

Ilonka Terlouw

PERFORMATIVITY AND MATERIALITY
IN THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS
OF EVANGELICAL PROTESTANTS



REAL FAITH

REAL FAITH

Real Faith

Performativity and Materiality
in the Personal Relationship with Jesus of Evangelical Protestants

Echt geloof

Performativiteit en materialiteit
in de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus van evangelisch-protestanten
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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For

**Jelte
van
Slooten**

For now
we see in a mirror, darkly,
but then
face to face.

For now
there are faith, hope, and love,
but of these three
the greatest is love.

1 Cor. 13:12a, 13

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Praise be to our Lord Jesus Christ.

A Note on Quotations

Because this PhD-thesis bears upon Dutch evangelical Protestantism, references to Dutch literature are numerous. I translated all quotations originating from Dutch literature into English. Therefore, I will not mention at every individual quotation that the translation is original. The capitalization of the original quotation is followed.

I translated the quotations from the interviews with the Dutch respondents into English as literally as possible. This also means that the quotations from the transcribed interviews, which are often full of grammar and idiomatic mistakes, were not corrected when they were translated into English. Adjustments to the original quotations were solely made if they were necessary to render the translated quotations intelligible.

REAL FAITH

The LORD God
took a handful of soil
and made a man.
Genesis 2:7 (CEV99).

It isn't good for the man
to live alone.
Genesis 2:18 (CEV99).

Make my life a prayer to you
I wanna do what you want me to
No empty words and no white lies
No token prayers no compromise [...]

I wanna tell the world out there
You're not some fable or fairy tale
That I've made up inside my head
You're God the Son and you've risen from the dead
Lyrics by Keith Green 1978, Album: No Compromise.

Jesus has always many
who love His heavenly kingdom,
but few who bear His cross.
All desire to be happy with Him;
few wish to suffer anything for Him.
Many love Him as long as they encounter no hardship;
But if Jesus hides Himself and leaves them for a while,
they fall either into complaints or into deep rejection.
Those, on the contrary, who love Him for His own sake
and not for any comfort of their own,
bless Him in all trial and anguish of heart
as well as in the bliss of consolation.
What power there is in pure love for Jesus.
Thomas à Kempis, The Imitation of Christ, Book II, Chapter 11.

1 Introduction

1.1 | About “Having It”

It was 2009. I had just started exploring the field of evangelical faith and decided to ask some field experts for their opinions and inside perspectives.¹ I started off by interviewing Feike ter Velde, a well-known evangelist and television personality in the Netherlands.² He was closely associated with and actively engaged in the Dutch evangelical movement when the movement started to grow rapidly and flourished from the 1960s and 70s onwards (Boersema 2004; Klaver 2011; Stoffels 1990; Vellenga 1991). I asked Ter Velde to explain what evangelicalism is all about. He then told me the following about his personal ‘explorations’ in the field of evangelical faith, long time back in the 1950s and 60s:

I always wondered: what actually is the gospel? And I always thought: those people in church, they don’t believe a single word of it. They all parrot each other, but they don’t really believe it; behind those words is nothing. When I went to catechism for the first time I thought: now we will finally hear it, what the Christian faith is about. Now we are so close to the minister! When I went home I didn’t dare to tell my parents, but one thing I knew for sure: this minister doesn’t believe it himself either. [...]

Sometimes I saw people who did have it. Those *Hervormde* (Reformed) people for example, they had something that *Gereformeerde* (Reformed)

¹ See chapter 4 for a proper introduction to this research’s method and design.

² An introduction to Feike ter Velde’s life is provided by himself on his personal website (*Feike ter Velde*, www.feiketervelde.nl) and in his autobiography (Ter Velde 2012). See furthermore the radio interview with Feike ter Velde, May 2012: <http://www.geschiedenis24.nl/helden-van-toen/afleveringen/religieuze-helden/feike-ter-velde.html>.

people did not have.³ When I was confirmed there was, amongst those who congratulated me, one elder – a common laborer, of small stature – and this man was shining from ear to ear when he congratulated me. And he spoke about Jesus, and well: so warm-heartedly! I thought: look, this man has something that all those others do not have. So I knew for sure: there is something that I don't have yet. [...]

When I served in the military, in New-Guinea, I had the same experience, you know. After church we went for a cup of coffee in the serviceman's hostel and there a boy of the navy was playing the piano. And he played: *Ik wandel in het licht met Jezus* (I am walking in the light with Jesus). And well, this boy was jumping behind the piano, and enthusiastic and, well anyway, he was almost singing it, but he was not singing it, but by his posture he was. And then I thought: he has it indeed too...! He also has something...

And thus there were a few people about whom I wondered: what is it they have? [...]

And then we came to live in Zwolle, and we met people in the *Gereformeerde Kerk* (Reformed Church) and they had it too! (Ter Velde 2009)

Some believers “have it.” The have something because of which they stand out – at least to some outsiders. It is something which is found amongst believers anywhere. Something, because of which these believers are often quickly labeled as ‘evangelical’ – while they can be a member of a traditional church at the same time. This elusive phenomenon constitutes an attractive element of evangelicalism to newcomers, even though they cannot always pin down what it is exactly. After becoming evangelical, they though point it out as the center of what evangelicalism is all about. Being an evangelical himself now Ter Velde says that “it” concerns what the gospel “actually” is. But what is it?

What is “it” those evangelical believers “have”? The question is not easily answered. The evangelical movement is a diffused movement with similar leadership. As the movement cannot be identified with a single organization or spokesperson and considerable differences exist between opinions and convictions of believers who refer to themselves as evangelical, authors (of academic as well as of popular literature) struggle to define evangelicalism with precision – church historian Timothy Weber even called it “one of the biggest problems in American religious historiography” (1991, 12) – and to demarcate its exact boundaries (e.g. should Pentecostals be included? Klaver 2011; Noll 2003).

³ The *Nederlandse Hervormde Kerk* and *Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland* are two brands of Reformed churches. Since 2004 they have been united in the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (Protestant Church in the Netherlands).

Still something unites evangelicals and surpasses the differences between them. Anthropologist Tanya M. Luhmann, studying American evangelicals, aptly identifies that “in general people seem to call themselves evangelical to signal something about their own sense of spirituality” (2012, 13). The *Handboek religie in Nederland* (*Guide to religion in the Netherlands*) gives a similar indication about the uniting force amongst evangelicals: it is founded in a shared faith (Klaver 2008). Anthropologist and theologian Miranda Klaver amplifies that, although the Dutch evangelical movement too is comprised of believers from all kinds of churches, they are working together on the basis of a deep feeling of solidarity which is grounded in this shared faith. This shared faith gives them a sense of affinity that surpasses denominational differences (2008, 146).

Evangelicals stand out because of their faith, and the rise of evangelicalism in the Netherlands, specifically its growth within Dutch traditional churches, triggers the question after this evangelical faith and spirituality even more. Given that ever more faithful members of traditional Protestant churches have an affinity with evangelicalism or even call themselves ‘evangelical’ (De Roest and Stoppels 2007a; Klaver 2011, 47–60), points to the conclusion that something in evangelical faith apparently triggers them too, just as it once appealed to Ter Velde. But what and why?

Evangelical Faith

Evangelicals speak of their shared faith as having a ‘personal relationship with Jesus.’ Even though some variations exist in the exact designation, having a personal relationship with Jesus always refers to an experiential type of faith. As Ter Velde (2009) puts it in the same interview as mentioned above: “You can confess to everything neatly, but then you do not have ‘it’ yet. Evangelicals distinguish themselves in this, that they actually experience what they believe.” This evangelical faith is furthermore always characterized by its primary focus on Jesus Christ. When these two characteristics are put together, it means that evangelicals are not so much concerned with knowledge about Jesus Christ as with knowing Jesus (e.g. McGrath 2003; Yancey 2000). Jesus is presented as ‘real’ living person, who a believer can relate to through faith in a personal, relevant and experiential way (Luhmann 2012, 13; McGrath 2000, 63). Because of this emphasis on personal experience, evangelical faith often quickly receives the designation ‘spirituality’ (cf. Eschbach 1996b, 10) as that term highlights the individual expression and experience of faith (McGrath 1999).

Research into evangelicalism often mentions the personal relationship with Jesus as an important aspect of evangelicalism (Randall 2005, 183; Stoffels 1990, 11; Vellenga 1991, 10), but seldom makes it the independent object of research. Luhmann (2012) is one of the few researchers who does. Studies into

evangelicalism have more often focused on historical (e.g. the five-volume series *A History of Evangelicalism*) and social (e.g. Stoffels 1990; Vellenga 1991) aspects of the evangelical movement, defining its religious dimensions by a list of characteristic beliefs and traits. One of the most famous definitions was brought forward by historian David Bebbington (1989). He used four catchwords to define evangelicalism: conversionism, activism, biblicism and crucicentrism. The definition has proven its merits and is still being used a lot. Probably, it is the most used definition (Larsen 2008). Historian Mark A. Noll (2003, 2004b, 2004c), an authority in the field of evangelicalism, presents Bebbington's quadrilateral as still one of the most apt definitions of the evangelical movement currently available. However, with this definition Bebbington describes evangelicalism from an outside perspective (Ward 2004, 12). The definition therefore does not attend to certain matters of faith as it is (or was) experienced and lived by the individual believer. Evangelical beliefs are emphasized more than the meaning of spiritual practices and experiences for the individual evangelical (cf. Klaver 2011, 45).⁴ Bebbington writes in one of his subsequent writings: "The theological convictions and social activities of evangelicals are much better understood than the inner dynamic that [gives] meaning to their personal and corporate life" (2005, 82).

As evangelicals throughout the ages have identified each other as shared participants in the evangelical tradition by this focus on having a personal relationship with Jesus (e.g. Mouw 2004; Randall 2005), understanding what this personal relationship with Jesus means to believers is of vital importance for a proper understanding of the evangelical movement (cf. Kärkkäinen 2010, 224). For evangelicals, this is what evangelicalism is all about. Studying the personal relationship with Jesus then means trying to understand evangelicalism from an inside perspective. It therefore seeks understanding of what it means for evangelicals to have a personal relationship with Jesus and pays attention to their practice and experience of faith over (prescribed or generally professed) dogma.

Dutch Traditional Churches

Evangelicals in Dutch mainline churches have been driven by a desire and a concern for this same personal relationship with Jesus. They indicated that what they felt was missing in their traditional churches was exactly the experience of a personal relationship with Jesus: "We wonder: isn't there a deep lack of spirituality, namely experiencing a personal relationship with the Lord Jesus Christ and en-

⁴ Dogmatic theologians might find that this definition emphasizes distinguishing evangelical beliefs still too little (Van den Toren 2011, 72).

countering the living God? This spirituality we find amongst others in the evangelical movement” (Eschbach 1996b, 10).

From the very beginning, the evangelical movement in the Netherlands has owed its growth to participation from (former) members of mainline Protestant churches (Van der Laan 1996; Vellenga 1991).⁵ Since the 1990s in particular, members of traditional churches have started to identify themselves as affiliated with the evangelical movement without leaving their mainline churches. They have rather started to search for possibilities to express this felt affiliation within these churches. The process of growing evangelical affiliation within mainline churches has been referred to as the ‘evangelicalization’ of traditional churches (Klaver and Versteeg 2007). A visible sign of the evangelicalization of traditional churches was the formation of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) in 1995. They called for a renewal of mainline churches and thereby pointed to the need of having a personal relationship with Jesus as quoted above.

Since the 1990s the evangelical spirituality has concretely found its way into traditional churches through the increasing number of small faith groups, called *Gemeente Groei Groepen* (Church Growth Groups). These groups work with materials from the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Eschbach 2007b). Furthermore, evangelical affiliation has been growing through the initiatives of ministers who sympathize with the evangelical movement and through the introduction of the *Alpha Cursus* (Alpha Course) in many mainline churches (Gumbel 1996, 2003). Another important incentive came from the organization New Wine, which started its activities in 1993, especially in the *Nederlandse Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church). The desire of a growing number of church members to express their evangelical spirituality within their own traditional churches, also – or rather especially – in the central worship services on Sunday, presents these churches with a similar growing number of questions. Churches find themselves confronted by requests to integrate *Opwekkingsliederen* (Revival Songs) in their church services, to introduce ‘ministry teams’ (i.e. specialized prayer teams) and start missionary projects. “There is not a single church where it does not count,” practical theologian Bert de Leede wrote in 2008 (2008, 4). Sociologist Peter van Rooden even called the rise of the evangelical movement the “most important event” in the recent history of Dutch Christianity, adding that: “Even though the evangelical movement theologically corresponds with the *Gereformeerde Bond*

⁵ In 1996 Pentecostal theologian Paul N. van der Laan (1996) estimated that 75% of the evangelical Christians were to be found inside mainline churches. Independent and free evangelical churches/communities constituted the other quarter. Sociologist Sipco J. Vellenga already arrived at a similar conclusion in 1991 (1991, 37, 272).

(Reformed Association⁶), the church she offers is a completely different one” (2002, 79). And apparently that church is an attractive one.

Such developments justify a serious investigation into the evangelical spirituality of this group of believers, a spirituality they refer to as having a personal relationship with Jesus. Especially considering that church membership in general is declining in the Netherlands (Sengers 2005c), these developments raise questions after this type of faith that succeeds to obtain a growing affiliation. However, the suggestions inherent in Van Rooden’s statement, namely that evangelicalism merely concerns the expression of faith (either in church or in daily life) and that this expression of faith functions independently or can be researched separately from evangelical theology, are rather questionable. Researching the personal relationship with Jesus does not mean investigating evangelical spirituality *instead of* evangelical theology. From a practical theological perspective, the lived experience of faith is theologically meaningful and rather an essential site for theological engagement.

1.2 | Research Goal and Question(s)

The ordinary believer – who was raised in a traditional church, is still a member of that church while feeling an affiliation with the evangelical movement – and his or her personal relationship with Jesus, lies at the heart of this research. This research aims at understanding their personal relationship with Jesus and its embodiment in practice and experience. This research wants to contribute to scholarly research in the field of empirical theology which aims at understanding contemporary religious praxis (Cartledge 2010; Miller-McLemore 2012b). Through the analysis of faith as it is lived and perceived by evangelical Protestants, this research aims at providing an insightful perspective on evangelical faith in Dutch traditional churches. Evangelicals constitute a still growing group of believers in mainline churches and adequate insight into their spirituality becomes ever more important. Both evangelicals and mainline churches could benefit from such insight in their (ecclesiastical, institutional or individual) attempts to sustain faithful life in mainline churches. The present research provides for the accountability of these attempts to the practical theological knowledge ‘arising out of’ (to be

⁶ The *Gereformeerde Bond* (Reformed Association) is fully named the *Gereformeerde Bond tot verbreiding en verdediging van de Waarheid in PKN* (Reformed Association unto spreading and defending the truth in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands) and propagates an orthodox interpretation of teachings of the Reformation (*Gereformeerde Bond*, www.gereformeerdebond.nl).

sure: it does involve serious study and a conscious interpretative exercise) the evangelical Protestant practice of faith.

The central research question is:

What is, from a practical theological perspective, the meaning of having a personal relationship with Jesus in the practice of daily life, for evangelicals in mainline Protestant churches in the Netherlands?

In order to answer the main question, the following sub-questions need to be addressed:

- How did the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus emerge and develop in the evangelical tradition, specifically in the Netherlands?
- How was evangelical faith received and perceived by mainline Protestant churches and their members in the Netherlands?
- What does it mean to evangelical Protestants to have a personal relationship with Jesus in the encounter with the challenge of everyday embodied life?
- What theoretical concepts are useful to provide and deepen understanding of this phenomenon?

This research concerns the faith of *evangelicals in mainline Protestant churches in the Netherlands*, which refers to members of Dutch traditional Protestant churches who qualify as evangelical by their self-identification as evangelical and by their concrete participation in activities organized by evangelical organizations. ‘Mainline church’ and ‘traditional church’ are used interchangeably and refer to the *Protestantse Kerk in Nederland* (Protestant Church in the Netherlands) and several smaller Reformed denominations (such as the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken*, *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* and *Christelijk Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland*). The Catholic Church is excluded from the research. As the evangelical movement has especially grown within Protestant churches, the procedure for selecting respondents resulted in respondents from mainline Protestant churches only (see §4.3).

The *personal relationship with Jesus* is taken as the center of their faith and its meaning constitutes the main object of research. The choice and formulation of this central research object was based upon literature study (cf. chapters 2 and 3) and interviewing field informants in the preparatory research phase. The research is concerned with the meaning of this personal relationship with Jesus for

evangelical Protestants *in the practice of daily life*. This addition reveals an interest in the personal relationship with Jesus as it is actually lived, experienced, and expressed by ordinary believers in their everyday lives. Whereas other studies have researched evangelical spirituality in congregational settings (e.g. Klaver 2011; Miller 1997; Roeland 2009; Versteeg 2001), this study is specifically interested in its expression and meaning in the practice of the individual's daily life. From the very start, evangelicalism has been a movement of the lay. The lives of ordinary men and women sustained the movement and still do (Noll 2004c, 427). Their everyday faith lies at the heart of this research. This also means that the personal relationship with Jesus is studied, not just as something people believe, but also as something people do and experience. This does not preclude attention to what motivates people to do so or to what it means to them to act in certain ways or experience certain things. Lived faith includes the ordinary theology of believers, which concerns how believers perceive of their own actions and experiences (Astley 2002).

In literature, the personal relationship with Jesus is often mentioned within the context of or associated with the evangelical emphasis on the experience of conversion (Bebbington 1989; Klaver 2011). This research does not deny the importance of conversion in evangelical faith, but does not study conversion. It rather concerns what happens *after* experiencing conversion. How do believers proceed within this newly found faith?

The *practical theological perspective* adopted in this research means that the research is carried out in the academic discipline of practical theology, a discipline that in recent decades developed a strong interest in the empirical research of concrete instances of religious, in specific Christian, life. Scholars in practical theology have attempted, as practical theologian Bonnie J. Miller-McLemore puts it, "to recapture human religious experience and practice as essential sites for theological engagement" (2012a, 1). The religious experience and practice 'captured' in this research are perceived as valuable sources of practical theological knowledge. The personal relationship with Jesus as lived has epistemic value concerning the practice of faith and God, as evangelical Protestants are experienced and reflective practitioners of faith who try to sustain a life of reflective faith. This research concerns the academic enterprise of studying and reflecting upon their faith as it is lived. It studies the particular constellation of experiencing, doing and thinking it entails and tries to understand the religious wisdom it embodies. It organizes and conceptualizes the insights this endeavor yields and so offers an insightful academic practical theological account of the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus. This research perspective will be elaborated upon in the next paragraph.

1.3 | A Practical Theological Perspective

“Faith and life are intertwined [...] Faith receives its shape in this life. It is involved in everyday existence, with its joys and cares, its challenges and conflicts, and with the miseries and passions that are often part of it. Faith is lived: it accompanies us in our daily lives and is part of our journey through life” (Immink 2005, 44–45). It is this reality of lived faith which is “in particular the domain of practical theological research” (Pleizier 2010, 5).

In asking after the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus in daily life from a practical theological perspective, this research concerns the scholarly enterprise of studying such lived faith. This practical theological research seeks understanding of and reflects about the ways in which faith takes on shape in the midst of ordinary life circumstances. Speaking about lived faith (instead of ‘lived religion,’ see below) places the personal relationship with Jesus explicitly in the Christian tradition. The personal relationship with Jesus is perceived as an instance of the Christian faith. The term lived faith allows for a broad perspective on faith, including all that belongs to the praxis of living and experiencing life and avoids an overly cognitive approach to faith (see Immink 2005; cf. Robbins 2010, 163). Believers act in relation to God, experience God, desire God, search God, believe certain things about God, receive faith and blessings from God, trust God. Their faithful endeavors give shape to this very particular reality of lived faith.

Part of this particular reality, and of particular interest for this practical theological research, is the reflective and conscious nature of the endeavors of believers by which they, in the encounter with the challenge of everyday embodiment, seek to respond faithfully. They might speak about their attempts as “following Jesus” or as “living out the gospel” (Miller-McLemore 2012a, 107). In the midst of ordinary life circumstances ordinary believers seek to discern the contours of faithfulness. Having a personal relationship with Jesus in daily life therefore involves “ongoing theological work” (Bass 2002, 6). The lived faith studied in this research as a result “articulate[s] wisdom that is in the keeping of practitioners who do not think of themselves as theologians” (6). Such wisdom and theological work have been referred to as “ordinary theology” or “lay theology” (Astley 2002) or as “lived wisdom” (Dykstra and Bass 2002); Miller-McLemore even dares to call it the “practical theology” of believers (2012b, 7). It is important to appreciate the reflective and interpretive enterprise of believers, and the meanings and self-understandings of faith this yields, as an integral part of lived faith. Paying close attention to it is part of the researcher’s endeavor to stay close to the empirical reality under investigation, studying it on its own merits and from an inside perspective. The believers’ wisdom furthermore provides

firsthand knowledge about the practice under investigation. Their perspectives might help the researcher to understand the “logic” – as sociologist Meredith B. McGuire calls it (2008, 15) – of lived faith. Of course the standards for the faithful reflection of believers differ from academic standards. In daily life, faith does not need to be logically coherent, neither to be rationally substantiated (McGuire 2008, 15). Their knowledge of God and faith is neither always articulated and ordered (Dykstra and Bass 2002, 24).

It needs to be kept in mind that practical theology is not confined to merely explicating this kind of self-understanding of believers. The aim of this practical theological research is to give an integrative interpretation of their faith as it is actually lived, experienced and understood in the practice of daily life. In doing so, this research provides for the formulation of practical theological theory. This practical theological theory or, more modestly formulated, theoretical reconstruction of the praxis of faith might at certain points diverge from the believers’ self-understandings. The research focuses on describing, organizing and conceptualizing the personal relationship with Jesus as embodied in ‘(new forms of) faithful practice, material religion, religious experiences and nuanced beliefs’ in response to daily life (cf. Dunlap 2013, 34). It seeks to deepen understanding of this lived faith by explicating assumptions, clarifying relationships, conceptualizing the processes that are shaping it, and pointing out inconsistencies or paradoxes, thereby taking account of the theological tradition believers confess to be part of.

Such a theoretical reconstruction is theological in its own right, because it analyzes its object as an instance of faith. Within practical theology the theological dimension of the research is often affirmed – some would even confine it thereto – in an evaluative research stage (following description and interpretation). This research stage evaluates the research results in the light of Scripture and (the Christian) tradition. Subsequently, standards and norms for the praxis can be formulated (see for instance Browning 1991; Cartledge 2010; Osmer 2005; 2008, presenting different versions of thus-staged practical theological research). However, a practical theological research gains its distinctive practical theological value not necessarily because of this evaluative phase. It is the analysis and interpretation of the *practice of faith*, its dynamics and inner logic that defines research as practical theological research. Practical theology does not just bring the actual *praxis* into focus, but also demonstrates *faith* at work. The study of lived faith so pushes the academic discipline of practical theology to regard faithful practice as source of practical theological wisdom in its own right and hence provides a source of critique for any practical theological judgment (cf. Dunlap 2012, 35). Practical theology provides a source of accountability that also holds interpreters of doctrinal and sacred texts accountable to the knowledge of faith

arising out of the empirical study of faithful practice (Dunlap 2012, 34).⁷ Finally, in shedding light upon and providing insight in the lived faith of – in this case – evangelical Protestants, it supports the ongoing reflective endeavors of believers trying to sustain a faithful life and so advances faithful living (cf. Miller-McLemore 2012b).

With this approach to practical theology, the field has come a long way since its original start as academic discipline applying theological doctrine to the ministerial practice. Practical theology started as the final phase and crown of the theological study. Since the introduction of this understanding by Friedrich Schleiermacher in the nineteenth century, the formational or ministerial model remained practically uncontested until the 1950s–60s (Cartledge 2010; Miller-McLemore 2012a, 2012b). The present research approach to practical theology stands at the opposite end of the developments that took place in the decades that followed. Throughout these decades, scholars in general challenged conventional dichotomies, dichotomies between theory and practice, mind and body, explanatory and interpretative science, academic and everyday knowing. In social, philosophical, political, and finally also in practical theological theory, new connections between thinking, being and doing were drawn (Miller-McLemore 2012b, 2). Well-known is practical theologian Don S. Browning (1991) who, in his classic work *A Fundamental Practical Theology*, challenged conventional structures of theological knowing by arguing that practical thinking is the center of human thinking. Theoretical and technical thinking are abstractions from it. All theory and all theology is thus embedded in practice, and when it seems to stand alone it is only because we have abstracted it from its practical context (9). He therefore viewed theology as “a practical discipline through and through” (ix, 36) and made out a fundamental case for empirical research.⁸

In these same decades, societal changes provided an immediate necessity to reconsider the course of the practical theological undertaking. In the Netherlands Protestantism changed (and still is changing) from a more “cognitive mode of Protestantism” embedded in a strong ecclesiastical setting “towards to a globally shared, expressive and experiential mode of Christianity” (Klaver 2011, 19). Since the 1960s religion in general and the Christian faith in specific have altered due to cultural processes of amongst others individualization and subjectivization (Kennedy 2005; Taylor 2002). Concrete affiliation with mainline churches de-

⁷ This does not mean that practical theological understandings gained by studying the lived personal relationship with Jesus have ultimate authority over understandings gained by studying other sources of (practical) theological knowledge like Scripture and Christian tradition.

⁸ The Dutch practical theologian Johannes A. van der Ven too made out a fundamental case for empirical research, while though envisaging a different empirical theological enterprise than Browning’s ethical approach; Van der Ven rather focused on the operationalization of theological concepts (Van der Ven 1993).

clined severely and believers' recognition of the authority of mainline churches decreased (a.o. Becker 2005; Sengers 2005a; Van Harskamp 2000, 2005). Such developments required theologians to ask new questions and to adopt new research methods (and still do, see Sengers' analysis (2005b, 15)). Practical theologian Gerben Heitink (1993, Eng. trans. 1999) therefore viewed practical theology as a theory of crisis. Practical theology felt the pressing need to integrate empirical methods and techniques in order to investigate current states of religious praxis and make proper recommendations towards this praxis. In the process, the action-oriented discipline of practical theology "demythologized the work of the church and its officials: God's work became the work of human beings" (1999, 5). Practical theology "suggested how this work might be carried out in the best possible way, on the basis of sound theological and agogic principles [and] could also manipulate the praxis [...] once again" (5).⁹

In the face of the changing religious climate, in the German theological landscape a somewhat different approach to practical theology developed with a particular interest in *gelebte Religion*. After practical theology's turn to practice, here practical theology turned to the subject. As it was recognized that religious institutions lost much of their authority and influence, attention turned to how the individual subject shapes his own religion (Gräb 1990, 2006a; Luther 1992). Religion is perceived to originate in daily life and the subjectively constructed religious praxis of the individual is perceived as authentic religious living. The study of *gelebte Religion* is often explicitly contrasted with institutionally prescribed faith (cf. Immink 2003, 18, 54-58). The term has particular value for discriminating the broad phenomena of religiousness or religious meaning that is still present in the lives of individual subjects and modern society, also when it is not (or not explicitly) motivated by Christian beliefs, traditions or practices.

Practical theologian Wilhelm Gräb for instance points to the religious significance of contemporary books and films. Nowadays, "the symbolism and rituals of the church are a long way off for the experiences of most contemporary people" (2013, 113). However, "the existential and religious topics of most of

⁹ On Dutch soil, this led to a discussion about the proper object of practical theological research. On the acceptance of his office of professor of practical theology Gerrit Immink questioned the theological character of Heitink's approach: Does not Heitink let secularization rule over practical theology's proper interest in the study of God (1994, 8)? A *theological* analysis of practice should do justice to the reality of faith, and consequently to the reality of God (13) and the subjectivity of God, an argument he worked out more fully in *In God geloven* (2003, Eng. transl. Faith 2005). On the same grounds Immink questioned Van der Ven's approach too (Immink 1994, 8-10, 14-16; 2003, chapter 8, cf. 247), who though argued that "it is the transcendence of God, which as transcendence, forms the limits of empirical research and empirical testing" (Van der Ven 1993, 103). (For more discussion also cf. Brouwer 2010; Heitink 2004; Van der Ven and Scherer-Rath 2005)

our biblical and church traditions are somehow kept in public perception through narrative cinema, literature, and visual arts, rather than through our theological reflections or hermeneutics” (113). Gräß emphasizes that the researcher needs to pay close attention to the perspective of the individual subject: “Cultural products like these books and films communicate a religious dimension through their interpretation of human experience by means of an idea of an ultimate and transcendent reality. To recognize this dimension, we have to take the perspective of the recipients” (113).¹⁰

Another recent approach to *gelebte Religion* constitutes the phenomenological-empirical approach of the German practical theologians Astrid Dinter, Hans-Günter Heimbrock and Kerstin Söderblom (2007). They develop a phenomenological-empirical approach to *gelebte Religion* that focuses on lived experience. Lived experience is defined according to phenomenological theories about perception and intentionality, in which lived, direct experience evolves from the horizon of one’s life world and in which embodied-sensual experience plays an indispensable role (60–71). These human experiences of God are just as part of reality as other ‘normal’ phenomena. At the same time, God and the world of human experiences remain distinguished (62–62).¹¹ The starting point of this phenomenological perspective on lived religion lies in the experience that people in ordinary, daily life experience the non-ordinary. Religion is about “Grenzerfahrungen.” “Es geht um Widerfahrnisse, die Menschen mitten im Alltäglichen als außeralltäglich erleben” (Heimbrock 2007, 78).

In the Dutch context, the attention for lived religion has especially been furthered by practical theologian R. Ruud Ganzevoort (1998a, 1998b, 2006, 2012), who studies lived religion from a narrative perspective. In this approach, Ganzevoort is particularly interested in *how* individuals construct their narratives and what it means for them to *tell* them (2006, 7). Of particular interest for the approach adopted in the present research, is how Ganzevoort enters into discussion with hermeneutic action-oriented approaches. He defends that a narrative approach towards lived religion is fully theological in itself. The praxis that is empirically studied is “loaded with theological material,” Ganzevoort explains.

¹⁰ In this article Gräß defines religious meaning as “the whole of meaning, that is, an unconditional, ultimate dimension of meaning, the interconnectedness of all this” (2013, 113).

¹¹ Practical theology needs a conception of reality that encloses the possibility of using the concept of God in a meaningful way. Therefore, in accessing reality, the possibility of supra-empirical phenomena must fundamentally be kept open. “Dabei kommt es vor allem darauf an, die Gottesvorstellung nicht beliebig *neben* eine bestimmte empirische erschlossene Wirklichkeit zu setzen und damit religiöse Phänomene von ‘weltlichen’ oder ‘normalen’ Phänomenen abzuspalten. Vielmehr muss ein theologisches Wirklichkeitsverständnis die Erfahrungen, die Menschen mit Gott machen, so gut wie möglich in das umfassende Bild der Wirklichkeit integrieren können” (Dinter, Heimbrock, and Söderblom 2007, 61–62).

This means that “it is not just about describing a practice that has to be theologically interpreted afterwards” (155). Not the mediation between tradition and experience is central to this practical theological approach (contra Heitink 1993, 187), but the empirical observable praxis itself from which “theological content” arises (Ganzevoort 2006, 155). In his presidential address to the International Academy of Practical Theology in 2009, Ganzevoort explains this difference as the religious praxis merely being the *object* of practical theology (theological categories, models and theories come from the religious and theological tradition) versus praxis being the true *source*, the *locus theologicus*, itself (2009, 9).

In recent years, practical theologians and scholars of religion worldwide took new interest in lived religion, ordinary theology and popular culture (Miller-McLemore 2012b, 3). Following the German idea of *gelebte religion*, scholars show interest in the actual experience of religious persons, distinguishing it from the prescribed religion of institutionally defined beliefs and practices. As such the term lived religion is used in sociological (McGuire 2008) and anthropological (Robbins 2010) research as well. Scholars ask after the reality of religion in the lives of people (Peter L. Berger in Ammerman 2007, v), and seek to describe what religion itself looks like as to learn about the way religion works (Ammerman 2007, 6).¹² Throughout this endeavor, markers of difference between previously distinct areas, such as systematic and practical theology, ethics, sociology of religion, and even church history and religious studies sometimes fade away (Miller-McLemore 2012b, 3). Amongst theologians, the attention for lived religion takes interest in the unity of thinking and doing in the practice of Christian living (also cf. Pleizier 2010, 1–6; Volf and Bass 2002). Christian theology is perceived as necessary dimension of the actual lives of believers as the knowledge of God “shapes, infuses, and arises” from these “ordinary, concrete activities of actual people” (Bass 2002, 2–3).

The present research positions itself in the midst of contemporary practical theological research into lived religion. The present research though confines its core subject matter to lived faith (instead of lived religion).¹³ But just as the

¹² The concept of lived religion is also closely associated with what in sociological research is often called spirituality (e.g. McGuire 2008; Wuthnow 1998). Both indicate the ways individuals attend to God or the sacred, but ‘lived religion’ (instead of ‘spirituality’) puts stronger emphasis on how this relationship is practiced, experienced and expressed *in everyday life*.

¹³ Because of this focus on lived *faith* the aim and audience of the present research partly differs in comparison with for instance Gräb’s hermeneutics of religion, which has no value for believers in advancing their faithful reflection – “für den frommen, glaubenden Menschen [ist] die Theorie der Religion nicht wichtig” (Gräb 2006b, 191) – but rather has explanatory value for those who do not believe or do not believe everything (192). As Gräb argues: “Glaubenden haben das alles was die Theorie über die Religion zu sagen vermag. [...] Die Religion jedoch, die als die persönliche Glaubensüberzeugung die eigene ist, liegt jeder Theorie über sie

cultural hermeneutics of Gräb, the phenomenological research of Dinter, Heimbrock and Soderblöm and the narrative approach of Ganzevoort, it too appraises its studied object as “loaded with theological material” in itself. The personal relationship with Jesus is seen and studied as an instance of lived faith. It constitutes the source of an inductive practical theology. Consequently, the research proceeds with an inductive, explorative methodology.

1.4 | Methodology

To discover the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus is no easy undertaking. It requires access to the lived faith of individuals and a method for analyzing the findings as source of practical theological knowledge in its own right. To a great extent, lived faith is hidden from view. It is part of an individual's personal life. Its expression in observable public behavior constitutes only a small part of it. And then still, we might not even recognize lived faith when we see it. On a Sunday afternoon walk through the forest, one cannot know whether a passer-by is there to relax, to work out, or to keep silent time. The researcher of lived faith is in desperate need of revelation.

Lived faith needs to be revealed by those who live it. Therefore this research opts for accessing lived faith through *personal interviews*. The great advantage of personal interviews is that they reveal the believers' personal insights and perspectives. As these are an integral part of their lived faith, they constitute indispensable data for analyzing the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus. This research aims at explicating what the personal relationship with Jesus is about from an inside perspective, what it means for them. As reflective practitioners their insights also provide access to the knowledge that emerges out of the practice of faith. As Osmer admits at the end of his exposition of practical theology, it might be “quite profitable and desirable to give greater prominence than I have here to the knowledge that emerges out of practices” and therefore to “make use of the insights of reflective practitioners because of the epistemic nature of reflective practice” (2005, 305).

A qualitative approach that uses insiders' perspectives and aims at discovery, is the *Grounded Theory* approach. It was introduced in the late 1960s (Glaser and Strauss 1967) and has been developed ever since. Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss themselves parted ways in their application of Grounded Theory. Whereas Strauss (with co-author Juliet M. Corbin) chose for a structured manner of

immer schon voraus und kann schon deshalb nie ganz von ihr eingeholt werden, weil sie bereits in ihre Voraussetzung eingegangen ist” (191) .

coding data according to a coding paradigm, Glaser thought this compromised the riches of the data (for a short introduction see Charmaz 2006, 4-9). Much debate has also been going on about the role of existing theory in relation to the exploration of the empirical field. Contemporary standards agree upon the need to include literature from the start (Boeije 2005, 46-47; cf. Maso and Smaling 2004, 18-20; Wester and Peters 2004, 28). Notwithstanding the varieties of Grounded Theory approaches, they are driven by one primary concern. The main question always asked is ‘What is going on here?’ (e.g. Charmaz 2006, 20; Pleizier 2010, 14; Wester and Peters 2004, 78). Grounded Theory is characterized by an inductive approach and is directed at developing theory from research grounded in data. It therefore offers a set of guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data (phased analysis, coding and constant comparison, theoretical sensitivity) to ensure that the resulting theories are ‘grounded’ in the data.

The intention of such Grounded Theory approaches differs from other approaches that are also quite common in practical theology and that often follow a description-evaluation-strategy pattern. Practical theologian John Swinton and scholar of religion Harriet Mowat (2006) for instance emphasize the use of a “hermeneutics of suspicion” in empirical research. According to Swinton and Mowat the “key question” asked by the practical theologian is: “Is what *appears* to be going on within this situation what is *actually* going on?” The empirical practice of faith is not studied to discover its inner dynamics as source of authentic practical theological knowledge. The sources of theological knowledge are Scripture and tradition. They explicate:

Practical Theology approaches particular situations with a hermeneutics of suspicion, fully aware that, when the veil is pulled away, we often discover that what we *think* we are doing is quite different from what we are *actually* doing. Thus through a process of critical reflection on situations, the Practical Theologian seeks to ensure faithful practice and authentic human living in the light of scripture and tradition” (Swinton and Mowat 2006, v-vi).

The intention of Grounded Theory, however, is in inductive discovery. It aims at developing a *grounded* theory and at building a theory of the practice. About what constitutes a theory and about the level of conceptualization and abstraction required, opinions again diverge. The present research follows a Grounded Theory research method based on the pragmatic approach of sociologist Fred Wester (1995, 2005, 2003), especially the work he wrote with sociologist Vincent Peters (2004). Wester and Peters describe the theoretical aim of Grounded Theory as a systematic theory which should “fit,” have “relevance” and be one that “works” (2004, 40). The theory should fit the field under inves-

tigation, it needs to express the main issues or basic processes that are going on in that field, and it has to provide for interpretations and explanations of these processes. Wester and Peters also refer to such a theory as an analytic framework. An analytic framework surpasses description, but remains substantially associated with the field of research. For this research it means that the central concept of ‘communicating with God’ does not refer to a general theory about communicating with God. It is rather an interpretative indication of a basic process by which the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus for evangelical Protestants can be understood and explained. The concept is defined by substantive concepts like ‘talking with God’ or ‘hearing God’s voice,’ which ensures that the concept remains closely associated with the field under investigation. At the same time the concept of ‘communicating with God’ is an independent practical theological notion in its own right and hence not restricted to the particular lives of any of the respondents either.

Even though the development of a theory is the method’s aim, some kind of analytic framework is present *from the start*, albeit vague, unspecific, and sometimes unconscious. It might consist of the researcher’s perspective and/or insights from an initial literature review. Sometimes (part of) this initial analytic framework is expressed explicitly in so-called ‘sensitizing concepts’ (Wester and Peters 2004, 41). Throughout the analysis the (pre-)conceptions of the researcher and the insights from literature interact with the respondents’ input. Wester and Peters therefore call it the “main research goal to develop the insights of the researcher [...] to a systematic theory fitting the empirical field” (2004, 40). Grounded Theory procedures thus focus on developing (rather than ‘discovering’) an interpretive analytic framework that reflects the respondents’ perspectives, practices and experiences adequately.

Wester and Peters’ proposed method is designed to attain this goal. It uses *coding* as important analytical tool to focus the researcher’s attention upon the perspectives of those who have a personal relationship with Jesus. It is furthermore directed at organizing and structuring the initially formulated codes and at summarizing and categorizing them into more abstract conceptual categories as to attain understanding of this personal relationship (2004, 86–88). The method envisages a first phase of explorative open coding, in which the data is summarized and labeled (153ff). It is followed by a phase in which the code list is structured and (more abstract) categories combining or entailing several codes are formulated (161ff). The relationships between the central categories are subsequently analyzed and the core concept or main process is defined (169ff). This core concept is worked out in more depth and detail in the last phase of research (176ff). The concrete execution of this method will be described in chapter 4.

1.5 | Thesis Outline

The thesis is divided into two main parts. The first part (PART I. SUBSTANTIVE BASIS) is mainly based on a literature review. It forms the point of departure for this research. They are ‘sensitizing’ chapters that explore the *concept* of having a personal relationship with Jesus (chapter 2) and the *research field* of evangelical faith in mainline churches (chapter 3). These chapters elaborate upon the initial research interest of the researcher and signal a variety of relevant issues concerning the relationship with Jesus. Chapter 2 provides for a preliminary understanding of the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus. Chapter 3 provides for a better understanding of the research population. The chapters aim at opening up the researcher (and reader) to what might be encountered in the empirical research.

The used empirical research method and its execution are described in a METHODOICAL INTERMEZZO (chapter 4). The research was executed in the period from August 2008 to December 2012, during which evangelical Protestants from a variety of traditional Churches were interviewed about their personal relationships with Jesus. Chapter 4 of this thesis shows the procedures followed for selecting respondents and interviewing them. It provides insight into the analysis of the interviews and the development of the theoretical framework that is presented in the second part of this thesis.

Part two of the thesis presents the research results in a systemized manner by presenting an analytical framework for understanding the personal relationship with Jesus as it is lived and perceived by the respondents (PART II. EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED RECONSTRUCTION OF THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS). It starts with the chapter ‘Real Faith’ (chapter 5), in which the relationship with Jesus is reconstructed as practice of communicating with God. The chapter elaborates on the important theoretical concepts of performativity and materiality which explain the sense of realness believers experience when they communicate with God. The subsequent chapters analyze the constituent components of the communication with God in more detail. Chapter 6 analyzes the communicative faith practices believers engage in, chapter 7 discusses the shape and meaning of their experiences of divine communication, and chapter 8 reflects upon the closeness of God believers consequently experience.

In a concluding chapter, lastly, the research questions are answered and the research results are evaluated (chapter 9).

PART I
SUBSTANTIVE BASIS

2 The Personal Relationship with Jesus.

Historical, Sociological and Theological Explorations

2.1 | Do You Know Jesus?

“Do you know Jesus Christ?” The question already bothered John Wesley, one of the founding fathers of evangelicalism (Noll 2003, 85). Wesley describes one of the for him disconcerting discussions he had with the Moravian Spangenberg in 1736 as follows:

[Spangenberg] said, “My brother I must first ask you one or two questions. Have you the witness within yourself? Does the Spirit of God bear witness with your spirit that you are a child of God?” I was surprised, and knew not what to answer. He observed it, and asked, “Do you know Jesus Christ?” I paused, and said, “I know he is the Saviour of the world.” “True,” he replied, “but do you know he has saved you?” I answered, “I hope he has died to save me.” He only added, “Do you know yourself?” “I do.” But I fear they were vain words (Wesley, Feb. 7, 1736 in Wesley, Works, I8:146, in Noll 2003, 85).

The question about knowing Jesus Christ and the just cited incident in which Wesley is being questioned about it characterizes faith as it is lived and experienced in evangelicalism quite aptly. Right away the incident makes clear that evangelicalism is not only about assenting to certain propositions. Evangelicalism is not, as evangelicals themselves would refer to it, about ‘head-knowledge.’ Evangelicalism is concerned with ‘heart-knowledge’ (Noll 2003, 52). The concern is: do you know Jesus Christ?

The question has a prominent place in evangelical spirituality up to the present day, although of course shifts have taken place since the eighteenth century. In Wesley's time the emphasis fell on putting trust in the salvific work of Christ, whereas nowadays the stress lays on having a personal relationship with Jesus. For Wesley the question "Do you know Jesus Christ?" was explicated by the question "Do you know he has *saved* you?" whereas nowadays the concern rather is whether you know Jesus *personally*. Research indicates – as this chapter will show in more detail below – that speaking of a 'personal relationship' in combination with frequent references to 'Jesus' belongs to a spirituality that assumed its particular shape only in the second half of the last century. This post-World-War-Two evangelical spirituality combines an emphasis on the historical Jesus with an image of Jesus as friend. It focuses on meeting Jesus individually and experientially, and speaks of this experiential contact with the divine as having a personal relationship with Jesus.

This chapter studies the spirituality of having a personal relationship with Jesus as it evolved under influence of the post-World-War-Two evangelical movement in the Netherlands. The chapter shows a multiplicity of meaningful aspects associated with the personal relationship with Jesus. The chapter firstly pays attention to the frequent references to 'Jesus' and the accompanying image of Jesus that characterize this spirituality (§2.2). Then it explores the typical way of speaking of faith as a 'personal relationship' (§2.3). Lastly it analyzes the personal dedication that accompanies this type of spirituality (§2.4). As the origin and meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus are closely connected to the arising evangelical movement after World War Two and the socio-religious conditions of that time, attention will be paid, next to theological dimensions, towards historical and social dimensions of the personal relationship with Jesus. This chapter will at some points necessarily be impressionistic as it sometimes needs to draw upon light and popular devotional reading to put a finger on the pulse of lay evangelical spirituality in this particular period and cultural setting (cf. Gillet 1993, 22).

2.2 | The Person of Jesus

A first eye-catching characteristic of having a personal relationship with Jesus, is that it emphasizes the believer's relationship with *Jesus*. The contemporary emphasis on Jesus stands in a long evangelical tradition emphasizing the person of Jesus Christ. However, over the past decades evangelical spirituality has developed a particular preference for speaking of Jesus (instead of the Lord God or

Jesus Christ) that closely associates Jesus with the historical Jesus and emphasizes the believer's relation towards this Jesus, the Son of God.

Theologian and apologist Clive S. Lewis provides an apt description of how Jesus was perceived by evangelicals in the past decades. His *Mere Christianity* (Lewis 2001), written mid twentieth century, would half a century later end up to be number three on the list of 50 most influential books that have shaped evangelicals in *Christianity Today* (The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals 2006).¹⁴ Lewis writes about Jesus:

A man who was merely a man and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on a level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God: or else a madman or something worse. You can shut Him up for a fool, you can spit at Him and kill Him as a demon; or you can fall at His feet and call Him Lord and God. But let us not come with any patronizing nonsense about Him being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. (Lewis 2001, 52)

As the quotation from Lewis indicates, speaking of Jesus draws attention to Jesus as he lived on earth at the beginning of the Christian era. It draws attention to the historical person of Jesus. It is this image of Jesus that was put forward by the evangelical movement in the Netherlands in its efforts to reach new converts after World War Two.

Defending the Historical Jesus

In the decades after World War Two, especially from the 1960s onwards, secularization and liberalization hit the Dutch society *and* Protestant churches. Religion ceased to function as a determining code for social life and churches opened up to the surrounding culture. In the following decades church attendance sharply declined, orthodoxy dropped, and religion individualized radically and in a new kind of way – to name a few of the important developments often subsumed under the heading ‘secularization’ or the ‘transformation of religion’ (e.g. Sengers 2005c; Taylor 2002, 2007; Van Harskamp 2000, 2005). The evangelical movement reacted towards these processes by raising a voice for orthodox, biblical Christianity (e.g. Boersema 2004; Vellenga 1991, 115–130).

¹⁴ Evangelical theologian Alister E. McGrath confirms that Lewis' exposition of Christianity does not differ much from evangelical convictions and ethos nowadays (2000, 61).

As part of its apologetic endeavors the evangelical movement raised a voice for the *historical* person of Jesus. The quotation from Lewis provides for a typical example thereof. Apologetic expositions about Jesus addressed questions as: who was Jesus? Did he really exist? Was he fact or fiction? (McDowell 1978)¹⁵ Other-worldly? Sectarian leader? Or just a good person? (examples from: *Jezus* 2000) Evangelical spokesperson Hans Eschbach presents this time – the 1960s and 70s, a time in which he himself “let Jesus into his heart” and started to work for Youth for Christ – as a time of discussion and debate. Youth for Christ introduced the *koffiebar* (coffeehouse) which attracted “hundreds, thousands of young people” (Eschbach 2009). Eschbach spoke at those evenings. He recalls: “That was the time of a quite apologetic approach. You had reason, you had arguments. And in the coffeehouse you would discuss till three o’clock in the night. You presented proofs for the existence of God. You showed it all. And at the end of the evening you said: ‘Well, yes or no?’” (Eschbach 2009)

Characteristic of such evangelical, apologetic expositions is the demonstration of Jesus’ (historical) uniqueness on the basis of the biblical testimony about him, the defense of the physical resurrection of Jesus as historical truth, and the call to people to relate to this Jesus in faith (McDowell 1978; Oden 2002; Vanhoozer 2002). As Eschbach’s memories about the coffeehouse evenings already indicate, evangelical expositions never end with the question regarding the historical Jesus. The last comment or question always addresses the listener or reader: who is Jesus to you? (e.g. Vanhoozer 2002, 79) That question nails the evangelical concern. The accounts given of the historical Jesus are supposed to arouse a reaction of the reader. As Eschbach said: “Well, yes or no?” (Eschbach 2009) Fact or fiction? (McDowell 1978) The biblical-historical Jesus is the one who can, because of his historical and physical resurrection, be known in faith today (Oden 2002, 117).

Note that for evangelicals, the *biblical* and *historical* Jesus are practically synonymous. The evangelical defense of the historical Jesus is intimately intertwined with a literal reading of the Bible as the truth revealed by God (cf. McGrath 1996, chapters 1 and 2; McGrath 2000, 64–67, 70). Evangelical expositions often address questions like “Is the biblical information reliable?” (McDowell 1978, 32–45), of course answering such questions affirmatively. The evangelical defense of the historical Jesus should therefore not be seen on the same wavelength as the ‘Quest of the Historical Jesus’ or *Leben Jesu Forschung* of the (primarily) nineteenth century, which also takes particular interest in the

¹⁵ McDowell’s *Jezus. Feit of fictie?* is a translation of *More Than a Carpenter*, which has known a circulation of over 1,5 million copies in English and has been translated in more than twenty languages. Also highly noted in the Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals is McDowell’s book *Evidence that Demands a Verdict* (1979).

historical Jesus. Evangelicals rather present their approach in explicit opposition to this, according to them, “skeptical approach of the Bible that dominated the past two centuries” (Vanhoozer 2002, 79). The historical-critical and more liberal theological approach that evangelical theologian Kevin J. Vanhoozer refers to, differentiates between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith. It tried/s to retrieve the historical Jesus in contrast with the image of Jesus as presented in the Bible and in the Christian tradition (the Jesus of faith). It hence too pays attention to person of Jesus and the gospel stories about him, but in quite a different way than evangelicals do.¹⁶ For evangelicals the historical Jesus is equated with the biblical Jesus and is then presented as the Jesus who can be known in faith.

Even though the evangelical Jesus-centered approach might give rise to numerous questions, one should not judge evangelicalism too quickly without fathoming the deeper meanings of its spirituality (cf. Van Harskamp 2000, 15). The biblical-historical Jesus is namely defended with a few important theological concerns in mind. The gospel is not firstly seen as a *teaching* about redemption and salvation. The gospel is presented as a *person*, Jesus, with whom the believer can have a relationship. By focusing on the earthly life of Jesus as described in the gospels, Jesus’ (unique) personhood and personality are drawn to the fore. It is about him being a concrete person to whom a believer can therefore concretely relate. It is this relationship with Jesus which is salvific in nature and gives the believer eternal life. With this soteriological approach post-World-War-Two evangelicalism joined a long standing pietistic Christian tradition that emphasized the necessity of living faith (McGrath 2000, 77–81).

Secondly, the defended continuity between the historical-biblical Jesus and the Jesus known in faith, reveals a desire for truth in the midst of a society that questioned any truth and knocked down established orders (e.g. McGrath 1996). In the evangelical approach, truth is perceived from a positivist stance, as objectively grounded in empirical reality. In line with this approach, Jesus is presented as historical reality, as an objective truth grounded in the material and physical qualities of history. As the truth about Jesus is grounded in the empirical reality of his life, death and resurrection, his realness *thus* cannot be denied. This also means that, for evangelicals, the Jesus *of faith* is an objective truth as well. The continuity between the historical Jesus and the Jesus of faith makes that the experience of Jesus is not considered to be a subjective projection of the human

¹⁶ Roughly speaking the ‘Quest of the Historical Jesus’ began with Hermann S. Reimarus in the eighteenth century and ended with Albert Schweitzer in the nineteenth century. “The ‘Quest’ began as an explicitly anti-theological, anti-Christian, anti-dogmatic movement. Its initial agenda was *not* to find a Jesus upon whom Christian faith might be based, but to show that the faith of the church (as it was then conceived) could not in fact be based on the real Jesus of Nazareth” (Wright 1996, 17). For more particulars see Wright’s introduction to the old ‘Quest’ and subsequent ‘New Quest’ (1996, chapters 1 and 2).

mind, even though he is subjectively known. Rather it holds, that just as sure as Jesus is a historical reality, just as sure is his real presence in the life of a believer nowadays (cf. McGrath 2000, 63). Evangelical theologian Michael Burgess formulates this evangelical concern tellingly: “Evangelicals of course believe in a created objective universe *out there*. As human beings, individually and collectively, we have to relate to the *it*, the *thou* and the *Thou* outside of us. [...] This act of relating, however, is inescapably subjective. [However] ‘metaphysical objectivity’ is compatible with ‘epistemological subjectivity.’ [...] Reality is not inherently undermined by our understandably subjective appreciation of it” (2005, 21; cf. McGrath 2000, 66).

This objective reality of having a relationship with Jesus is, thirdly, perceived to determine its relevancy. Whereas liberal theology was considered to have proven itself as pastorally weak and having “little to offer to the world” (McGrath 2000, 13), evangelical theology was perceived to be soteriologically relevant. Relevancy is achieved by nothing more or less than a simple proclamation of and sticking to the (objective) truth (McGrath 2000, 104). Burgess continues his exposition:

Evangelicalism believes it has a story to tell. [...] Against the postmodernist charge of ‘logocentrism’ (that we are bound to relativistic beliefs as a result of the social manipulation of language), [...] our story revolves around the undeniable and absolute historical fact of Jesus Christ. Indeed, evangelicalism places fundamental significance in the Christ story that talks about the Christ who *is* the ‘way, the truth and the life’ and who opened up the path of truth along which to walk. Fundamental to the story is the coherent identity between the historical Jesus and the Christ of faith. In response to postmodernist relativism, then, we believe that actually, we *do* have a historically backed metanarrative to offer. (Burgess 2005, 22–23)

From an evangelical perspective, this particular approach to reality, history and the Bible ensures the relevance of the Christian faith for (post)modern people. Evangelicals keep away from accommodating faith to modernity, a faith in which traditional beliefs are stripped of their objective status. They instead focus upon the clear, objective message about Jesus and his death on the cross.¹⁷

It comes as no surprise that this Jesus-centered, biblical-historical approach has also raised questions and has often called for irritation too. Do evan-

¹⁷ It is therefore too, that evangelicalism has sometimes also been portrayed as naïve reaction of people who (wrongfully) feel threatened by modernity (McGrath 1996, 17; 2000, 106–107; Van Harskamp 2000, 15; cf. Vellenga 1991, 115–130).

gelicals really identify the truth with a person, with Jesus? Are people really invited to accept Jesus, or rather forced to accept a series of (dogmatically correct) propositions about him? (cf. McGrath 1996, 177ff) What room does the attention for the historical Jesus leave for the divinity and transcendence of the risen Christ? How does an individual Jesus devotion relate to worshipping God the Father? Furthermore, does their literalist approach to the Bible not lead to an approach in which, in reality, individual, subjective face-value reading determines truth? Does their awe for the absolute authority of the Bible not facilitate an unjust and excessive divinization of the Bible?¹⁸ And maybe above all: is there any room for diverging opinions about Jesus or for varying views about the interpretation of the gospels? With this last question we hit one of most important sources of irritation. Speaking of Jesus is associated with exclusivist claims to the objective truth, which puts other believers and non-believers off (cf. Van Capelleveen and Kroll 1972, 24ff; Van Heusden, De Knijff, and Medema 2002, 12). More liberal believers feel intellect is unjustly written of (Hakkenes 2007), other believers indicate to find it difficult that evangelicals “always keep talking about Jesus, who was crucified, like this would be the only way about which we could speak about God’s love for us” (Ten Have 2000, 7).

An Amicable Jesus

After World War Two the evangelical apologetic for the biblical-historical Jesus presented believers with a concrete image of a person to whom they could relate: Jesus as he lived on earth. The defense of the historical Jesus so gave rise to a particular image of Jesus that drew attention to his uniqueness as Son of God and his death on the cross. Developments did not stop there. They had rather just started.

Notwithstanding the growing attention for the person of Jesus, the biblical-historical post-War Jesus is still not the one “who worries with you about whether to paint the kitchen table,” as anthropologist Tanya M. Luhmann describes the contemporary image of Jesus (2012, xv). Through influences from America (in interaction with cultural changes in the Netherlands – the massive turn to the subject and the rise of a new consumerist individualism – see §2.3 and §2.4) the image of Jesus, the Son of God who was crucified, started changing towards that of a *personal friend*. Luhmann (2012) studied the present generation of American evangelicals and their relationship with God. She was startled by these believers who, over the last few decades, “sought out an intensely personal

¹⁸ This approach might be a facilitating factor in the communicative and divinatory usage of the Bible in present evangelical Protestantism (see §6.3 *Divine Realities* and *Reading the Bible* and §7.4 *Sacred Signs*).

God, a God who not only cares about your welfare but worries with you about whether to paint the kitchen table” (xv).

Luhrmann points to an important impulse contributing to the contemporary “Jesus-culture” of believers who have a “personal relationship with God/Jesus.”¹⁹ Luhrmann traces the origins of this American evangelical relationship with God/Jesus back to the Jesus movement of the 1960s in America (2012, 3–38; also cf. Miller 1997). The Jesus movement started off in 1967 with an explosion of interest in spiritual experience as hippies discovered Jesus. As the counterculture accepted Jesus, Jesus was made their own: “This Jesus was a Jesus of love. [...] The coffeehouses and the communes did not offer an institutional Jesus. They offered a personal relationship with a God who loved without restraint and without reservation” (Luhrmann 2012, 20). Not only did the people of this movement start to emphasize their relationship with Jesus rather than with God or the Father, but they also changed their understandings of God and of Jesus in a remarkable way. Luhrmann summarizes how the image changed:

...toward a deeply human, even vulnerable God, who loves us unconditionally and wants nothing more than to be our friend, our best friend, as loving and personal and responsive as a best friend in America should be; and toward a God who is so supernaturally present, it is as if he does magic and as if our friendship with him gives us magic, too. [...] What we have seen in the last four or five decades is the democratization of God – *I and thou* into *you and me* – and the democratization of intense spiritual experience, arguably more deeply than ever before in our country’s history. (Luhrmann 2012, 35)

Research has pointed out that the Dutch evangelical movement received a considerable impetus from the American evangelical movement (Boersema 2004; Klaver 2011; Stoffels 1990). As soon as the early 1970s, evangelist and journalist Jan van Capelleveen (1972) discerns these American influences in the Netherlands, including those of the American Jesus People, and connects these influences with the increasing use of Jesus-vocabulary in the Netherlands. He notices the ever more frequent use of the name Jesus instead of Christ, and also notices how with this shifting vocabulary the image of Jesus shifts as well. According to Van Capelleveen, Jesus is more like a “friend standing next to you” than Christ “the risen one who is far away in heaven” (1972, 8). Hence Jesus

¹⁹ In most literature, the notions of having a personal relationship with *God* and with *Jesus* are used interchangeably. This chapter argues, that a particular focus on Jesus started to characterize evangelical spirituality after World War Two, because of which the phrase ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ became stock language. In practice, this notion has probably always been used next to and interchangeably with speaking of a personal relationship with *God*.

“brings God closer” (8). Van Capelleveen continues: “The word ‘Christ’ unconsciously expresses a certain distance. Christ is far away in the unreachable heaven. But Jesus is the Lord who became human, who came to earth, who came to the people, who cared about people” (8). He furthermore notices a shift towards “personally having contact with this Jesus,” because “He will solve all problems in one’s life” (11), “all problems, the cosmic one’s as well as the smallest possible ones” (99). Van Capelleveen combines his exposition about these developments with the common evangelical, apologetic exposition concerning the historical Jesus, asking: “Who is this person Jesus Christ?” (111–114). So the Dutch evangelical movement started to integrate the image of the biblical-historical person of Jesus, the Son of God, with that of a divine friend, able to solve all problems.²⁰

Examples of these developments, demonstrating an increasing preference for speaking of Jesus as well as a shifting image of Jesus, are seen in the *Marches for Jesus* and the developing genre of *Opwekkingsliederen* (Revival Songs). Shifts in the image of Jesus can also be detected by comparing evangelical expressions throughout the decades. When the 60.000 people came to hear Billy Graham speak in Rotterdam in 1955, they were still welcomed by large banners covering the field asking “Jesus your *Savior*?” (Polygoon Hollands Nieuws 1955, emphasis original). The emphasis on Jesus is combined with an image of him as Savior. Billy Graham proclaimed that: “If you have failed to live as good as Christ, you have come short and are a sinner” (Polygoon Hollands Nieuws 1955). Reviewing the speeches of Ben Hoekendijk held at the *One Way-Days* a few decades later, still shows a clear emphasis on Jesus as King, Lord and Son of God. Ben Hoekendijk ended one of his speeches, for instance, with the question “Who is Jesus to you?” and then continued to invite everyone who “wants to accept Jesus as *King* and *Lord* to stand up” (Hoekendijk 1979, 69, emphasis original). At the same time Jesus is made more personal too, more helpful, and friendly. There is less emphasis on the themes of sin or sinfulness. Themes like loneliness, personal frustrations and the ability of Jesus to heal it and to satisfy personal desires are addressed as well (Hoekendijk 1979, 16–22).

These influences from America, in particular those from the Jesus People, are though not solely responsible for changing the image of Jesus. Van Capelleveen and the speeches of Ben Hoekendijk already point towards other impulses as well. The positive image of Jesus is closely connected with the emergence of the notion of having a ‘personal relationship’ with him and the cultural

²⁰ As in the Netherlands the Jesus People never constituted a movement comparable in size to the one in America (e.g. Stoffels 1990, 27), the evangelical image of Jesus in the Netherlands might be somewhat less amicable – “less colorful” (Van Capelleveen and Kroll 1972, 55) – than the Jesus of Luhrmann’s description.

changes of the past decades (see §2.3). But before addressing these issues, one other issue needs attention.

The Evangelical Tradition: Christ the Savior

Notwithstanding the above given exposition of the evangelical attention for Jesus after World War Two, the question remains: was it anything new? Church historian Ian Randall claims that: “All evangelicals, whatever their views about issues such as predestination to salvation, could sing, in John Newton’s words: *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds / In a believer’s ear!*” (2005, 183). Hence he concludes that “what has bound evangelicals together has always been the personal relationship with God in Jesus Christ” (183). According to Randall the “central theme of this strand of spirituality is a personal relationship with Christ” (23). (Note that Randall speaks interchangeably about the relationship with *Christ* and with *God in Jesus Christ*, while referring to a song focused upon *Jesus*.)

Indeed, the evangelical tradition has always been strongly Christo-centric and has not refrained from speaking of Jesus either.²¹ The Dutch evangelical movement is indeed embedded in a longstanding evangelical tradition, including its focus on the person of Jesus Christ. Still, even though traditional evangelical spirituality shows traces of speaking of ‘Jesus’ next to ‘Christ,’ throughout the evangelical tradition the emphasis falls on Christ the Savior who forgives the sins of those who repent and convert. The post-World-War-Two shifting vocabulary and emerging amicable image of Jesus is embedded in but in some respects also diverges from this image.

In early evangelicalism, in the eighteenth century, the focus on experiencing Jesus Christ was associated inextricably with “conversionism” and with “crucicentrism,” as church historian David Bebbington later called it (1989, 5ff, 14ff). The conversion experience was bound up with major theological convictions concerning the *justification by faith*. The spiritual experience concerned the experience of *repentance* and was perceived as receiving salvation for which Jesus Christ, who died on the cross for the sins of humanity, had to be *trusted*. Next to the doctrine of the justification by faith, assurance and a focus on the cross of Jesus Christ determined spiritual fellowship *with God* in the life of faith that followed it (Bebbington 1989, 20-74; cf. Noll 2003, about religious experience 262-290). Present day attention for Jesus as historical reality, human, teacher and friend starts shifting attention away from these themes of sin, the cross and the justification by faith of the believer (contra McGrath 2000, 72).

A first move into this direction is already seen in nineteenth-century evangelicalism, in particular in the holiness movement. Bebbington observes that

²¹ Just as the Jesus-centrism of the past decades does not refrain from speaking of Christ either.

it is only throughout the nineteenth century that evangelicals start to emphasize their relationship with Jesus rather than with the Father (2005, 85). The historiographical research from historian Virginia L. Brereton (1991) confirms this (see §2.3). Bebbington indicates that the pattern became more marked as the century wore on (2005, 86). However, nineteenth-century evangelical spirituality still centered on Christ *the Savior*. Associated with such a Christocentric spirituality was the conflict with sin. The theme of sin was central to the experience of conversion, as well as to attaining holiness after that (chapter 3, cf. 252). At the same time, the doctrine of sin was limited too. Sudden sanctification was proclaimed to be a general experience standing at the beginning of a life of progress. Bebbington writes: “The constant quest for a closer approximation to the *character of Christ* was the heartbeat of the movement” (82). The holiness movement was part of a most far-reaching cultural shift, namely romanticism, which brought the power of the individual will and self-improvement into the prominence. Hence this movement was a precursor of later developments that would carry on these religious and cultural shifts (Bebbington 1989, 151–180). The believer’s quest for holiness anticipates later developments in which the *life and person of Jesus* gain importance as concrete examples for daily living.

Notwithstanding Bebbington’s observations, Randall’s claim (‘All evangelicals could sing *How sweet the name of Jesus sounds*’ (2005, 183)) deserves to be mentioned once more as well. For indicating the heartbeat of the evangelical movement, Randall refers to the content of a song, something which is quite justified in the context of analyzing evangelical spirituality. Hymns in particular are an important record of past spiritual experiences of a believing community (Gillet 1993; Mouw 2004). Randall might therefore be right to suggest that evangelical spiritual experience has always been characterized by an important focus on Jesus too, as the evangelical hymnody indeed reveals an intimate devotion to Jesus (e.g. Mouw 2004; Randall 2005). Think for instance of *What a Friend We Have in Jesus*, written mid-eighteenth century, put to music a few decades later. Studying the evangelical hymnody leads to the conclusion that devotion to Jesus has been present in evangelicalism right from the beginning. It though must be said that these hymns do not speak about a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ literally. In addition, the analysis of the traditional evangelical hymnody reveals that the evangelical religion of these hymns enduringly features Jesus (Christ) as Savior. It features the “need of sinners for Christ, the love of God in Christ, the saving power of Christ, the refuge and healing found in Christ, the joy of redemption in Christ and the hope of eternal life in Christ” (Noll 2004a, 6–7). The song indeed continues: *What a Friend We Have in Jesus / All Our Sins and Griefs to Bear!*” Hence in the traditional devotion to Jesus, Jesus was still and above all the God-send Savior of sinners and not a friendly companion of religious individuals.

2.3 | A ‘Personal Relationship’

The preferential option for speaking of Jesus is not the only characteristic of the spirituality of having a personal relationship with Jesus. Believers speak of faith in him as a *personal relationship*. Interestingly, although evangelicals are known for their strong biblicism (e.g. internationally: Bebbington 1989; in the Netherlands: Vellenga 1991), their central concept to refer to faith lacks a direct biblical basis. Evangelicals are surely convinced of the biblical base of the concept, but the concept itself is not found in the Bible in the same way as notions like “being born again,” “conversion” or “faith.”

It is only since the 1960s and 70s of the last century that speaking of having a *personal relationship* has started to become stock language. The post-World-War-Two developments in evangelical spirituality and the growing focus upon the person Jesus as described in the above paragraph are intimately connected with this development: the concept of a personal relationship is easily associated with friendship and intimacy and thus fits the image of Jesus that arose after World War Two. Both developments – Jesus-centrism and speaking of a personal relationship – should be seen as two each other reinforcing dimensions of the same process of a changing evangelical spirituality.

Emergence of the Adjective ‘Personal’

There is no indication that the wording of having a ‘personal relationship’ with God/Jesus – neither the usage of the adjective ‘personal’ nor speaking of a ‘relationship’ – was commonly used in the past ages of the evangelical tradition. Even though several scholars indicate that the personal relationship with Jesus/God has always been the center of evangelical spirituality (e.g. McGrath 2000; Mouw 2004; Randall 2005), this should thus (at least partly) be seen as an anachronism. These scholars *are* right in embedding the meaning associated with the personal relationship with Jesus in personal religion as it developed in the evangelical tradition throughout the past centuries. The actual phrase of having a ‘personal relationship’ however started to come into use probably only in the twentieth century.

The shift toward *personal religiosity in general*, and subsequently toward evangelical spirituality with its emphasis on personal engagement and inward devotion in particular, originates centuries back, as many church historians confirm (e.g. Bebbington 1989, 2005; Noll 2003). Also a cultural philosopher like Charles Taylor traces the emergence of personal religion back to the time of the Reformation (2002, 9). Consequently scholars point back to these ages of the emergence of personal religiosity as the birth-place of the personal relationship

with God/Jesus. The evangelical theologian Alister E. McGrath for instance points in particular to pietism as the birth-place of the ‘personal relationship.’ This movement was indeed very important to, amongst others, John Wesley and to the evangelical movement in general. The similarities between having a personal relationship and personal religiosity in pietism are undeniable. Nicholas Ludwig von Zinzendorf for instance often spoke about the “*täglicher Umgang mit dem Heiland*” advocating a life of daily, active godliness in a way that would probably still appeal to many evangelicals today (Meyer 1973). But as McGrath correctly points out – thereby referring to Zinzendorf’s teacher August Hermann France – the personal appropriation of faith was referred to as vital faith (McGrath 2000, 24, cf. 78-79). Vital faith, saving faith and possessing justification was the common vocabulary used in early evangelicalism.

It is difficult to determine exactly when evangelicals started to speak of a personal relationship, but historiographical research from historian Virginia L. Brereton (1991) indicates that *vocabulary* started to change only at the beginning of the twentieth century. Brereton studied a wide swath of time, from early evangelicalism (1800) until the present, which gave her the possibility to discover broad changes, or “macro shifts” as she calls them, in (evangelical) conversion narratives (1991, xv). Around the beginning of the twentieth century she notices an “interesting new element in the language of the convert,” which is “the constant reference to a ‘personal relationship’ with Christ or to Christ as one’s ‘personal Savior’” (57). The idea is expressed in many ways. Brereton refers to expressions as “Jesus died for me, *personally*.” Others referred to their “*personal* knowledge of Jesus Christ” or to “knowing him *personally*” (57). Brereton continues: “The idea of a personal divinity was marked by a preference for Jesus Christ the Son over God the Father. The Father was largely inscrutable, but the Son could be known from the gospel narratives” (58). Her research confirms Bebbington’s observations that in the late nineteenth century believers started to emphasize their relationship with Jesus rather than with the Father (Bebbington 2005, 86). Searching for similar expressions in earlier sermons and writings, Brereton is able to find only an occasional instance in the sermons and writings of Dwight L. Moody (second half nineteenth century). In reports on the Boston revivals of 1909 she finds no similar formulation. But then, in the 1922 writing from William Jennings Bryan, she finds him writing about the need for a belief in a “personal” God, rather than one who was “remote” and “distant.” Only in a short time, by 1930 “the notion of a personal god and a personal relationship with him had become stock language for converts” (Brereton 1991, 58).

According to Brereton, the shifting vocabulary is connected with shifting meanings concerning faith. Brereton interprets the meaning of this language as follows: “The allusions to Jesus as a personal savior and the many variants of this idea seem to contain a couple of intertwined meanings. Firstly, the argument is

that God is a person, not an impersonal force nor a doctrine [...]. Second, the adjective ‘personal’ refers back to the worshipper: God, a good democrat, acknowledges and responds to each human being as a *person*, as a unique and valuable individual” (57–58).

With the emergence of the adjective ‘personal,’ Brereton notes two other significant and related changes: vocabulary used to describe the act of conversion changed around the same time. It changed into an active voice of *accepting* Christ, rather than being accepted by him. The *decision* for Christ tended to be emphasized increasingly (55, 56). Secondly, Brereton notices that in the twentieth century, Christ the Savior gradually became a *friend* or a *companion*: “He is addressed more colloquially and informally than in the past. Narrators often speak to and about him simply as ‘Jesus’” (58). Brereton situates this last development in the context of the more informal atmosphere of twentieth-century worship and prayer, because of which it seems more suitable to bring “slang” into transactions with the Lord.

Anthropologist Henri Gooren associates Brereton’s last findings with the emergence of Pentecostalism. It was Pentecostalism that provided for a more informal worship-setting in which there was space for such informal religious vocabulary (2010, 96; also cf. Van Capelleveen and Kroll 1972). The Jesus People that Luhrmann (2012) writes about subsequently boosted and magnified such existing developments. Thus the increasingly informal worship atmosphere in evangelical Christianity throughout the twentieth century and the subsequent explosion of spiritual interest since the 1960s (amongst others amongst the Jesus People) provided significant impulses towards the emergence of the ‘personal’ – meaning: friendly, informal and individual – dimensions of the personal relationship with Jesus.

Transferable Evangelization Concepts

Another (very concrete) impulse prompting the expression ‘personal relationship’ to become stock language needs to be taken into account. The concept of having a personal relationship was namely heavily used in evangelizing endeavors after World War Two.

Evangelization endeavors after World War Two were stimulated by the secularization and liberalization of the Dutch society. Because of these processes and their rapidly unfolding effects on society after World War Two, the ‘new’ evangelical movement²² started pondering upon reaching people who were ever

²² Originally the label ‘new evangelicalism’ was used to indicate this new form of evangelicalism that arose in Nord-American Protestantism. It had a world-accepting and culture-

more lost about the relevancy of the Christian faith or were quite unfamiliar with the Christian faith at large.²³ A telling memory from Billy Graham about his visit to the Netherlands in 1955 reads: "There were millions of people in Europe that could easily be called 'numb secularists,' even though in the background, they certainly had some knowledge of God and the Bible. And still a deep desire was alive after knowing the gospel and people were open to it with all of their heart" (Graham 1997, 257).

How to reach those "numb secularists"? And how to explain what the Christian faith is all about? The new evangelical movement adopted a more world-accepting and culture-integrating approach than the evangelical movement had done before, also in respect to its evangelization strategies. Its evangelists, including Billy Graham, started to defend and explain the Christian faith with strategies, language and images fitting the age. This would turn out to constitute an important impulse towards developing an image of faith as having a personal relationship. Whereas 'faith' is a particular religious concept, having a 'personal relationship' is a concept stemming from ordinary daily life. It was supposed to be easy to grab and understand for anyone. It fits an age in which personal relationships, friendship and intimacy are becoming ever more important for the individual as counter force to the fragmentation of life and the loneliness accompanying it, while at the same time respecting the individual's private space, will and choice (cf. Luhmann 2004, and see §7.5).

The development and usage of the concept of a 'personal relationship' gained its most concrete impulse by the widespread adoption of transferable evangelization concepts by the new evangelical movement. Also in the Netherlands evangelical organizations (mainly from American origin) started to make extensive use of these so called "transferable concepts" in the 1960s and 70s. "A transferable concept is an idea or a truth that can be transferred or communicated from one person to another and then to another, spiritual generation, without distorting or diluting its original message. [...] Educational research confirms that the average person can master the content of a concept, such as this one, by reading it thoughtfully six times" (Bright 2009). Originating from ordinary sales strategy using standard sales pitches, evangelists started to use transferable concepts to win converts.

Widely known in the Netherlands are *The Four Spiritual Laws*, which were used by Campus Crusade for Christ.²⁴ The concept was developed by Bill

integrating vision, in contrast to the fundamentalist movement of the 1920s and 30s. Soon the term was replaced by the shorter indication 'evangelicalism' (McGrath 2000, 38-39).

²³ For a short but telling introduction to the Dutch society and situation in the post-War decades, including the situation in traditional churches, see for instance Vellenga (1991, 115-130).

²⁴ A Dutch division of Campus Crusade for Christ was founded in 1969. The organization is now called Agapè (*Agapè. Deel van je leven*, www.agape.nl).

Bright in the fifties of the last century (Bright 2009). Of Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws* over 250 million copies have been printed and distributed worldwide (Watt 1991, 17). In the Netherlands they became well-known through tracts like *De weg terug* (*The way back*) and *Kent u de vier geestelijke wetten?* (*Have you heard of the four spiritual laws?*) Documentation shows that when Bill Bright visited the Dutch division of Campus Crusade for Christ at its foundation day in 1969, he right away taught people how to explain the gospel to others by the use of a few simple drawings.²⁵ Billy Graham's team developed a similar tract during the London Crusade in 1954.²⁶ "In four brief steps, you come to an understanding of how to find eternal life," so the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association explains on its website (see website Billy Graham Evangelistic Association). *Steps to Peace with God* contains a "simple system to bring people to faith." In the exposition of these "How To's" an explicit and concrete development towards speaking of having a personal relationship with Jesus can be noticed. The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association explains that *Steps to Peace* is a "succinct and clear presentation of how to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and experience peace with God."

These evangelization initiatives, combined with a changing imagery of Jesus, highly determined the outlook of the rapidly growing evangelical movement in the Netherlands.²⁷ In research it is well-attested to that since the mid-1960s evangelical organizations from American origin have inspired the Dutch evangelical movement by introducing new evangelization methods (e.g. Boersema 2004, 29, 38ff; cf. Klaver 2011, including appendix II; Watt 1991, 18). It is difficult to argue that the pamphlets accompanying these evangelization methods are *the* representative documents of the early decades of popular evangelicalism in the Netherlands. But they certainly are *amongst* the representative documents.

The tracts signal the beginning of the typical way of speaking of faith as a personal relationship with Jesus. They are characterized by a limited Christian vocabulary and from the beginning of their publication explicitly speak about having a "relationship" with God. Bright's *Laws* for instance starts by explaining

²⁵ See the PowerPoint presentation with historic information provided by Agapè (*Van CCC naar IvE*, www.agape.nl/download/Van%20cc%20naar).

²⁶ The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association claims 1954 as the year the presentation was developed (Billy Graham Evangelistic Association, www.billygrahamlibrary.org/PGView.aspx?pid=13). Bill Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws* looks very similar and was designed, according to Bright, in 1956 (Bright 2009). Dutch (modern) versions are available from the web (IkzoekGod.nl, www.ikzoekgod.nl; Jesus.net, www.jesus.net; ZoektochtNaarGod.nl, www.zoektocht.net).

²⁷ Historic overviews of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands are provided by Boersema (2004), Klaver (2008), Stoffels (1990) and Vellenga (1991).

that these are the “laws that govern your relationship with God” (Bright 2007a). Even though it should be noted that the first tracts still sparsely use vocabulary like ‘personal,’ ‘relationship’ and ‘Jesus,’ still in these tracts the idea of a relationship is worked out from the beginning onwards by visualizing a broken relationship between God and believer: God and the believer are visualized as standing at opposite sides of a gorge. The gap is bridged by the cross of Christ. The believer must receive Christ through “personal invitation.” These tracts show the ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ to be a concept evolving from the concrete practice of evangelization of a growing movement. It is a concept of and for the lay believer. The tracts therefore also communicate a somewhat simplistic understanding of faith. They highlight certain Christian dogmas while omitting others.

As the conception of faith as a personal relationship develops, the accompanying vocabulary gets more and more integrated in the original tracts. In his book *Jezus revolutie! (Jesus revolution!)* Van Capelleveen (1972) too points toward the important contributions organizations like Campus Crusade for Christ, Navigators and Youth for Christ made to the Dutch evangelical movement. He too points toward their use of new evangelization methods and cites the Dutch version of Bright’s *Laws* as it circulated at that time. In this version references to Jesus are already more frequent than in the American version. The early 1980s Navigators’ version (1982) refers still more frequently to “Jesus,” to having a “personal relationship with God” and having “contact with God / with Jesus.” The *Four Laws* gets renamed to: *Would You Like to Know God Personally?* (now the most widely used version, Bright 2007b). References to “knowing God personally” and “having a personal relationship with Him” are now inserted on almost every page. Interestingly, the tract now concludes with the explicit words “Now that you have entered into a personal relationship with Christ.” Note that the next page continues: “To enjoy your new relationship with God...” (Bright 2007b). The tracts reveal a continuing duality (maybe even confusion) about whom to have a relationship with (cf. Randall 2005), but at least the vocabulary of having a personal relationship has become stock language.

From the beginning these tracts reveal another remarkable shift in the perception of the Christian faith by evangelicals. Even though the tracts still emphasize the atoning and salvific work of Christ on the cross, they consciously start by presenting the attractiveness of Christianity. They start positively and personally by proclaiming God’s love for the reader and revealing that God has a plan for the reader’s life. Bright’s considerations in designing the *Four Laws* confirm this shift: “In the pamphlet’s early drafts, the first of the four laws boldly proclaimed: “You are a sinner and separated from God.” [...] But just before the pamphlet went to press Bright decided on a very different point of departure. In its final form – “God loves you and offers a wonderful plan for your life” – the first law implicitly rejected the notion that God has predestined some human to

damnation” (Watt 1991, 21). According to McGrath evangelicalism emphasizes the attractiveness of the gospel without changing it (2000, 112–113), but already at the time Bright designed and published his *Laws* many did not agree with that (Watt 1991, 21ff).

Lastly, it should not be overlooked that underneath the usage of simple explanatory devices as the transferable concepts of Bright and Graham, lies the quest not just for faith, but specifically for *true* faith. As Graham’s quotation already indicated, many of the people evangelicalism was trying to reach *did* actually have *some* knowledge about God and the Bible (Graham 1997, 257). They just needed to be introduced to what faith was *really* about. The concept of a personal relationship was used to explain what true faith was about. In this respect the post-War evangelical movement continued a long-standing evangelical tradition that had always been driven by the “quest for true religion” (Noll 2003, 262ff). In the 1990s, the research of sociologist Hijme Stoffels confirms this underlying understanding of the personal relationship with Jesus as *true* faith. His research shows almost 90 percent of the evangelical participants to answer affirmatively to the question whether having a personal relationship with Christ is necessary for *true* faith (1990, 151). By then, the phrase ‘having a personal relationship with Jesus’ had become the *shibboleth* of evangelical faith.

(Post)modern Experientialism

The conception of faith as having a personal relationship with Jesus evolved in a time and from a social context in which interest in spiritual experience exploded. In the 1950s Graham already noticed that people had a “deep desire after knowing the gospel” and were “open to it with all of their heart” (1997, 257). The religious experientialism that developed in the decades that followed determined the type of personal religious experience that got associated with having a personal relationship with Jesus considerably.

As society changed – especially during the cultural revolution of the 1960s – people started to concentrate on their own, private lives, making their own choices. Welfare increased and traditional structures that had always determined ways of living decreased. An age of consumerism, authenticity and expressivism evolved. The choices and options available invited the individual to start searching for his or her own happiness, driven by his or her own preferences and taste (Taylor 2002, 2007; Van Harskamp 2000, 2005). According to Taylor post-War welfare, fueling an individual consumption culture, was amongst the most important catalysts for the cultural revolution of the past decades (2002, 79ff; 2007, 473ff). These cultural changes also affected religious structures. Hence also Protestant religion and the associated traditional structures of living and believing lost their influence. As secure traditions fell away, people were thrown back on

themselves and forced to make their own decisions on the basis of their own experiences and insights, also in respect of religion. An explosion of desire for religious experience resulted from these processes and people started to search for religious happiness based on their own preferences and taste (Roof 1993, 2001; Wuthnow 1998). Scholar of religion Donald E. Miller (1997) speaks of a “Second Reformation” which changed the way Christianity is experienced and scholars of religion Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead (2005) speak of a *Spiritual Revolution* as they see and claim that “religion is giving way to spirituality” as a consequence of this massive turn to the subject.

The just mentioned studies place contemporary evangelicalism within these broader cultural changes that took place and that affected Christianity and religion in general. Hence, the conception of faith as a personal relationship with Jesus which developed from the 1960s and 70s onwards cannot be perceived as a *mere* fundamentalist or orthodox reaction against liberalism, as for instance the quotation from Graham implies in speaking of “numb secularist” who still had “some knowledge about God and the Bible” (also contra McGrath 2000, 41; cf. Miller 1997, 20ff; Van Harskamp 2000, 15; Vellenga 1991, 127). Solely focusing on the opposition between orthodoxy and liberalism might easily lead to misunderstanding contemporary evangelicalism and an unjust focus on the propositional content of evangelical faith. The process of liberalization is embedded in the broader cultural processes that took place over the last 50 years, in which a profound shift in the general character of religiosity can be observed towards a more expressive experiential Christianity (e.g. Miller 1997). The personal relationship with Jesus developed in interaction with these cultural changes. In this new style of believing, individual experience assumes increasing importance and recognition as constitutive dimension of faith.

Now personal experience has always been an important aspect of evangelical religion. Evangelicalism has often been referred to as a “twice-born” religion (Gillet 1993) as the movement has always been characterized by a strong emphasis on the experience of conversion. The conversion experience was perceived as a personal experience, as something inward and something personally felt. In describing his conversion experience, John Wesley for instance describes how his heart was strangely warmed; he felt he did trust in Christ alone for salvation and how an assurance was given him that Christ had taken away his sins (Noll 2003, 97). This kind of religious experience has always had a prominent place in the evangelical “quest for true religion.” True religion was believed to be based upon personal conviction and inner devotion. In this context however experience was not seen as the *norm* of truth as such, but rather as the *channel* for

it (Burgess 2005, 26; Gillet 1993, 16).²⁸ Religious experience was a means to ensure *true* religion as opposed to “formal, inherited, nominal, simply traditional or corrupted” Christianity (Noll 2003, 262ff). Upsurges of such desires for a more spiritual life can be noticed all throughout the history of Christianity and go hand in hand with the feeling that church and faith have fell into decay and mere formalism (Van Harskamp 2000, 140).

But the cultural changes of the past decades led not only to a renewed desire after religious experience but also changed the *character* and *status* of experience. It is not only that secure religious traditions fell away and people were forced to base choices on their own insights and experiences, but as a culture of expressive individualism developed the whole idea of conforming oneself to external authorities became incomprehensible. A “new expressivist self-awareness” developed (Taylor 2002, 84) because of which individual experience (preference, taste, insight) became the *norm* to build one’s life, or for that matter religion, upon (also cf. Klaver 2011, 23ff). In the 1970s and 80s therefore a “new paradigm” (Miller 1997) developed within Christianity, sensitive to the needs and wishes of seekers and modern believers, appropriating contemporary cultural forms and providing (continual) access to the sacred for ordinary believers by means of spiritual experience. This kind of spirituality was inaugurated by the Jesus movement of the 1960s, but developed into a modern Christian spirituality for white, middle-class, main stream believers (Miller 1997, 7). It is this spirituality that Luhrmann (2012) identifies as the evangelical relationship with God/Jesus. It is a relationship in which God is thought to be present as a person in someone’s everyday life and in which God’s supernatural power is thought to be immediately accessible by that person. Even though Dutch and American evangelicalism cannot be equated completely, they are certainly comparable as American evangelicalism has always been an important source of inspiration for the Dutch evangelical movement.

The sensitivity of this type of spirituality to the individual’s desire for religious experience, led to changing theological emphases in evangelicalism. It shifted attention from what *God has done* (i.e. the traditional evangelical emphasis on divine salvation provided by the blood and cross of Christ) and from what *God can do* (i.e. the traditional evangelical emphasis on the offer of grace) towards emphasizing the *human search* within the spiritual journey (cf. Gillet 1993, 34, even though his analysis slightly differs). Attention shifted to human, existential needs, to the believer’s quest for meaning. Evangelicals still claim to find the

²⁸ In early evangelicalism therefore also tests were developed to authenticate spiritual experience. Evangelical theologian and preacher Jonathan Edwards provides five tests by which to judge any claim for a renewing work of God’s Spirit: 1) Does it exalt Jesus Christ? 2) Does it attack the kingdom of darkness? 3) Does it honor the scriptures? 4) Does it promote sound doctrine? 5) Does it lead to an outpouring of love towards God and man? (Edwards 1741)

answer to those needs in what God can do (see for instance contemporary evangelical approaches in Gumbel 1996, 2003; Tomlin 2008). At the same time, perceptions about *what* God can do start changing: God is no longer only or primarily the God who saves from eternal damnation. He starts to be perceived as the one who empowers the believer for his present life here on earth, including all ordinary, daily tasks, choices and earthly troubles the believer faces.

Heelas and Woodhead elaborate how in such contemporary evangelical spirituality of having a relationship with Jesus experience is still not fully authorized (2005, 19). Evangelicalism for instance still puts a lot of emphasis on submission to Jesus (cf. Elisha 2008). In that respect, evangelical spirituality is not oriented on *cultivating* the subjective life in itself. It however still does *cater for* and *nurture* the subjective life, by the promise that those who submit to God will be rewarded “by nothing less than reconstructed inner lives,” as Heelas and Woodhead put it (2005, 19). “The ‘trick’ which such congregations play is to offer subjective enhancement and cultivation in terms that can make sense to a subjectivized culture, but to insist that this comes not through reliance on one’s inner resources but through submission to the higher authority of God, Christ, the Bible and congregational instruction” (Heelas and Woodhead 2005, 19). Still, as such personal submission is often depended upon and highly intertwined with the subjective experience of God (e.g. with the experience of conversion), religious experience shows itself to be a leading force in contemporary evangelicalism.

Thus, even though experience might in (evangelical theological) theory not be fully authorized, in practice it has considerable force. As personal experience makes religious truth real (at least for the affected religious believer), personal experience has in practice authoritative and even generative force (Klaver 2011, 25).²⁹ Note that, in this process, attention shifts from what is *true* to what is *real*. The direct experience and feeling of contact with God/Jesus make God above all ‘real’ to the believer (Burgess 2005; Luhrmann 2012; cf. Van Harskamp 2000, 139–141). Recent scholarship focuses upon this perceived ‘realness’ in the relationship with God. “How does God become real for people?” is the leading question directing Luhrmann’s study (2012). In this context, ever more studies point to the importance of embodied experience for the production of religious

²⁹ Compare how Bright’s *Laus* still emphasizes that the choice for Jesus should not to be mistaken with a feeling, it is an act of the will even though feelings will follow (Bright 2007a, 12). Also a highly popular evangelical book like Foster’s *Celebration of Discipline* (1989) emphasizes the will instead of feelings. As religion transformed, evangelicalism and the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus transformed. In the practice of evangelization in the Netherlands, more and more attention was paid to enhancing religious and emotional experience. Mass events, a certain style of music, the call to stand up or come forward to accept Jesus, were all devices stimulating such religious experience.

meaning (Csordas 1993; Mitchell and Mitchell 2008); they study its intertwining with ritual (Elisha 2008; Klaver 2011; Luhrmann 2004) and emphasize its constitutive role in the evangelical relationship to God.

2.4 | Personal Dedication

The contemporary evangelical spirituality of having a personal relationship with Jesus is lastly characterized by a call to personal dedication. The personal relationship with Jesus does not just provide the believer with meaningful religious experience, it also demands something from the believer, namely an individual choice, commitment and personal dedication. Even though Bright's *Laws* presents faith by quite positively formulated statements, these beliefs still need to be accepted by means of an individual choice for Jesus, made in or confirmed by prayer (Law 4, Bright 2007a, 8ff). This choice for Jesus is perceived to be only the beginning of a life of dedication, marked by spiritual growth (Bright 2007a, 14ff).³⁰ The continual admonition to grow in faith, present in many evangelical writings, made that having a personal relationship with Jesus got closely associated with practical Christianity and dedicated Christian living.

Especially throughout the 1970s and 80s, as the Dutch evangelical movement grew into a recognizable movement of considerable size and evangelization endeavors resulted in ever more converts, the demand for follow-up religious education grew. New themes needed (and received) attention, themes that addressed how life was supposed to look like *after* conversion. This resulted in an increasing attention for topics like "living in the Spirit," "discipleship" and "fulfillment with the Holy Spirit." Throughout these decades, having a personal relationship with Jesus got ever more perceived as starting a new life. This new life needed to be fed, to be nurtured and deepened. Navigators specialized in such follow-up materials about "the new spiritual life" (e.g. De Navigators 1982). Campus Crusade for Christ director Leo Habets writes about similar themes in *Geestelijk Leven*, i.e. *Spiritual Life* (1986). The notion of having a personal relationship with Jesus so moves away from its original association with conversion (e.g. as in tracts like those of Bright and Graham, in which the relationship with Jesus is closely associated with conversion because of their emphasis on the need to make a personal choice for Jesus). The relationship with Jesus rather becomes associated with living the Christian life in daily practice. Having a personal rela-

³⁰ According to David H. Watt this constituted an important tension in popular evangelicalism from the start: "On one level that message seems to offer only comfort and no challenge to its auditors. On another it presents a rigorous, if somewhat circumscribed, call to discipleship" (1991, 18).

tionship with Jesus concerns ethics and daily devotion (also e.g. Foster 1989). Up to the present day the relationship with Jesus is being associated with the life of faith that follows *after* conversion (Van Harskamp 2000, 135). It is seen as a notion that refers to a way of living, an ethos (McGrath 2000).

The WWJD?-hype (What Would Jesus Do?-hype) of the 1990s is a good example of the life of faith that is supposed to follow upon entering the personal relationship with Jesus. The attention for the historical person of Jesus after World War Two now quite naturally results in paying attention to a life of faith based upon the teachings and acts of this Jesus. Bonhoeffer's *Discipleship* or in Dutch *Navolging* (2003), for instance, is widely known and read amongst evangelicals (The Top 50 Books That Have Shaped Evangelicals 2006). These developments in evangelical spirituality show well how nowadays religion is supposed to affect all of the believer's life. Van Harskamp attentively observes that the "secularization of religion" ("*verwereldlijking*" of religion) includes the process of "disappearing borders between the profane and sacred" (2000, 12, 29). This means that the religious domain might become smaller, while religion at the same time penetrates an ever larger area of the individual's life. In evangelical vocabulary this might rather be expressed as the "relevancy" of faith for daily life, a dimension of the personal relationship with Jesus which is highly appreciated by its followers (Klaver and Versteeg 2007).

New Ways of Living

As the emergence of the personal relationship after World War Two interacted with new cultural developments of the 1960s, 70s and onwards, new shifts took place in the character of personal dedication and the Christian way of living associated with the relationship with Jesus.

From the 1960s onwards, in the face of the emergence of a "new individualism" (Taylor 2002, 2007), personal choice takes on ever more importance and acquires consumerist dimensions. As this new consumerism enters the quest for religious meaning, a change in attitudes of believers can be observed from obligation to consumption and to catering for one's needs (Klaver 2011, 23-28). The choice for a personal relationship with Jesus is no longer solely founded in the need to escape eternal damnation, but is founded just as much in the promise of this-worldly gains. To illustrate this once more by referring to Bright's *Laws*: the focus is upon what faith has to offer the believer in this life, see opening phrases as "God loves you," "God has a wonderful plan for your life" and "Christ has come to give life abundantly" (Bright 2007a, 2, 3; 2007b, 2-3). Cultural changes provided the emergence of such a presentation of the personal relationship with Jesus with fair weather (Klaver 2008).

Throughout the past decades, this kind of religious consumerism influenced the conception of the Christian way of living which is supposed to follow conversion. Ethics and religious devotion are not the only ways of living that got associated with the relationship with Jesus. As the individual's dedication to the relationship with Jesus is also driven by the promise of this-worldly blessings, strands of evangelicalism developed a particular attention to how to receive such blessings and how to experience the promised abundance. In "new paradigm" spirituality, as Miller phrases it, Jesus is "still in the business of healing people" (1997, 6). The focus is upon experiencing Jesus and his super natural power, his blessings and miracles in daily life. Just as Jesus did miracles in his earthly life, so he still does in the believer's life now.

These last mentioned developments however also demanded an increasing attention to the work of the Holy Spirit (e.g. Klaver 2008, 151). Jesus is mainly associated with the person who lived on earth, and thus the Holy Spirit is needed to continue the work of Jesus. Hence it comes as no surprise that the evangelical movement has been open to influences from Pentecostal religion. The pervasive influence of Charismatic spirituality is widespread and very few expressions of evangelicalism have not been affected by its presence. Many strands of evangelicalism have assimilated the emphases of charismatic spirituality, even though great discussion exists within evangelicalism about the way in which the Holy Spirit is perceived as coming to and being present in an individual's life (Gillet 1993). Also in the Netherlands evangelicalism "charismatizes" ("de charismatisering van de evangelicale beweging," Klaver 2008, 154), think for instance about the widespread use of the Alpha Course in the Netherlands and the New Wine movement. Both movements emphasize the continuing supernatural work of the Holy Spirit and explicitly teach about gaining access to the gifts of the Spirit and about how the power of the Spirit should be a natural asset of the believer's personal relationship with Jesus (Fokker; Gumbel 1996, 2003). In general the emphasis on the *power* (often not the *person*) of the Holy Spirit goes hand in hand with a consumerist, positive and promising line of approach to faith. It transforms the personal relationship with Jesus from a spirituality of redemption into a spirituality of empowerment: through the Holy Spirit the (miracle working) power of Jesus is available in the present lives of the believers. He can perform miracles, provides for blessings, spiritual experience, and power or guides the believer in daily life.

Burdens, Doubts and Disappointments

In *Explorations of Evangelical Spirituality* theologian David K. Gillet explicates something that is often overlooked in considering evangelical religion. The personal relationship with Jesus does not only indicate a consumerist style of believ-

ing that caters for the believers' needs. It also constitutes a quite demanding style of believing: "To keep at the centre of one's discipleship the liveliness and reality of a personal relationship with God demands a daily life of obedience and openness to the work of God's Spirit, without which there comes a very quick decline into meaningless formalism, brittle cerebralism or petty legalism. This can lead some away from evangelicalism as too hard a road" (Gillet 1993, 31).

With the turn to experiential, seekers-oriented faith, the personal relationship with Jesus acquires new dimensions of burdensomeness. In practice, the experience of the personal relationship with Jesus is not always there. Believers have to search for such an experience time and time again. When the promised blessings and miracles stay out, the believer feels called to a more intense devotion and dedication in order to get them. In this context, scholar of religion Omri Elisha (2008) even speaks of an "anti-humanistic tendency" in this type of spirituality. The search for religious experiences is characterized by a particular mode of subjectivity in which the status of individual agency is diminished. The "individual (temporal) will is ideally renounced in submission to divine sovereignty and authority" (Elisha 2008, 62). Elisha agrees in this respect with Heelas and Woodhead (2005): subjective experience is not fully authorized in evangelical religion. Entering the personal relationship with Jesus through the born-again experience is therefore also the beginning of a demanding "lifelong spiritual journey of learning how to feel, act, and live in total accordance with God's will" (Elisha 2008, 62).

Throughout the past decades in which the phrase 'having a personal relationship with Jesus' became a standard designation for the evangelical way of living, doubts and disappointments therefore got associated with the experience of having a personal relationship with Jesus as well. Even though the concept was originally used to explain the Christian faith because it was a familiar concept stemming from ordinary daily living, *in practice* this conception of faith turned out to bear little or at least limited resemblance to ordinary personal relationships. At the end of the 1980s (a Dutch translation became available in 1993) Philip Yancey already felt the need to address such issues. He explicates the common associations of believers with the concept of a personal relationship, including their disappointments:

I found that for many people there is a large gap between what they *expect* from their Christian faith and what they actually experience. From a steady diet of books, sermons and personal testimonies, all promising triumph and success, they learn to expect dramatic evidence of God working in their lives. If they do not see such evidence, they feel disappointment, betrayal, and often guilt. As one woman said: "I kept hearing the phrase 'personal relationship with Jesus Christ,' but I found to my dis-

may that it is unlike any other personal relationship. I never saw God, or heard him, or felt him, or experienced the most basic ingredients of a relationship. Either there's something wrong with what I was told, or there's something wrong with me." (Yancey 2001, 9)

Note, that Yancey draws upon the familiarity of the notion of having a personal relationship with Jesus. He expects it to be quite a familiar concept for his readers. Furthermore, the idea as such is not questioned. Rather, Yancey will use the remainder of the book to argue in favor of it. In similar vein the personal relationship with Jesus is still defended in contemporary evangelicalism, examples of which are not hard to find in any Christian bookstore (e.g. Stafford 2009). However, this particular evangelical conception of faith is no longer wholly uncontested either.

Explicit departures from this conception of faith are presently visible as well. In the Netherlands the Emerging Church movement (originating again from England and the United States) explicitly distances itself from perceiving the Christian faith as a personal relationship with Jesus. The Emerging Church movement presents itself as *post*-evangelical and tries to move away from such a conception by focusing on the Kingdom of God: "A huge difference between EC (Emerging Church) and the evangelical-orthodox movement is that they hold radically different opinions concerning the question: 'What is the gospel?' The old view was: 'Jesus died for my sins and that is why I have eternal life.' Disadvantages of this view is that it is very individualistic, leans towards (pietistic) experience of God and an emo-culture, takes up an exclusivist position by keeping outsiders outside unless they convert to 'the gospel': Jesus as dogma or as magician. EC gives a different answer to the question: 'What is the gospel?'" (Ter Beek 2008, 23–24)

The Emerging Church movement perceives of Jesus as the one who calls humans to take part in God's mission to establish his kingdom here on earth and to be an actor in that story (Ter Beek 2008). Even though this movement is not large (yet), such developments in particular show and draw attention to the downsides of a conception of faith as personal relationship with Jesus. The Emerging Church movement points to a certain one-sidedness present in this conception of faith and indicates that it is not always and not by everyone perceived as a suitable conception of faith (Doornenbal 2008).³¹

To conclude, the contemporary evangelical spirituality of having a personal relationship with Jesus refers to a living spiritual tradition which is in con-

³¹ For more particulars and a thorough academic analysis of the Emerging Church movement see Doornenbal's thesis (2012). Johan ter Beek is a participant in the Emerging Church movement himself and wrote *EmerchingChurches.nl* (2008) from an inside perspective.

stant flux and needs to be studied and described in close relation to the setting and the time it belongs to. Even though it is characterized by certain particulars – it refers to an individual and informal (*personal*), experience- and consumerist-oriented conception of faith (faith is about having a *relationship*), in which dedication to the person of Jesus takes up a central position (faith is about a relationship with *Jesus*) – the personal relationship with Jesus cannot be approached as a stable, rigidly fixed conception of faith. As this research is concerned with evangelicals in mainline Protestant churches, the personal relationship with Jesus needs to be studied with this setting in mind. The Reformed Protestant tradition these churches belong to can be expected to influence the way the personal relationship with Jesus is experienced. Certain dimensions might stand out more than others, either because they resemble or because they contrast with the Reformed Protestant tradition. The next chapter will outline evangelical faith as it grew and was received in traditional Protestant churches throughout the past decades.

3 Evangelical Faith in Dutch Mainline Churches

3.1 | “That Sectarian Youth for Christ!”

Hans Eschbach shares: “On a certain day, I came home: I had come to faith at Youth for Christ. That was a very deep, far-reaching experience for me: Jesus is real. I wanted to go to Bible school. My father was shocked because that was considered to be a sect, that whole sectarian Youth for Christ! You cannot just ‘come to faith,’ it has to be ‘given’ to you” (Eschbach 2009). Hans Eschbach was one of the field experts interviewed in this research’s preparatory phase. Eschbach stood at the base of the foundation of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) in 1995, which was the first organization that brought evangelicals in Dutch traditional churches together at an institutional level. His experience, which dates back to the 1970s, expresses aptly the atmosphere surrounding the encounter between evangelical faith and faith in Dutch mainline churches. Faithful individuals stemming from the established churches participated in the para-ecclesial, evangelical network that attracted them with their festivals, (youth) activities and conferences. Touched by the spirituality they encountered at those events, they went back to their homes and churches, ready and motivated to debate the more tradition-oriented faith they had been raised with (cf. Dekker and Oevermans 1997; Klaver and Versteeg 2007, 172).

It has been a sometimes fierce and stormy debate. Evangelicals first of all faced the accusation of Arminianism. But the allegation of Arminianism was not the only critique that evangelicals had to face in Dutch traditional churches. Their experience-oriented spirituality and their ‘worldly’ activism were not heartily welcomed either, to say the least. The more evangelicals made themselves known within the traditional churches, the more the discussion ensued.

The present chapter delves into the internal discussion between the established churches and evangelicals which has been going on for the past half

century (§3.2) and zooms in on several of the themes that predominated the discussion (§3.3). The encounter between evangelicalism and Dutch mainline churches forms the historical and socio-religious context of the personal relationship with Jesus as studied in this research. These are the issues that the evangelical Protestant respondents of this research had and have to deal with in practice, in their attempts to sustain a life of reflective faith, their relationship with Jesus. Even though the personal relationship with Jesus is a uniting force amongst evangelicals world-wide (see chapters 1 and 2), the expression and experience of this relationship might show local differences due to the specific circumstances from which the relationship evolves and in which it is nurtured.

For general overviews of the historical growth and development of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands and Dutch traditional churches, I refer to the overviews provided for in several theses: the theses of Klaver (2011, 43–61), Roeland (2009, 23–40), Boersema (2004, 28–41), Vellenga (1991) or Stoffels (1990, 15–41).

3.2 | Reception of Evangelical Faith in Dutch Mainline Churches

Are Evangelicals Taking over the Church?

The foundation of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) in 1995 marks the ecclesial appropriation of evangelicalism.³² It was clear that, after the successful growth of the evangelical movement since the 1960s and 70s, evangelicals were here to stay. Even though the general growth of the Dutch evangelical movement seemed to slow down and sometimes even stagnated at the beginnings of the 1990s, within the established churches their visibility started to grow significantly (e.g. Boersema 2004). Evangelicals presented themselves in the established churches by setting up several organizations and activities, like the *Evangelisch Werkverband*, the charismatically oriented *New Wine* movement, and the introduction of the evangelization course *Alpha*.

³² The *Charismatische Werkgemeenschap Nederland* (Charismatic Working Community in the Netherlands) was already erected in 1972. Now charismatic renewal movements are often considered be part of the broad evangelical uprise too (McGrath 2000). However, in the 1970s the *Charismatische Werkgemeenschap Nederland* was explicitly ecumenically oriented and not actively involved in the network of evangelicals in the Netherlands (cf. a reaction from the established churches and the difficulty they find in classifying the CWN, Veldhuizen 1988, 110–117). The *Charismatische Werkgemeenschap* can therefore be said to belong to “the margins of the evangelical movement” (Klaver 2011, 57).

While the Protestant synods³³ “heartily welcomed” the *Evangelisch Werkverband* as organizational spokesperson for evangelicals within the church in 1996 (according to Eschbach 2009; also see Eschbach 1996b), others spoke more repelling about the *Evangelisch Werkverband*. A random newspaper article from 1997 is titled: “Dr. A. A. Spijkerboer about goals *Evangelisch Werkverband*: A Disaster for the Church” (Redactie kerk 1997). Spijkerboer, who belongs to the broad middle-orthodox part of the established churches, critiques both the initiatives of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* and their pragmatic approach to realize these goals. “It is all so this-worldly!” Spijkerboer reacts to the “organizational urge” of the *Evangelisch Werkverband*. He comments: “They take it all in their own hands” (Redactie kerk 1997). Spijkerboer attacks amongst others their idea of establishing their own evangelical academic education, their initiative to publish an evangelical songbook and their goal to establish prayer groups in 50% percent of all congregations. Spijkerboer: “What is this for a *worldly* approach to *ecclesial* business! That a chain of supermarkets handles things this way, I can understand, but a *church*? Why every time this 50%, why not right away 100%? If you are driven by the Holy Spirit, you cannot do with less!” (Redactie kerk 1997)

Generally speaking, the established churches and their members were ambivalent and at times even hostile in their attitude towards the evangelical movement and their plans. Evangelicals, however, were driven and motivated to enter the debate. Evangelical sympathy within the traditional churches had grown over the former decades and these evangelical minded church members were determined to make themselves a home right there. They felt that traditional churches should, instead of criticizing the evangelical experience and undertaking, rather labor to provide a bed to the evangelical experiences of their members (Het Evangelisch Manifest 1996, 10-11; Oevermans and Dekker 1998). They pointed out how the existing structures of the traditional churches did not offer room for evangelical initiatives and raised a voice for those church members and ministers with evangelical sympathies who “got stuck” and “petered out” in their churches, and often consequently felt forced to leave them (Het Evangelisch Manifest 1996).

In this decade of ecclesiastical evangelical undertaking, church membership of traditional churches still declined rapidly. Evangelicals took their own view on these developments and attributed the decline to spiritual causes instead of sociological causes (e.g. secularization). Evangelicals portrayed the traditional churches as full of “sternness, lukewarmness, and indifference.” This attitude was

³³ At that time the Protestant Church in the Netherlands was still in the process of formation and the synods of the three Protestant churches that were part of the process were still independent. The Association’s official name at its erection therefore was *Evangelisch Werkverband binnen de VPKN i.w.* (Evangelical Working Association in the United Protestant Church in the Netherlands in the process of formation).

perceived to inevitably cause “the decay of our churches” (Bakker and Eschbach 1996, 16). When the church leaves its first love, God will move the lampstand out of its place (see Revelation 2), or at best ‘prune’ the church (see John 15), so evangelicals argued (Bakker and Eschbach 1996, 17–18). Evangelicals saw themselves and their spirituality as a potentially revitalizing force for the church (Bakker and Eschbach 1996, 24–25; Koppe 1996b, 38–39; Perk 1996). They firmly believed in the possibility of a spiritual renewal of the church and awaited such a renewal from God with “burning desires” (Eschbach 1996b).

Evangelicals therefore aimed at evangelical church formation within the established churches. They advocated liturgical freedom, making room for evangelical songs, and preaching and teaching that accentuates the work of the Holy Spirit (Het Evangelisch Manifest 1996, 13–14; Van Setten 1996). They were eager to tackle church formation with a systematic and methodical approach (Veenhuizen 1996). Such an attitude characterized evangelicals quite generally: they were eager for the fray. Sometimes the tone of their plea even sounds aggressive. To give a random example: editor of the *Evangelische Liedbundel* (Evangelical Songbook) Kees van Setten defends evangelical praise and worship by attacking the organists in traditional churches. Van Setten: ‘Organists are unwilling to play evangelical songs and boycott them, even though organists and church choirs often cannot even produce a single song at an acceptable level themselves!’ (Van Setten 1996, paraphrased)

Throughout the 1990s evangelicals got acknowledged by the established churches, but they were certainly not embraced. Church leaders (both Reformed Protestant and evangelical minded leaders) of the established churches indicate that, from both sides, there was “little readiness to cooperate and stereotype representations [kept] pouring in” (Kristensen and Visser 1997, 46). Hans Schaeffer speaks about a “tense situation” and a “polarizing process” (2001a, 218–219). His article gives an overview of the confrontation and discussion between evangelicals and the *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* (Reformed Churches *vrijgemaakt*) in the 1990s. Schaeffer describes how, in fierce polemics, the different movements combat each other, while a broad theological research into the evangelical tradition is still lacking (2001a, 219). Throughout the decade, the main idea within the established churches remained that the church should never become evangelical. And so the relationship between established churches and evangelicals remained tensed (Schaeffer 2001a, 17; Van Mulligen 1992).

Because of the apparent successes of evangelical initiatives in established churches, the tensions kept building up in the beginnings of the 21st century. The *Evangelische Liedbundel* (1999) got introduced and turned out to be quite usable in evangelical minded churches. The number of *Gemeente Groei Groepen* (Church Growth Groups) increased and the *Groei Groep* became a household word (Eschbach 2007b). In this first decade of the 21st century, a fair amount of

churches participated in the project *40 Doelgerichte Dagen* (40 Purpose Driven Days), in which Rick Warren's *Doelgericht leven* (*A Purpose Driven Life*) was read with the whole congregation (Warren 2003). It was a project that roused the emotions and stirred the discussion about Warren's books and theology in Dutch Newspapers and Christian magazines (Berkhof and Tijssen 2008). At this time, some established churches started to give more room to evangelical youth events and praise and worship meetings too. Even quite independent functioning youth churches, like Heartbeat in Amersfoort, arose (Eschbach 2011a). Several established churches developed a forthright evangelical Protestant profile, in which evangelical elements were prominently visible while certain traditional elements were cherished as well (e.g. the Church of Diever, De Roest 2007). Wim H. Dekker already spoke about the *evangelikaalslag* (evangelical blow) of the Reformed denomination in 1997 (Dekker 1997). At the beginning of the 21st century, the evangelical line of thought seemed to have indeed penetrated the core of the traditional churches (Krol 2001; Schaeffer 2001a, 218). Schaeffer explicated the question that was on the mind of many church members: "Are evangelicals taking over the church?" (Schaeffer 2001a).

It should not be forgotten that these Dutch trends were in line with international developments: in America, England and other countries, the evangelical movement and mood took root in established churches as well. This development has been referred to as "new paradigm" Protestantism by scholar of religion Donald E. Miller (1997). Similar developments are visible in what are called neo-Pentecostal churches or renewal churches. Those are white mainstream churches that accept an adapted Pentecostal ethos and/or embrace a spirituality in which congregants experience God immediately, directly and personally (Luhmann 2012, xx). These international developments inspired evangelicals in the Netherlands (Eschbach 2007a, 240), but scared others. Evangelical theologian Alister E. McGrath fuelled these fears, when he made the assessment in his book about the *Future of Christianity*, that the force of the evangelical tradition would be inescapable (McGrath 2000, 12). A few years later he stirred the discussion in the Netherlands in particular, when he visited the Netherlands and predicted: "The last tenability [of the denomination] has perished since long. [...] It won't take long, I expect, or Protestants will stop defining themselves as Protestants. [...] Speaking worldwide the future belongs to the Roman Catholic Church, to the Eastern Orthodox Church and to the Evangelicals. I don't see a separate place reserved for Protestantism anymore" (in Buijs and Paul 2003).

Being an evangelical himself, McGrath's prediction could be mere wishful thinking (Schaeffer 2001b). But he was not the only one to think so. Others agreed with him, like for instance sociologist Durk Hak (2006), who too predicted that the evangelical orientation would become dominant within the estab-

lished churches. In the light of these developments and discussions, it can be understood that sociologist Peter van Rooden spoke about the rise of the evangelical movement as the “most important event” in the recent history of Dutch Christianity (2002, 79).

Evangelical versus Reformed

The heated discussions in the 1990s and thereafter, about evangelical faith and its relation to the established churches, did not appear out of the blue. From its beginnings, the evangelical movement in the Netherlands had attracted members from the traditional Reformed churches.³⁴

An early publication of the orthodox Reformed ministers Maris and Paas shows that the church has been concerned about this sympathy for evangelicalism from the start. They wrote: “Traces of this new-evangelical spiritual mood and attitude are visible in the Netherlands in basically *all churches*, groups and circles, also in those of a ‘right-wing’ persuasion” (Maris and Paas 1976, 7). Belonging to this ‘right-wing,’ Maris and Paas felt compelled to react.³⁵ They show little appreciation for the new-evangelical trend and articulate some of the typical Reformed concerns about evangelicals. They warn for: “...the danger of one-sidedness and limitation due to personal aptitude and preference. It is the question whether people do not – in good faith and with the best intentions – restrict the content of the Bible. Whether people do not with the term ‘evangelical’ more or less distance themselves from the – just as Biblical! – proclamation of for example the demands (laws), the ordinances and the judgments of God, also concerning the public life” (Maris and Paas 1976, 5). Evangelicals are judged as half-hearted. They do not make a stand against mistakes, but seek cooperation. They do so by consistently proclaiming a number of their basic convictions, instead of attacking convictions they oppose. Maris and Paas speak about “spiritual schizophrenia” and an “attitude of compromise” (43).

Although still very cautious in their appreciation, middle-orthodox Reformed church leaders and members were somewhat less opposed to the evangelical movement. The Reformed (*Christelijk Gereformeerde*) opinion leader and minister Jan Hendrik Velema for instance wrote a series of articles about “the groups,” as evangelicals were referred to at that time, at the end of the 1970s (Velema 1979a, 1979b, 1979c, 1979d). He acknowledges that evangelical groups

³⁴ At that time, the names of almost all established church denominations referred to the Reformation and its tradition. People spoke about themselves as *Hervormd* or *Gereformeerd* (which both translates into the English adjective *Reformed*), not as Protestants. The name Protestant Church in the Netherlands did not exist yet either (founded only in 2004).

³⁵ At the time, Maris was general secretary of the fundamentalist oriented International Council of Christian Churches.

offer freedom from strict church structures, joy and warmth, and shamefully admits that established churches are often filled with dryness, weakness and hollowness. Church members indeed often show little assurance in faith, in contrast to evangelical believers (1979a). However, Velema also shows how, from a Reformed point of view, the evangelical way of believing is not unproblematic either (1979d). The tone of Velema's writing is characteristic for this period: within Protestant churches ministers and members recognize their deficiencies (and those of their churches) and openly criticize themselves concerning certain points. But instead of switching to the evangelical tradition, they emphasize that the evangelical tradition has its deficiencies too and instead advocate a revitalization of their own Reformed heritage (also e.g. Hoofdbestuur van de Ger. Bond in de NHK 1990). Given the many responses to the series of articles written by Velema, the evangelical spirituality was a matter that exercised the minds of many ordinary church members just as much.

The above examples indicate how the discussion about evangelicalism has mainly been a discussion about the Reformed tradition versus the evangelical tradition. Part of the Reformed-versus-evangelical discussion became publicly visible in the use of the adjectives 'Reformative' and 'evangelical' in names of institutions and organizations. Think for instance about the *Evangelische Omroep* (Evangelical Broadcasting Company) in 1967, the *Evangelische Hogeschool* (Evangelical School for advanced learning) in 1979, and the *Evangelische Alliantie* (Evangelical Alliance) in 1979. In contrast to this adjective, the use of the adjective *Reformatorisch* (Reformative³⁶) set in as well: the *Reformatorische Dagblad* (Reformative Daily Newspaper) in 1977, and the *Reformatorisch Politieke Federatie* (Reformative Political Party) in 1975 (Runia 1984, 5, 6; Vellenga 1991, 32-34). Since these years, many booklets, theme magazines and articles have been published that discuss the relationship between Reformed religion, Reformative religion, and evangelical religion (Soteria 8/3 1991; De Vries 1999; Credo 18/9 1991; Hoofdbestuur van de Ger. Bond in de NHK 1990; Kamphuis 1981; Runia 1984, 1992; Veldhuizen 1988).

The booklets discussing Reformed versus evangelical faith are in general characterized by an informative character. They shortly sketch the historical roots and growth of the evangelical movement. They show where and how the movement historically came forth out of the Reformation and emphasize where it diverged. Furthermore they try to identify the most important characteristics of the evangelical movement and then move on to an evaluation of these characteristics. Writers from a Reformed signature often appreciate that evangelicals "hold

³⁶ The Dutch language knows several words for 'Reformed,' amongst others *Hervormd* and *Gereformeerd* (Reformed) and *Reformatorisch* (Reformative), whereas the English language has only one word to translate it. The connotation of the words is not exactly the same.

on” to the infallibility of the Bible (in contrast, as is often mentioned, to liberal Protestants and ecumenical Protestants. In their tradition, the Christian faith often *verhorizontaliseert* (‘horizontalizes’)). However, the evangelical *way* of reading the Bible is not appreciated. It is felt to diverge from the Reformed way of reading the Bible “as unity” and in accordance with the Reformed confessions. Furthermore, the typical evangelical low appreciation or even neglect of the institutional church is often harshly criticized (Kamphuis 1981; Runia 1984; Velema 1979a). Against the more rational-oriented faith of the (orthodox) Reformed churches, evangelical subjectivism is criticized, as well as their overemphasis on the work of Holy spirit (Runia 1984, for a more elaborate exposition of these viewpoints, see §2.3). Characterizing these booklets are the many references to the Reformed confessions and to other writings of the Reformers, like the *Institutes* of Calvin. Overall, the evangelical religion is seen *in contrast* with faith in the Reformed tradition. While some of them end with a moderately positive judgment and seek cooperation (Runia 1984, 1992), most are disapproving of the evangelical approach to faith (De Vries 1999; Hoofdbestuur van de Ger. Bond in de NHK 1990; Wilschut 2007).

These writings and booklets – mainly written from a Reformed perspective – continually show how Protestantism in the Netherlands has theologically been deeply affected by Calvinist Protestantism. Expressions thereof are found in writings like the Belgic Confession (1561) and the Heidelberg Catechism (translated into Dutch in 1563), that testify to and steered developments in Reformed Protestantism in the Netherlands from the beginning and are authoritative sources of faith up to the present day. Of particular importance has been the fierce conflict about predestination between two Leiden professors of theology, Jacobus Arminius and Franciscus Gomarus, which led to the formulation of the doctrine of Dordt (*Dordtse Leerregels*) in the early seventeenth century. This theological conflict between Arminius-Gomarus and its outcome of a mitigated version of the doctrine of double predestination, affected the Reformed Church’s theology in important ways and often directed debates in church, including debates with secessionists (the most important one being the *Afscheiding* in 1834).³⁷ It is this old heritage which is often brought to the fore in confrontation with evangelicals. It shows how concrete and visible differences between the two ways of believing are embedded in substantially differing theological approaches to faith.

³⁷ For a proper introduction to Dutch church history see for instance the article ‘Protestantism in the Netherlands’ by Peter van Rooden (Van Rooden 2004). The article pays much more attention than I can do here to the close relation between political and religious developments in the Netherlands, the peculiar interwinement between the ‘public’ Reformed church and the state, the pillarization of Dutch society in the twentieth century and the rise of the modern Dutch welfare state in the 1960s.

The tone that was set in the 1970s and 80s continued in the 1990s. Even though the discussion fired up in the 1990s, the content of the debate did not change much. The same points are mentioned over and over again, the same answers are given, and the same references are made to the Reformed Confessions. The discussion seems one without progression. Who has read some of the first reactions and booklets, might find it a quite boring experience to read the latter.

From Enemy to Acceptance?

In the second millennium, with the passing years, evangelicalism has penetrated the mood of established churches to such an extent that the term ‘evangelicalization’ starts to be used to interpret the process going on.

The signs are clear: church members eagerly read the books of Willem Ouweneel and Dereck Prince (Wallet 2008a, 2008b). Rick Warren’s *Doelgericht leven* (*A Purpose Driven Life*) is still popular reading material too and in many churches the Alpha Course and the books of Nicky Gumbel are being used and read (Vergunst 2008, 5). Theologian Benno van den Toren (2011) mentions the popularity of writers like Jim Packer, Alister McGrath, John Piper, Max Lucado and Rich Warren. These signs all indicate a growing evangelical line of thought amongst traditional churches members. Minster M. A. Kuit recognizes, in the practice of his work as minister in the Reformed Church, that there is an increasing demand to sing other songs than the psalms, a demand to use other instruments next to the organ, that more and more space is given to testimonies in confirmation services, and that it is quite common that children have a small talk during worship service with the minster (Kuit 2008, 7). In addition, openness towards missionary activity – a typical evangelical characteristic – starts characterizing the established churches as well. Towards the end of the first decennium, the word evangelicalization has become stock language to interpret these processes of ecclesial appropriation of the evangelical spirituality (De Roest and Stoppels 2007a).

In these years, something finally seems to change in the relationship between evangelicals and Reformed Protestants too. There is room for moderation. It helps that, although the process of evangelicalization is far reaching and touching the church in fundamental roots, some of the successes of the evangelicals are put into perspective as well: the Alpha Course is not such a success as once thought (Sengers 2005b; Verboom 2002), the project *40 Doelgerichte Dagen* yields mixed results and its usage drops. The consequences turn out not to be as far reaching as expected. The evangelical movement itself shows signs of moderation

too.³⁸ The *Evangelisch Werkverband* drafts a new manifest and publishes an accompanying book (Eschbach 2011c; *Evangelisch manifest 2010* 2010). This new manifest puts the importance of *methodic* church formation models into perspective. It is acknowledged that “the church of Christ is not makeable.” It is a “gift of God’s grace” (Eschbach 2011b, 13; *Evangelisch manifest 2010* 2010). Instead, the new manifest pays more attention to personal faith and spiritual formation. Because of such developments, the tone of the discussion about the evangelicalization of the established churches changes. First the discussion was characterized by a lot of “fear,” now the discussion turns into a “meeting between the evangelical, charismatic and the Reformed world.” And this meeting is “certainly no one-way traffic” (Wallet 2008a).

Now evangelicals have become part of the established churches, new issues demand attention as well. In the second millennium, it is no longer self-evident that evangelical members leave their mainline church. Evangelicals are often actively committed to their church. This poses new questions to the established churches. Reformed minister Piet J. Vergunst gives a telling example: “Jan is Reformed elder and started thinking differently about baptism. On a certain Saturday he let himself be baptized, but the following day he ‘as usual’ participates in the Holy Supper. [...] Thirty years ago, Jan would, whether or not after a heated discussion with his minister, left de Reformed Church. [...] Now Jan remains acting as elder in the church, which cannot but create tension” (2008, 4). Such an example shows that, as practical theologian Bert de Leede puts it, the time of “just doing some fun evangelical stuff” is over (2008, 4). “Playtime is over” and a serious reaction is required for dealing with this and similar issues.

Overall such issues give rise to a growing sense that evangelical elements are not just “sold loose” (De Leede 2008). Sociologist Van Rooden wrote that evangelicalism merely offers a different church, while theologically it corresponds with the Reformed tradition (2002, 79). But theologians in the established churches do not agree (De Leede 2008; De Roest and Stoppels 2007b, 167; De Leede, Smouter and Van der Kooi in Wallet 2008a). There is a felt need for a deeper understanding of the evangelical tradition and for an adequate and time-appropriate Reformed response. Practical theologian Bert de Leede, minister Karel Smouter and dogmatic theologian Kees van der Kooi especially point towards the need for a solid Reformed Protestant pneumatology.

The need for a solid pneumatology is in particular pressing as the ongoing process of evangelicalization shows clear traces of influences from charismatic movements and Pentecostalism. In *Voortdurend verlangen (Persistent desires)* of the

³⁸ Also compare a publication like *Ooit evangelisch (Once Evangelical)*. Even though it is not concerned with evangelicals in mainline churches, it is indicative of a growing moderate attitude to the apparent evangelical successes (De Bruijne, Pit Peter, and Timmerman 2009).

Evangelisch Werkverband the influence of charismatic movement are visible in chapters that address a theme like the gifts of the Spirit (Poot 2011) and that discuss the ministry of healing and deliverance (Kranen 2011). The evangelical incorporation of Pentecostal elements and experiences heralds a “second phase of evangelicalization” within the established churches.³⁹ The influences from the charismatic and Pentecostal movement ask for a renewed interpretation of the process of evangelicalization (Wallet 2008b). The ‘charismatization’ of the evangelical movement also brings new questions to the fore in mainline churches. Because of the attention for the Holy Spirit, church members and ministers strive to create more room for the gifts of the Spirit, like speaking in tongues. Associated faith practices like the so called ‘ministry prayer,’ the anointment of the sick, or the ministry of deliverance attract rapt attention and are increasingly practiced. The relationship between such (Pentecostal) practices and mainline churches is complex. Van der Kooi indicates, that when Pentecostal elements are being incorporated and practiced within established churches, they end up in a different theological framework. In this new theological framework, the character and content of these elements change immediately (Van der Kooi in Wallet 2008a, 6).

Despite moderation in the debate, it thus seems that charismatic evangelicalism constitutes a significant force which is still not to be underrated. As Bart Wallet put it: “The charismatic renewal has only just begun” (Wallet 2008a). Over the past years, the story about evangelicals within the established churches has developed into a more colored and less unequivocal story. But it is a story which still continues with ‘persistent desires.’

3.3 | Encounters between Evangelical Faith and Faith in the Established Churches

The discussion about evangelicalism in the established churches was dominated (see previous paragraph) by several recurring themes: the evangelical way of reading the Bible, the abundant appeal to emotions and subjective approach to faith,

³⁹ This “second phase” of evangelicalization can be seen as part of the broad phenomenon of third wave Pentecostalism (Anderson et al. 2010, 19; Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010; Wallet 2008b, 8). Worldwide evangelicals incorporate elements of Pentecostal spirituality and theology, without incorporating the core Pentecostal identity marker of baptism in the Holy Spirit. The newly emerging form of strongly expressive and experiential evangelicalism includes the already mentioned new paradigm churches, neo-Pentecostal and renewalist churches, which for a great part now make up the evangelical world (Luhrmann 2012, xx).

and their neglect of the institutional Church. These three topics often function(ed) as examples par excellence of the fundamental difference felt between evangelical faith and Dutch Reformed Protestantism.⁴⁰ These three themes do not necessarily give a proper characterization of the evangelical movement worldwide. In confrontation with the established churches, Dutch evangelicalism gained its *couleur locale*. The traditional churches reacted hostile to evangelical sympathies and hence evangelical faith was often defined in contrast to the faith of the established churches.

In studying the three mentioned topics within the context of the encounter between the Reformed established tradition and the newly emerged evangelical tradition in the Netherlands, clusters of issues become visible in which theology, spirituality and practical issues are often interwoven.

About Assurance, Answers and Authority

Already in 1979 – the heyday of Dutch evangelicalism – Velema (1979a) observed how evangelical groups run over with assurance in faith and therefore appealed to members of the mainline churches. Mainline churches were rather characterized by a profound lack of such assurance (also De Leede 1992, 24).

Assurance has been an age old evangelical identity marker, already since the eighteenth century (Bebbington 1989, 42-50). As theologian David K. Gillet explains: “It is a primary feature of evangelical piety that individuals can be *sure* that God is at work within them” (1993, 40). He adds: “Without this certainty of faith at its heart evangelicalism would not have developed into such a distinctive tradition” (40). This visible, experiential and (to many) appealing characteristic of evangelicalism, originated in a shift in theological doctrine: assurance was believed to be generally available to all believers (Bebbington 1989, 42). In this respect, evangelicalism broke with the existing Calvinist tradition and its belief in predestination, which rather casted doubt on the believer. Within the Calvinist tradition, which has been a major point of reference for Dutch Protestantism as well, doubt hangs over the believer’s faith whether to be amongst the elected and saved. Not even saving faith did necessarily include assurance. Historian David Bebbington elucidates: “It was taught that the lack of assurance is in some ways an advantage. The ignorance of the believer about his future destiny would drive him to scrutinize himself for signs of grace” (1989, 43).

⁴⁰ I will speak of Reformed Protestantism to indicate the strong ties of Dutch Protestantism with the Reformation. Sometimes this indication is shortened to speaking about the Reformed, about Protestants or Protestantism. These indications do not mean to say that evangelicals are not Protestants as well.

Also in the Netherlands, the evangelical approach to assurance led evangelicalism to develop into a distinctive tradition with a distinctive spiritual atmosphere. An atmosphere that differed from the spiritual atmosphere in Dutch mainline churches. In evangelicalism, assurance in faith spilled over into a sphere of certainties in all kinds of things. Confidence characterized evangelical believers. Their leaders spoke with confidence and authority. Clear cut, biblical answers were provided on many issues. The evangelical movement provided answers to many ethical issues. Many people therefore (still) associate evangelicalism above all with a certain degree of moralism (cf. Van Essen in Dekker and Oevermans 1997). In a newspaper article dating from 1982, evangelist Feike ter Velde takes an assured, faithful stand on issues as homosexuality, abortion and nuclear weapons (Utrechts Nieuwsblad 1982). Some people were quite surprised to see such an authoritarian atmosphere of assuredness and having-all-the-answers in a time that people were claiming their freedom and independence in many other areas of life (Mak 1982). This particular form of evangelical assuredness might be due to other reasons than theological doctrine. Sociologically interpreted, it could well be seen as reaction against the loss of certainties in modern life which lead to a renewed demand for security (Mak 1982). Evangelical spokesman Andries Knevel looks back on those decades as a time in which, indeed, they simply battled against everything that could be called ‘modernistic’ (Knevel in Oevermans and Dekker 1998).

The evangelical way of Bible reading is another key area that breaths such an atmosphere of assurance: for evangelicals it is clear what the Bible says. The Bible is perceived to be full of answers and believers feel sure about what the Bible says about many issues of faith (also cf. §2.2 Defending the Historical Jesus). In general, Reformed Protestants do not appreciate such Biblicism at all. As Velema explains: “The way the Biblicist reads the Bible, that’s how the Lord speaks. The opinion of others is irrelevant” (Velema 1979d). Church historian and dogmatician J. Kamphuis (1981) sums up a whole list of problems with evangelical Biblicism. He attacks the naïve intellectualism with which the Bible is read amongst evangelicals (7). This way of reading fragments the Bible and does not honor the unity of the Scripture at all. It has individualistic traits, because the individual choice in faith is what counts: the Bible says what I read (7–8).

A decade later, the critique has not changed much. Practical theologian A. Noordegraaf (1992) elaborates on the same points, explaining that personal Bible reading is important as long as one keeps in mind that the community precedes the individual. Believers receive Scripture through the channels of the family, a church, a tradition, a society. “We are not the first to listen, and not the only ones either. We read and listen within the space of the Church of all ages!” (36). Because of these reasons, these Reformed Protestant writings continually

refer to the Dutch confessions of faith, which uphold the unity of Scripture and place the individual reader in the context of the church of the ages.

Evangelicals reacted passionately to these critiques: “Do believers inside the churches get around to the Bible? Does one learn to read the Scripture oneself and to question the Scripture, without waving them aside with cliché-ridden Reformed answers?” (Bottenbley and Bakker 1992, 20). For evangelicals the written confessions can keep believers away from the living Word and from the living confession of the heart.

The encompassing atmosphere of assurance visible in leadership, ethics and Bible reading extends lastly too, to the practice of worship and spiritual experience. In the practice of worship, devotion and spiritual experience many things are taken for granted just as well: You *ought* to accept Jesus, you *ought* to go forward at least once, you *ought* to experience God, you *ought* to be enthusiast and self-evidently you *want* to maintain silent time every day. In practice though, such casualness might rather prevent the individual from being personally challenged. The individual might simply respond as he or she is expected to.

A deeper lying critique of such common evangelical expectations embroiders on this: Do evangelicals have a real eye for the searching person? The Reformed but evangelical minded minister Rob van Essen in the end worn out on the evangelical moralism and legalism. He concluded: “They do not know the true authentic search” (in Dekker and Oevermans 1997, 6). Van Essen explains how humans often have to deal with and suffer from the eclipse of God. But evangelicals do not know such a thing; God is always within a human’s reach (in Dekker and Oevermans 1997). Evangelical theologian Alister McGrath (2000) can only acknowledge that this is true of evangelicalism in general. Evangelicals are utmost critical towards approaches of faith “that loosely and vaguely speak about our search for God” (73). He points out, that this exactly can (and often does) lead to a “strong spiritual overstraining” within the evangelical movement. Such a “spiritual perfectionism,” in which the truth is firmly established, leaves no room for doubt and reflection (162).

Faith or Feelings?

In confrontation with the established churches, evangelicalism also had (and still has) to face a lot of critique associated with its experiential bias. Protestantism in the Netherlands has always had a quite rational and intellectual slant to it, both in its orthodox and in its more liberal forms (Van Rooden 2004). Hence the evangelical attention to emotions and feelings has always been viewed with suspicion. Up to the present day, it still is a favorite topic for criticizing this type of faith (De Heer 2009, 59).

The Reformed minister P. de Vries articulates one of the most common critiques of the evangelical attention for experience: due to their attention to experience, they pay “regrettably low attention to the truth and doctrine.” As a result the evangelical experience “loses its Christian character” (1999, 13). In basis, this classic and often heard critique follows a very simple line of argumentation: attention for one thing (feelings, emotions, the Holy Spirit) leads to neglecting other areas of faith (dogma, doctrine, Christ). However, the critique of evangelical experientialism normally goes one step further: the neglect of proper dogma and doctrine is believed to empty religious experience from its religious content altogether. As Velema (1979c) too asserts: in evangelical spirituality the Spirit has been “untied” from Christ. He therefore warns church members for participating in evangelical groups: “Know what you do, because you will lose sight of Christ; they speak of the work of the Spirit and it seems warm and spiritual, but you are left with mere human experience” (Velema 1979c).

Notwithstanding these critiques, evangelicals value and continue to value spiritual and individual experience. Feelings and emotions are associated with the active presence of the Holy Spirit. They emphasize that it is the Holy Spirit who is felt and experienced by the believer in conversion and in a continuing lively relationship with Jesus (e.g. Bebbington’s conversionism, Bebbington 1989; also see McGrath 2000). Emotions and experience are considered to be a quite legitimate part of the believer’s expression of faith and love towards God as well. Evangelical liturgy therefore commonly gives room to the individual, subjective and emotional *expression* and *experience* of faith in worship, praise or personal testimony, and sometimes in dance too. Evangelical worship services stimulate the senses in all kinds of ways, by the use of lights, design and atmosphere of the location, music, and images (several examples of evangelical worship services can be found in De Roest and Stoppels 2007a; see for example Roeland 2007). For the *Evangelisch Werkverband* these topics are top priority. “Living in the power of God’s Spirit, worship and praise, and the personal experience of faith” are essential ingredients for bringing about the renewal of the established churches in the Netherlands (Eschbach 2007a; also see Het Evangelisch Manifest 1996). Nowadays, evangelicalism’s experiential orientation is more prominent than ever before. The incorporation of charismatic influences stimulates rather than lessens the attention to expressive and emotional experience.

In 2008, De Leede modifies the common critique. He argues, that believers are not necessarily left with “mere human experience,” they might be left with a general experience of “God”:

We still have God, but we have lost Jesus. We must find Him again. The foundation of the Christian faith in mere religious experience falls short of the tensions provided by the Reformation. Those are, at the one

hand, the fullness of the knowledge of God in Christ, and at the other hand the *extra nos*, that our salvation is to be found outside ourselves in Christ. If Jesus disappears in the Church this will, at the one hand, result in a blurring image of God and a blurring of spirituality into something we have in common with all people. It becomes psychology or moralism. At the other hand, it can result in a too massif faith in God, in which the brokenness of the Christological knowledge is missing. (De Leede in Wallet 2008a, 9)

Not everyone reacted completely negative. The Reformed (*Gereformeerde*) but evangelical minded minister Bram Krol values the evangelical attention for experience. He agrees, that in the evangelical movement there is shift visible from dogma to feeling. But this shift fits the culture and character of the age (Krol 2001). The evangelical movement rightly attacks ecclesial formalism and fossilization of faith found in traditional churches (cf. §2.3 (Post)modern Experientialism), and brings back a Biblical sound on many pulpits, even in churches that were “affected” by liberal thinking (Krol 2001, 230–231). But also Krol cannot help worrying whether the evangelical attention to experience and feelings is sometimes not a bit off balance. Specifically at the beginnings of the 21st century, he too fears that the evangelical movement has subsided her battle for the truth of God’s Word and centralized the human being with his subjective experience too much (232).

Barth versus Schleiermacher

To gain a better understanding of these repetitive sounding discussions about experience between Protestants and evangelicals, insight in the underlying theological traditions might help. Dogmatician Kees van der Kooi (2005) points out, that the deadlock between Reformed Protestantism and evangelicalism about religious experience reflects two different theological schools. Theologically speaking, the quest has not been between an intellectual versus non-rational type of faith. The matter is whether the evangelical experience-based theology is not contrary to the Word theology of the Reformation. Word theology focuses on God’s Word and God’s promises. In the twentieth century the great expounder of this tradition was the Swiss theologian Karl Barth. He spotlighted Jesus Christ as central revelation of God, as the ‘yes’ of God to human beings. He put God’s revelation, the Word, center stage. It has primacy above everything else, experience is secondary. The theological fixation on the concept Word implies that the Word can never be captured in the experience and keeps its own objectivity. Therefore human experience is at last uninteresting. The only interesting thing is

God himself in his revelation, in his Word coming towards us (Van der Kooi 2005).

Van der Kooi contrasts Karl Barth with Friedrich Schleiermacher, the theologian of the experience. Schleiermacher stated that faith does not exist in all kinds of doctrines or in morality, but originates in *schlechthinniges Abhängigkeitsgefühl*, the immediate existential sense by which one relates to being in itself. Faith therefore exists in a receptivity that precedes thinking and that precedes the will and our judgment. Faith exists in *Anschaung* and in the *Gefühl*. God is not an idea but an experience of infinity within the temporary. As faith is not a matter of ideas and concepts but a matter of living, Schleiermacher located faith in the community, in the communal experienced and relived experience (Van der Kooi 2005).

In his reflection on present day experientialism and evangelicalism, Van der Kooi is cautious. The worth and motive of Barth's reaction to Schleiermacher, emphasizing God's Word over the human experience, should not be overlooked. When human experience is constantly put center stage, it is not imaginary that individual experience starts being normative. Experience-based faith can lead to a feelings-based theology. In such feelings-based theology, good or fine feelings will determine the theological truth. Even though Van der Kooi values experience, he warns that individual experience should not become a dictator (Van der Kooi 2005).

The Further Reformation and Evangelicalism

In the debate about religious experience, many commentators furthermore also refer to the Further Reformation. The reference is used to point out that personal religious experience is not alien to the Reformed tradition (a.o. Klaver 2011; Krol 2001; Van der Kooi 2005). Within this context, Van der Kooi also points towards the mystical tradition which preceded the Further Reformation. He then mentions the spirituality of Calvin and the pietistic tradition. Klaver too points out that an experiential orientation has always been an important undercurrent of Dutch Protestantism. The Further Reformation of the seventeenth century is only a first example thereof. Experientialism continued to be present in Dutch Protestantism, as the *Nijkerkse Beroeringen* (Uprours of Nijkerk) of the eighteenth century and the Dutch Réveil movement of the nineteenth century show (Klaver 2011, 49–54).

Professor Graafland (1998) offers a theological reflection about the presence of this experientialism in the Dutch Reformed tradition. He starts his argument by referring to Calvin's teaching on the matter, which consists of the twofoldness (*twee-eenheid*) of doctrine and experience. This twofoldness is founded in the unity of Christ and the Spirit. At the same time, Calvin makes a clear distinc-

tion between the two topics and reckons with the possibility of a discrepancy in the believer's life between doctrine and experience. It is possible that the salvation of Christ remains outside a person and has no personal meaning. In true faith they though go together: an existential experience which is object-oriented, namely towards God's promises. This doctrine was systemized and rationalized more and more in the time after the Reformation. The systemized doctrine started to incorporate experience and turned it into a teaching. The Further Reformation reacted and tried to recover the original twofoldness of doctrine and life. Graafland's main point is to point out that the tension between doctrine and experience has characterized the Reformed tradition from the start. At the same time, within this tradition, the importance of experience has always been qualified by its object, the salvation in Christ. It is quite unfortunate that this object became systemized, rationalized and was separated from the experience, especially since the Enlightenment (Graafland 1998).

Graafland therefore concludes that the evangelical movement moves within the borders of the Reformed tradition and constitutes a kind of neo-pietism. It is a reaction against a too rational-objective approach to faith of the Enlightenment. Subjectivity, as identity marker of personal authentic faith is, according to Graafland, quite legitimate. Still, also Graafland mentions at the end of his exposition, that the evangelical experience of salvation is not only subjective, but in modern times also emotional. He too wonders: Does evangelicalism not cross the border from legitimate experiential faith into a feelings-without-saving faith? (Graafland 1998)

Notwithstanding Graafland's exposition and his defense of a certain continuity between the Dutch *bevindelijke stroming* (Reformed pietism) and evangelical experimentalism, other commentators point out that there is no *direct* historical continuity between Dutch evangelicalism and Dutch pietism. Historically the evangelical movement has its roots in the Anglo-Saxon world. After World War Two American influences in specific determine the outlook of the Dutch evangelical movement. Even though Dutch evangelicalism might have followed on from certain pietistic undercurrents in Dutch Protestantism, both types of religious experience therefore differ quite a lot. Minister Smouter points out how the underlying questions differ radically. The Reformed pietistic tradition does *not* offer the living daily experience of the message of Jesus Christ who was crucified: "The deficiency of the pietistic tradition is that experience of the Spirit is viewed in the terms of assurance. So the question is: Do I belong?" (Smouter in Wallet 2008a, 5) But according to Smouter, "the Holy Spirit is not the 'principle of insecurity,' but of security." Hence religious experience in the Dutch pietistic tradition and in Dutch evangelicalism move into two different directions. Van der Kooi agrees and confirms this analyses (Smouter and Van der Kooi in Wallet 2008a, 5).

Arminianism & Activism

A third unremitting, theological critique evangelicals have faced from the beginning onwards, is the accusation of Arminianism. Evangelicals indeed emphasize personal choice and personal dedication (see §2.4). The classic accusation against this dimension of evangelicalism was already formulated by for instance ir. J. van der Graaf in the 1980s: Evangelicals are Remonstrants. Justification for nothing is overruled by the surrender of a person himself to Christ (in Runia 1984, 51).

By 2008 not much has changed. Minister Hendrikus J. Lam, for instance, president of the *Gereformeerde Bond* (Reformed Association), repeats the accusation. Evangelical theology shows many biblical lines, excepts when it comes to the election: “Then we hit an Arminian slip” (Lam 2008, 8). According to church historian Willem J. Van Asselt (1998) here we find the root cause of the deep gap between evangelical faith and Reformed faith. Evangelical faith follows a different theological basic principle. He sums up his conclusions by reference to the words of the first Sunday of the Heidelberg Catechism: “In Reformed Protestantism Jesus is not our own, we are His” (61).

In the article ‘God first or we first?’ Van Asselt (1998) elaborates on this difference between Reformed Protestants and evangelicals by comparing the Confession of Dordt and the theology of John Wesley. The Confession of Dordt emphasizes the sovereignty of God in his unconditional election *to* faith (Van Asselt 1998, 57). John Wesley however, father of the evangelical movement, emphasized the individual’s choice of faith and the human pursuit of sanctification and hence subscribed to a conditional universal election (56).

According to Van Asselt, this deviating theological basic principle leads to the typical evangelical worship practice, in which the (simple) sermon and the joyful songs accompanied by handclapping are directed at evoking an emotional answer. People have to be brought to the point of surrender to Jesus as their personal Savior on the base of an immediate choice. Consequently, services are set up according to mainly practical criteria indicating how to get as many converts as possible (54). All this evangelical activism greatly differs from Reformed Protestant worship practices. According to the Confession of Dordt, both justification and sanctification have their ground in God’s grace and in God’s ‘activism.’ God’s choice precedes the human choice. Van Asselt does not clarify how he would like to see that translated into church practice. His analysis is theological and theoretical.

As the article of Van Asselt shows, the theological principle of Arminianism has often been associated with the display of evangelical activism. Activism has been an evangelical identity marker from the start (Bebbington 1989). Even though Van Asselt associates it mainly with evangelical worship practices, evangelical activism has traditionally been defined by their great effort to express the gospel. The movement is generally characterized by a great dedication of laypeo-

ple to convert others (Bebbington 1989, 3, 10-12). This missionary attitude indeed directs the evangelical style of worship. For evangelicals it is important that worship services appeal to modern people (Verboom 2007, 254-255).

For this reason, evangelicalism in the Netherlands has been an enterprising movement in many kinds of ways (e.g. Vellenga 1991). Evangelicals have invested considerable effort in starting off prayer groups and growth groups in 50% of all established churches (see §3.2 Are Evangelicals Taking over the Church?). They have put church formation programs into action. They have set up commissions for every possible area of faith. They have organized youth events, festivals, praise and worship services with all possible means available (e.g. beamer, evangelical songs/revival songs, sketches, popular music). They have exerted great effort in providing for evangelical education in all kinds of ways and at all possible levels. They produced Bible study material for the *Gemeente Groei Groepen* and more recently set up the *Bouwstenen Bijbelschool*, a two year Biblical education for the lay. They invested in academic education through the foundation of the CERT (Centre of Evangelical and Reformed Theology at VU University in Amsterdam). Hans Eschbach (1996a) aptly phrased the evangelical attitude in his closing article of *Vurig Verlangen*: “Believing is something you should dó! Praying is something you should dó! Making plans is something you should dó! Executing plans is something you should dó! Who dares?”

Covenant versus Community

Evangelical Arminianism and activism are often seen in a direct connection to the evangelical low appreciation of the institutional church. Soteriology and ecclesiology are intimately related (De Vries 1999; Hoofdbestuur van de Ger. Bond in de NHK 1990, 9, 15; Noordeggraaf 1992, 33-35; Runia 1984, 28; Veldhuizen 1988, chapter 6; Velema 1979a, 1979d; Verboom 2007, 256ff; Wilschut 2007, chapter 3).

In line with their emphases on the individual’s choice for Jesus and their effort in inviting people to make that choice, evangelicals view the church as “primarily a community of people who accept Christ as their Lord and Savior of their lives” (art. 6, Het Evangelisch Manifest). This individualism – the individuals’ choice and effort occupies the central stage – contrasts with the Reformed Protestant view of the church as *verbondsgemeenschap*, as community of the covenant. The covenant is one “which God establishes with people, and which God maintains by means of *visible institutional* acts of the church” (Verboom 2007, 253emphasis original).

Practical theologian J. Kamphuis (1981) elaborated upon the difference in the eighties of the last centuries as follows. Firstly he notices how this evangelical individualism does not only have *religious* roots, but is also formatted by the

culture of the age. It might even be a product of it. Since the enlightenment everything has been centered on the individual; the individual person has been set free from its ties. As it is the individual's religious decision what counts, historic-ecclesial consciousness "dries up" (8). Kamphuis expounds: "Individualism has no eye for God's work in the history and therefore also not for his work through the generations, whom he gave a place in his Covenant, and for his continuing work in the Church" (8). Kamphuis exemplifies his argument by pointing towards the increasing preference of evangelicals for adult baptism instead of children's baptism (cf. De Jong 2003; Verboom 2007, 257).

Evangelicals indeed value adult baptism based on personal choice. Throughout the decade, the discussion about adult baptism has been top priority on the agenda of many evangelicals. It led to fierce discussions, and often difficult decisions and painful situations. Two chapters in *Vurig Verlangen*, dedicated to the subject, show how sensitive the topic was and is (Cohen Stuart 1996; Koppe 1996a). For evangelicals and Reformed alike, the whole discussion about Arminianism, activism, individualism, covenant or community of saint has often 'clenched' in this specific and concrete practice of baptism. It brings baptism on the verge of becoming the *shibboleth* for being evangelical or Reformed.

Evading the issue of baptism, practical theologian A. Noordegraaf takes up the point about the church again, but now from the viewpoint of the Holy Spirit, which is so important to evangelicals (1992). He presses on evangelicals, that the Holy Spirit first of all "produces" church consciousness and continues by emphasizing that "*God* gathers his church in the line of the generations" (34, emphasis original). Noordegraaf though admits that still, even though evangelicals do not have strong feelings for the institutional church, they do highly value Christian fellowship (34). Something which should be appreciated and might be taken as reminder for the established churches to actually live as God's covenantal community in practice.

The 'community of saints' is indeed highly regarded amongst evangelicals. Evangelicals stress the importance of Christian community for the execution of tasks like evangelizing, spiritual formation, education, mutual edification (McGrath 2000, 84). But for evangelicals the *doctrine* of the church is indeed not all-decisive. They rather focus on the importance of the community and practicing fellowship (McGrath 2000, 85). Because of their appreciation of Christian fellowship, evangelicals in the Netherlands have in practice actually advocated church membership. Most evangelical organizations took active church membership as a prerequisite for their employees (Land. Centrum voor Ger. Jeugdwerk and Land. Herv. Jeugdraad 1982). Furthermore, it should not be forgotten that the *Evangelisch Werkverband* and *New Wine* have always seen the existing institutional church as their working space. They "love" the Protestant Church

(Veenhuizen 2004) and invest in its advancement, even though the *institution* in itself is not their main priority.

This, to conclude, might be said to have generally characterized the encounter between Reformed and evangelical faith: evangelicals have focused upon practice, which was subsequently evaluated from a well-wrought dogmatic theological perspective by Reformed Protestants. Even though evangelicals throughout the years have developed their theological perspective (McGrath 1996; Stott 2003), it remains a movement concerned with practice, not with (theological) theory. In this respect, it seems that evangelicalism and Reformed Protestantism have not really met each other (yet).

METHODICAL INTERMEZZO

4 Research Design, Execution and Data Analysis

4.1 | Introduction

In 2009 and 2010 evangelical Protestants from a variety of traditional Churches were willing to share with me what their personal relationship with Jesus is all about. “What actually is that, a personal relationship with Jesus?” I asked them. “How does that work and what does it mean to you in your daily life?” The interviews with the respondents led to open conversations, deep and personal testimonies, encounters in which both tears and laughter had their proper place. Prayers were said, meals were shared, and treasured belongings or places of significance to their faith were shown to me.

This chapter presents the research design of which these interviews were part (§4.2). It provides insight in the process that led to contact with these believers (§4.3) and in the process that led from interviewing them to reconstructing the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus (§4.4). This chapter describes and accounts for the steps taken, the decisions made and procedures followed.

4.2 | Research Design and Phases

The research was executed in the period from August 2008 to December 2012 at the *Protestantse Theologische Universiteit* (Protestant Theological University) in Utrecht, under supervision of professor of practical theology dr. F. Gerrit Im-mink with the assistance of practical theologian dr. Theo J. Pleizier, and professor of sociology of religion Hijme C. Stoffels (*Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam*). The choice was made to conduct a qualitative survey as this would provide access to the meaning of the personal relationship of evangelical Protestants from the per-

spective of evangelical Protestants (cf. §1.4). Conducting a qualitative survey aims at developing a theoretical framework through the constant comparison of a variety of comparable cases. The analysis focuses upon discovering the characteristic ‘qualities’ of what they have in common: the personal relationship with Jesus. What are the relevant characteristics of the interviewees’ personal relationships with Jesus? How do these relate to each other? Which basic processes can be identified? Where do believers diverge from each other in their experience of their relationship with Jesus?

The research was designed and executed primarily according to the guidelines provided by Fred Wester and Vincent Peters (2004).⁴¹ The research design consisted of a preparatory phase, followed by two rounds of interviewing, which were alternated and followed by four phases of analysis. The phases of interviewing and analyzing partly overlapped, according to Grounded Theory procedures. Grounded Theory is characterized by a phased research design in which the tasks of reflection–observation–analysis form a constantly returning cycle (Wester and Peters 2004, 40–43). This cycle ensures that the research is constantly theory driven (reflection), while the alternation between observation and analysis keeps the developing theoretical framework firmly grounded in the data.

An important part of the research consisted of the preparatory phase. Wester and Peters pay little explicit attention to this phase, even though the phase is quite essential. Wester and Peters speak about formulating “general ideas” about the research field in the initial exploratory phase (2004, 40–41, 75–81). Such “general ideas” direct the initial research questions and form provisional organizing tools for analyzing the empirical data (77). In Grounded Theory these initial ideas are generally referred to as ‘sensitizing concepts’ (e.g. Charmaz 2006, 16–17; cf. Wester and Peters 2004, 28) and for good reason so. Sensitizing concepts do not just provide information what the research is about, they aim at ‘sensitizing’ the researcher, at creating involvement with and at the same distance towards the research field. Qualitative interviewing requires the researcher to place him-/herself in the situation and perspective of the respondent, while at the same time listening actively and critically to what is being told (cf. Wester and Peters 2004, 61–63). A proper preparatory field orientation is therefore indispensable for opening up the researcher to the wide array of aspects that might be involved in having a personal relationship with Jesus. The researcher will gain an initial understanding of the respondents’ perspectives and be aware of issues that might be at stake, and will gain an initial understanding of his/her own perspectives and presuppositions and be able to explicate (unconscious) fore understand-

⁴¹ Other works of Wester were consulted as well (1995), including his writings concerning the presentation of research (2005, 2003).

ings (Boeije 2005, 46-47). The researcher is no *tabula rasa*, as Wester and Peters put it (2004, 28).

The Preparatory Phase

The preparatory phase consisted of the first ten months of research and included literature study, interviewing field informants, preparatory in-depth interviewing and following courses about doing qualitative research. The original research interest concerned the growing evangelical affiliation in Dutch mainline churches. Therefore a literature review was conducted to gain insight in evangelical spirituality in the Netherlands and worldwide, and to learn about the nature and characteristics of spirituality in general. Simultaneously four interviews were conducted with central spokespersons of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands. These field informants were asked after their perspectives on the development of the evangelical movement in Dutch traditional churches and after the characteristics of Dutch evangelicalism. They were asked after their own evangelical spirituality and its relation to the traditional church. Thus in the preparatory phase both academic and popular perspectives on evangelicalism in Dutch traditional churches were explored.

The four field informants were selected because of their deep involvement in organizations that presently in a visible way shape the evangelical movement in Dutch traditional churches (Bakker 2009; Eschbach 2009; Ter Velde 2009; Zandbergen 2009). Notwithstanding their evangelical affiliation, they still are members of traditional churches. Feike ter Velde is an exception. He was especially involved in the beginnings of the rise of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands. He worked for the *Evangelische Omroep* (Evangelical Broadcasting Association) and as editor for the magazine *Het Zoeklicht* (The Searchlight). The evangelical movement did not have any visible organizational shape in Dutch traditional churches at that time. Ter Velde's field of work rather stirred the emergence of it. Presently, Feike ter Velde is not a member of a traditional church anymore. A fifth informal interview was conducted with Dick Westerkamp, minister of the *Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerk* (Dutch Reformed Church) in Houten and initiator of the New Wine Movement in the Netherlands. There was no opportunity for a formal interview that could be recorded and therefore this interview is not included in the list with field informants. The interviews with the four other field informants were recorded and transcribed.

The pursuance of academic and popular perspectives led to the decision to focus upon the personal relationship with Jesus. An initial research question was formulated with the personal relationship with Jesus as main sensitizing concept. The preliminary understanding of this central research object led to the decision to proceed by means of personal interviews with evangelical Protestants.

The literature review concerning the personal relationship with Jesus and evangelicalism in Dutch traditional churches was worked out in two chapters (chapters 2 and 3), providing a theoretical base and starting point for the empirical part of the research.

Field Informants

Feike ter Velde	Evangelist, former radio and television presenter, former redactor <i>Het Zoeklicht</i> (The Searchlight)	January 14, 2009
Menno Zandbergen	Board Member <i>Evangelisch Werkverband</i> (Evangelical Working Association)	January 20, 2009
Hans Eschbach	Initiator and Board Member <i>Evangelisch Werkverband</i> (Evangelical Working Association)	February 3, 2009
Jan Bakker	President <i>Stichting Alpha</i> (Alpha Foundation)	February 6, 2009

In qualitative research the researcher's competence is quite important, both for the task of collecting data (Wester and Peters 2004, 62) as for the task of analyzing the data (Boeije 2005, 12). Therefore, in this preparatory phase three in-depth interviews were conducted with evangelical Protestants about their daily faith. The interviews were used to gain initial affiliation with and competence in in-depth interviewing. The three respondents were selected on my request by the minister of a mainline Protestant church which explicitly affiliates itself with the evangelical movement. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and critically reviewed by myself, supervisors and colleagues. Common interview mistakes were pointed out and the content was discussed. Ordinary theology is from an academic theological perspective often seen as heretic and superstitious (Astley 2002, chapter 3). It might be practically coherent in the sense that it "works," but it does not necessarily need to be logically coherent (McGuire 2008, 15-16). Studying the personal relationship with Jesus thus requires an attentive and open-minded attitude of the researcher to discern and understand what believers do, experience and believe in actual practice, even when on first sight their perceptions and expressions might not seem to make sense at all. Therefore, we critically reflected upon my attitude, opinion and assumptions.

The transcribed interviews were analyzed with the use of the computer program Atlas.ti to learn coding techniques and gain initial competence in using Atlas.ti. At the same time courses about qualitative research procedures, analysis technique and interviewing were followed. These courses were organized by KWALON, an independent organization concerned with the methodology of

and reflection on social-scientific qualitative research.⁴² The use of the three preparatory interviews remained confined to the first research phase. They do not constitute empirical research data and their content is not incorporated in the research results.

4.3 | Selection of Respondents

Selection Criteria

After the preparatory phase, data was collected in two rounds of interviewing. For these interviews respondents had to be selected first. The research question after the personal relationship with Jesus of evangelicals in mainline churches led to the following three selection criteria:

1. Respondents say they have a personal relationship with Jesus;
2. Respondents express affiliation with the evangelical movement in words and deeds;
3. Respondents are a member of a mainline church.

The first common sense requirement for respondents is to have a personal relationship with Jesus. The research is concerned with how believers practice and experience such a relationship. What is a relationship with Jesus according to believers and what does it entail according to them? In line with that research interest, the requirement of having a personal relationship with Jesus is made to depend upon the respondent's self-understanding of having such a relationship.

The research population is furthermore defined as evangelicals in mainline churches. This research population has no clear-cut demarcations. Evangelicals do not define themselves as evangelical on basis of formal membership of a particular organization. Still, the evangelical movement has always gained a visible shape in the inter-ecclesial festivals and conferences they put on. At these places, the contours of the evangelical movement become tangible. The contours of the evangelical movement in Dutch traditional churches have also found expression in such conferences and mass events. In the Netherlands several organizations both promote evangelicalism in traditional churches and organize such

⁴² Courses followed: Qualitative Analysis, by J.C. Evers and A. van Staa; Qualitative Interviewing, by F. de Boer and F. van Gemert; Methodological Quality, by A. Smaling; Advanced Course Atlas.ti 5, by S. Friese (cf. KWALON. Platform voor kwalitatief onderwijs, www.kwalon.nl).

festivals, like for instance the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) who organizes a yearly *Vernieuwingsfestival* (Renewal Festival). It is to be expected that members of traditional churches attend such festivals because of their evangelical affiliation. As Grounded Theory selection procedures aim at selecting ‘research units’ that will feature the research object outstandingly (Wester and Peters 2004, 46), these conferences could be quite suitable places for recruiting respondents. In this way evangelical affiliation is defined by the movement’s self-expression and by the respondents’ self-understanding, rather than solely by the outward judgment of the researcher and minister (preparatory interviews).

Attending such an evangelical festival is taken as first indicator of the respondents’ evangelical affiliation. Secondly, the participants of such conferences will be asked if they personally feel affiliated with the evangelical movement. They could of course be visiting the conference, for example, upon invitation, for relaxation purposes, maintaining friendships, out of curiosity. This second indicator leaves some room for different understandings of what ‘evangelical’ might mean and differences between the respondents’ evangelical affiliation therefore need to be reckoned with. Next to their expression of evangelical affiliation in the act of festival participation and their evangelical self-understanding, lastly and thirdly, having a personal relationship with Jesus points towards their evangelical affiliation as well.

As the research concerns evangelicals in traditional churches, membership of a traditional constitutes the last selection criteria for respondents. Formal church membership constitutes an objective criterion that is easily measured. It was chosen as selection criterion because traditional churches in the Netherlands, in contrast to evangelical churches, have always been strongly organized on the basis of formal membership. Furthermore it was kept in mind that the required evangelical affiliation of the respondents might have led to more or less declining feelings of affiliation with their traditional church, to declining church attendance or participation in the church’s activities otherwise. Disagreements between traditional churches and evangelicals are well-known and widespread, and the history of evangelicalism in the Netherlands has shown that many evangelicals consequently left the mainline churches (cf. chapter 3). Therefore feeling affiliated with a traditional church, church attendance or participation were no suitable selection criteria.

Recruitment of Respondents

In 2009 four conferences were selected for recruiting respondents. Firstly, the conference of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) and *New Wine* were selected. The *Evangelisch Werkverband* and *New Wine* are two

important organizations that have promoted evangelicalism within traditional churches since the 1990s (see §1.1, §3.2 and §3.3).⁴³ These organizations and their conferences stimulate the evangelicalization of traditional churches and aim at the formation of evangelical Protestants. Evangelical Protestants are highly likely to be found at these conferences.

Evangelicalism within traditional churches though dates back further than the nineties of the last century. Therefore I decided to include two other festivals as well. Firstly, the yearly gathering (*Toogdag*) of *Het Zoeklicht* (The Searchlight). *Het Zoeklicht* originates in a movement started by Johannes de Heer (cf. Van der Laan 1996). It constitutes one of the oldest evangelical stirrings within traditional churches (Boersema 2004, 34). The field informants indicated that still numerous church members are related to this organization and read their magazine. Secondly, the *Pinksterconferentie* (Pentecost Conference) of *Stichting Opwekking* (Revival Foundation) was selected for recruiting respondents. Their songbook is extensively used in traditional churches (Klaver and Versteeg 2007, 47; *Opwekkingsliederen. Ontstaan*; Van der Laan 1996). This foundation therefore greatly enhanced evangelical sympathies in traditional churches. *Stichting Opwekking* indicated that 50%–75% of her visitors stem from traditional churches (ANP 1994; Kerkredactie 2000).⁴⁴

I visited those conferences in person and conducted short surveys amongst the participants. I waited at the exit after a meeting of the main program and addressed the festival participants upon leaving the gathering. I asked them to participate in a short survey. I conducted these surveys personally as personal contact might lower the threshold for further participation of the potential respondent. Personal contact helps to build confidentiality between the future interviewee and interviewer (cf. Wester and Peters 2004, 62–63). The survey consisted mainly of a short checklist of the above described requirements for participating in this research. At the end, respondents were asked if they were willing to participate later on in the research through a personal in-depth interview. In general respondents were friendly and willingly complied with my request for some minutes of their time. In total 118 surveys were conducted.

After visiting each of the conferences a report was written containing basic information about the conference, its program and theme, my impressions and observations. Even though the data collection of this research does not include participant observation, being present at those conference informed me

⁴³ For overviews of the contours of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands, its emergence and growth, see Klaver (Klaver 2008, 2011; Klaver and Versteeg 2007), Roeland (2009), Boersema (2004), Vellenga (1991) and Stoffels (1990).

⁴⁴ For more information about these organizations see their websites (*Evangelisch Werkverband*, www.ewv.nl; *Het Zoeklicht*, www.zoeklicht.nl; *New Wine Nederland*, www.new-wine.nl; *Stichting Opwekking*, www.opwekking.nl).

about present day evangelicalism and affected my perspective. Through reports these influences were accounted for. In addition, respondents might later on in the interviews refer back to the conference and an informative report about the conference might then turn out to be quite useful (cf. Wester and Peters concerning participant observation, field reports and the role of the researcher, 2004, 51–60).

Of the 118 surveys conducted 62 respondents did not meet the requirements for further participation in the research: they were no member of a traditional church, were doubtful about their affiliation with the evangelical movement or were not willing to participate further. A few people dropped out because they indicated not to have a personal relationship with Jesus (yet). Of the 56 respondents left over 8 were selected for a first round of in-depth interviewing. I looked for a proportional division between men and women, a variety of ages, church origin, and geographical distribution. The goal was to select respondents who would be comparable, while still displaying variety in their expression of the relationship with Jesus. In this way a complete picture of the phenomenon will be acquired (Boeije 2005, 50–51; Wester and Peters 2004, 46–47). After the first contact I made with these respondents at the conferences, I met them again for a more elaborate interview at their homes.

For the second round of interviewing almost the same procedures were followed. I did not visit the *Pinksterconferentie* and the *Toogdag of Het Zoeklicht*, because it turned out in the first round that few people of traditional churches visited these conferences. In selecting respondents for the second round I especially searched for older respondents because they were lacking in the first round of interviewing. In addition I searched for more variation in church membership. That is why three respondents from the *Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt* were selected. I also selected three couples to increase interaction during the interviews. In their combined effort to explain to me what a personal relationship with Jesus is and the expected critical interaction between the two of them, new aspects concerning the research object might come to light. These selection procedures followed are referred to as ‘theoretical sampling’ (Wester and Peters 2004, 44–49). In the second round 13 respondents were interviewed, amongst which 3 married couples.

The Respondents

The selection procedures as described above resulted in a sample of research respondents that vividly portrays the phenomenon of interest, the personal relationship with Jesus, and fits the desired group of evangelical Protestants. The selection procedures led to adult respondents (I conducted surveys after a meeting of

the main program, not the youth program. I did not visit youth conferences). Three of them are (just) below thirty years old, the others are older.

Conferences visited 2009

Surveys Church

<i>Vernieuwingsfestival</i> , <i>Evangelisch Werkverband</i> (Renewal Festival, Evangelical Working Association)	April 18, 2009	19	17 PKN 2 other
<i>Pinksterconferentie</i> , <i>Stichting Opwekking</i> (Pentecost Conference, Revival Foundation)	May 30, 2009	40	6 PKN 4 NGK 1 GKV 23 other 6 no church
<i>Zomerconferentie 2009</i> , <i>New Wine</i> (Summer Conference 2009, New Wine)	July 27, 2009	21	8 PKN 3 NGK 7 GKV 1 CGK 2 other
<i>Zomerconferentie 2009</i> , <i>New Wine</i> (Summer Conference 2009, New Wine)	July 29, 2009	25	7 PKN 8 NGK 4 GKV 1 CGK 5 other
<i>Toogdag</i> , <i>Het Zoeklicht</i> (Yearly Gathering, The Searchlight)	September 12, 2009	13	4 PKN 9 other

Conferences visited 2010

Surveys Church

<i>Vernieuwingsfestival</i> , <i>Evangelisch Werkverband</i> (Renewal Festival, Evangelical Working Association)	April 17, 2010	19	15 PKN 1 NGK 2 RKK 1 other
<i>Zomerconferentie 2010</i> , <i>New Wine</i> (Summer Conference 2010, New Wine)	July 28 & 29, 2010	19	2 PKN 5 NGK 4 GKV 1 GG 5 other 2 no church

PKN, Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands)

NGK, Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (Dutch Reformed Churches)

GKV, Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt (Reformed Churches liberated)

CGK, Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands)

GG, Gereformeerde Gemeenten (Orthodox Reformed Congregations)

RKK, Rooms Katholieke Kerk (Roman Catholic Church)

A general picture can be drawn. Most of the respondents were raised in a Christian family and went to a traditional church on a weekly basis. For some of them, church attendance and faith in general watered down in their teenage years or during the first years of their marriage. All of them can tell about entering the relationship with Jesus. The start of their personal relationship with Jesus is normally marked by one or more faith-renewing experience(s). In general this faith-renewing experience coincides with their beginning interest and participation in evangelical activities. The respondents show several characteristics common to evangelicals: they love to sing revival and worship songs, they regularly visit semi-church gatherings and conferences. All of them except three are still regularly attending a traditional church on Sunday. Most of them are quite active in other activities of their churches as well. Their active participation in church is though not always self-evident anymore. The respondents shared about their problems or disagreements with their churches as well.

The second group of respondents complemented the first sample of respondents well. They were selected because there was a need to deepen and refine the insights gained from the first round of interviewing (and analysis). The level of education and present occupation varied with regard to the first group. Because of these variations, the same phenomenon was sometimes described with different words, which led to a better understanding. The increasing amount of research data made it possible to analyze and distinguish more variety within the personal relationship with Jesus, but also gave better insight in constant factors within this relationship.

Respondents Round 1

Justus	Male	29	PKN hervormd
Kees	Male	37	PKN
Leo	Male	43	NGK
Roeland	Male	62	NGK
Leonie	Female	28	NGK
Marjoleine	Female	41	PKN gereformeerd
Tilde	Female	49	PKN gereformeerd
Evelien	Female	52	PKN

Respondents Round 2

Ted and Marie	Couple	54	GKV
Mr and Ms Rosegaar	Couple	76 & 67	PKN hervormd
Mr and Ms Mol	Couple	73 & 70	PKN hervormd
Rien	Male	32	PKN
Nico	Male	42	PKN hervormd
Ernst-Jan	Male	54	PKN hervormd
Aagje	Female	29	GKV
Jill	Female	30	NGK
Lianne	Female	44	NGK
Reina	Female	55	PKN hervormd

PKN, Protestantse Kerk in Nederland (Protestant Church in the Netherlands)

PKN hervormd / gereformeerd (believer is a member of one of the two brands of former Reformed Churches, which are now united in the Protestant Church)

NGK, Nederlands Gereformeerde Kerken (Dutch Reformed Churches)

GKV, Gereformeerde Kerken vrijgemaakt (Reformed Churches liberated)

CGK, Christelijke Gereformeerde Kerken in Nederland (Christian Reformed Churches in the Netherlands)

4.4 | Interviewing

‘Producing’ Data

“Data are not collected like they are beech-nuts ready and waiting to be picked up by someone” (Wester 2005). Wester points out that it is important to keep in mind that by interviewing data is not merely collected but produced. Because of the interview setting and questions respondents are ‘induced’ to tell certain things. This is not necessarily negative, but does require a proper interview preparation (Baarda, De Goede, and Van der Meer-Middelburg 1996; Emans 1990; Evers 2007; Wengraf 2001; Wester and Peters 2004, 61–66). Interviewing aims at producing valid, complete, relevant and clear empirical data. Therefore it is important to build rapport (a relationship of trust, see Evers 2007, 41–43), to continue to ask questions about the topic under discussion for gaining a complete and correct picture (especially in cases of inconsistencies, see a.o. Emans 1990, 72–83), and to triangulate received answers (Wester and Peters 2004, 191–204).

The selection of respondents was followed by making appointments for interviewing them. In general, interviews were conducted at the respondents' homes. The safe environment of their own homes is expected to give the respondent a more personal and open attitude. In the preparatory interviews I had noticed that conducting an interview at the respondent's work restricted the respondent's openness throughout the interview severely. The interview was interrupted several times and the respondent was distracted by the work awaiting him. I furthermore held back any information concerning my own faith affiliation, as to prevent the interviewee to build *under-rapport* (not trusting me and trying to evangelize me), as well as to prevent the interviewee to build *over-rapport* (both the interviewee and interviewer can lose their reflective and critical attitude, which does not provide for reflective insight in the meaningful relationship with Jesus either).

One of the research respondents insisted that I visited him at work, even though I explicitly requested and explained him that an interview at his home might be better. As it seemed highly meaningful to him considering the question after his personal relationship with Jesus, I finally agreed. And so it turned out. After arriving I got half an hour tour over the workshop he was leading after which he concluded, spreading his arms wide open, looking out over the workshop: "You see, this is my personal relationship with Jesus."

Interview Guidelines

For the first round of interviews, I decided to conduct quite open interviews. I opened the interviews with the respondents by bringing into focus the main topic of the interview by means of a short introduction of the aim of the interview. The respondents were told: "We met each other at *NAME CONFERENCE*, in *YEAR*. You said to have a personal relationship with Jesus. I would like to know: what actually is that? How does that work and what does it mean to you?" In addition I emphasized that the conversation would be very open and invited the respondent to take all the space and time they needed to tell about their faith. I emphasized being interested in the way faith takes shape in daily life, that there are no correct or wrong answers, and that the interviews would be anonymized and handled with confidentiality. Three main interview questions were formulated:

- 1) What is a personal relationship with Jesus?
- 2) Can you describe what your relationship with Jesus looks like in daily life?
- 3) What does your personal relationship with Jesus mean to you?

Evers and De Boer call this the *sluismodel* (floodgate model) as it aims at getting a broad perspective on the phenomenon researched. It aims at letting the interviewee share his/her knowledge about the phenomenon (2007, 57). During the interview the interviewer tries to acquire depth by means of going on asking the respondent to explain what he/she is talking about. The interviewee however determines the breadth of the interview (58). The average length of an interview exceeded 100 minutes.

For the second round of interviewing, the interview guideline was adapted and I worked with a topic list (see *A Second Round of Interviewing*, p.96). Evers and De Boer call this the *boommodel* (treemodel, 2007, 60). The aim of the second round of interviewing was to generate more data and different data, amongst others data concerning the questions that arose throughout the first round of interviewing and analyzing. The interviews were introduced similarly. The first question was formulated even more open: “Can you share something about your relationship with Jesus?” The former opening question sometimes resulted in believers giving a confessional definition of their relationship with Jesus, whereas the research is interested in their spirituality in daily life. For respondents the new question was more difficult to answer. The question however did lead to more variety in the answers received and to a more personal approach of the believers to their relationship with Jesus. Working with a topic list was not easy. Respondents were eager and enthusiastic to share with me about their faith, but it was not easy to interrupt them. The personal relationship with Jesus turned out to be highly intertwined with their personal life story and respondents sometimes found it difficult to be interrupted while telling their story. The topic list still turned out to be very useful. Because of the topic list, themes that were not discussed in the first round of interviewing were now discussed in depth. For the different interviews I choose in advance different topics to focus upon in order to have time to discuss the respective topic in depth. The interviews of the second round lasted on average 105 minutes.

Transcription

The interviews were recorded, transcribed, anonymized and analyzed. Because of these procedures, the data concerning the personal relationship with Jesus is captured in verbal form. The transcribed interviews replace the actual reality of the personal relationship with Jesus. Using transcribed interviews as empirical research data has limitations, as it is to be expected that respondents cannot verbalize all aspects or dimensions of their personal relationship with Jesus. Inken Mädler mentions dimensions as the “Unaussprechliche”, “Vorsprechliche”, but also the “Atmosphärische”, “Selbstverständliche” and the “Stumme” (Mädler 2007, 251). The meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus is richer than its ver-

balized form communicates. Keeping this in mind, I tried to give respondents a lot of freedom throughout the interview to share and reflect, but also to show emotions, to be silent and to include gestures.

Clear signs that the meaning of the personal relationship cannot be fully captured in verbal form, were abundantly provided by the respondents themselves. A lot of respondents insisted on me staying for lunch afterwards. They wanted to show me Christian hospitality and share time with me as brothers and sisters in Christ. Often the meal included a moment of devotion and devotional reading afterwards. Often too respondents felt the need to exemplify things they shared about in the interview in practice. Certain items they had mentioned were shown, like little text cards or song texts; I had to see the evangelical bookshop one of the respondents volunteered for; I had to see the farm that was felt to be provided by the grace of God and was now used for evangelization purposes; I had to see the devotional book they read after lunch or before sleeping – to name just a few examples. Some respondents also insisted on praying with and for me after the interview was over. For these respondents no better information could be given about the personal relationship with Jesus than experiencing the actual thing itself.

Immediately after the meeting I wrote down the not-recorded table conversations and additional observations. Their content was kept in mind throughout the analysis of the transcribed interviews. I also used these notes for purposes of triangulation: did the respondents share different things about their personal relationship with Jesus in the informal chitter and chatter afterwards? Or did it rather validate the content of the interview? These initiatives also showed the great willingness of respondents to share openly with me what their personal relationship with Jesus means to them and so validated the reliability of the research respondent.

4.5 | Analysis

The transcribed interviews were uploaded in Atlas.ti and subsequently analyzed. The analysis is divided into four phases: an exploratory phase, a specification phase, a ‘reduction’ phase and an integration phase. All phases are characterized by the cycle of reflection–observation–analysis (Wester and Peters 2004, 40–43, 147–180, cf. §1.4). The exploratory phase and specification phase made use of the data collected in the first round of interviewing. After the specification phase the second round of interviews was conducted and transcribed. The majority of them was then coded similarly to the first round of interviews. With the results of both interview rounds, the analysis moved on to the ‘reduction’ phase. Three inter-

views, which were so far withheld from the analysis, were now included as well and used to check the validity of the developing theoretical framework. A last withheld interview was introduced in the integration phase.

Exploration Phase

Open Coding

One of the main aims of the first, exploratory phase of analysis is to create a fundamental openness towards the acquired research material. What are the respondents actually telling and sharing? Interview fragments are labeled with codes that try to grab what the fragment is about. The formulated research question and preliminary theoretical framework direct the coding process, amongst others for determining which segments of the interview constitute relevant data and which not. Right from the start coding data fragments therefore includes making analytical interpretations of the data (Wester and Peters 2004, 91-93, 153-160).

In this phase the insights of sociologist Kathy Charmaz were of much help (2006, 47-57). Charmaz advises to invoke a “language of action rather than of topic” in open coding. Coding “data *as* action [...] curbs our tendencies to make conceptual leaps and to adopt extant theories *before* we have done the necessary analytic work” (48). She furthermore advises to look for tacit assumptions and explicate implicit actions and meanings, again to avoid applying preexisting categories to the data (47-50). Continually returning questions are: what is the respondent saying in this line? What is the data about? What is the significance of what is being said? Charmaz emphasizes speed and spontaneity in initial coding procedures as this can “spark your thinking and spawn a fresh view of the data” (48-49).

Still, time, discipline and perseverance are quite essential as well in the coding process in this exploratory phase. In general a researcher’s initial codes will contain a lot of obvious conclusions and be based on a lot of pre-existing theoretical assumptions about the personal relationship with Jesus. This is useful, as such codes show where the data confirms and where it diverges from existing perspectives (Wester and Peters 2004, 155). However, it is also necessary to take time to continue the process of initial coding to start off a more creative process. The aim of creativity is not to develop new concepts or original frameworks *per se*. The aim is to create openness towards the research material with the goal that the codes will be as close as possible to and as accurate as possible concerning what the respondents are saying. Creativity makes it possible for the researcher to move beyond his/her first and most obvious biases and assumptions towards the respondents’ perspectives. Such creative processes do not happen out of thin air.

They require time and perseverance. The start of the analysis process thus functions like a funnel turned upside down. When all possible meanings are explored, the funnel can be turned back again. The best codes can be selected and kept for further analysis.

Is It All About Praying?

Coding the first four interviews produced 244 codes, distributed over a total of 494 segments of data. The codes are (extremely) varied. The most frequent themes were praying, Bible reading and extraordinary experiences of faith. In a concept memo I wrote down my first intuitions about defining ‘having a relationship’:

The concept of having a relationship calls for association with the codes like ‘having contact,’ ‘coming to God,’ ‘talking with each other,’ ‘praying,’ ‘experiencing his presence,’ ‘following Jesus’ (morally?), ‘God has a plan for your life,’ ‘surrendering your life to Him.’ (memo *Een relatie hebben is...* PRmJ V2-ATLAS.ti)

Considering the amount of codes, it is not difficult to understand that some amount of chaos, confusion and insecurity also belong to this phase. In an early memo I wrote about my confusion concerning the codes ‘God speaks’ and ‘God’s closeness’: “It does not seem possible to neatly distinguish between ‘God speaks’ and ‘God’s presence!’” (memo *Gods nabijheid en God’s spreken – 16-08-2010*. PRmJ V2-ATLAS.ti) The more I continued and compared fragments, the more I got confused about the exact definition of either of the codes and the dynamic relationship between the two. By far not in all segments of ‘God speaks’ did respondents actually hear God speak. Still they were coded so as they were quite similar to other fragments of data that were labeled thus.

In this phase, the code ‘praying’ stood out in particular because it was used very often. It seemed obvious and accurate for a lot of data segments. Is it all about praying? I wondered after coding the first four interviews. But as I continued coding, I found ‘praying’ to be something of a catch-all term. Its content, significance and relation to the other segments of data and their codes was quite unclear. The code did not seem to explicate the full significance of the segments of data. Why do respondents so frequently talk about praying? What does praying actually mean to them? I started to wonder. Did I not label many fragments with ‘praying’ too quickly? Is the actual word ‘praying’ used at all in the data segments labeled ‘praying’? What are the respondents trying to say with the vocabulary and expressions *they* use? These considerations were recorded in concept memo’s (Wester and Peters 2004, 100-101).

Such considerations show how important it is not to brush the less often used codes aside too quickly. It also demonstrates the importance of coding data segments with labels that are close to the particular expressions used by the respondents: ‘communicating with God,’ ‘having contact with God,’ ‘talking with God,’ ‘keeping silent time,’ ‘investing time in God,’ ‘involving God,’ ‘putting something before God.’ Because of such codes the code list will grow and will contain quite some codes that are used only a few times each. These codes however provide indispensable insight in the meaning of the catch-all code ‘praying.’

As I started to reflect upon the relationship between those codes and the code ‘praying,’ and between data segments concerning ‘praying’ and other data segments, the exploratory phase was moving on into the specification phase. In a memo I wrote:

The meaning of the relationship with Jesus seems to be answered mainly by reference to the practice of praying. Having a relationship is having contact and contact expresses itself in communicating with each other, talking with each other, praying. [...] But what then: does God talk back then too? How then? That seems to be no trivial issue because hearing God’s voice in small things, in moral issues, in life choices big and small, is the goal of the lives of these believers who want to live for God for the full 100%. Because God is not always talking back, the communication from God’s side is often provided for by means of experiences of God’s presence and positive feelings of joy, peace that are attributed to him. (memo *Een relatie hebben is...* PRmJ V2-ATLAS.ti)

I continued the process of open coding for the next four interviews as well. Because by now I was ‘bored’ of coding half of all segments of data with ‘praying,’ I started to pay renewed attention to the content of the segments. What are these respondents saying about praying that is not coded yet? What unique perspectives do they offer compared to the interviews with the first four respondents? What is not being said about praying? Are there gaps in the data? New codes were added to the list, some others were dropped. I decided to ask respondents in a second round of interviewing about this issue: does having a personal relationship with Jesus more or less equal praying a lot? The exploration phase finally resulted in a total of 259 codes and 601 segments of data.

Profile Memos

At this stage in the research a profile memo is written about each respondent (Wester and Peters 2004, 100). Profile memos have a summarizing character and note down remarkable aspects of each respondent. Part of their function is to

counteract possible fragmentation of the research data due to initial coding procedures.

The profile memos draw attention to the narrative nature of evangelical spirituality (Klaver 2008, 148; 2011, 82). In the interviews respondents shared their complete life stories, which usually starts at their upbringing in a Christian home and end with the present day. Sometimes respondents focused upon the blessing of growing up in a Christian family, sometimes upon the required church attendance. Respondents shared about their search for something more, about meeting God and finally entering into a relationship with Jesus. Their stories are always intimately interwoven with stories about personal issues, family or work relationships and often too with personal dramas, pain and illness, which are often told as meaningful stories of faith. Their life stories also include many smaller – but often very detailed – stories of how living with Jesus is experienced in daily life. Ask believers after their relationship with Jesus, and they will answer by telling you many detailed stories – stories which are always part of a larger life story.

In the practice of interviewing, I sometimes experienced the stories of the respondents as long-threaded and as an unnecessary digression from the topic I was interested in. Sometimes I knew the rhythm of the story that was being told in advance and tried to make the respondent move on. Especially in the second round of interviews I started with the intention of trying to skip the elaborate life stories. But in practice, that was simply not possible. Respondents had to tell their life story. And so it dawned me how important the relation between these stories and their spirituality actually is. The story-telling of the respondents shows how the personal relationship with Jesus is experienced as process that evolves over time, a process by which sequences of events in life get meaningfully related to each other. They also reveal how intimately faith and daily life are interwoven, even to the point that a believer cannot distinguish between ordinary human life and the life of faith anymore. “It seems that speaking of a ‘personal relationship with Jesus’ is used to emphasize that faith for these believers is not a dimension of life, it is their way of life” (memo *Geloof bepaalt doen en laten*. PRmJ V2 – ATLAS.ti). The personal relationship with Jesus “is in everything that happens in life, I tell you honestly,” one of the respondents puts it.

Specification Phase

Having near 300 codes and accompanying memo's, the need for (renewed) reflection arose. The specification phase evaluates and reflects about the results of the first phase (Wester and Peters 2004, 160-169). What questions does the code list evoke? The code list needed to be studied and reflected upon. The researcher searches for the structure that underlies the code list. It needs to be decided

which codes are the most important ones. Codes are organized by categorizing them or relating them as sub codes to a main code.

Codes that were only supported by one or two segments of data were specifically looked into. A code becomes theoretically relevant when it is supported by several segments and can be used to explain a considerable amount of the data. This is not to say that codes with only one data segment attached to them can be removed. By comparing text fragments with one another, I searched for overarching categories that could account for several of those codes and the fragments attached to them. A lot of codes for instance concerned the respondents' attitudes towards or experiences with their (traditional) churches. All variations concerning this theme were joined together in two contrasting main categories: 'Church' versus 'Church: criticism.' All codes relating to the respondents' conversions or turning points in their lives were joined together in a single category concerning this 'turning point.' As the relationship with Jesus changed their way of life and themselves, a lot of codes constituted 'results and consequences' of having a personal relationship with Jesus.

Codes with fragments that could not be combined with other codes, were studied even more in depth as to analyze their relationship with the cautiously developing theoretical framework concerning the communication with God (see below). The list got specified to 144 codes of which quite some were hierarchically related to each other.

To Communicate with God... or Not?

The above described reflections and structuring acts were recorded and elaborated upon in theoretical memos (Wester and Peters 2004, 99-102). The main themes relevant to the respondents were clear without doubt. Judging from the frequency of the codes used, it could be said that the data is about 'praying,' '(trying) to hear God's voice' and a certain 'style of living' daily life. The data segments underlying those codes were studied more thoroughly.

Reflecting about 'praying' and the sub codes of praying, it stood out that respondents used a lot of communicative vocabulary to refer to praying ('talking,' 'communicating,' 'having contact'). They emphasized the importance of the verbal act by phases like "you have to name it" and "you speak that out." Respondents always relate the act of praying directly to God. Instead of just mentioning to 'pray,' they would more often speak about "praying to God," about "talking with God," "involving God," "dedicating to God." Praying for them is a relational act. But what is God's role in praying? What do believers expect from God?

'Praying' and '(trying) to hear God's voice' were closely related and often attached to the same data segment. They seemed to belong together. Re-

spondents pray in order to hear God's voice. The believer invests time and effort in it and actively searches for God's will for his life. Every believer is understood to communicate with God. At the same time, the communication is far from self-evident. In structuring the code list, many codes seemed to relate to the dynamics of communicating with God and specifically also to the difficulties this brought along.

Interestingly, even though evangelical faith is especially known for its experiential spirituality, the code 'God experiences' was not amongst the top three. The code was actually some kind of sub code of '(trying) to hear God's voice.' Respondents spoke about their experiences of God by using communicative vocabulary: God is saying something to them or communicating with them through the experience. "God's voice" actually never refers to a literal voice. Respondents hear God's voice in a variety of signs, means, miracles, experiences, in the Bible, in music, in nature, in thoughts, in extraordinary events, in feelings. Respondents told stories about all those things and constantly said to "notice something of God" in those things or events. In telling the stories, they were trying to convince me (or themselves?) that something 'really' happened, that God 'really' spoke to them. The elaborate stories, the confirmative statements added at the end of the stories, the excessive reference to details, were all functioning towards that end. The 'realness' of faith started to catch my (renewed) attention. In the memo *God speaks* I wrote:

I have to admit, 'hearing God's voice' does by far not always refer to a literal voice or a direct verbal message. In the personal relationship with God it is all about God personally interfering with the life of the believer. And God is not interfering in an invisible or silent way. No, the believer can see and notice it. God has something to say. God's tangible presence and activity in the life of the believer is experienced as highly meaningful. It is like God is saying: "I am really there," or "I do see and hear you." (memo *God spreekt*. PRmJ V3-ATLAS.ti)

When the code 'style of living' was studied the data pointed into three different directions. At the one hand, it was used to label segments of data in which the respondents explicitly spoke about the close intertwining between their ordinary life and religious life. At the other hand, it referred to faith practices like praying and Bible reading. These data segments especially emphasized the need to do them and to make it a way of living. Thirdly, there was a large amount of data subsumed under 'style of living' with a more ethical dimension, for which respondents used expressions like "living for God" and "obeying God." I wondered what would be the relationship between communicating with God and living for God. In studying the code 'living for God' the expression of

“desiring more” kept returning and catching my attention. What does the respondent desire? Why? Is it ever enough? The questions were included in the second round of interviewing.

Focused Coding

The list got specified to 144 codes which were used to re-code the 8 interviews, carefully taking care that similar incidents were similarly coded. Focused coding moves away from the open and initial codes, and makes more use of the existing code list. At the same time, as the data is studied from the perspective of this existing code list, new codes might be added if they say something meaningful about any of those codes. Of course, the researcher always remains open to new insights.

Methodical Memos

In methodical memos considerations and decisions concerning the progress of the research were laid down (Wester and Peters 2004, 100). As the theoretical memos pointed towards the importance of the communication with God, the need arose to question respondents again and more thoroughly about this theme for additional insights. At the same time I wondered what had happened to the code ‘God’s presence.’ The code had faded into the background because of my reflections about the codes concerning communication. Still, the code was used many times and its significance and relationship to the communication with God needed to be explored. In a theoretical and summarizing memo concerning the meaning of ‘having a relationship’ and my understanding so far I wrote:

Many respondents point directly or almost directly to the communicative dimension of their relationship with Jesus. Communicating with God is, you could say, the main theme of the interviews. At the same time, it might be useful to look again and to look more carefully to the answers believers gave. It seems that talking about praying and talking with God is also something of an ‘easy way out.’ The depth of having a relationship with Jesus is not easy to express in words. The communication with God is maybe just a more easy theme to talk about. (Memo *De relatie 04-10-2010*. PRmJ feb2012-ATLAS.ti)

Hence it was decided to conduct a new round of interviews using a topic list. ‘Living for God’ needed to be included in this new interview guideline, as well as the interesting notion of ‘desiring more.’ One more topic needed to be included: what about Jesus? Right from the start the first interviews and explora-

tion phase made me wonder about this original object of research. However, respondents tended to speak foremost about ‘God’! An early memo says:

Quite strange! Jesus is for quite some respondents not the person with whom they are, in faith, having contact. He plays, as now living divine person, quite a restricted role in their spirituality. He is a ‘necessary asset,’ and that holds foremost his *work* (not him as a person!) at the cross in 30 AD.” (memo *Jesus is...* PRmJ V2 – ATLAS.ti)

For the second round of interviewing therefore a topic list was developed, focusing on these themes.

A Second Round of Interviewing

The theoretical and methodical memos of the selection phase led to composition of the following topic list:

1. **The Relationship with Jesus.** What is it all about? To what extent is this relationship comparable or not to relationships you have with other people?
2. **The Communication with God.** How does that work exactly? What are your expectations? Why is this so important in your relationship with Jesus? Is ‘talking with God’ a fitting definition of your relationship with Jesus?
3. **Living for God (obedience of faith).** What does this relationship mean for you daily life? Goal?
4. **Community: Conferences and Church.** What brought you at those conferences? What are you looking for? What does the church mean for your relationship with Jesus?
5. **Jesus.** You speak about *God*, but say to have a relationship with *Jesus*. How does that work for you? Who is Jesus to you?
6. **Desiring more.** How do you hope that it will proceed? What expectations do you have regarding the future?

Coding the second round of interviews yielded important insights. The interviews drew attention to the importance of the respondents’ life stories in relation to their faith (see *Profile Memos*, p.91). Notions concerning God’s presence and the experience of the closeness of God got ever more important throughout the coding process and questions arose how to integrate these notions in the theoretical framework concerning the communication with God. The second round of interviews somehow seemed to qualify the communication process between God

and believer by placing it in the context of the encompassing notion of the ‘closeness of God.’ Elaborating and understanding the notion of God’s closeness was an important part of the analysis up to the end of the research. It provided direction to the critical note I made just before starting the second round of interviews (see *Methodical Memos*, p.95).

‘Reduction’ Phase

The name ‘reduction’ phase does not seem completely accurate for the phase as it was carried out in this research. The phase was not mainly about reducing the code list. The phase is a quite theoretical phase in which theoretical memos are worked out, literature is consulted, the relationships between codes and concepts are specified, and actually contrary to reduction new codes are developed. The new codes resulted from deepening insights in the main concept of communicating with God and from studying the nature of the relationship between the several dimensions of communicating with God. In addition, as the second round of interviews was coded new codes got introduced into the code list as well.

A Real Relationship

Throughout this phase I put much effort into understanding the communication with God. What are its main dimensions? How are they related? Maybe even more importantly I tried to gain understanding of the significance of the communication with God for respondents. Why is communicating with God so important to respondents? What theoretical concepts could provide understanding of this phenomenon? (see research question §1.2)

I focused upon studying the difficulties respondents encountered in their communication with God, as to better understand how communicating with God is perceived to work. I was surprised by the assumed ordinariness of the process of communicating with God at the one hand, and the amount of (implicit) conditions mentioned by respondents at the other hand. Quite some sub codes of the performed communicative faith practices function as contingencies and conditions upon which the successful engagement in these practices depends. Studying those contingencies and conditions (communicating with God requires time, discipline, motivation, concentration, competency...), it sometimes seemed that ordinary daily life itself is experienced as obstacle in the relationship with God!

In reflecting upon the meaning of the communication with God, the experienced sense of ‘realness’ was a constantly returning theme. One of the respondents formulated it so: “That you have real contact with him. Yes, real contact... eh, how do I explain that? It is real in the sense that: you just know

that if you pray, he hears you.” In addition, throughout coding (especially throughout coding the second round of interviews) two contrasting categories of ‘having a relationship’ versus ‘not *really* having a relationship’ were generated, in which also a sense of ‘realness’ featured prominently. For respondents, this sense of ‘realness’ pointed to a fundamental difference between the time before entering the relationship and after entering the relationship. After entering the relationship, faith and God became real to them. This ‘realness’ seemed to be closely connected to the practice of communicating with God and seemed to grasp its meaning. It seemed to explain why communicating with God is the fundamental process that defines what having a relationship with Jesus is all about.

The three dimensions of communicating with God (practices, experiences and closeness of God) were studied to see where and when such a sense of realness was experienced or talked about. In acts like praying and Bible reading, respondents stressed the need to actually *do* it, to address God and “name the things.” In experiences of God, respondents constantly seemed to put forward all kinds of concrete details as tangible proof that God *really* spoke to them. In interaction with literature study, a performative and material approach were adopted to explain this sense of ‘realness.’

Three interviews, which were so far kept aside and not coded, were used to check the validity of the analysis by coding the interviews with the codes of the theoretical framework. The framework fit the interviews. At the same time, the experience of coding these interviews was a strong reminder that ‘real faith’ as lived and experienced in actual life by ordinary believers is never as rigid and neatly ordered as the analytical framework which is used to explain and understand it. Therefore, in the following integration phase careful attention was paid to give an exposition of ‘real faith’ in a manner fitting the nature of the original interviews and to give room to the unpolished nature and raggedness of faith.

Integration Phase

As concepts, processes and relationships started to crystalize out, the work on an integrative exposition of the meaning of the relationship with Jesus could be started. It is the last phase of analysis mentioned by Wester and Peters (2004, 176-180). The results are elaborated on and explicated in the next part of this thesis and need no further elucidation at this point.

PART II
EMPIRICALLY GROUNDED RECONSTRUCTION
OF THE PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH
JESUS

5 Real Faith

5.1 | ‘Really’?!

“Faith is... well, for a relationship it takes two and you have to be open for that [...] and after that, you are with the two of you. And that’s how it *really* is,” Ted tries to explain to me in the interview about his personal relationship with Jesus. Ted is what could be called an evangelical Protestant. He is sixty years old and presently works at a large beer factory. He grew up in a traditional Christian environment but churchgoing watered down throughout his marriage, especially after moving places. Eight years ago he “met Jesus.” Before that time he certainly “had faith,” but at that moment the “Lord came in again.” “No,” Ted corrects himself, “*really* came in.” He concludes: “This is not believing, it is knowing.”

Twenty-eight-year old and single Leonie talks in a similar vein about her relationship with Jesus. She is still impressed by all what that relationship entails. She lives at home with her Reformed parents, is herself a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, but has been visiting a Pentecostal Church since last year. She shares: “Knowing God and being Christian means much more than just a God far away.” Even though she got a Christian upbringing, it was a befriended family that made a lasting impression upon her. They were “*really* Christian” and “lived *real* close to God.” From them she learned that being Christian is about “*really* living with God.” “You can have a *real* relationship with God and that makes it much more interesting,” she explains and concludes: “That relationship with God is the only thing that gives you *real* peace.”

Having a personal relationship with Jesus is about *real* contact with God and about *real* peace. It is about *real faith*. But what actually is this real faith they are talking about? Aagje, married and mother of two young children, confirmed that the relationship is all about “having real contact with him.” But she wondered: “Yes, real contact...eh, how do I explain that?” The question started to

occupy me more and more as the analysis of the interviews proceeded. What do they mean by *real*? How to explain what *real faith* is about?

The experience of real faith arises from the practice of *communicating with God*, which encompasses practices to communicate with God, experiences of God communicating in return and a growing sense of God's closeness. According to the respondents, communicating with God defines what having a personal relationship with Jesus is all about. This empirically grounded reconstruction of the personal relationship with Jesus will be introduced in §5.2.

To understand this real faith better, a *performative* and *material* approach are adopted. These approaches fit the believers' understandings of faith, but also go beyond them. The concepts of performativity and materiality give insight into the sense of 'realness' believers experience, how it comes about and what it means. A performative approach (§5.3) draws attention to action as most basic feature of the communication with God. For these believers, the relationship with Jesus is not something they merely refer to. It is a reality which is acted out. A material approach (§5.4) draws attention to the importance of the material dimensions of the respondents' faith. Their faith takes on shape in the material realm, which effectively mediates God's presence and makes God as real as the material realm. Believers speak about God being "really real."

Finally, this chapter addresses the *role of Jesus* in real faith (§5.5). Even though believers say to have a relationship with Jesus, in practice they communicate with God.

The chapters 6, 7 and 8 will present a more elaborate reconstruction of real faith. The structure of these chapters closely follows the believers' understandings of their relationships with Jesus; their vocabulary is used wherever possible. Performative and material dimensions will be highlighted throughout the description. The interviewed respondents will be referred to as 'believers,' 'respondents,' 'evangelical Protestants,' and by their names.

5.2 | Communicating with God. An Introduction

Having a relationship with Jesus is established in *communicating with God*. In a real relationship God and believer communicate with each other, personally and often informally, throughout the day. The relationship is about "real contact," as believers express it. After wondering how to explain what she means by "real contact," Aagje says: "[The relationship] is real in the sense that: you just know that if you pray, he hears you."

Real contact – communicating with God – is comprised of three vital components. Firstly, the active pursuance of *communicative faith practices* (chapter

6), like praying and Bible reading, forms a salient part of the respondents' daily life. Secondly, their lives are characterized by numerous smaller and bigger *meaningful experiences of God* (chapter 7), like experiences of God's guidance or of miracles, in which God is perceived to communicate with the believer. Thirdly, the interaction between communicative faith practices and experiences of God gives rise to perceiving to live in the *closeness of God* (chapter 8). Together these three components "just mean everything," as respondents like to put it, to the believer. They evoke a sense of realness because of which the relationship with Jesus is perceived more meaningful than the faith they used to have.

Communicative faith practices are a conspicuous component of having a personal relationship with Jesus. Believers who have a personal relationship with Jesus eagerly engage in practices like praying, Bible reading, singing, faith sharing and churchgoing, and typically desire to engage in it more extensively and intensively. They pray at any time, anywhere and about everything but would always love to pray more. Ask evangelicals about their relationship with Jesus and the odds are they start telling about "talking with God" or something the like. "All day long being in contact with him, that's really point one. That's not only in your quiet time, when you wake up in the morning. Then I already start talking with him," Justus (29 years old) answers right away when asked to explain what it is like to have a personal relationship with Jesus. The much older Mr Rosegaar (76) confirms: "It is a direct relationship where you can get rid of everything. Whatever you cannot tell your wife, you can get it off your chest and tell him. In my eyes, that is the core." Praying, clearly, is the most common communicative faith practice, but the interviews show that many other practices, amongst others Bible reading, singing, churchgoing and faith sharing,⁴⁵ are cultivated for the same reason of communicating with God.

Communicative faith practices are practices that aim at – and are presumably capable of – establishing reciprocal communication with God. Believers engage in these practices for sharing *their* feelings and lives with God, but at the same time aim at hearing something from *God*. That is why farmer Kees (37 years old) takes time every morning – before milking the cows at five o'clock! – to pray and read the Bible: "Gods wants to speak to you, and you shouldn't run away from that." "Hearing what God has to say" is an important motivation for engaging in communicative faith practices. The success of this attempt is a fundamental component of the relationship with Jesus. To put it simply, believers who have a personal relationship with Jesus both pray and receive "answers from God" to their prayers. To be sure, believers do not usually hear a literal voice speaking to them. Rather they experience all sorts of (extraordinary) things or events, which they interpret as stemming from God and revealing God's will. It

⁴⁵ 'Faith sharing' translates the Dutch original "*het geloofsgesprek*" or "*over het geloof praten*."

is the combined play of performed communicative faith practices and these experiences of God – like experiences of God’s care or guidance – that is understood by evangelical believers as reciprocal communication between believer and God. The thus experienced intersubjectivity is spoken of as having a real personal relationship with Jesus.

Exactly this however – reciprocity or “hearing God’s voice” – is not a matter of course, also not to believers who are in a relationship with Jesus. Leonie says in plain terms: “Of course the relationship is all about talking a lot with someone, telling this someone things and that this other person tells you things as well. But when I pray, it is rather often: the one who is speaking, is me.” Still believers have great trust in the efficacy of communicative faith practices to establish reciprocal communication. They experience that their engagement in communicative faith practices brings them close to God. There, close to God, they will surely be able to hear his voice. At the same time, however, they have to exert themselves continually to make these practices function properly: by practicing them regularly and ever more extensively and intensively, by being continually aware of possible obstacles and removing these, and by searching new ways to interact with God, meet him and draw closer to him.

Even though the communication with God knows its “ups and downs,” over time the experience of interaction with God gives rise to a more stable and continual awareness of God’s presence. Believers perceive to live close to God. It becomes their way of being in the world. And so respondents “just know” that if they pray, God hears them.

5.3 | Performativity

Evangelical Protestant faith is best understood by looking at it from the perspective of *performative action*. Having a relationship with Jesus does not primarily refer to a spiritual bond of love, neither to a mental state of mind, to an attitude or conviction. The personal relationship with Jesus is above all a reality enacted in the performance of communicative faith practices.

A performative approach draws attention to faith as something that is being done. It tries to understand what is being done on its own right, by looking at the very nature of what is being done: it is a quality of action. The present research therefore draws upon several theories of action from the field of practical theology (Nieman 2008), the field of ritual studies (Houseman 2008; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2008) and sociology of religion (Riesebrodt 2009). These studies draw attention to the performative force of action. They pay attention to practice and/or ritual from the perspective of what acts *accomplish* and (set out to) *do*, in-

stead of paying attention to what (the content of) these acts might intend to *communicate*.

The attention to the performative force of practices and rituals developed under influence of performance studies and studies of the philosophy of language. US performance studies scholar Ronald L. Grimes (2008) provides for a concise overview of such developments. Performance studies adopt a drama or performance framework to theorize rituals. They draw attention to the enactment itself, as well as to being on display while doing so (379–380). The attention to the performative dimensions of rituals makes it possible to ask questions about form and effectiveness: How did you do that? Where did you learn that? Why didn't that work? (379) Throughout time, performance studies show a terminological shift from 'drama' to 'performance' (1970s) to 'performativity' and push the notion of performativity beyond theater. A distinct but convergent strand of theorizing that pushes the notion of performance beyond theater includes names like philosophers J. L. Austin and John Searle (390). In these studies of the philosophy of language performativity connotes 'doing things with words.' Throughout the past decades both strands of theorizing influenced the emergence of the notion of performativity as the opposite of expressivity, pointing to the enactment of meanings.

A performative approach fits the respondents' emphasis on developing a relationship with Jesus by engaging in communicative faith practices. It helps to explain how these practices establish real contact with God and gives the possibility to address the respondents' concerns about the operational logic of their practices. Why does God, or why does God not, talk back?

Action-based Faith

In order to establish real contact with God first of all *action* is needed: the prayer needs to be prayed, the Bible needs to be read, the sung needs to be sung. The believers' relationships with Jesus are characterized by the active pursuance of communicative faith practices. Communicative faith practices are practices that foremost of all need to be *done*.

Practical theological studies concerning faith practices (Nieman 2008) and studies in the field of ritual studies (Houseman 2008; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2008) point towards action as important starting point for analyzing practices or rituals. This might seem obvious as action is the most basic feature of a practice. It is however important to realize, as US practical theologian James R. Nieman points out (in a straightforward article addressing the question 'Why the Idea of Practice Matters'), that the condition of action implies that attitudes and dispositions alone do not qualify as practices (2008, 21). Indeed, having the right mindset or a proper understanding of God simply does not suffice in this type of faith.

Having a personal relationship with Jesus refers to a spirituality of *doing*, not primarily of *believing*. This does not mean that convictions or feelings do not play a role, but they are subordinate to what the believer actually does (Houseman 2008, 414). The idea of action matters as it draws attention to the effort and energy involved in communicative faith practices, the proficiency required of believers, and the practices' inherent plan of action to accomplish a certain end (Nieman 2008). Note that although evangelicals are generally renowned for their activism, the presently meant activism does not equal the (missionary) activism mentioned by Bebbington (1989, 10-12), nor social activism or ethical correctness. It refers to the actual and active engagement in communicative faith practices.

Believers themselves are very much aware of the need for this type of concrete action. Justus explicates: "If you then only have a feeling or an emotion – He does know and does feel my emotions, and he feels my feelings. I would not say that he doesn't. But if you *really* want to have contact, then you will have to talk." 'Talking' is a good example of the kind of action required. It shows that communicative faith practices involve concrete actions of a communicative nature. This quotation also portrays the typical evangelical way of using the word 'really.' It shows that the believer's sense of realness is closely connected to his or her engagement in communicative faith practices. The believer's actual engagement in a communicative faith practice enacts a relationship with God and so leads to experiencing answers from God.

Right away this action-oriented approach to the personal relationship with Jesus diverges from interpretations of evangelical faith that highlight its experiential bias to explain the experience of realness. This research is not the first to point towards the evangelical notion of 'real' (faith). Evangelicals themselves have emphasized the realness of their faith throughout the past decades. At the foundation of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association), Van Heusden wrote about the success of the evangelical movement and attributed it to the realness of evangelical faith: "The evangelical movement offers a truth that can be verified. It is not about knowing the facts, but about knowing the person Jesus Christ through a personal encounter. The evangelical movement establishes God's presence. There is a high expectation that the truth is not only proclaimed, but is also realized: sins are being forgiven, the sick are being healed, relationships are being restored, and the Spirit is poured out in the hearts" (1996, 56-57). This "verification" and "realization" of the truth is usually interpreted in terms of experiencing (something of) God.

UK evangelical theologian McGrath too explains that "evangelicals emphasize the experience of faith. Evangelicals emphasize the experience of being saved by Jesus Christ, more than the cognitive, dogmatic and historic expression of this experience" (2000, 62). For evangelicals knowing God is just as much an

experience as a cognition. This experience is as real as history. As McGrath explicates: “Justification is just as much an experience of conversion as a doctrine, in almost the same manner as Jesus Christ is a real presence in the life of a believer as much as he is a historic reality and central source of nourishment and authority for Christian theology and life” (2000, 63, cf. §2.2).

Dutch evangelical Protestant faith is also characterized by the experience of faith, but the realness these experiences evoke is embedded in the practice of faith. I asked Justus what the relationship with Jesus is comprised of next to “talking with God.” He reacted: “Well, I see answers right away.” But Justus added immediately: “*Because* you communicate, you get answers in return too.” These “answers from God” gain a tangible and recognizable face in the concrete stories respondents tell. In these stories, events and situations of ordinary life are retold with a continual reference to the presence, closeness and intervention of God. As Klaver explains “in telling such testimonies the reality of faith is being confirmed and reconfirmed” (2008, 148). The respondents’ God experiences indeed *confirm* the reality of the relationship with God. They are however not solely responsible for establishing it. The connection respondents make between their religious experiences and the performance of communicative faith practices shows that experiences of God do not happen out of thin air. They are grounded in the performed faith practices. For this very reason believers engage in communicative faith practices: they are the *means* to experience God’s help and guidance. This connection resurfaces in the interviews time and time again. As Ted emphasized: “I may involve God in everything *and then* he will help me for sure.”

US anthropologist Tanya M. Luhmann (2012) is an author who deeply inquired into the sense of realness evangelicals perceive. She too connects the believers’ God experiences to the effort they put into attaining such experiences. She started off her inquiry with one important question: “How does God become real for people? How are sensible people able to believe in an invisible being who has a demonstrable effect on their lives?” (xi) For her ‘realness’ has to do with the existence of God as “being in the world” (xix) and his active involvement in the daily life of believers. Whereas Klaver points towards narrating stories *afterwards* to confirm the reality of faith, Luhmann focuses upon what *precedes* these experiences: “These evangelicals have *sought out* and cultivated concrete experiences of God’s realness. They have *strained* to hear the voice of God speaking outside their heads. They have *yearned* to feel God clasp their hands and to sense the weight of his hands push against their shoulders” (xv, emphasis original). Luhmann concludes that “coming to a committed belief in God was more like learning *to do* something than *to think* something” (xxi). In her book she presents an intriguing and beautifully illustrated “theory of attentional learning” which means that “the way you learn to pay attention determines your experience of God” (xxi).

The weight given to experience in the relationship with Jesus thus has to be balanced by the weight given to the pursuance of communicative faith practices. Sometimes it seems that experience is all there is to evangelical faith. The core of the relationship with Jesus seems to be the subjective experience of God. That interpretation does not do justice to what respondents tell. Respondents talk to God, listen to God, invest time in him and use intermediaries in several kinds of practices. The relationship is not only about all kinds of experiences of God, but about engaging in communicative faith practices and therein experiencing God. In the performance of these communicative faith practices, real faith finds its starting point.

Enactment of a Reality

Justus emphasized that the believer “will have to talk.” But why then actually? Reflecting upon practices from the perspective of action means that it is important to look at what practices *do* and what they bring about, rather than at what they and their content *communicate*. They are performative practices, rather than representative means of communication. Communicative faith practices bring about – they *enact* – a relationship with God. Through the intentional and emotional performance by the believer that relationship with God is real and ‘alive.’

Throughout the historical development of ritual theory the emphasis shifted from understanding ritual as form of communication, to theories that emphasize ritual as form of action, practice or performance (Foley 2010, 146–1147; also cf. Grimes 2008; Wulf 2008). An influential, traditional representative of ritual as communication is sociologist Emil Durkheim. He viewed ritual “in its role as the paradigm and the practical origin of the social, as the direct antithesis of a utilitarian understanding of action. Thus, as action, it is symbolic *rather than* rational, expressive *rather than* effective” (Laidlaw and Humphrey 2008, 265). Ritual as action attempts to depart from this view and emphasizes the self-referential nature of ritual instead of viewing ritual as ‘symbolic’ (Foley 2010, 147). Anthropologist Michael Houseman, viewing ritual as a quality of action, summarizes one of the main acquired insights well: “Rituals do not tell stories, they enact particular realities” (2008, 414).

These insights from the field of ritual studies proved helpful to understand the respondents’ emphasis on the need to talk in order to have “real contact.” In communicative faith practices believers *do* something: they relate to God in a direct manner. Believers do not sing *about* God or read *about* God in the Bible, but they pray or sing *to* God or read God’s Word. These acts imply a relational configuration, as especially Houseman points out (2008, 413). They *act out* a relationship with God. Hence the relationship with God is not merely referred

to, but one which is being acted out. Houseman therefore emphasizes that such ritual relationships should not be seen as “expression of or vehicle for certain values or ideas” and cannot “in the manner of myths for example, be reduced to logical or metaphorical connections between abstract terms or categories” (415). The personal relationship with Jesus rather constitutes a “lived-through experience” (416). A believer can never be an entirely neutral performer. He/she is intentionally and emotionally involved. In the performance the relationship with Jesus is therefore “immediate, personally invested and, for lack of a better word, alive” (416).

Houseman points out that he enactment of a relationship implies the ongoing reciprocal involvement between subjects implying, for all parties concerned, the attendant qualities of agency, interaction, intentionality, affect and accountability (2008, 415). In case the relationship involves non-human entities, their quality as actual subject and the reciprocal involvement between believer and God is however not unproblematic. The German sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt (2009) therefore emphasizes how communicative faith practices, in acting out a relationship with God, “dramatize” the religious premise of the existence of God as well as his accessibility (86). God too is no longer a mere belief or supposition, but ‘real.’ According to Riesebrodt, it is here that “the aura of factuality” (after Clifford Geertz) is produced as these practices “ground and strengthen the experience of religious reality emotionally and cognitively” (86).

Farmer Kees illustrates these processes quite well when he tries to find words to describe what is happening when he prays: “When I am praying, I don’t have the idea that I am gabbling hot air, to put it that way, but neither do I feel a hand on my shoulder.” In the act of praying something happens that is not easy to describe, but at least the believer is not “gabbling hot air.” In the act of addressing God directly a reality is enacted, namely the reality of having a personal relationship with him. This reality, and the reality of God that is part of it, is not like “feeling a hand on [one’s] shoulder” but it is real nevertheless. The enacted reality exerts a lasting effect on the day or time that follows. Kees continues telling: “I always start the day with praying and Bible reading [...] because *then* God is with me throughout the day.” The experience of living daily in the closeness of God thus starts with actually relating to God through engaging in communicative faith practices. The relationship with Jesus is first of all a ritual relationship. It is enacted in the performance of communicative faith practices. In the performance the relationship is real.

Versus Re-enactment

Enactment is not re-enactment. Scholar of religion Ninian Smart explains the performative character of songs and prayers as re-enactment. He points out that

in Christian songs and prayers things are said *about* God. Things which the singer or prayer already knows and does not need to be reminded of. When we sing and pray about God and his deeds we rather re-enact those events (in Immink 2011, 42). Dutch practical theologian Gerrit Immink (2011) uses Smart's performative approach to understand ordinary Christian worship as event in which "the sacred happens." Drawing upon insights of Smart he explicates how in a Christian worship service a connection is made with decisive, salvific revelations of the past. These salutary events of the past become a renewing and active force in the performance of the worship service (Immink 2011, 43).

Immink's performance approach points towards an important aspect of Christian practices: their relationship to the cross and resurrection of Christ. How is the relation between the personal relationship with Jesus and his death and resurrection configured? A double answer needs to be given in this respect. First, the enactment of the relationship with Jesus is not a re-enactment. Whereas Smart takes the *words* and *content* of songs and prayers as his starting point of analysis, in the relationship with Jesus the *act* of relating to God is the point of departure. The meaning of this *act* of relating to God is not understood from its *content* or reference towards salutary events or revelations from the past. The meaning of the act is first of all self-referential and lies in the enactment of an immediate relationship with God. These acts *do* something rather than *communicate* salvific events of the past to the believer. Communicative faith practices are thus not firstly to be interpreted from the perspective of salvation history. They do not bring together the past and the present, i.e. the divine salvation of the past and the believer's life of the present. Communicative faith practices are better understood from a relational perspective of immediate contact between *human* and *divine*. They are concerned with relating two realities to each other. They bring together the human reality and the reality of God. The performative force of communicative faith practices is to enact a relationship between God and the individual in the present.

Who then is this God a believer is relating to? So critics ask, concerning the God image of evangelical Protestants (cf. §3.3 Faith or Feelings?). UK anthropologists James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey (whose article elaborates upon the relationship between action and meaning) emphasize that that meaning is not pre-existing and received by participants. In contrast with Durkheim's view, meaning is attributed *in response to* ritual (2008, 274). In response to the ritual, to the enactment of the relationship with God respondents seek understanding and form a God image.

A spot-on example is provided by Justus. He has prayed to God all of his life. Before his conversion he though did not know that he "needed Jesus" to pray to God. He just "called out unto God," "out of habit." For Justus, the prac-

tice did not re-enact the salvific past, but it did enact (some sort of) a relationship with God. Now he understands it thus:

If you now ask me: All that time you could go to God without Jesus? I say “No.” But you have prayed to God without Jesus? “Yes” I then have to say. But at that time Jesus interceded for me with his Father, like: “That boy is panicking.” And so his Father has given me to him, like: “Search him, give him rest.” [...] So yes I prayed to God without doing it through Jesus. So I really called upon God. And eh, so Jesus has heard that. He prayed, so I think now, all this time for me to the Father. Maybe he asked: “Can I have him?”

Justus attributed this specific meaning only in response to his practice of praying to God, at a much later date.

Evangelicals are usually well aware of the performative force of communicative faith practices. They therefore display a tendency to continually invite people to participate in faith, to come forward, to pray, and give your life to Jesus. Even if people do not yet (fully) understand what having a relationship with Jesus is all about, these practices will enact a relationship with God. That is what matters. Understanding can wait (compare a.o. Bright’s *Laws*, see §2.3). After so entering into a relationship with God, believers often demonstrate a desire for understanding the practices that they *are already engaging in*. They put effort in understanding their relationship with God through studying the Bible, reading Christian books and visiting conferences. So their practice of communicating with God gets embedded in the Christian tradition, and so they come to understand the God they address from the perspective of that tradition. But communicative faith practices themselves are no vehicles for communicating this tradition.

A second answer is though needed to answer the question about the relation between the personal relationship with Jesus and the re-enactment of his death and resurrection. Believers are namely firmly convinced that it is *only* possible to relate to God “through Jesus” or “through the redemptive work of Jesus.” Such expressions indicate that the enactment of the relationship with Jesus *does* include or is based upon *some kind of re-enactment* of Jesus’ redemptive work. The habit to pray “in Jesus’ name” points thereto as well.

The statements of the believers give no clear insight into the relationship between enactment and re-enactment (see §5.5 What about Jesus?). Some statements indicate that the power of the cross is administered to the individual believer in the act of conversion. At the moment he/she converts and enters into the relationship with God, forgiveness and grace are administered in a one-time event. After the believer “has been saved,” the believer can freely communicate

with God and live daily with him. In the act of conversion, the power of the cross in once-only re-enacted.

Other statements (like the one just cited of Justus) indicate that the daily enactment of the relationship with God entails a simultaneous re-enactment of Jesus' salvific power. Believers speak in *present* tense about "Jesus who *clears* the path unto God." They indicate that "you *need* Jesus to be able to come to God." Every act of communicating with God not merely depends on the availability of the power of forgiveness which is *once-only* administered to the believer in the act of conversion. It re-enacts that power *every time and day* again when communicative faith practices are performed. To pray "in Jesus' name" seems to indicate such as well. The performance of communicative faith practices, then, is not merely possible *because* the believer *has been* redeemed. In the performance, the redemptive power of the cross *is* enacted every time again.

Justus' understanding is one of the most far-reaching in this respect. In his perception, the (re-)enactment of the Jesus' power happens *independent* of the words used, the intention or understanding of the performer. Justus did not pray "in Jesus' name" and did not "know Jesus" at all. In Justus' perspective, the performance of communicative faith practices simply always brings Jesus' power into force. Jesus is imagined as intercessor who actively and continually reminds the Father of the forgiveness he has attained through his atoning work at the cross.

Versus Pretending

Notwithstanding the imagination used by Justus and other believers, performing is not the same as pretending. Luhrmann describes the task of learning to relate to God as a person as pretending, after the suggestion in the chapter Let's Pretend by C. S. Lewis in *Mere Christianity*. She explains:

God has no face. You cannot look him in the eye and judge that he hears you speak. He does not make the little phatic grunts we make to each other on the phone, to show we're still listening. [...] To deal with this problem, the churches like the Vineyard invite congregants to *pretend* that God is present and to make believe that he is talking back like the very best of buddies. (Luhrmann 2012, 73)

Luhrmann shows how in the evangelical world many practices invite the believer to behave with God as imaginary friend, for instance by setting out a second cup of coffee for God or by taking time for a walk with God for some informal chit-chat and chatter (2012, 74-75). Luhrmann contrasts such *pretense* with the *act* of imitating Christ (Thomas à Kempis). Imitating Christ is to behave in reality and is an act (73). Pretending however is not an act, but a suspension of disbelief.

According to Luhmann, the reality of the relationship with God lies in the experiences that will follow. Hence the adage is “let us pretend in order to make the pretense into a reality” (73).

In a performative approach to communicating with God, believers do not pretend. They act. They address God. By speaking to God, being silent for him, investing time in him or using intermediation they actually relate to God. Luhmann indeed notices that believers themselves usually reject the words ‘pretending’ or ‘imaginary’ (74, 77). A performative approach seeks to do justice to this rejection. Believers experience to *really* have contact with God. To them it is certainly not imaginary. In the performance God is addressed, his existence is dramatized, the relationship with him is acted out and pretense is superfluous.

The respondents of this research also do not indicate to engage in practices of pretense in the same way as described by Luhmann. The imaginative informality that characterizes those practices of pretense – like “setting an extra dinner plate for God,” “giggling with God as they walked down the street” or “having a date night with God” (74-75) – generally fails in their practices.

Real Meaning

Respondents talk about the meaning of the relationship with Jesus in high-flown style and use all-encompassing terms to express its meaning. When asked to describe in a few words what having a personal relationship with Jesus means to them, believers typically answer: “A lot,” “It just means everything,” “Without Jesus you have nothing” and “It is indispensable.”⁴⁶ In real faith the relationship with Jesus determines all of the believers’ lives.

According to Riesebroth, it is through the performance of communicative faith practices that the relationship with Jesus becomes “a reality that holds the whole human being in its grip” (2009, 86). Riesebroth presents a meaning-oriented theory of action, in which *interventionist practices* function as primary source of religious significance. Drawing upon Melford Spiro (1987), he sees religions as concrete “systems of practices that are related to superhuman powers” (Riesebroth 2009, xii). Religions are thus “based on the premise of the existence of superhuman powers, whether personal or impersonal, that are generally invisible” (74-75). The meaning of religion is defined by those practices that aim at establishing contact with these powers or at gaining access to them. Those practices are called interventionist practices. Interventionist practices are to be distinguished from discursive practices – interpersonal communication reflecting upon

⁴⁶ Answers from the surveys. For recruiting respondents for this research a total of 164 short surveys were conducted among festival participants at selected festivals, see §4.3 Selection of Respondents.

interventionist practices, their nature and the God at whom they are directed – and behavior-regulating practices that are concerned with the rules for correct behavior and pertain to the religious reshaping of everyday life with respect to superhuman powers (75–76).

Interventionist practices are, according to Riesebrodt, the core of any religion. Interventionist practices “dramatize” the religious premise of the existence of superhuman powers, “ground” experiences of religious reality, and most important in this respect also “justify” all other faith practices: “Just to believe in the abstract that superhuman powers exist does not make them a reality that holds the whole human being in its grip. Only the fact that one *not merely ‘believes’* in the existence of superhuman powers *but also communicates* with them justifies all the other practices” (86). “Logically, systematically, and pragmatically, behavior-regulating and discursive practices [therefore] presuppose the existence of interventionist practices” (86).

Communicative faith practices belong to the category of interventionist practices. Through their performative qualities they present God as reality to the believer. Only a *reality* – not a *premise* – can “hold the whole human being in its grip.” As a consequence, discourses concerning this God now become important and gain relevance: Who actually is this God? How should we pray to him? Similarly it becomes relevant to inquire into the will of this God and start acting according to it. In other words, the enacted relationship with Jesus activates and authenticates (in Riesebrodt’s words “justifies”) Christian beliefs, prior held convictions, believed promises, ethics and practiced morality. Thus communication with God leads to a highly meaningful faith.

The interviews clearly testify to such processes. Respondents tell that convictions “came to life” as soon as they “met Jesus.” Ted shares about his practice of Bible reading: “What had always been a story, was suddenly such a piece of reality.” Tilde experienced that many convictions she had always held, suddenly “came closer.” The respondents were brought up in a Protestant family and used to go to church. They were familiar with the Protestant tradition, its dogmas and theology from the start. They experienced faith as somehow meaningful. But these beliefs gain *real* meaning upon the enactment of a personal relationship with Jesus. As Ted put it: he “had faith” but at a certain moment “the Lord really came in” and believing became “knowing.” Meaning does not only depend upon (the content of) the answers the Christian faith provides. Real meaning is also measured by the *force* by which it presents these answers to daily life. Only the believer’s successful engagement in communicative faith practices and the enactment of a relationship with Jesus makes faith an effective force: it activates Christian beliefs and authenticates God’s promises. Indeed, these evangelical Protestants can often be characterized by their strongly held (orthodox) beliefs (Crapanzano 2000; Stoffels 1990). But these strong beliefs are rather the

outcome of the relationship with Jesus, not its foundation. The personal relationship with Jesus is a practiced reality in which faith leads to faith.

Riesebrodt points towards a second process that explains how the relationship with Jesus holds believers “in its grip.” One that is of particular interest for this research: “In an intensified form, behavior-regulating practices can also assume the meaning of interventionist practices, for example, when they are interpreted as communication with superhuman powers or as strategy of self-empowerment. Ethical behavior or the intensive study of sacred texts can be interpreted as a form of religious service and thus take on the quality of an interventionist practice. It is as if the limits were constantly in flux” (2009, 76). In the personal relationship with Jesus the limits shift steadily into one direction. Behavior-regulating practices (like Bible reading) and discursive practices (like faith sharing in small faith groups) take on the quality of interventionist practices.

Well-known is the practice of ‘interventionist’ Bible reading. Many believers would confirm Ms Mol’s explanation of reading the Bible, when she claims: “this is God’s word, God speaks to us.” The practice enacts a relationship between the believer and God. Not only in Bible reading, but also in listening to a sermon or lecture, singing, sharing faith, receiving ministry prayer, in all those practices the words read, song or heard can assume the status of “this is God’s word, God speaks to us.” Their Christian content or context makes it even quite self-evident for believers to take these words as words directly emanating from God. The believers’ eagerness to “hear what God wants,” makes that all these practices continually assume a communicative or, in Riesebrodt’s words, interventionist meaning.

5.4 | Materiality

Concrete actions and tangible experiences materialize the personal relationship with Jesus and closely intertwine the experience of the relationship with the realness of material life. It is the “stubbornness of the materiality of things” (Appadurai in Vásquez 2011, 13) which makes faith stubbornly real.

A material approach takes the materiality of religious life seriously and does not see it as mere external manifestation of inward beliefs (Meyer 2010, 2012a; Meyer and Houtman 2012b; Vásquez 2011). A material approach seeks to overcome the long-standing conceptualization of the duality between body and mind.⁴⁷ Scholar of religion Manuel E. Vásquez presents an insightful overview of

⁴⁷ Even though not necessarily adopting a fully material perspective, a comparable attempt is presently visible in practical theology’s interest in Christian practices and lived religion that

the philosophical genealogies of this conceptual duality and shows how spirit got privileged above matter and the body was denigrated (2011, 21–41). It produced an understanding of religion in terms of belief, meaning and interior spirituality, with Protestantism as its main exponent (Meyer and Houtman 2012a). The presumed antagonism between religion and materiality dominated the nineteenth century understanding of materialism, which expressed a clear antireligious position of those who “foolishly denied the existence of God in favor of sheer matter” (Meyer and Houtman 2012a, 6). The ‘new’ materialism of the 21st century however acknowledges and appraises the concreteness and tangibility of religion and is rather interested in understanding how religion – not so much is *expressed* materially but – “*happens* materially” (7, emphasis original).

A material approach is in line with a performative approach. Indeed action “involves effort and energy in the *material realm*” (Nieman 2008, 21, emphasis original). A material approach underlines that these actions are not merely the *expression* of a relationship with Jesus. They *are* the relationship. Indeed real faith “happens materially.” Performative action is though not the only issue at stake here. Respondents continually draw attention to the material dimensions of their faith, because it gives their faith its own sense of realness.

A material approach points to the constitutive importance of form and matter in faith because they *mediate* God’s presence. Scholars of religion Birgit Meyer and Dick Houtman define a material approach as one that: “...advocate[s] coming to terms with materiality as part of (the study of) religion. The point is not simply to unmask entities such as God, gods, and spirits as fictions but to grasp how practices of religious mediation effect the presence of these entities in the world through bodily sensations, texts, buildings, pictures, objects, and other material forms that involve bodies and things” (2012a, 6). As the believers’ God experiences are closely intertwined with the material realm, a new sense of realness is added to the enacted reality of the personal relationship with God: God is “*really* real.” The believers’ faith is as real as the material realm it is part of.

The Material Density of Faith

The material qualities of communicative faith practices matter to believers. Communicative faith practices involve time, space, silence or music, movement, gestures, things – to name just a few material dimensions. Ted emphasizes: “You have to make time for that!” A believer needs, amongst others, to make time for practicing the relationship with Jesus. Marie, Ted’s wife, reacts and confirms: “Because you are always busy and then you think: Later, I will do that later. And

tries to resist a separation of thinking from doing (cf. §1.3. See a.o. Foley 2010; Volf and Bass 2002).

‘later’ is again being postponed and in the end you still haven’t materialized it in the evening.” The importance of faith ‘happening materially’ contrasts with long standing Protestant assumptions (see Meyer and Houtman 2012a, 9ff) that beliefs or inner religiosity are more fundamental than matter. An appreciation of materiality as fundamental dimension of the personal relationship with Jesus is visible amongst all respondents.

These material dimensions of the personal relationship with Jesus are strongly intertwined with daily life. Daily life is the liturgical stage where communicative faith practices are performed, preferably on a daily base. As the regular engagement in communicative faith practices like praying and Bible reading literally takes up space and time, the personal relationship with Jesus affects patterns of daily living. In a material approach it is recognized, that humans do not exist as bodiless souls in a spiritual universe but as bodily beings who are part of and act in a material world. As Vásquez summarizes the main line of a material approach to religion creatively well: “It approaches religion as it is lived by human beings, not by angels” (2011, 5). This line of approach therefore also draws attention to the fact that the daily performance of the personal relationship with Jesus involves the bodily participation of the believer: the believer needs to go into a room, sit or kneel down, take the Bible, clear his/her mind, concentrate. The significance of this dimension of bodily participation should not be underestimated. Kees for instance, as indicated before, prays and reads the Bible every morning, before milking the cows. For Kees this is quite a challenge, to pray and read the Bible every morning: at five o’clock his body is not yet too willing to be awake and participate! The personal relationship with Jesus is thus in no way confined to the believers’ inner lives, but part of their real lives. It is in the real life, in the “messy realm of work, love, celebration, and suffering where human beings dwell” (Bass 2002, 1) that the relationship with Jesus happens.

As the relationship with Jesus is part of real life, it constitutes an experience of real faith. The active engagement of believers in communicative faith practices gives their faith significant *material density*. Vásquez uses the concept of material density to confront social constructionism with the materiality of cultures and selves (also cf. Meyer and Houtman 2012a, 5ff). Vásquez subscribes to a cultural realism seeing cultures as “material in their own right” namely “through social practices that mediate how we experience the world and our own embodiment” (2011, 6). So the participation of believers in communicative faith practices makes the reality of the relationship with God which is enacted through them “*quite real*, as real as the physical world from which it ‘must’ have evolved” (Margolis in Vásquez 2011, 6). Nieman explains it quite straightforward: the concrete acts that make up a faith practice involve “doing something with the stuff of our lives and world, in a way that is more than the private manipulation of thoughts or ideas” (2008, 21). In the same vein, the contact with God result-

ing from the performance of communicative faith practices is, in the believer's experience, "more than the private manipulation of thoughts or ideas": it is real.

In evangelical Protestant faith the material density of faith is consciously increased by investing large amounts of time in God through keeping daily quiet time and through visiting conferences. Believers consciously attempt to increase the intertwinement of their daily life and faith, through the performance of practices like praying on their bicycles, listening to the Bible while driving to work, singing at work. They try "to involve God in everything." So every scrap of the believer and of the believer's daily life get intertwined with (the enactment of) the relationship with Jesus. The material density of faith is also increased by more specific practices as baptism by immersion, anointment with oil, laying on hands in acts of blessing, participating in ministry prayer (see in particular §6.5 Using Intermediation). The material nature of those acts enhances the experience of the enacted relationship as real, as it gives the enacted religious reality of the personal relationship with Jesus ever more material density.

An example from the interview with Mr and Ms Mol shows how evangelical Protestants connect *realness* with *materiality*. Ms Mol shares how she was dissatisfied with faith: "I thought: There must be more. What I experience presently in this church is not enough for me." A few others in church had "the same thing too." She continues: "We wanted to concretize that. [...] We wanted something real. So what to do?" From the interview it is clear that Ms Mol was not dissatisfied with faith in general, she just wanted "something real." In her desire for *real faith* she searches for what she can *concretely do*. As a result a Church Growth Group (*Gemeente Groei Groep*) was set up with the theme 'In training with Jesus.' "As Jesus coached the disciples, so he tried to coach us too because we were doing an internship with him." As the twelve members of the Growth Group talked about how to be "fishers of men," they decided to send the troubled and sick of their church a card for encouragement. "We did that three times and send nine cards," Ms Mol can tell with precision. The materiality of the twelve group members, the three times, and the nine cards matter. Through such concrete materializations, believers enlarge the concrete role faith has in their daily life. It becomes tangible in meeting fellow believers, in buying cards, writing them and posting them. The example of Ms Mol shows how daily life does not only provide a *stage* for practicing faith, but also its *content*. By sending cards, these believers engage themselves with the concrete concerns of daily life: with sickness and the concrete needs of other people. Ms Mol had a desire "for more." She wanted "something real." So she *did* something *concrete and material*, and got *real faith*.

This type of faith moves away from dualistic notions of faith that have been widely 'celebrated' in evangelicalism as well. *Celebration of Discipline* (Foster 1989), much read amongst evangelicals over the past decades, illustrates the

meant dualism well. Foster writes how the spiritual disciplines invite us “to explore the inner caverns of the spiritual realm” (2). The disciplines are about “exploring the inward life” and “reaching beyond the physical world” (3). He contrasts this aim explicitly with the “materialistic base of our age” because of which people do not understand the disciplines anymore but want to get on with the “*real* business in the *real* world.” “We need the courage to move beyond the prejudice of our age and affirm with our best scientists that more than the material world exists” (3). Faith in the sense of having a personal relationship with Jesus is not something inward or solely spiritual, neither are the spiritual disciplines means to “reach beyond the physical world.” In *real faith* these distinctions do not apply in this way. Faith *is* to get on with the “real business in the real world.” The relationship with God is not something “beyond the physical world,” but part of the real world. Through the abundant practice of faith, daily life and faith get intertwined to a point that the reality of God and the reality of the believer coalesce. Note in this respect, that the realness Ms Mol found cannot be fully equated with the (realness, concreteness and tangibility) of the twelve group members and nine postcards. It depends upon the emergence of a holistic experience of the reality of faith and the reality daily life through the engagement in concrete faith practices. In this experience of reality, God and daily life are consequently perceived as equally real.

Real Signs

In real faith God communicates with believers as well. Just as the respondents’ communicative faith practices are intertwined with concrete patterns of daily living, God’s answers are intertwined with concrete patterns of daily living too, or sometimes with notable deviations thereof. Respondents share about the numerous smaller and bigger God experiences they encounter throughout their lives. In these experiences of divine communication materiality is of the essence: God talks back in a *demonstrable* way.

Sixty-two-year old Roeland exerts himself to explain how God communicates with him through the material realm: “Having a relationship with Jesus is about hearing that voice [of God], and there’s *no need* that it sounds in your heart.” He continues: “It can be in something else, in a little parenthesis that you for instance say to me. Or, well, in the midst of my depression, I stood in the woods here and for the first time in my life I saw a little oak flower, which is green on green. That was so impressive! But it can also be in a dream.” Experiences of divine communication are by far not always founded in feelings or emotions. They rather often culminate in a concrete, tangible object or circumstance through which God is perceived to communicate. The tight connection between “hearing God’s voice” and the materiality of life stands out in all of the inter-

views. Roeland felt a touch of the sacred in seeing the little oak flower. Others tell about finding a job or surviving a deathly sickness. Sometimes the materiality of the event evokes an experience of God right away (as in Roeland's experience in seeing the oak flower). Sometimes the events or things are only afterwards discerned as "sign" from God.

In her study *When God Talks Back*, Luhmann (2012) studies American evangelicals. Their experiences of hearing God's voice refer to *mental* events: to thoughts, images and sensations that believers identify as God-generated. Typical vocabulary that believers use to refer to such experiences includes the verb *pop*. Believers indicate that God's words "popped" into their minds, or that an image "popped" into their mind (52-67). When thoughts are felt to be spontaneous and unsought, it is more probable that they are stemming from God (64). As Luhmann indicates: it is hard work for people to develop skills to hear God speak in your mind "as if it were external speech" (41). In the present research, such mental events are in practice mainly reserved for religious experts, who exercise their competences by ministering prayer, in Dutch referred to as *ministry gebed*. Ordinary believers use more "mundane ways" to identify God as speaking to them: through circumstance, through scripture, through dreams (56ff). Such concrete signs ground the experience of hearing God speak "as if it were external speech." In the present research, these "mundane ways" dominate. Bible texts, cards, things, dreams and circumstances figure in the believers' experiences as signs from God. Experiences of divine communication do not *pop* into their mind, but much rather *happen* to them.

The material dimensions of experiences of divine communication are important to respondents. They firmly confirm the enacted reality of the personal relationship with Jesus. To believers, such experiences demonstrate that God is "really real." This can be explained, by viewing God's acts of communication as performative action too. The believer's primary concern is not what the God experience *communicates*, but what it *does*. It enacts God's side of the relationship with the believer. In this process of enactment, the material nature of the experience is decisive. It convinces the believer that God and the experience of hearing his voice are not imaginary. Lianne shares about an experience of deliverance at a conference led by Herman Boon. She tells about her experience of the Holy Spirit "going through" her and the bodily manifestations that accompanied it. Afterwards rest enters her body. She concludes: "If you have that experience, then you cannot do without anymore. Then you cannot deny anymore that God exists." Here we see something of the traditional evangelical positivist stance to truth: it is objectively grounded in empirical reality (see §2.2 Defending the Historical Jesus). The material is what is real and true for sure.

The material dimensions of experiences of divine communication give religious experiences a *widerfahrnischarakter* too, as the German practical theologi-

an Manfred Josuttis calls it (2004, 19). In two consecutive studies Josuttis (2002, 2004) reflects upon the *Handlungslogik* (the logic of acting) of spiritual methods and upon the *Wirkungslogik* (the operational logic) of religious experiences. He too approaches religion from the perspective of action and refuses to locate the center of praxis in one's consciousness. He approaches religion as *Handwerk*, as craft, as something that is done, and focuses on spiritual methods. Comparable to Riesebrodt's interventionist practices, these methods are directly concerned with God. They are spiritual as they are based on divine influence and aim at influencing the divine (Josuttis 2002, 15). The *Handlungslogik* of spiritual methods assumes the *Wirkungslogik* of religious experiences. In some ways God is available through the engagement in spiritual methods. Believers create and evoke, they 'make' religious experiences by using spiritual methods and by engaging in rituals and exercises (2004, 19). In this context Josuttis therefore highlights the *widerfahrmischarakter* of religious experiences. From Protestant perspective they happen under the influence of the Holy Spirit. Whatever effort put into spiritual methods, *that* religious experiences happen is by the grace of God (2004, 19).

It is this specific *widerfahrmischarakter* of experiences of divine communication that respondents try to point towards, by highlighting the *material* dimensions of God's communication. The materiality of the experience is felt to be outside the control of the believer. Respondents therefore have the feeling that something actually happens *to* them which is initiated by an outside force. Notwithstanding their *own* efforts to hear God's voice, believers passionately testify that religious experiences happen to them by the grace and initiative of God. They are taken by surprise. God experiences might be mediated, but are certainly not created by a believer's practices of communication. Josuttis points towards this difference, by contrasting religious experiences with a *widerfahrmischarakter* and the emotional and sensational experiences that belong to our *Erlebnisgesellschaft* (experience-oriented society): "Hier geht es nicht um die Inszenierung aufregender Situationen, um den Konsum mitreißender Augenblicke, auch nicht um den mehr oder weniger ekstatischen Ausdruck frommer Gefühlsregungen" (2004, 19).

Experiences with a *widerfahrmischarakter* are religiously highly meaningful. Through such experiences, believers perceive faith as an effective force coming at them and *making* them believe. They constitute embodied faith, initiated by God. Justus for instance shows how he was *made* to believe by being saved from a perforation of his intestines. The perforation was not noticed in time, because of which he arrived at the hospital in critical condition. He was operated within half an hour. The surgeons who performed surgery on him told him afterwards: "There must have been an angel on your shoulder. You really experienced a miracle." Justus reacts: "And I knew for sure for 100% that God existed, because he had kept me alive." For him this shows that, even though at a certain point in

time *he* accepted Jesus Christ, it was actually *Jesus Christ* who came into his life and made him believe. The materiality of the sign is central to the “‘not-me’ experience” (Luhmann 2012, 67). Hence, it is from God.

Through these concrete experiences, daily life gets characterized by God’s presence. God is present and acts in this material world. The believer experiences daily life as living in the closeness of God. But the daily life of evangelical Protestants so also re-enchants. It becomes a life in which anything and potentially everything can be religiously meaningful. Believers therefore start scrutinizing their daily lives and wondering about the things that happen: is this maybe a sign from God? Does God maybe want to say something to me? Even one’s birth date can constitute a sign from God. When I asked Roeland after his age, he immediately responded: “That is a very special moment in the history of the world. It is the day of the resolution that made the foundation of the State of Israel possible. I find that very curious.” Roeland is not sure, but there might well be a deeper meaning to his birth date. Through such processes of re-enchancement, believers constantly move on the edge of a holistic perception of reality. At the one hand God’s presence is holistically intertwined with daily life, which he guides for the benefit of the believer. At the same time, this experience makes them search for the deeper meaning *behind* the course of events too. Their practice of discerning God’s will therefore also evokes dualistic notions, in which God’s will reveals the ‘true’ or ‘real’ meaning of daily life.

Creating Signs

The importance of the material in evangelical Protestant faith stands out in the habit of believers to *create signs* that capture their God experiences. Sometimes the created sign reflects the sign received from God straightforwardly. But as not all God experiences culminate in the reception of a concrete sign, respondents sometimes need to be more creative to create a sign that will remind them of the experience. In either case, the created sign constitutes an enduring entanglement of life and faith. Through such materializations, God is continually *really* present in their daily lives.

I asked Kees if God ever answers him. He said: “Well, the farm is the most concrete example.” The realization of the farm is experienced by Kees as true guidance of God. Therefore he named the farm ‘The Miracle.’ He put up a large sign on the farm saying so. It is a tangible memory of the experience that God really spoke to him. Note that the God experience itself entailed important material dimensions. Kees exploited the material dimension *of* the experience by putting up a sign. This sign will remember him and everyone who visits the farm of what he once experienced as stemming from God. The sign is though more than a tangible memory. Through the sign God remains a visibly present reality

in his daily life. God's presence is as real as the sign and as the farm where the sign refers to. The experience of God's involvement in his life so endures. Experiences themselves are temporary and fleeting. The sign however is a continual demonstration of God's involvement in Kees' life and therefore creates an ongoing reality of living in the closeness of God.

A common habit of these believers is to keep small text cards or personal notes between their Bibles. Often the text card refers to a Bible text or saying that once particularly appealed to them. Sometimes the text card is connected to a special event when the believer received the card, to a worship service or a particular experience. Last week, Nico and his family visited an evangelical church instead of their own traditional church. That is actually against Nico's principles. At the same time it is very important to him that his children get to know God as well and the evangelical church offers much better children's services. That Sunday, the children returned from the children's service full of enthusiasm *and* with a text card containing a Bible text. Nico experienced it as confirmation from God of his decision to go to an evangelical church and as demonstration of God's involvement in his children's lives. Nico therefore hung it on the refrigerator. After telling about it in the interview, he quickly stands up to get it and show it to me.

Another common practice is to underline Bible texts. When believers receive a specific Bible text in for instance ministry prayer, they underline the sign received from God in their Bible in order not to forget it. When Lianne received a prophecy she too wrote it down. She tells: "And one of the words I received is that I would encourage many, many women. That I am a strong woman and that I would encourage very many women." She was not sure what the prophecy would mean in practice. She commented: "Well, I just leave it. I let go of it. But I do write it down; it is in between my Bible." Another example is provided by Justus, who shares about a particular God experience, in which he turned on the Great News Radio and was caught by the Bible text that was read aloud.⁴⁸ He wrote it down and underlined the text in his Bible. He comments: "I always write down everything. Everywhere I come, I write down everything I experience."

A telling example of creating lasting signs is provided by Evelien. Years ago, she participated in an Alpha Course. At the course they taught her that the Holy Spirit convinces a believer of being a child of God. Evelien is worried. She does not feel such a thing inside at all. In a service during the Alpha Weekend about the Holy Spirit, she comes forward and tells the reverend about her worries. He tells her that she really is a child of God and then prays for her. It is a life-changing moment for her:

⁴⁸ See §7.2 for a full account of the incident.

And then he started to pray for me. And at that moment, I really experienced that I was lifted up. [...] And I loved it. But nothing further. So I sat down again at my place while there was prayer for other people.

And at a certain moment, it seemed like a light came beside me. And it radiated warmth. It was just like a shower of warmth that penetrated me, followed by a clear message in me, like: ‘You are a child of God. You are my child. Don’t doubt it.’ That was so convincing! I just knew for sure that... I think: yes! That is Jesus, or the Holy Spirit!

When we walked outside – the service was somewhere in a chapel in the woods – I picked up a little acorn. [...] I think: this you have to take home, that is a tangible proof that this really happened, because in a month you might start doubting again.

I discussed the incident with Evelien in depth. She confirmed once more that the light was really a light: “I sat like this and the light came from that side,” she showed me. “It was really a light.” Then she adds: “But no one else has seen it.” At the moment it happened, she did not even dare to look to her left, to the light, as she was afraid that it would disappear again.

Evelien remembered that the reverend had once told in a sermon, that when such special experiences happen, you should create a tangible memory of it or write it down. In case of doubt afterwards, the believer then has a concrete “memory point,⁴⁹ that brings you back to that point,” to the moment of the experience. Evelien: “I found this so special, that I was really afraid, like, in a moment I might... in a while I might not believe anymore that this really happened. So this is a tangible proof that I have been there and that it is really true.” And indeed, Evelien started doubting afterwards. She wondered: “Did I maybe want to see it that way?” She therefore kept the little acorn for years.

The concrete object constitutes a kind of material evidence that has the power to convince the believer of the truth of the experience. Note, that the created sign was originally part of the religious experience itself. All experience *is* in some way material. As human beings are no bodiless souls, all experiences is somehow connected to the senses, to a time, place or event. The acorn Evelien picked up is not something external to her experience, it was actually *part* of her experience. Her experience was partly immaterial, but also closely tied to a particular place and event. The acorn was part of that place and *therefore* has the power to convince Evelien in times of doubt. McGuire explains: “Where is memory located? In Western ways of thinking, we tend to identify the memory as an operation solely of the brain. But biological and anthropological evidence

⁴⁹ Dutch: “*herinneringspunt*.”

suggests that memory resides in the whole body [...]. That means that memory can be closely connected with our senses and bodily states” (2008, 99). Consequently a certain smell, object or anything that touches the senses can “instantly awake a related memory.”

The importance of creating lasting signs should not be underestimated. Despite their extraordinary experiences, believers are rarely free of doubt.⁵⁰ Their doubts are though not resolved by arguments and reason, but by the experience of real faith. The relationship with Jesus is real in the entanglement of God’s presence and concrete daily life. The practice of creating signs generates an *ongoing* entanglement and so *ongoing* sense of God’s presence in the believer’s daily life. For these respondents, faith essentially remains something that is being done; it is a way of living. It is in continually enacting and materializing a relationship with God. So these believers create and sustain an ongoing, highly meaningful reality of living in the closeness of God.

5.5 | What about Jesus?

Evangelical Protestants continually speak about their relationship with Jesus as having real contact with *God*. They talk *with God* and hear *God’s* voice. But what about Jesus?

When recruiting respondents for this research at evangelical festivals and conferences, I asked the festival visitors: “Do you have a personal relationship with *Jesus*?” The respondents answered “yes” right away.⁵¹ Often festival visitors returned the question and addressed me: “And what about you? Do *you* have a personal relationship with Jesus?” Having a personal relationship with Jesus seemed without doubt a thing that really matters to them. But throughout the subsequent interviews conducted at their homes, respondents – and that somewhat surprised me – spoke often about relating to *God* and little about relating to *Jesus*.

⁵⁰ According to philosopher of religion Charles Taylor doubt belongs to the conditions of a secular age. Exactly because personal experience is the new means for providing immediate certainty, common to modern spirituality, doubt is something inherent in faith nowadays too. The believer “is never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection – by some experience which won’t fit, some lives which exhibits fullness on another basis, some alternative mode of fullness which sometimes draws me, etc.” (Taylor 2007, 10–11; cf. Van Harskamp 2000, 60ff)

⁵¹ For recruiting respondents for this research, I visited evangelical festivals and conferences. I asked the festival visitors to participate in a short survey. Amongst others they were asked: “Do you have a personal relationship with Jesus” and “Can you in a few words indicate what this personal relationship with Jesus means to you?” See §4.3 Selection of Respondents.

Some believers addressed the issue of God/Jesus by themselves. I asked Tilde to “share something about her relationship with Jesus.” She reacted: “It is about knowing that the things that live in your heart, that live in your mind, that you express to God, that they are heard by God – and so also by Jesus. You ask for Jesus in specific, but I.... But well, I don’t separate that just so quickly.” Leonie gave a similar reaction: “Well actually, it is more of a relationship with God for me. But it is Jesus who clears the path thereunto. So what I just told you: that I need Jesus to be able to come to God, that Jesus is really the only way to God so to say.”

Other respondents did not address the issue by themselves. They simply did not seem to experience any discrepancy between the question after their relationship with *Jesus* and their answers about talking and listening to *God*. At some point during the interviews I confronted them with the matter and asked them about the specific role of Jesus in their faith. It put some respondents a bit off balance. Some needed a minute to realize that, indeed, they had been talking for over an hour about the role of *God* in their lives, while being interviewed about their relationship with *Jesus*!

Throughout the analysis of the interviews it turned out that believers mainly communicate with *God*. For them this is an all-inclusive term, which does not necessarily exclude Jesus. At the same time, the role of Jesus in their faith *is* different from the role of God. Whereas believers in practice relate to God, they believe in Jesus.

Relating to God

The answers believers gave about the role of Jesus in their faith are very similar. Their primary responses were usually of a mildly defensive nature. Believers defended that relating to God or Jesus actually comes down to the same thing. Tilde answered that she doesn’t “separate that just so quickly” (i.e. relating to God or to Jesus) and explained that “Father and Son are very similar.”⁵² A similar answer was given by Marjoleine. When I asked her – after an hour of interviewing – whether Jesus played a distinct role in her daily life of faith, she responded: “Well yes, I don’t know whether that is Jesus, God or the Holy Spirit. For me that is just the Trinity. Not Jesus in specific, I think.” The equation between God and Jesus is often substantiated by a reference to the doctrine of the Trinity. So Kees put it too: “[The Trinity], that is the theory behind it.” He continued: “But that Trinity is for me foremost a unity.” Thus Kees concluded: “Having a personal relationship with Jesus is not something different from having a personal relationship with God.”

⁵² Dutch: “*Vader en Zoon liggen heel dicht bij elkaar.*”

After this or a similar answer, the respondents' answers usually took an interesting turn: the believers turned to their own practice of praying. They started scrutinizing their actual practice of praying, as to check the answer they had just given. When I asked Aagje whether she felt to have a relationship with *Jesus*, she answered: "Well, well... God... I see those three... the difference between those three, I don't see that so much. There is a difference, I know that. *But, I do really pray to God*, and for me that includes Jesus." To Aagje, the difference between God, Jesus or the Holy Spirit is not that clear at all. She knows there is a difference and thereby hints at the doctrine of the Trinity. However, in practice she simply prays to God. And it seems that to her, that is what really counts.

The believers usually enlarged on their practice of praying at length. The issue of God/Jesus triggered them to give a nuanced and reflective exposition. Justus explained: "You have to separate two things. I always pray *to* my Father in heaven, and *through* the Lord Jesus. And now and then I speak to the Lord Jesus himself. But I also speak very often, actually most often, to my Father. I cannot exactly tell you how or when or what." Aagje said: "I pray *to* God, but then I also talk *about* Jesus. And when I thank God that Jesus died for me on the cross, then I actually thank Jesus too, so to say."

For Rien the Father, Son and Spirit sometimes do play a distinctive role in prayer: "It just depends upon the theme that you are praying for or what you are engaged with." Other respondents agreed. "That Trinity is for me foremost a unity," Kees said, continuing: "Although... in prayer I sometimes also really mention them separately. [...] The general things I pray to *the* God, the three-in-one God. You see. And when sometimes specific matters are at stake, eh when [...] I have to commence the meeting [of the church council], then you pray for the power of the Holy Spirit, for receiving the words thereunto. And when we celebrate Eastern, then I explicitly thank Jesus for what he has done. Do I see the creation, then I foremost think of God as Creator." Still, Kees too concluded: "But well, now you mention it, many, many prayers do actually start with Father."

The matter of God/Jesus is a difficult matter for most believers. Leonie pondered: "But well, Jesus is the Son of God, so I find it difficult sometimes: do I only have to pray to God or to Jesus as well, you know?" Later on she continued: "Anyway, I pray foremost to God actually. Because you ask things in Jesus' name from God. So I wonder: but I wanna thank Jesus too! You understand?" Tilde puzzled aloud:

Yes, I link many things quite quickly to God. [...] For me, there is such a connection in that Father and Son! I am thinking: when I pray, then I speak to God and also to Jesus. There is a difference. At the end I always finish in Jesus' name. So then you speak to the Father actually. I have

been wondering about that myself a few times already. Like: how do you see that and how do you actually do that? But well... Only through Jesus the way is open unto God. I am all into that! In that way I arrive again at the grace, [...] at God as my Creator [...]. He is de Father who knows me.

The believers' answers show that evangelical Protestants usually pray *to God*. And even though 'God' does not necessarily exclude Jesus, God is more closely associated with God the Father than with Jesus. These answers lead to the conclusion – fitting the general impression the interviews give – that, for these respondents, God or God the Father is the one they have a *real* relationship with. As he is addressed, a personal relationship with him is enacted in the performance of communicative faith practice. Dutch evangelical Protestants mainly relate to God.

This might signal a shift in evangelical spirituality. At the start of the evangelical movement, personal experience was intimately linked to devotion *to Christ* (Bebbington 1989, 34). After World War Two a more specific *Jesus*-centered spirituality developed. This Jesus-centrism was closely related to the notion of 'having a personal relationship.' The phrase 'having a personal relationship *with Jesus*' so became stock language.⁵³ Contemporary evangelical Protestants in mainline churches do not demonstrate such a clear Jesus-centrism in their practice of communicating with God. In line with post-war evangelicalism, their faith *is* defined by the notion of having a personal relationship with Jesus, but *in practice* their personal relationship is one of relating to God. The respondents' Reformed backgrounds might exert a mitigating influence on the Jesus-centrism of the evangelical movement.

The respondents' answers furthermore confirm the constitutive role of performative action in the personal relationship with Jesus. When the respondents are asked to clarify something about their personal relationship, they turn to their practice of praying for information. Believers associate their personal relationship with Jesus indeed first of all with concrete action. Also to the believers themselves, the performance of the relationship gives the best insight in the role of Jesus in their faith. Their answers furthermore indicate that praying or talking with God is the most fundamental practice by which that relationship is enacted. The answers confirm that the performative force of the act lies in addressing God. Respondents scrutinize their prayers especially with respect to the issue of who is addressed.

⁵³ Even though at that time as well an ambivalence was present. Speaking about relating to God was used next to relating to Jesus, see chapter 2.

This emphasis on action also means a de-emphasis on the actual words used (cf. Houseman 2008, 415). The respondents' doubts and reflections about addressing God or Jesus in their prayers seem to be evoked by the interview questions, not by their own concerns. In the end, respondents are simply not too much concerned about who to address. God, Jesus and the Spirit are the same after all, or as Rien phrased it: "God is no bureaucrat that he will say: 'Hey you, wrong window!'"

Believing in Jesus

But Jesus is not unimportant. Notwithstanding their practice of talking with God, respondents consistently claim that they "need Jesus" in order to be able to do so. As Tilde phrased it: "Only through Jesus the way is open unto God. I am all into that!" Or as Leonie put it: "I need Jesus to be able to come to God, that Jesus really is the only way to God."

In order to gain access to the *relationship with God*, believers need to *believe in Jesus*. Jesus is, so to say, the gatekeeper of the relationship with God. As Leonie phrased it: "It is more of a relationship with God for me, but it is Jesus who clears the path thereunto." Leo: "Jesus plays more of a role as mediator. That sounds so Reformed of course. But through Jesus I may pray to God." Justus says in similar vein: "The core of your faith is, I think, the relationship with your Father in heaven. I really experience him that way. And that Jesus Christ has made that possible." A person thus "needs to believe in Jesus Christ," Justus adds.

A Crucified Jesus

Believing in Jesus is defined as believing in the biblical-historical person of Jesus and his death on the cross (see §2.3 Defending the Historical Jesus). In general, his death on Golgotha is understood in terms of satisfaction by penal substitution for the sins of mankind. Leonie confesses: "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and that he died for my sins, and because of that I can have contact with God." Justus explains that you need Jesus' forgiveness because of the curse of death. Jesus was nailed to the cross so the curse was put on him. He concludes: "That simply is the function of Jesus."

The "function of Jesus" is this essential, that many respondents opened the interview with reference to it.⁵⁴ Leo defined the core of his faith as "Jesus and he crucified." "The core of my faith is the salvific work of Jesus," Kees answered

⁵⁴ In the first round of interviewing, the opening question explicitly asked 'what is the core of your faith?'

in similar vein. He continued: “Well, let me put that in classic Protestant terms: that I know that I am a sinner and by Jesus redemption is now possible. Actually quite simple that you are saved.”

The defining importance of Jesus is confirmed in the personal biographies of amongst others Justus, Ted and Nico. At some point in their lives they “discovered Jesus” as Ted put it. Ted continued: “And that was really weird, that there is not only a God, but also a Jesus.” Their stories show that their belief in Jesus qualifies their God image. As Nico puts it: “Jesus has to say something about God. [...] God is a concept that can be used somewhat more general.” Nico shares how he “discovered” Jesus long time ago:

Let’s see. I was in primary school. My schoolteacher read from the books of Nicky Cruz, *The Cross and the Switchblade*. [...] And she was very, very cheerful. She really called to make a choice for Jesus. Then already. And in church, I was not used to that at all. Because I myself am a member of a traditional church, a *Gereformeerde Bondsgemeente*. So there Jesus actually was... Well, they spoke about God and about his Son and sometimes about the Holy Spirit. But it was more about God than about Jesus. So that I learned later on, like: that’s what it’s all about! Whatever faith community you belong to, everything goes back to Jesus. And if you can talk about Jesus, then differences, I feel, differences disappear.

Even though many theologians in established churches worry that evangelical believers are on the verge of “losing Jesus” (see §3.3 Faith or Feelings?), the interviews do not confirm this.

The crucified Jesus is however real to believers in a different manner than God is real to them. God becomes a real living person to respondents through addressing him in the performance of communicative faith practices and through subsequently experiencing divine communication. But the realness of Jesus is neither due to a practice nor an experience. His realness is related to a cognition, to the belief in him. In this belief, believers relate to a person of the past, to the biblical-historical Jesus. He is a *historical reality* to them. He is the one who really existed and really died. He remains a reality, foremost, of the past, even though his function extends into the present. This attention for the biblical-historical Jesus and his work on the cross diminishes attention for the person of the living Christ. Whereas believers constantly speak about Jesus dying on the cross, they *never* mention the resurrection in the interviews. Jesus is foremost of all the one who died, not the one who lives.⁵⁵

⁵⁵ In line with this, believers speak more often of ‘Jesus’ and the ‘Lord Jesus’ than of ‘Christ.’

Consequently, respondents tend to speak about Jesus in the past tense. Leonie says that Jesus “*took* our sins upon him. Yes, that I think is the most important. He must *have loved* us incredibly much, that he *was prepared* to do that for us.” In contrast believers generally speak about God in the present tense: “God *knows* me” and “God *loves* me.”

Jesus the Intercessor

In addition to all this and most interestingly, another function is sometimes assigned to Jesus. Justus, Leo and Mr and Ms Rosegaar talk about Jesus as intercessor.⁵⁶ It remains to be seen whether this truly is *another* function of Jesus. It rather extends and actualizes Jesus’ atoning function. To believers who emphasize Jesus’ interceding function, Jesus seems to be much more alive. They demonstrate a livelier Jesus-image in their faith in general. Jesus did not just fulfill his atoning role once, in the past. He is still interceding. He is still watching over the believer.

The respondents give a lively description of how they perceive of Jesus’ intercession. Leo describes that when he is praying, Jesus “brings the things for him before God.” I asked Leo to explain it. He answered: “To put it plastically, well maybe it’s not so respectful, but I sometimes have the idea that God says: ‘Leo, you have done this or this, so you deserve punishment.’ But that Jesus then says to God: ‘No I have forgiven him, so listen to him’.” In interceding for believers, Jesus’ atoning work at the cross is continued in the present. Talking with God enacts a relationship with God in the present, on the basis of the simultaneous re-enactment of the power of the cross. Justus too gives a very lively description of Jesus’ interceding role (see §5.2). He used to pray to God before knowing about Jesus. “But,” so Justus now believes, “at that time Jesus interceded for me with his Father.”

For Mr Rosegaar Jesus’ interceding role extends into the far future. In his conceptions, Jesus will intercede for him at the moment that God will administer justice. He relies on Jesus to plead his case at the last judgment: “All my wrongdoings, all the sins that I committed, consciously or unconsciously, will be revealed. That says so in the Bible too. But well, there is one thing: if you pass by Jesus, then you do not have salvation. Then you do not have an advocate. And

⁵⁶ The interceding role of Jesus is tied to the practice of praying to God. Maybe that references to praying “in Jesus’ name” or “through Jesus” are understood as reference to Jesus’ current intercession. This would mean that much more respondents assign such a current interceding role to Jesus. However, the phrase “in Jesus’ name” might also simply refer to Jesus’ atonement at the cross, and function as a memory thereof or of the moment of conversion because of which the believer could enter the relationship with God (see §5.2 *versus re-enactment*).

Jesus will then, to say it in my own words, he will say: ‘Well, I also have accomplished it for Hans.’”

Jesus’ interceding function reinforces the emphasis on the atonement established by him and highlights the believers’ *continual* and *current* need for it. These statements so signal an ongoing awareness of sin and wrongdoing amongst (at least some) of the respondents. This might be a remnant of their Reformed background. The Reformed tradition has always emphasized that believers remain sinners, while also being justified. This is significant as scholars, like evangelical theologian Benno van der Toren, signal and warn for a demining consciousness of sin and guilt among evangelical believers. Such a tendency might lead to a diminution of the importance of the cross in lived faith (2011, 72). Van der Toren explains that listeners to the gospel above all experience to be *lost* and to need salvation. But believers do not experience themselves as *sinners* carrying the weight of guilt that needs to be forgiven (76, emphasis original). The interviews give no clear confirmation hereof. Only one of the respondents, Marjoleine, indicates otherwise. Marjoleine confesses: “Jesus is the one who died for my sins.” But when I asked her “Do *you* need it, that Jesus saves you from *your* sins?” she answered that, after her conversion experience – a near-death-experience of almost twenty years ago – she “does not need that so much.” She adds herself: “Well, that sounds a bit arrogant, doesn’t it?” But still she goes on to explain that she does not sin anymore.⁵⁷

Taking all this into account, a differentiated picture arises of the role of Jesus in the respondents’ experience of real faith. For some believers, like Leonie and Tilde, real faith is more of a relationship with God. They are puzzled whether they should pray to Jesus as well. Some believers discovered during their lives that “there is a Jesus too.” In that experience, as Ted put it, Jesus “came alive.” Some even describe how they “met Jesus” in their experience of conversion. For other believers, Jesus is someone who is still continually interceding for them, like Leo and Justus indicated and Mr and Ms Rosegaar. Through his intercession, Jesus comes alive to them.

And finally there is Roeland, one of the few respondents who throughout the interview quite often indicates to relate to *Jesus* just as he relates to *God*. He shared how he “really got to know Jesus” through a time of depression and how it “turned [his] life upside down.” For him, past and present are inextricably bound up. He speaks about Jesus who “*knew* what he *did*. He *knew* how the

⁵⁷ Believers, ministers and theologians worrying about the demining consciousness of sin and guilt among believers, might profit from the insights provided by these believers. They indicate the usefulness of emphasizing the continuing atoning function of Jesus in and throughout the performance of communicative faith practices. In a faith that is determined by performative action and materiality, this would make Jesus real in the sense God is real and alive to them and simultaneously make sin and wrongdoing an ongoing reality too.

world works. He *knows* how I work. And still he *does* not pull out. He *is* loyal. You *notice* that in everything.” He keeps talking about Jesus, Jesus’ love and that Jesus “really is” that way.

Following Jesus’ Example

The biblical-historical Jesus provides believers with a concrete example of how to live. This is the most active relationship believers have with Jesus in the daily practice of their faith: they *follow Jesus’ example*. Jesus is their role model. His life shows “how God wants you to live.”

At first, Marjoleine was not sure at all whether Jesus played a distinguishing role in her daily life of faith. “But well,” she added, “He does [play a distinguishing role] as example.” Jesus’ life as described in the Bible provides believers with a concrete example of faithful living. In daily life, believers therefore continually try to “pay attention to Jesus,” as Ernst-Jan puts it. Leo constantly wonders: “What Would Jesus Do?” Note, that when believers try to follow Jesus’ example, they also run the risk of *reducing* Jesus to a ‘mere’ example. As Burger explains: “In him we see how we should live with God and with each other. But Jesus Christ does not himself determine the relationship between God and the believer” (Burger 2008).⁵⁸

Believers however indicate that such a focus on Jesus adds a valuable dimension to their faith in God. Jesus “comes closer,” “Jesus is more personal,” believers explain. Leonie tells: “Because you read a lot about Jesus in the Bible. Simply, where he wandered around. Really as a human. And eh, that he met with ordinary humans too. So like a friend. He was like a friend in their midst.” Through paying attention to the life of Jesus and the example he gave, Jesus qualifies the God image of the respondents. Rien wonders therefore, whether an increased attention for Jesus might not improve his practice of praying as well:

I experience it myself in that way, that it comes closer. Praying to God can be somewhat of praying to a distance. And if you pray to Jesus, well, then at once it becomes a whole lot more concrete for yourself too. It comes closer. [...]

⁵⁸ Dogmatic theologian Hans Burger warns for *reducing* Jesus to a mere example: “The significance of Jesus Christ is in danger of being reduced to a moral or spiritual example. In him we see how we should live with God and with each other. But Jesus Christ does not himself determine the relationship between God and the believer. However, this neglect of Christ can take a different, more conservative form. Accordingly, Jesus Christ is reduced to the one who died for our sins but who, in the present, does not really play any role. [...] Jesus Christ himself remains someone of the past.” (Burger 2008)

So with praying you can have a distant meeting with God. For example, you can thank your food – that’s good to do anyway. Sometimes there are days that you think like: actually I don’t feel like saying grace, but then it is good to say grace nevertheless. – But sometimes you have to bring the concrete near. Then you thank God for your food, let’s say as Creator thereof. You thank him that he takes care of you as a Father. That is already bringing it closer. And eh, then for example you can pray too like: Holy Spirit teach me to share from what I receive. That you pull it very concretely, personally towards you.

Jesus’ example also offers believers some direction in their search for “what God wants.” Evangelical Protestants try to discern God’s will through interpreting all kinds of personal, extraordinary experiences as revelation of God’s will (see §7.6 Revealing What God Wants). Interpretations of such religious experiences are often highly tentative and subjective. They are though directed by general assumptions about God’s will. The life of Jesus gives their interpretations at least some kind of direction. However, the prominent place of discerning God’s will through the personal communication with him puts the significance of following Jesus’ example into perspective as well. The believers’ faith is not firstly about following the example of Jesus. Real faith is about communicating with God.

6 Communicative Faith Practices

6.1 | “In the Name of Jesus: Start!”

Lianne is a 44-year-old homemaker keen to “involve God in the things [she] does.” She shares the following story. Her husband enters the house grumpy after trying to start the car several times. Right when he needed to leave, it just did not start. Lianne responds immediately and says to him: “No. It didn’t start, but now it will!” She is convinced that if she just says: “In the name of Jesus: start!” the car will definitely start. She goes outside, says the words and the car starts indeed. “The first time it didn’t start,” Lianne says, “but the second time it did. Thus you can pray, this concretely. God is involved in everything you do.”

Evangelical Protestants communicate with God by engaging in communicative faith practices, like for instance praying. Communicative faith practices have performative force, which means that they *enact* a personal relationship with Jesus. They are in basis modeled after ordinary inter-human communication. Just as in daily life personal communication is associated with verbal conversation, believers too talk with God (§6.2) and listen to God (§6.3). To intensify the communication with God believers invest time in God as much as they possibly can (§6.4) and sometimes resort to the help of gifted believers to act as intermediary in their communication with God (§6.5). As a result of these practices, the closeness of God is established: the reality of their daily lives and God are connected to each other.

Close to God, believers await answers from God with confidence. As the example of Lianne shows, evangelical Protestants have great confidence in communicative faith practices to *work* and to generate experiences of divine communication (the car *will* surely start). Also in this respect, these practices demonstrate an intimate intertwinement of faith and daily life. Believers involve God even in the reality of a not starting car. As the example of Lianne though shows, their

faith also regularly balances on the verge of what in the vernacular might be called magic or sorcery. Instead of communicating with God and awaiting his answer in faith, practices are performed as if they automatically enforce the wished-for answers from God.

6.2 | Talking with God

Of all communicative faith practices *talking with God*, also referred to as “praying” or more generally as “having contact with God,” stands out as the – by far – most often performed practice. “Having a relationship with Jesus is that you know and that you also speak that out to him, that you need him,” Tilde says. Lianne explains: “You talk with the Lord Jesus just like we’re talking now.”

Believers talk with God anytime and anywhere. Talking with God is typically *not* confined to separate moments of prayer. Believers are therefore cautious to use the word ‘praying’ to refer to their practice of talking with God, as it might call for the wrong associations. Lianne: “It is the conversation you have. It is not like: right now I will pray for a moment.” Scholar of religion Friedrich Heiler once said: “*Dem religiösen Menschen ist das Gebet das Alpha und Omega aller Frömmigkeit*” (1923, v). For these respondents it is not so much *das Gebet* but rather *praying*, which is, quite literally too, the alpha and omega of their relationship with Jesus. It starts “when you wake up in the morning” (Justus) and continues all throughout the day.

Because of this ongoing process, so Ernst-Jan explains, his “whole life” is actually “one prayer.” He has been leading a workshop (*sociale werkplaats*) for socially disabled people since three years and is by now quite known for his practice of talking with God: “When I just walk over the premises [of the workshop], then I can just like that pray and talk with God. So it isn’t anymore like: I go and sit in private like that. Well, that I still do in the morning. Yes, that I always call meditation. ‘So, Ernst-Jan, are you meditating again?!’ the coaches ask when they come in. ‘Yes,’ I say, ‘I am talking with God again.’ [...] And the rest of the whole day I am praying.”

Respondents also take separate moments for devotion. The practice of talking with God is embedded in these moments – as Justus puts it: “*Then* I already *start* talking with him” – but never confined thereto. Ted underlines the point by rhetorically asking: “And praying, is that specifically: going to sit in private, being quiet and closing your eyes?” He continues: “Yes, you have to make time for it. Clear. But outside that it is actually a continual process.” He explains: “When I go out of the door, I cannot convene with my wife or I would have to pick up the phone. But when I go out of the door, he is going

with me and our discussion can go on, all day and all night long. [...] While driving – and not with my eyes closed or hands folded, because I have to pay attention to the road, yes. But that is praying too! Or like my wife says: while you are in the woods on your bicycle.”

For believers it is self-evident that talking with God throughout the day, means talking with God about everything too. Justus talks with God about all kinds of daily events: “When I enter into conversation with people, then already I ask God: ‘Will you help me, Lord?’ Or when I have to make acquisitions for the company or something the like, I immediately ask if my Father will go with me, if he wants to help me, wants to strengthen me for that. But also when I become restless or get a restless feeling, right away I go to my Father and ask him, I pray to him.”

To an outsider it might seem that these believers talk with God in or out of season. Consider the example of Lianne, who tells about shopping with her son for new shoes:

Then I can go to God and tell God: “Lord Jesus, we have to buy shoes, we have to buy gloves. Lord Jesus, I would so love to pull it off in one go. Would you help me, Lord Jesus, that if we go to the shop that it doesn’t take too much time? Lord, that we can buy good shoes for a good price Lord? And that we are both satisfied with the shoes we buy? But let us please not have to go along ten shops to buy shoes.” That is concretely going to the Lord Jesus and laying it down before God of what will happen this afternoon.

Even though the Bible abounds in examples of prayers concerning concrete wishes (Sanders 2011), the matters never seem so small and mundane as buying shoes. Throughout the Christian tradition, reverence for God used to delimit the believer’s prayer (Lewis 2007, 13, 23). These believers however feel free to pray about anything and even seem driven by a certain urge to do so. As anthropologist Tanya M. Luhrmann phrased it, their God is a God “who not only cares about your welfare but worries with you whether to paint the kitchen table” (2012, xv).

The act of wording is often performed inwardly, in silence. But even when done inwardly, talking with God is not regarded as merely having certain feelings, a form of mindfulness, or as a habitual stream of thoughts. Respondents emphasize the act of wording and of addressing God: “It is really clearly with spelled out words, either aloud or that I speak that out in my mind. It is really talking. It is not having a feeling. No, it is really about naming the things” (Justus). Justus admits that praying sometimes can be no more than just sighing. However: “That is maybe 5% of the contact with God, that you give a sigh.”

Leo tries to make a similar point by contrasting talking with God with running: “That can be a good way to empty your head as well.” But it is not the same as “talking it off with God.” Because then you do not only empty your head, but “you bring it before God and leave it there.”

To Involve God

Talking with God effectively enacts a relationship with God by *involving God*. The practice brings about an (ever more) encompassing intertwinement of the reality of God and the reality of the believers’ daily lives.

The ordinary prayer theology of evangelical Protestants is revealed in expressions that refer to praying as “involving God in everything,” or as “dedicating everything to God.” “You present the day to him, bring it before God,” other respondents put it. “You lay down everything before God, all the people whom you met or that were brought on your path,” Lianne says. Nico explains: “I involve God in everything I do in my life, in all decisions I take.” The expressions focus on the performative force of the act of talking. Believers point out that in the act of talking something actually happens: by talking a believer “involves God” in things or “brings things before God.” The act of praying effectively establishes a relation between that which is mentioned and God. The respondents speak about “the closeness of God” to describe the character of the established relation. The enacted closeness of God is strongly related to the concretely mentioned thoughts, feelings, events and other aspects of the believer’s life. Whatever is named in prayer is brought into the closeness of God. Together with these things, the pray-er himself comes before God. So Leo says: “Prayer brings me close to God.” Or as Kees concludes about his morning devotions: “And so God is with me throughout the day.”

The act of wording is quite important. In pronouncing and “naming” the different aspects and concerns of daily life, they are subjected to God. The words spoken matter; they relate the things to God. In other words: prayer language is performative. It is ‘symbolic’ communication only in the active sense of *sum-ballein*, of bringing things together (Barnard and Post 2001, 21; Barnard and Schuman 2002, 15, 18). Two separate domains, the human and the divine, are effectively linked together. As practical theologian Manfred Josuttis phrases it: “*Was durch Welten voneinander getrennt ist, wird in einer Zeile oder in einem Satz miteinander verknüpft*” (2002, 117).

Josuttis explains the act of wording as “*zusammenführen*” or “*verknüpfen*.” Whereas Josuttis is mainly talking about petitionary prayer (the act brings together the human need for help and the divine willingness to help), believers attribute this process of “*verknüpfen*” or intertwinement to all their acts of talking with God. Whether they thank God, praise God, ask for his guidance, seek his help or tell

him what is going on in their lives, the effect is that the mentioned aspects of their lives and God are joined together. In talking with God more is at stake than ‘merely’ invoking divine help: for believers it is about the ‘*Verknüpfung*’ in itself, the intertwinement, the value of being close to God.

As anthropologist Joel Robbins explains about comparable Pentecostal prayer practices: “There is little acceptance of a distinction between the sacred and profane” (2010, 164). Therefore “Pentecostals work to maintain a break between themselves and profane life such that they never participate in contexts they define as wholly profane. For this reason, Pentecostals see ritual as relevant in all social domains, and it comes to permeate their everyday life” (164). The statements of Robbins might be too strong to apply to evangelical Protestants as they do not express a fear of participating in profane contexts and do not distinguish between sacred and profane as sharply as Pentecostals. Evangelical Protestants are though concerned with a similar intertwinement of the (sacred) reality of God and the (profane) reality of their daily lives. To involve God in everything establishes the closeness of God and elevates daily life to more than ordinary. Talking with God is the continual uplifting of the believer’s concrete life before God. It brings it into the presence of God because of which life is effectively lived *coram Deo*. The closeness of God is constituted by continually and concretely implicating faith in daily life.

Talking with God then is a class of prayer of its own. The practice of talking with God resists a categorization into classic categories of confession, petitionary prayer, intercession, thanksgiving and adoration (still often found in evangelical prayer manuals, Evangelisch Werkverband 2013; Packer and Nystrom 2006). Even when entailing a request, the practice should not be primarily understood as petitionary prayer. See how Lianne speaks of “telling God” about the afternoon shopping. Even though she formulates a lot of requests, she above all perceives of it as “laying it down before God.” Respondents do not feel they are asking God things all the time. Through such requests God is simply involved and the closeness of God is established.

The established closeness of God is subsequently – but only in the second instance – also closely associated with receiving answers and experiencing divine communication. Near God, a lot of God’s goodness, care and guidance can be expected. Or as Justus puts it: “Because of praying, miracles happen.” These experiences, which will be further examined in chapter 7, explain why believers feel they have to “go around together with God in everything” (Nico). Talking with God has real-world consequences. Justus explains once more: “There is no blessing in things, if I don’t do it together with God. So I bring it to him again.” The act of talking with God is therefore also associated with feelings of rest and peace. The believer feels relieved to get everything of his/her chest by praying. Now that God is involved and the issues are brought under his secure

presence, the believer can trust God to answer and intervene according to his will.

How to Pray Effectively?

For an effective performance of the prayer act, believers first of all *simply have to talk* with God. Nothing more, nothing less. They furthermore try to *list everything* that concerns their lives and make it their habit *to pray instantly*, when things come to mind or happen around them. Finally, by *keeping it personal* believers effectively intertwine their current daily lives and faith.

Praying the Prayer

In order to involve God, above all, the prayer simply needs to be prayed. Communicative faith practices *work* – praying is an efficacious act – as long as they are simply *done*. Evelien shares how she got engaged in praying and so discovered that praying works. She participated in the following Bible study:

It came down to this: every morning you just had to start with the question whether the Holy Spirit wanted to lead you and thanked that he did so, because that was written in his Word. And then I thought: well sure! Do I have to do that? The Lord knows already, doesn't he? Still, I just do it, you know. So I started to do this every morning. And the surprising thing was, that when I started doing so, well, then you got so many people on your path! People whom you could talk to and share the gospel with! That was a very special time.

Evelien's wording indicates that she experienced the "people she got on her path" as God given possibility to share the gospel. For Evelien the performed prayers resulted in experiences from God that did not happen without praying. Notwithstanding the fact that God already knows everything, it is therefore still necessary to pray the prayer. (Contra popular and often simplistic understandings of talking with God as "informing God what is on your mind and going on in your life," Gumbel 1996, 71; Stafford 2009, 37-47; Warren 2003, 88ff).

The incident shows that Evelien does not know how it works exactly. Apparently for prayer to be effective that is not necessary either. The concrete act of praying is more important than understanding the act. From a performative perspective, meaning is inherent to the performance. It cannot – and need not to – be clarified in advance. Communicative faith practices are not simply the result of applied ideas (Nieman 2008, 24). By entering into a practice like talking with God, a believer enters a "deeper meaning that only make[s] sense through the

participatory performance itself” (Nieman 2008, 25). There is thus only one solution: to pray the prayer.

Listing Everything

Whatever is mentioned in prayer is effectively related to God. This confines the efficacy of praying to what is actually named. Believers therefore demonstrate a tendency to list everything that happens in daily life as completely as possible and so to establish an encompassing closeness of God.

Leonie’s story illustrates the phenomenon vividly. When a certain gathering strongly appeals to her, she reacts to the call to come forward for prayer:

That was quite an emotional moment. And then they prayed for me, for all sort of things that were on my mind and that were bothering me, also just, that I would like to have a relationship. But also for the relationship with my father, which is not too good. And for my brother. I worry about him, actually, because he doesn’t believe. [...] And well, for everything actually. Really for everything that was bothering me at that moment. Except for one thing, but that I found out later. Yes. So I had just given my whole life to God again.

As Leonie emphasizes, “really everything” that is bothering her is listed in the prayer.

As the story continues, the felt urge of believers to mention and enumerate everything in prayer becomes increasingly clear. Although Leonie thought they prayed “for everything,” at the end of the conference another thing comes to her mind. She realizes that a certain argument with a colleague is actually bothering her as well. Therefore, at the last meeting, she responds to the call to go forward and she “prayed together with someone. Again!” She tells how she felt ashamed to go forward for a second time, as if she just tried to be the center of attention. But because the argument with her colleague had not been named in the first prayer, that prayer was really not sufficient – even though she referred to the prayer as “her whole life” being given to God.

Another very concrete example is given by Kees. Every day after dinner he and his wife have a moment of shared devotion. They use a weekly prayer schedule as not to forget anything: “Every day we have a set topic. Then you don’t forget your family, then you don’t forget your neighbors, then you don’t forget her work. Well, then the week is already almost over. And then we still have the missionary. Well, then the week is gone, so to say. And that comes back every week.” When using the prayer schedule, Kees again makes sure to “name everything” related to the set topic. When “dedicating the farm to God” he

therefore “name[s] everything of the farm and pray[s] about that to God. Then we dedicate our work here, and the farm and the animals to God.”

Instant Prayer

Talking with God gains its most characteristic outlook in the believers' practice of instant prayer. Instant, spontaneous prayer throughout the day is the most effective means for believers for involving God in everything they do. In this practice pre-eminently, believers continually uplift their daily lives before God. Aagje: “It continues all throughout the day. [...] Of course, it is not like I am praying all day long like: ‘Lord God, what do you actually want from me?’ That is indeed really in the moment of quiet time, but at the moment that... Well, I also just pray on the bicycle like: ‘I simply don’t get it.’ And then I don’t pray aloud, but just in my mind. Like: ‘Well God, you’ve done an excellent job.’ Or eh: ‘What do I have to do with this?’ Or whatever is occupying you at that moment.”

Through instant prayer believers interweave their ordinary lives and faith. At the moment something happens, or when the believer meets someone or gets involved in a situation, he or she right away relates it to God by mentioning it in instant prayer. When Kees tells about his prayer schedule, he quickly adds: “But you see, when a cow falls ill, I pray for that too.” Leonie explains: “For me praying [...] is just whatever comes to my mind. And I like best to pray for that right away, else I forget it again.” She illustrates: “Sometimes I am just at work, editing pictures and then I think: o, actually I can pray for this or that right now.” As the practice really permeates all of their daily lives, respondents typically introduce the practice of instant prayer with a summarizing statement like: “My faith actually always plays a role.”

Respondents take the practice to great lengths, as the example of Lianne buying shoes already showed. There is no topic that is not talked about with God. Evelien, for instance, is keen on buying a new set of wooden furniture and talks to God about an appealing offer she sees on *Marktplaats* (an internet forum for selling and buying secondhand goods):

I think: [...] Lord, is this really true?! [...] Well, I was completely happy already. Then I don’t have to fold my hands. It just happens acutely, form behind my dust cloth or from behind the computer that I say: “Wow Lord, is this really true?”

So I phoned my husband. [...] I told him: “It is in Amsterdam.” [...] And normally Jan does not like [...] to do something like that on his Friday night off. So I think: “O, please, let Jan say yes, because else I can whistle for that!” But that is then, actually, really that line [with God].

Really, I'm not saying that into a void. I really have the feeling I am talking that over with God.

Also in trivial matters faith is implicated. Mind though, that even though the content of the prayer might seem trivial, instant prayer is not about chitter and chatter with God. As Evelien involves God in buying furniture on *Marktplaats*, she is establishing the closeness of God in every aspect of her life. She pursues a life lived *coram Deo*.

Keeping it Personal

Respondents lastly emphasize the need for personal and free prayer in contrast to set prayers. Personal prayer language is necessary to effectively involve God in one's personal life.

Personal, spontaneous prayer is often seen as only true and authentic form of prayer (Josuttis 2002, 111-112). So Heiler presents prayer as "*eine rein seelische Größe, der unmittelbare Ausdruck eines urkräftigen seelischen Erlebens*" (1923, 488). In this psychological oriented understanding of prayer, personal prayers are a direct expression of the soul, set prayers are not. Theological appreciation for this approach is amongst others found by practical theologian Gerrit Immink, who presents prayer as expression of one's inner life, emotions and subjectivity towards God (2011, 182-196). As Lewis shows, the need for such personal prayer can theologically be founded in God's calling of humans to have *personal* contact with him as a father (2007, 20-21).

Now the evangelical tradition too has always emphasized personal prayer as preferable form of prayer, seeing set prayers at most as aid to personal prayer (Gillet 1993, 34-36; Randall 2005, 76-85). In the present research, the believers' main concern is though not *authentic* prayer, but *effective* prayer.⁵⁹ To connect the believer's life with God, the believer needs to name everything that concerns him or her personally and present everything that happens in his or her personal life to God. This demand can only be met in personal prayer, either spontaneous throughout the day or in devotional times. As Gillet rightly points out, in personal and extemporaneous prayer the individual with his or her particular interests sets the agenda (1993, 35). Authentic, personal prayer is a means to effectively intertwine one's personal life and faith.

In addition, personal prayer also enhances the receptivity of the believer. Believers talk with God in the expectation that God will answer. But to be able

⁵⁹ Josuttis too stresses that a psychological oriented understanding of praying could easily and undeservedly devalue set and liturgical prayers (cf. Immink 2011, 189-196) and neglect methodical and performative aspects of praying (Josuttis 2002, 111-112).

“to see” the answers God gives, receptivity is required. Such receptivity is concretely enacted in praying personally. Praying in one’s own words guarantees a certain measure of actual, personal participation in the practice, which helps to experience God. Mr Rosegaar puts it this way: “You have to live in it, else you won’t experience it.” “Living in it” refers to praying personally and being involved in what one prays about. So the believer opens up these areas of life to God’s involvement. It contrasts with praying without involvement, thoughtless, using set prayers. His wife explains: “I think that eh... If you always pray the same prayer, like *Our Father* and nothing else, then that is an automatism in the long run. And I think, that if you pray more in the free prayer, to put it that way, that you become much more personal. [That is important] because you search a personal relationship with the Lord and want to experience that.”

Note that issues of “global significance” (Kees) are generally lacking on this personal agenda. Talking with God is about intertwining one’s personal life with the reality of God. Therefore the practice has little connection to intercessory prayer. Kees even contrasts both practices. Sometimes he does pray for issues “of global significance.” It though concerns a different (and less often and less intensely practiced) practice. Kees tries to explain: “Look, you can pray for Israel. But when you are there, you pray for Israel quite differently. Then it is tangible. If I pray for peace in Iraq – of course you do that, because you see the images, but that is much farther away.” Interestingly, issues of “global significance” also include issues that traditionally received a lot of attention in evangelicalism, like the second coming of Jesus. “So yes, that level. Then I become much more reflective. I don’t feel that. I see it, but don’t feel it. You get it?”

Increasing the Efficacy of Praying: Talking Out Loud

Respondents often indicate that *praying out loud* increases their awareness of God’s presence. Leonie shares: “Most of all [I pray] in my head actually. Only very sometimes aloud, if we pray with a group. And I always find that very beautiful, because very often you then also feel that the Holy Spirit is there.” Talking out loud fosters Leonie’s experience of God’s presence. In a performative approach, action is defined by the “effort and energy involved in the material realm” (Niemman 2008, 21). The more a believer puts these material dimensions of a practice to the fore, the more effective a practice will be in generating an experience of God’s presence.

Rien shares how the act of talking with God first of all *enacts* the closeness of God. Rien shares: “God promises to be with you. [...] So I pray trusting thereunto.” He expounds: “In praying I can really experience that too. But not always. Sometimes it also just that you think: according to my feelings, the prayer does not reach any further than the ceiling.” Rien though discovered that pray-

ing aloud helps to also *experience* God's closeness. Sometimes *Rien's* act even generates an experience of *divine* communication: his words become God's own words! Rien:

I myself have experienced that praying aloud is of tremendous help [...]. Because praying for yourself... I do believe that God hears that too. But your own thoughts wander and go into all possible directions. At least, that holds for me, when I pray for myself or silently.

And sometimes it happens that you're praying [aloud] and that you're finished praying and think: did I pray that? Where did those words come from? For example, [...] I was praying for friends. And for the one friend I prayed that I might be silent and for the other friend that I might talk. And then afterwards I thought: why do I pray that?

And a week later or so the first friend came to me and said: "I need to tell you something." [...] And that was really a moment to be quiet and to let him tell. [...] And then I thought back about praying [the week before] and thought: yes beautiful! But I surely did not make that [prayer] up myself.

In special and urgent situations respondents therefore often testify to pray out loud, as if they are somehow aware that it increases its performative force. Evelien shares about her niece Marieke who lately lapsed into an irreversible coma. Evelien cannot find peace, knowing her niece does not believe. At a certain Saturday, she suddenly thinks of the Bible story about the daughter of Jairus. She then prays that God might call Marieke, just like he called "Talitha koum" (Mark 5:41). On Sunday her brother-in-law calls. It turns out that he prayed – aloud – a similar prayer for Marieke, that same Saturday afternoon. Evelien tells: "My brother-in-law called. [...] He says: 'I prayed out loud.' He says: 'I was alone and I prayed: 'Lord God, call Marieke. You can call Marieke.''" On top of everything, Evelien learns later on that her husband, who was at work that Saturday, prayed a similar prayer for Marieke too! Evelien concludes: "Three people who prayed so intensively the same thing and did the same thing, may I not see a promise from God in that?" The triple act of talking with God out loud almost enforces God's answer: he must have surely called Marieke.

Between Desires and Demands

A conception of faith based on the performance of communicative faith practices puts a lot of stress on the actual performance of them by believers. Having a personal relationship with Jesus is not a given, but something strived after. Evangeli-

cal Protestants have great confidence in the efficacy of communicative faith practices, which stimulates their voluntary engagement in these practices. But their desires to involve God and to live life *coram Deo* are always on the verge of becoming (self-imposed) demands too: the prayer *has* to be prayed.

This demanding aspect of the relationship with Jesus is communicated to believers from the very start. The coercion is often intuitively felt by believers and not always appreciated. Last year Aagje followed a discipleship course, consisting of 12 evenings. Half way the course the participants are invited to ask God to reveal them the “blockades” in their relationships with God. Aagje tells how she felt a resistance against praying “that one prayer,” which she finally did pray:

You could fill it in yourself, you know. So no standard prayer or something like that. But well, whether God wanted to show you whether there are things [...] that hinder the relationship between you and God. And as a prayer example Psalm 139 was given. [...]

And my attitude about this was... Well, if you said the prayer that you actually had a bit the idea like: if I don't receive any answers in the next two weeks, then the prayer has not been correct. Then, then... well, I couldn't stand that, because it was kind of pressed into that form. And then I just thought: well whatever, let it be.

Even though personal and extemporary prayer is advocated, this does not mean that the practice of talking with God is not scripted at all (even though respondents might like to think so). The necessity to pray the prayer counters the freedom provided by personal word choice. And even though believers are invited to pray in their own words, at the same time an example prayer or topic list is provided prescribing what the believer should say. Praying is still “pressed into” a certain “form.”

In daily life too, the need to pray the prayer and to do it concerning everything constitutes a demanding task. Believers are quickly haunted by guilt when these demands are not met. Lianne shares how guilty she felt when she did not share everything with God, but with friends instead. So ordinary life and even friendships can threaten the relationship with Jesus:

I shared very, very much with them and in doing so I put my friends above God. [...] He gives friendships, but he wants to be involved in what you do, in all the daily things, in everything. [...] I wanted to get my story off my chest, but instead of getting rid of it and telling God, I went to them. [...] It was easier to pick up the phone and share it with them. [But] it belongs with God! God is leading you! God says: Give everything to the Lord and he will determine your path!

Other respondents too indicate the need to be fixed upon God and God alone. “What do you really find important in your life? Or are there things that keep you away from God?” Kees asks. “Yes, that could be you daily life. Yes,” so he answers the questions himself. Money for instance is quite important in Kees’ business: “I have to be able to buy stuff every month. And have to be able to eat and to invest. Well, if I talk about it [i.e. money], then I regularly question myself: does this stand between me and God? [...] How can I involve God in it? But then it becomes very troublesome for me to... Well, to put it crudely: you cannot convene with God about an interest rate.”

Even though the practice of talking with God is about *uplifting* daily life by involving God, the desire to involve God in everything can paradoxically *devalue* daily life too and lead to perceiving it as an inconvenient obstacle thereunto.

6.3 | Listening to God

Listening to God is the counterpart of talking with God. Having a personal relationship with Jesus “is not only about saying: ‘Father, this and this and this I all want,’” Roeland explains, “he also has to be given the chance to say: ‘This and that I want.’” As believers have talked to God about their lives, they now want to hear what God has to say about it.

Justus told about talking with God extensively and elaborately. It almost self-evidently invited the question whether God ever talks back. Justus responded: “Well, quite coincidentally in my lesson it is now about ‘How can you hear God’s voice?’ You have to listen.” The main concern of these believers is not whether God talks back. The question is whether the believer listens. “I can do that by his Words,” he explains, referring to the practice of Bible reading. Ted explains in similar vein: “Praying is only part of that relationship [with Jesus]. And in that [relationship] the Bible too, of course plays a bloody important role in it. Because whereas praying is the asking, that Bible gives answers.” In reading the Bible – but also in being silent in prayer, singing and faith sharing – believers perceive to encounter God and to listen to what he has to say to them concerning their lives.

Listening to God has always been regarded essential to faith, especially in the Reformed tradition these believers are stemming from. As Van der Kooi (2005) explains in reference to Karl Barth, Reformed Word theology emphasizes God’s Word and God’s promises. In Jesus Christ God says ‘yes’ to human beings (see §3.3). The Reformed tradition focuses on the extraneous nature of salvation which is attributed to believers in the act of justification. Consequently, the

proclamation of this truth is the all-important matter. The believer needs to listen to the Word of God and is foremost an answering being (cf. Berkhof 2002, 182ff; Immink 2003, 44, 79ff). Reformed theology thus draws attention to *God* ‘talking’ to humans, not so much to *believers* talking with God.

According to theologian David K. Gillet, evangelicals too give supreme primacy to God’s Word and initiative (1993, 129). The “human awareness of God, and the human response to God, is dependent on God’s prior activity. We can address God because he has addressed us” (137). He then, quite importantly, continues: “Consequently, there is a logic to a daily devotional pattern that reflects the primacy of God’s action, and the consequent response awakened in the believer, by putting Bible reading before prayer” (137–138).

Real faith however does not display such patterns. Believers enact a relationship with Jesus, above all, by addressing God and talking with him. Talking with God then incites them to listen to God. These practices are in general not driven by soteriological motives either, but aim at experiencing something of God in return to their communication with him.

To Pay Attention to Sacred Realities

Listening to God is an actual act that requires action, effort and not a little energy of believers in the material world. It is executed in concrete acts of reading the Bible, singing, talking with fellow believers and praying in silence. In these acts, believers *pay* intense *attention to what* either *the Bible* or *(fellow) believers say*. As God is not physically present as any other person to listen to or observe, the Bible and believers ‘substitute’ God. This is though no mere convenient solution. For evangelical Protestants the Bible and believers constitute sacred realities, characterized by God’s presence. Hence, these are the best places for engaging in listening to God.

The Bible is imbued with sacredness due to its “inspiration by the Holy Spirit.” Evangelical Protestants therefore speak about the Bible as “God’s Word” and as “God’s letter to us.” It is where “God makes himself known to us.” Respondents consequently indicate to “believe everything it says in the Bible, even though I do not understand a lot of things.” Evangelical Protestants demonstrate a(n) (almost equal) high regard for what fellow believers have to say.⁶⁰ Believers do not give any explicit justification for doing so. It is though in line with their attention for the presence of the Holy Spirit in the heart of every believer (cf. McGrath 2000). The Holy Spirit imbues believers with sacredness too, just like the Bible. Respondents consequently attach great value to the practice of faith

⁶⁰ This shows especially in practices of intermediation, in which sayings of specialized pray-ers, healers and prophets are received as words emanating from God himself (see §6.5).

sharing, which is not merely perceived as social interaction, but as communicative faith practice in which believers listen to God.

The act of listening means to pay attention to these sacred realities and involves a constructive thinking exercise. Believers construct what God has to say out of the words contained in the Bible or out of what is thought and expressed by fellow believers. This thinking exercise aims at the *particular* and explores possible similarities in patterns or matters between what is read or heard and the believer's *present, personal* life. Believers tentatively apply what they read, hear or think to their own lives, to see if it is possible to construct a meaningful whole out of them. If a fit is discovered, it is experienced as something that has been revealed to them by God himself. Practices of listening so dramatize God as speaking subject (with all attendant qualities of agency, interaction, intentionality, affect and accountability, Houseman 2008, 415) and therefore enact a real relationship with him.

In her study concerning evangelical Americans, Luhrmann (2012) tries to understand how they come to hear God's voice inside their own minds (also cf. Luhrmann 2004; Luhrmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010). She presents a theory of attentional learning, arguing that "the way you learn to pay attention determines your experience of God" (xxi). When people learn specific ways of attending to their minds and their emotions, they will find evidence of God. Both "what they attend to and how they attend changes their experience of their minds, and [...] as a result, they begin to experience a real, external, interacting living presence" (xxi). She shows how this interaction is the result of *training* the mind and *learning* to reinterpret familiar experiences of one's own mind and body as not being one's own at all – but God's. Even though Luhrmann focuses upon the experience of hearing God's voice *inside* your mind, she indicates that the same principle holds for other experiences of hearing God's voice in which the supernatural is experienced to break through into the everyday. Also then it holds, that if a believer knows how to pay attention, the believer will be able to see it happen (56ff). Luhrmann points out that either way, it requires hard work.

Luhrmann's study is insightful in two respects (at least). First of all it points to the relationship between paying attention and experiencing divine communication. Listening to God *mediates* the experience of divine communication. Indeed, the respondents of the present research indicated, that when they started to pay attention, they also started to experience divine communication. The practice of listening so eventually lead to experiencing texts, things or events as divine interaction. And this is what Luhrmann's study secondly points out, that experiencing divine communication requires *learning*. For the believers of this research, experiencing God is something that often did not come naturally to them. Believers rather emphasize how they had to be *taught* to pay attention to the Bible or their own thoughts *as* God speaking to them.

As listening to God involves learning, it also means that skills are involved that can be improved by exercise. Respondents share how over the years they improved in the practice of listening to God and started to hear God's voice through the Bible or fellow believers much clearer. "Years ago these words were much more distant for me," Tilde said concerning her practice of Bible reading. But the more "you penetrate God's Word, at least for me, the more it fascinated, but also the more it spoke to me." Expressions like "penetrating God's Word," or "really searching God," "keeping my eyes focused upon God" indicate that a serious level of effort is involved in the practice of listening to God.

The invested effort is though never experienced to be in vain. Even when concrete experiences of divine communication stay out, the serious engagement in acts of listening enhances the realness of God's closeness. In being concentrated upon what God might have to say, God's presence takes on a new quality of realness. Luhmann explains this as the psychological process called "absorption," which simply put means that "when you get absorbed in something, it seems more real to you" (199).⁶¹

The act of paying attention as performed in practices of listening to God often spills over into a more general attitude of attentiveness. Over time, paying attention to God's Word and to God's people has the effect that believers develop an encompassing attitude of attentive living. Consequently they start to experience God in all that happens in their daily lives (see chapter 7).

How to Listen to God in Practice?

Listening to God is performed in acts of *reading*, *singing*, *faith sharing* and *being silent*. These mainly discursive faith practices take on the quality of a communicative faith practice when believers pay intense attention to the Bible and to believers as God speaking to them. As sociologist of religion Martin Riesebrodt already pointed out, the line is "constantly in flux" (2009, 76, see §5.3).

Reading the Bible

Believers read the Bible to listen to what God has to say to them currently and personally. "The Bible contains words for you *for everyday*," Tilde explains. The believer interacts with the words read and tries to apply them to his or her par-

⁶¹ Interestingly, the absorption hypothesis also suggests that next to practice, proclivity matters as well (Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010). "Getting absorbed in something" involves both training *and* talent (Luhmann 2012, 202), which might explain why some people are more likely to experience God as real than others.

ticular situation, sometimes quite literally. While experiencing a burn-out, Roeland started to read the Bible on a certain evening:

I found myself reading psalm 139 [Roeland grabs his Bible and starts reading the psalm aloud]: “Yahweh, you have searched me, and you know me. [...]” Then I got angry, really! [...] “I do not understand a thing of what you are now permitting into my life!” I was really, really furious. [...]

[I read:] “Where could I go from your Spirit?

Or where could I flee from your presence?

If I ascend up into heaven, you are there.

If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there!”

Then I completely exploded, like: “God what a nonsense! You are in heaven, and I cannot come there. I feel like being in Sheol, in the world of the death, and you are not there. God what a nonsense!”

“Well, Roeland, that is not what it says. But if you choose to escape into euphoria, I will go with you. If you choose to flee again into depression, I will go with you.”

I was just as broken, I was still worn out, but there was that arm around my shoulder: “Just come along.”

By interacting with the words he reads, Roeland listens to God and experiences God to address him personally saying “just come along.” So Bible reading is a direct encounter with the divine (cf. Gillet 1993, 138) and enacts a personal relationship with him.

In this practice, believers read the Bible as *contemporary* and *personal* document, as God addressing them now, personally.⁶² When farmer Kees reads about the rich young man in his morning devotions, he reads it as a question posed to *him*: “Would *you* be willing to sell [the farm]?” Such is a relatively new practice: “Few Christians in the 1950s read the Bible as if it were a contemporary document,” Luhrmann points out (2012, 23). But “the Jesus people [...] came at the text [...] as if it were written for them, as if it were straightforwardly true, and as if all they needed to do to understand what the writer had meant was to read it” (23).⁶³

⁶² Evangelicals have always advocated a devotional reading of the Bible as source of spiritual truth, for which the reader is in need of illumination by the Holy Spirit. This is not necessarily the same as reading the Bible as contemporary document. See for instance how Richard Foster advocates meditating on the Bible (1989, 38–39) and studying the Bible (1989, 78ff) and the considerable differences in this type of Bible reading with the respondents’ practice.

⁶³ This particular, personal usage of the Bible has always raised scathing criticism. Historian Mark A. Noll (1994) spoke of the *Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* and Biblical theologian Arie

As anthropologist Vincent Crapanzano points out, in this approach believers often “exploit the materiality of the sign” (2000, 54-56) to help them to hear what God has to say. As the Bible’s material, this-worldly quality cannot be disentangled from its divine character, believers develop a peculiar respect for the Bible as book and its literal text. The Bible is somehow a “weird book,” as Ted puts it. Several respondents felt the need to physically take their Bibles in their hands or place it in front of them before starting the interview. As if the Bible was giving them the power to do well in the interview. See how Roeland grabs his Bible and wants to quote Psalm 139 literally.

The practice so assumes the qualities of what might be called a ‘divinatory practice.’ Believers rather tell and divine God’s will than that they listen to God. Ted:

I’m not in favor of just reading sections haphazardly. [...] But it’s very weird: [...] you can read the same section five times, under five different circumstances, and five times you get a different piece of response back. [...] And that is really purely tapered to yourself. That is purely private. So if you have things of which you say: that is bothering me, well, then you take that Bible and open it out and then it says: ‘Don’t be afraid, have some faith.’ Well, all right! Bingo! Then it says so! And next time you read straight past it, but at that moment it applies to you and then you spot it too.

Ted calls it a “weird” practice. He does not understand the practice at all. Actually he does not even approve of it! He just knows by experience that Bible reading *works* that way. And that experience wins it from the feeling that it is also somehow “weird.” (Remember how Evelien too learned that praying works, without fully understanding it). “Yes,” Leo too says, “but sometimes [Bible texts] just stand out too. Sometimes, when you read for instance in the evening a bit in the Bible, or at another moment, or during quiet time, and then sometimes you thumb through, I thumb through the Bible and then suddenly a text is there!” Also in this example, the material dimensions of the practice stand to the fore: taking the Bible in one’s hand, reading a bit, thumbing through, applying the literal text to one’s own situation. The text becomes almost void of its pre-given historical and literary meaning and functions as vehicle or conduit through which God sends personal messages to the believer.

W. Zwiap about turning the Bible into a “ventriloquist”: “Under the guise of ‘letting the Bible speak for itself’ [...] the Bible became a ventriloquist, who turned out not to be able to say anything more than the resourcefulness and the fantasies of the reader who happened to read the text would permit” (2007, 34).

To be sure, respondents are certainly aware of other ways of reading the Bible as well. They also study the Bible as source of information concerning a variety of (often moral) issues.⁶⁴ Rien:

Sometimes it is just [...] well, that I am happy that God has led this, had this written down, so to say. That I can learn from it now. Sometimes too it is just very directly. [...] At that moment I really have a feeling like: God is showing me this right now. [...] Then it isn't anymore a beautiful theoretical historical story in which you are taught something by God, or learn something about God. But yes, then it really becomes so very personal in your life. Then I experience, very directly so to say, that God is with me and is speaking through that.

Being Silent

Being silent is most clearly of all listening practices modeled after ordinary inter-human communication: after talking with God, the believer is silent and listens. Roeland says he can ask God anything, but “at the other hand, I notice that being silent is very important too.” The practice is a counter intuitive practice: all respondents were initially unfamiliar with the practice and needed to be taught to listen to God in this way, either at a conference or other faith course.

Marjoleine for instance took a course ‘The Gifts of the Spirit.’ The practice of being silent was explained to her as “tuning into God”:

Everyone is actually paranormally gifted. It is just a matter of who you tune into. You have a channel, and you tune that to God, so that he, through you, through that channel, can pass on things to you. Or do you tune to other powers?

And at *Zegenend Helpen* (Helping by Blessing) too they say: “We pray” – and that was actually quite an eye-opener for me – “We pray, say ‘amen’ and start vacuuming.” But at *Zegenend Helpen* they say: “You pray for a while and you are silent for a while. Because if your conversation goes up the telephone line and God wishes to answer, then you have to be silent for a while, so the line is empty and information can go down again.”

Whereas we only ask, ask, ask. Or pray, or thank, or tell. And then you do something else. Often we don't take a moment's rest so God can make things clear to you.

⁶⁴ About what constitutes a biblical interpretation, see for instance Crapanzano (2000, 73).

The act of being silent is presented as act of literal, perceptual listening. It seems that God is expected to talk back verbally. Respondents though indicate that they have never heard a literal voice speaking to them, and neither expect God to do so (cf. Luhrmann 2012, 49).⁶⁵ In practice, believers interpret the silence as God's presence and attend to their own thoughts and feelings as God addressing them.

The act of being silent builds a contrast with the activity of daily life. Being silent is about not vacuuming. There is a need to abstain from daily activities and take a moment's rest. The moment of embodied silence draws the just established closeness of God (enacted in talking with him) to the fore. The embodied silence helps the believer to focus attention on God's presence, because of which he becomes more real (Luhrmann's absorption hypothesis). The experience fills believers with feelings of peace, as the experience of real closeness of God assures them that an answer *will* come sooner or later.

During the silence, believers attend to thoughts, feelings and intuitions "popping into" their mind. Leonie said: "Well, I have yet never heard him speak literally. Not really like a voice or so, but sometimes I have in a thought." In being silent, evangelical Protestants engage in practices of *apophatic* prayer (Luhrmann 2012, 157-188).⁶⁶ They aim at *emptying* their minds and then simply *wait* for a response from God. Just as Bible texts can be channels of divine communication, so the believer can become a channel of divine communication. Just as in such practices the Bible text is emptied from its pre-given content, so the believer attempts to empty his/her mind. Indeed, as Foster indicates (1989, 29), this is a very difficult practice. Distractions are manifold. Leonie elucidates:

I would like to just have a moment's rest in my head, that I'm not constantly distracted by thinking about all kinds of other things. Just in order to listen to what God actually wants to say to me, instead of talking to God all the time. I want to hear, for a change, what God actually wants from me at this moment, you know. [...] But I am way too busy for that most of the time! [...] I almost never get to that point. And that I find hard. I am so quickly distracted!

⁶⁵ One respondent testifies to having heard a literal voice, but the experience was not related to the practice of prayerfully being silent (see §7.2).

⁶⁶ Being silent is used in *kataphatic* and *apophatic* prayer practices. Luhrmann points out how most American evangelicals engage in *kataphatic* prayer practices. In this practice, believers shift attention to their inner experiences by focusing on *mental imagery* and *inner sensory experiences* (Luhrmann 2012, 157-188). According to Foster most people "descend with the mind into the heart most easily through the imagination" (1989, 29). But Foster seems right when he says that most people are unfamiliar with this form of meditation (38). The believers of the present research do not indicate any familiarity with the practice and rather engage in the more difficult *apophatic* prayer practices.

So I think, yes, that I just simply have to empty my mind and just have to be silent and have to see whether God wants to say something to me.

Sharing Faith

Faith sharing too is a practice for communicating with God. It is not the first thing believers mention. But when believers are asked what else is important in communicating with God (besides talking with God and reading the Bible), they often mention faith sharing: “Discussion groups and being church together, attending services, cooperating in services. You know, we have *Groei Groepen* (Growth Groups), those sorts of things” (Tilde). Faith sharing is a communal effort of paying attention to the Bible and fellow believers at the same time, and so to God.

For Ted faith sharing helps him to listen to what God has to say through the Bible: “And then indeed too, that piece of Bible reading of which you think that it says a certain thing, and then hearing in the group: ‘Well, according to me it says otherwise.’” In similar vein Tilde explains:

Those are things too in which you get to know God and Jesus better. Discover surprises. God reveals himself in another way to you, because of the things [he does].

Interviewer: The other things God does?

Tilde: No! The things *you* do! The things that *you* are engaged in. So that is: in the service, in singing, in listening, but also in a discussion group, in what you share with others, or what are different ways of seeing things. And in those things I notice quite often a piece of surprise. That I think: hey! That is true too! Or a song that is very beautiful. And in that, *that* is a piece of your relationship with God.

Through the practice of faith sharing, God is experienced “to reveal himself.” So the practice enacts a personal relationship with God.⁶⁷

Especially in faith sharing, the line between its discursive meaning and its communicative meaning is a thin line of which the limits are “constantly in flux” (Riesebrodt 2009, 76). Faith sharing, however, never becomes mere social talk. Sociologist Omri Elisha uses the concept of *discursive piety* to indicate that faith sharing is always more than a “mere intellectual exercise” (2008, 61–62). Practices like discussion and Bible study with a small faith group are “performative ritu-

⁶⁷ See §7.5 for an example in which Tilde interacts with what is being studied in the Church Growth Group and hears God’s voice through it.

als in which evangelicals reproduce ascetic standards and seek to internalize them through discursive piety” (61–62). The term is borrowed from anthropologist Lara Deeb (2006) who uses it to characterize Shi’i Islamic piety. Discursive faith practices are important for *authenticated* piety to take root (99–128). This is of particular importance for pious Shi’is who try to move away from tradition into a new kind of religiosity, one that involves conscious and conscientious commitment (5). So faith sharing too constitutes a form of discursive piety, helping evangelical Protestants to move away from traditional faith into a direct relationship with God.

However, discursive piety does not only facilitate a process of (religious) internalization, but in particular also of externalization. As respondents share stories of faith and reflect upon daily life, they externalize and materialize their experiences of God. As Klaver rightly indicates: “Small group meetings give space and possibility to interpret experiences that people acquire in daily life as God experiences” (2008, 148). So faith sharing confirms the reality of the personal relationship with Jesus (cf. Luhrmann 2012, 8–9). As these stories lay “the accent upon the presence and closeness of God” (Klaver 2008, 148), the practice shifts again towards assuming meaning as practice of listening to God. In the stories shared, believers see something of God and hear his voice.

Singing Songs

Also through singing believers listen to God. Tilde: “Through the words you sing, of course you offer praise to God. But sometimes too, you sing many, many words like, well take the song ‘At your feet, Lord, is the highest place,’ that is praise to God, but next to that it is listening to God. You get what I mean?” Believers sing to God while simultaneously listening to the words sang. In singing, *addressing God* and *listening to God* coincide.

As it not only engages the mind, but through sound and rhythm also the body (Klaver 2011, 195ff), singing seems to mediate God experiences more effectively than other practices of listening. Respondents often indicate that singing “does a lot” to them or “moves” them. The believer’s intentional and physical involvement in the act of singing facilitates the act of paying attention to the words song and hearing God’s voice through it. Listening to God means to “sing with your heart,” as Tilde puts it. “You do not only sing the words with your mouth, but with your heart too. And that is both praise, as well as listening.”

Similar to talking out loud, the words sang *to* God can therefore assume meaning as words spoken *by* God himself. Leonie addresses God while simultaneously interacting with and listening to the words she sings. During the performance her words transform into God’s words:

When I'm listening to such music, I become happy for God. Not always, you know. Sometimes I'm with my mind completely elsewhere. But sometimes I think: yes, what they sing here is true! That God really loves us this much and has given his Son! And then I think: yes God, you are so great! Or something similar, you know. Then I just have something like: gee! Then it is almost like those are not *my* words anymore, not words that I speak to God, but then it is just like the *Holy Spirit* is praying them, like: gee, your name is high! The words don't seem to originate from me anymore. But sometimes they are, you know. Sometimes they are just my own words.

When believers "give God a chance to say something" through the act of singing, they do not refer to singing psalms or hymns from the church hymnbook. "And what for me plays an important role too is *praise*," Roeland emphasizes. Believers prefer to sing typical evangelical songs of praise and worship from the Dutch well-known songbook *Opwekkingsliederen* (Revival Songs). Roeland: "And eh, the first *Opwekkingslied*, well, I stood there as the wife of Lot, but it defrosted me like nothing else, it brought me so close to the Father. I have noticed that to worship and to praise him, that, that is everything!"

A recent analysis of 50 of the most popular *Opwekkingsliederen* shows that more than 80% of those songs directly address God (Riphagen 2013). They are therefore more suitable for communicating with God than traditional songs singing *about* God. Even though singing has been important throughout the evangelical tradition, *Opwekking* concerns a recent style of music and singing (Klaver 2011, 187-195). The importance of right this type of contemporary praise and worship music, confirms that the personal relationship with Jesus denotes a contemporary type of spirituality.

As the songs "try to effect a direct conversation between the singer and God, they break free of the concrete situations of lives. Every individual has to be able to sing along. Evangelical songs consequently erode and become an abstract experience in the here and now" (Riphagen 2013). In the experience of believers though, the general wordings enable them to become personally invested in the act of singing. Therefore singing does *not* become an abstract experience. It is rather able to mediate a personal message from God to the believer concerning his or her current life.

Riphagen furthermore criticizes the God image of the songs in which "Jesus actually loses its *humanity*" being "King of all days, highly exalted, glorious in heaven above." This God image though complements the image of God as friend (presumed by practices of talking with God) quite well. The God who "worries with you whether to paint the kitchen table" is not just an ordinary

bosom friend, but a divine friend. He is not only concerned with the needs of believers, but also has divine authority over believers, being able to bless them.

Spaces that Evoke God's Presence

Listening to a God who is not physically present and who cannot be perceptually heard, constitutes a quite difficult task. Certain *spaces*, however, are able to evoke a sense of God being close and so invite believers to listen to God.

Spaces are often more important than believers themselves realize. Many respondents claim not to need any separate space to communicate with God, but often right away tell about specific spaces they use for communicating with him. Leonie first tells that praying happens all day through. Then she continues: “Yes, and sometimes I do have actual moments for praying. Especially when I am sitting in bath actually, then I have some rest, and then I start thinking about things and then, then I can actually pray quite well, so to say. It’s a bit weird.” Leonie finds it “weird” to discover that a certain space helps her to pray. As many other respondents, she discovered certain practices to simply *work*, even though not knowing why. At first sight, the bathroom is quite a profane space, not connected to faith at all. But when Leonie thinks about it, she understands the inherent invitation of the bathroom: for her the private space of the bathroom is connected with reflection, rest and peace. It makes her “think”: she pays attention to God’s presence, listens to him and consequently can pray much better as well. The bodily rest and inactivity and the privacy of the bathroom effectively mediate a sense of intimacy with God and so make him more real.

For these respondents it is specifically the demarcation of a certain space, sealed off from the outside world, which creates a space where God can be found. In Christianity, this has often been referred to as ‘the inner chamber’ or ‘closet,’ after Matthew 6. Justus for instance, refers to it that way. His bedroom is his “inner chamber.” Most respondents have the habit to use their bedrooms as inner chambers. These respondents though also ‘create’ new inner chambers, the bathroom of Leonie being a good example of that. Another space that stands out is the car. When Leonie drives to work, she often sings and listens to God. It is in these moments, that her songs turns into God’s own words (see above). Sealed off from the world outside her, she has wonderful moments of devotion. Evangelicals are sometimes renowned for praying on their bicycles, but in the interviews the car is mentioned much more often. The closed, private space evokes a sense of God being close; the believer feels invited to pay attention to him.

The high level of small faith group participation amongst these believers seems to function in a similar way: the small faith group demarcates a safe and intimate space, separated from daily life. Kees shares about a men’s-group he is part of. The group is “closed,” Kees explains, “in the sense: it is not accessible for

others.” He continues: “And then we really share, well, call it our innermost feelings. And that really is... There is crying, there is laughing, we speak very openly about our relationship with our wives, or with our children, or... well just anything! Also sharing God’s Word. What am I struggling with? That rich young man, what should I do with that?”

Some respondents indicate that certain open spaces evoke God’s presence just as well. Ernst-Jan for instance tells about the moments he calls “meditation.” During the interview, Ernst-Jan stood up from behind his desk to show the place where he “meditates,” pointing out through the window: “I walk there, through that garden, and I go and sit on a little chair. In summer I go and sit outside. Then I hear the birds and everything.” For him the openness of the place, opens him up to the omnipresence of God and makes him listen with awe.

6.4 | Investing Time in God

Investing time in God or taking time for God is a third often mentioned act for communicating with God. The act refers to a certain amount of time that believers consciously set aside to occupy themselves with God. Respondents talk about “investing time in God” in alternation to “engaging” or “occupying oneself with God,” expressions which show that the sheer *amount* of time matters, as well as spending that time *on God*.

The act is repeatedly compared to two people spending time together in a love relationship or friendship. Respondents present it as basic act of communication in any relationship. Ted: “It is just as in a relationship: you have to invest time in it.” Leonie explains: “If you from your side don’t put energy into it, then that is not really good for your relationship [with God]. You see, it’s just as a friendship you have with someone, or with your boy-friend for instance. It is important that you put time into it, if you want to build up the relationship and if you want to be able to see the effects of what it brings you.”

The respondents’ statements reveal an *economic approach* to time. They speak about “*investing* time in God,” about time as an economic investment which is believed to bring in certain revenues. See how Leonie speaks about “putting time into the relationship” because of “the *effects* of what it brings you.” In an economic approach to time it matters how time is used and whether it is used productively. Investing time in God is done by using time productively to pray, read, study the Bible and similar faith practices, either in private or with other believers. The “effects” or products aimed at are experiences of divine communication. Therefore a believer even “*has to* invest time in God. [...] It is all about God wanting to say something to you and you *shouldn’t* run away from

that” (Kees). The respondents’ economic approach also points out that costs are involved. Indeed, in a time and society in which daily life is very demanding, time is a sparse and highly valuable good. Taking time for God therefore constitutes a demanding task which is often obstructed by the demands of daily life. Kees confirms: “It is important to invest time in God. I have to get up early in the morning to milk the cows, often before 5 o’clock, and then you don’t always feel like it. Discipline, then, is very important.”

Even though time scarcity might seem something belonging to modern society, it has been a known problem for evangelicals. Historian David W. Bebbington describes vividly how the agenda of an evangelical would look like in the eighteenth century: full and overcrowded with all kinds of religious activities (1989, 10-12, 41). Activism has been a leading characteristic of evangelicals since the beginnings of the movement and with it the problem of time management was born. Bebbington confirms: “Time was scarce” (1989, 11). However, an evangelical was *not* supposed to spend “his nights and days in fasting and prayer, but an [evangelical saint of to-day is] a man who is a zealous Sunday-school teacher, holds mission services among the poor, and attends innumerable committee meetings” (R.W. Dale 1879 in Bebbington 1989, 10-11). Souls needed to be saved.

For evangelical Protestants nowadays investing time in God is a communicative faith practice. It is not directed at saving the souls of other people, but rather prioritizes God and the communication with him. Evangelizing activities are rather experienced as distraction from it. Lianne explicates that such activities are done *for* God, but not directed *to* God. In evangelizing activities believers therefore even run the risk of “losing God”:

You can be so busy and engaged with God’s work, that you cannot find peace anymore to be silent with God. My quiet time just went up. I had become a busybody of Christian activities. And I... Well, in the end it is about that relationship with God and to find peace in him and to let God lead you. [...] I mean, God is not happy when we are just occupied with all kinds of activities *for* him, God is happy when we search *him* by being... by being in his presence. That’s enough. God doesn’t ask us to do all kinds of stuff. [...] Being close to God, being in his presence, is much more important than all those other things.

For these believers, investing time in God is an important means in the communication with God. It is a communicative faith practice with performative force, intensifying the involvement of believer and God with one another. The act embodies practices of talking and listening. Taking time for these practices underlines once more that they “involve effort and energy in the material realm”

(Houseman 2008, 414). The personal relationship with Jesus is no volatile, spiritual reality. Communicating with God is something that is done, takes time and gets shape in daily life. Note furthermore that believers do not speak about investing time *in talking* with God or *in listening* to God, they speak about investing time *in God*. Time does not merely embody practices of talking and listening, but adds its own value to the practice of communicating with God.

To Intensify Involvement

Investing time in God first of all *intensifies the involvement of the believer* in the communication with God. It enacts holistic involvement: in setting aside an actual amount of time for God, the believers' physical and mental participation in the communication increases. The degree of involvement increases with the duration of the performance. The thus intensified involvement makes the believer susceptible to God and fosters reflection about what he has to say. Time so forcefully improves the quality of the communication with God.

Believers often explain the meaning of investing time in God by contrasting it to casual prayer throughout the day. Leo:

I try to, actually every day, well every other day, to just take some quiet time, that I really take time for prayer, to read some Bible, or well from the magazine *GROEI (GROW)*. [...] After that I start praying. And that takes about ten minutes, quarter of an hour or so. That takes up a bit more time than just in between, so to say. Between times you try to pray as well. Usually everyday a few times. But eh, but those are the moments that you really – quiet time you call that – that you really take a little time for God.

Note the many times Leo uses the word “really.” Apparently there is such a thing as “praying” and as “really praying,” the difference between them being due to the time taken for their performance. At the moment Leo “really take[s] a little time for God,” something changes in the quality of the performance of a practice like praying.

Other respondents confirm such a change. Aagje is sure that “God doesn’t mind” instant prayers. “I think he understands it.” But she adds: “I think you should take care that it is not confined to just such prayers, like I just said: I pray on the bicycle or in the car. Well those are really not lengthy prayers, you know? They are more that you think like: well God... [...] And if you always have that kind of prayer, if you always pray with your mind on other things, then you are missing out on something, I believe. [...] And then you don’t take, in my opinion, time for that relationship.” Even though respondents continually

emphasize the importance of talking with God throughout the day (§6.2), paradoxically they also underline that such instant prayers do not suffice. Aagje points out that “*really* praying” is about “having your mind on it.” Expressions like “occupying yourself with God” or “being engaged with God” are therefore used interchangeably with “investing time in God” and explicate this deliberate engagement – *really* praying – in the performance.

Mind though, that this deliberate engagement does not refer to a mere mental act of concentrating on God. It is (only) attained by actually taking time for God. Kees expressively explains:

Well, you could say for yourself that it's important that you get a massage because your shoulders are hurting. To name something. But if you never sit down for it and let someone massage you, then your shoulders keep hurting. And then you can say 100 times that it is necessary, but it never happens.

It is just as in the relationship with your husband or wife, if you never sit down together on the couch in the evening, and drink a wine together or something similar, then you always have casual conversations. So that's what I do in the morning, or in church or that's what I do when I talk with other people about faith. Then you open yourself so to say – while you remain closed, really. But you are receptive for it, let me put it that way.

Real involvement with God is about “sitting down” and “drinking a wine together” instead of having casual conversations. The concrete act effectuates a more conscious participation of the believer in the communication with God. Praying becomes “*really* praying”: body and mind coalesce. The communication with God so broadens and deepens. Because the invested time also evokes a sense of God being present, the believers' attention is directed to what God has to say as well. As Lianne says: “I need that time with God, I need that time for thinking, or just to be in his presence.”

The more time is put in the practice, the higher the revenues are expected to be. Respondents sometimes intensify their involvement in the communication with God by taking several days or weeks for God. Aagje participated in a weekly discipleship course and asked God to show her whether there were any blockades between her and God. “Then you are just *really* very *consciously engaged* with that *for a few days*,” she explained. Consequently, the impact of praying “that one prayer” was large as well.

Time can even intensify involvement against the will of the believer. Time's efficacy is strong enough to overcome involuntary participation. Leonie

had to go to church for two and a half years due to a boyfriend she had. As she had to sit out the long services, she started to listen after a while:

Well, you know, I was somehow engaged with faith. But I was not used to go to church and I felt quite a resistance to it as well, to being required to go, you know. And I didn't really see the use of it either. But at a certain I moment, while I was folding paper airplanes, I started to listen a bit to what that man was telling and thought: well, it is actually quite useful what he has to say. But that really took a long, long time! But well in two and a half year, a lot can be achieved.

To Prioritize God

As time is a scarce good, investing time in God also *reveals* the *priorities* one has in life. Kees continues: "I can drown myself in my work. I can work 25 hours a day if I wanted to. It's never finished. So that can stand between you and God. And then in the morning: 'No, I don't have time, now I have to...' Well, then that stands between you and God. [...] Well, what then do you really find important in your life? Or is God the most important one?"

Because the believer intensifies his/her involvement and prioritizes God, *God* is expected to intensify his involvement in the relationship as well. Simple relational dynamics explain why. Lianne explicates: "God is happy when we search him." Being made someone's priority makes God willing to respond. Investing time in God demands a deliberate choice of the believer to prioritize God. It communicates submission to what God has to say and an intense commitment to the relationship with him. Because of such intentional involvement, the believer expects a similar increasing involvement from God. God will surely return the love received from the believer.

In practice, time so also functions as kind of *pressure means* to convince God to answer. By investing time in God, making him priority and waiting for an answer, it will in the end be hard for God to resist answering – so is the reasoning. Leonie shares that God hardly says anything back to her in direct response to her prayers. She therefore plans to spend more time with God: "Just being close to God. Maybe that he doesn't say something to me right away, you know. But [that he does] if I do that more often, if I just take the time to be with God." This waiting for an answer is sometimes found hard going. Kees calls it "wrestling with God." In the church council the issue of women's ordination is under discussion and he wants to hear what God has to say about it. "Well, then just allot several days for it," Kees says "to pray together [...] and wrestle with the Word of God." He too assumes that when enough time is put into these faith practices, they will certainly hear God's voice.

Investing time so also easily functions as a *measurement* of faith. When a believer does not receive an answer from God, the obvious conclusion might be that he/she “should” simply invest more time in God. Indeed, in speaking about the practice of investing time, believers often feel that they should take (more) time for God. Because else “that is not really good for your relationship” (Leonie). When God is not continually and regularly made priority, believers experience less of him and his power. Respondents speak about God’s power “wearing off” if they “haven’t prayed for a couple of days” (Leo). Leo experiences to receive less divine power to, for instance, “turn off the television.”

Such a lack of divine power could suggest that God feels hurt or takes offence at not receiving the attention he deserves. McGuire seems to suggest so. She notices that divine power often wears off after some time, thereby referring to a woman whose healing lasted only temporary. According to McGuire, “because [the woman] had not given thanks enough” (2008, 82).

Evangelical Protestants are never willing to take the relational dynamics this far. For them, the performative nature of real faith implies that communicative faith practices are subject to *regular* action. The performance of communicative faith practices enacts the closeness of God and brings the believer within reach of God’s power and blessings. If believers fail to perform communicative faith practices regularly, it is not God who withdraws his power, but the believer who “wanders off” from God (cf. §8.5 Fluctuations).

Practices That Take Time

Evangelical Protestants strive to *keep quiet time* on a daily basis. In addition, they plan regular *quality time* with God.

Keeping Quiet Time

Respondents try to set time apart for God, preferably on a daily basis. Ted says: “Reading the Bible is something I do at least – if it is possible, but quite often it is – say safely three, four mornings a week. [I do that] in the morning before I walk out the door, ten minutes, quarter of an hour.” In keeping quiet time communicative faith practices of talking and listening are strategically cultivated: they are performed regularly and with personal attention and so effectively establish the closeness of God throughout the day.

Nico “involves Jesus in things” by keeping quiet time in the morning and evening. Communicating with God so effectively encompasses his whole day. “In the morning I always start with a personal prayer. [...] Then I just dedicate the day and always thank God... or I thank Jesus and the Father for the good night’s rest and for the new day that begins. And I dedicate the day to him

as well: in everything we do, and everything that happens in between. And then, in the evening, we keep quiet time again and then eh, we close the day with him.” Keeping quiet time is often practiced at the turning points of the days. Amongst others McGuire (2007, 2008), Orsi (2006), Vasquez (2011) remind us of the potential of such embodied practices to affect daily life. As daily time is alternately spend on God and ordinary business, the reality of God and the everyday intertwine.

These believers seem to have a slight preference for keeping quiet time in the morning. In evangelical Christianity morning times have often been favored (Bebbington 2005, 83; Randall 2005, 77) and the practice is still encouraged in popular evangelical literature (e.g. Nee 2001). For evangelical Protestants morning times are favorite, mainly because of practical reasons: all meanings attached to time are well cultivated. It prioritizes God by literally starting the day with him, the quietness of the morning helps the believer to be quiet for God, and the practice intensifies receptiveness for God throughout the rest of the day. Lianne: “That is the most splendid time. No one has spoken yet. It is really the first... the best time is for God. Then you can really start. Then you still enjoy peace. No one has said anything to you and thus you can focus much better on God than in the midst of the day, because so many things have happened by that time a day.”

The practice of keeping quiet time *regularly* does not come without problems. The practice prevents believers from drifting away from God. However, the installed routine carries the risk of increasing automatism. Time spend on God maintains its material qualities, but loses its subjective intentionality. No experiences of God are generated anymore. Mr Rosegaar and his wife still pray together in bed, every night before they go to sleep. They pray “each for themselves,” but still it “moves them.” But Mr Rosegaar adds:

I don’t want to say, that you always dwell upon it at great length, we have to be sensible.

Interviewer: How do you mean ‘not always dwell upon it at great length’?

Mr Rosegaar: Well, we have to take care that it does not become a mere grind. At the one hand it should be a routine, that prayer, you know, that you do it.

Ms Rosegaar: Every time, every night.

Mr Rosegaar: Every time. But at the other hand, you have to do it consciously. That you keep your thoughts on it, let me rather put it that way. [...] If it is a mere good habit... then you don’t live in it. Then you don’t experience it.

Spending Quality Time

Believers sometimes plan for more time to spend on God. Some of them call it their ‘quality time’ with God. Kees: “Sometimes you are in need of really building your relationship with God for some longer time. With other people sometimes. By means of a small faith group or by means of such a *Vernieuwingsfestival* (Renewal Festival). Then you, as it were, set aside a whole day.” Sometimes this quality time functions as counter measure for bogged down quiet time. It also prevents automatism and rigidity.

At a conference, the serious amount of time spend in the closeness of God intensifies the experience of God’s closeness significantly. Leonie tells that she went to *Opwekking* (Revival), an annual conference in the weekend of Pentecost, because she “really needed *that boost*.” Before she went there, she “still believed in God” but “was just not engaged with him. I was just really otherwise engaged.” Because of the sheer amount of time a conference takes, it forcefully intensifies the believer’s involvement in the communication with God and so fosters experiences of God to happen.

Tilde points out that the communal aspect of conferences intensifies involvement in the communication with God as well. “Well, that group that is present there is of course so consciously directed towards wanting to listen to God. And therefore it gives so much more than an ordinary church service.” The intensified involvement of all believers is experienced to add up, giving the believer an empowering experience of God’s presence.

6.5 | Using Intermediation

In a last and eye-catching group of communicative faith practices, believers *use an intermediary* in their communication with God. Believers appeal to intercessors, prophets and healers to support them in their efforts to communicate with God. These mediators are fellow believers who are especially gifted or have attained certain competence in communicating with God. Believers employ the competences of these ‘communication specialists’ to communicate with God. They go to them because they are in need of a divine word of truth, a word of comfort, a blessing or because they are in need of divine healing power.

Lianne, for instance, is in desperate need of divine power. She is about to go to a marriage conference with her husband (Richard) next week; their marriage is in critical condition. The Sunday before the conference she therefore engages in the practice called “ministry prayer.” Lianne: “That Sunday I came forward. I needed prayer. I was about to go to a marriage weekend, together,

Richard and I. And I wanted a blessing, I wanted prayer, I just wanted God to change something, that something would happen.”

The ministry prayer is a common practice in evangelical Protestantism. In the front of the church or meeting, gifted pray-ers⁶⁸ wait for believers to approach them with a request for prayer. According to Lianne nothing extraordinary is at hand: “You just ask for prayer. You ask if they want to pray and if they then want to receive the guidance of God. And sometimes they receive words from God too, it can be very specific.” But whereas Lianne speaks about “just asking for prayer,” her exposition indicates that more is at hand than “just pray-er.” The intercessor does not only pray *for* the believer, but also ministers the divine *to* the believer by blessing the believer or by giving a prophecy.

This and similar practices forcefully establish reciprocal communication with God. The words (– or sometimes acts too –) of the intermediary reveal “what God has to say” to the believer. These practices are therefore quite popular amongst the respondents. Reciprocity is no matter of course in the communication with God. Even though believers might talk with God about everything, experiences of divine communication often stay out or are difficult to interpret. The question “what God has to say” or “what God wants” remains a constant struggle. Practices of listening to God or investing extra time in God do not solve the problem just like that either. It is no surprise then that the help of a third party is sought.

Next to ministry prayer, other practices in which an intermediary appears are: practices of blessing, prophesying, healing, delivering and anointing. In contrast to *talking with God*, *listening to God* and *investing time in God*, respondents do not speak about these practices as *using intermediation*. However, the appearance of an intermediary in those practices is such an outstanding, common characteristic of these practices, that it seemed fit and necessary to bring them together under one term. The performances of these practices follow similar patterns and in practice, often no clear distinction can be made between them. In the mediation of the divine, blessing and delivering, prophesying and healing often overlap.

Practices in which an intermediary appears are, or rather used to be, typically new to the respondents. The respondents are introduced to such practices at evangelical conferences or faith formation courses. A few participants, especially the older ones, do not speak about them at all, for instance Mr and Ms Rosegaar.

⁶⁸ To facilitate reading *pray-er* is used to refer to the person praying, *prayer* to what is being said.

To Be Ministered the Divine

The interceding believer *ministers the divine* to the asking believer by materializing and so mediating divine communication. The words spoken aloud pass on a divine truth to the asking believer or mediate divine power. The interceding believer functions as mediating channel between God and believer. Note, that *words* are not required per se. In for instance practices of anointing, pouring the *oil* mediates divine blessing or healing power.

Moving into the Closeness of God

These practices, staging an intermediary, typically prepare the believer for receiving a divine revelation by first evoking a sense of God's presence. The believer is invited to walk to the front of the church or gathering to the religious intermediary. The act of standing up and coming forward is an important part of the practice, as in the performance the believer as it were approaches God. The physical act of standing up and going forward enacts the intention to listen to God. The respondents speak about these acts as "opening up for the Spirit" and as "creating space for God" or "for the Spirit."

Nico and his family attended a conference called Family Impact. The central worship meeting was concerned with ministering prayer to every family. Nico: "Well, then there was the call for prayer, so to say. And [formerly] I would never have come forward. [...] Well, I am not very keen on these sorts of things. But still I just do it. Then I think: if someone wants to lay hands on me and say a prayer over me, then I am okay with that. Then I think: with that I open myself for the Spirit."

The example shows action to be of constitutive importance in the communication with God. Nico was not at all "keen on" participating in the practice. He always thought of it as "a lot of hoo-ha." "Still," he said "I just do it." Again: the relationship with Jesus does not start by cognitive understanding, but by participating.⁶⁹ The practice starts off with physical action: the believer has to make a move. By this action Nico directs himself to God and opens up. This opening up is not a mere mental act, but a physical act in which the mental comes along. Nico is convinced that the Spirit is pushing him to "be open towards coming forward." He looks back and explains: "Remaining seating is easier. [...] But, yes, that really is that thing of creating space." The movement of the believer into the demarcated space in the front of the church where the religious intermediaries are gathered situates God's presence in actual space, which fosters the mediation of God's presence.

⁶⁹ Remember how Evelien too "just did it" (praying the same prayer every morning) and how Ernst-Jan too simply reads the Bible haphazardly to receive a response from God.

The thus evoked experience of God being close is reinforced forcefully when the interceding pray-er subsequently lays hands on the believer throughout the prayer. In ministry prayer it is common that the intercessor raises one hand towards God while touching the believer's shoulder with the other hand. In blessing rituals sometimes both hands are laid on the believer's head (cf. Fokker; Klaver 2011). On grounds of his/her gift or competence, the mediating believer is presumed to stand in direct contact with God. During the performance, he or she physically channels contact between the believer and God.⁷⁰ The physical touch mediates contact with God for the believer.

Interceding Prayer

Using an intermediary involves an act of prayer by this intermediary. He or she acts as a *specialist* in the communication with God. Respondents seem somewhat confused about this prayer act and interchangeably speak about "asking someone to pray *for* you," "praying *with* you," "letting someone say a prayer *over* you," and "receiving prayer." At the one hand the prayer act looks very similar to their personal prayers, at the other hand the act as a whole somehow differs.

The prayer act is comprised of several distinguishable actions. The 'communication specialist' often shortly converses with the believer to hear his/her request for prayer. He or she then talks aloud to God, (often) invites the Holy Spirit and expresses the believer's requests to God. The interceding pray-er then listens to God silently and subsequently articulates the received revelation to the participating believer. The 'communication specialist' is thus the active performing party, the believer the receiving party. The divine revelation can be a thought, image or Bible text that comes to mind (i.e. the mind of the 'communication specialist'). The pray-er expresses this mental revelation to the believer, for whom the verbalized revelation constitutes a blessing, prophecy, divine encouragement or calling. The 'communication specialist' thus, characteristically, does not only address God in prayer, but subsequently also the believer.

To gain more insight in the practice, I participated in the course 'Listening to God' at the *New Wine Zomerconferentie* (New Wine Summer Conference), in which participants were taught how to listen to God *for* other believers. Magda Tunderman (2010) led the workshop. After a short review of Biblical examples of God speaking personally with believers, she let the participants practice in hearing God's voice. Participants were divided into groups of four or five per-

⁷⁰ Intermediation rests on the presupposition that the interceding believer is or can be a channel of divine communication. Note that this is a quite common presupposition in the faith of the respondents. All practices of listening to God presume the same. Practices of ministry prayer or prophesying extend this presumption to a distinguishable practice that instrumentalizes the assumption.

sons. One person introduced him- or herself by exclusively mentioning his/her name. Then 10 minutes of silence followed, till the bell rang. In those ten minutes the other group members tried to focus their thoughts on God in prayer. After the bell rang, they wrote down their thoughts and handed over the note to the person concerned. So the divine was ministered to the person in question. Tunderman encouraged participants to hold on to the note, and review it in a year. It might turn out to be much more meaningful than they would think on first sight! This demonstrates the great confidence believers have in these practices. Believers therefore often feel empowered simply by participating in such practices. They hold on tightly to the words received, even if it does not make sense to them at all. It is believed to constitute a divine revelation. With time they will certainly come to understand its meaning more fully.

Using such intermediation can be a quite disappointing experience as well. Sometimes, the interceding pray-er does not receive any revelation, thought or image at all. Marjoleine shares about her experience at a conference of Wilkin van de Kamp. “And then they could pray for you. Well, then you receive a word or something. You stand facing each other. And the person that was [praying] with me said: ‘I just do not receive anything. I can invent something myself, but well, that is not intended. So.’”

Respondents never speak about the possibility that the words spoken to them by the pray-er are irrelevant or wrong. From the beginnings of Christianity the need for discernment was recognized: “Test the spirits,” 1 John 4:1 commands. Contemporary manuals and courses concerning the practice of ministry prayer and similar practices often refer to this Biblical task and assign it to the *receiving* believer. The intercessors are explicitly taught *not* to interpret the received images, but to express everything that comes to mind as neutral and objectively as possible to the believer asking for prayer. The receiving believer subsequently has the task of discerning what God wants to say to him/her through the expressed image, Bible text or word. Hence the individual who prays asks the receiving believer: “Does it make sense to you?” The assumption is that the verbalized inner impressions and thoughts *possibly* contain a personal message for the believer but they do not need to (Fokker; Klaver 2011, 304-305).

In practice though *no* such discernment is practiced by the receiving believer. Because the interceding pray-er is assumed to possess a specific spiritual gift for hearing what God has to say, discernment by the receiving believer becomes superfluous. Whatever thought or image this ‘specialist’ receives has divine authority beforehand. So it happened that, shortly after the just mentioned prayer session, one of the other ‘communication specialists’ approached Marjoleine and said: “I received the following about you: ‘Blessed are they who have not seen, yet have believed.’ I don’t know if this makes sense to you?” The woman presented her words to Marjoleine cautiously. But the fact that she approached

Marjoleine uninvited and said “I received the following about you...” simply clothed the spoken words with divine authority. Marjoleine therefore gratefully received this “wink from God” and interpreted it as God explaining to her why she did not receive a message from him earlier, during the prayer session.

The Power of Conference-like Settings

Interceding practices are performed in settings that are typically not part of the respondents’ daily lives or ordinary social networks. They often take place at conferences that last one or two days, or at inter-ecclesial discipleship courses that take place once a week or month.

Respondents often mention the conferences of New Wine, specifically the annual Summer Conference where ministry prayer is practiced as well as taught. Also often mentioned are the conferences of Wilkin van de Kamp. He and the team of the organization *Geboren om vrij te zijn* (Born to Be Free) organize conferences throughout the country about the ministry of deliverance and healing. A variety of other conferences – often held at Christian conference resort *De Betteld* – are mentioned, for instance Family Impact. Other mentioned examples are: *Koninkrijksdag* (Day of the Kingdom) of Willem Ouweneel and Martin Koonstra and courses and conferences offered by the organizations *Genezing en Herstel* (Healing and Recovery), *Zegenend helpen* (Helping by Blessing) and *Bidden en vasten* (Praying and Fasting). These conferences (or courses) often offer multiple opportunities to believers to use intermediation. *Bidden en vasten* even offers a ten days program to which the believer can subscribe.

Attending a conference is a practice with performative force, which intensifies the believer’s involvement significantly. The believer leaves daily life behind to move into another world. The conference is held at a defined place separated from daily life, is visited by a large group of unknown other believers searching for God, and requires the investment of a serious amount of time. The conference-setting demarcates a material space of closeness of God. There, God is present. The act of going to a conference constitutes an act of opening up and entering into the closeness of God. As Nico pointed out (after sharing about coming forward at the Family Impact conference): “And I do think, well yes, you have to search that at those places, at least we want to search for that.”

At these conferences respondents often get involved in practices of intermediation without having explicitly asked for it. Kees went to a *Bevrijdingsconferentie* (Conference for Deliverance) of Wilkin van de Kamp. He and his friends intended just to watch from the side, when one of the interceding pray-ers came to them and said: “I saw the light of the Holy Spirit above you.” She continued by revealing the divine word she received for them. The act of attending the conference ‘replaced’ the act of coming forward and asking for prayer. Attending

the conference had already enacted the deliberate involvement of these believers. Kees and his friends are deeply impressed by the experience.

The invitation to use intermediation is often preceded by verbalizing and so materializing a general, divine revelation to all visitors present. The ‘communication specialist’ starts the prayer session with making some general statements about the attending believers. He/she tells the believers that God has revealed that some of the attending believers are in need of a certain healing, delivering or are struggling with specific sins. Right away the individual believer wonders whether God is addressing him or her. The heightened expectation intensifies the believer’s involvement.

It is not strange to appeal to the help of a mediator multiple times. Some believers seem to want to collect as much divine power as possible. By using intermediation *multiple* times, the received divine power is believed to add up. After his first experience, Nico too started to appeal to mediators more often. His daughter finally pointed out to him that “enough is enough.” When he asked her: “Shall we go forward again this meeting?” she replied soberly: “No, because I have been blessed already two times this week. There’s no need anymore.”

Especially at courses focusing on the “deliverance of demons” and “evil ties,” using intermediation multiple times is seen as necessary to reach the desired result. It constitutes a process of progressive deliverance. A large amount of divine power needs to be collected, before the participant can be fully delivered. Furthermore, just like the efficacy of talking with God is confined to what is mentioned in prayer (§6.2), so the interceding prayer session is confined to what is explicitly mentioned. Thus often multiple sessions are required to mention everything and deliver the believer in all areas of life.

Three Examples

The Prophecy of Tears and Cheers

When Nico attended the Family Impact conference at *De Betteld*, he participated in several practices of intermediation. At one of those occasions, something remarkable happened. Nico attended a small scale seminar about ‘The Father’s Heart of God,’ in which God’s fatherhood and the believer’s fatherhood were related to each other. Nico introduces his experiences that afternoon: “And well the speaker, he – I actually didn’t know that – had the gift of prophecy. To me that’s all new, but anyway.” Nico continues: “He looked straight at me and said, well actually exactly what kind of person I am. And also considering fatherhood, that I am a good father and... But then he said something like: ‘Who sows in tears will reap with joys.’ That he pronounced over me.”

For Nico the experience is very special. He treasures the words spoken to him even though he does not understand them. To him, they constitute a divine revelation. Throughout Nico's story no doubt is cast upon their status or origin. Some time after the conference Nico gets fired. He shares how he suddenly knew what the prophecy was about. He has to "sow in tears." Nico tells: "And at that moment [i.e. of the prophecy] I actually did not know yet that I would lose my job. It had not come up yet." Now the prophecy gives Nico hope and strength as well. He continues: "I sometimes have a quite gloomy attitude and then I think: you see, the tears I have shed, would now not finally the time of joy come?"

The Healing of Absent Pain

Jill went to a conference of Wilkin van de Kamp about the ministry of deliverance. The act of going to the conference is surrounded by an aura of divine intervention and draws attention to Jill's physical well-being from the start. She tells elaborately about the events the week before, how she felt sick all week and hesitated going to the conference after being home from work all week. But that Saturday she felt well and she was sure she needed to go.

At the end of the morning session it is time for ministry prayer. Unintendedly, Jill becomes the object of a practice of healing. Jill:

The speaker started praying. [...] I still don't know how it works, you see. He knew he had to pray for a woman of my age, who also had problems with her father etcetera, and had pain in her lower back. But well I am Reformed, so I remained seated. I don't come forward!

Till he spoke my name and said: "Yes, it starts with a J... It is an I and..." No way! Out of a room filled with thousand people! [...] I had felt addressed from the start, but I really had no intention to come forward. [...] But then I had no choice anymore. And so I came forward. [...] And well, he knew exactly what he had to pray for.

The story of Jill's healing takes an interesting turn as she shares: "I never had pain in my lower back, but he said so." She had though been somewhat depressed the year before. To make sure, I interrupted her: "*So you did not have pain in your lower back at that time?*" Jill confirmed the question.

Jill then continues and tells that she did always have a hollow back: "And well the 'pain' in my lower back, that is due to that hollow back. But I had never labeled that as really a lot of pain or something the like. And he [i.e. the intermediary] talked about: 'The words of your father, those were like a stab in your lower back.' Well, I still find that quite vague, but I know by now that it just

evidently was that way.” The words spoken by the healer have performative impact on Jill. Realities concerning lower back pain are enacted and beliefs concerning its causes are generated.

When this ‘communication specialist’ starts praying for her, Jill feels a crack in her neck. “And suddenly,” she says, “everything was straightened!” She tells how she felt tottered afterwards, how she cried, how she felt that the depression was taken away like a heavy blanket being taken off her. When she comes home, she looks in the mirror and observes that indeed her whole back is straightened. “Now I can walk on high heels much better too. At a certain moment, months later I still had aching muscles in my bottom because I stood differently. So all of my back was straightened.”

About an Ordinary Mixture of Salad Oil

Quite a different practice of healing is found in the practice of anointing the sick. Quite some respondents refer to the practice, but only one respondent has actual experience with anointment. Kees shares how he anointed his sick sister:

Yes, my baby sister. That was not that easy. When we heard that she had cancer, last year. [...]

And she said: “Don’t you want to do it? In our church they do not want to do it, at least they have never done it yet, but the elder will be present. Can’t you do it?”

I said: “Yes, eh, of course, but eh... eh...”

But well, I had read how it is done. Amongst others because of conversations with rev. Abma and these kind of people. And then I think: you just have to do it.

And so Kees did. He explained how they confessed their sins, as prerequisite for the actual act of anointment. Nothing should stand between you and God and block the road. That is how he was taught the practice.⁷¹ He then anoints his sister with oil. When I asked him how he experienced the practice, he shares:

Well, apart from the fact that it was my sister, because that gives an extremely personal bond. But, you feel that you are really an instrument in God’s hand at such a moment. And you fight against your feelings: what is this actually? A few drops of oil?! Maybe it is just an ordinary mixture of salad oil! Yes! I do not experience it as something magical, but at the

⁷¹ Kees mentions courses given by reverend Abma, the conversations he had with Janet Westerkamp and books he read from dr. Paul (Paul 1997).

other hand I think: well, these are the things that God tells us in his Word. We all know the text, so I feel extremely obedient. [...] You feel extremely, extremely small. And such a moment I experience almost as a holy, a holy moment. My sister is quite sober in comparison, luckily. So when it was finished and I had prayed, she said: "Hm, shall we have a drink?"

Kees performs the anointment with confidence, while it fills him with confusion at the same time. (But again, understanding is not what matters most.) The use of the oil is difficult for him to grasp. It seems that Kees perceives it as a mediating means. The oil is somehow believed to be able to channel divine healing power, just as he experiences himself to be an instrument in God's hand. At the other hand, he is quite sure that it cannot be that simple that the oil itself is actually ministering healing power. Such would be "magic."

The uneasiness expressed by Kees touches on common Protestant concerns, who try to avoid an understanding of the sacraments as iconic presentations of the reality they signify. The sacraments are rather understood as "sign and seal" of something which is already received by faith (Van der Kooi and Van der Kooi-Dijkstra 2006). In that context, Reformed minister Kees Geluk (2008) presents the "oil" as Biblical symbol referring to the Holy Spirit. However, as modern people do not speak that "language" anymore, the symbol is dated and should therefore not be used anymore to prevent a "magical" understanding of the oil as actually mediating healing power (111-116).

Practical theologian Josuttis (2002) points into a different direction. The oil could also be seen as consecrating the body of the sick, so it can become a temple of God and of divine power (176). Such an understanding could well fit the respondents' approach to their relationships with Jesus, in which performative acts of talking and naming bring the believer's life close to God. They 'consecrate' their daily life, so God can bless it. Believers make use of demarcated spaces, set times and physical movement to enact such closeness more forcefully. In similar vein, the oil could be perceived as means to demarcate a space for God's presence. Just as the believer stands up and moves to the front of the church into the closeness of God, so the sick body is brought into the closeness of God. Through the anointment "space is created" for God.

Shifting Meanings of the Personal

While practices staging intermediaries facilitate the reciprocal communication between believer and God, they affect the character of that communication with God at the same time.

Firstly, evangelical Protestants experience the core of a real relationship with God as one of having *direct* and *personal* contact with God. Therefore believers talk with God, addressing him directly. The personal character of talking with God puts the believing subject and his or her subjectivity center stage and effectively intertwines the believer's ordinary daily life with God. It so enacts an intimate, personally invested relationship of closeness to God.

In using intermediation however, the *believer's* practice of talking with God is transferred to the *mediating pray-er*. He or she acts as 'communication specialist' and talks with God *for* the believer. His/her words replace the believer's personal self-expression towards God. The prayer of the intermediary gives only limited expression to the believer's subjectivity. Sometimes this subjective and expressive dimension is lacking altogether, for instance in the experience of Jill when the 'communication specialist' addresses her right away. She is not even asked to explain any of *her* needs or concerns. The pray-er "knew exactly what he had to pray for" beforehand.

This, in important respects, *indirect* and *impersonal* character of the practice is furthermore reflected in the atmosphere of anonymity surrounding the believer and his or her life. Often the believer and pray-er met just minutes before. The practice of using intermediation deliberately upholds anonymity. Often the believer is not even asked for his/her name.⁷² The intermediating pray-er needs to remain as 'empty' as possible to channel the divine. Conference-like settings contribute to such an atmosphere of anonymity, as they are one-time gatherings in which the believer anonymously participates. Such anonymity is experienced as providing for safety and openness, because of which believers are sometimes more willing to share highly personal issues. But the expression of such highly personal issues in mediating prayer will always be an expression in isolation: isolated from the full context of the believer's life, the risk being that the so established communication with God remains just as isolated, confined to the anonymous setting of the conference. How to integrate the experienced mediation into the reality of ordinary life? Indeed, respondents indicate that attending conferences often leaves them with a feeling of some sort of loneliness and emptiness afterwards. Conferences can decrease the need to express such personal issues to God personally and to deal with these issues in daily life.

Secondly, in using intermediation the *status* of the believer shifts from subject to being the object of the ministry of the divine. God's status often changes simultaneously: from a personal subject to an impersonal power that is

⁷² Lianne explains that the divinatory specialist typically does *not* ask for the name of the believer. A believer can anonymously ask for prayer and the specialist prays for the mentioned themes not knowing what is actually going on in the life of the believer asking for prayer. In the workshop of Tunderman names were asked, but it constituted the limits of what was revealed about the person in question at the same time.

being channeled and ministered to the believer. The increasing emphasis on God as source of divine power is especially visible in practices of blessing, healing and deliverance. All of them are directed at administering divine power to the believer.

This attention for God as divine power sometimes result in a far-reaching redefinition of the believer's life in terms of 'powers' as well. Personal issues and relationships are redefined in terms of impersonal relationships between good and evil forces. Some interview incidents show much stronger tendencies thereunto than others. Especially in practices of healing and deliverance such tendencies are visible, see the example provided by Jill. In the healing practice her hollow back is firstly refined as an aching back. Her aching back is then redefined as originating from an evil force. This evil force is subsequently said to be due to the words of her father. Her personal life, both in terms of the physical and the relational, is thus radically redefined: her physical condition is redefined as an evil spiritual condition caused by the relationship with her father. As the intermediary associates her father with her back pain, Jill's relationship with her father too is depersonalized and redefined as an evil power.

Thirdly and lastly, in practices in which believers appeal to a mediator, the intentional and free (the graceful) communication between God and believer '*mechanizes*': God's response is subjected to the rules and practice of intermediation. Correct practice and technicalities matter: not asking names, how to touch someone, not interpreting impressions but describing them, verbalizing all of them, using the name of Jesus. As Klaver puts it: "This form of prayer suggests an instrumental understanding of a particular prayer practice, practically subordinating the intervention of God in this world to particular techniques" (2011, 305). As mediating specialists verbalize everything that comes to mind, they subject the divine to their own thoughts, impressions and verbalization thereof.

Instead of searching for God's will, these practices are often driven by assumptions concerning God's will. A certain woman asks Lianne (as member of the Celebrate Recovery team of her church) for prayer. She is in panic, as she will be fired if she does not take on more responsibility at work. Lianne tells: "Panic bursts. But panic is not from God! We start praying for her. Panic is not from God. And at the moment we pray, people get images and people receive texts for her and she is totally blessed. And because we know Bible texts [...] God can insert certain thoughts in you." Lianne twice said firmly: "Panic is not from God." She felt confident that panic cannot be matched with God's will. Consequently, she and the other 'communication specialists' materialize this assumed will of God by blessing the panicking women. By presuming to know the will of God, the intermediary acts as if her/she has divine power at his/her

disposal.⁷³ God's response is no longer an experience of grace, but of hard work. God's response is, amongst others, determined by the number of Bible texts the specialist knows.

To be sure, by far not all respondents are positive about such practices, right because they feel God is forced to say or do things. Marjoleine shares about a healing service she attended: "The sick were invited to come on stage. And then there is praying for people with length difference in their limbs. Well, the manner in which that is done is: 'Yes, come, come, come.... Come on, come on, come on!' That was really spoken in that way! Then I think: well hello! You're not really forcing it,⁷⁴ are you?! I did not find that deferential."

When No Discernment Is Practiced

Practices in which God's will is presumed to be known stimulate the evasion of discernment. Healing practices are often based on the presumption that God does not want any believer to be sick and that God *thus* wants to heal them.

The life story of Reina shows how such practices can turn out terribly wrong. Reina's daughter has been seriously and chronically ill since she was thirteen years old. Her daughter has undergone dozens of operations. She is severely handicapped. Reina's daughter has been visiting several healers, amongst others Jan Zijlstra. One time she visited two healers who came over from America. They held healing services in an evangelical church nearby. Reina: "There was that healer, who had prayed with her personally and told her: 'Within one week, you will be healed, physically, from this illness, completely. You have to pass this week praying continually and reading the Bible.' – Well, if you would know my daughter! She is living here [with us]; her room is specially adapted for her. There is an adapted lavatory, and shower facilities specially adapted for disabled. Everything is specially adapted."

Reina's suspicions are clear. But for her daughter who engages in the healing practice, the experience is quite different. It is the first time she receives a specific prophecy of healing and it generates instant belief and practice. Reina tells: "That week came, and she only prayed and read the Bible. Even when visiting the toilet, she read the Bible. And then the week passed, and I was upstairs, early in the morning and she stumbled upstairs. She was completely shaken, crying: 'Mama, mama! Everything is still there! I am not healed!' That dealt her such a tremendous blow." When later that same year the healers visited the

⁷³ The separate occasions organized for healing practices increases the idea that a divinatory specialist has actual divine power at his or her disposal. Her or she can hence organize meetings for ministering it to believers.

⁷⁴ Dutch: "Je gaat het toch niet afdwingen?!"

Netherlands again, Reina and her daughter revisited them and asked for clarification. But the healer just told them: “Well, then this was the wrong prophecy.” And he turned around and walked away.

The example shows the power imbalance between the mediator, assumed to be a ‘communication specialist,’ and the believer. The believer does not communicate with God directly, but depends upon the specialist who enjoys the reputation of receiving divine revelations. The believer is the receiving, passive party, dependent upon that revelation. Power relations need to be balanced by practices of accountability. But as such practices often take place at one time conference-like meetings to which the respondents often attend only once, such power relations can exist without any interference.

7 Experiences of Divine Communication

7.1 | “I Haven’t Heard from Him for Years”

“No, not anymore,” the woman answered resolutely when I asked her whether she had a personal relationship with Jesus. She continued: “I used to have a personal relationship, but I haven’t heard anything from him for years.” In 2009 I visited the *Toogdag*, the yearly gathering of *Het Zoeklicht* (The Searchlight). There I met a disillusioned woman who was in her early sixties. More and more she doubted that having a personal relationship with Jesus is really possible. “I still believe God has created the world,” she explained, “but for the rest... I find his continuing involvement a very, very difficult matter.” Her voice sounded sad and bitter; she had not experienced anything of God for years now.

Experiencing something meaningful of God is a defining part of the personal relationship with Jesus. “Not hearing anything from him” is incompatible with the idea of a personal relationship. Only when communicative faith practices are successfully performed and interaction with God is experienced, believers will speak of having a personal relationship with Jesus. That relationship is both a *practiced* and an *experienced reality*. The respondents frequently speak of “receiving answers from God” to their prayers. They “hear his voice” in events that happen throughout the day: in a sudden beam of sunlight that touches their faces, in a mysterious dream they had the other night, in a suddenly starting car, in an issued community permit for building a new farm. They experience such events as responses from God to their acts of communicating with him.

Whereas the believers’ communication with God is to some extent modeled after ordinary human interaction, divine communication does not seem to be at all. Rather in all kinds of seemingly ordinary events believers “notice” that God is present. They characterize these experiences as “winks” and “kisses”

from God. Through such alluring yet elusive experiences of divine communication, God responds to the believers' efforts to communicate with him (§7.2).

Four dimensions of experiences of divine communication attract attention. Experiences of divine communication are, firstly, characterized by the experience of something *extraordinary* (§7.3). Secondly, the experience of something extraordinary often culminates in the reception of a *concrete sign* from God (§7.4). Thirdly, such experiences clearly *demonstrate God's personal involvement* in the believer's life (§7.5) and, lastly, make believers willing – even longing – to submit to *God's will as revealed* in those experiences (§7.6).

7.2 | Hearing God's Voice

Hearing God's voice does not refer to a sensory experience of a verbal message, spoken by God and heard by the ear by the believer. Hearing God's voice refers to the experience of a meaningful incident which the believer recognizes as divine in origin and therefore experiences as revealing something of God. Respondents constantly speak about such God experiences by using communicative vocabulary. In these experiences they "hear God's voice" and perceive that God is "telling" or "showing" them something or is "answering" their prayers. They actually experience that God communicates with them. That God speaks is not a belief or confession for these believers, it is a concrete experience.

"Does it happen that God says anything back?" all respondents were asked. Respondents often started the interview by telling about their engagement in communicative faith practices, about talking with God and listening to him (chapter 6). It invited the question: does God say anything back? Some respondents replied negatively in first instance. "Well not that you hear a voice from heaven. That would be nice! Sometimes I would wish so. Some clarity," Leo replied. Lianne confirmed: "I have never heard him speak in a literal sense." A note from heaven is neither within the bounds of possibility: "Yes, I would certainly prefer a fax or something the like," Kees said, "but that of course is not possible."

But that is not all that is said by the respondents, by far not. Leo does not hear a voice from heaven, "but," he adds right away, "sometimes he does [say something back]." Leo continues: "Sometimes there are very clear texts, which are pointed out to me all of a sudden. Then you think: yes, that is clearly God who is telling me so, or the Holy Spirit who calls this to my mind." Nico explains in a similar way that, although he had always hoped that God would send a note straight from heaven telling him what to do, he realized throughout the years that "God is not so fond of notes, he rather makes use of a Book." In

the experience of Leo and Nico, God does not talk with believers in a manner similar as believers talk with him. They (and the other respondents too) however do experience that God communicates personally with them through for instance Bible texts that stand out while reading or praying. “That Book contains lots of notes,” Nico puts it.

Experiencing divine communication is not confined to Bible texts that stand out. It refers to all kinds of events that stand out. It can be during a worship service, at a conference, or simply throughout the day. It can happen while being engaged in a communicative faith practice or when being at work. In a moment of panic a believer somehow finds strength to go on. During a conference the words of a prayer get stuck in the believer’s mind. An ATM provides for the right amount of cash just when needed. Such incidents startle believers and make them wonder. In their amazement they turn their attention to God. He must have “directed it”; “his hand” can be seen in it. “Hearing God’s voice” can so refer to an actual prophecy, but just as well to a miracle, a healing or an experience of guidance. Sometimes respondents phrase it cautiously: “I am sensing that the Holy Spirit is trying to make clear to me that...” or “I have the feeling that God is guiding me to...” Sometimes they speak with more confidence about the reciprocal communication with God, as for instance Justus: “And then miracles happen. [...] Because you are communicating, so you get answers back too.” Respondents thus almost never hear a literal voice but so still experience God to “speak” with them.

As “hearing God’s voice” refers to concrete, identifiable incidents, it should not be confused with more general feelings of rest and peace. “It is not that it happens every day,” Rien explains. Lianne adds that, in that respect, she is thus not “feeling God all the time.” Feelings of rest and peace *do* characterize the respondents’ daily lives, reflecting a sense of being close to God. By the active engagement of believers in communicative faith practices the closeness of God is established and God is involved in their lives. Believers feel relieved, safe and secure. When Kees tells about his morning devotions, he concludes: “And so God is with me throughout the day” (see §6.2). This experience is though *not* an experience of divine communication.

Respondents themselves distinguish between such a general experience of God’s closeness and concrete experiences of divine communication. Justus:

I do also see answers right away. Not always right away. I am waiting... Well, for one thing I have been waiting for four years already, for an answer. But with other things it happens that I get an answer really within five minutes. But sometimes it happens that I get something else than what I expected. And sometimes it [the answer] turns out differently from what it seemed at first sight. But the feedback, so to say, that God

gives me is a) right away peace and b) that I can shed everything. So I don't have to worry. [...] And then miracles happen!

Justus can always count on the experience of peace and relief. This experience is not considered to be the concrete answer from God he is praying for. The experience is rather an integral part and consequence of talking with God. The experience eases his worries, but does not solve his problems. The peace of God though gives him the patience to wait for miracles to happen.

Alternative Imagery

Speaking in terms of “hearing God’s voice” is typical for these respondents, but their vocabulary is not restricted thereto. Respondents also speak about *winks*, *love letters*, *kisses* and *manna* from heaven. These images indicate a certain awareness among believers that their experiences are somehow different from ordinary speech: God communicates with them in a more subtle manner.

Winks from God

Throughout the whole interview Marjoleine speaks about the “winks” God gives her. Marjoleine does not “really feel God” like some people do. “I mean, I know he is there. But what I see at some conferences, that people say like ‘Wow, the Holy Spirit is here!’ or something the like, well then I think: apparently I am too down-to-earth for that, because I don’t see that right now.” I responded: *So, if I understand you correctly, the experience of God does not play such an important role in your daily life?* Immediately Marjoleine objected: “No, it plays a very important role! It is in the small stuff. Yes, winks, that’s how I see it.” Marjoleine merely wanted to contrast the highly emotional experiences of God’s presence at conferences with the winks she receives.

At a tough day a friend calls her and tells her: “I don’t know, but all day I have the feeling I have to call you” – she never calls me! – “and I don’t know why, but at the end of the day I thought: well let’s just do it anyway. I don’t know why.” Marjoleine responds to her friend: “Well, *I know!* I feel so lonely today, so, this was lead on my path.” Marjoleine explains: “I recognize that as things that are directed. [...] Then I think: that is not... that cannot all be coincidental. But well, yes, often it is in the small things.”

These small things affect Marjoleine. It fills her with gratitude. She feels seen. “Then I think: well, thank you. Then I can go on again.” There are days that she gets “winks from God” one after the other. “Then I really have something like: wow! This is outstanding!” For her this is what faith is all about: “Receiving many, many more winks!”

Love Letters and Kisses

Kees uses images that highlight dimensions of love and affection. He compares his dynamic interaction with God to the love letters he and his wife wrote each other before they got married. The real value of such love letters lies not so much in their content, but in the fact of receiving them. Because your loved one has written the letter, reading the letter evokes all kinds of feelings. That is what experiences of divine communication are about, Kees explains.

Later in the interview he elaborates on the image of two lovers. He doubts whether to tell it or not, but decides: “Well, still, I will make the comparison.” Kees then compares experiencing something of God with “kissing.” The image points to the divine love and intimacy which is felt to be communicated through such experiences. The image also gives him the possibility to differentiate between the intensity of experiences. Some experiences stand out, Kees explains, because “you feel God three times closer” than at other times. “The first kiss I will never forget, but the hundredth I cannot remember anymore. But I have received it. You understand? Those things. And I am very, very happy with those things. And I believe you may reach out for that.”

Manna from Heaven

Justus compares divine communication to the manna God gave the Israelites when they wandered through the desert (cf. Exodus 16 and Numbers 11): “I have learned and I see it like this, that this relationship is that God will rain manna from heaven on me. [...] And he does so in my life personally, just like for the people back then. And the manna was rotten at the end of the day. [...] And why? Because God would rain new manna the next day.” For Justus this image conveys a sense of enjoying life without care: “Enjoy today, and receive strength, experience that. Trust God to lead you through this day and that you can face the problems of today.”

Justus tells about the ways God rains manna on him at length: about the boy next door who unexpectedly rings at the front door and donates a large amount of money to the family, about a speaker at a conference who personally comforts and edifies him, about a sudden prompting to turn on the internet radio on which a Bible text is being read aloud that appeals to him. Justus shares about the last mentioned experience:

I was so strongly captured by that Bible text [...] that *God* was telling me and not anymore the radio, not the Bible, but that God said: “Eh, Justus, I am with you, remember? I will guide you by my counsel, won’t I?” [...] And so I thought, while I got more tears all along: darn it! God just gives answers again. And directly afterwards, because you are also having

material worries, the song *Er komen stromen van zegen* (There Shall be Showers of Blessing) was on the radio. Well, I received enough again. I had manna again.

Note that Justus emphasizes that he experienced *God* to communicate with him. According to Justus “it was not anymore the radio, not the Bible, but *God*” who told him “I am with you.” “This is really one of the five hundred million examples that you experience,” Justus comments. “And then, in the evening I think: how much manna I’ve received again! Well, in this way, I have something every day. Really every single day I experience something like this.”

Divine Reciprocity

Experiences of divine communication are *responsive* experiences. Believers speak of them as “answers” from God, as “heard prayers” or something similar. Justus for instance speaks about the “feedback” God gives him. According to the respondents, there is a close relationship between their practices of communication and their God experiences. God is perceived to communicate in a concrete and personal manner with the believer *in response* to the believer’s need, search and his or her request for help. It is this experience of interaction, of reciprocity, because of which believers say God communicates with them. He responds.

Question-Answer Dynamics

At first sight, the ordinary theology of believers points to the relationship between experiences and practices as one of answers to questions. If the believer asks, God will answer. If the believer does not pose a question, God will not answer either. The question-answer logic is embedded in a personal relationship that is based on voluntary love and individual willingness. If the believer is willing to involve God, God is always willing to answer.

The willingness of God to answer presumes a certain ‘availability’ of divine answers, miracles and guidance. The believer only has to ask for it. This presumption is consciously reckoned with by the believer. Lianne beautifully explains how experiences of divine communication – gifts of grace, comfort, help – are available to any believer who simply asks for it. Lianne addresses me, explaining: “[I want to tell you] that he wants to give you many things and wants to give me many things. There is a box ready, labeled Ilonka Terlouw. And it is just standing there [in heaven]. And if you have the desire to follow God, then he will unpack the box here already, here on earth. But that box is there, with everything he wants to give you here on earth.”

The willingness of God to answer also includes a certain reserve of God to communicate as long as the believer is not open to his intervention. Rien phrases it: “I believe he is there in any case. But I experience as well that Jesus is not obtrusive. So I can... if I choose to pass over him then Jesus says: ‘Well, alright then.’ [...] I think that it is above all, that then I cannot pick the fruits of it, if I keep him at a distance, but that he still is there.” The idea of God not being obtrusive means that the choice is to the believer. Unpacking the box in heaven only happens “if you have the desire to follow God.” God’s reserve in answering continually questions the believer’s intentions: are you really willing to involve God in your life?

Providing God ‘Space’ to Answer

A second line of thought characterizes the believers’ thinking about the relationship between experiences and practices. Note how Rien speaks of Jesus not being obtrusive when he is kept “at a distance.” When he is brought close, answers though can be expected.

Through engaging in communicative faith practices and involving God, believers bring God close (§6.2). The closeness of God points to the intertwining of the reality of daily life and the reality of God. This ‘space’ should not be understood literally, but as a reality of its own consisting of those dimensions, issues and things of daily life that are “brought before God” or “laid down before him.” It is a reality characterized by God’s blissful presence and his freedom to act. Joel Robbins suggested that *believers* “work to maintain a break between themselves and profane life such that they never participate in contexts they define as wholly profane” (2010, 164, see §6.2). These believers however seem to practice faith on the basis of the idea that *God* will never participate in contexts that are wholly profane. The closeness of God is the ‘space’ where and the reality in which God acts. God’s intervention is limited in ‘space’ to that which is close to him. Communicative faith practices are performative practices that so actually create space for God to speak.

In the interviews notions about providing God opportunity to answer continually resurface. When Tilde talks about “noticing God” throughout her daily life she explains: “Yes, you notice it. And in that I see the Holy Spirit. [...] But how much space do you give him? And how much is he allowed to mean in your life? That is, I think, *because of which* you experience him. [...] Your life is so absorbed by all kinds of things of yourself. And how much space do you want to give God in your life?” Believers often speak about “giving God space to answer” and “giving space to the Holy Spirit.” Remember how Leonie asked for prayer at an evangelical conference. They prayed for everything that was on her mind, “except for one thing” that comes to her mind afterwards (§6.2). For Le-

onie, thinking about that one thing constitutes an experience of divine communication. She explains: “I think, *exactly because* I had given all of my life to God again, God could make things clear to me at that moment.”

This way of thinking, however, puts quite some pressure on believers to engage in communicative faith practices. God might not be forced to do anything, but the believer surely feels forced to provide God with enough space. As Tilde put it: “How much is he allowed to mean in your life?” Or as Leonie phrased it: “I just *have to* be busy with God and *really maintain* that relationship myself, *if* I want to notice the positive consequences thereof.” Also remember how Evelien was surprised about being taught to pray the same prayer every morning. “Do I have to do that?” She thought. “The Lord knows already, doesn’t he?” But indeed, communicative faith practices are not about informing God, but about dedicating daily life to God, so he has the opportunity to bless it. It gives believers great responsibility for providing space for God. Believers therefore start talking with God, reading the Bible and visiting conferences fervently. They so hope to gain more God experiences.

At the one hand, engaging in communicative faith practices is thus a *prerequisite* for experiencing divine communication. At the other hand, the closeness of God merely provides God the *opportunity* to intervene. It leaves room for unanswered prayers as well. “For one thing I am waiting for four years already, for an answer,” Justus said. Ted confirmed: “Well, praying helps. Praying works.” But he also indicated: “And then I immediately get the question [from you]: ‘But does he then answer?’ Yes, he does. ‘Do you notice that directly?’ Sometimes yes, sometimes no.”

Does God really only speak in this humanly ‘created’ reality of closeness to God? Is God’s action limited by human action? Respondents constantly seem to reckon with that possibility. Remember how Lianne phrased it (§6.2): “Give everything to the Lord and he will determine your path.” I responded: “*Is that a prerequisite? To bring everything before the Lord?*” Lianne reacted with a fascinating answer: “To me it is.” Lianne provides for a fine example of ordinary theology in the practice of evangelical Protestant daily life. Believers like Lianne simply experience that, in the practice of their faith, it seems to work this way. Lianne does not claim to have the final dogmatic answer to the question about how God answers prayers. It simply works that way: if one prays, God will guide. And this experience seems to be more forceful than any teaching about the subject matter will ever be to them.

7.3 | Experiencing Something Extraordinary

Experiences of divine communication start with the experience of something weird, exceptional, and special. Something *extraordinary* happens in the life of the believer which grasps his or her attention and directs it to God. “Yes, that I thought was so, so special” Tilde concludes about meeting one of her former foster children, who casually mentioned to still believe in God. “It was unbelievable!” Justus exclaims when, after only half an hour of feeling distress over money, his neighbor donates the cash he needs. So Evelien experienced “the people she got on her path to share the gospel with” as a quite “surprising thing.” Lianne had a deep, intense talk with an unknown woman at the schoolyard, which she experienced as “very exceptional.”

Sometimes the experience of the believer is extraordinary without doubt. The incident would raise questions for an outsider just as well. How is it possible a doctor declares someone cured from an incurable disease? (Reina’s daughter) What to think of the near-death-experience of Lianne? In most cases however the experience of something extraordinary is an insider’s experience. The experience is extraordinary for the believer in question.

The extraordinariness is thus not always something big or outright supernatural. It can be quite small. Leonie, for instance, had just told a Christian acquaintance about her disagreement with a friend. The acquaintance prayed for her that they would patch up the quarrel. While Leonie was not into patching up at all and decided to avoid her friend, the acquaintance predicted she would meet her friend today or tomorrow. And indeed, the day right after the prayer they met in the bike shed at school. “And I thought: well, that is actually funny! You know? And then she started talking to me, I believe. And then we made up. So that was quite funny.”

Stories of Surprise

Believers share about their extraordinary experiences in the form of well-rounded *stories of surprise*.⁷⁵ Believers cannot fully grasp the course their lives take, but are rather grasped by it. It fills them with wonder and surprise.

The interview incidents about such extraordinary experiences are self-contained units with a clear beginning and end and with an often predictable plot. The experience of something extraordinary is part of a process: the stories

⁷⁵ The designation ‘stories’ – believers would probably rather speak about them as “testimonies” (Klaver 2008, 148) – is not meant as judgment about the veracity of these experiences. The interview incidents about religious experiences are simply framed as stories and display typical narrative characteristics (e.g. Bal 1990).

typically start with some sort of personal crisis in the life of the storyteller. The crisis can be large and existential, but small as well. It can concern a daily matter or a deeply treasured wish. The crisis does not typically concern soteriological questions about the forgiveness of sins or finding eternal salvation. The questions concern mundane and often concrete matters of daily living. The believer searches for divine help and intervention by engaging in communicative faith practices. He or she prays, reads the Bible, talks with fellow believers etcetera.

The search reaches its climax when, in the perception of the believer, something extraordinary happens. All believers without exception tell about such extraordinary experiences. They are perceived as acts or messages from God. In the extraordinary the sacred is perceived to break through in the mundane. The content of the extraordinary experience relates to the personal crisis at issue for which divine assistance was sought. These salvific or directive interventions from God solve the crisis or relieve the burden. God is the hero of the story, the believer the beneficiary. So the story comes to some sort of happy ending. The addition 'some sort' needs to be stressed in order to prevent a simplistic understanding of the meaning of experiences of divine communication. Directive interventions of God often present believers with quite a challenge to take on.

These stories present experiences of divine communication as individual and personal experiences that can only be understood in context of the believers' lives. In this respect the respondents' spirituality fits the experiential type of Christianity that has grown especially rapidly, in interaction with the cultural changes that took place, since the 1960s (Klaver 2008, 2011; Luhrmann 2012; Miller 1997; Taylor 2007; Wuthnow 1998, cf. chapter 2). It puts individual experience center stage as primary source of religious signification. The emphasis on the believer's search and his/her needs is another common trait of such contemporary experiential spirituality. The mundane and material concerns of the individual matter.

Because the experience of the extraordinary is embedded in the concrete context of the believer's personal life, the *meaning* of the experience is embedded in the believer's personal life as well. The experiences are incidents of subjective signification (Heelas and Woodhead 2005) in which what is extraordinary and what is personally meaningful are practically interchangeable. Even though experiences of divine communication are highly personal in content and character, they are not necessarily highly emotional. Just as the personal crises of the respondents vary in intensity and importance, so do the believers' experiences of God. Sometimes these experiences touch the emotions heavily, sometimes they are merely "funny" (Leonie).

Although the believer's search for answers arises from this-earthly concerns, domestic crises and personal choices that need to be made, the extraordinary *points beyond* the believer's life. Believers are touched by something beyond

themselves. The extraordinary experience *grasps them*. It upsets their daily lives and provides meaning in a positive way. Throughout the interviews it is hard to miss the many exclamations of wonder and surprise: “Wow,” Evelien exclaims about getting the wooden furniture set. “It is so special!” Aagje exclaims when she tells about her legs getting weak in answer to her prayers. “It is something so unique, something so special, so miraculous,” Ted explains about his experiences of divine communication. These ‘miracle’ stories of evangelical Protestants are individual expressions of wonder and surprise about the course life is taking. Theologian Anne-Marie Korte speaks of such stories as “*miniaturen van verwondering*” (miniatures of surprise; 2004, 2005a, 2005b, 2008).⁷⁶ Wonder and amazement about sometimes small and seemingly meaningless incidents define the religious experiences of these believers.

The respondents’ stories are in line with the growing attention for the miraculous and extraordinary over the last decades. People started to display a bent for enchantment, magic and ecstasy, possibly as reaction to tendencies of demythologizing, rationalizing and intellectualizing that characterize modern society and modern theology (Korte 2008). Van Harskamp argues that the emergency of this bent for magic and ecstasy is also due to the excessive pre-occupation with the self in modern society. In response to the “massive turn to the subject” (Taylor 2007) believers reach out to something beyond themselves (2000, 66–84).⁷⁷ It gives believers relief to identify the extraordinary with God. They feel relieved, ‘saved’ by the fact that they are not solely responsible for all the choices they face in life.

Dimensions of the Extraordinary

A lot of these extraordinary events would probably strike an outsider as quite ordinary events. Thinking about familiar Bible texts while praying does not seem strikingly astonishing. Withdrawing money from an ATM when you are in need of cash is one of the most common acts for any person nowadays. And what is so special about meeting your friend in the communal bike shed at school? What counts as extraordinary?

⁷⁶ Korte conducted an empirical research project into contemporary miracle stories. The stories were provided by the KRO (Catholic Broadcast Organization) in the form of letters send in by viewers of the television program *Wonderen Bestaan* (Miracles Exist). I was involved throughout the whole research as research assistant.

⁷⁷ This is only a very simple summary of the more subtle and complex argument of Van Harskamp.

Too Much Coincidence

Firstly, the *timing* of the event is very important: the incident is too accidental.

Marjoleine tells: “I work at a car company. And if I have a tough day, then a customer comes who has a key ring saying ‘God loves you’ – such a tag. I mean: how many keys do I lay hands on? Hundreds! But never one like that, and at that moment it just happens. So in that, yes, I think that that comes from above. It is directed. It must be.” The short remark Marjoleine makes at the beginning is easily overlooked: “*If I have a tough day...*”, she starts telling. That specific setting turns laying hands on the mentioned key ring into an extraordinary experience. It is too coincidental, it thus must be “directed.” Marjoleine experiences God to encourage her, right at such a day. It is a very personal experience. For someone else that key ring would not have special meaning. However, it might not have special meaning for Marjoleine at any other day either! For Marjoleine it thus has to originate from God: “Else, I would have received it a day later, when I wouldn’t need it. Then there would be too much coincidence, I believe.” She added once more: “Yes, I see that [e.g. the key ring] as signs. I cannot see all those things as coincidence. That is too much, isn’t it?”

For an experience of “too much coincidence,” the relationship of the experience to performed communicative faith practices is often crucial. Within that context of communicating with God something happens that seems *too* accidental to count as coincidence. Communicative faith practices create the possibility of religious associations to arise between private issues concerning the believer(s) life and events that happen afterwards. Marjoleine explains: “*If I have prayed* ‘make me clear what I have to do’ and *then* I have pain, would that not be an answer?” Ernst-Jan explains: “For instance, I am sitting in the garden and I am praying. *And then* I stop and I walk away and *suddenly* there is a gust of wind. And there is not a breath of wind, you see? And then suddenly a gust. How can that be? Or a bird that suddenly starts to chirrup. Or the right person that suddenly drops by.” Because of the questions asked and the prayers prayed, the events that happen afterwards are seen from a different perspective, they are judged from the perspective of faith.

Respondents are though prone to make clear that God’s intervention in the world is still an objective event. As respondents recount their religious experiences, they try to demonstrate that what happened was really exceptional. The narratives are often widespread and full of small details. Respondents constantly insert phrases like: “You just have to know that...” and “before I go on, you just have to understand that...” and “without this you cannot understand that...” Often stories consist of a chain of several special events that reinforce the feeling of extraordinariness. In addition, believers tend to appeal to external authorities: in many narratives respondents bring in a third person (who certainly does not need to be a believer) who confirms the extraordinary course of events. These

other persons, so the listener is told, were startled by the events as well. Finally, respondents often round up the story like: “It really was a miracle.” Or: “Really, you simply cannot explain that.” The summarizing phrases often include the words “really” and “miracle,” “miraculous” or “extraordinary” and confirm once more how exceptional the events “really” were.

A Clearly Divine Content

Secondly, the supposed content of the event is of importance to define something as extraordinary. Something happens, is said or comes to mind that is in the perception of the believer clearly divine in content.

What counts as divine is often defined in contrast with ‘natural’ human wishes and desires. Everything that is good is associated with God’s will, everything that is bad is associated with human desires. Traditional Christian beliefs concerning the wickedness of mankind, not able to do any good, and the goodness of God vaguely resound here. In practice it simply means that believers often identify God experiences by their unlikeable content.

Leo explains how the Spirit calls things to his mind:

Sometimes I am pondering... [...] Well, ehm... impure thoughts or what you would call sexual thoughts... That you think: good grief! And then suddenly you are shown certain matters through a certain text. A text from Job, that he made a covenant with his eyes. [...] Or that, in a flash, you see the story of David and Bathsheba, while you yourself would preferably forget something like that. [...]

You have to face hard facts. That’s how it feels sometimes. Yes, no, I do think that is good, because I just want... I want to follow Jesus and I want to hear the Lord God.

Something ordinary (remembering familiar Bible texts) is experienced by Leo as extraordinary. The extraordinariness of the event is measured by the unlikely message communicated by these Bible texts. Of his own accord, he would certainly not think about these texts, Leo believes. These thoughts thus have to originate from God. So Rien too explains: “Because it is sometimes quite confrontational. These are the things that, well, that you don’t want to see. [...] Those are then things that do land, so to say. Then I think: yes thus.”

Such an experience of God’s will comes with doubt and requires judgment. Leo explains: “And sometimes you do doubt: is this from me, or is it from God? Sometimes you do not always know either.” “But”, Leo adds, “sometimes it is so clear that it has to be from God too!” When I asked Leo what makes it so clear, he added: “Because you would not have picked it yourself and because it

still very clearly bears reference to the moment.” The unlikeable content of the experience *and* the timing of the event *together* constitute a forceful experience of extraordinariness.

Deviations from Set Patterns

Finally, extraordinariness is seen in deviations from set patterns or habits. The experience therefore beats the expectations of the believer. As the believer feels lost to explain how it happened, the event is allocated to God’s initiative.

Jill shares about song texts that pop into her mind. She believes she is very poor in remembering song texts. Surprisingly though, at certain moments, she does remember the text:

Well very often I receive, when I think of something or when I am busy with such a prayer or with a subject, that I really just get a song in my head that has something to do with it.

Last year we had many, many troubles with my parents-in-law, serious arguments and the like. [...] We didn’t go there afterwards anymore, and you understand that that gave a lot of tension. Well, then you are praying like: “Help us Lord, to still radiate that love.”

And then I thus got all of a sudden a song in my head about... well anyway, I already forgot which one it was. But at least: it really helped us very much. And then I think like: the weird thing is, that the songs that popped into my head were songs too that I would normally speaking really not know by heart. And at that moment I do!

Jill’s experience is embedded in a domestic and mundane concern about her parents-in-law. She prays for God’s help and in that context experiences the song that pops into her mind as answer from God. It beats her expectations, in particular because she is usually not good at all in remembering song texts. The extraordinary constitutes a ‘deviation’ from the believer’s subjective (and sometimes negative) self-perception.

More often, the regular performance of communicative faith practices provides for a set order, pattern or habit from which deviations can be observed. While (or after) engaging in a communicative faith practice respondents question themselves: do I feel in any way different from usual? Do I remember a certain Bible text, while I normally forget what I read within half an hour? Is the ordinary pattern of this practice of intermediation upset by something? Especially in practices of intermediation this seems to happen particularly often. Remember Lianne who wanted prayer and a blessing for her marriage and therefore “that Sunday came forward” to “ask for prayer” (§6.5). She received a very concrete

answer from God, but not through the ministry prayer itself. The answer addressed her loneliness in her marriage in a different way than she expected. After the interceding prayer the ‘communication specialist’ asked her for her name. “That is not normal!” Lianne exclaims. It was a clear deviation from the usually anonymous practice of ministry prayer. It turned out that the women had been trying to contact Lianne for quite some time, unsuccessfully up to that moment. They became friends instantly. Lianne continued: “We hugged and I was totally shaking in the coffee-corner like: ‘O God, how did you direct this!’ [...] That was such guidance from God! It was so special how we met! [...] Our friendship was settled.” Because of the deviating pattern of practice Lianne perceived God to communicate with her.

Recognizing the Extraordinary

Experiences of something extraordinary are far from being unequivocal experiences. The believers’ experiences are exactly not highly mystical or direct experiences of the divine, but rather experiences of ordinary events in which something extraordinary lightens up. A believer can therefore also easily “miss” or “fail to recognize” God’s intervention. “There are really very many extraordinary things, but you do have to *recognize* them,” Marjoleine puts it. Nico confirms: “No, I really believe that the Holy Spirit, he is always present. Even when you don’t pray for it. But you have to, well yes, you have to *learn to see* him. And that is a process actually too.”

Stories are often marked by an intentional search for the extraordinary. In their efforts to recognize the extraordinary believers intentionally add transcendent meaning to the course their lives took or are taking. They so increasingly sacralize their daily lives and the events that took place in them. The interviews demonstrate a constant tension between *being grasped* by the extraordinary and by *grasping* what is supposed to be extraordinary.

Over time and through practice and training believers become more affluent in recognizing when God is saying something. Leo now recognizes when God “put prayers into his heart. [...] At once you have the idea that you have to pray this.” First he did not pay attention to such inner promptings, but now he recognizes God in it. And that is “a piece of experience, you know. It is hard to... You feel it. Yes, that really is... Well, I don’t know how to explain that” (cf. Luhrmann 2012, 68).

To build competence in recognizing when God is saying something is not easy at all. It requires effort and not a little bit of time, discipline and perseverance, and even then there are no guarantees. Evangelical Protestantism therefore demonstrates both a need and esteem for believers who have that extraordinary competence in hearing God’s voice: religious intermediaries play a signifi-

cant role in the believers' communication with God (§6.5 also see Meyer (2010, 117). At the same time, in real faith, experiencing divine communication remains essentially something of the ordinary believer too.

Paying Attention

A first step in the believer's search for the extraordinary is to simply pay attention to everything that happens. Believers often intensify their engagement in practices of listening to God as these practices in particular foster reflection and help the believer "to put the things together," as Lianne phrases it. So jobless Nico engages in the practice of faith sharing by talking with his wife about the events that just happened:

Right now the possibility occurs that my wife can work one day a week extra. [...] So we were thinking about it together. [...] And someone else might call it "that's having luck." But I say: actually we could see this too as a piece of guidance, that it is taken care of, so to say. [...] And those are just the concrete things, and then I think: somebody else would live straight pass it, so to say. But that is really, I find it again the Holy Spirit who is saying: "Well boy, pay attention, things are happening for which you can thank God." And those are really very practical things. That is not at all woolly or far from us. It is just eh... reality! It is within us.

Nico decides to see the opportunity for his wife to work more as divine guidance. He thinks about the events with his wife and then intentionally adds transcendent meaning to it. He is therefore well aware that others might "live straight pass it" or will say "that's having luck." Nico though believes that the Holy Spirit gave him this insight. Hence, a particular attention for the work and gifts of the Holy Spirit is visible in the respondents' faith. The believer needs to pay attention, but the Holy Spirit provides for insight.

Once believers start to pay attention, they start to display a tendency to see all positive and good things and thoughts as stemming from God. Tilde tells about doing the dishes and thinking: "O let's feed the breadcrumbs to the birds." She sees it as the Holy Spirit giving her insight to act responsibly with what is given her. She too is quite aware of her private interpretation of it: "Another would not see this as God's guidance." She though does and sees "feeding the breadcrumbs to the birds" as giving more and more "space to the Holy Spirit." So she "allows" him to mean more in her life.

To facilitate the act of paying attention, believers sometimes keep a notebook. Marjoleine is "sure God works a lot of things in everybody's life, but

you don't recognize it." To help herself recognize God, she "wrote things down for a while." "When I went through a difficult period. I thought: let's just every day write down the bright spots." As she wrote down all the hopeful things that happened throughout the day – note that God is associated with all the good things beforehand – she started to recognize God: "If you then look back, then certain things became clear, because I was told so in three ways by different people who spoke to me independently from each other. While, if I would not have written that down, I would have thought: well yeah, good for you. And then you live on, and one month later you never think of it again. Then you don't put it together, because of which you think: I have to do something with this."

Education

Faith education too helps believers to recognize God's activity in their daily lives.

Jill explains that she first "couldn't" recognize God's intervention, because of the belief she had that the Holy Spirit was not presently active anymore. Education gave her insight in what constitutes divine communication. She did not start to have new experiences, but started to perceive life differently. She explains:

What is new in specific is to say that it stems from God, to acknowledge that it stems from God. Because I think that I had [such extraordinary experiences] in the past as well, because I have always been very much involved with singing.

The period I was pregnant, I used to sing a lot as well. I think, just for comfort. And it gave me peace as well. But then I would have never named it as 'I received this from God' or something similar. But I couldn't, because of the belief I had that the Holy Spirit was something of 2000 years ago. You could only believe through the Word. So that is quite a change.

A concrete example of how evangelical Protestants are taught about divine communication is provided by the teaching of Magda Tunderman.⁷⁸ Similar to what many authors of popular evangelical literature do, Tunderman reviews Biblical examples of God speaking verbally to believers. She presents them as exemplifying contemporary experiences of divine communication: "In the entire Bible we see that God speaks. [...] All through Genesis we see that God speaks.

⁷⁸ At the *New Wine Zomerconferentie* (New Wine Summer Conference) 2010 she taught the seminar 'Listening to God,' which I attended to improve my understanding of hearing God's voice. Also see §6.5 *Interceding Prayer*.

In the paradise [...] Adam and Eve of course, Abram, Isaac and Jacob. God speaks with those people. There were prophets, males and females, who spoke in the name of God, says the Bible” (Tunderman 2010). She continued by giving examples from the New Testament: of prophets speaking in the name of God, of Saul who was spoken to by God. Tunderman (2010) concluded: “Does God still speak? Yes, I believe so. In Hebrews 13 it says, verse 8: ‘Jesus Christ was nowadays and yesterday and today the same.’ If Jesus spoke 2000 years ago or before that even, then he will, if he is the same, still speak today. And that’s why I believe that God speaks.” Tunderman then provided her listeners with a list of eight means by which God speaks to believers nowadays: the Bible, thoughts or impressions, dreams or visions, images, music, encouragements of other people, nature, films. “I really believe that our God is a creative God and he can speak much more to us than just these examples,” Tunderman (2010) explained. None of the participants seemed to be bothered by (or even notice) the discrepancy between the Biblical examples and the contemporary examples of divine communication that Tunderman provided for. The stories of the respondents testify to the substantial influence of such teachings in their constructive efforts to recognize God in daily life. They use lists as the one provided by Tunderman to recognize or reconstruct God’s intervention in their daily lives.

Education is by far not always focused on transferring knowledge. Courses often *train* believers in practices of listening to God. So the first part of Tunderman’s course was continued by a second part of practicing and training in interceding prayer (see §6.5). In this respect, a lot of the respondents speak full of praise about the Alpha Course too, where believers are ‘trained’ in the (more easily accessible) practice of faith sharing. “Yes, I find that an amazing course for people, whether they are in church or not, but for the deepening of your faith. It is very simple actually, but it touches you like nothing else, and you can really delve with each other into the matter” (Evelien).

Looking Back

By paying attention and receiving education, the believers’ perceptions of their lives shift. In the end, they even start to reconstruct their *past* lives as one characterized by God’s intervention.

When Ted comes to faith, he learns that “there is no such thing as coincidence.” He subsequently starts to identify God in the things that are (presently) happening in his life. In due time, Ted also starts to look back. He shares about the difficult period of being jobless and finally finding a new job. Only now he realizes that that was all due to divine intervention: “Yes, that is really, well call that once more one of those presents [from God]. That just had to be.” I asked him to explain how he saw God’s hand in it. Ted:

Well for sure! For sure! If you are applying for jobs for over two years, if you have send out 175 letters, let's not talk about the phone calls I made and e-mails I sent, and nothing works out! And then you take for yourself the decision like: right now I will go straight for the first thing available. And the first job interview that you have... I entered H. on a totally new job, a totally new department for which they were looking for 34 men, of which 33 had to be under 30. And there this guy walked in too, being over 50!

The story continues about all the implausibilities that were present, but how he still got the job. The story looks very similar to other experiences of divine communication. It emphasizes the extraordinary course of events, Ted's crisis and the search, the crucial timing of finally being accepted for a job, which is a clear deviation of the pattern of 175 unsuccessful applications. At that moment though, Ted did not involve God in it at all! He did not have a personal relationship with Jesus at that time: "That was of no importance at that time. [...] But that there, looking back, happened quite something that was needed, yes, that I really believe now." It is only now, years later, that Ted reconstructs the experience as experience of divine communication.

So Ernst-Jan too shares about a "rescue" he experienced in his childhood. He had never understood what happened, until now. When he was three or four years old, he "rolled into the ditch in front of our home, with a high quay. [...] And I held on to the bank with my hands like this." Ernst-Jan shares: "And I saw people walking and I cried for help, that must be. And they just passed by. And eh, I did get out. But afterwards I realized that I was lifted out of it. Not by people. Afterwards I can remember that I was lifted out of it. So on the bank. Well, if you tell that in *vrijgemaakte* [i.e. traditional Reformed] circles, they will say: 'You are crazy! Because that is nonsense! That doesn't happen!' But it does! God did not only do miracles in the Bible, he still performs miracles. Just watch closely." So believers increasingly reconstruct their whole life as a project from God.

The Transformation of the Ordinary

In their efforts to recognize God's voice, believers continually direct their attention to the extraordinary. But what happens to ordinary life when faith turns attention towards the extraordinary? It is noteworthy that respondents do not speak about their experiences as the experience of something *supernatural*, but as the experience of something *extraordinary*. The extraordinary surpasses the ordinary, but at the same time can only be experienced in comparison to the ordi-

nary. It is embedded in it and arises from it. Indeed, the respondents' God experiences are about events that are *ordinary and extraordinary* at the same time.

Korte (2005b) emphasizes that contemporary miracle stories should be taken seriously, because they incite the tension between the sacred as manifestation and proclamation. As "manifestation" the sacred is experienced in continuation with daily living, as "proclamation" the sacred is square to our world. It constitutes a breach to it or an infringement thereof. In the Jewish and Christian tradition the second is emphasized, while the first is generally distrusted (Korte 2005b in reference to Paul Ricoeur 1995).

In the respondents' experiences of divine communication a comparable tension is present. At the one hand, their experiences are subjective figurations of the sacred in continuation with the ordinary. Experiences of divine communication are often about seeing the extraordinariness *of* the ordinary. In their God experiences, the ordinary gains religious meaning. Rather than a dismissal of the ordinary, these experiences so uplift the daily and ordinary. It is a reality in which God is present and close. This fills believers with joy, confidence and direction. Faith is relevant and something of the here and now. It is no longer something of the future only, of going to heaven. As Van der Kooi (2005) comments: "For too long, theology took for granted that nobody experiences God, that the world is completely void of him and that at most he will appear, eschatologically, at the end."

At the other hand, the believers' God experiences also maintain their quality of extraordinariness. They constitute an infringement of daily living and grasp the believer. The extraordinary touches upon the limits of the ordinary, the limits of what people can grasp and of what is makeable. According to Korte, these extraordinary experiences are a positive confrontation with or awakening to what is not makeable and the worth thereof (Korte 2005a, 2008). The extraordinary constitutes a positive experience of the limits of life. As believers run up against what they cannot control in life, these miracles break up the drag of daily life and provide meaning to it. They break life open unto God. For believers living therefore "acquires more dimensions" (Tilde). In particular, they provide believers the hope that their lives and they themselves can be more than ordinary. As scholar of religion David H. Watt already wrote, evangelicalism gives ordinary people "the hope to live extraordinary lives" (1991, 16). In reconstructing their lives as project from God, believers start to wonder about God's motivation to do so. What is his plan with it? What is God's plan with them and their lives? So believers start to believe that God has something extraordinary in mind for them.

Paradoxically too, the more respondents reconstruct their lives as projects of God, the less they view their ordinary daily lives and work as divine vocation. As they focus on the extraordinary goal of God with their lives, their

appreciation for the ordinary, for daily duties and routines seems to diminish. Most of these respondents made huge life changes, because they rather wanted to “work for God.”⁷⁹ Ernst-Jan gave up his well-paid job and started a social workshop. Leo and Rien share similar stories. Jobless Nico is in the midst of the process of searching for a more ‘spiritual’ job. Leonie too wonders what God has in mind for her. Ted found a much less demanding ‘ordinary’ job and believes he so “received time from God” to spend on the church and on God. That is what counts.

Few respondents thus see their ordinary work as part of God’s vocation for life or as a central spiritual practice (cf. McGuire 2008, 109ff). Their urge to “work for God” rather contrasts with ordinary work. But does ordinary life not have intrinsic worth as part of God’s creation? Does not God’s presence in the ordinary, in daily living and the human world (to which the believers’ experiences testify), confirm the fundamental goodness of it? (cf. Smith 2008) Is it not true then, as Wim Dekker and Herman Oevermans (1998) point out, that “the road worker also practices a divine profession?” Exactly because of the undervaluation of the ordinary, real faith also has something ‘tiresome’ about it: believers constantly search for the extraordinary, while feeling restless and dissatisfied with the ordinary.

7.4 | Receiving Concrete Signs

Marjoleine felt comforted by God when she physically laid hands on a key ring saying ‘God loves you.’ The importance of this *concrete sign* should not be overlooked. The experience of something extraordinary is generally not of a mystical or contemplative nature, but is rather characterized by its tangibility. God experiences often culminate in the reception of a concrete thought, a material object or specific event. God is perceived to speak through the sign. When Nico told about his wife getting the possibility to work more, he emphasized: “And those are just the *concrete* things. [...] And those are really very *practical* things. That is not at all woolly or far from us. It is just eh... reality!” Roeland highlighted that the things Jesus tells him are very, very concrete: “And then Jesus starts, in my depths, in that pit he descends, and starts telling me, *very concretely*, small things.”

Concreteness means specificity. The sign can be – and by believers is – defined and described with precision. It is not a general, friendly word that is spoken, but a specific key ring that says ‘God loves you.’ For the believer the

⁷⁹ Work related issues stand more to the fore in the interviews with male respondents. The women are often homemakers and mothers and seem to talk somewhat less about their frustrations of integrating their daily lives with God’s vocation.

reception of such a specific sign, heightens and confirms the “too coincidental” course of events. The match between search and answer is too fitting to be accidental and therefore points to God’s intervention. Because of its concreteness the experience gains the status of divine communication. Ted contrasts it with the sense of amazement that nature can invoke. When he cycles through the woods and looks around he cannot but conclude: “This cannot all happen by itself. More is needed, a greatness is needed!” Even though the experience fills him with wonder and surprise, he indicates that this is not an experience of divine communication. God does not speak to him at that specific moment by giving him a concrete sign. The wonder and surprise rather incite *Ted* to talk with God. But in experiences of divine communication *God* talks to the believer.

Concreteness often means ‘material’ as well. The materiality of the signs God sends stands to the fore in many stories of divine communication. Whether it is a key ring, a felt breath of wind, or an envelope with money, they can all be identified as stemming from God when their appearance is out of the ordinary.

When Justus shared how “he found Jesus,” I first misinterpreted his story. He told how he started to read the New Testament by himself after his sister had given him a Bible. He then received a booklet titled *Waarom Jezus?* (*Why Jesus?*) and subsequently went to the catechism of his church. His catechizer wrote on the board at the beginning of the season *Op zoektocht naar Jezus* (The search for Jesus). Shortly later he fell ill due to a perforation of his intestines. His condition was life-threatening and he was saved just in time. Justus concluded: “And everything taken together, with the sickness added to it, with everything there was to it, name it, *that* resulted in me finding him. [...] *I was driven out to him*. I had to say yes to Jesus.” I asked Justus to clarify what he meant by “having to say yes.” Was some kind of “inner voice” making him say yes? Justus merely repeated the words of the question he was asked, but in contrast started to emphasize the *external events* through which God had spoken to him: “Well yes, it was in any case an inner voice, but it was also because of: the booklets, the people that were placed on my path, through the things that God showed me, like: if you don’t follow Jesus, this is what will become of you, if you follow my Son well then that is what you will become. Yes, those sorts of things.” The Bible he received, the booklet, the catechizer’s proposal to search Jesus, the sickness – all those concrete things and events provoked the experience of Justus that a voice was speaking to him.

Even though from an outsider’s perspective the interpretation of such signs is very subjective, for believers the materiality of these signs give their experiences an objective dimension. The material sign is a public entity, which is just as perceptible to others as it is to the believer. To put it simply: the material is what is real and true for sure, as anyone can see for him-/herself.

Because of their material and ‘objective’ quality, signs are able to *provoke* experiences and to *instill* feelings and beliefs. Keane speaks about the “relative autonomy” of material forms. “It is in that materiality that they are part of experience and provoke responses” (Keane 2008). So Keane shows how material forms permit new inferences across places and time. For evangelical Protestants this process itself has specific religious meaning. The sign reverses the direction of communication in the relationship. From being subject and talking to God, the believer experiences to become the recipient of divine communication. Believers speak about “being found by God.” Or as Justus put it, he “was driven out” to God. According to these respondents, the common religious pattern of *seeking and finding* is not all there is to faith. It has to be complemented by a pattern of *being sought and being found*. More than that, Evangelical Protestants emphasize this last pattern over the first.

Bible Texts and Sayings of Believers

In principle God can use any object or event to communicate with believers. It is though hard to miss that *the Bible* and *Bible texts* function particularly often as signs from God in the stories believers tell. The Bible is perceived as sacred reality (see §6.3). Consequently, believers find it quite likely that God (often) uses the Bible or Bible texts as media for communicating with them. “It is his Word, isn’t it?” Lianne defends.

Bible texts help believers to identify God as actor of the experiences they have. Especially when inner phenomena like thoughts, dreams or visions figure in experiences of divine communication, Bible texts are useful tools. When sudden thoughts include references to Bible texts, they most likely originate from God. Like other believers, Leonie finds it difficult to discern whether thoughts originate from God. Sometimes it is though very clear. Leonie explains: “[Because] I just cannot have thought this up by myself, because this is not how I think, it’s not in my nature. Or maybe it was a Bible text that popped into my mind.” When a Bible text pops into her mind, it without doubt settles the question whether the thought originates from God.

Even though the Bible is a tradition-oriented source of significance, evangelical Protestants do not always use the Bible in a traditional way. Interpretations of Bible texts are often subjective and highly individualistic. They are good examples of subjective sacralization (Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Korte 2005b, forthcoming 2014/5). Historian Mark A. Noll even speaks of the “talismanic” use made of Scripture (2004b, 35). Without any hesitation believers cling on to experiences that stage a Bible text, granting them full authority. Remember how Nico held on to the text he received from the prophet (the prophecy about tears and cheers) at the Family Impact conference (§6.5). Sometimes believers

hold on to Bible texts so tightly, that they turn into near-sacred objects. It is almost as if the Bible text itself possesses divine, salvific power or can protect the believer from harm. As Noll interprets it, the “pre-modern and the postmodern are probably more important in worldwide evangelicalism than the modern” (the modern being identified with “rationalism, logocentricism, and linear thought,” 2004b, 35).

Sayings of fellow believers seem to have the same (or even higher) value as Bible texts. A telling example concerns the prophecy Mr and Ms Mol received. Mr and Ms Mol have always been active members of the Reformed Church. At some point in time they also start attending evangelical services. In the very first evangelical service they attend the Holy Supper is celebrated. “The Holy Supper was different from what we were used to. You had to go forward to pick up your piece of bread. Couples went together. [...] And then they prayed with you and a prophecy was pronounced over you. And we didn’t know anybody there. And what that man said about us! We said to each other: ‘How can he know that?’ We didn’t understand it at all. For us it was an amazing experience!” They share about the prophecy: “The Lord told us, that he wants to use us in the place he put us” (meaning: in the Reformed Church). The prophecy dates from years back. The prophecy has not been confirmed by anything that has happened since then: the years that followed were characterized by ongoing, deep troubles of Mr and Ms Mol with their church. In the end Mr Mol was dismissed as elder from the church council. Mr and Ms Mol now visit another church. Still, however, they hold on to the prophecy and therefore continue their membership of the Reformed Church. They still believe God has placed them there and has a plan with it.

For evangelical Protestants, the recurrent presence of Bible texts and sayings of fellow believers in experiences of divine communication makes faith ‘more-than-individually’ real. A believer is not on his own in experiencing God through Bible texts or sayings of fellow believers. Other believers experience God through the same things. From the perspective of believers, their God experiences are not due to mere individual and subjective interpretations of certain Bible texts et cetera. These shared signs, Bible texts and sayings from other believers, make God a shared *and hence* ‘objective’ reality.

Bodily Manifestations

Physical signs are peculiar but still very concrete signs that characterize the God experiences of some respondents. Marjoleine is actively searching for a study that she can take up next year. Therefore she visits a variety of courses and open days. Through physical signs, like paralyzing her legs and letting her throw up, God directs her choices: “I mean, if I pray like ‘show me what I have to do or where I

have to be' and I visit all those courses and in everything I feel... I mean, it happened at some courses that I just threw up! That I went to the open day with my husband and that I said: 'Yes, bring me home again, this is not it.' [...] That's weird, isn't it?"

In the respondents' stories, bodily manifestations can point to a message from God. It stands out that only 4 respondents tell about such bodily manifestations. In addition they are all female and relatively young: Jill (30), Aagje (28), Marjoleine (41), Lianne (44). Bodily manifestations are often connected with practices of intermediation, in particular practices of deliverance. These practices often involve the body in a variety of ways: through the music, in acts like going forward, laying hands on. They so prepare the body to be used as sign by God. Such physical signs mediate God's presence in a very tangible way and in a way that is very intimate to the believer at the same time. However, this way of communicating also violates the physical integrity of the believer.⁸⁰ The believer's body is objectified and subjected to divine power for communicative purposes. His/her body becomes a 'utensil,' a means of communication. In addition, demons and evil spirits use the human body in a similar way too. Whereas communicating with God brings the believer close to God, now his or her body is no longer a reality characterized by the closeness of God. It rather becomes a site of contest.

So Aagje told about a discipleship course she followed (in which she prayed to God to show her the "blockades" in her relationship with him). At home she experienced the following: "I was in the shower and I thought and really said it like that to God: 'Well, I have never received an answer from you.' I said: 'I'll probably be the only one in the group not hearing anything.' But also: 'I really want this.' [...] It was just like I was swept all over with shower water. Like: this is it! So to say. And then, yes, then you actually, for a moment, you do get very cold, for a moment." At that very moment she had to think of a troublesome love relationship of years ago, which apparently still hinders her relationship with God. Even though Aagje does not agree with God, she cannot evade the authority of the experience that easily either. When she steps out of the shower, she has to take a moment to sit down and realize what just happened.

In the time that follows Aagje is overcome with emotions. She describes to smell certain odors that terribly frighten her. The odors evoke emotions that remind her of the troublesome love relationship. The odors, fears and other emotions are "signs of demons" who try to "block" her relationship with God, so they teach her at the course. Aagje's story shows that she becomes increasingly receptive for physical manifestations: a time of what she calls "spiritual warfare"

⁸⁰ To be sure, the same holds when God uses the believers' thoughts for sending messages. That too can be viewed as violating the personal integrity of a believer.

starts. Her fears grow. Certain spaces heighten her fears in particular: she does not dare to be home alone and is afraid to go upstairs. Being in church heightens the fears as well. She grows more and more convinced that what God said to her is true after all: her former love relationship still hinders her present relationship with God. At the course they teach her how to pray against those “demons.” When she now prays “in the name of Jesus” she calms down. Aagje adds: “And sometimes too, really, [I get] a warm shoulder or that you get warm spots in your body.” Since these events, she experiences bodily manifestations regularly.

Note that the *meaning* of these bodily manifestations for Aagje depends heavily upon the interpretation of these manifestations by third parties. The manifestations themselves are though extremely effective in making such beliefs *real*. They enact the reality both of God and of demons (McGuire 2008, 102ff). As Mitchell and Mitchell comment: “The point is that the demons do not exist as such until their casting out. The performance thereof and associated feelings constitute the demons as an experiential reality” (cf. Csordas 1990, 64–69; Mitchell and Mitchell 2008, 84).

In 2009 Lianne got involved in a practice of deliverance for the first time. Her experience illustrates these processes of interpretation and enactment well:

And he [i.e. Herman Boon] saw in me, a spirit of anxiety sitting in me. [...] And he said: “I see a spirit of anxiety in you.” And he says: “Well, that spirit wants... we can take him out.” Then he delivered me from that spirit of anxiety. And then it goes like this, that he prays for me. And in Jesus’ name he addresses that spirit: “Spirit of anxiety go out in Jesus’ name.” He binds the spirit and then takes him out. And that spirit went out!

That was in 2009. And that was a totally new experience for me in my spiritual life. That there are spirits, that you can be bound by these spirits in your life. Never known. Never ever heard of.

Even though the role of the intermediating specialist should not be underestimated, the bodily manifestations are powerful mediating signs in their own right. Lianne says it “was like giving birth” and continues: “All muscles contract and relax again and contract. So something actually happens with your body. You really don’t know what is happening. *You cannot deny it anymore*. It just happened. [...] My whole body was involved and I sweat like anything, perspiring. But then you also feel the peace that entered afterwards.”

Practicing Concrete Receptivity

Quite interestingly, there seems to be a more than coincidental match between believer and sign. Some believers receive dreams from God (Roeland's daughter, Lianne's daughter), others are always notified by God through bodily manifestations (Marjoleine). Some believers always receive Bible texts (Lianne), others song texts (Jill). God seems to be quite specific in his choice of medium for communicating with a believer.

For believers this is not a surprising finding at all. According to them God simply uses the type of signs that a believer is most receptive for. Jill explains: "I think that it works in this way, that God just uses what you know. He speaks to you in conformity with your character and what you are sensitive for, because he knows you. He knows that I really do a lot with singing." Lianne always receives Bible texts from God and explains: "God is specific. My daughter is a dreamer. So it is very likely that God speaks to her through dreams, while he cannot reach me with dreams, but maybe he can through other things, through texts."

Because the believer is more sensitive for certain signs than for other signs, the believer has most likely acquired a certain familiarity with and knowledge about this type of signs over the years. God uses and activates this knowledge. So Jill indicates, that the songs that *God* puts into her mind are "apparently already somewhere in *my* head." As she said before: "God just uses what you know."

Being aware of this mechanism, respondents also consciously train their receptivity for such signs from God. They increase their knowledge of the particular domain that God is most likely to draw upon for communicating with them. Since Lianne discovered that she is quite receptive for Bible texts, she has started to memorize as much Bible texts as possible. "Because in that way, because we know texts or because we focus upon God and concentrate, God can instill certain thoughts in you and God is able to guide you." Now Ted has been converted, he too started to study the Bible: "If I need certain promptings, I just receive them. And there are Bible texts that have really been burnt into my memory, so that you can just come up with it and can use it. Ideal! Splendid! I just receive it! A present!"

When Concrete Signs Channel Divine Communication

God speaks to believers by making use of the ordinary world. As the divine so breaks through into this world, the world of evangelical Protestants re-enchants (cf. Meyer 2010, 115). As McGuire points out, this re-enchantment of the world is quite a different one than the medieval "spiritual overlay" of reality. "The

sacred is not *simply there*" (2008, 77ff). The divine breaks through into reality *now and then*, in the signs God sends.

McGuire rightly notices that "evangelicals today find it continually necessary to make the connection between the sacred and the secular" (77ff). The mediation of God's presence namely depends, to a large extent at least, upon the action of the believer. God responds to believers who communicate with him. As the prestant chapter showed: the performance of communicative faith practices creates a reality of God being close. Believers so "create space for God" to speak and send signs (see §7.2). The performed communicative faith practices and the enacted closeness of God function as religious frame of reference for interpreting the things and events as signs send by God. So (only) *when* a believer enters the human-divine reality of the closeness of God, ordinary reality transforms into potential divine means of communication, and in that sense re-enchants.

In an enchanted world "meanings are not only in minds, but can reside in things, or in various kinds of extra-human but intra-cosmic subjects" Taylor elucidates (2007, 35). Entered into the closeness of God, believers start "to see" reality in a new way and start to recognize God's hand in events that happen. When recognized as sign from God, the events gain a different meaning. God is believed to convey a specific message through the sign. Marjoleine is not simply ill, she receives direction from God concerning her choice of study. Aagje did not just "get very cold," she got a message from God about unresolved pain from an earlier relationship. Believers bear in mind that there might be more to reality than it seems at first sight. They continually search for the meaning 'behind' what is happening. As everything in daily life can be used by God for communicative purposes, real faith easily brings daily living on the verge of becoming a *find-the-hidden-signs puzzle*, of which believers have to put the pieces together as to discover God's will and God's plan.

Through identifying things and events as signs send by God, believers accept that meanings "can reside in things." Believers however do not attribute divine power and agency to things itself. At the same time, the idea that God might be present in or through things is not far removed from the view that matter and spirits are fully entangled. The line between the sign and the divine force behind it get blurred easily. To illustrate this Meyer (2010) points to the missionary attitudes concerning religious things in Ghana and shows how missionaries at the one hand disenchanted natural substances, but at the same time required converts to burn their shrines and paraphernalia and so actually confirmed the very power of these objects.

The reception of concrete signs from God subjects believers to these things and events around them. The position of the believer changes from subject being in charge of this world (cf. Gen 1:28) to being the object of things and

events that happen to them, influence them and are supposed to determine their path.

A quite far-reaching entanglement of matter and spirit is sometimes visible in the interviews with evangelical Protestants. In a few instances believers express fear for certain objects because they are “possessed” or seen as channels of satanic communication. Nico shares about a certain family he knows and their troubles: “That family has serious difficulties. The children are all placed out of... the one is in one home, the other in another. And well we heard this week that there are a lot of Buddha figures in their house. Someone else would say: ‘Pffff, those wooden things!’ and would not attach value to it. But we see that as a real danger.” Nico tries to explain: “Well that’s another God then we worship and those are dangers that...” *Interviewer: “But what wrong can the figures do?”* Nico: “I don’t know all the ins and outs of the matter either. But there’s just something wrong there. [...] Because I would really like it, if that family would be delivered as it were. [...] I really believe that Satan is that crafty, he tries in all sorts of ways, either through Buddha figures or well through reading horoscopes in magazines... and if you are not alerted to it, then you totally fall for it.” Nico is not sure how to evaluate the matter exactly, but at least “there’s just something wrong” in owning a Buddha figure. Even though the family does not attach such value to the figures themselves! Still, they would do better to get rid of them: the Buddha figures themselves make the owners of them vulnerable to the devil. As Taylor puts it: “Charged things have a causal power which matches their incorporated meaning” (2007, 35).

7.5 | Demonstrating God’s Involvement

The extraordinary, concrete and personal experiences believers encounter constitute an important and indispensable domain of religious meaning to them. Not in the first place because of the message they convey, but because they enact the relationship of *God* with the believer. They authenticate God’s realness and presence and so generate real faith.

Divine Enactment of the Relationship

Experiences of divine communication derive their profound meaning from the fact that these experiences are enactments of reciprocity in the personal relationship with Jesus. As Luhrmann rightly points out, people “love these stories because they are the enactment of a relationship between a creature and his creator” (2012, 9). Experiences of divine communication are perceived as *divine acts* that

enact a personal relationship of God with the believer. Just as believers engage in communicative faith practices and so enact a relationship with God, so does God by ‘talking back.’

When believers communicate with God, they address God and “dramatize” his existence. So God becomes real and the relationship with him “alive” (see §5.3). As Houseman pointed out, this enactment of a relationship with God, implies the ongoing reciprocal involvement between subjects, implying, for all parties concerned, the attendant qualities of being a personal subject (2008, 415). This implication is realized by experiencing to be addressed by God in a personal way. This means, that not the content of the message per se, but simply the fact that a message can be and is in fact received matters. Religious experiences so authenticate the (by believers) enacted reality of the personal relationship with God. They confirm for the believer the existence and reality of God. As believers put it: addressing God makes God “real,” experiencing divine communication makes God “really real.”

The experienced confirmation gives believers a strong sense of assurance. As Kees puts it: “I am sure of my faith. Of course it has been shaken now and then. But eh, you know... [The assurance] is due to putting into practice what you have learned and then having sometimes very deep experiences in that.” Lianne too confirms that this is the fundamental meaning of having God experiences: “An experience of God means to me, knowing for sure that God exists and feeling in your heart that he is present.” Marjoleine shares: “I have had a near-death-experience, almost nineteen years ago. And then I had something like: wow, this is what I have used to be taught. It’s correct! Then it was... believing became knowing for sure: there is much more and many things are directed and guided.”

The believers’ assuredness demonstrates the significance of personal experience in evangelical Protestant faith. Evangelicals haven often been criticized for putting personal experience over doctrine (chapter 3). However, the authenticating function of their God experiences *presupposes* something that *is being* authenticated by the experience. God experiences are responsive experiences that authenticate the relationship as enacted in the performance of communicative faith practices. Notice how Kees does not only mention his God experiences but speaks about practicing faith and *therein* having God experiences. Experiences of divine communication are understood in the context of these practices. For believers the meaning of experiences of divine communication has therefore little to do with putting experience over doctrine. By experiencing divine communication, what has been taught to them becomes their own (authenticity) and the enacted relationship is confirmed (authentication).

In this process of authentication, the material qualities of experiences of divine communication are again quite important. For these believers it holds:

what is material is more true and real than what is rationally accounted for or what can be felt inwardly.

‘Dramatizing’ the Believer’s Existence

Just as communicative faith practices “dramatize” the religious premise of the existence of God” (Riesebrodt 2009, 86), so experiences of divine communication ‘dramatize’ the *existence of the believer*. Just as God becomes real and alive in addressing him, so the believer becomes ‘real’ and alive in being addressed by God.

Here the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus reaches its most existential and religious depth. It exceeds every sense of the original amazement that startled the believer. When the believer “hears God’s voice,” in the experience of being addressed, the believer becomes alive. In the midst of ordinary life, the believer’s existence is singled out and put at the center stage by God. The believer’s existence is ‘dramatized.’ He or she is called to life by God himself.

Respondents confirm time and time again how profound the impact is that experiences of divine communication have on them. They experience their lives as special and more real through the reciprocal communication with God. Experiences of divine communication give the believer feelings of being seen, of being loved, of being cared about, of being someone. Leonie finds those experiences from God “really the things that are very special. Because of these things, I really notice that God listens to what I tell him and that he cares. Of all those five milliard people – How many are there around in the world? – that he hears me too, so to say. And that he thinks I am important. And that he is involved with me personally.” Note that feelings of being seen and heard cannot be separated from the concrete God experiences. In the “things that are very special” the believer feels special. Roeland too points out that his feelings of being known are linked to concrete experiences: “Jesus knows me. I have experienced that in so many things, that he knows me. And that he doesn’t judge me in any way. He is standing here beside me. And then he helps me very concretely, very concretely.”

The profound meaning of being addressed by God lays the main emphasis on *undergoing* the experience: it reveals the active presence of God in the life of the believer. God is felt to be close and personally involved with the believer. The *content* of the experience is of secondary importance. So Roeland tells about a dream his daughter had. She was walking through a park with Jesus. Then Jesus took her onto his lap and she played with his beard. Roeland does not understand the meaning of the dream at all, but still feels safe and secure. For him, the mere experience of his daughter having such a dream means that his daughter is being looked after by God.

Some God experiences are therefore still experienced as highly meaningful even though their content does not have any clear beneficial value for the believer. Kees, for instance, got engaged in a practice of intermediation. The mediator summed up all kinds of truths and facts concerning Kees' life. While several crises of Kees' and his friends' lives were concretely named, no solution was offered and no comforting message was given. God did *not in any way* solve any crisis at hand. The experience was maybe extraordinary, but seemingly meaningless at the same time. Still the experience made a lasting impression on Kees.

Kees shares how someone of the ministry team approaches him and his friends at the end of a two day conference about the ministry of deliverance:

“Yes,” she said – and that makes my Reformed hair stand on end – “I saw the light of the Holy Spirit above you.”

I think: yeah, sure! What is this?

“Do you mind coming forward?” [...]

Then she prayed for us. She absolutely didn't know us. I had never seen her before. She prayed for us one by one and every one of those prayers hit the mark.

I will give an example. My friend and his wife had just had a miscarriage, two months before. And she named all of that: the pain that remained, but also that they had now given it its proper place. Those sorts of things. I am not frightened by that, but I do get emotional. Those experiences make you so sure of your faith, that you think: yes God, this is so special, so close!

She named a desire in me – which I won't elucidate now, that's overstepping the mark – but she named a desire in me that I have never expressed to anybody. So yes, that is no hocus-pocus. That has been God. That is an example that I carry with me for a very long time.

For the believer the mere fact that something of God is noticed, that God addresses the believer personally, suffices. “God knows me,” “God is standing beside me,” “God thinks I am important” – that is what matters. Experiences of divine communication so give believers an existential sense of self-worth. For respondents this is what the experience of grace is all about: to be known, seen and heard. To be someone special. The meaning of such experiences therefore reaches far beyond the actual, concrete incident.

This might also explain the current popularity of the personal relationship with Jesus. In one of her earlier articles about the subject of having a personal relationship with God, Luhrmann draws upon research into the U.S. experience of relationship, which suggests that it is thinner and weaker than in the

middle of our last century: U.S. citizens have become increasingly disconnected from friends, family, and neighbors through both formal and informal structures” (2004, 527). Research suggests that “U.S. citizens might feel lonelier” and “are certainly more isolated” (527). And it might be exactly the personal relationship with Jesus which is offering them a way out, which is protecting them against the isolation of modern social life, as God is a God who is “always listening, always responsive, and always with you” (527).⁸¹

In the light of this fundamental, existential meaning of experiences of divine communication, the believers’ active engagement in communicative faith *practices* like talking with God and investing time in him takes on existential significance as well. For these believers communicating with God is not about chitter and chatter with God. It is a deeply meaningful undertaking in which everything is at stake, in which the believer’s existence is at stake. In Lukken’s terminology (1999) these practices are not just about rational communication, but not in the least too about symbolic communication that aims at a deeper level of communicating. In communicating with God the believer aims at being heard. As Lukken puts it: “The worst thing that can happen to you, is that another person consciously does not respond to what you are saying: that your existence, your person is being ignored” (1999, 28).

7.6 | Revealing What God Wants

Being addressed by God is an experience of being called to life. For the believer this experience is not without reason. The received life is not without purpose: God has a plan for it. Through experiences of divine communication believers receive insight in God’s will for their lives. They are perceived as communicative devices through which God’s plan is revealed to them.

“God’s will” or “what God wants” is a broad and multidimensional concept. It is often used unreflectively and respondents offer no clear-cut understanding of it. Still, throughout the interviews, a general picture arises of God’s will as the collection of divine preferences for the arrangement of the believer’s daily life. The nature of these preferences – “what God wants” – is not only of a moral order, though it certainly includes that. But “what God wants,” above all, refers to God’s concrete ideas about the believer’s path of life.⁸² In this respect

⁸¹ Consequently, more specific Christian convictions about grace – about forgiveness through Jesus Christ as (personal) Savior who died on the cross, for sins committed, and rose again – (indeed) retreat into the background.

⁸² This distinction is important as throughout the Christian tradition, God’s will has often been associated with the morally good, as revealed in the divine commands in Scripture. Doing

believers often refer to “God’s plan” for their lives. This “plan of God” constitutes the particular outline for the course of life of the individual believer. It is designed according to the purpose God has in mind for the believer’s life and is embedded in his loving care for the individual believer. As Lianne phrases it: “God has a plan with your life. God wants to bring you to higher purposes, to more of him.”

Through experiences of divine communication, God directs the believer’s life according to this plan. There is no clear agreement how detailed God’s plan is, but at least there seem to be no limits to what God’s will can entail. Remember how Evelien experienced the wooden furniture set as answer from God to her prayers. She concluded that God “*wanted*” her to have that furniture set. “It is standing there now for a year, but still every day I enjoy it intensely, that I think: wow! How this has been guided!” In the God experience of Evelien God’s will is *executed* and the believer can merely gracefully accept that (apparently) this is what God wants. Believers speak of experiencing “God’s guidance.”

Often too, God experiences do not execute but *convey* God’s will in a message to the believer. Through the message the believer is informed about the content of God’s will and is invited to respond appropriately. Remember how Leo felt that God ordered him to quit watching adult videos. The individual believer is made co-responsible for the execution of God’s plan. He or she perceives the experience as personal direction from God for decisions that need to be taken. In the communication with God believers are no equal partners of God. They are called to subject themselves to God’s will. Driven by the experience of being loved and seen, believers generally exert themselves in admirable ways to submit to the will of God.

Even though the revelation of God’s will entails the demand to obey, it does not in the least constitute an experience of grace too. God’s will gives meaning to the believer’s daily, ordinary life. In the context of God’s plan, the daily activities have a purpose and are meaningful. Being made co-responsible for the execution of God’s plan pressures believers to obey, but also values them as worthy co-workers of God himself. Within the believer’s perception, God’s will is not first of all the highest *authority* to which a believer is *obliged* to submit. It is first of all the ultimate *good* a believer *desires* to receive as a precious gift from

God’s will concerned living a holy life in contrast to a life full of sin (see Randall, for both Calvinist as well as evangelical interpretations of holiness and the intimate relationship between the Spirit’s guidance and holy living, 2005, 111–128). The prayer that “God’s will be done” (Matt. 6:10) was interpreted as a prayer for the conversion of people, that people would repent of sin and avert from hate, deceit and anger (both in the Protestant tradition (e.g. Luther 2010, 16–17) as in the evangelical tradition (e.g. Grudem 2003, 214)). God’s will was thus seen as something known (cf. Micah 6:8) and perceived as something that above all needed to be *done*, not to be *sought*.

God. A life according to God's will is the best, most blessed and highest meaningful life a believer can get. "Just do it!" Roeland exclaims. "You wouldn't even think of putting diesel in your car. Do you understand why? No. [...] I am a technician. [...] So I do know why you shouldn't do so. I am not going to explain you, because it of no use for you. Just don't put diesel in your engine! That's stupid. It will break down. The structural engineer has made it that way. And so we are made according to God's image." God's will is the fuel a human being simply runs on best.

Believers having a personal relationship with Jesus therefore show a strong preoccupation with divine volition. They turn to God in processes of decision-making and exert themselves to make choices that will comply with God's preferences. For Ernst-Jan the quest for God's plan determines what his relationship with Jesus is all about. It is not about what to believe, but about what life to live. Faith is not about the content of beliefs, sermons or divine laws, but about the content of God's plan for your life: "What does Jesus mean to you? [...] We can tell beautiful stories, also in sermons and churches and eh, you can be rigidly legalistic. [...] But what is life actually all about? Why are you kicked into this world? Only one thing, isn't it? To glorify God's name. That's all. And well, how then do you do that? Because then comes the question how to?" The question 'how to' turns out to be important indeed: discerning God's will is no easy task.

Discerning God's Will

Discernment refers to the decision-making process believers engage in as they try to determine God's will in their everyday lives (Osmer 2005, 284). Discerning God's will points to a process of spiritual decision-making in which priority is given to God's will. Believers try to discern God's will through communicating with him. They search for enlightening God experiences from which they can infer what God wants.

Believers therefore actively engage in the cultivation of communicative faith practices. They have great faith in communicative faith practices to lead to revealing experiences of divine communication. "If God really has a very clear plan with me, wouldn't he make that clear to me when I pray for it?" Leonie explains. Roeland looks back on a position he accepted in a local division of a political party years ago. It turned out disastrous; he was not qualified for the job. He is sure: "If I had prayed, I would have known that I should not have accepted that position."

The interviews are full of detailed narrations of believers trying to discern God's will. Communicative faith practices are intensively cultivated. Aagje speaks about "being busy with God," an expression often used by respondents to

refer to the intensive and extensive cultivation of communicative faith practices. Believers fervently pray, read, study and discuss the Bible, sing, participate in ministry prayer, blessing rituals and so on and subsequently pay meticulous attention to everything that happens around them in order to discover what God wants. Notice, that this practical and individual process of discernment differs from the sense of discernment spoken about in reference to practices of intermediation in §6.5. There discernment primarily concerns the *judgment* about the *veracity* of experiences of intermediation. In the believers' attempts to discover God's will for their everyday lives they are though driven by a hermeneutics of discovery rather than a hermeneutics of suspicion.

In the quest for God's will, the communication with God rapidly instrumentalizes. It becomes a means of divination, a mechanism used to discover what God wants. Believers no longer engage in communicating with God for the sake of having a relationship with Jesus in itself. They search: what does God want? What is God saying? Should I choose this or should I do...? What is God's will in this matter? They aim at answers from God that reveal his will and will direct their decisions. This creates a tension, sometimes felt by respondents too, between communicating with God for the sake of communicating in itself (addressing God and being addressed, seen and loved) and desiring concrete answers and direction. At the same time it is right here – and this matters greatly to believers – in the discernment of God's will, that faith is experienced as concretely and tangibly relevant for daily life. God's will constitutes an all-encompassing but still concrete connection between God and the believer's daily life.

As God is believed to “have an opinion” (Aagje) about everything, believers “involve the Holy Spirit in everything” they do (Nico). “Yes, even in ordinary shopping!” respondents comment, “that you realize in all things: how am I going to do this?” Lianne asks God in everything “whether it is right what I do or whether it is not right, or what choices you make, or how to organize your time, or what you do buy or don't buy, or whom you visit or not. Those things.” For believers there is no essential difference between those small scale decisions and life changing decisions, between moral choices and life choices.

Somewhere in the process of “being busy with God” then grows the tentative insight that God speaks or has spoken. The examples below show that it cannot be pointed out exactly where “being busy with God” changes over to “hearing God's voice.” Similarly, there is no clear separation possible between the experience of hearing God's voice and subsequently discerning and interpreting God's will. Throughout the course of events a conviction grows within the believer, that was not formerly there. It thus has to come from God. Somewhere the believer is being grasped. Tilde can merely say: “And then you actually do have the feeling that God is leading you.”

In the context of the present age discernment is quite an unusual practice. “For many people today, to set aside their own path in order to conform to some external authority just doesn’t seem comprehensible as a form of spiritual life” (Taylor 2002, 101). The present consumerist society is highly structured on the basis of individual choices and preferences. But exactly this might also constitute the driving force behind the practice of discernment. “Discernment is not needed when prescribed rules or roles provide us with adequate guidance in determining what we should do. It is needed in circumstances that are complex or confusing, when we are uncertain how we should proceed and must sift through various factors in coming to a judgment” (Osmer 2005, 284). In the present age there are few prescribed rules and roles to form the individual identity. People have to construct their own lives and constantly make choices what to do, where to go and who to be. The changing religious climate in which prescribed rules and roles cease to determine conduct is in line with these societal developments. Believers could therefore feel a heightened need for God’s guidance.

Examples of the Spirit’s Guidance

The five incidents below illustrate how believers discern God’s will in practice and experience the Holy Spirit to guide them.

Tilde’s Foster Children

For years now, Tilde and her husband have been fostering children for *Bureau Jeugdzorg* (Bureau for Childcare). Now *Bureau Jeugdzorg* asks them to foster two children, who had been with them before, anew. But at that time, they already foster two other children:

Well, then you are very much occupied with: what next? What do we choose now? Do we say: “Our door is open again for these children?” Because then they do not have to go to a new place again. And then in the *Groei Groepen* (Growth Groups) we were engaged with Moses. And then it was... that Moses started to bring forward all kinds of arguments when he was standing there at that bramble bush. And then you get going on it – or well, we together. And then you actually have the feeling that God is leading you, like: “Put those arguments aside and try to be there for the kids.” And so we did.

Tilde seeks direction concerning a concrete situation in her life. In this situation the question what God wants is not only a moral question. Moral concerns are

though interwoven with the decision-making process: Tilde is driven by a certain feeling that she should be there for the kids. She enters into communication with God, engages in the practice of faith sharing and subsequently actively tries to connect what has been read and discussed in the faith group with her own questions. For Tilde, discussing the story of Moses in the small faith group becomes a sign from God from which she deduces that God wants her to adopt the children. “Yes, at least, I see that as an answer. Someone else might say: ‘You just think so.’”

Leo's Job Switch

Leo (43 years old) has been working as coach for mentally disabled people for over 20 years by now. Originally he studied civil engineering. After his study he could not find a job right away. Several people advised him: “Maybe you can do something with mentally disabled people.” Leo thought “that’s not my cup of tea,” but still visited an open house of an institution nearby. After that, he applied for a very attractive job in the field of civil engineering and got accepted. Leo shares about that situation as follows:

And then I was actually wavering: am I going to do that, or do I go that other way? [...]

And then... I was listening to an LP. [...] And then a text from a Psalm came very much to the fore. What was it again? Eh, it was a singer – at that time I didn’t know what Psalm it was – and he sang Psalm 86. That’s about that he [...] rather sits at the feet of the temple, at the door of the temple than that he stands in the world, so to say. That’s how the singer sang about it. And then I had something like: no, I have to go to the field of work God is calling me to. God is calling me to start working in his Kingdom.

Believers usually view God’s will as entailing a specific divine calling for their particular lives. Therefore they seek divine directions when facing important life choices. At the crossroads of life God’s guidance is needed most. Leo’s initial involvement of God is not so explicit. He opens up himself to other job choices by listening to what people say him and visits an open house. Only later on Leo more explicitly involves God by listening to Christian songs and associating the songs’ contents with the matter. Discerning divine volition is a process that takes time and in which all things taken together are felt to reveal something of God’s will.

Kees' "Deal with God"

When a believer remains unsure about what God wants, the believer sometimes takes specific 'measures' to discern God's will. In their prayers they give God an either-or choice: 'If you want A, then do this. If you want B, then do that.' So they enforce an answer from God. Kees speaks about this mechanism as "making a deal with God." Kees shares about the miraculous course of events concerning the realization of his farm as follows:

In 1995 we build this farm. I really wanted to be a farmer, but my father said: "That's not possible." Because the old farm was located in the village. "Yes," I reacted, "then we have to build a new one. [...] We went to the accountant and to banks. All honest people, who gave us the advice to move away further. [...]"

I myself presented it to God: "Well God, how then?" Yes, I would certainly prefer a fax or something the like, but that of course is not possible. So then I said: "If you want that..." – Well, are you then making a deal with God? How should I put it? You speak it out: "God do you want to lead that? And do you want to make clear to us what we have to do in this matter?" [...]"

Well, then you start the process. [...] And two and a half months later, everything was arranged! We had sold the old farm, we had a building permit and everything was arranged! Well, that I have experienced as an answered prayer. Because of that, we were very amazed about it, hence the name.

A large sign saying 'The Miracle' adorns the farm.

The discernment of God's will did not put Kees in a position of submitting and obeying to God's will. The story rather starts with Kees' wish and its execution. Kees does entrust the situation into God's hand, but at the same time also forces God to answer: whatever happens is God's will. If the farm is realized, it is God's will. If it does not work out, it is God's will too. Kees so also effectively evades his own responsibility for the course of events, which is on fore-hand passed unto God.

Evelien's "Deal with God"

The Spirit's guidance often concerns small decisions as well.

Evelien has a conversion-like experience at the Alpha weekend about the Holy Spirit. She wonders whether to tell others about it. They have a regular Alpha evening the Tuesday after and she wonders: "Should I tell this? Should I share what happened? And then I prayed about it, like: 'Lord, if you want me to

tell this – I was completely unaware of how the evening would go – then tonight it will be asked if someone wants to share something. And if then no one comes forward, it is your will that I share about what happened’.”

And so it happened. No one came forward and so God “told” her to share about her experiences the weekend before.

Nico’s CD

Nico’s story exemplifies a large category of experiences in which believers identify their inner incentives to do something good with God’s will. Nico shares:

Yes, lately too it happened. Church finished. And there was a woman, her mom passed away recently, at quite a young age. And she was really in tears. And I thought: what should we do? [...] What can I mean to her?

And I know a very beautiful song from Reni and Elisa Krijgsman. [It is] an encouragement actually. I think: I will burn a cd with that specific song on it and I will just bring it to her.

And well, these are just for me the practical things that the Holy Spirit right at that moment tells me: “That’s what you have to do.” [...] Then I think: that is showing something of Jesus.

Nico’s story shows a most interesting aspect of stories of discernment: often the believer does not so much receive a concrete sign from God, but becomes a concrete sign himself.

Interpreting God’s Will

The discernment of God’s will includes a conscious interpretive step of the believer. As Tilde indicated “And then you get going on it.” So Leo told how he “was actually wavering” when suddenly Psalm 84 appealed to him.⁸³ It became a sign for him from which he discerned God’s will. Leo elucidates this last interpretative step as follows:

The singer says: “I’d rather be at the feet of the temple than that I am in the world.” I’d rather have a job close to God than that I am standing in the midst of the riches of the world or choose for wealth.

⁸³ In the given quotation Leo refers to Psalm 86. From what he tells, it shows he means Psalm 84.

Well, in the calculation, in that field of work, in that branch of civil engineering, that is *of course* where you can attach the ‘feet of wealth,’ the ‘gift of money’ to. At least, that’s how I felt it at that moment. [...]

If I would choose for health care, it meant that I had to go back to school for the rest of the winter. And that would be a combination of working and learning. It would mean working on the basis of minimum wage. [...]

I was already working at a food company. So I had quite a decent job [...] and decent salary as well. Well, the calculation for which I could choose, where I would earn even more, or I would go back to a minimum wage if I chose to work in the health care.

Leo’s interpretation of God’s will is not a totally random, individual enterprise. Two common assumptions concerning God’s will are at play. The goodness of God’s will is assumed to contrast and conflict with ordinary human desires, especially human desires concerning material well-fare (see p.193). “Of course” the field of calculation is the evil world of money, which therefore ‘of course’ contrasts with “a job close to God.” Rien too explains: “Quite often it is contradictory, when you think: this is what God wants, this is what I want. This is much more fun than what God wants. While, if you really start looking and start doing what God wants, you notice that it, in the end, is still the best for me as well.”

The second assumption places the first assumption in the context of the purpose of God’s plan for the individual’s life. The believer’s submission to the goodness of God’s will is assumed necessary to show other people God’s love. Believers assume that God wants to “use” them to show his goodness to others. So Leo decides to devote his life to caring for others. For believers “being used by God” seems to constitute the ‘final stage’ of experiencing divine communication. It constitutes the ultimate goal of communicating with God and the divine calling for their lives. This is what God’s plan is in the end all about.

The experience that God communicates through the signs he sends, now evolves into the experience of “being used” as a sign. Nico was instrumental in providing the woman with a sign from God: a cd with a comforting song text. In that act, he himself becomes a sign from God to his acquaintance from the church. This experience fits the believers’ approach towards divine communication quite well: all of life – objects, events, the believer’s thoughts, body *and so also* the believer in person – can function as sign from God.

To be sure, believers also try to ‘discern’ and do God’s will as it has been revealed in Scripture. Believers actively try to imitate Jesus and to live according to the guidelines they read in the Bible. Leo: “Very often you think: what would Jesus have done at such a moment? You try to give that an interpretation.” Rien even explains that discerning God’s will on the basis of experiences of divine

communication is actually the exception. I asked him: “What then is the rule?” Rien answered: “I think that God, eh, through the Bible also make a lot clear to us for which he does not need to speak to us. That God, that’s what I think now and then, thinks: yes, you can read, can’t you!?” Rien continues: “God doesn’t need to tell me, like: ‘You are not allowed to steel,’ you know. He does not need to communicate that with me through his Spirit, because it says so.”

In practice, the subjective application of Biblical guidelines to the situation at hand and experiencing the Spirit’s guidance go hand in hand. Rien confirms: “I do notice that the Holy Spirit also applies things to your life, so to say.” His faith so “started to influence him.” “If you want to take [your faith] seriously, then it means that you are standing in a different way at *Midden-Noord* (Midst-Nord).” In Deuteronomy he read things about Israel that seemed completely unrelated to the soccer match. But the Holy Spirit made him thinking “about the opponents and about the supporters of the opponents.” They are often addressed as *Joden!* (*Jews!*) Rien: “What do I actually all wish them, through what I am calling? But actually I don’t! It is quite logic that they are in favor of their club if they are coming from there, isn’t it? So now I actually only sing along with songs that are positive and that are about E.”

Also now, doing God’s will has a higher purpose. God wants to “use” Rien for sharing his love to his soccer friends. Rien comments: “But those friends notice it, because normally I blurt out everything. Then you think as well: what kind of influence does it have on them? And sometimes you have a tiny little conversation about it as well. And I see that they are changing in that as well.” It reinforces Rien’s preoccupation with communicative faith practices: “I pray regularly before I go to a soccer match: ‘May I show something of you in that?’ so to say. And if you pray about it, then it immediately affects your own behavior of course. Yes, sometimes it displays small, bright spots. Yes, Jesus is then present too.”

Doubts, Disappointments, Disaster...?

It comes as no surprise that believers have been criticized for such a practice of discernment. Is this really how God’s will is revealed? Is Kees’ experience of God’s guidance not rather a story about a self-fulfilling prophecy? Do Tilde’s and Leo’s experiences not depend upon a completely arbitrary application of a random Bible text? Does Nico not simply substitute any good intention with the Spirit’s guidance?

The interviews show that believers face similar doubts. Aagje shares: “It is quite difficult to think of: what is that answer I receive? Because I was at loss with that for a long time too. Like: is that then really stemming from God? And then I believe it myself, but my husband thinks of course something like: yeah,

sure, again? In the sense of: is all of that really possible?" Such questions and doubts do not prompt believers to question their practice of discernment. They are though willing to question their own interpretation of God's will. In other words, believers are not willing to judge their experiences from an outsider's perspective, but try to find a solution to their doubts in the light of their faith.

Evelien explains: "Sometimes you start wondering: did I want to see it that way?" She comments herself: "And then I thought: no, Evelien, send those thoughts away, because it came from God and the evil one wants you to doubt it. Don't buy it... But of course you do have your own fantasies." Tilde shares her doubts concerning her incentive to feed the breadcrumbs to the birds (instead of throwing it into the trash bin). She sees it as "the Spirit who gives me insight: can you not do that in a different way?" But she also indicates: "Or is that giving yourself a pat on the back?" She is, however, not willing to actually answer that question. It is the question of an outsider and she is not willing to allow that perspective into her judgment: "If you break down everything, like we now keep on talking and talking, then you could almost arrive at the point.., what some reverends of course write about: that it is just an image of your own. And that, I *don't want to* believe. And actually I am sure, that it is not [an image of your own]."

How then do believers handle their doubts? When Tilde and her husband decided to foster the two children again, the events took an unexpected turn. The children turned out to be unmanageable and they had to send them away again:

And then you do have the feeling, like: did we have to do this or not?

At the other hand, we both have something like: well, at that moment we both clearly felt that God sent us onto this road. That he answered us.

And eh, the other option was that they had to go for observation somewhere else, and then their problems would have shown there. So, probably, this maybe has been right after all.

Only we started with the line of approach, like: we will completely take care of these kids, for always. Well, that was not the matter, while you then think that you know the answer, or hear the answer, or receive. And then after a while you think: hey, the answer is apparently quite different from what I thought at that moment.

While struggling with such questions, Tilde concludes that it just must have been the right decision they took. They discerned the direction God gave correctly, only interpreted its meaning in the wrong way. God meant it to work out differently. She elucidates about her struggles:

I did very clearly ask: “Yes but God, what did you actually want? Did we hear you wrong? Did we understand you wrong? Did we want too much, to do good for someone else? Do you hamper yourself? What... What... Did I hamper you?”

Well, at a certain moment you learn to find your way in it. And now we can both distance ourselves from it somewhat. And besides, I always have faith: God will hold them. Even though you yourself think: well God, then you should have held them in a different way.

Interviewer: What do you think, now you look back on it? Did God lead it this way?

Tilde: Yes, I think so. [...] Eh, maybe [he did so] to teach us as well: there are limits to what you might all want and can mean for someone else. Sometimes, you want way too much.

Tilde holds on to her experience of divine communication, but the meaning of the experience turns around 180 degrees. No longer is this an example of God caring about these two children. It was an incident of God teaching Tilde something.

Kees confirms: “I mean, yes it happens, that you are very convinced of something but after a while you think: well, oe! That’s not quite how I imagined it.” Believers deal with such difficult questions by *holding on* to their faith and God’s plan with their lives. The negative experience will surely work out positively. Mr Mol felt God called him to be an elder in his church. It turned out disastrous and he even got expelled from the church council. He though still believes: “Yes, this doesn’t happen for no reason. I am convinced that it doesn’t! This is not for nothing.” While believers so hold on to their original God experiences, they put the importance thereof into perspective at the same time. As Tilde puts it: “And besides, I always have faith: God will hold them.” In the end, the relationship is not only about receiving answers, but about the relationship in itself.

Even though it seems that God’s plan and God’s faithfulness so provide an answer to everything, none of the respondents denies that such questions remain a continuing struggle too. Mr Mol indicates repeatedly that he keeps wondering: “Did I do it right?” He expounds: “Yesterday evening I saw on TV [a program] about *Opwekking* (Revival). [It was] an interview with a few young people. And then I just become jealous of those youths, because there the Lord does speak! According to them, the Lord speaks to them. And then I think: the Lord does not speak to me [in this regard].”

In addition, the hardships of daily life make believers question God too. “Why this? Why does it go wrong?” Justus shares, referring to the bankruptcy of his family’s company. Reina shares how her daughter’s chronic illness (cf. §6.5) returned after she seemed cured for a few whole years. “How should I phrase that? I miss an answer in this. I will never receive an answer to certain questions,” Reina sadly says. She continues: “I cannot reconcile it... That is the line of which I just think: Lord, where are you in this? And that, I find tough. Very tough.”

However, in all those cases of experiencing doubt, disappointment and disaster, notwithstanding pain, sickness, the lack of answers and understanding, believers claim and testify that faith remains ultimately meaningful to them. It shows another level of real faith that precedes or exceeds the concreteness of experiencing divine communication. Especially at this point, an adapted picture of real faith arises, one in which faith is not only about experiencing (concrete) answers, but also about trusting (an unseen) God: about living in the closeness of God.

8 A Growing Closeness of God

8.1 | “He Sits Here with Us!”

“He sits here with us! He is sitting right here!” Ernst-Jan looks around in the room, pointing out with his arm gestures, that God is for sure there in the room with us. “I just experience that God is with me. God is with me all of the day,” Ernst-Jan adds. Justus too emphatically explains: “I think, that if we could just... Well, we see three dimensional, but if the fourth would be open to us, we would see that he is sitting right here with us at the table. I really believe that. That’s why I call it a personal relationship.” Evangelical Protestants are absolutely sure that God is always there with them. And that is “not something volatile, not a wind, not eh... not a spirit or something the like. It is really the Three-in-One,” Justus adds. God in person is a continually present reality in their daily lives.

Evangelical Protestants *live* with a strong awareness of *God’s continual presence* (§8.2). This closeness of God is the third constituent component of having a personal relationship with Jesus. Living in the closeness of God refers to an engaged mode of being in the world which develops over time and which can be understood as the believer’s religious imaginary.

This religious imaginary develops simultaneously to the development of a personal relationship with Jesus, which takes place when traditional faith is no longer experienced as satisfactory. Believers *desire for more* (§8.3). Often their searches culminate in a specific (conversion-like) God experience. As the believer gets involved in the practice of communicating with God in a new way, he/she experiences to *enter a personal relationship with Jesus* (§8.4). Over time, the communication with God develops and changes. Believers perceive to *growth in faith* (§8.5). Their desires *for more* now evolve into desires *to do more* and their lives become an ongoing quest to *live for God* (§8.6).

This chapter draws attention to the importance of heartfelt personal desires. They constitute the driving force behind the development of the personal relationship with Jesus and so eventually give rise to a life in the perpetual closeness of God.

8.2 | Living Close to God

The ‘closeness of God’ has been mentioned several times throughout this thesis: it has been mentioned in relation to the performance of communicative faith practices and in relation to experiences of divine communication. But throughout the interviews these believers also speak about a certain closeness of God which seems neither to be directly connected to their engagement in communicative faith practice nor to experiencing divine communication. It rather refers to their way of living, of being in the world.

When respondents communicate with God and involve him in everything they do, they enact a reality of God being close and as a result thereof experience feelings of rest and peace (chapter 6). This closeness of God is a reality of its own, in which the reality of God and daily living are intertwined. It entails all those dimensions, issues and things of daily life that are “brought before” God. It is the reality in which God acts and responds to believers (chapter 7). Over time these two sides of the relationship with Jesus – practices and experiences – give rise to a steady and continual perception of life as *living in the closeness of God*. This perception of life does no longer coincide with times of practicing communicative faith practices or with moments of experiencing divine communication. For these believers, God is simply always there, even when a believer does not pray and even when a believer does not experience anything of God.

God’s Continual Presence

In contrast to the tangibility of experiences of divine communication, the *continual presence of God* is something intangible. It is therefore no easy task for believers to describe what the continual presence of God exactly entails and means. Living in the closeness of God is about abstract, intangible things like intimacy, love and attachment. These abstract things are nevertheless invaluable to believers. The closeness of God gives them a sense of security,⁸⁴ safety, a sense of being known and being loved.

⁸⁴ Dutch: “geborgenheid,” a word used a lot amongst others by Tilde.

Tilde gives the most elaborate and insightful explanation of what living in the closeness of God means. She refers to Psalm 139. Living close to God means “that God knows you in all aspects of your life. And that is that piece of security, and that is knowing about his protecting presence all around you – even though you can still break your leg.” As Tilde points out, God’s presence does not protect the believer from sorrow or illness. Tilde: “No, no, sometimes not at all, not from sadness or something the like. But this is it: God is with you! Yes, that is that security.” It is about “the certainty that you are never on your own.”

The peculiar character of living in the closeness of God clearly differs from the experiential side of the relationship, in which God’s active involvement, help and care are concretely noticed by the respondents. Living in the closeness of God, however, does not provide for any material, ordinary human well-being. It is about being known, about being loved. This love gives a “piece of security” as Tilde puts it. But what is the meaning of “security” if you can still “break your leg”? Tilde explained it with help of the term “attachment.” She has been a foster parent for a long time and clearly knows how important it is that children become attached to their parents. Tilde: “And that is how you can help a child, by letting him get attached, by giving him love, security and safety. And *that* is the security I feel with God.” She continues: “Children are sometimes in distress too, and as a parent you can give them a piece security without taking away the sorrow. And I think, that’s, yes, that’s how I see God: as a father, as a parent.”

Many respondents describe God’s continual presence as a deep sense of peace. “A deep sense of peace within yourself,” Lianne clarifies. She explains: “When you love someone, you want to be very close to that person. You want to spend time together, do things together, but also just to be, to be close to each other. That is comparable to the relationship with Jesus.” The security and peace of being together as loved ones is what living close to God is about. Rien confirms: “The beautiful thing about the relationship with Jesus is that God is there.” He explains: “I have to think about Genesis 2, where God creates a woman because it is not good that the man is alone, both as a helper and as a ‘vis-à-vis.’ I think that you can see the relationship with Jesus in a similar way. It’s not good if you’re alone, because a human without God is profoundly lonely.”

This intangible and peculiar sense of security and peace is not something believers always necessarily feel. They rather speak about “knowing” that God is there and about “trusting” him. It is about “always *being in* [not always *feeling*] the presence of the Lord Jesus Christ,” Lianne explains. Such knowledge and trust develop over time. Over time, the concrete interaction with God gives rise to the development of a steady trust in God’s presence. It is a process of “getting attached” to each other. Through “spending time together and doing things together,” a deep bond of love, including a sense of being loved, develops. Concrete experiences teach believers to trust that God is always with them. Rien

explains: “Sometimes you can notice it quite directly [that God is there]. Sometimes it is only afterwards, that you will experience that. But because you have that relationship for a longer time, you can trust more and more upon it, so to say, that it is that way, even if you don’t experience it right at that moment.”

Mr Rosegaar gives an example from his own life. He is sure, that God is always with him. This peculiar sense of assurance cannot be reduced to a feeling *anymore*. But Mr Rosegaar has not always been so sure. He had “to learn” to trust in God. And he surely learned it the “hard way.” He shares about a special God experience he had when he needed heart surgery. At that moment he experienced an inexplainable strong sense of peace, which transformed his attitude towards life significantly: “Because you are facing heavy surgery, and then the moment [of the operation and experiencing God] is there. But now it is: would I have a heart attack later on, then it is alright in my eyes, then all is well too in my eyes. Well, that sounds a bit, how should I put it, self-assured. But yes, that I am now, I think, self-assured.” Through a particular concrete experience of God’s presence, he learned to depend upon God’s presence whatever might happen to him. Living in the closeness of God does not refer to theoretical knowledge or to the formal profession of certain beliefs. It is more like a kind of experiential knowledge that grows over time

The value attached to God’s continual but intangible presence reveals a paradox in the relationship with Jesus. At the one hand, evangelical Protestants continually emphasize the need to concretely communicate with God in daily life as they trust this will effectively establish the closeness of God and lead to concrete experiences of divine communication. At the other hand, living in God’s presence is about trusting and knowing a God who is neither seen nor always felt. Sometimes, respondents feel torn between these two sides of the relationship. As Marjoleine explains: “What some people have, like ‘I really feel God,’ I don’t have that. I know he is there. [...] I know he is there, but I don’t feel it. So that is kind of double. Because at the one hand, the relationship is very much an emotional thing. And at the other hand, for me it becomes knowing at that point. He will be there, but I don’t see him.” Aagje too admits, somewhat unwillingly, that the most important goal of communicating with God is just “to have real contact with God and then *not* because of the answers. [...] And of course I want to... Well, those [answers from God] are beautiful experiences, so you want to experience that more often. But it is really above all, yes, about that relationship with God. About knowing he is there and thanking him for that.”

A Religious Imaginary

Living in the closeness of God can be understood as the believer’s religious imaginary. The concept ‘imaginary’ stems from philosopher of religion Charles Taylor

(2007). It is a most useful concept for understanding what respondents are referring to when they speak about living in the closeness of God, about knowing God is there and about trusting him.

Taylor speaks about “social imaginaries” and starts by explaining what this term is not: “This term is something much broader and deeper than the intellectual schemes people may entertain when they think about social reality in a disengaged mode” (2007, 171). The term ‘worldview’ would be a more proper term to refer to such an intellectual scheme (Klaver 2011, 20). But the respondents’ awareness of God’s presence does not refer to a particular worldview. To them, it is about *living* in the closeness of God. The concept ‘imaginary’ therefore seems more fit. According to Taylor, an ‘imaginary’ is about an “engaged mode of being in the world.” It is about “the ways in which they imagine their [social] existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met and the deeper normative notions and images which underlie these expectations” (2007, 171).

Scholar of religion Birgit Meyer too draws upon the notion of ‘imaginary’ to explain certain dimensions of Pentecostal religion. She speaks of the Pentecostal “imaginary *of the world*” instead of *social* imaginary, to point out that their imaginary does not only include the social, but also a cosmology that includes the existence and presence of God (2010, 117–118). By drawing attention to the Pentecostal cosmology, Meyer however emphasizes beliefs in and about God rather than the typical intertwining between the reality of God and the reality of daily living that characterizes the evangelical Protestant imaginary. Therefore, in the context of evangelical Protestant faith, it seems more fit to speak of a *religious* imaginary.

The religious imaginary of evangelical Protestants is strongly God-centered. Mr Rosegaar gives a beautiful example thereof. When he tries to explain what living in the closeness of God means to him, he refers to the image of a cross. “The vertical line carries the horizontal line,” Mr Rosegaar explains. The image of the cross conveys that the daily, social reality and the reality of God constitute *one* and the same reality, in which it is all about “faith, hope and love.” Mr Rosegaar then continues and explains: “You have your relationships with people here on earth. That is the crossbeam. And without the vertical line, there would not be a crossbeam.” This dependency of the horizontal upon the vertical, to use Mr Rosegaar’s imagery, expresses the intertwining of faith and daily life, as well as the God-centeredness of the religious imaginary of evangelical Protestants.

This God-centered imaginary makes it clear that faith, for evangelical Protestants, is something that permeates all of life. The personal relationship with Jesus is about “everything you do,” Aagje explains. Or like Ted puts it: “Jesus

always plays a role.” In this respect real faith differs from the faith believers used to have. Aagje elaborates:

Yes, it is really, *now* it is really part of my life. *Before* indeed it was, well praying and reading the Bible before and after dinner, but now it permeates all of my life. [...] It is interwoven with all you do, with choices you make, with... Even when going shopping, that you are just thinking of it differently: there is again so much lying in the shop here! Well, wow! Like that. Just those kinds of moments. It is not like... that I am the whole time, with my pushcart, the whole time am thinking about God. But, yes, just those kind of moments. The other day I was vacuuming and then I thought: ha! That, we luckily don't have to do in heaven! Yes, those sorts of things.

As the quotation shows, these believers did not always live in the closeness of God. Concrete God experiences rather *taught* them to depend upon God's continual presence. As Aagje indicated: “*Before* indeed it was, well praying and reading the Bible before and after dinner.” So Tilde similarly explained that even though she always believed, God used to be “much farther away.” The engaged mode of living life close to God only developed during their lives of faith.

Taylor (2007) focuses on this process of changing-over to a new imaginary. When new theories infiltrate the existing order, transformations take place (175). Taylor points towards the particular importance of new practices in this process: “What is originally just an idealization grows into a complex imaginary through being taken up and associated with social practices, in part traditional ones, but often transformed by the contact” (175). He argues that what is involved in the transformation of a social imaginary is that “for the most part, people take up, improvise, or are inducted into new practices” (175). The new outlook, the one first articulated in the theory, is the context that gives sense to these new practices. “Hence,” Taylor argues – and this is an important claim he makes – “the new understanding comes to be accessible to the participants in a way it wasn't before. It begins to define the contours of their world, and can eventually come to count as the taken-for-granted shape of things, too obvious to mention” (175–176).

Taylor draws particular attention to how (new) practices generate implicit understandings. That is comparable to the process visible in the respondents' change-overs to living in the closeness of God. During their lives of faith, these believers got involved in communicative faith practices in a new way. Sometimes, the practices were new to them altogether. Over time, their (re)new(ed) participation in the communication with God starts to define the

contours of their world. So living in the closeness of God becomes a “taken-for-granted” state of life. The closeness of God becomes a permanent way of experiencing life, which no longer directly relies on the concrete experience of that closeness. The rise of this religious imaginary shows the efficacy of the practice of communicating with God. For believers it is not theory, appealing dogma’s or rationally substantiated theology that changes their perceptions of life, but practices and in addition experiences.

Their newly risen imaginary, subsequently, becomes a force and authority of its own. A religious imaginary is a strong and steady construction of the world. As it no longer directly relies on the immediate and concrete experience of God’s presence, it is therefore not easily overthrown either. It remains when things speak against it. And things often do, also in the lives of evangelical Protestants. None of the respondents’ lives presents a mere success story of faith. They all have to deal with the realities of pain, sickness and brokenness. Realities in which God seems to be the obvious absent one. Notwithstanding such experiences, believers do not give up faith. They do not even think about it. “My life will never be without God. It is unthinkable! Because I still, throughout the years, have always received strength. Just, whatever happened, that you noticed that he was very close. I simply have no other place to go,” Reina explains. Justus too explains, that – even though he could mention “hundreds, millions of examples” when God did answer him – he does not receive all the answers he wants. He adds: “I have now found peace, you know. But well, still it occupies you. And that I find hard, and that is a big struggle.” It is an ambivalent answer, about having found peace and struggling at the same time. All respondents speak about such counter-intuitive experiences of strength or peace in moments of pain, of sickness, of not understanding, of not receiving answers. Their stories show that in the absence of concrete experiences of God, there is still something of God that keeps them going.

So this religious imaginary also leaves room for the “not yet.” According to practical theologian Bert de Leede this “not yet” is one of the first topics that established churches need to deal with in their encounter with evangelicalism: “Exactly when [we] expect God to still act in the present, can we then, spiritually and theologically, cope with the fact that it still ‘lasts’? (2008, 12). In practice, evangelical Protestants surely can. Their faith is not only about experiencing (concrete) answers, but also about trusting (an unseen) God. It is about living in the closeness of God. God’s closeness empowers the believer. It determines the believer’s identity and the way the believer relates to other people, daily life and the world. This empowerment thus differs from a Pentecostal-oriented spirituality of empowerment. For Pentecostals the empowering presence of the Spirit manifests itself in spiritual gifts, speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing (Kärkkäinen 2010; cf. Meyer 2010; Meyer 2012b; Robbins 2010). The evangeli-

cal Protestant spirituality of empowerment should however be seen as this engaged mode of being in the world, of living in the closeness of God.

8.3 | Desiring for More

The respondents' religious imaginary of living in the closeness of God develops over time. What is concretely involved in the change-over towards this new imaginary? The process of changing-over is closely intertwined with (certain moments of) the believers' religious biographies. A study of their biographies reveals that their relationships with Jesus started with a desire for more (Terlouw 2013).⁸⁵

This desire is best exemplified by the concrete story of one of the respondents. Evelien is a fifty-two-year old homemaker. Two of her four children still live at home. Fifteen years ago she switched churches because she longed "for more, for deeper." She used to be a member of the Reformed Church in M., the town where she is presently living, but changed membership and joined the Reformed Church in S., a nearby town. She is an active member of this church and in her free time voluntarily visits the elderly of the church. Evelien explains:

Here, I mean since we live here, we have started searching more, yes. But we couldn't find what we were looking for. Actually the programs of the Evangelical Broadcasting Company fostered the search. You heard more and, well also with the children you were confronted with questions and situations. And... and then fellow church members said to us: "How can you say this or that about our minister? Who are you to say that?" And then we reacted: "Well, the Bible says so."

So then we started searching because we couldn't find it here in our own church. We have tried it here for ten years! So after ten years, in 1995 I think, we went to S. and the church there. And there it actually all started. At least, the personal relationship with Jesus I already had. But, I mean that you go deeply, do more studies, meet people who had more of that as well.

⁸⁵ The story of every respondent is personal and unique, and it would be impossible to do fully justice to every one of them in this context. Still, the respondents' lives demonstrate some important common patterns in their course of faith too. This paragraph focuses upon such common traits.

Interviewer: Who had more of that? What do you mean?

Evelien: Who also had that... that desire for more, for deeper. Then you start searching together.

What does Evelien mean? She says that she longs “for more, for deeper,” but what is she actually longing for? These questions are not easily answered, as the object of her desires is not mentioned explicitly. It might even be that Evelien herself does not know (yet) what she is longing for!

As for the source of her desires, Evelien refers to programs of the Evangelical Broadcasting Company and to unsettling questions and difficult situations in her daily life. Her desire “for more” is stirred by an experience of dissatisfaction in combination with the offer of evangelical faith. The dissatisfaction is not a dissatisfaction with faith in general, but a dissatisfaction with faith as it relates to the questions of ordinary life. Evelien wants her faith to provide answers and meaning in daily life. This desire increases because of programs of the Evangelical Broadcasting Company. They offer Evelien new religious meaning(s) and stir in Evelien the hope that her faith can be much more meaningful than it is now. Thus, Evelien is motivated to search “for more, for deeper”; she searches for a more meaningful faith.

What kind of meaning did Evelien find? In the Reformed Church in S. Evelien found what she was looking for. “And there,” she says, “it actually all started.” When I asked her what exactly started, she described how she learned to exercise her faith in several faith practices, with praying as one of the most important, and how these faith practices resulted in experiencing God:

Well, it came down to this: every morning you just had to start with the question whether the Holy Spirit wanted to lead you and thanked that he did so, because that was written in his Word. And then I thought: well sure! Do I have to do that? The Lord knows already, doesn't he? Still, I just do it, you know. So I started to do this every morning. And the surprising thing was, that when I started doing so, well, then you got so many people on your path! People whom you could talk to and share the gospel with! That was a very special time. And other people, those who also went to those Bible studies, had of course the same experience. So you grew up together.⁸⁶

⁸⁶ Even though this particular incident has been quoted before (§6.2 *Praying the Prayer*), it is repeated here to demonstrate how engagement in the communication with God (the demand to *pray the prayer*) functioned in the believers' searches for more and was effective in providing them with the answers and the faith they were looking for.

Evelien finds the fulfillment of her desire “for more” in the regular performance of the faith practice of praying. She finds the meaning she was looking for, not in cognitive answers – not even those provided by the Bible – but in practicing and experiencing faith. This experiential interaction, communicating with God, becomes of utmost importance in Evelien’s life, and she starts to perform a variety of communicative faith practices regularly and intensively. The generated experiences affect Evelien’s ordinary life. In the example above, Evelien can share the gospel because she “got so many people on her path” – the wording indicates that she experienced this possibility to be God given. To “be used by God” affects her daily life concretely and gives it purpose and meaning. Faith and daily life get intertwined and the closeness of God is enacted. Evelien sought meaningful faith; she got a meaningful life.

Seekers-Religiosity

The pattern in the interview with Evelien resurfaces in other interviews. Respondents “feel” something is “missing” in their faith in relation to the concrete concerns of daily life and therefore start “searching” elsewhere. Sometimes this is expressed as an explicit “desire for more,” but these exact words are not always used. Aagje, for instance, says that she and her husband had always been Reformed: “But we always had something like: is this it?” For Leo, his marital problems – “before we started seeking, in our marriage a lot had happened” – stirred him to “seek again,” and he started attending evangelical conferences. Nico finds that having faith is getting “ever more difficult these days” as “temptations around us increase.” Therefore Nico “desires for, really a piece of education, growth in faith.” These patterns found amongst the respondents are in line with more broadly attested tendencies in spirituality since the 1950s. They indicate a “spirituality of seeking” (Wuthnow 1998) or “seekers-religiosity” (Roof 1993, also cf. chapter 2).

Evelien’s wording of desiring “for more” characterizes the respondents’ seekers-spirituality well, not as expression of covetousness, but as acknowledgment that their former faith (before entering the “more” meaningful relationship with Jesus) was not completely meaningless. They assumed that meaning was inherent in their faith and expected faith to provide meaning to their lives from the start. When too little meaning was experienced and they started desiring “for more,” they consequently searched “for more” not outside faith but inside faith. Thus, faith generates faith. Speaking in terms of “more” and “deeper” modestly acknowledges that religious meaning is never simply available. Also in evangelical faith meaning is not simply available; contact with God is not at the believer’s disposal but is to be sought after. Indeed, faith and the God to whom believers relate in faith are never fully grasped. There is always “more” to search for.

The desire “for more, for deeper” enhances our understanding of the considerable effort put into the cultivation of communicative faith practices. Evangelical Protestants show a strong desire “to involve God” in everything they are doing (chapter 6). Their continual effort to communicate with God is an inevitable consequence of the quest for meaning. Real faith and meaning evolving from the desire “for more” are no longer things people inherit, but things for which they strive. As there are many forces in society questioning the good and meaningful life, this meaning has to be established and affirmed again and again. The need to share that burden with a community of believers – “growing up together” (Evelien) – can readily be understood. At the same time, it can be understood that the effort put into cultivating these communicative practices is done eagerly and happily, for it also constitutes a fulfillment of the desire for a more meaningful faith.

The respondents’ desires “for more” lastly suggest that the evangelicalism of these believers should not so much be represented as a “quest for true religion” (Noll 2003, 262) – which intrinsically judges the received faith, and Christian faith more generally – but as a continual personal quest for religious meaning. Their search constitutes a personal quest for religious meaning in the encounter with the challenge of everyday embodied life.

The Empty Rituals of Traditional Faith

All respondents confirm that, even though something was missing in their former way of believing, traditional faith has always been of worth as well. Believers emphasize that there is both continuity as well as discontinuity between their former faith and now. This gives evangelical Protestant faith an outlook of its own.

The respondents of this research grew up in an orthodox Christian environment. They stem from a Christian family in which weekly churchgoing was the common habit, after dinner father read from the Bible, before sleeping prayers were said, to name just a few characteristics. In general, this experience is not evaluated as particularly negative. It is not evaluated as particularly positive either. Except for four respondents, none of them has ever left the mainline church or stopped going to church regularly. Tilde, a fourth-nine-year old homemaker, tells about this period:

Yes, we believed, yes. And at that time our children were baptized as well and we always went to church. You know? You *do* believe, but... It has gotten more dimensions. Many more, yes, many more.

Interviewer: Can you name a few of those dimensions?

Tilde: Ehm, it is much deeper now, I mean.

Interviewer: But baptizing your children, you don't do that for no reason, isn't it?

Tilde: No, no, no. That is also faithful, and being engaged in it. And we run the youth club and did all those sort of things. But later it still became somehow different again. And that happened especially because of that period of change.

Just like Tilde, the majority of the respondents were faithful church members. They believed, got married in church (a.o. quite important to Ted and Marie), baptized their children (Tilde, Ernst-Jan), run the youth club (Tilde, Aagje and Evelien). What then was wrong with traditional faith and church going?

Evelien's search pointed towards the importance of establishing a relationship between faith and the questions of ordinary life. This *more* meaningful kind of faith she found in the regular performance of communicative faith practices and in so enacting the closeness of God. This reality of God being close, associated with feelings of being loved and seen, contrasts sharply with the believers' former faith in which God was "much farther away." "It was more about rules and tradition than about a relation" (Tilde). These rules and traditions were not meaningless, but they were not able to bring God near. Tilde describes:

There were a lot of rules like: you do it this way, or you don't do it at all. [...] And that did not always work out positively, although I have believed from my youth up, yes indeed. I was faithful. But God was much farther away. [...]

But it is different now! I have never given it much thought, what the difference is exactly. The other is more 'form,' this is much more, well, yes 'relation.' This is more communication. Communicating more, being in contact. [...]

It feels good to be in conversation with God. While before that – or, before that? That makes it look like... Still... yes, there really has been a turning point.

Aagje describes in similar vein: "I have always believed that God is there. But well, the image I had of God was at odds with 'you have to, you have to, you have to.' That love, that wasn't there. I think that I just always really missed that, and that that's what kind of collided." The love she now experiences actually moves her. Aagje: "Well, until then it was chiefly in my head. Eh, intellectual-

ly, I knew that it was that way. But I didn't feel anything.⁸⁷ And after that you just notice: hey, it does something to my emotions as well! And it does something to my feelings. And then you maybe have to take care that you don't let yourself be guided by feelings alone, but that you find a balance in that."

A careful analysis of the respondents' references to the former "rules," "forms" and "tradition" shows that these expressions are associated with a dissatisfactory performance of communicative faith practices. Lianne explained: "It was more out of tradition: going to church, praying, reading of the Bible. That. But I did not have any God experience. That was the difference." In Lianne's former faith, experiences of divine communication were lacking. The performance of communicative faith practices like church going, praying and Bible reading did not lead to reciprocal communication with God. The practices failed. Aagje confirms: "What foremost really, yes very much changed is, that when I pray, I now really notice, I really perceive that God is listening. And that you really notice like: hey, I receive answers to my prayers." These believers never thought it was nonsense what they were taught at home, even better: they believed it. But the time before entering the relationship is always presented as a frustrating time in which communicative faith practices were practiced, but did not result in any reciprocal communication.

The frustrating experiences of the respondents can be understood as experiences of empty ritual. The notion of empty ritual expresses that the experience that belongs to the successful engagement in rituals is missing. Sociologist Meredith McGuire speaks about lifeless or meaningless rituals, referring to ritual practices that have been severed from people's emotions, social ties, and spiritual experiences (2008, 101). Whereas the personal relationship with Jesus is defined by the *successful* performance of communicative faith practices, the problematic issue in the time before entering the relationship is the *failing* performance of communicative faith practices.

Anthropologists James Laidlaw and Caroline Humphrey (2008) analyze why the ritual fails and how they can be made to 'work.' They point toward the importance of intentionality of all human action. Ritual action, however, is some sense non-intentional action as the identity of the action is fixed by prior stipulations (277). As the agent performing the action remains intrinsically conscious and reflexive, he or she thus needs to apprehend the ritual actions performed if they are not to become empty, meaningless rituals. Humphrey and Laidlaw point to two ways of apprehension: by learning and rehearsing certain propositional meanings, especially widespread in Protestant traditions, or through direct engagement with the physicality of certain ritual acts (279).

⁸⁷ Dutch: "Maar ik voelde er niets bij."

The respondents were familiar with the propositional meaning of the practices they engaged in from their youth up. As they put it: “We believed!” But this might exactly have been the ‘problem’ as well. While they were taught about the meaning of those practices, they were not taught about the importance of direct, personal engagement in them. Practices were rather performed habitually. Believers engaged in the practices *of* their parents or churches, as spectators rather than as participants. Even though these believers knew the identity of prayer action, of Bible reading, and church going, they therefore did not experience such meanings when the acts were performed. These believers might in that respect have been *too* familiar with these practices.

The respondents’ searches for more point toward the force of apprehending these practices through a renewed engagement in them. This renewed engagement is characterized by an emphasis on direct, physical engagement with the practice, which enforces actual involvement of the individual in the communication with God. Remember how Evelien shared that she started to experience answers to her prayers, when she started to pray for the Spirit’s guidance. In the new church they taught her *to actually sit down, every morning of every day*, and to pray *explicitly* and *verbally* for the Spirit’s guidance. She tried it out of curiosity. Her direct and embodied engagement turned out to make the practice ‘work’ indeed. As anthropologist Tanya Luhmann puts it: “The most interesting anthropological phenomenon in U.S. evangelical Christianity is precisely that it is *not* words *alone* that convert” (2004). It is this new, direct engagement in performative practices which generates (a new kind of) real faith.

Re-projecting the Personal Relationship

It is a unique characteristic of evangelical Protestant faith, that believers *re-project* their (newly) won relationship with Jesus to their childhood.⁸⁸ All respondents, somewhere throughout telling the story of their search for and entry into the relationship with Jesus, add – paradoxically enough – that the relationship was actually already there. When Evelien shares how “it actually all *started*,” she interrupts her own story and adds: “At least, the personal relationship with Jesus *I already had*.”

⁸⁸ Biographical reconstruction means that “people who undergo a conversion experience literally reconstruct their lives, giving new meanings to old events and putting different emphases in the bigger ‘plot’ of their life stories” (Gooren 2010, 93). Many respondents indeed indicate, that at the time before their faith-renewing search, they did probably not see their (traditional) faith and God’s role in it in the same way as now. When they talk about their former faith in the interviews they often add phrases like “looking back, I can *now* say that...” or “but at *that* time, I did *not* experience that as such...”.

This ‘former’ relationship carries different meanings than the present one. One of the respondents puts it thus: “Well I did pray and go to church every Sunday, and I do believe *God saw that as a relationship*.” In other words: it was not “really” a personal relationship with Jesus – an expression commonly used to express the difference between the former and present relationship with Jesus – but God saw it as one. The respondents point to a particular *theological* apprehension of their former relationship with Jesus, in contrast to the *experiential* apprehension of the “real” relationship they have now. This theological apprehension is characterized by a firm belief in God’s faithfulness. He is and always has been present in the believers’ lives. His single-sided guidance is perceived to be the ultimate foundation of the believers’ current relationships with Jesus.

A few examples from the interviews illustrate this most neatly. Aagje believes that she must have always had that relationship with Jesus: how else can it be explained that she stayed in church throughout her upbringing, youth and marriage? Aagje: “Because like I just said: I actually did not want to be part of that. And still I stayed. Still I continued. Well, I didn’t do that by myself. So that relationship must have been there at that time as well, also without those beautiful moments, yes without those special moments, without really feeling that he’s really there for you. Mainly a cognitive relationship maybe, but I couldn’t do without it either.” Staying in church, Aagje believes, was due to God’s guidance. She “didn’t do that by [her]self.”

Evelien explains in a similar way: “From my side maybe [that relationship was broken]. But I don’t think from God’s side. Absolutely not. I think that he, straight through all those things, has always been there for me. [...] Really that intense relationship that I have now, was not there at that time. It was at that time, actually more like a prayer now and then. And saying your standard prayers. And reading the Bible. [...] It was indeed more distant back then.

And so Ernst-Jan too expresses: “In retrospect I can say: God has always been involved with me. I’ve served as a professional soldier in the navy. I did not go to church at all. Hey, I just say. But he was still with me. Looking back I see all of that. He has never let me go. Why have I always been blessed? At least, I thought so, in that manner. But I was always blessed with health, with everything. But a living faith I did not have.”

The believers’ quotations express a revaluation of the (Reformed) belief that God is first in faith (Van Asselt 1998; Verboom 2007, cf. §3.3). This faith in God’s faithfulness grows *in response* to the enactment of a real relationship with Jesus. As Ernst-Jan said: “In retrospect I can say...” During their search *for* God, they start experiencing something *of* God. They start experiencing God as someone who is intimately involved with believer’s personal life and who is continually present. Consequently, their perceptions of traditional faith change. Through these newly generated beliefs, traditional faith regains meaning. This again

demonstrates, as Mitchell and Mitchell elucidate aptly, that the practice of communicating with God “should be seen not [solely] as outward material manifestations of something else – in our case belief – but as generative processes that constitute belief” (2008, 84).

Over time the respondents so start perceiving *their* search as a concrete example of *God’s* intervention in their lives. As Justus puts it: “The core of my faith is Jesus Christ, who I have accepted.” He adds immediately: “Looking back I see that he came into my life. I have not asked for it in principle.”

8.4 | Entering into the Personal Relationship

The quest of evangelical Protestants for a more meaningful faith usually culminates in a *particular faith-renewing experience* that marks the *entry into a “real” relationship* with Jesus. As Ted puts it: “At that moment the Lord came in again. No, really came in.”

Believers do not perceive of these experiences as true conversion experiences. As expounded above, believers re-project the relationship with Jesus to their childhood. Therefore, they do not perceived their faith-renewing experiences as actual conversion experiences in the sense of being-lost-but-now-I-am-found – the pattern of the classic example of conversion of Saint Paul (Gooren 2010, 95). The respondents do not talk about transferring from death to life, but rather from just “having faith” to a “real relationship.”

Their experiences are conversion-*like* with regard to the direct encounter with God. Believers describe their faith-renewing experiences as a direct and personal “meeting” with Jesus or God, as direct and as real as the encounter of Saint Paul with Jesus on the road to Damascus. This meeting is presented as entry into the relationship with Jesus and as kick-off for a more continual communication with God. The faith-renewing experience is perceived as a definitive crossing of certain borders: the believer now enters into a life in the closeness of God.

Sometimes, the start of a real relationship with Jesus is marked by several important moments and experiences. Entering into the personal relationship with Jesus is then perceived as a learning process. Tilde for instance speaks about a “period of change.” God used to be “much farther away. [...] And a certain point in time that changed. And that happened... well, also gradually. At the one hand, because you search for that, and at the other hand because of the circumstances.” Tilde lay down with a slipped disc several times; throughout these years something somewhere changed. For her this was a “*period of change*.” Still, even though she cannot point out exactly at what point her faith changed she also speaks about a “*turning point*.” Remember how Tilde questioned herself, wheth-

er she could speak about a time “before” being in conversation with God, but then confirmed: “Still... yes, there really has been a turning point.”

Research on conversion displays a wide range of theoretical orientations. Klaver gives a concise overview and analysis of conversion studies (2011, 76–95). Early studies focused on conversion as inner transformation and were accompanied by psychological perspectives. Attention to the involvement of social networks and their means of attracting new members increased during the 1960s. In the 1980s more active conversion models were adopted, followed by the narrative turn drawing attention to conversion as biographical reconstruction. Klaver herself points to the limits of language and therefore adopts an approach of conversion as a complex of performative, embodied practices. The present empirical research did not focus on conversion, and its study of the respondent’s faith-renewing experiences is therefore limited. Still, it seems safe to conclude that a perspective that focuses solely on changed beliefs and worldviews is inadequate as well. Their faith-renewing experiences are marked by transition from “secondhand religion” (Roof 1993, 67) to a direct personal relationship with Jesus, through their renewed participation and involvement in religious practices (cf. §8.3).

The respondents’ faith-renewing experiences, furthermore, draw attention to the importance of evangelical events and networks that engage believers in such practices. In general, the respondents’ faith-renewing experiences occur in typical evangelical settings and meetings, for instance on a conference or an Alpha-weekend about the Holy Spirit. At these places believers – willingly or unwillingly – get involved in communicative faith practices generating real faith.

Sometimes the believers’ faith-renewing experiences are accompanied by some sort of crisis in their personal lives: being fired, a marriage-crisis or severe illness. This crisis, together with their acquaintance with the Christian faith, gives them a very open and God searching attitude resulting in a faith-renewing experience. Such a crisis is certainly not a prerequisite. More than three-quarter of the respondents do not tell about such a crisis immediately preceding the experience.

Entering “The Other Pasture”

Rien’s story illustrates well how believers’ enter into the closeness of God. His story shows the force of direct practice and personal experience. For Rien it certainly holds that ‘not words alone convert’ (Luhmann 2012). His story rather confirms the “formative power of embodied religious practices,” which is more important than doctrines in the ‘making of’ converts (Klaver 2011, 301–302).

Rien’s search starts in his mid-twenties. He starts wondering how it is possible that his sister, who has been chronically ill since her youth, has always kept the faith. “Even better,” Rien says, she “believes ever more.” Rien himself

lost his faith in his teenage years: with a friend he put God to test and prayed for the recovery of his sister. His sister did not recover, so Rien said God goodbye. His family including his sister however kept the faith. In his twenties this triggers him to take a more serious look at the Christian faith.

He and his wife decide to participate in an Alpha Course. As a result, he starts looking towards faith in a different way. Desires “for more” start growing. “Like: hey, but I want this too. It appealed to me.” Quite interestingly though, Rien continues: “And I wanted to try to take a step towards God, but I just couldn’t.” The experience of his teenage years keeps bothering and frustrating him. He cannot get pass the resentment that God did not heal his sister when he asked for it. He explains: “I compared it at that time [of participating in the Alpha Course] as well like: it is like I am standing in a pasture. And in the other pasture I see all kinds of, a lot of believers. And there it is good and I can see it too that it is good. But the ditch between the pastures, I don’t know how to get across it.” There is a profound difference between being in a personal relationship or not, a difference that cannot be bridged by Rien’s personal desires neither by the information about the Christian faith provided by the Alpha Course.

During the Alpha Course, Rien starts attending church regularly. And then the moment is suddenly there:

I attended a church service, and the minister spoke about the suffering he encountered in the practice of his work. I don’t know exactly what he told anymore. But at that moment I really experienced that, well, God showed me that he had always been with my sister and always will be. And well, that was for me actually enough to take away my resistance. Yes, and at that moment, I have really been able to take that step, or actually, God took the step. Yes, that... I do not have an answer to a single question I had, but the answer was good enough, was convincing.

One thing is clear right away: *not* the words spoken convert him, at least not words in the sense of a rational explanation of the suffering in this world. Rien does not even know anymore what actually was said. Rien did not receive an answer in the cognitive sense. He received a convincing answer of another, experiential kind. Rien continues:

It happened during the service. I did not arrive at that insight by myself, God just showed me. I cannot put it any other way. God just convinced me completely and directly of it. Because my sister had been telling me for years already that it was like that. But then I always had something like: you can say so, but it is not good to me.

Interviewer: And during the service that understanding was suddenly there?

Rien: Yes, it just came in a pffffff..... It came in me and it was not like hearing a voice or so like: "Rien I have always been with youuuuuuu." [...] If I would describe it, then it comes closest to... as if God picked me up and put me in the right pasture. Yes, I think that that comes nearest. [...] I had the idea like: at once I am standing in the right pasture.

The meeting with God touched Rien in several ways. It was an almost physical experience for him, like a wind coming in and blowing through his body. He gains a new vision. He feels like he is being lifted up and then lands in a different reality. He continues:

In that service coincidentally, the opportunity was offered that you could ask for intercessory prayer. They had just started with that, that in the service church members could intercede for you. Yes, and I went to the front then as well. [...] That was really a very emotional moment for me, yes. And with that I just stood in the right pasture so to say.

I have to say, that I didn't analyze it that much at that moment. I think that, well, it is a convincing meeting. [...] I had a meeting with God and that was convincing. I was not able to get around it anymore.

Rien enters into the closeness of God, but it is not so much by rational choice. His search and the faith formation he received at the Alpha Course are important for giving him an open attitude, but that in itself is not enough to generate a relationship with Jesus. The experience of God's presence coincides with his participation in this church service, and more particularly, with the act of (interceding) prayer. The engagement in the communicative faith practice of praying enacts faith. That reality is confirmed by the physical-emotional experience of God's presence right away. It is the only answer Rien did receive and that puts him, quite unexpectedly, into a life in the closeness of God.

Rien's faith-renewing experience shows that the formative power of embodied religious practices does not depend upon understanding or having confidence in the efficacy of the practice. Rien indicates that "at that moment" he did "not analyze it that much." It was just a "very emotional moment," and with that he "just stood in the right pasture."

Later on in the interview he shares, that only recently he came to understand what actually happened: "Two days back I have actually realized or discovered what really happened there." After a discussion with a Jehovah witness, he starts searching in Exodus for the passage they discussed. In Exodus 2 and 3 he reads how God descended because he heard the groaning and saw the misery of

his people. God therefore sends Moses and assures him: “I am who will be with you.” Rien comments: “And then I realized too, that: if God showed the deepest of himself [to Moses] by saying that he is there, then at that moment [in the service] God has shown me the deepest of himself by saying that he has always been there. That really was like: hey! I got to see the deepest of God! [...] And then I thought too: well, not so strange, that that was convincing!”

Learning by “Mere Child’s Play”

Evangelicals are usually well aware of the great force inherent in the direct engagement in religious practices and therefore put much effort in creating opportunities for involving people in them. In evangelical meetings, believers are often simply drawn into the performance of communicative faith practices. The story of Kees continually shows how he got intentionally-but-unintentionally involved in the practice of communicating with God. So Kees gradually learned what having a relationship with Jesus is really about.

Kees’ first faith-renewing experience dates back to his twenties. As a student he participated in an evangelization campaign which was organized by an evangelical church. He recalls: “Well, then you go right under. Especially in respect to the ‘manner of.’” The members of the evangelical church announced to visit the evangelization team the night before the campaign in order to pray for them. Kees recalls that he thought: “Huh? My goodness, what on earth...!” He shares about that particular evening: “They formed a circle around us, and prayed for us. And I was thinking: whew, what on earth is going on?! Well, those are the first times you experience things like that. Yes, that is of course absolutely fantastic. It has tremendous influence. You are twenty and it exerts tremendous influence.” Kees does not share at all how he experienced the campaign itself. It is this prayer experience that lasts: standing in the midst of the circle, being touched, hearing strange sounds being uttered (some of them prayed in tongues). Because of such experiences learning happens “by mere child’s play,” as Kees puts it.

Another important event is his decision for adult baptism, a decision that “was certainly not easy!” His participation in this practice too was intentional-but-unintentional. He shares that the issue of baptism “drove a wedge” into his marriage: his wife wanted to be baptized, while he did not. As she did not want to wait any longer for him, he finally agreed to join her. “But I do stand by my decision,” Kees adds, explaining that his wife is simply “always a step ahead of” him. He concludes: “Yes, that is in all respects an experience that doesn’t let go of you anymore. You know, these things are like taking steps in your faith. You kind of erect a memorial. Or am I now too intemperate with my words?”

A more recent experience of Kees concerns his attendance of a conference of Wilkin van de Kamp. At the end of the two day conference, someone of the ministry team approaches him and his friends because she “saw the light of the Spirit above” them. That “makes his Reformed hairs stand on end.” He does not trust such things at all! Still, he so gets – intentionally-but-unintentionally – involved in a communicative faith practice of intermediation. His direct engagement in the practice makes a tremendous impression on him and he experiences God “closer than ever before” (for a full account of the event, see §7.5). He now refers to the experience as his “first kiss” from God.

Kees’ stories show that entering the personal relationship with Jesus is a process that can last several years. No single moment can be pointed out as *the* moment that the relationship started. Every single incident enacts a relationship with God and so builds and strengthens Kees’ relationship with God. For Kees, ‘entering’ the relationship is about developing a relationship with God and drawing ever more close to him. Kees says about his last and most extraordinary experience: “I have the idea too, that that has to do with a certain faith growth. It is about sticking to the same basis, but you notice that God can work ever more extraordinary things through you too. Or shows you extraordinary things. Sometimes that goes step by step.” As a result of his gradual entry into the personal relationship with Jesus, Kees quite naturally perceives the relationship with Jesus as an ongoing process of growing in faith.

8.5 | Growing in Faith

“I just have such a hunger because of it. Yes... Yes... More, more, more!” Jill exclaims. “I mean, it gives such a magnificent feeling. Yes, not only a feeling. Yes, I... I am terribly inquisitive in that respect.” The believers’ desires for more are stimulated by the God experiences they encounter during their search. The process of searching and enacting a personal relationship with Jesus fuels itself. The believers’ desires for more initiate a process with no end to it. Believers just want “more, more, more!”

Growing in faith has always constituted an important topic in evangelical teachings (cf. §2.4). In a recent copy of Bright’s *Laus* faith growth is explained as an acronym. The believer is suggested to: **G**o to God in prayer, **R**ead God’s Word daily, **O**bey God, **W**itness, **T**rust and to let the **H**oly Spirit control and empower daily life. “Your walk with Christ depends on what you allow Him to do in and through you” (Bright 2007b, 15). Devotion, ethics and evangelization are supposed to be important hallmarks of the Christian way of living (Foster

1989; McGrath 2000). Multiple methods have been developed to guide believers thereunto step by step (Eschbach 2011a).

The believers' perceptions of growing in faith encompass similar themes. But the believers' desires also steer their faith into a particular direction. Their main focus is on experiencing more of God. Their need for relevant, real faith makes them continually strive for more experiences of divine communication. As evangelical Protestants are driven by heartfelt *desires* to grow, religious *obligations* retreat into the back (cf. Klaver 2011, 24).

Dimensions

Growing in faith does not constitute a step by step process. Believers rather experience that their faith is continually in motion in a variety of ways. These changes are generally valued as positive and perceived as growing in faith. The idea of '*more*' characterizes their perceptions of growing in faith: believers aim for *more* experiences of divine communication; they do *more* for God in return; they trust God *more*; they have *more* knowledge. The '*more*' respondents speak about has both quantitative dimensions (e.g. increasing numbers of experiences) as qualitative dimensions (e.g. increasing trust in God).

Several processes of growing in the relationship with Jesus can be distinguished: *consuming* (having more God experiences), *maturing* (doing more for God), *trusting* (increasing trust), and *learning* (increasing knowledge). Growing in faith encompasses all of these four dimensions. These four processes cause changes and movements in the relationship with Jesus, which are experienced as enrichments of the relationship. In general, all believers mention all four dimensions as constitutive elements of faith growth. In practice, believers focus on one or two particular processes at a time.

The 'younger' people seem to be slightly more fixed upon quantitative faith growth: having more God experiences (*consuming*) and doing more for God (*maturing*). The dimension of *trusting* seems to be emphasized somewhat more by the 'older' respondents (over 60 years old). This division might indicate a development of the believers' perceptions concerning faith growth over time. Respondents themselves indicate how, throughout time, they discovered new and dynamical dimensions of the relationship, modifying their perceptions of what the relationship with Jesus is all about. Sometimes it therefore seems that the sequel of those growth processes *is* growing in faith itself. More research is however needed to be able to say something more definite about it.

Consuming

Faith growth is firstly measured by the number of God experiences a believer has. Through having multiple God experiences believers “grow in experience” (Kees). In order to receive God experiences, a believer has to do nothing more or less than to enjoy the relationship with Jesus. Simply maintaining a relationship with Jesus – engaging in communicative faith practices, enacting the closeness of God, receiving experiences of divine communication in return – automatically means to grow: the number of experiences will increase. Growing in faith is not a cognitive learning process, but a process of consuming, enjoying and practicing.

There is a clear *consumerist* dimension to this dimension of faith growth: believers strive after God experiences because they are perceived as pleasant and as enhancing the believer’s enjoyment of daily living. Leonie explains: “For myself it is just more pleasant to live with God, to be close to God.” Lianne explains: “At the moment that you see that Jesus is starting to lead your life, and is going to change things in your surroundings, ehm if you have God experiences [...] and receive those, then you start to desire more of God. You want more and more of him.” Kees too is sure that God “wants to give [him] so much more, not only materially. I am not such a welfare believer. I do receive such blessings. But also [...] in growing in faith, in gifts maybe, in being filled with the Holy Spirit. Those are big words indeed.” God experiences satisfy the believers’ religious needs for confirmation. They make them feel special and fill them with feelings of joy and peace.

The satisfaction of desires subsequently arouses a desire for more *extraordinariness*. Kees associates such extraordinariness with “being filled with the Holy Spirit” and “the gifts from the Holy Spirit.” As he comments: “Those are big words indeed.” Over time, only such experiences out of the ordinary are experienced as really growing in faith. For Kees, the unusual experience at the conference of Wilkin van de Kamp constitutes a clear example of growing in faith. So Tilde too shares about a conference she visited, where she celebrated the Lord’s Supper together with all conference attendants: “Well, that was just really special. [...] You passed along a lamb that was tied up somewhere. [...] and then you received bread and wine. And then you went through a doorjamb that was set up and that was smeared with blood and you went through that. And as a cleansed person you could step into life.” This unusual experience adds a new dimension to her relationship with God. Tilde: “Well, that does a lot, really a lot with you. That touches upon your relationship with God.”

The craving of believers for ever more extraordinariness might point to increasing consumerist tendencies in contemporary evangelical faith. Evangelicalism has been criticized right on this point of being more devoted to individual wishes, emotions and feelings, instead of to God (e.g. De Heer 2009). At the

same time, such criticism seldom has a real eye for the underlying meaning of these longings. Above all, believers desire more of God. (They interchangeably speak of desiring for more and desiring more of God.) Their desires for more are not just desires for things that can be possessed, neither for God experiences that can be temporarily experienced. They are desires for a person, for God himself. This desire, this “passion” is, according to practical theologian Duncan B. Forrester, rightly at the heart of practical theology (2000, 10ff). They are not passions that celebrates “emotion as such,” but passions that “seek a goal outside the self and find their ultimate fulfilment in God” (15). In this life such desires will never be fully satisfied. As practical theologian Ruud Ganzevoort phrases it: “Our deepest desires are too fundamental to be fulfilled by concrete experiences, so that we encounter only partial or temporary fulfillment. Often we replace the most fundamental desires for more accessible ones, but the ensuing satisfaction can only reveal that our deeper yearning is insatiable” (2013, 7). Hence the believers’ desires for ever more extraordinariness can be understood as desires that replace the more “fundamental desires” and grasp ahead at and reveal hope for a future yet to come.

Maturing

Believers are not just fixated on experiencing ever more *of* God. They also desire to do something *for* God. Throughout time, processes of maturation – a concept believers use themselves – start to affect them. Believers themselves present it as ‘second stage’ in the relationship with Jesus. They desire to do something for God in return for all the favors he bestows on them.

When Ted for the first time “really” entered a relationship with Jesus, “the Lord came, at once, so extremely close.” Ted experienced and realized that Jesus “did not just die for humanity,” not even “for us,” but really “for me!” Ted: “The Lord doesn’t ask anything of us [...] it is all grace.” So he developed a very personal relationship with Jesus. Ted: “And that is luckily something – so you experience and learn in the years that follow – that doesn’t change. It only deepens. And that is wonderful.” He then adds: “But it has become different too.” He continues: “Fortunately, I may mean something to him as well in this world. Because it is like that: it now has become a reciprocal relationship.” And so Ted shares about helping in the maintenance of the cemetery adjoining their church, together with some other men of the church, on Saturday mornings.

Believers speak of this process as one of growing up, of maturing. Rien compares it to the relationship between him and his father:

You grow up, you mature. And in that, the relationship at that moment becomes more reciprocal. But he remains my father, you know. And I

think that that is the same with God and people too. He remains the Father, but the more you grow up, the more reciprocal that relationship becomes too. I believe that's God's intention from the bottom of his heart. God does not want children he needs to raise constantly, needs to correct and whatever else. Yes, he wants to and he does it with love, but he does so for reasons of a mature relationship that is, so to say, almost, an equal relationship.

For believers, the process of maturation is sometimes frustrating too. The satisfaction of experiencing something of God meets with the dissatisfying experience of never doing enough in return. Growing to maturity is part of the never ending quest of trying to live for God as best one can (see §8.6).

Trusting

The relationship is thirdly affected, simply by its duration. Over time and through hardships the believers' trust in God increases. Building trust is a dimension of growing in faith that cannot be enforced methodically by intensifying the performance of communicative faith practices, neither can it be taught to a believer by a third person.

As the relationship endures, believers go with God through good times and difficult times. Memories pile up and 'memorials are erected' (Kees). A process of "attachment" (Tilde) unfolds and the believer starts to experience the closeness of God. "You grow towards each other," Kees puts it. Tilde compares it to her marriage: "My relationship with my husband has deepened throughout the years too. And now it is much more familiar to me and it has gotten many more beautiful sides. And so it is, I think, with [the relationship with God] too." Evelien confirms: "I think that through everything that happens, of course in your marriage, with your children and everything, that your relationship becomes more intense. And that you start to let go so much more of yourself, that you let God's Spirit work through you." Respondents speak again about maturity. Roeland: "And with the passing of the years, you just notice that. Like a child you grow to maturity." He continues: "And then you just notice: you really take refuge in living with him. And then you do not get rid of all your worries. Things still occupy you. And still, you learn every time again to say: Lord, you take care of it." Exactly this dependency on God's continual presence is according to Roeland being a "mature believer, and still remaining a child."

Building up trust coincides with the emergence of a religious imaginary of living in the closeness of God. The trust and imaginary provide stability to the relationship. Ted uses a somewhat old-fashioned Dutch expression, saying that the relationship "*bestendigt*." Over time, the relationship "is made permanent."

Ted explains: “How you have to see that? Well, that in the beginning you have those peaks and then again too those doubts and depths. Yes, no, [over time] it all becomes clearer, more fixed, yes, that’s it.” Mr Rosegaar confirms: “You’re not always standing on top of the mountain, but you don’t have to either. [...] It’s a certain and steady hope you have.”

This build-up trust is not only able to *endure* hardships, it also grows *because of* hardships. When I asked Reina to share something about her relationship with Jesus, she right away indicated that it “has actually grown over time.” Reina: “Because of many things you grow towards him. Because you have to deal with a lot of sickness and with quite a lot of trouble. Then you thus have the feeling: there is only one where I can go to, and that is he. And that is not always that easy, you know.” Paradoxically thus, the relationship grows not only through having numerous experiences of divine communication, but also through the absence thereof.

Learning

Lastly, through cognitive learning processes the relationship with God progresses too. Respondents speak about the need for “faith education” and the need “to be nourished.” They want to “grow in knowledge” (Kees). Or as Nico explains, the relationship grows “by being *engaged* with it and by receiving *education*. That desire is just there. We want to grow.”

Faith education serves two main purposes. Firstly, it stimulates actual, and sometimes renewed, engagement in the communication with God. In teachings and workshops, believers are taught how to communicate with God. Familiar practices of communicating with God are explored in detail, new practices are introduced. Believers are often emphatically invited to comply with what is being taught. But as evangelical Protestants are generally open to trying new things, little admonition is actually needed. After receiving education about it, many respondents for instance tried to be silent in prayer to listen to God (Lianne, Ernst-Jan). Other respondents share that they choose for adult baptism because of the faith education they received. Because of these new practices, the relationship with Jesus develops and flourishes.

Secondly, Bible study affects the believer’s interpretation of their relationships with God and teaches them what he wants from them. Justus indicated: “In the beginning it seemed like I said yes [to God]. And because I started growing, I discovered that I don’t amount to anything, and that it is all God who did this in me.” Nico shares: “Well eh, faith, I find that a process. Faith is not like: I believe and eh, the rest will just happen. You have to be fed, you have to receive education, you actually have to discover who Jesus is and why Jesus did certain things, why he said certain sayings. And that you can apply to your daily life.”

Generally speaking, learning increases the conscious engagement of the believer in the relationship with God. Lianne shares: “I became much more conscious, that when I leave the house [...] and go outside, that God can bring someone onto my path. And first I was not conscious thereof.”

Through faith education, a certain measure of ‘obligation’ enters the notion of faith growth as well. Teachings present a certain standard of faith that believers have to live up to. Believers, for example, feel they “*have to* set time apart” to pray (Ted). When they fail to do so guilt rises: “Sometimes I get confused when that guilty conscience comes back. I have that regularly, like: hey, again you haven’t kept quiet time! And that is the unpleasant side of the relationship” (Leo).

Fluctuations

The performance and experience of reciprocal communication with God makes believers grow in faith. But the line upwards is by no means a straight line. It is full of fluctuations. As Leonie puts it, the development of her relationship “goes with ups and downs.” Such “up and downs” affect the experience of living in the closeness of God. God can be near, but a believer can keep him at a distance just as well. Sometimes a believer feels that God is close, sometimes God is far away.

Fluctuations are caused by the fluctuating engagement of the believer in the communication with God. Leonie right away explained her “ups and downs” by pointing out that she is “not always so actively engaged with God.” She continues: “I just have to be busy with God, and really maintain that relationship myself, if I want to notice the positive side of it, so to say. And I do want to grow too.” “Praying brings me close to God,” Leo similarly indicates, but “if I haven’t for a few days, for example, because of busyness, just haven’t prayed, then I notice that I, well yes, do wander off a bit from him. [...] Of course, you then just say ‘go pray every day.’ Well yes, that is my intention, but it doesn’t always work out that way [...] because of the commotion of the day.”

Jill emphasizes that, notwithstanding such fluctuations, the relationship with God as such is not at stake. “You are always connected with each other,” Jill indicates. “You are so through the moment that you came to faith. Only that connection, you have to maintain that by being in contact with each other. And that you do by praying, reading the Bible, meetings and all those sort of things.” But “the connection deteriorates if you don’t talk with each other.”

Respondents mention one other reason for decline: immoral conduct. Sinful behavior is often brought forward as an obstacle for growing closer to God. Rien explains that a believer can keep Jesus at a distance by “choosing for yourself.” He continues: “All throughout the day you face choices of which you know in your heart: that’s the right choice, that’s what I have to do, but actually

I'd like to do that." During a soccer match, for instance, Rien faces such choices constantly. Rien: "Yes a lot of emotions are involved in soccer. [...] Well, if the arbitrator then makes a few mistakes, then you [think]: I shouldn't call him names, but right now...!!! And then you can make the choice: no, right now I don't do it because I don't believe it's the right thing to do. Or: now he [the arbitrator] is asking for it and now I tear into him! And if you then choose to call him all sorts of names, yes, then you put Jesus at a distance with that."

Rien also adds that the relationship itself is not broken in such situations: "I believe he is with me anyway." But, so Rien explains, "I think the main thing is, that I cannot harvest the fruits of it when I keep him at a distance – so to say – but that he is still there."

Kees too indicates that the relationship often declines because of his own conduct: "[Decline is], well, doing the things that keep God away from you. See, that knowledge of anointing the sick, they can never take that away from you anymore. But if something happens because of which you say something because of which you are so human that it just isn't right, like 'Bla... blabla, and that's not going well and that rotten crisis! And now this breaks down too!!' [...] Then I have to give myself a good talking-to." Kees points out that this decline cannot simply be counterbalanced by investing in a lot of time in God, in hopes to grow in faith. The undesirable conduct itself has to be put to halt first.⁸⁹

Such perceptions of faith growth and decline make faith a quite demanding enterprise: the quality of the relationship seems to depend entirely on the believer's devotional and moral behavior. Some respondents experience this as an appealing challenge. Rien: "I would not want a God who is not critical. Because what's the use of that? No, that is exactly something that appealed to me." Rien appreciates it, that he is taken seriously as believer and as human: his acts matter. Aagje though feels it as a constant pressure that she is responsible for searching God and maintaining the relationship with him: "You really have to search him. [...] You see, the relationships you have here, those people you meet again. My husband comes home every evening. Your attention is directed towards that, that you are working on that [relationship]. God you have to... yes, God you have to search.

Right this demanding characteristic of evangelical Protestant faith might explain the respondents' love for (meetings with) the faith community. Respondents regularly point to the usefulness of, even the need for, a community of believers in order to grow in faith. Leonie mentions that she really needs her group

⁸⁹ Note, that obedience to God merely stops the deterioration of the relationship, it does not lead to faith growth. Increasing engagement in the communication with God is required to grow again. The opposite of immoral conduct, sinfulness and disobedience is not obedience, but devotion.

of Christian friends in order “to keep her strong.” Fellow believers constitute a motivating force to engage in communicative faith practices and their presence is usually perceived to intensify the enactment and the experience of closeness to God. “The concerted action, the unity in searching for God [at evangelical conferences], that adds to your relationship with God again” (Tilde).

The Limits of Decline

Notwithstanding such “ups and downs,” the relationship with God is never wholly dependent upon human conduct either. Believers are firmly convinced that God himself will guard the future of the relationship with him. When Aagje ‘complained’ about the pressure of always having to search for God, she suddenly changed her tone and added: “Yes, but still, it is actually [...] not completely correct either, what I am saying now. Because I have had periods that I was very angry with God and that I thought like: I don’t feel like it at all anymore! And that God right then enters [into your life] extra. So that you think: now I cannot get around it at all. [...] So yes, it is a bit crooked what I am saying.”

Evangelical Protestant faith demonstrates a persistent trust in God’s initiative and his unremitting graceful commitment to believers. Just as they confess that God has always been there in their lives from their youth up, that God in his grace searched them and initiated a relationship with them, so they trust God to set limits to the decline of the relationship with him.

God merely “allows” decline for educational purposes. Roeland explains: “Sometimes, he just let you thrash about. And then I think: do you really have to do that? Well, apparently he had to. Apparently I have to learn something again.” Rien compares it to having children:

If you look to children growing up: children make mistakes. If they learn to ride a bike, they fall. If I have to learn things in faith, well yes, then sometimes I fall. God knows that. At the moment he is teaching me to ride a bike, then he also knows: well, you are going to fall. But that is necessary to learn to ride a bike. So I don’t have to panic when I fall! It may hurt, and then I may – just like that child that fell and goes to his father because it hurts – I may go to God because it hurts.

8.6 | Living for God

Whereas God puts a halt to the decline of the relationship with him, to growth there seem to be no limits. Respondents demonstrate an ongoing and unremit-

ting desire “to do more” for God. Once entered in the closeness of God, believers wish for nothing better than to live for God.

Aagje is a young woman (28) who started her search “for more” a year ago. She participated in a weekly discipleship course and for the first time in her life experienced God to communicate with her in response to her prayers. Since then she desires “to live for God”:

Interviewer: You said: “Now I live for God.” What do you mean by that?

Aagje: Yes, I experienced that reversal last year I think, indeed like: we are not placed on this earth to just live our lives. It is really: he has a purpose for your life. And well, I hope that in the time lying ahead of me, that I may really be there for others to show his love. That desire is really growing to ch... I think that many people just... well, I went through that myself: how miserable you can feel. Also towards God, like: o, I can never do it right! I think, well, I made of course myself quite a switch and now that desire grows to pass it on. In the time that you have, well, in your life here on earth, that you get the desire to be busy with God, instead of leading your own life, and a bigger house and a nicer car. Yes, your priorities just shift.

Aagje sees her desire to share the gospel as God’s purpose for her life. She assumes God has a plan for her life and assumes (at least hopes) it is directed at using her to spread the gospel. Her desire to share the gospel extends her quest for a more meaningful faith, in which daily life and faith are intimately related, to the quest for a more meaningful life. “Living for God” gives her daily life purpose and meaning because her temporal life gains eternal significance through her evangelizing. Aagje is very clear that God’s plan and God’s will often conflict with human desires, such as getting a “bigger house or a nicer car.” Some respondents are even afraid of the consequences. Leonie, for instance, confirms that “when you really follow God and follow Jesus, you are supposed to start telling other people about him,” but then worries: “But then I have to start living for God for 100 percent, and what is God going to ask of me?” Anxiously she exclaims: “Then I cannot be normal anymore!”

It comes as no surprise that, since God’s will conflicts with ordinary desires, most believers feel they are not living 100 percent for God. Besides, as almost all respondents have ordinary jobs and a family that require their time and attention, in practice little time is left for missionary activities. Therefore, the desire “to live for God” often takes the form of the desire “to do more.” Kees tells of a conversation he just had with a young troubled believer whom he comforted by sharing and explaining the gospel. He says: “That [i.e. sharing and explaining the gospel] I would like to do much more, and I also hope that I will get

much more opportunities to do so.” Kees “dreams of doing much more” too with the Bed & Breakfast he and his wife manage. He is convinced “that something more will happen,” referring to presumed plans of God to use the Bed & Breakfast for missionary activities. Similar desires are expressed by Leo. When he elaborates on the greatness of God’s love, he exclaims, “I often have the feeling that I am doing way too little with that!” He continues, “I should just leave everything behind and tell people fulltime about Jesus,” but then wonders whether that corresponds with God’s plans. Maybe “God wants to use you right here and now, in your work and daily life.” Still, he took a first step by changing churches, because he “wanted to live more for God” and did not see the opportunity to do so in his former church.

Kees and Leo speak about their desires “to do more” in reference to God and God’s plans for their lives. Kees hopes God will give him opportunities to share the gospel and Leo feels he does too little with God’s love. “Doing more” means “doing more for God” by means of all kinds of missionary activities and corresponds with the expression “living for God.” As already indicated by the quotation from the interview with Aagje, respondents assume as a matter of course that God wants them to evangelize. Although God’s plan for their lives is not always completely clear, it is never a matter of *whether* God wants them to evangelize, but rather *how* God will execute this plan.

The Quest for God’s Desires

The missionary zeal of evangelicals (and the activism that goes with it) is of course well known (Bebbington 1989; Stoffels 1990; Vellenga 1991). The interviews, however, reveal some interesting particulars about this desire: evangelization is above all something God wants. (Maybe it can even be said: God ‘desires.’) The respondents’ desire to evangelize is above all a desire “to do more for God.” It is a *quest for God’s desires*. Their spirituality is first of all God-centered and only subsequently world-centered. This God-centeredness is indeed driven by self-centered desires in which the believers’ religious and existential needs play an important role.

The believer’s desire “to live for God” highly affects lived faith and does so in a manner which reinforces the preoccupation with faith instead of the world around them. In order to find out God’s will, believers fervidly engage in communicative faith practices. They actively scrutinize their daily life for possible signs of God and engage in highly subjective interpretations. This raises all kinds of theological questions about the epistemological status of subjective experiences and the status and pre-modern usage of the Bible (cf. McGuire 2008, 84). Believers, however, do not demonstrate much concern about these questions. Their material approach to faith is set forth quite naturally in searching for meaning by

identifying God (and God's will) within the materiality of daily life and experience, as chapter 7 showed.

Even though believers' religious desires are motivated by individual, existential needs (for a more meaningful faith and life), the experience of faith paradoxically incites believers to invest considerable effort into turning away from their own desires. Experiences of God entail experiences of heteronomy, which require the believer's obedience and are associated with giving up one's own desires. The believer feels called upon to submit to the authority of God's will. Sociologist Omri Elisha therefore speaks about the "underlying resonance of anti-humanism" of evangelical faith. "The role of individual agency in the pursuit of the ambitions of Christian piety is indeterminate; some even view it as relatively insignificant. The crucial factor for most evangelical Protestants is the process of becoming the subject of divine volition" (Elisha 2008, 58). Although not often highlighted in studies of evangelical spirituality, this makes evangelical faith quite demanding too (Gillet 1993). The respondents' daily life of faith is about self-denial, obeying, and submitting, demands in which they always fall short. Having faith can almost resemble not having faith, as Aagje exclaimed: "How miserable you can feel. Also towards God like: o, I can never do it right!" The faith under examination then is not only characterized by a consumerist-style desire "for more" (for more religious experiences and the like), it is a serious search, constituting an "endless yearning" (Elisha 2008, 58), requiring "considerable effort" (McGuire 2008, 77).

The desire "to do more" however also indicates actual changed priorities. Note that Aagje first claimed "now I live for God," and only then alternated it with speaking about desiring "to do more." Her priorities did change. The experience of faith entails a demanding experience but apparently it is also a forceful experience that brings about change. Almost all of the respondents have also taken subsequent concrete action in some way or another, ranging from giving up well-paid jobs for jobs in community service to fostering children in need. The meaning of faith constituted by having a personal relationship with Jesus then is to be understood as energetic in the sense that it "empowers" (Klaver 2011, 19, 118ff; McGuire 2008, 82) believers to reach beyond themselves.

Is It Ever Enough?

One question remains. Is it ever enough? Is there an end to the continuing quest "to do more"? The question seems particularly relevant when a closer look is taken at the desires of Kees (concerning his Bed & Breakfast) and Leo (concerning his desire to leave behind everything and tell people fulltime about Jesus).

Something peculiar stands out. Let me recall how Leo and Kees experienced God's guidance (see §7.6). Leo was educated in civil engineering, but felt God called him to work with mentally disabled people instead of "at the feet of wealth." Kees wanted to be a farmer and made a "deal with God" about the provision of land and permits for building a new farm. When he got the farm he therefore called it "The Miracle." Both Leo and Kees share with firm conviction that God guided them. They felt this was what God wanted them to do.

Taking these stories into consideration, it is quite a surprise to hear how Leo and Kees desire to "do more for God" still. Apparently, their extraordinary experiences of God's guidance offer them no rest, no peace, no satisfaction, at least not in the long run. At the time of the interview, Leo wonders whether he should not just "leave everything being and tell people fulltime about Jesus." Where does this desire "to do more for God" stem from? Did he not already switch jobs and give up a well-paid job in civil engineering for God? According to his own experience, he *is* working for God fulltime. His job is according to God's will and God's plan. His desire "to do more" seems to undermine faith itself!

Similar questions can be asked when Kees shares that the Bible story of the young rich man makes him wonder: "Would I be willing to sell the farm?" At the end of the interview he expresses the hope that God will "give him many more chances to share the gospel. Maybe with speaking too." His desires go much more "into that direction," he explains, then that they concern his work on the farm. "On the farm, milking the cows in a more Christian way?! I would not know how to do that." But should he? Is that "what God wants"?

Real faith aims at the intertwinement of daily life (with all ordinary concerns of daily life) and the reality of God. But the interviews show, that real faith is regularly threatened by spiritualistic aspirations of believers (that in the end come down to 'saving souls') that leave little room for a relationship between God's will and the ordinary. As Kees elaborated: "Well many things on the farm, you just know how to do that well technically. I have to feed the animals the right food, and do everything right. And then I do not pray to God, whether I may bottle-feed that cow in the right way. You just do that. You are technically good in that. At those moments God does not play a role." And apparently Kees does not like that.

There is however another option, not often expressed by these believers. Aagje though let it slip in the interview when she suggested that maybe a believer "*should not* lapse into praying for every trifle." She explained: "You may also just rely on your own reason, which you have received. [...] God leaves room for yourself too." "But," she adds tellingly, leaving the question after the measure of what is enough an open question: "I find that a very unclear boundary."

9 Conclusions and Reflections

“My life is one prayer to God,” so Ernst-Jan (54) said in one of the interviews. He commented himself: “Strange, isn’t it?” After studying the personal relationship with Jesus of evangelical Protestants intensively, it does not sound that strange anymore. Just like other evangelical Protestants, Ernst-Jan actively engages in the practice of communicating with God. He prays everywhere and all the time. The performance of such communicative faith practices brings God alive. It intertwines the reality of God with the reality of daily living. So faith becomes “real.” As an integral part of daily living, God and the relationship with him are as real as they can be. This realness is affirmed, when signs from God start to light up in daily life. God is indeed “really real.”

The thesis *Real Faith* is an empirical research into the personal relationship with Jesus of evangelical Protestants. A growing number of church members of traditional churches sympathize with the evangelical movement. They characterize their faith as having a ‘personal relationship with Jesus.’ Consequently, this thesis addressed the following research question (§1.2): “*What is, from a practical theological perspective, the meaning of having a personal relationship with Jesus in the practice of daily life, for evangelicals in mainline Protestant churches in the Netherlands?*” After an initial literature review, I conducted an empirical investigation into the meaning of the relationship with Jesus according to evangelical Protestants. Subsequently, I analyzed evangelical Protestant faith with the help of the concepts performativity and materiality to explain its most significant characteristic: the experience of *real* faith.

From a practical theological perspective (§1.3), the personal relationship with Jesus is perceived as an instance of the Christian faith. In reconstructing the meaning of the personal relationship with Jesus, the research therefore focused on reconstructing *how* believers relate to *God*, why *they* call it a personal relationship, and what it means to them *in daily life*. It so paid attention to the *actual practice* of faith: to its actual shape in daily practice and experience, including the believers’

self-understandings thereof. This determines the research' *theological* relevancy too: it provides for an invaluable source of first-hand information about faith. This is how faith simply works in practice, at least for an important group of believers.

A 'Personal Relationship with Jesus': *True Faith*?

Having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' was and still is stock language in evangelical Protestantism. It indicates a type of faith that is perceived by the believer as highly meaningful. For believers the term almost self-evidently defines true Christian faith. It is though far from self-evident. The conducted literature review indicates that Christian believers started presenting faith as a 'personal relationship with Jesus' only quite recently.

Chapter 2 presents the results of this literature review and provides an answer to the first sub question of this research: *How did the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus emerge and develop in the evangelical tradition, specifically in the Netherlands?* In the Netherlands, the emergence of the concept is closely related to the rise of the evangelical movement after World War Two. After World War Two a specific focus on the historical person of Jesus started to characterize evangelical spirituality. The gospel was presented as a person – Jesus – with whom the believer can have a real relationship. That relationship is as real as the 'objective' historicity of Jesus. Evangelization endeavors stemming from America and accompanying tracts like Bright's *Four Spiritual Laws* introduced the concept of having a personal relationship with Jesus most concretely. In these tracts the concept is surrounded by a solid aura of love and attractiveness. Having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' forms the core of the Christian faith, so these tracts claim. This is the simple message of the Christian faith: everyone who desires a life full of divine love, happiness and abundant blessings, merely needs to make an individual choice for Jesus.

Such findings should encourage modesty. Evangelical Protestants need to realize that having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' is not as self-evident as it might seem to them. Until a century ago, believers – also *within* evangelicalism – believed in God and talked about faith in substantially other ways. Consequently, it does not seem right to turn the notion of having a 'personal relationship with Jesus' into a dogma or to present it as the *only* true way of relating to God. Having *real* faith and *true* faith should not be equated. To realize this gives openness to explore how other believers relate(d) to God, which might well enrich evangelical Protestant faith in return. In addition, following a lead of Gillet (1993, 31), this might safeguard the future of (evangelical) Christianity much better. What if the next generation feels less at home with this particular spirituality? 0041nd what if they are taught that this is the only true way to relate to God?

They might reject the Christian faith as a whole, because evangelical Protestantism was presented to them as such, instead of turning their attention the wider tradition of Christian spirituality.

To explore the concept's origins and meanings associated with it gives furthermore insight into its strengths and weaknesses. Its widespread use in evangelization projects after World War Two demonstrates its value for initiating people in faith. Speaking about a 'personal relationship with Jesus' makes the Christian faith accessible. What the Christian faith means is expressed in plain language and in a concept that fits the social world of modern people. People need to have a certain measure of basic *understanding* of faith in order to enter it. That goes for evangelical Protestants nowadays too. Faith started to make sense when they developed a personal relationship with Jesus. However, the research also showed that this was not only due to a better cognitive understanding of faith. Above all it is the *practice* of having a relationship with Jesus that was useful to them. By getting involved in the practice of communicating with God, faith started to make sense. Instead of being associated with "rules" and "tradition," faith became a daily practice infused with meaning and realness.

The use of a familiar, everyday concept seems particularly valuable in this respect. The concept offers believers a clear starting point, but simultaneously leaves considerable room for personal inferences. Their familiarity with the concept gives believers the opportunity to develop a relationship with God of their own and to explore the riches thereof freely and creatively. The respondents' experiences of having a personal relationship with Jesus indeed show rich, personal diversity. Their faith moves (far) beyond the basic and somewhat simplistic representation of the 'personal relationship with Jesus' in Bright's booklets. It is characterized by true desires, faithful endeavors, and a reflective openness to God's guidance. Every one of them looks for and follows God's guidance in his/her own way. As their faith is grounded in everyday reality it is also characterized by the complexity of ordinary human living. None of the respondents had a life merely 'full of divine love, happiness and abundant blessings' (see Bright's *Laws*). Life has been just as tough for them as for any other human being. Still, the concept 'works.'

A Faith of the Present, a Savior of the Past

The time in which the concept emerged affected the image of God and the spirituality associated with the concept. When the adjective 'personal' came in use at the turn of the twentieth century, it reflected a new appreciation of humans as unique, individual persons. God personalized alike. Under influence of the Pentecostal spirituality, and later the Jesus movement, this personal God became a friendly and accessible God. This God image continued to evolve under influ-

ence of the cultural developments of the past decades. Cultural processes of individualization, the massive turn to the subject, and an ever stronger emerging consumerism affected the spirituality of evangelical believers.

The empirical research showed that evangelical Protestant believers still relate to a similar, personal God, who is caring and involved with the believer's personal life. He guides the believer's life according to a plan solely designed for that particular and unique individual. The purpose of that plan is clear without doubt: to use the believer as an instrument to share his love, or in classic evangelical terms 'to save souls.' Because evangelical Protestant faith incorporates and is in line with the trends of the time, it fits many of the needs of modern believers. The personal relationship with God offers intimate contact in a life that is ever more fragmented. It gives believers a secured sense of being known and seen, in a time and age in which every individual is thrown back upon him-/herself. It gives guidance in a society that challenges people to make the best of life.

Though evangelical Protestant faith is right up to date, its savior is of the past. The empirical research showed a God image, in which a *crucified Jesus* plays a significant role (§5.4). The personal God image of the respondents is combined with a quite traditional belief in Jesus as Savior. Jesus is, through his death on the cross, the gatekeeper of the relationship with God. By speaking of 'Jesus' instead of 'Christ,' evangelical Protestants strongly identify their Savior with the biblical-historical Jesus. As chapter 2 showed, having a 'personal relationship' has always been linked strongly to the biblical-historical Jesus. As a result though, Jesus often remains someone of the past too. In the daily performance and enactment of the relationship with God, the salvation-historic dimension remains in the background. Jesus does not seem to determine the daily practice of communicating with God. Sometimes he is not even *someone* of the past, but a mere *example* of the past!

What would happen to evangelical Protestant faith, when believers would focus more on Christ as the living Savior? Even within the evangelical tradition itself a sole focus on knowing *Jesus* personally seems to be a relatively late development. It started with a focus on knowing *Christ* the Savior. Indeed the Biblical tradition, that evangelical Protestants value so highly, does not speak of a crucified *Jesus*, but of a crucified *Christ* (1 Cor. 1:23 cf. Acts 2:23-24). This title underlines that the crucifixion is meaningful *because* Christ is the risen one, the living one. In this respect, the empirical research showed promising opportunities to incorporate a focus on the living Christ, in a way that fits the evangelical Protestant conception of faith. A few respondents namely pointed out, that Jesus' atoning function is set forth in his current intercession for them. They perceive every incident of communication with God to be determined by Jesus' advocacy. In their image of Jesus, he is much more alive. As living Savior, he is the one who continually intercedes for them (Hebr. 7:25).

Such a focus on the living Christ might as a result broaden the horizon of evangelical Protestant faith. There are many dimensions of the Christian faith that move beyond the idea of having a personal relationship. Focusing on Christ shifts the emphasis from our human contact with God (through Jesus) to the perspective of the living Christ. The Reformed tradition for instance, speaks about “*being Christ own*” (Heidelberg Catechism, Sunday 1). Such draws attention to Christ’s current authority over the believer’s life. Being the living, resurrected Lord, his lordship defines the relationship with him in new ways. As Christ’s own, believers are part of the new creation and challenged to life accordingly. According to New Testament scholar N. T. Wright this means that believers must anticipate the eventual renewing by working for God’s kingdom in the wider world. The believer cannot stop at ‘saving souls’ but is called to bring healing and hope in the present life (2008, 225–230).

Mainline Churches versus Evangelical Protestantism

During the past decades of the emergence of the evangelical movement in the Netherlands, evangelical sympathies were, to put it mildly, not welcomed heartily in mainline churches. The ‘Reformed’⁹⁰ reaction to evangelicalism was of a dogmatic theological nature and focused on soteriological and ecclesiological questions.

To answer the second sub question – *How was evangelical faith received and perceived by mainline Protestant churches and their members in the Netherlands?* – chapter 3 explored the heated discussions between mainline churches and the growing evangelical movement. Members of the mainline churches attacked the evangelical atmosphere of assurance in faith as visible in their style of leadership, ethics and way of reading the Bible. The evangelical emphasis on feelings and experience was highly criticized. In the Reformed perspective, truth and correct doctrine should always be placed above personal experience. Whereas evangelical faith is characterized by individual choice and personal dedication, the Reformed emphasis lays on the justification by faith which totally depends upon God’s initiative. As these statements show, the hostile reactions of the traditional churches to evangelical sympathies often resulted in an over-simplified presentation of both evangelical faith as well as ‘traditional’ faith.

Notwithstanding such discussions, the number of evangelical initiatives in established churches increased. Evangelicals seemed to have time on their side.

⁹⁰ ‘Reformed’ indicates the strong ties that Dutch traditional churches have with the Reformation. Opponents of evangelicalism often placed their faith and church explicitly in this context. So the discussion about evangelicalism was presented as one between the Reformed tradition and evangelical tradition. Also see footnote 39.

Especially with the establishment of the *Evangelisch Werkverband* (Evangelical Working Association) in 1995, it was clear that evangelicals would constitute a firm and continuing group of believers in traditional churches. The empirical research shows that these believers are faithful, committed and enthusiastic church members. The (in the respondents' perceptions) 'theoretical' discussions, that have been repeated over and over again throughout the past decades, are in general not of their concern. Their faith points to the need of believers for a concrete integration of faith and daily life.

The research therefore calls for a revaluation of evangelical Protestantism. Apparently there is a need among members of traditional churches that evangelicalism well attends to. The respondents speak relatively positively about the traditional faith they received throughout their upbringing (see §8.3). It was not all meaningless. However, the "rules" and "tradition" were not experienced as relevant for daily life. Evangelical Protestant faith offers a way to fruitfully incorporate modern daily living (as affected by the trends of the (post)modern society) and faith. Notwithstanding certain disadvantages hereof, the evangelical Protestant spirituality so offers a critical but also useful perspective on the needs of believers in general.

In addition, the traditional churches could appreciate the respondents' faithfulness itself to a higher degree. The present empirical research revealed a lot of pain and disappointments amongst the respondents. Painful memories about their encounters with their established churches run through all stories. Still they choose to remain a member of their local, traditional church. It shows something of what the Christian faith stands for: faithfulness. These believers demonstrate a deep love for and commitment to the church. This invites Protestant churches to be faithful to them just as much. Is this not, what the Christian faith after all stands for: faithfulness, as reflection of God's faithfulness? God challenges believers to love each other, not necessarily to like each other. This, though, is more properly a topic for preaching than for researching.

The empirical research though did show that evangelical Protestants will not stay endlessly. The respondents are willing and committed, but it is sure that their faithfulness will fall short of God's faithfulness. Their departure would be a sad waste of the unflashing energy and loyal commitment they bring with them, especially in a time when the church needs all support available.

Speech is Silver, Silence is...

For evangelical Protestants having a personal relationship means to continually enact a relationship with God through the practice of communicating with him. 'Communicating with God' is first of all a descriptive term that reconstructs and orders the believers' experiences of having a personal relationship with Jesus. To

them, having a personal relationship with Jesus means to communicate with God. This answers the third sub question of this research: *What does it mean to evangelical Protestants to have a personal relationship with Jesus in the encounter with the challenge of everyday embodied life?* This empirically grounded reconstruction of the personal relationship with Jesus was presented in chapters 5 to 8.

The communication with God is understood in a plain, everyday sense: just as people communicate with each other, believers communicate with God. Chapter 6 described how believers talk with him and listen to him. Believers hold that these acts constitute a relationship of *direct* and *personal* contact with God. Communicative faith practices, as these practices have been referred to throughout the thesis, have performative force: through those practices respondents enact a relationship with God. The relationship with God is more than merely a belief. It is even more than an individual experience. The relationship with God is a *reality* that is acted out in the practice of communicating with him. By addressing God, God's existence is "dramatized" (Riesebrodt 2008, 86) and both God as well as the relationship with him are real. So talking with God is much more than an informal chat with God. It inaugurates a highly meaningful relationship with God. Believers talk with God in and out of season, about the most mundane matters possible. In this way, they continually single out specific dimensions of their concrete lives and bring it into the presence of God. So life is effectively lived *coram Deo*. The closeness of God believers consequently experience is perceived as a promising reality: near God a lot of God's goodness, care and guidance can be expected. Believers therefore await answers from God with confidence.

This waiting for an answer from God is concretely enacted in practices of listening to God. At this point, but only in a second instance, believers now also share that communicating with God is not that self-evident either. Listening to a God who is not physically present and does not speak verbally is a quite difficult thing to do. In practice, believers read the Bible and pay attention to what fellow believers say as means for "hearing" what "God has to say" to them. Evangelical Protestants lean upon the concrete – an object like the Bible, the words of fellow believers – to mediate something of God. In their experiences, the words of the Bible and of fellow believers can become vehicles for a personal message of God to the individual believer. This is an important characteristic of evangelical Protestant faith. The physical and material world is not experienced as a hindrance to the communication with God, but rather as a helpful means for mediating something of God. This characteristic runs through all of their practices: out loud spoken words, a tangible object like the Bible, concrete spaces, set times of silence, physical movements are all used to evoke a sense of God's presence. The experience of God's presence motivates believers to communicate with him and confirms their confidence that he will answer.

Taken all together, communicating with God is the most easiest and natural thing to do, but at the same time a most demanding and difficult enterprise. It requires considerable effort and discipline. Believers put a lot of effort in praying as comprehensively as possible. They discipline themselves to read the Bible with regularity – or feel guilty for not succeeding to do so. They invest serious amounts of time in God to intensify their involvement in the relationship, in hopes that God will intensify his involvement the like. It is no surprise, then, that the help of gifted believers, to act as intermediary in the communication with God, is highly appreciated by many believers.

Even though these intermediating practices often quite effectively establish reciprocal communication with God, they also raise questions. It might even be said: *because* they effectively establish *reciprocal* communication, these practices raise questions. In practices of intermediation, the believer does not only address God and so acts out the believer's side of the relationship with him. *God's* side of the relationship is acted out as well. The intermediating believer also addresses the believer in the name of God and materializes what God has to say. The respondents defend the practice, by pointing out that some believers are gifted for and more competent than others in "hearing God's voice." The precise relationship between this combination of gift and competence remains unclear. But as hearing God's voice becomes a matter of training, intermediating practices generally tend to 'mechanize' the personal communication between God and believers. God's response is subjected to the rules of the practices instead of being a free gift of grace.

All in all, it does not become completely clear why God does not respond to believers directly. After all, is the personal relationship with Jesus – according to believers themselves – not all about the *direct* communication with him? Why would God speak to one believer via another believer? And why are his messages often so unclear or general? Are they not supposed to reflect his personal involvement with the believer's particular life? In this respect, evangelical Protestants still have a lot of thinking to do. At the same time, right these intermediating practices show the performative character of their faith outstandingly. They simply "do it," even without understanding how and why exactly. Just because 'it works.'

God Talks Back

The salient role of experiences of divine communication in the believers' spirituality is without doubt. The respondents share many stories in which they recall how God communicated with them. Evangelical Protestants testify that God responds in answer to their practice of communicating with him.

Chapter 7 explored these *experiences of divine communication*, which constitute the second fundamental component of the communication with God. For respondents knowing God is more important than knowing *about* God, as they put it. Roeland explains: “Religion is something you can give an exposition about, a relationship you experience.” In all kinds of seemingly ordinary events believers “notice” that God is present and “hear God’s voice.” Believers experience such events as anything but ordinary. Experiences of divine communication are rather characterized by the experience of something extraordinary, which then culminates in the reception of a concrete sign from God. The sign is taken to convey a personal message from God. Through such alluring yet elusive experiences of divine communication, God communicates with every believer individually.

In order to receive answers from God, believers exert themselves “to create space” for God. Through engaging in communicative faith practices and involving God in everything they do, believers bring God close. The closeness of God points to the intertwinement of the reality of daily life and the reality of God. In this peculiar human-divine reality, God is most likely to act and make himself known to the believer. According to believers, their acts do not force God to do anything he does not want to do. He is merely provided with an opportunity to act. At the same time, believers continually experience that receiving answers from God is linked inextricably to their practice of communicating with him.

At this point, a material approach proved very useful to understand the dynamics of evangelical Protestant faith. Communicative faith practices are not only performative practices that enact a relationship with God. They are also mediating practices that simultaneously effect what they set out to mediate (cf. Meyer, 2012a, 26). According to believers, their practices make “space” for God so he can answer. Trusting that God wants to and thus will answer, they consciously start to search for signs from God. Because of the questions asked and the prayers prayed, the events that happen afterwards are seen from a different perspective. They are judged from the perspective of faith. Thus, the signs believers receive are meaningful events *within* the context of their practice of communicating with God. Experiencing divine communication is part of this constructive, generative practice of paying attention to what happens from the perspective of the performed communicative faith practices. As respondents explain it: ‘If you don’t experience God, you are not looking right.’ In other words: a believer “has to learn to see him.”

This generative attempt to experience God is exemplified particularly well in the believers’ efforts to memorize as much Bible texts as possible, or to learn songs by heart (§7.4). Lianne explained: “Because in that way, because we know texts or because we focus upon God and concentrate, God can instill cer-

tain thoughts in you and God is able to guide you.” Their constructive efforts of taking care that answers from God ‘stand by,’ do not seem to hinder them from experiencing these answers as originating from God. For believers there seems to be no tension between *knowing* a Bible text already and subsequently *receiving* it from God. “God just uses what you know,” Jill explains. But an outsider could easily wonder: does a believer not simply create answers from God, by trying to learn as much Bible texts as possible? Is God more or less confined to what a believer knows? Are believers not confusing the cognitive process of remembering something with a revelation from God? It just seems too easy. As if God’s acts of communicating can be pushed into a system. Such questions, however, do not do fully justice to what believers experience. None of them says it is easy. Often, it *is* confusing to recognize whether something comes from God or not. At the same time, their God experiences learn them every time again that God uses objects, events and situations in daily life to communicate with them. In their experiences of divine communication, the human and divine are always inextricably intertwined. To them, this seems to reflect something of the mystery of faith and of the mysterious work of the Holy Spirit: God *can* be detected in this world, but his presence cannot be singled out and God himself never becomes a tangible person or entity. The detection of his presence is always depended upon the embodied involvement of the believing subject.

In this way, evangelical Protestants demonstrate a refreshing openness towards the world. It is grounded in a deep trust that God will lead the believer’s life. Averse to such critical reflections, evangelical Protestants approach all that happens in their lives with a ‘hermeneutics of discovery.’ They are simply eager to discover what God has in store for them. Their starting point is trust, not suspicion that it might all be fake or deception. This might sometimes strike as somewhat naïve. At the same time, there is something very powerful to it. They live life confidently, trusting that God is still in control over this world, and put the power of God above the power of evil, deception and emptiness.

The Mystery of God’s Will

Characteristic for the believers’ practice of communicating with God is their preoccupation with divine volition. Believers turn to God in processes of decision-making and exert themselves to make choices that comply with God’s will. When believers refer to “God’s will” or to “what God wants” they usually refer to God’s plan for their lives: God is believed to have a whole lot of concrete ideas about the believer’s path of life. There is no clear agreement how detailed this plan of God actually is, but at least there seem to be no limits to what God’s will can entail. Experiences of divine communication are perceived as communi-

cative devices through which God's ideas concerning the believer's life are revealed.

In evangelical Protestantism, the concept of 'God's plan for the believer's life' is usually linked up with evangelization motives. God's ultimate purpose for the believer's life is to "use" the believer as an instrument, as a concrete sign directing others towards him. The respondents continually point out that they feel called to "show other's God's love" and "tell other people about Jesus." Their evangelizing desires push the concrete and ordinary – which is in general so important in their real faith – into the background. Real faith, as we have seen, aims at the intertwinement of daily life and the reality of God. But the interviews show, that real faith is regularly threatened by evangelistic aspirations that in the end come down to 'saving souls.' Concrete, human life so seems to lose some of its intrinsic value. The believers' lives become instruments for saving others, instead of being most worthy and precious sites for living in the closeness of God. God said of creation that it "was good" (Gen. 1). But is the world for evangelical Protestants *good* or merely *useful*? A means to get into heaven?

In addition, believers need to take care that their preoccupation with God's will for their particular lives not lessens their efforts to *do* God's will. Often they spend all their energy on searching God's will. But has God not shown already what he requires of believers? Which is: to act justly, love mercy and walk humbly with God? (Micah 6:8) This concrete task of God goes beyond the task to save 'souls' and encompasses the this-worldly well-being of human beings. This concrete task of doing God's will can be located in context of the "mystery of God's will" (Eph. 1:9). In this context, 'God's will' does not refer to God's mysterious plan for the believer's particular life, but to his plan for the entire world: "to sum up all things in Christ, the things in the heavens, and the things on the earth, in him" (Eph. 1:10). As Wright explains it: Jesus' resurrection is the beginning of God's new project [...] to colonize earth with the life of heaven" (2008, 293). The mystery of God's will once more draws all attention to the resurrection of Christ. It is his resurrection that reflects and inaugurates God's will. It is this 'plan of God' that believers are called to anticipate by 'acting justly, loving mercy and walking humbly with God.'

This places the idea of God's plan for the individual's life in a new perspective. The focus of faith shifts from emphasizing the *individuals'* relationship with Jesus to Jesus' lordship over the *whole earth*. To continually focus on 'God's plan for one's life' is in important respects egocentric. Wright continues: "The announcement of God's kingdom and of Jesus's Lordship and of the consequent new creation, avoids from the start any suggestion that the main or central thing that has happened is that the new Christian has entered into a private relationship with God or with Jesus and that this relationship is the main or only thing that matters. (Some currently popular Christian songs seem to suggest this rather too

frequently, as though the main thing about the gospel were that Jesus could take the place of my girlfriend or boyfriend.)” (229).

This might sound – and indeed be – a bit too critical in the ears of evangelical Protestants. However, it should not be forgotten that the perspective it offers is also liberating and eases ‘spiritual overstrain.’ Maintaining a lively relationship with God is a demanding enterprise, especially when the believer is focused on discovering God’s will. In search for what God wants, the believer needs to reach out to God and be receptive for experiences from God continually. It puts pressure upon the believer to communicate with God very intensively in order not to miss out on God’s personal guidance. The task of interpreting God’s will correctly only adds to the pressure and raises doubts and insecurities. What if you miss what God wants to say to you? What if you interpret God’s signs wrong and so miss out on God’s calling?

It might be quite a relief to know that one’s personal relationship with God is not all there is to faith. The lordship of Jesus Christ surpasses the salvation of the individual believers. There is someone bigger than I am, bigger than my faith, bigger than my abilities to live faithfully. In this perspective, the experience of having a relationship with God might well change and become much less demanding. To hear something of God becomes mere grace, not a prerequisite for faithful living. Having a personal relationship with Jesus now rather gives peace, as the believer can be sure that the lordship of Jesus Christ not only surpasses, but certainly also encompasses him/her.

When God Does Not Talk Back

Luhrmann’s study (2012) of American evangelicals points to the defining importance of hearing God’s voice in their relationships with God. Hence the title of her study *When God Talks Back*. Evangelicals in mainline Protestant Churches in the Netherlands distinguish themselves in this, that they hold on to God, also when he *does not* talk back. At the one hand, Dutch evangelical Protestants too emphasize the need to *concretely* communicate with God in daily life as they trust this will effectively establish the closeness of God and lead to *concrete* and *material* experiences of divine communication. But at the other hand, their faith is about trusting and knowing a God who is neither felt nor seen. For these believers, God is simply always there, even when a believer does not pray and even when a believer does not experience anything from God concretely.

In chapter 8 this third and last constituent component of the personal relationship with Jesus has been discussed: a deep sense of living in the *closeness of God*. Living in the closeness of God refers to an engaged mode of being in the world which develops over time and which can be understood as the believers’ religious imaginary (after Taylor’s “social imaginaries,” 2007). Through com-

municating with God and experiencing answers from God in return, believers enter into a life characterized by the closeness of God. This perception of life is characterized by God's *continual*, but *intangible* presence. This closeness of God does not (or: no longer) coincide with times of practicing communicative faith practices or with moments of experiencing divine communication. It is a stable perception of the world which turns out to hold even when things go wrong and so empowers believers. Through this closeness of God they are able to endure the realities of daily life (including pain and sickness), also in the absence of any God experience.

The respondents' religious imaginary of living in the closeness of God develops over time, through engaging in communicative faith practices and experiencing God. The process of changing-over to this imaginary is closely intertwined with (certain moments of) the believers' religious biographies. An analysis of their biographies shows that their personal relationships with Jesus are driven by desires "for more." Respondents were dissatisfied with traditional faith. For them, it did not relate to and thus not help them with the questions of ordinary life. Evangelical Protestants want faith to provide answers and meaning in daily life. Thus, they started to search "for more, for deeper." Their desires draw attention to the anthropological dimensions of volition and affect as driving forces behind real faith. The relationship with Jesus can be understood as the *result* and *expression* of human desires and wishes. Real faith is something believers long for and strive for.

Also from this angle, it is clear that the evangelicalism of the believers is not a "quest for true religion" (Noll 2003, 262). These believers were never driven by a concern about the truthfulness of their faith. They were quite sincere believers from the start! *Therefore* they started searching "for more." Their search is rather a personal quest for religious meaning in the encounter with the challenge of everyday embodied life.

Once entered into a personal relationship with God, the practice of communicating with him also *arouses* a desire: the desire "to *do* more" for God. Real faith is a source of power that motivates believers to fulfill the will – or so you will: the 'desires' – of God, namely to evangelize. This desire "to do more" extends the believers' quest for a more meaningful *faith* to the quest for a more meaningful *life*. "Living for God" gives purpose and meaning to their daily lives, because their temporal lives gain eternal significance through their evangelizing endeavors. Quite paradoxically then, evangelical Protestant spirituality firstly legitimizes human desires – and even constitutes the result thereof! – but subsequently also motivates believers to give them up in submission to God's desires.

Performativity and Materiality in the Personal Relationship

Having a personal relationship with Jesus – reconstructed as the practice of communicating with God – leads to the experience of a certain *realness* in faith. To explain this “realness” the concepts of performativity and materiality have been put forward. These concepts point towards and explain two important dimensions of the experience of realness in evangelical Protestant faith and function as critical analytical tools. This then answers the fourth and last sub question of this thesis: *What theoretical concepts are useful to provide and deepen understanding of the personal relationship with Jesus?*

As chapter 5 set out, performativity brings the dichotomy beliefs (or attitudes, intentions, meanings) versus action to the fore. *Real faith is in the act*. It means that in addressing God, a reality is enacted. As believers talk with God a relationship with God is acted out. A performative approach does justice to the believers’ claim of having a direct relationship with God. In the act of talking with God, believers address God and so communicate with him directly and personally. Even without any experience of God’s presence, the relationship is real.

The intertwinement of concrete communicative faith practices with ordinary, daily living adds another sense of realness to this relationship. For evangelical Protestants, faith is as real as the material realm it is part of. *Real faith is in the concrete*. A performative approach already implies that action involves “effort and energy in the material realm” (Nieman 2008, 21). The concept of materiality zooms in on this particular dichotomy of faith as something inward versus faith as something concrete and material. “A material approach takes as its starting point the understanding that religion becomes concrete and palpable through people, their practices and use of things” (Meyer, 2012a, 28). It emphasizes that the concrete and embodied nature of these practices is an essential characteristic of these practices. Within evangelical Protestantism this is not self-evident. The essence of faith has often been confined to the inward act of giving one’s heart to God. Also the main purpose of God’s plan for the believer’s life to ‘save souls’ is precisely of such a spiritualistic nature. In present day evangelical Protestantism, however, the concrete, embodied nature of communicative faith practices is perceived as a fundamental part of communicating with God. It is neither a mere expression of the inward act, nor an optional addition thereunto.

A material perspective, furthermore, draws specific attention to the materiality of religion from the perspective of mediation: “Meaning production is not disembodied and abstract, but deeply sensorial and material” (Meyer, 2012a, 28). As an analytical tool, this approach helps to understand the respondents’ practices better. As in particular chapter 6 showed, their faith displays a clear tendency to use sound, time, space, bodily movement to meditate God’s pres-

ence. As in particular chapter 7 showed, their practice of communicating with God is a concrete means that effects the experience that God answers.

The concepts performativity and materiality so bring a characteristic tension to light, concerning the respondents' claims to communicate with God in a *direct* manner. Believers insist on maintaining an immediate link with God. According to a material approach, however, "immediacy [is] not prior to, but an effect of mediation. The purpose of taking mediation as a focus for research is to explore the actual process of generating a sense of an extraordinary and immediate presence" (Meyer, 2012a, 25). A careful analysis of the interviews though showed that the *reality* of having a *direct* relationship with God is associated with talking with God and addressing him. As Mr Rosegaar explained it, the personal relationship with Jesus "is a *direct* relationship where you can get rid of everything. Whatever you cannot tell your wife, you can get it off your chest and *tell* him. In my eyes, that is the core." Consequently, the concept of performative action turned out to be most crucial for analyzing the respondents' faith.

This does not mean that the personal relationship can be explained adequately without a material approach either. The experience of God's presence and the believers' acts of communicating with God exhibit a significant degree of concreteness and materiality. Concrete practices lead to the interpretation of all kinds of events as signs from God. They mediate God, his presence and message, to believers. Believers themselves continually indicate that they understand God's acts as effects of their practices. These God experiences, though, do not necessarily give believers a sense of immediate contact with God. Often they do not, and believers cannot but accept that God communicates with them in a much less direct manner. His presence in this world is not automatically given. At the same time, the world is not void of God either. It is God's creation and still controlled and directed by him. Hence, the material realm can well mediate God's presence.

The use of material media in evangelical Protestantism to mediate God's presence, has often been heavily criticized. Contemporary concerns often display a fear of generating experiences of God that are 'invoked' and therefore not 'real' (e.g. De Heer 2009; Geluk 2008). The theological concern throughout Protestant Christianity is however not just that people manipulate their own feelings or emotions, but much more that they manipulate (or attempt to manipulate) God. This concern dates back to the Reformation. As Taylor puts it: "The point of declaring that salvation comes through faith was radically to devalue ritual and external practice in favor of inward adherence to Christ as Savior. It was not just that external ritual was of no effect, but that relying on it was tantamount to a presumption that we could control God" (2002, 10-11). Both concerns are quite legitimate. This research into evangelical Protestant faith does not

resolve either of them, but rather puts them forward as topics in need of further theological research and reflection.

To Conclude

In answer to the main question of *the meaning of having a personal relationship with Jesus*, it can be concluded that evangelical Protestantism points to the value of optimizing the concrete intertwining of faith and daily living through the practice of communicating with God.

It is this *real faith* that provides secure religious meaning in the face of ordinary, embodied daily living, with all its doubts and uncertainties. Indeed, the believer “is never, or only rarely, really sure, free of all doubt, untroubled by some objection – by some experience which won’t fit, some lives which exhibits fullness on another basis, some alternative mode of fullness which sometimes draws me, etc. (Taylor 2007, 10–11). Real faith, however, does not merely provide for an alternative, more convincing spiritual experience. It provides for a way of living that intertwines the reality of God and the reality of daily life, in such a way that it cannot be untied easily. Therefore inherited religious traditions do not suffice just like that either for these believers. These traditions need not only to be understood or to be authenticated by personal experience. No, the meanings and beliefs they communicate need to be personally appropriated through the believer’s concrete, practical involvement in faith. Evangelical Protestants do so through the practice of communicating with God. Through practices like talking with God and the resulting experiences of “hearing God’s voice,” God and the relationship with him come to live. Faith is real.

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Echt geloof

Performativiteit en materialiteit in de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus van evangelisch- protestanten

“Mijn leven is één gebed tot God,” vertelt Ernst-Jan (54) in een van de interviews. “Ja, raar hè?” reageert hij zelf. Echter, na jarenlang intensief onderzoek te hebben gedaan naar de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus van evangelisch-protestanten klinkt dat niet meer zo “raar.” Net zoals andere evangelisch-protestanten communiceert Ernst-Jan intensief met God. Hij bidt overal en altijd. Het uitoefenen van dergelijke communicatieve geloofspraktijken brengt God ‘tot leven’ voor deze gelovigen. De beoefening ervan verweeft de realiteit van God met de realiteit van het dagelijkse leven. Zo wordt het geloof “echt.” Als een integraal onderdeel van het dagelijks leven, zijn God en de relatie met hem zo echt als maar kan. Deze echtheid wordt bevestigd door tekenen van God die vervolgens in het dagelijks leven oplichten. God is “echt echt.”

Hoofdstuk 1 | Introductie

Evangelischen ‘hebben’ een bepaald type geloof en noemen dat een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus. Dit geloof overstijgt kerkmuren en geeft evangelischen een gevoel van onderlinge verbondenheid. Het is gelieerd aan een bepaald type geloofsbeleving (Klaver 2008, 146; Luhrmann 2012, 146). Ook in traditionele kerken is er al meer aandacht voor dit type geloof (e.g. Het evangelisch manifest 1996 en 2010). Gevestigde kerken ‘evangelicaliseren.’ Deze ontwikkelingen maken het uiterst relevant om empirisch onderzoek te doen naar wat het betekent om een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus te hebben. De centrale onderzoeksvraag luidt:

Wat is, vanuit een praktisch theologisch perspectief, de betekenis van het hebben van een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus, in de praktijk van het dagelijks leven, voor evangelischen in de gevestigde protestantse kerken in Nederland?

Het onderzoek betreft gemeenteleden van traditionele, protestantse kerken (zoals de PKN, de NGK, de GK vrijgemaakt en de CGK) die zichzelf evangelisch noemen en deelnemen aan evangelische activiteiten en conferenties.

In het onderzoek staat het *geleefde geloof* van de individuele gelovige centraal, niet het geloof zoals dat voorgeschreven of formeel beleden wordt. De persoonlijke relatie met Jezus wordt gezien als de kern van dit geloof en wordt beschouwd als een concreet voorbeeld van christelijk geloven in de praktijk van het dagelijks bestaan. Vanuit praktisch theologisch perspectief wordt dit geleefde geloof gezien als bron van praktisch theologische kennis. De gelovige wordt daarbij gewaardeerd als een reflectief en ervaren beoefenaar van het geloof wiens opgedane wijsheid uiterst waardevol is voor de academische discipline van de praktische theologie.

Hoofdstuk 2 | De persoonlijke relatie met Jezus. Historische, sociologische en theologische verkenningen

Hoofdstuk 2 richt zich op de eerste deelvraag van dit onderzoek: *Wanneer kwam het concept ‘een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus hebben’ in gebruik en hoe ontwikkelde dit concept zich in de evangelische traditie, in het bijzonder in Nederland?*

Literatuuronderzoek wijst erop dat het concept ‘een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus hebben’ een relatief recent begrip is. Het verwijst naar een specifiek type christendom dat getypeerd kan worden als evangelisch, eigentijds en ervaringsgericht. In Nederland kwam het begrip in gebruik ten tijde van de opkomst van de evangelische beweging in Nederland, na de Tweede Wereldoorlog. Terwijl de maatschappij seculariseerde en kerken liberaliseerden, verdedigden evangelischen het geloof vurig. In hun apologetische uiteenzettingen van het christelijk geloof legden evangelischen sterk de nadruk op de historische Jezus (door evangelischen geïdentificeerd met de Bijbelse Jezus, contra de *Quest of the Historical Jesus* in de achttiende en negentiende eeuw). Zij benadrukten dat het evangelie niet draait om een *leer* maar om een *persoon*: Jezus. De gelovige kan met deze persoon, met Jezus, een echte relatie hebben. Deze relatie met Jezus is net zo echt als de ‘objectieve’ historiciteit van de persoon Jezus.

Het concept ‘een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus hebben’ werd het meest concreet gebruikt in evangelisatie initiatieven die overwaaiden uit America. In traktaten zoals *Kent u de vier geestelijke wetten?* (Bright © 1965, 1994) en *De weg terug* (Billy Graham Evangelistic Association) wordt heel concreet gesproken over

het hebben van een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus. In dergelijke traktaten is het concept omgeven met een solide aura van liefde en aantrekkelijkheid. Het hebben van een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus wordt voorgesteld als dat waar het in de kern van het christelijk geloof om gaat: iedereen die een leven vol van Gods liefde, geluk en overvloedige zegen verlangt, hoeft slechts een individuele keuze voor Jezus te maken.

Hoewel de evangelische traditie al sinds de achttiende eeuw de noodzaak van een persoonlijk geloof onder de aandacht bracht, sprak men in deze eeuwen eerder over de noodzaak van een 'levend geloof' en de 'rechtvaardiging door het geloof' dan over een 'persoonlijke relatie.' Het historiografische onderzoek van Virginia L. Brereton (1991) laat zien dat het spreken van het 'persoonlijk' kennen van Christus of van Christus die voor mij 'persoonlijk' stierf, pas in de twintigste eeuw in gebruik kwam. Tegelijkertijd werd de actieve keuze voor Christus al meer benadrukt in plaats van het passieve gekozen worden door hem. Door de toenemende informele sfeer in evangelische samenkomsten in de twintigste eeuw (o.a. door de opkomst van de pinksterbeweging) ontwikkelde zich een al informelere en vriendschappelijker geloofstaal.

Daarnaast moet niet vergeten worden dat culturele processen van individualisatie, de massale aandacht voor het subject, en de opkomst van de consumptie maatschappij (e.g. Taylor 2002; 2007) de evangelische spiritualiteit de afgelopen decennia sterk beïnvloedden. Evangelische spiritualiteit is daarom over het algemeen te karakteriseren als subjectief, consumptief en ervaringsgericht. Daarnaast 'charismatiseert' de evangelische spiritualiteit door recente invloeden uit de pinksterbeweging. Zij is sterker expressief, meer emotioneel en gericht op de gaven van de Geest dan voorheen.

Hoofdstuk 3 | Evangelisch geloven in de gevestigde kerken in Nederland

Hoofdstuk 3 richt zich op de tweede deelvraag: *Hoe werd het evangelische geloof ontvangen en gezien door de gevestigde protestantse kerken en hun leden in Nederland?*

De groeiende evangelische beweging kon allerminst rekenen op een hartelijk welkom van de gevestigde kerken. De groei van de evangelische beweging – met de oprichting van het Evangelisch Werkverband in 1995 niet meer weg te denken uit de gevestigde kerken – zorgde in de gevestigde kerken voor een sfeer van angst. Men was bang dat de kerk zou worden “overgenomen” door de evangelischen (Buijs and Paul 2003; Dekker 1997; Schaeffer 2001a). De gevestigde kerken zagen dit als “een ramp voor de kerk,” zoals de emeritus-predikant Spijkerboer het uitdrukte in het Nederlands Dagblad van 1997. De gevestigde kerken hadden sterke theologische bezwaren tegen de gebrekkige en ‘Arminiaanse’

evangelische soteriologie en ecclesiologie. Evangelischen daarentegen vonden de kerkelijke praktijk vol “hardheid, lauwheid en onverschilligheid” (Bakker and Eschbach 1996, 16). De gedurige toename van evangelische sympathieën binnen traditionele kerken leidde zo tot verhitte discussies, gedomineerd door het thema ‘gereformeerd versus evangelisch.’

In deze discussie werden de afgelopen decennia telkens weer dezelfde punten naar voren gebracht. Ten eerste werd de evangelische atmosfeer van geloofszekerheid (en zelfverzekerdheid) bekritiseerd. Deze zekerheid kenmerkte ook de evangelische leiderschapstijl, ethiek en wijze van Bijbellesen. Ten tweede bekritiseerden de gereformeerden de evangelische nadruk op het gevoel en ervaring. Gereformeerden beriepen zich op het belang van de waarheid en de correcte leer. Ten derde legden evangelischen veel nadruk op de individuele keuze voor Jezus en persoonlijke toewijding. Voor gereformeerden was dit in tegenspraak met de rechtvaardiging door het geloof, die geheel berust op Gods initiatief.

In de 21^e eeuw lijkt er tenslotte ruimte te komen voor een genuanceerdere discussie. De angst ebt enigszins weg en nieuwe thema's, onder andere aangewakkerd door de ‘charismatisering’ van de evangelische beweging, krijgen aandacht (e.g. de gaven van de Geest, het *ministry* gebed, bevrijdingspastoraat).

Hoofdstuk 4 | Onderzoeksopzet, uitvoering en data analyse

Om een empirisch gegrond inzicht te krijgen in de betekenis van de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus voor evangelisch-protestanten vandaag de dag, werd een praktijkonderzoek gedaan. Door middel van diepte-interviews met evangelisch-protestanten en de systematische analyse van deze interviews, wordt inzicht verkregen in de betekenis die de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus heeft volgens evangelisch-protestants gelovigen zelf. Dit inzicht wordt vervolgens verdiept en geïnterpreteerd met behulp van theoretische concepten en bestaande theorieën.

Het kwalitatieve onderzoek werd opgezet en uitgevoerd volgens *Grounded Theory* procedures (zie de richtlijnen van Wester and Peters 2004). De voorbereidende onderzoeksfase omvatte literatuurstudie (zie hoofdstukken 2 en 3), het interviewen van veldinformanten (zoals Feike ter Velde en Hans Eschbach), het oefenen met diepte-interviews, en het volgen van verdiepende cursussen over kwalitatief onderzoek doen. Vervolgens werd er data verzameld in twee rondes interviewen. Op evangelische conferenties werden daarvoor eerst korte enquêtes gehouden, 156 in totaal. Daaruit werden de deelnemers voor het onderzoek geselecteerd, waarbij gestreefd werd naar een zo gevarieerd mogelijke groep deelnemers qua leeftijd, opleiding en woonplaats. Vervolgens werden deze deelnemers bij hen thuis geïnterviewd (de interviews duurden gemiddeld meer

dan 100 minuten). De interviews werden opgenomen en vervolgens uitgeschreven. De uitgeschreven tekst werd gecodeerd en vervolgens geanalyseerd met behulp van het computerprogramma Atlas.ti.

Hoofdstuk 5 | Echt geloof

De hoofdstukken 5 tot en met 8 beantwoorden de deelvragen drie en vier. De derde deelvraag luidt: *Wat is voor evangelisch-protestanten de betekenis van hun persoonlijke relatie met Jezus in het licht van de uitdagingen die het dagelijkse, aardse leven biedt?* De vierde deelvraag luidt: *Welke theoretische concepten kunnen het inzicht in dit fenomeen verdiepen?*

Uit de interviews blijkt dat het hebben van een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus betekent dat gelovigen voortdurend vormgeven aan een relatie met God in het concrete communiceren met hem. De communicatie met God bestaat uit drie essentiële componenten: communicatieve geloofspraktijken, communicatieve Godservaringen en het leven in Gods nabijheid. Het is deze wederzijdse communicatie tussen God en mens waardoor het geloof als “echt” ervaren wordt. Hoofdstuk 5 gaat in op de twee concepten die in bijzonder bruikbaar bleken om deze ervaring van het geloof als *echt* te begrijpen, namelijk: performativiteit en materialiteit.

Performativiteit | Evangelisch protestants geloven kan het beste verstaan worden vanuit het perspectief van *performatieve geloofspraktijken*. De relatie met Jezus is een werkelijkheid die tot stand komt in het beoefenen van communicatieve geloofspraktijken. In het *doen*, in de uitvoering van dergelijke praktijken is de relatie met Jezus een realiteit en daarmee “echt.”

Een performatieve benadering vraagt dus aandacht voor geloven als iets dat wordt *gedaan* (zie rituel scholars Houseman 2008; Laidlaw and Humphrey 2008; praktisch theoloog Nieman 2008; en godsdienstsocioloog Riesebrodt 2009). Deze benadering sluit aan bij de nadruk die respondenten zelf leggen op het communiceren met God in de dagelijkse praktijk. Dat in de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus het *doen* en niet allereerst het *belijden* of het *gevoel* centraal staan, betekent niet dat overtuigingen of gevoelens geen rol spelen. In de relatie met Jezus zijn zij echter ondergeschikt aan dat wat de gelovige in de praktijk doet (Houseman 2008, 414).

Deze op de daad georiënteerde benadering van de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus wijkt af van interpretaties van evangelisch geloven die de nadruk leggen op haar ervaringsgerichtheid om daarmee de echtheid van het geloof te verklaren. Hoewel in het onderzochte evangelisch-protestantisme de geloofservaring ook een belangrijke rol speelt, is de werkelijkheid die de Godservaring veronderstelt en oproept stevig ingebed in het praktiseren van het geloof. De Godserva-

ring bevestigt de echtheid van het geloof waaraan door geloofspraktijken wordt vormgegeven.

In communicatieve geloofspraktijken doen gelovigen namelijk iets belangrijks: zij richten zich rechtstreeks tot God. Gelovigen zingen niet *over* God en lezen niet *over* God in de Bijbel, maar bidden of zingen *tot* God en lezen *Gods* Woord. Deze daden impliceren een relationele configuratie. Met andere woorden: zij geven vorm aan een directe relatie met God. De relatie met God is niet enkel een manier van spreken over het geloof of een manier waarop deze gelovigen God ervaren. Doordat de relatie met God wordt geleefd en gepraktiseerd, heeft zij daadwerkelijk gestalte. Door God rechtstreek aan te spreken, wordt ook de religieuze premisse dat God bestaat en toegankelijk is “gedramatiseerd” (Riesebrodt 2009, 86). Zo is ook God niet slechts een geloofsovertuiging of veronderstelling van de gelovige. Ook hij is “echt.”

De werkelijkheid die tot stand komt in de *performance* vormt voor gelovigen een alomvattende, betekenisvolle realiteit. Zij voorziet het gehele leven van gelovigen van betekenis. Volgens de godsdienstsocioloog Martin Riesebrodt is dat een logisch gevolg van de beoefening van *interventionistische* praktijken (in dit onderzoek: communicatieve geloofspraktijken). Omdat dergelijke praktijken de religieuze premisse van het bestaan van bovenmenselijke krachten “dramatiseren,” funderen zij de ervaring van de religieuze werkelijkheid en “rechtvaardigen” zij andere geloofspraktijken. Zoals Riesebrodt het uitdrukt: “Het abstracte geloof dat bovenmenselijke krachten bestaan alleen, maakt van hen nog geen realiteit die de hele mens in haar greep kan houden. Alleen het feit dat iemand niet slechts ‘gelooft’ in het bestaan van bovenmenselijke krachten, maar daar ook daadwerkelijk mee communiceert, rechtvaardigt alle andere praktijken” (2009, 86).

Materialiteit | Concrete geloofspraktijken en tastbare Godservaringen geven de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus een vaste, tastbare gestalte. Voor de respondenten wordt het geloof ook juist daardoor “echt.” Een materiële benadering neemt afstand van dualistische opvattingen over het geloof, waarin geloven hoofdzakelijk wordt geassocieerd met geloofsovertuigingen, zingeving en innerlijkheid, en waarin het wordt gezien in tegenstelling tot dat wat uiterlijk, materieel en belichaamd is (Meyer 2010, 2012a; Meyer and Houtman 2012b; Vásquez 2011). Het geloof is net zo echt als de materiële, ‘echte’ werkelijkheid waar zij deel van uitmaakt.

De materiële dimensies van communicatieve geloofspraktijken zijn belangrijk voor gelovigen. Door de regelmatige *performance* van communicatieve geloofspraktijken verkrijgt het geloof een zekere materiële densiteit (n.a.v. Vásquez 2011, 6). Het dagelijks leven is het liturgische podium voor communicatieve geloofspraktijken. Daar verkrijgt het geloof materiële densiteit: de beoefening van communicatieve geloofspraktijken zoals bidden en Bijbellezende neemt

letterlijk ruimte en tijd in beslag. De persoonlijke relatie met Jezus beïnvloedt zo het dagelijkse leefpatroon van gelovigen. Een materiële benadering heeft er oog voor dat zij geen immateriële zielen zijn die leven in een geestelijk universum. Zij zijn lichamelijke wezens die deel uitmaken en handelen in een concrete wereld om daarmee vorm te geven aan een echt geloof. Juist door de concreetheid van hun geloofspraktijken wordt de relatie met Jezus ervaren als meer dan “de particuliere manipulatie van gedachten en ideeën” (Nieman 2008, 21).

In dit echte geloof, communiceert God ook met de gelovige. Net zoals de communicatieve geloofspraktijken van de gelovige zijn ook Gods antwoorden verweven met de concrete patronen van het dagelijkse leven of juist met opvallende afwijkingen daarvan. In de Godservaringen van de respondenten is materialiteit essentieel: God praat met hen op een aanwijsbare manier. Zijn spreken geeft het geloof daarom ook significante materiële densiteit. Zulke concrete godservaringen bevestigen dat God “*echt* echt” is. Immers, de concreetheid van de ervaring overtuigt de gelovige ervan dat de ervaring niet slechts inbeelding is. Voor gelovigen verwijzen deze tastbare en aanwijsbare dimensies van hun Godservaringen tegelijkertijd ook naar Gods genade. Het materiële en tastbare van het ontvangen teken van God veruitwendigt de ervaring en geeft haar een *widefah-mis* karakter (Josuttis 2004, 19). De respondenten hebben het gevoel dat hen daadwerkelijk iets overkomt dat geïnitieerd wordt door een kracht van buitenaf. De Godservaring is te danken aan Gods genade alleen.

De waarde van het materiële in het evangelisch-protestantse geloof is tenslotte zichtbaar in de gewoonte van respondenten om concrete tekenen te creëren die hen herinneren aan hun Godservaringen. Soms is dit eenvoudig omdat God tot hen sprak door middel van een concreet teken dat door de gelovige bewaard kan worden. Soms moet de gelovige creatiever zijn. Gedacht kan worden aan het bewaren van tekstkaartjes met Bijbelteksten, het opschrijven van ontvangen profetieën, het mee naar huis nemen van een tastbaar object van de plaats waar de ervaring plaatsvond. Respondent Evelien raapte bijvoorbeeld een klein beukennootje op nadat zij een “licht” in een kerkdienst had gezien, om zichzelf blijvend aan deze ervaring te herinneren en zo twijfel te voorkomen. Door zulke voorwerpen te bewaren, creëren gelovigen een tastbare realiteit waarin het aardse leven en het geloof blijvend met elkaar verweven zijn.

Hoofdstuk 6 | Communicatieve geloofspraktijken

Evangelisch-protestanten communiceren met God door te participeren in *communicatieve geloofspraktijken*. Dit zijn geloofspraktijken met performatieve kracht: door het beoefenen van deze praktijken geven respondenten concreet vorm aan een persoonlijke relatie met God. Het communiceren met God volgt in basis de

logica van de gewone intermenselijke communicatie: gelovigen praten met God en luisteren naar God. Daarnaast investeren zij tijd in God om de communicatie met hem te intensiveren. Soms maken ze gebruik van de hulp van begaafde gelovigen die voor hen bemiddelen in de communicatie met God.

In het *praten met God* betrekken gelovigen God continu in alles wat ze doen. Door uitdrukking te geven aan hun gedachten, gevoelens en zorgen aan God, verbinden gelovigen de genoemde aspecten van hun leven met God (cf. Josuttis 2002, 117). Zo vervlechten ze hun dagelijkse levens en de realiteit van God. Het praten met God – zelfs al betreft het soms zeer aardse en triviale zaken – moet niet gezien worden als een onbetekenend onderonsje met God, als een gesprek over koetjes en kalfjes. In het praten met God wordt het leven van de gelovige voortdurend benoemd en daarmee toegewijd aan God. Het leven van de gelovige wordt in Gods nabijheid gebracht. Zo leeft de gelovige *coram Deo*. De nabijheid van God die gelovigen als gevolg daarvan ervaren, vormt een beloftevolle werkelijkheid: dicht bij God heeft de gelovige veel van Gods goedheid, zorg en leiding te verwachten (cf. Riesebrodt 2009, 85-86). Gelovigen wachten daarom vol vertrouwen op een antwoord van God.

Het wachten op een antwoord van God wordt concreet vormgegeven in geloofspraktijken waarin de gelovige *luistert naar God*. In dergelijke geloofspraktijken besteden gelovigen aandacht aan die dimensies van de (materiële) werkelijkheid waar God verwacht wordt aanwezig te zijn: ze lezen de Bijbel en delen het geloof met medegelovigen. Door middel van deze praktijken luisteren gelovigen naar God: ze construeren Gods stem door de woorden die in de Bijbel staan of door wat medegelovigen zeggen te reconstrueren als woorden die God persoonlijk tot hen spreekt. Door dergelijke praktijken *leren* gelovigen hun aandacht richten op God en op wat God te zeggen heeft. Gelovigen grijpen zo vooruit op de ervaring dat God spreekt. Ze ‘leren’ zo eigenlijk God te ervaren (Luhmann 2004, 2012; Luhmann, Nusbaum, and Thisted 2010). Het luisteren naar een God die niet fysiek aanwezig is, blijft desondanks een moeilijke taak voor gelovigen. Daarom buiten gelovigen de materialiteit van dergelijke praktijken soms uit (denk aan: de Bijbel als boek koesteren, vasthouden aan de letterlijke Bijbeltekst, geluid of stiltes gebruiken, ruimtes). Het goed benutten van dit soort materiële dimensies van geloofspraktijken kan een besef van Gods nabijheid oproepen, hetgeen kan helpen beter naar God te luisteren. Soms echter worden de materiële dimensies van deze geloofspraktijken dusdanig geëxploiteerd dat Gods wil hiermee eerder voorspeld wordt, dan dat er naar God geluisterd wordt.

Door *tijd te investeren in God* intensiveren gelovigen hun concrete en mentale betrokkenheid op God waardoor ze ontvankelijker worden voor wat God te zeggen heeft. De communicatie met God verbetert zo. Gelovigen verwachten dat God ‘als dank’ voor hun betrokkenheid ook zijn betrokkenheid in de relatie intensiveert. De geïnvesteerde tijd wordt dus verwacht zich terug te

betalen in een toenemend aantal Godservaringen. Aan deze verwachting ligt een economische benadering van tijd ten grondslag: investeren loont. Dit wijst er direct op, dat er ook ‘kosten’ verbonden zijn aan het communiceren met God: het is een veeleisende onderneming die van de gelovige inzet, tijd en discipline vraagt. In deze geloofspraktijk fungeert tijd ook als een maatstaf voor het geloof. Investeert de gelovige wel genoeg tijd in God? Gelovigen voelen zich al snel schuldig omdat ze het gevoel hebben niet genoeg tijd in God te investeren.

Omdat communiceren met God eenvoudig en veeleisend tegelijk is, nemen gelovigen al vaker hun toevlucht tot *bemiddelingspraktijken*. In dergelijke praktijken maken gelovige gebruik van de gaven of competenties van andere gelovigen die voor hen met God communiceren. Deze ‘communicatiespecialisten’ verbaliseren wat God heeft te zeggen als volgt: eerst luisteren zij naar God, dan adresseren ze de gelovige die om bemiddeling vraagt en beschrijven ze de gedachten, ingevingen en beelden die hen geopenbaard zijn. In dergelijke bemiddelingspraktijken ‘mechaniseert’ de intentionele en vrije communicatie met God vaak al snel doordat ze onderworpen wordt aan de regels en gebruiken van de mediatie praktijk. Het veelvuldig gebruik maken van bemiddelingspraktijken verandert het karakter van de persoonlijke relatie met Jezus: de directe relatie met God wordt vervangen door een indirecte relatie met God, de persoonlijke communicatie met God wordt vervangen door een methodisch gekanaliseerde communicatie, en de persoon van God verandert (vaak) in een onpersoonlijk goddelijke kracht.

Hoofdstuk 7 | Communicatieve Godservaringen

Evangelisch-protestanten hebben regelmatig concrete *Godservaringen* waarin *God tot hen spreekt*. De wijze waarop God communiceert lijkt echter in het geheel niet op gewone menselijke communicatie. In allerlei op het eerste oog normaal uitziende gebeurtenissen “merken” gelovigen dat God aanwezig is. Gelovigen doen hun uiterste best om “ruimte” te creëren voor dergelijke Godservaringen. Daarom communiceren zij intensief met God. Hiermee bieden ze God de gelegenheid om op hun vragen te reageren. Daarnaast brengen communicatieve geloofspraktijken Gods nabijheid tot stand. In deze menselijk-goddelijke werkelijkheid is het het meest waarschijnlijk dat God zal handelen en zichzelf bekend zal maken aan de gelovige. Zoals gezegd: dicht bij God kan er veel goedheid, zegen en hulp van God verwacht worden.

Vier dimensies van deze communicatieve Godservaringen trekken de aandacht. God openbaart zich allereerst in *het buitengewone*: in afwijkingen van vaste patronen en in wat te toevallig lijkt om toeval te zijn. Omdat het buitengewone een allesbehalve ondubbelzinnige ervaring is, doen respondenten bewust

moeite om het buitengewone in de dagelijkse gebeurtenissen te “zien.” Ze letten actief op de dingen die gebeuren en reconstrueren hun leven doelbewust als een project van God. Zo verandert hun leven: het gewone en dagelijkse wordt verheven tot een leven gekenmerkt door het bijzondere en goddelijke. Tegelijkertijd leidt dit (helaas?) soms ook tot een onderwaardering van het gewone en dagelijkse.

De ervaring van iets bijzonders bereikt vaak haar hoogtepunt in het concrete en materiële: gelovigen ontvangen een *concreet teken van God*. Door dit teken communiceert het met hen. De Godservaring is dus meestal niet mystiek of contemplatief van karakter, maar kenmerkt zich eerder door haar tastbaarheid. Omdat God tot de gelovige spreekt door gebruik te maken van de gewone wereld, wordt echt geloof gekarakteriseerd door een intieme verwevenheid van het goddelijke en menselijke, *ook* in ervaringen van goddelijke communicatie. Tegelijkertijd geldt dat de wereld van evangelisch-protestanten op deze manier ook betoverd raakt (hoewel slechts gedeeltelijk en op een specifieke manier). De werkelijkheid verandert in een communicatiemiddel van God. Zo wordt het dagelijks leven al snel een puzzelplaatje. Het is aan de gelovige om alle puzzelstukjes te vinden en samen te brengen om zo Gods boodschap aan hem of haar te ontdekken.

Voor gelovigen wijzen zulke ervaringen echter duidelijk op *Gods persoonlijke betrokkenheid* op hun leven. Dergelijke ervaringen geven gestalte aan Gods kant van de relatie en bevestigen dat God “echt echt” is. In de ervaring door God aangesproken te worden, wordt het leven van de gelovige “gedramatiseerd” (n.a.v. Riesebrodt 2009, 86). Hij of zij voelt zich speciaal, gezien en geliefd. De diepgaande betekenis van het aangesproken worden door God verschuift de aandacht van de inhoud van de communicatie naar de ervaring zelf: zij openbaart de actieve aanwezigheid van God in het leven van de gelovige. In het aangesproken worden door God, wordt de gelovige tot leven geroepen, een leven dat bedoeld is om “door God gebruikt” te worden in het plan dat hij ermee heeft.

Dit is de laatste dimensie van ervaringen van goddelijke communicatie: ze worden verondersteld *Gods wil* voor het leven van de gelovige te onthullen. Omdat gelovigen Gods wil zien als het hoogste goed en een leven naar Gods wil als het meest betekenisvolle leven dat een gelovige kan krijgen, vertonen evangelisch-protestanten een sterke preoccupatie met Gods wil. Ze betrekken God in hun besluitvorming en doen hun uiterste best om keuzes te maken die overstemmen met Gods wil. Het onderscheiden van Gods wil neemt vaak een dominante plaats in de dagelijkse praktijk van de relatie met God in en ‘instrumentaliseert’ de communicatie met hem. Het wordt een middel, een mechanisme dat gebruikt wordt om te ontdekken wat God wil. Aan de ene kant lijken gelovigen zo soms hun eigen verantwoordelijkheid voor de loop van de gebeurtenissen te ontwijken, aan de andere kant vinden ze rust en vrede in het geloof dat hun

leven uiteindelijk in Gods hand ligt. Hij zal het gebruiken voor het doel dat hij voor ogen heeft.

Hoofdstuk 8 | Een groeiende nabijheid van God

Door de wederzijdse communicatie met God ontwikkelen gelovigen een diep besef te *leven in Gods nabijheid*. Het besef te leven in Gods nabijheid verwijst naar een diep persoonlijke en betrokken wijze waarop deze gelovigen hun leven en de werkelijkheid ervaren. Het kan opgevat worden als hun *religious imaginary* (zie Taylors “*social imaginaries*,” 2007, 171–176). Het is een zienswijze die zich door de tijd heen ontwikkelt, met name door het praktiseren van communicatieve geloofspraktijken en het ervaren van God. Op den duur echter, valt deze op God betrokken perceptie van het leven niet langer samen met het eigenlijke praktiseren van communicatieve geloofspraktijken of met die momenten waarop Gods spreken ervaren wordt. Het is een duurzame perceptie van de werkelijkheid die standhoudt wanneer de dingen verkeerdt gaan. Het geeft gelovigen kracht.

Deze evangelisch-protestantse ‘beeldvorming’ van de werkelijkheid kenmerkt zich door een sterk besef van *Gods voortdurende aanwezigheid*. Voor deze gelovigen geldt dat God er eenvoudigweg altijd is, ook wanneer de gelovige niet aan het bidden is of wanneer de gelovige niets van God ervaart. De waarde die gehecht wordt aan Gods voortdurende, maar tegelijkertijd ook ongrijpbare aanwezigheid openbaart een paradox in de evangelisch-protestantse relatie met Jezus: aan de ene kant benadrukken evangelisch-protestanten continu de noodzaak van actie, van het concrete communiceren met God in het dagelijks leven, aan de andere kant leidt de communicatie met God tot een leven in Gods nabijheid waarin het gaat om het vertrouwen op en kennen van een God die niet gevoeld of gezien wordt.

De ontwikkeling van dit besef van Gods nabijheid is nauw verbonden met de religieuze biografie van gelovigen en bepaalde gebeurtenissen daarin. Kenmerkend voor de biografieën van de respondenten is hun sterke *verlangen “naar meer.”* Dit verlangen vormt een drijvende kracht in hun geloofsleven. Door dit verlangen raakten zij uiteindelijk betrokken bij de evangelische beweging. De antropologische en innerlijke dimensies van de wil en het gevoel zijn dus van belang in hun geloof. Tegelijk laat juist dit verlangen zien dat het concrete, dagelijkse leven er ook toe doet. Gelovigen verlangen namelijk naar een geloof dat relevant is voor het ‘echte’ leven. Dit betekent dat het geloof betrokken moet zijn op het concrete, materiële en dagelijkse. (Wat dat betreft voeren deze gelovigen dus geen “strijd voor de ware godsdienst” – de “*quest for true religion*,” Noll 2003, 262. Zij zoeken slechts naar dat wat voor hun persoonlijke leven van bete-

kenis is.) De persoonlijke relatie met Jezus kan worden opgevat als het *resultaat* en de *uitdrukking* van dit verlangen.

Door het uitleven en beleven van een relatie met Jezus groeit een specifiek geloof in Gods trouw. Gelovigen komen tot het besef dat *hun* zoektocht naar God, eigenlijk *Gods* zoektocht naar hen is. Ze komen tot het besef dat God er altijd al was in hun leven, al sinds hun jeugd. Door de tijd heen, gaan gelovigen hun vroegere, traditionele geloof daarom al meer waarderen. Ze gaan ook dit geloof zien als een ‘persoonlijke relatie,’ maar dan als een persoonlijke relatie van God met hen. Evangelisch-protestants geloof vertoont een hardnekkig vertrouwen in Gods initiatief en zijn niet aflatende, genadige toewijding aan de gelovige.

Ten slotte, het hebben van een dergelijke persoonlijke relatie met Jezus wekt ook verlangens op. Gelovigen verlangen ernaar om nog “meer te doen” voor God. Zij verlangen ernaar te “*leven voor God.*” Dit verlangen wordt aangewakkerd door het praktiseren en daadwerkelijke beleven van een relatie met Jezus en wijst daarom op het geloof als een bron van kracht die gelovigen motiveert om de wil – de ‘verlangens’ – van God te vervullen. In de praktijk betekent dit dat gelovigen proberen zich in te zetten voor de verspreiding van het evangelie, omdat ze aannemen dat dit het diepste verlangen van God is. Dit vraagt echter van hen, dat ze eigen plannen en verlangens opzij zetten. De paradox hierin is, dat de evangelisch-protestantse spiritualiteit aan de ene kant menselijke verlangens legitimeert – en zelfs gezien kan worden als het resultaat daarvan – terwijl het gelovigen tegelijkertijd motiveert ze weer op te geven in dienst van een leven voor God.

Hoofdstuk 9 | Conclusies en Reflecties

Op basis van empirisch onderzoek kan geconcludeerd worden dat het hebben van een persoonlijke relatie met Jezus in het dagelijks leven betekent dat de gelovige *echt geloof* heeft en beleefd. Voor evangelisch-protestanten ligt de waarde van dit geloof in de concrete verwevenheid van het geloof en het dagelijkse leven. Deze verwevenheid krijgt gestalte in het communiceren met God.

Dit *echte geloof* biedt religieuze zekerheid in een leven dat vol onzekerheid is. Zoals Taylor zegt: “Het komt nooit, of uiterst zelden, voor dat ik het werkelijk zeker weet, dat ik vrij ben van alle twijfel, dat ik me niet door een of ander bezwaar van de wijs laat brengen – door een ervaring die niet past, door levens die op een andere basis blijken te geven van volheid, door een alternatieve wijze van volheid die me soms aantrekt etc.” (2012, 53) Echt geloof biedt echter niet slechts een alternatieve of overtuigendere geestelijke ervaring. Het biedt een levenswijze die de realiteit van God verweeft met de realiteit van het dagelijkse leven. Het doet dit op een manier die niet zomaar ongedaan gemaakt kan wor-

den. Ook daarom voldoen de kerkelijke tradities waarmee deze gelovigen grootkwamen niet zondermeer voor hen. Deze tradities moet namelijk niet slechts begrepen worden of geauthentiseerd worden door persoonlijke ervaring. Nee, de betekenissen en overtuigingen die zij communiceren moeten eigen gemaakt worden door de daadwerkelijke deelname aan het geloof. Evangelisch-protestanten doen dit door te communiceren met God. Door praktijken zoals praten met God en ervaringen waarin Gods stem wordt verstaan, komen God en de relatie met hem tot leven. Het geloof is echt.

Curriculum Vitae

Ilonka Terlouw (born September 25, 1980 in Laren) is an enthusiastic theologian, who weekly takes the pulpit in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and regularly speaks at (youth)conferences. She is author of, amongst others, the popular publication *Geloven in seks (Having Faith in Sexuality, 2010)*. She speaks and preaches with a passion for people, their everyday questions and questions of life and death, driven to give voice to the gospel in a manner that touches their real lives.

After graduating from high school in 1996, in which she excelled in five extra subjects, she took up studies at the University College Utrecht, where she majored in International Law, Human Rights, (Comparative) Politics and Economics. After a semester of additional studies in politics and theology at the University of Heidelberg (Germany), she received her bachelor's degree in 2002 *cum laude*.

From 2001 onwards she studied at the Faculty of Theology and Faculty of Divinity (*kerkelijke opleiding vanwege de NHK, nu PKN*) of the University of Utrecht. She specialized in exegetical studies of the Old and New Testament and wrote her thesis on the death wish of Moses in Numbers 11. Meantime, she was an assistant at the departments of Philosophy of Religion and Spirituality and was involved in a research project of prof. dr. Anne-Marie Korte into contemporary miracle stories. In 2006 she stayed at the Aizawl Theological College (India) for half a year to study the position of women in the Protestant Church of India.

After receiving both her Master of Theology and Master of Divinity in 2007, she received an appointment as junior researcher at the Protestant Theological University, where she conducted the present research. First research results were presented in 2011, 'Expectations of Evangelical Faith for Dutch Mainline Churches' (at the *Conference Eglises de Reveil*, Kinshasa), and published in 2013, 'Desiring More of God' in *City of Desires*.

"FAITH IS... WELL, FOR A RELATIONSHIP IT TAKES TWO AND YOU HAVE TO BE OPEN FOR THAT [...] AND AFTER THAT, YOU ARE WITH THE TWO OF YOU. AND THAT'S HOW IT REALLY IS," TED (60) EXPLAINS. LEONIE (28) ADDS: "KNOWING GOD AND BEING CHRISTIAN MEANS MUCH MORE THAN JUST A GOD FAR AWAY. YOU CAN HAVE A REAL RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD AND THAT MAKES IT MUCH MORE INTERESTING."

HAVING A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS IS ABOUT REAL CONTACT WITH GOD AND ABOUT REAL PEACE, IT IS ABOUT **REAL FAITH**. BUT HOW TO UNDERSTAND THIS REAL FAITH THEY ARE TALKING ABOUT?

THIS PRACTICAL THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH INVESTIGATES INTO THE MEANING OF HAVING A PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS IN THE PRACTICE OF DAILY LIFE. THE RESEARCH CONCERNS EVANGELICALS IN TRADITIONAL CHURCHES AND AIMS AT UNDERSTANDING THEIR RELATIONSHIP WITH JESUS AND ITS EMBODIMENT IN PRACTICE AND EXPERIENCE.

Ilonka Terlouw (1980) is an enthusiastic theologian, who weekly takes the pulpit in the Protestant Church in the Netherlands and regularly speaks at (youth)conferences. She co-authored the popular publication *Geloven in seks (Having Faith in Sexuality, 2010)*. This study is her PhD-thesis.

