections also highlight how she imagines herself to be a fully mobilised agent at 'the heart of mission' through her own acts of proclamation. Her self-definition of her speech acts as *'not preaching'* but *'sharing the gospel'* and *'sharing the good news of Christ'* perhaps models in some way what King describes as a tendency for women to tackle issues of

³⁵⁵ Kienzle and Walker, *Women Preachers*, xiv.

definition by developing ‘new language to disguise what they were doing.’³⁵⁶ King argues that strategies of developing new language to describe the ways they were speaking ‘operated to give women power within limits already set by those who insisted that women had no right to preach officially, from the pulpit, in public, or before men.’³⁵⁷ Although Sarah does not appear to be deliberately disguising her speech-acts, she describes her speech in terms of accepted ways of understanding female speech in mission: these definitions may perhaps have emerged or been encouraged through a desire to in some way distance the female voice from the idea of ‘preaching’. For Sarah, her description of her speech in terms of ‘*sharing the gospel*’ was accompanied by her sense of inclusion in what constitutes ‘*the heart of mission.*’ And yet by distinguishing her action of ‘*sharing the gospel*’ through mission from the act of preaching ‘*from a pulpit*’; she excludes herself from any general association with the concept of ‘preaching.’

When asked whether they had preached the gospel in mission contexts, Jessica and Grace similarly resisted the term ‘preaching’ and defined their experience differently. Jessica attributed the term to a specific form of biblical teaching and therefore considered it inapplicable to her own experiences: ‘*I’ve never stood up in front of a crowd and given a biblical exposition, I have done children’s stories.*’ And yet, her opening question of ‘*what do you mean by “preaching”?*’ indicates her awareness that preaching can be understood in different ways. By her choice of definition she excludes herself and the past use of her voice from association with ‘preaching.’ It seems reasonable to suggest that Jessica’s definition of preaching as something that involves standing up ‘*in front of a crowd*’ and giving ‘*a biblical exposition*’ has developed in response to – or been handed down by – her own particular church background. Grace identified her speech in mission as rooted in ‘*speaking to people about the gospel*’ and ‘*telling people about the gospel*’ rather than ‘preaching the gospel.’ Emily spoke of doing ‘*little talks*’ in her youth group that were ‘*not preaching, but kind of like that.*’ There is a tension present in Emily’s response: between her readiness to state that the talks she gave were ‘*not preaching*’ and her acknowledgement that they were ‘*kind of like that.*’ Such a tension implies that Emily has inherited a particular definition of preaching that inspired her to distance her particular speech-act from the term

³⁵⁶ King, *Voices of the Spirit*, 339.

³⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

‘preaching’, yet she experienced the process of giving talks to somehow resemble ‘preaching’ on a personal level. Evidently through their missional engagement women are engaging with various kinds of proclamation while continuing to embody tensions inherent in questions of what defines ‘preaching’ or ‘teaching’ and the degree to which the ecclesial restrictions of their own church traditions should be carried over into mission contexts. Emily’s response encourages the idea that young women may desire to see the vocal authority of missional contexts recognised and affirmed more fully, rather than set apart from church-based preaching.

It was overwhelmingly clear from the interviews, however, that regardless of how they are defining it, women are using their voices through mission – and for the sake of mission – in ways that share the gospel and are ultimately empowering.

Mission and Calling

Finally, many of the women reflected upon various feelings of being personally called to join in mission; an experience that offered unquestionable right to participate in a full and life-enriching way.³⁵⁸ For Jennifer, an experience of calling established mission as something she understood to be a personal and unavoidable responsibility: *‘I felt really challenged at the end of school to go and make disciples of all nations ... that whole notion has been stalking me ever since, it feels like a responsibility I can’t shirk.’* Megan’s account of what she understood as a calling into mission shows a correlation between responding to a call and the experience of mission itself. In relation to a particular mission trip to Romania, she speaks of wondering *‘is this meant to be?’* After hearing that there was a need for someone with her skills-set, *‘they were looking for someone who could do sport or music, it just seemed to really fit.’* She felt *‘confirmation that it was where I was meant to be’* after she was offered a place on the team. She linked her understanding that God wanted her to be involved in this particular expression of mission, of its being divinely *‘meant to be’*, to a feeling of being *‘at peace’* and *‘at home’* while on the trip: *‘having that overwhelming sense of peace and knowing I was happier than I had been in a long time even if my situation would dictate otherwise – knowing you’re meant to be there.’*

³⁵⁸ 10 women referred to experiences of feeling ‘called’ into mission.

Alice reviewed calling in terms of understanding what God wants for her life; responding to calling being an essential component of reaching your full potential as a witness: *'If I follow what God wants for me, I believe I have potential to achieve what he wants for my life. We could be called to do something massive'*. In a similar way, Lauren believed that her greatest possibility would emanate from the call of God who, she has been taught, *'can use me for anything'*: *'I should listen to that and follow that and that's the best for me.'*

This sense of calling experienced by many in relation to mission also seemed to encourage a more general sense of the ultimate authority of divine calling. Emily demonstrated her allegiance to personal calling as something that should not be argued against or undermined:

I think God calls us to do what we do and I think to say there's a passage here and to use that to stop someone from doing something they believe God is calling them to do is very destructive.

Likewise, Claire's experience of seeing men and women fulfilling a variety of different roles led her to an assurance that God would openly call and equip:

I've definitely seen men and woman preach, glorifying God in every service. Being a minister, being a speaker, being the background people. I've seen men and women do everything and do an equally good job. So I think it's just whatever God calls you to do, and it doesn't matter what gender you are, if that's what he wants you to do he'll make you good at it.

According to these women, the charismatic authority that emanates from a divine calling overrides the power of restrictive ideas or practices. The women who reflected most upon the idea of 'calling' and its authority for their lives tended to be the interviewees with the most inclusive view of spiritual roles and functions. Indeed, for some, to affirm calling was to affirm their own right to witness in any way God desired. Mission definitely provided a space in which women experienced a sense of calling; whether that was a calling into mission in general or a calling to take up a specific role. Many of the women I interviewed associated the idea of divine 'calling' with mission. In this way, mission functions in a uniquely empowering way: connecting women with their

personal 'calling', seeing women equipped and enabled to fulfil '*whatever God calls [them] to do*' and allowing women to be encouraged as they witness and work alongside other female believers fulfilling roles they are called to. For Claire, a calling from God extends into all areas, leading women into unlimited forms of service: '*being a minister, being a speaker, being the background people*'. One could conclude therefore that as women increasingly engage with their calling into particular roles through mission, they may be encouraged, empowered and affirmed by others to take up the same roles elsewhere.

Conclusion

In conclusion, in reflecting on Christian mission we approach something that – along with Christianity itself – faces a certain degree of crisis. Anderson suggests that 'the word mission has become politically incorrect in a postmodern world,'³⁵⁹ while Sivalon stresses that the church risks 'becoming an interesting artifact' if it does not begin to engage well with present culture.³⁶⁰ While some argue that Christian mission faces nothing but crisis in the contemporary context, perceived as an unacceptable or intolerant practice of a dying church; many missiologists focus on a sense of possibility in the midst of change. Sivalon calls for a 'fresh understanding of God's mission' and a 'new way of being and doing'³⁶¹ while Bosch desires a 'new vision to break out of the present stalemate ... a different kind of missionary involvement.'³⁶² Perhaps in this atmosphere of change there is space for missional activity itself to witness to God through its continuing empowerment of female witnesses.

From the sample of young women I spoke to we can discern some of the ways in which mission is presently functioning to empower female believers to serve God with freedom. Dana Robert traced a progression evident in women's missionary history; 'opportunities for women's leadership in foreign mission agencies' encouraging a 'quest for formal recognition, and ultimately ordination, in the churches at home.'³⁶³ In this

³⁵⁹ Anderson, *An Emergent Theology*, 179.

³⁶⁰ Sivalon, *God's Mission and Postmodern Culture*, 13.

³⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 10.

³⁶² Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 7.

³⁶³ Dana Robert cited by Stanley, *The World Missionary Conference*, 315.

way, Robert inspires consideration of whether this sort of tendency has emerged in the lives of missionary women of the past and present; a desire to actively respond to the empowering realities of the mission-field by transforming church structures and practices to create the same sort of space at home for female witnesses. Bosch calls for mission to ‘respond creatively to the challenges it is encountering,’³⁶⁴ and arguably there is a need for the church to simultaneously respond creatively to its increasing relegation, allowing women to participate as they are missionally enabled to elsewhere; in such a way that revitalises the church’s life ‘by fully incorporating more than half of its membership.’³⁶⁵

Women have witnessed to God from the very beginning; instrumental agents of Christian mission from the very earliest Jesus movement onwards. Christianity has a long history of women being offered opportunities through mission and the act of witnessing to God beyond centres of institutional control. Through involvement with mission women have historically joined with what we now call the *missio Dei*; empowered to act, speak and witness to God’s present and coming kingdom as called and dignified believers, apostles and teachers. Female witness has been associated with charismatic authority from Christianity’s beginnings; women remembered as having possessed authority to lead, proclaim, and represent the divine as martyrs, confessors, prophetesses, leaders of house-churches and Christian missionaries throughout history. For the young women I interviewed, mission was still very much a space associated with openness and opportunity. And yet, many did not treat the opportunities they had been given in mission as particularly extraordinary: ‘*I’ve been given opportunities to do both, to speak at the front and speak in churches and things like that*’, ‘*taking on a leadership role and organising the team and being leader*’, ‘*it’s quite normal to think about how I fit into God’s plan, it’s not a strange thing.*’ Many interviewees did not associate opportunities in mission with the missional context itself, but with their relationship with God and his calling. This suggests that women are increasingly being enabled to serve God with freedom in all contexts.

³⁶⁴ Bosch, *Transforming Mission*, 374.

³⁶⁵ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 301.

Conclusion

Christianity continues to carry deeply rooted uncertainties about woman and her place within its ranks. In choosing to identify with the Christian tradition, young women, to varying extents, inherit, carry, and understand themselves in relation to these uncertainties. When it comes to issues surrounding the potential or place of the female believer, it seems unlikely that ambiguity and conflict will imminently disappear. And yet, while historical uncertainties about female status and role can be traced in the self-understanding of contemporary Evangelical young women, they are responding in overwhelmingly positive ways; ways that both echo and diverge from strategies adopted by others throughout Christian history. The women interviewed related to their faith in a way that was deeply personal and life-enriching.³⁶⁶ Their refusal to ‘flee’ from Christian tradition did not equate to any passive or hopeless ‘alienation from themselves,’³⁶⁷ but rather, they had developed – and continued to develop – ultimately empowering ways to understand their nature and place in Christian tradition, church and mission.

The young women affirmed their own creation as *imago Dei* and built their understanding of themselves, God, and their relationship with God on the foundation of this reality. In examining whether contemporary young women from mainly Evangelical backgrounds³⁶⁸ had inherited ancient denials of woman as *imago Dei*, it was apparent that those interviewed had developed overwhelmingly positive approaches to ideas historically used to exclude and oppress. For example, Christian history’s belief that ‘if sufficiently pious’ women could achieve ‘the self-same sex as men’³⁶⁹ did not often find fresh expression in the self-understanding of these women. And when it did, for example, in Katherine’s affirmation of her own status as ‘God’s son’, it was used to signify divine resemblance and equal dignity between women and men. These young women engaged with ideas of imperfect reflection of the divine image, but in relation to

³⁶⁶ See Methodological Appendix for an analysis of the sample.

³⁶⁷ Jensen, *God’s Daughters*, x.

³⁶⁸ See Methodological Appendix for a full breakdown of the sample’s backgrounds.

³⁶⁹ Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 109.

sin in general and not to their gender. Instead, they emphasised humanity's imperfect resemblance of the *imago Dei* as a result of the Fall. Historically influential ideas of woman's weaker connection with the divine found no counterpart in the women's affirmation of their innate ability to reflect God's nature and thus bear his image. Finally, historically restrictive ideas born out of interpretations of Genesis' second creation account surrounding woman's secondary creation out of man re-emerged in the young women's understanding, but were positively directed towards a view of woman's creation as completion of God's creative act and imperative for humanity to reflect the *imago Dei* in a complete way. Indeed, while such ideas of completion have been foundational in restrictive complementarian approaches to woman's status and role in the church, the young women I interviewed utilised similar ideas to affirm the equality of men and women and their equal possession of the divine image.

When it came to the figure of Eve, the young women I interviewed engaged with inherited ideas regarding female sinfulness from a position of personal assurance of their salvation and innate dignity as image bearers. Many of the interviewees related to Eve and her memory in a way that positively re-imagined her story and significance, thus providing further evidence for Malone's claim that 'in women's own self-knowledge, the traditional alignment of women and evil is coming to an end.'³⁷⁰ And yet, the hope of such a reality for these women must be accompanied by an awareness that this sample cannot be taken as representative of all young women within expressions of Christianity today. A feasible progression for this sort of study would be to delve more deeply into particular Christian denominations – perhaps those that have been traditionally most restrictive of women – to further trace any existing 'alignment of women and evil'³⁷¹ and its effects upon female self-understanding.

Ideas have been potently influential in the history of women and Christianity. Indeed, Cloke argues that negative ideas regarding women and the *imago Dei* directly inspired the view of women as inferior within Christian communities, and that ideas of the inferior status and 'imperfect participation of women in the *imago Dei*'³⁷² justified female exclusion from roles and practices. This study however, draws attention to how

³⁷⁰ Malone, *From the Reformation*, 251.

³⁷¹ Ibid.

³⁷² Cloke, *This Female Man of God*, 27.

contemporary Christian women are understanding themselves in ways that seem to reverse this trend; developing ideas in response to practices and experience. Many of the young women I interviewed derived empowering ideas of themselves and their potential for roles and functions from personal experience of God – as well as the enacted faith practices of other women – rather than forming their self-understanding from embedded theological ideas. One example of how this reversal worked for these women was expressed almost unanimously. When asked how God viewed them – ‘Who are you to God?’ – experience of intimately relating to God as a father figure led many to identify as a child of God, and thus as an equal sharer in the divine image. The influence of historically dominant ideas of the created order, woman’s secondary creation, and man’s superior resemblance of the divine image as ‘the beginning and end of woman’³⁷³ exerted relatively little power over the self-understanding of the women I interviewed. They did not ultimately derive understanding of their role and function within churches, and for general Christian witness, from the theological ideas most typically directed towards the restriction of women. Rather, they approached texts and ingrained ideas with a willingness to source new meaning: *‘It would be interesting if Adam had been in that position of being tempted by the snake. I believe he would have been equally vulnerable.’* When it came to understanding their potential, and woman’s potential in general, the women seemed to have ultimately developed understanding from what they did – *‘you have to do it to a certain extent to realise you can do it’*; *‘In Romania it was definitely a case of discovering what I could do ... it was basically learning by doing’* – or saw other women do, in the service of God at home or in missional contexts: *‘I’ve seen too many gifted female speakers to deny the fact that God is speaking through them’*; *‘seeing what other Christian females from other backgrounds - how they view their role ... changes how I view my role, to increase my potential.’*

The young women I interviewed elevated their self-understanding and enlarged their sense of spiritual potential in response to the missional – and church-based – contribution of other female believers. There is hope too that by bringing into focus the faith-based activity and witness of these contemporary young women, and others like them, a similar process of female empowerment may continue. This thesis encourages increased acknowledgement of how young women are participating in witnessing to God,

³⁷³ Aquinas, *ST*, 93.5.

particularly freely in mission contexts. If the witness of young women is increasingly valued as credible contribution, and associated less with ideas of obligatory compensation,³⁷⁴ Christianity's next generation of young women may be led to attest to their own giftedness more fully. In this way, there is hope that the impossibly represented female role models of Christianity's past may be increasingly replaced in women's self-knowledge by real and authentic female identification figures, female believers who embody spiritual freedom and female giftedness alongside men, and encourage other women to do the same:

I've definitely seen men and woman preach, glorifying God in every service. Being a minister, being a speaker, being the background people. I've seen men and women do everything and do an equally good job. So I think it's just whatever God calls you to do, and it doesn't matter what gender you are, if that's what he wants you to do he'll make you good at it.

This research also examined the way in which Evangelical young women, like theologians such as Sakenfield, Russell and Farley, persisted with the Bible out of a belief that it is a personally authoritative and 'saving word.'³⁷⁵ Indeed, most of the young women I interviewed reflected on the Bible as an ultimately valuable source of divine revelation: '*God speaks to us through it and guides us through it*', '*I view it with huge importance ... I really value spending time with God and reading his word*'. Many of the young women responded to the Bible in a similar way to Cady Stanton, their belief in its value and authority driving them to interpretatively re-imagine the texts and dominant interpretations that presented greatest challenge to their faith and self-understanding. Some openly refuted the authority of certain interpretations, and nearly all rejected imposed meaning through self-determined reading of texts themselves. While none explicitly applied Wacker's hermeneutic of rejection³⁷⁶ in order to entirely dismiss difficult texts, some did model subtle patterns of abandonment – in ways that resembled Fiorenza's desire to 'remove oppressive texts of Scripture from use'³⁷⁷ –

³⁷⁴ Jansen notes how key female figures came to be understood as playing a 'compensatory role in the history of salvation' through association of the female with sin in 'Maria Magdalena: Apostolorum Apostola', 59.

³⁷⁵ Malone, *First Thousand Years*, 60.

³⁷⁶ Wacker, *Feminist Interpretation*, 39.

³⁷⁷ Fiorenza cited by Schottroff, *Lydia's Impatient Sisters*, 63.

through ignoring or overlooking texts in favour of others: *'it's one of those texts you just want to ignore.'*

Nearly every woman I interviewed spoke of her struggle to understand the relevance or implications of particular biblical texts. Some were content with uncertainty, persevering in the knowledge of God they could glean from the rest of the Bible and personal experience: *'I don't think I'm going to know the answer. I know what I live by ... I don't think we'll know the answer until the end.'* Uncertainty for others seemed to have little influence, as inherited meanings of texts remained unchallenged: *'I think it says somewhere about men ruling over women. I think that because I don't actually know ... that's just how it is.'* Most of the women I interviewed however, responded to texts they found to be difficult or ambiguous by developing reading strategies that allowed them to continue to cherish the Bible as an authoritative and sacred collection of texts. Some approached biblical texts in a similar way to Catherine Booth, using 'proof-texts' to undercut dominant interpretations. This proof-texting technique, and the way in which certain interviewees prioritised the reading of particular texts, models what Snodgrass called the establishment of a 'canon within the canon.'³⁷⁸ For example, Claire admitted to having canonical preferences: *'I relate better to the gospels ... because they're easier to put into your life.'* Others based their reading of biblical text upon a core theological foundation, in a similar way to Brunner and Grover with their 'primal truth' and 'Golden Rule' respectively.³⁷⁹ This core theological foundation generally took the form of their personal knowledge of God, and texts were read in light of this knowledge. For example, Emily reflected on 1 Timothy 2:11-15: *'I know from knowing God that he has more for me than bearing children.'* Emma mimicked the likes of Swidler by using Jesus as a hermeneutical principle. Indeed, she undermined the authority of texts she associated with Paul for her own life by reflecting on Jesus' example instead: *'You never see Jesus talking down to women, Jesus' interactions with women are encouraging and edifying and loving and building them up.'* Finally, many approached biblical text in a similar way to Hayter, Fiorenza, Tamez – and many others – seeking to understand meaning in view of context and motivation. And yet, in this

³⁷⁸ Snodgrass cited by Lakey, *Image and Glory of God*, 27.

³⁷⁹ As is discussed in chapter two, Brunner based biblical interpretation on the 'primal truth' that men and women were created in God's image. For Grover, Jesus' command given during the sermon on the mount – 'Whatever ye would that men should do unto you, do ye even so unto them' – was 'the Golden Rule' through which the rest of the Bible should be read., Brunner cited by Hayter, *The New Eve* and Grover, 'The Bible Argument Against Women', 95, 15.

there was a certain wariness, a caution rooted in belief in the Bible's authority and a fear of incorrectly denouncing texts as culturally irrelevant. Emma described the process of reading in this way as wading through the *'muddy water of how you decide what was contextual and what is not.'*

The young women I interviewed also seemed to be creating and prioritising particular patterns of interpretation of their own. Some relied on the biblical teaching of authoritative sources. Many sought meaning communally, individual struggle becoming shared interpretative battle: *'If I really struggled with a passage I'd often ask someone and then they're often very good at explaining if I'm struggling'* , *'as I have sought other people's opinion ... I have been very much encouraged'*. In this way, even in ongoing struggle with texts and interpretations that are difficult to reconcile with ideas of full spiritual equality and dignity, it appears that women will find meaning and encouragement in community.

Finally, this thesis addressed the various ways Christian mission is continuing to provide women with a space of empowerment for witness and the development of an enriched self-understanding. As throughout Christianity's history, missional contexts offered these young women charismatic authority and opportunities to serve God beyond any boundaries of institutional definition. Just as we took the memory of Junia and Mary Magdalene's apostolic activity to signify that individual women who engaged with missional tasks were not extraordinary, but indicative of not uncommon realities, we take the missional activity of these interviewees as indication of the enduring significance of mission for female believers. These young women associated mission with freedom to discover and utilise personal gifting in service of God and participation in mission encouraged the formation of a confident and authentic knowledge of God and self. Mission has a long history of being intrinsically connected to ideas of preaching or proclaiming the gospel. Many of the young women I interviewed experienced mission as a space in which they could engage in leadership and proclamation as they felt called.

Fiorenza calls for Christian women to respond to the centrality and influence of early missionary women by *'reclaiming the centre'* in their own religious lives and *'by refusing ... imposed marginality.'*³⁸⁰ In a like manner, women should be encouraged to respond to

³⁸⁰ Fiorenza cited by Malone, *From the Reformation*, 253.

their central role in contemporary Christian mission by increasingly resisting being restricted to a peripheral position within church contexts. As young women continue to participate in Christian mission and embody the empowerment of charismatic authority in their witness, there is hope that unjustified boundaries may be undermined and thus eventually cease to restrict female calling to missional contexts and exceptional circumstances. Mission provides young women with space in which they may develop knowledge of themselves, their potential, of God, of their gifts and calling. There is a need to undermine the strict 'differentiation of charismata' that continues to confine particular kinds of female participation to the mission-field. Young women who experience charismatic authority and calling into mission should be enabled to affirm divine calling to freely utilise their gifting in home contexts.

The young women I interviewed for this study understood themselves in relation to ideas surrounding the *imago Dei*, the Bible, and Christian mission in complex, yet overwhelmingly positive ways. Woman's historic struggle to understand her status and place in Christian tradition found fresh expression in the lives of the sixteen women I interviewed. In approaching ideas and texts that have been used to promote various forms of female oppression and limitation, these women adopted some of the same strategies of self-empowerment used by women of Christianity's past, and those historians who have sought to critically engage with Christian tradition. And yet, these women had also developed their own techniques of understanding themselves and God in relation to ideas surrounding the *imago Dei*, difficult texts of Scripture and Christian mission, in ways that allowed their faith to continue to enrich their life. The young women at the heart of this study exhibited a determined construction of spiritual self-understanding rooted in affirmations of their own created dignity and an ever increasing acceptance of their own gifting and potential. In choosing to tackle restrictive theologies, textual interpretations and ingrained practices, they resisted the influence of such phenomenon over how they understand themselves and their faith. In all of this, and perhaps most significantly, these young women testified to the relationship that has historically inspired women to continue to identify with Christ and his calling. These women professed an intimate and life-transforming knowledge of God; a relationship with the divine so deeply personal that its authority in the construction of their self-understanding could not ultimately be denied.

Methodological Appendix

Research Methodology

Sample Analysis

I interviewed sixteen women between the ages of 19-25. As a small scale qualitative study that used non-probability sampling, the sample was never intended to be widely representative, but was designed to allow research enriching reflection on individual women's stories. Participants were chosen in advance from pre-existing social connections, and were not expected to help identify further participants; it was not snowball sampling. I wanted to speak to the women who had inspired me to question the nature of female self-understanding within contemporary Christianity in the first place, as I had started this project with the belief that some of my female friends and acquaintances would have something interesting to say with regards to how they understand themselves and their faith. I interviewed sixteen women I knew from home, church and university. At the time of the interviews nine of the women had permanent residence in Northern Ireland, and three from Northern Ireland, two from England and two from Scotland were studying in Glasgow. The sixteen women interviewed profess personal Christian faith and come from a variety of Christian backgrounds.

The denominational backgrounds of those interviewed can be broken down as follows:

- seven grew up, and still actively involved in, an egalitarian evangelical church in belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Ireland.
- two became connected to the same church in their teens, one of these is now a church elder.
- one became a Christian at university and subsequently attended an evangelical church of conservative complementarian stance in Glasgow, Scotland.
- one grew up attending a church belonging to the Presbyterian Church of Ireland and at the time of interviews attended the evangelical church of conservative complementarian stance mentioned above.

- two are attending a non-denominational church plant with connections to American evangelicalism.
- two are members of the Free Church of Scotland.
- one attends a church in Glasgow belonging to The Association of Vineyard Churches.

The Questionnaire

The questionnaire was designed in such a way as to direct reflection towards the thesis' three main points of enquiry into the condition of female self-understanding, while simultaneously creating a space for women to think and speak freely. The forty questions were not chosen to produce a rigidly structured interview, but rather to prompt the women to speak as much or as little as they wanted to surrounding a variety of deeply complex ideas.

The thesis' focused examination of particular facets of Christianity required the questionnaire to provide some degree of direction, and a desire to record as much of the women's voices as possible inspired a multitude of potential questions. The forty questions which made up the final questionnaire were chosen in the hope that they would allow for thorough and in-depth record of female religious experience, while also creating an interview that would flow and create connections between areas of thought. The interview process included open questions – such as: 'Who do you think God has made you to be?' – as well as closed questions which were included to elicit foundational information: 'Do you believe male and female believers are spiritually equal?'

In some cases (e.g. questions 12-15, 17-18, 20-21), similar points of enquiry were addressed through multiple questions each expressed slightly differently, so as to prompt deeper thought, or to gauge familiarity with particular terms or expressions. For example, questions 17 and 18 were complementary, both included in order to provide a real opportunity for each participant to reflect on how they understood their potential in general, and within church contexts, as well as uncovering the potential sources of this self-understanding:

17. What have you been taught/come to understand regarding your spiritual/human potential?

18. From whom/from what have you come to understand your role in God's service?

The interviews also incorporated five biblical texts, Genesis 1:26-31, Genesis 3, 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, 1 Corinthians 14:33-40, 1 Timothy 2:11-15, which the women were invited to read before answering related questions. The texts were chosen as five scriptural passages that have been contentiously and consistently connected with historical questions regarding woman's Christian identity and role. The two texts from Genesis were chosen with the focus of the first chapter of this dissertation in mind, as texts inextricably linked with theology and doctrine regarding the *imago Dei* and female sinfulness. The remaining three were chosen as texts that have been traditionally brandished to justify theologies of female inferiority and the exclusion of women from particular roles and identifications within Christianity. This thesis sought to explore how young women read these texts and whether they do so in empowering ways.

Most of the questions related to these biblical texts were included to invite contemplation on what each interviewee understood as the 'meaning' of what they had read. For example: 'What do you think these texts are saying? What do you think they mean? What does it mean for you?' The questionnaire was formed in such a way as to facilitate analysis of *how* women engaged with these texts, rather than simply *what* they had to say about them. In order to enable analysis of how each participant read these biblical texts, similar questions were repeated in relation to each text. This was designed to reveal patterns and thus to help to identify reading styles and strategies of engagement and personal application.

Collection of Data

The interviews lasted between 25 minutes and an hour, with the recorded questions being consistently deployed each time, without further embellishment or follow up questions. It was emphasised before each interview began that there was freedom to speak for as long or as short a time as was desired in response to each question. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone, and the women interviewed were informed that they could decline the usage of their recorded interview or withdraw from participation at any time. The interviews were transcribed verbatim by me and stored alongside the recordings. I then carried out immersive reading of the transcribed texts in order to become more familiar with the tone and content of each.

The interview data was not coded as a whole, rather I coded each portion of data alongside my preparation for each individual chapter. For example, questions 19 to 30 were designed to relate to the focal question of my second chapter: ‘How do young women understand themselves in relation to the biblical text?’ As I prepared to address this question I read through the transcribed answers to these questions first, and arranged data under key thematic headings which included: ‘owning the book’, ‘disillusionment/abandonment’, ‘silence’, ‘headship’, ‘exclusion’, ‘authority and definition’. As I read over interviews, these were common themes which emerged clearly. Responsive strategies were also coded and grouped together, under headings such as: ‘removing texts’, ‘battling with texts’, ‘the canon I choose’ and ‘Jesus as hermeneutical principle’. The similarities between themes and strategies that generally emerged also allowed me to identify answers that provided stark contrast. For example, in relation to 1 Corinthians 11:1-16, only one woman I interviewed professed to understand the passage in any complete sense; her explanation acutely highlighted the influence of institutional teaching on her understanding of biblical text: *‘(My pastor) did a series on it ... and it completely explained it and now I understand it and don’t really have a problem.’*

My research sought to establish connections between historical engagement with restrictive theologies and ideas and the strategies of self-empowerment adopted by young women today. In order to do this, after initial preparation for each chapter’s opening analysis of the history of thought surrounding the chapter’s focus, I reviewed

the interview transcripts in light of the chapter's proposed central points and identified overlapping themes and ideas. This then allowed me to prioritise the historical material and analysis of secondary literature that would best precede the analysis of the qualitative research, in order to most cohesively answer the research question at hand. Likewise, reviewing both the uncoded interview transcripts and data coded by theme in relation to the historical analysis allowed me to extract from the most relevant common themes, as well as the most contrasting ideas, for further analysis, and incorporation into the larger narrative of each chapter.

The Interview Questions

1. *The interview opens with an invitation to talk freely about their own 'faith-story':*

'Please tell me a little about how you came to know God and who God is to you now.'

2. Who do you think you are to God?

(Participant will be asked to read the first set text: Genesis 1:26-31)

3. What does it mean to you that God created human beings 'in his image'?

4. Why do you think God created women?

(Participant will be asked to read the second set text: Genesis 3)

5. How have you been taught/come to understand the idea of the Fall? How would you explain this Christian doctrine to somebody who had never heard of it?

6. Where does guilt lie in this story?

7. What was the result of what happened in Genesis chapter 3?

8. What do you think of when you think about Eve's character? What do you associate (if anything) with Eve?

9. Do you believe men and women were created equal?

10. Did what happened in Genesis chapter 3 change this?

11. Do you believe male and female believers are spiritually equal?

12. What [spiritual] gifts do you think God has given you?

13. Who do you think God has made you to be?

14. What has God made you for?

15. What do you think your future of serving God looks like? What will it involve? Has God called you to anything in particular?

16. Do you believe there are certain roles within God's service set aside for men and women respectively?

17. What have you been taught/come to understand regarding your spiritual/human potential?

18. From whom/from what have you come to understand your role in God's service?

19. Describe your relationship with the Bible - how you personally relate to it/perceive it/use it in your life.
20. Are there any biblical texts you find difficult to read as a young female believer?
21. Are there any parts of the bible you find hard to read because of what they say about women?

(Participant will be asked to read third set text: 1 Corinthians 11:1-16)

22. What do you think this text is saying? What does it mean?
23. What does it mean for you? Does it mean anything?
24. Is there anything you struggle to understand in this text?
25. Is there anything that bothers you about this text?

(Participant will be asked to read fourth and fifth set texts: 1 Corinthians 14:33-40 and 1 Timothy 2:11-15)

26. What do you think these texts are saying/mean?
27. What do you think they might mean for you?
28. How do these texts make you feel?
29. Have you been taught anything in particular about these texts/what they're saying?
30. Have you ever taken part in any sort of Christian mission?
31. Can you tell me about your experience of mission? [What did you do? What did you learn? What did it mean to you? How did it impact you? What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about God?]

32. Did your experience of mission involve you preaching the gospel?
33. Why did you take part in mission?

(Participant will be asked to read sixth set text: John 4:1-42)

- 35:** What do you think about this text?
- 36:** What do you find most significant about this text?
- 37:** How do you feel reading this text?

(Participant will be asked to read the seventh set text: John 20:1-19)

- 38:** What do you think about this text?
- 39:** What do you find most significant about this text?

40: How do you feel reading this text? Do you think this text means anything for you personally?

CONSENT TO THE USE OF DATA

University of Glasgow, College of Arts Research Ethics Committee

I understand that _____

is collecting data in the form of

for use in an academic research project at the University of Glasgow.
(See attached information regarding the nature of this project.)

I give my consent to the use of data for this purpose on the understanding that:

- ♣ All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised.
- ♣ The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.
- ♣ The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

Signed by the contributor: _____ Date:

Researcher's name and email contact:

Laura Campbell
l.campbell.4@research.gla.ac.uk

Supervisor's name and email contact:

Dr Charlotte Methuen
Charlotte.Methuen@gla.ac.uk

Department address:

Theology and Religious Studies,
4 The Square,
University of Glasgow,
University Avenue,
Glasgow
G12 8QQ

Research Information for Interviewees

Research Question: 'Go and Tell': How do young Christian women understand themselves in relation to Christ's missional calling?

Research Aims:

- To assess the current condition of self-understanding among young women (aged 18-25) within contemporary expressions of Christianity through discussion of ideas surrounding gender-based restriction and preaching, teaching, evangelism and mission.
- To explore how young women are formed by various sources of authority (tradition, Scripture, identification-figures) to view their likeness; examining the tension between theological foundations of humankind created as *imago Dei* and Christianity's developing theology surrounding 'the Fall' and the female person.
- To expose and analyse the interesting dynamic behind how canonical texts have been traditionally used by separate parties to argue for and against female restriction.
- To assess how young women currently relate to, understand and use the Bible as the 'Word of God' in light of particularly 'difficult' or contentious texts.
- To analyse how Christian women have historically engaged in mission and discern how young women of faith currently participate in, and experience spiritual freedom and fullness through, various expressions of missional behavior.
- To reflect upon how young women can be most effectively empowered to actively take their place within the Church's necessarily missional future.

The Interview Procedure:

- All names/identifiers will be anonymised.
- Interviews will be recorded using audio recording equipment.
- A series of questions will be asked in order to direct reflection upon particular ideas/texts.
- Participants reserve the right to refuse information; retaining control at all times regarding the personal information they wish to divulge.
- Material will not be shared or used beyond the specifications of this project and will be kept confidential.

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