# Anchored in Scripture:

# The Role of Biblical Values in Christian Ethical Decision-Making Amid Competing Moral Frameworks:

# A Qualitative Multiple-Case Study

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## Abstract

To examine how Christians apply biblical values to present-day ethical decisions, a qualitative multiple-case study was conducted. The research sought to address an underexplored gap between normative Christian ethics and the lived reality of how biblical convictions withstand competing moral frameworks. The study focused primarily on two cases: a married Christian couple who could articulate the values they desired to guide their family, and an adult whose story involved peer pressure, addiction, recovery, accountability, Christian community, and moral formation. Descriptive material from a Family Values Seminar was also included. Data were gathered through semi-structured conversations recorded in handwritten field notes, participant and seminar records, and supporting materials. Thematic analysis was conducted within and across the cases, yielding five themes: intentionality gives practical direction to belief; competing influences remain formative when biblical commitments are not fully operative; values must be expressed through concrete practices; relationships can strengthen or weaken personal commitments; and moral formation is an ongoing rather than instantaneous process. The findings indicate that biblical convictions become more formative when they are personally embraced, tested through practical discernment, expressed through repeated practices, and supported by accountability within Christian community. The study proposes a framework, informed by the findings and relevant literature, consisting of Biblical Conviction, Practical Discernment, Intentional Application, Communal Reinforcement, and Ongoing Moral Formation. It also distinguishes among professed values, which individuals claim to hold; aspirational values, which they desire to embody; and operative values, which are consistently demonstrated through daily decisions, relationships, habits, and conduct in everyday life.

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**Anchored in Scripture: The Role of Biblical Values in Christian Ethical Decision-Making Amid Competing Moral Frameworks: A Qualitative Multiple-Case Study**

At the heart of Christian ethical reflection is a theological conviction, namely that Scripture is an authority on the moral direction of a life of faith. But one should not think that biblical teaching makes for easy ethics; there are practical difficulties to be had in making decisions. Christians must make sense of Scripture in the context of their lives, whether at home or in the church, at school and work, in peer and digital circles or the culture at large, all of which put forward their own moral claims and expectations. So, the question becomes as much about how the things Christians take from Scripture are made concrete and internalized enough to bear on what they do as it is about what they believe Scripture to be saying.

In a pluralistic culture where one's moral judgments can be informed by more than one framework, some of them at odds with each other, this is a salient issue. A Christian today might hold fast to the authority of the Bible and yet be up against social pressures over matters of money, technology, sexuality, success, autonomy, family and relationships. One will not always find these in the form of a philosophical case against Christianity; they are more likely to be found in the routines and assumptions of a normal life; in one's desires and schedule and the need for social approval. Hence the ethical challenge is not simply a matter of having the right beliefs but of the processes by which such beliefs are turned into practice and then into character. It is an old preoccupation of Christian ethics to see how a theological conviction translates into obedience. Hays (1996) would have it that New Testament ethics is more than a set of rules, since moral discernment must come from the wider scriptural picture of new creation, cross and community. In the same vein Wright (2004) sees in the Old Testament a moral vision all encompassing, dictated by the vocation and identity of God's people. Hauerwas (1981) makes

much of the part played by the Christian community in forming character, contending that its practices condition its members to inhabit and see the world in a way peculiar to Christians. What they have in common is the recognition that ethics is about formation, not just decision-making.

The present study puts that insight to an empirical test. The dissertation's theology is clear in affirming the authority of Scripture; the empirical work is to see how participants in ordinary life apply, sustain and put into words that authority. There is no attempt here to use qualitative research to make a case for the truth of Scripture. Theology is what gives the study its normative claims, and the research looks at how particular Christians in particular circumstances receive and act on them.

Of special interest is the gap between the professed and what in fact moves a person to action. This is not to suggest hypocrisy where there is none; a human being may want to live up to a conviction in good faith and still be swayed by temptation, habit, the demands of others or a lack of full internalization. The research will therefore make room for the difference between professed values (what a person deems important), aspirational values (the commitments he or she wishes to rule his or her life) and operative values (those that have a hand in one's priorities and decisions).

**Rationale and Background**

At the heart of Christian discipleship is the nexus of belief and practice. One finds in Scripture a constant linking of hearing to doing, conviction to obedience and wisdom to faithful living. The moral traditions of Christianity put equal weight on an ethical life as something that requires not just knowledge of what is good but the dispositions to see it through. In his 2007 work on virtue MacIntyre has done much to refocus scholarly eyes on the role of habits,

communities and practices in moral formation, even if his account is not confined to Christian ethics. Hauerwas (1981) and J. K. A. Smith (2009) make a like case in Christian scholarship for the way in which communal institutions, narratives and loves form a person, more so than abstract propositions.

Such a formative view has its place in the present day. It is not only by means of overt pronouncements on right and wrong that Christians are engaged with culture; they are also formed by the routines of family and education, by peer groups and economic imperatives, by social media and entertainment. According to Smith (2009) people are made by their loves and the things they do out of habit as much as by the ideas they can put into words. There is an implication here that the locus of ethical conflict is often below the level of formal argumentation. A Christian might hold to a biblical tenet in theory and yet be drawn to some other priority by dint of repeated exposure to a different milieu.

In this study we employ the notion of moral ecology to denote the cultural, institutional and relational environments that overlap in one's life. Be it church or family, school or work, digital networks or recovery communities, these are the settings where convictions are either reinforced or called to account. The term is an analytical tool for the dissertation and should not be read as positing a single theory to account for all Christian moral behavior; it is meant to locate decision-making in the environment proper.

Practical theology literature would support this preoccupation with what is lived. Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) have characterized lived religion as an engagement with the meanings and practices in their embodied form, not simply as an institution would have them. And Swinton and Mowat (2016) see in qualitative research a useful ally for practical theology, one that can put theological commitments in dialogue with the intricacies of human experience.

This offers a method for approaching Christian ethics from the accounts of those putting their beliefs into practice as well as from normative texts.

There is a pastoral dimension to the study as well. While congregations and families have no shortage of biblical instruction, that does not in itself answer every ethical quandary. They must determine how their views on God, stewardship, health and community will bear on their spending, technology use, parenting and time. For someone under the strain of addiction or social pressure the question of which value has the authority to sway a decision in the moment is even more pressing. These are matters of formation, not doctrine.

So, the rationale is not to suggest any want of substance in the theological tradition of Christian ethics. The need is found where normative theology and the actualities of ethical life meet. By way of a qualitative inquiry centered on practice, this study aims to give an account of the part that Christian relationships and deliberate practices have in upholding commitments and of the difficulties Christians may have in making the transition from conviction to decision.

**Biblical and Theological Basis**

At the heart of the study is a theological premise: that Scripture is the source of normative moral guidance for the Christian. One would not be right to think this means an ethical issue of the day can be settled by the finding of one verse. In fact, biblical ethics is to be found in the totality of the redemptive narrative, in the commands and wisdom of the text, in prophetic critique and apostolic teaching, and in the person and example of Jesus. As Hays (1996) puts it, an ethic worthy of the New Testament demands that one pay close heed to how any given text fits into the wider patterns of Scripture. Wright (2004) makes a similar point regarding the Old Testament, underscoring its missional and communal dimensions as against any tendency to see it in terms of moral rules standing on their own.

Such a view of the Bible calls for a measure of practical discernment. It is incumbent on the Christian to go from the revelation of Scripture to what faithfulness entails in the circumstances at hand. There is no relativism in this; it is done with firm theological convictions but with the wisdom to apply them. A value will be put forward in different ways when the situation of the decision is not the same. Stewardship will inform the finances of a Christian family but will not have them all adhering to the very same budget. Or in matters of education, media and church life, discipleship of one's children may well determine the course of action without every household having to make the identical educational provision.

In the present study, then, biblical values are treated as succinct moral commitments which stand for larger theological beliefs in the various domains of life. They are not a substitute for Scripture but are of use in enabling the believer to bring scriptural conviction to bear on practical questions. What is envisaged is a progression from Scripture to biblical conviction and thence to an articulated value, from there to practical discernment and on to action, a process that does the necessary interpretive work of ethical practice while remaining answerable to Scripture.

An instructive theological image is supplied by the words of Jesus on the wise and foolish builders (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27). He makes a distinction between those who hear Him and those who do. Both the wise and the foolish builder have been exposed to the teaching; what separates them is whether or not they have made it the basis on which to build their lives. The passage is not put forward here as an empirical hypothesis for proof so much as a lens to give meaning to the gap between what is professed and the values that are in operation.

**Statement of the Problem**

One can find no shortage of theological debate on the subject of biblical ethics, but an empirical grasp of the way Christians put biblical values to work in their day-to-day ethical choices is still wanting, particularly where other moral frameworks are in play. While the literature is replete with normative descriptions of a Christian's moral life and there is an expanding empirical record on religiosity, prosociality, church involvement, recovery, as well as the socialization and transmission of faith within the family, these strands of scholarship do not invariably come together on the question of how a conviction is made into a value that will inform a particular decision.

Evidence would have it that religious identity and one's moral conduct are not one and the same, which puts the problem in sharper relief. Kelly et al. (2024) and colleagues report a modest link between religiosity and prosociality, one more pronounced in self-reporting than in behavior as directly measured. One would be unwise to conclude from such results that a profession of religion is tantamount to a steady behavioral showing. Then again, J. Smith (2023) has shown regarding family transmission and religious upbringing that the environment does its part in shaping moral development. The issue then is not the matter of religion's importance so much as how those commitments take root and function in practice.

For pastoral ministry, churches and Christian families the implications of this oversight are considerable. A church might be under the impression that the impartation of biblical truth is enough to engender biblical values in the life of the congregation; parents may think internalization is assured by dint of exposure to the faith. An individual can hold to his or her biblical convictions in good faith and yet find that in the end it is convenience or fear or the pull of habit and peers that dictates a course of action. Lacking an appreciation for what connects

conviction with practice, the formation of Christian ethics is apt to be little more than the passing on of information or a form of crisis management once destructive patterns have set in.

To get at this, the present study employs a qualitative multiple-case design. By means of two principal cases and some supplementary material from seminars we look at the articulation, application and reinforcement of biblical values in a Christian setting as it is lived. There is no intention of making causal claims or any statistical generalization; rather the aim is to provide an account of the processes at work in Christian experience, and to do so with care.

**Purpose of Study**

This qualitative multiple-case study sets out to examine the way in which Christians come to grips with biblical values and put them into practice in the course of ethical decision-making today. Of special interest is how they do so in light of their own biblical understanding, the demands of a Christian community, intentional practice and the challenges of the present culture. We look at what pressures get in the way as participants make the link between their convictions and what they do, and whether relationships and habits of a kind have an effect on moral formation over time. The aim is not to demonstrate any causal link between biblical values and ethical conduct, nor to put forward the notion that Christians are in some way morally superior to non-Christians; the study is more concerned with the process by which such beliefs take hold in one's decisions.

**Driving Questions**

The following question is at the center of the inquiry:

> In contemporary culture, how do Christians go about applying and understanding biblical values for ethical purposes?

Three other questions serve to structure the research:

1. What bearing does a participant's reading of Scripture have on his or her ethical reasoning?
2. Where do one's biblical convictions run up against the norms and expectations of the culture?
3. How much do Christian community and spiritual discipline have to do with upholding an ethical commitment?

**Qualitative Research Model and Conceptual Framework**

As a matter of course for a qualitative approach, there are no statistical hypotheses to be tested here. The work is underpinned by a conceptual framework drawn from the literature, in keeping with Manda University's expectation that the dissertation will lay out the model for the research problem. One should not think of this as a universal stage theory or a means of imposing a rigid code on the data. It is an interpretive tool to see the transition from conviction to action.

In broad terms the framework can be stated thus: Biblical Conviction leads to Practical Discernment, then Intentional Application, Communal Reinforcement and finally Ongoing Moral Formation. By biblical conviction we mean the participant's sense of scriptural or Christian moral duty; practical discernment is the interpretation of those duties in specific circumstances; intentional application is the making of concrete decisions. Communal reinforcement is the part played by communities and relationships in either buttressing or eroding such commitments. Ongoing moral formation is the gradual work of shaping character, priorities and habit.

There is nothing linear about the arrows in this framework. Moral formation has its cycles and interruptions. A conviction may not be applied, in which case one might be led to

fresh discernment. Community can be a source of support or of subversion. A value can be fortified by doing it repeatedly or weakened by other habits. The model is designed to accommodate inconsistency and reversal as well as progress.

A few distinctions bear mentioning. The study makes a difference between professed values (what an individual deems important), aspirational ones (a genuine desire to be governed by even if behavior is wanting) and operative values which in fact inform one's decisions. Then there is reactive ethics, which deals with a dilemma after the event, as opposed to formative ethics with its pre-existing practices and habits. And we employ the term moral ecology for the various environments in play that can be at odds with or supportive of a moral commitment. All of these concepts are used to address what is of primary concern: not whether a person can put a Christian belief into words but whether it is enough of a part of him to be acted upon.

**Significance of the Study**

In three respects the study is significant. To begin with, it contributes to the field of Christian ethics scholarship by having normative theological reflection and the realities of experience speak to each other. While Christian ethics is properly concerned with the question of what faithful action should be, qualitative research puts forward another: during an ordinary life how do Christians set about enacting their convictions? One sees the merit in giving due attention to religious practice as Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) and Swinton and Mowat (2016) have done, all without reducing theology to a matter of sociology. This study takes its cue from them, letting empirical and theological claims inform each other yet remain separate.

Then there is the significance for Christian families. A family's moral priorities are made known not just in what is put forth in teaching but in the way they worship, spend, choose their media, relate to one another and make decisions on education, as well as in the routines that are

part of their schedule. Studies of religious transmission would have it that the environment of the family influences the moral and faith development to come, though it is hardly automatic. The present study is therefore insistent on intentionality, short of any suggestion of parental control; practically speaking it is meant to put before families a clearer view of the connection between their stated values and what their practices convey.

For churches and those in pastoral ministry the study holds significance as well. Much of a congregation's time is given over to the teaching of biblical content, but discipleship is also about enabling believers to put their convictions into practice. By drawing a line between operative and professed values the study offers a way of inquiring if biblical instruction is linked to habits, discernment, accountability and relationships. In the pastoral care of someone with addiction or other destructive behavior this can be a useful non-reductionistic stance: spiritual commitments are important, but they are found in social and behavioral environments of some complexity.

None of this is to say that two cases will put forward a general law of Christian behavior; the study's value is in a measured account of processes to guide further research and prospective studies, as well as pastoral and family discipleship.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

There is a deliberate boundary to the study. It does not purport to be representative of Christianity at large, being confined to an evangelical context in New England. Qualitative evidence is drawn from two focal cases with some descriptive context provided by a Family Values Seminar. The concern is with the making of ethical decisions and moral formation, not with any measure of doctrinal orthodoxy, treatment efficacy or psychological health.

By virtue of the design there are limitations. With so few focal cases statistical generalization is out of the question. My prior relations with the participants are a source of context but also carry the risk of researcher influence, role confusion and social desirability. As pastor and teacher in the seminar I was in a position to exert influence, and I have been transparent about it rather than downplaying it.

The documentary record that remains is not complete. There are no verbatim transcripts or audio recordings to be had, only the odd original note that is now gone, and so the study will not put words in anyone's mouth from memory and resorts to direct quotation when the wording is there. What thematic analysis was done on the record in 2023 was formal and should not be taken as having been coded at the time.

Temporal considerations apply too. A document from Case One was put to paper by the participant after the fact from notes of the original research period and is used as such, not as an artifact of 2023. In the case of Case Two the overlap of research and pastoral work calls for care in separating the two. And the study makes no causal claim that outcomes were the product of Christian community, church participation, accountability or biblical values.

**Terms Defined**

*Biblical values*. Those moral commitments which the participants and I see as having their basis in Scripture, or being largely so informed, and by which we are guided in our decisions, practices and priorities on an ongoing basis.

*Competing moral frameworks*. In the form of something philosophical, cultural, institutional, practical or relational, these are other sources of moral formation, expectation or authority that can either buttress or be at odds with biblical convictions.

*Professed value*. An individual's way of marking a moral commitment as one of importance.

*Aspirational value*. A moral commitment to which an individual is drawn and wants to have rule over his life, for all that present conduct may not be in keeping with it.

*Operative value*. One's actual priorities, practices and decisions are meaningfully swayed by this kind of commitment.

*Practical discernment*. What happens when one applies an interpretive process to a given situation to give effect to a broader biblical or moral conviction.

*Reactive ethics*. Ethical reflection that is put to work after the fact of a crisis or dilemma to determine the course of action.

*Formative ethics.* The sort of ethical reflection that has to do with the character, habits, relationships and practices being put in place prior to any crisis.

*Moral ecology*. For the purposes of analysis in this study, the term describes the various environments, be they cultural, institutional or relational, which overlap and in doing so challenge, compete with or underwrite moral commitments.

*Moral formation*. Over time, this is how character, habits, perception, relationships and priorities come to be formed.

*Christian community*. The church and like settings where through teaching, accountability, correction and reinforcement, among other things, one may find belonging.

*Practical theology*. A disciplined engagement with Christian practice and experience in the light of empirical inquiry, context, tradition and Scripture.

**Organization of Study**

There are five Sections to the dissertation. An exposition of the key terminology, conceptual framework, limitations and significance is found in in the Introduction along with the research questions and the problem and purpose of the work. The second part is a literature review covering such matters as lived practice and virtue and habit in biblical and Christian ethics, competing moral frameworks, family transmission, addiction and recovery, religiosity and behavior, and practical theology. The methodology is laid out in the third section; this encompasses the qualitative multiple-case design, thematic analysis, instrumentation, data collection, subjects and setting, as well as the researcher's positionality and any limitations. Results and discussion are put forward in the forth section by means of the two cases in focus, cross-case themes and supplemental seminar material, and a conceptual interpretation of the research questions. The final section will sum up the study and its findings vis-à-vis the literature, put forth theoretical and practical implications and recommendations for further research, and end on the matter of how biblical conviction and practice in life are related.

**Summary**

A qualitative multiple-case study is put forward in this section to look at the way Christians make sense of and put into practice biblical values when faced with the ethical choices of modern culture. While the theological authority of Scripture is the starting point, the empirical emphasis is on how convictions are made to work in day-to-day life. What is at issue is not an absence of theological musing on biblical ethics so much as the necessity of an empirical grasp of the means by which Christians will interpret, uphold and apply those values in the face of other moral frameworks.

To do this the study employs a conceptual framework drawn from the literature, one that is more cyclical than a strict linearity would allow. It is built on the pillars of Biblical Conviction, Practical Discernment, Intentional Application, Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation, and is further qualified by such things as the difference between professed, aspirational and operative values, or reactive versus formative ethics, and the notion of a moral ecology. In so doing it can get at how beliefs translate into priorities and practices, not just what participants claim to believe.

In Review of the Literature, the focus shifts to the body of scholarly work that underpins the framework. By way of providing the requisite theoretical and empirical context, it covers biblical and Christian ethics and a range of empirical scholarship on matters of moral formation and lived religion, family transmission, the link between religiosity and behavior, addiction and recovery, and the Christian community.

## Review of Literature

A review of the theological and empirical literature bearing on biblical values and the making of Christian ethical decisions is undertaken in this section. The research question at its core is how Christians in today's culture come to terms with and put into practice biblical values in their ethical deliberations; the review is structured accordingly. In that light, it is not enough for the literature to be a recitation of biblical precepts or a general summary of what has been written on religion. One must also see in it an exploration of the way scriptural conviction is made manifest in ethical conduct, the role of family and church in shaping that conduct, the impact of relationships and habit, and the strains of rival moral frameworks, as well as the circumstances that render professed beliefs a factor in real decisions.

There are two bodies of scholarship on display here, distinct yet complementary. The normative and theological kind puts forward questions as to what constitutes Christian ethics, the part Scripture should play in moral reasoning, the character the Christian life is meant to produce and the church's involvement in it. Wright (2004) and Hays (1996), to take two examples, do not make of the Bible an assortment of discrete rules but read biblical ethics in the context of its broader narrative and theological structures. Hauerwas (1981) would have one consider the moral import of character and community in the Christian life. Then there is Errington (2019) who draws attention to the practical wisdom of turning moral knowledge into action of faith. Such works supply the theological grammar for an understanding of biblical values.

The other is the empirical literature which looks at the workings of habit, social support, congregational life, family socialization and recovery while living. It does not allow for the easy assumption that being religious will of itself ensure moral behavior. A large swathe of research surveyed by Kelly et al. (2024) reveals only a modest if positive link between prosociality and religiosity, more so when the behavior is self-reported than when it is measured directly. Nor is the influence of parental religion a straightforward affair, as family-transmission studies would have it (C. Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; J. Smith, 2021, 2023; Zammit & Taylor, 2026). This side of the literature thus poses a more exacting inquiry: when are religious convictions internalized and reinforced to the point where they govern one's choices?

Starting with the theological underpinnings and moving on to the realities of moral formation, the review first puts before the reader the foundations of Christian and biblical ethics and the interpretive step from text to discernment. It then turns to such matters as virtue and character, the pluralism and relativism of the culture, family and congregational formation, addiction and recovery, the discipline of practical theology and the connection of behavior to

religiosity. These are brought together in a conceptual framework for the study and the gap the present research sets out to fill is identified.

What the section contends is that the formation of a Christian ethic is something more than right belief or acts of obedience done in isolation. While biblical conviction is a requirement of the study's theological framework, the literature would indicate that it is through interpretation, deliberate application and the building of character that conviction has any formative power. From this the section derives a framework informed by the literature: Biblical Conviction leading to Practical Discernment and Intentional Application, then Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation. Not an established theory of universal application, this is a synthesis for the purposes of the study to give order to the relationships found in the literature.

## Biblical and Christian Ethical Foundations

### *In the Old Testament*

One does not find biblical ethics as an autonomous moral system superimposed on the text; it is to be found in the theological universe of Scripture. According to Wright (2004), the ethics of the Old Testament are put into proper perspective by the nexus of God, Israel and the land. What is at the root of moral responsibility is the person and deeds of God, the covenantal standing of his people and the social structures that give expression to that identity. Such a reading will not have it that Old Testament ethics can be whittled down to a catalogue of commands. Rather, the law, the prophets, wisdom and narrative writings all serve to depict a people whose communal existence is to be marked by justice, holiness, mercy, faithfulness and loyalty to the covenant.

For this study the covenantal nature of the text is of some consequence. Biblical values are not regarded as abstractions but flow from a theology of who God is and the sort of people that are his. There is a link between the commands around property, worship, sexuality, truth-telling or the care of the vulnerable and Israel's status as a people made by divine redemption and covenant. In this way ethical practice is a public matter of belief; if God is just, holy and faithful, then there are consequences for the community's dealings with the poor, with workers and family, with strangers and neighbors.

The wisdom tradition brings something else to the table. It is not the case that one can find an exhaustive rule in biblical wisdom for every eventuality. Proverbs would have it that to live wisely is to exercise judgment and perception and be teachable, to know what is appropriate when circumstances alter. Errington (2019) makes the case that these elements of practical reason and wisdom are indispensable to Christian ethics. Moral maturity is not simply a question of having the right propositions; it is a cultivated facility for seeing what is relevant in each situation and acting in accord with God's order. That has a bearing on the ethical decision-making in ordinary life which is of interest here.

Moral formation is also located in the household and the community in the Old Testament. (New King James Bible, 1982, Deuteronomy 6:4-9) has instruction as an embodied and recurrent thing in the life of the family. The commands are to be taught and spoken during one's travels and at home. One could say this prefigures empirical work showing that beliefs are passed on by way of routine, relationships and example as much as formal teaching. While the text is no theory of socialization, religious and moral formation is intergenerational and communal.

In sum, three themes emerge from the Old Testament that are pertinent to the present study. Biblical ethics is a matter of theological identity, not a detached technique. Practical wisdom is needed to apply one's convictions in specific cases. And moral formation is a repeated, communal affair. These provide the basis for looking at biblical values as things to be reinforced and put into practice, not only affirmed.

### *New Testament Foundations*

A similar joining of theological conviction, the identity of the community and what is done in practice is evident in New Testament ethics. Hays (1996) contends that the images of cross, new creation and community that recur in the New Testament inform its moral reasoning. They are how individual texts are interpreted, and Christian obedience is seen as part of the life of a redeemed people. Ethics is not put forward as an assortment of unconnected imperatives; moral instruction has its place in the story of God working in Christ and making a community to match.

Jesus' words are invariably linked to action. In the Sermon on the Mount, he draws a line between those who do what they hear and those who do not (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27). For the purposes of this study that is a telling distinction, putting the matter of belief versus practice at the heart of discipleship. Both builders have heard the teaching; the question is whether it comes to bear on how they make their lives.

What is more, Jesus shows that the moral life is as much about the shaping of desire as it is action. Be it anger, lust, generosity or prayer, these are not viewed as externalities but as indicative of the person being made. The New Testament thus has a vision of morality that goes past crisis decisions to encompass character, loyalties, habits and the ordering of loves, a view

that accords with virtue ethics and the distinction drawn in this study between formative and reactive ethics.

With Paul one finds theological identity and practice of a kind joined together. Whether it is a call to sexual integrity, mutual service, the fruit of the Spirit or the renewal of the mind, the exhortations presuppose a Christian identity that will show itself in the way one lives. To put off the old and put on the new is language of development; the believer is being shaped over time to practices befitting a new identity, not changed in an instant without effort.

The New Testament bears out the dissertation's central thesis. Doctrine gives the theological world in which to make sense of faithful action but assent to it is not the whole of Christian ethics; discipleship is a matter of turning convictions into habits and forms of communal life. Hays (1996) is of use in this regard, his canonical method eschewing proof-texting and subjectivism alike. Ethical discernment is a matter of placing commands in the context of the New Testament's moral vision and then reasoning out their application today.

***Character and Community in Christian Ethics***

In the matter of bridging action with belief, theological ethics has often made recourse to character and community. Hauerwas (1981) would have it that the church is something more than an association of like-minded moralists; it is a community where one's loyalties, virtues, practices and narratives determine what sort of person a Christian is. In this view there is no dividing line between ethics and ecclesiology since the moral life is a product of being part of a community that instructs its members in what to put into practice, to desire, to remember and to pay attention to.

One finds an affinity here with MacIntyre's (2007) take on the fragmentation of modern morality. For MacIntyre, it is in the context of narrative and tradition that virtues are rendered

intelligible and moral language coherent. While his is not the same project as Christian theology, it serves to make plain why a moral rule will be wanting in practical force if unmoored from a formative context. A value is only a slogan until it is put in the hands of communities and practices that can show what it means to be faithful to it.

The literature on Christian virtue would add that repeated action is key to the development of moral dispositions. Sytsma (2020) shows in his work on Calvin that one need not see Protestant theology as at odds with the notion of habituated virtue. It is possible for Christian moral formation to be dependent on grace and yet give due weight to discipline and the cultivation of stable dispositions. This bears on the present study in that biblical values are not regarded as some self-made moral accomplishment but as convictions Christians set about embodying by way of their communal and theological surroundings.

Such an outlook puts a crimp in any ethics that is solely decision centered. Decisions are consequential but they come from persons whose desires and habits have been shaped by stories and relationships of the past; the choice itself is not a morally isolated event. When a Christian must decide on raising children or how to resist a bad pattern or put money to use, he or she does so with a history of formation behind him. The formative ethics of the present study is predicated on this: what kind of person is in the making? What has been internalized or trusted before the crisis comes?

### *Moral Coherence and Biblical Values*

An approach grounded in biblical values must also contend with the issue of coherence. There is a danger of fragmentation in Christian moral parlance when values are wrenched from the scriptural vision that undergirds them. One can affirm love, freedom, stewardship, holiness, compassion, justice and integrity all on their own, but their application in good faith is

contingent on how they stand in relation to each other. Wright (2004) and Hays (1996) are among those who eschew an atomized reading of biblical ethics in favor of placing moral claims in a wider theological pattern. The logic of the present study is to consider values as a distillation of biblical conviction, not as absolutes standing apart.

It is necessary to make this point since experience can put values in opposition. A parent might hold to both independence and protection, a pastor to truth and to compassion, someone in recovery to autonomy as well as accountability. To be ethically mature is not to pick and choose a value to the exclusion of others. Practical discernment must determine the ordering of legitimate goods in a way that is theologically sound and promotes human flourishing. So biblical conviction is less a list of competing priorities than a moral vision that gives values their proper place.

The Christian preoccupation with character is of assistance in this regard. Virtues are qualities of the person, not techniques, and they order one's actions and judgments to the good. Hauerwas (1981) stresses that the church is formed in a story which makes faithfulness visible; MacIntyre (2007) contends that traditions supply the standards of excellence and the human good that render virtues sensible. These are ways of seeing biblical values as interrelated facets of a Christian moral identity.

Coherence is also a check on the selective use of the Bible. People will make an appeal to grace to sidestep accountability, or to truth to the detriment of love; family can be made into an instrument of exclusion, stewardship into a control born of fear. A biblical ethic of any substance will not permit values to be used as a cover for one's preferences but will test them against the communal and canonical whole.

Consequently, the analytic interest of this study lies not just in whether participants espouse certain values but in the way they are connected and ordered. If a participant can account for how a value informs choices without serving as a convenient shield, it has greater ethical import. The qualitative cases will not amount to a systematic ethic, but they do show how moral priorities are put in order and what tensions have not been resolved.

## From Biblical Text to Lived Ethical Practice

### *A matter of interpretation and practical discernment*

To make of Scripture a contemporary action one must interpret it. There are Christians who will not contest the authority of Scripture yet differ as to its application in each personal or cultural context; this is not tantamount to moral relativism. It is simply the hermeneutical work of sifting the enduring moral claim from what is culturally bound, of making out the theological principles at play and the canonical context, and of being wise where an explicit command of the Bible is wanting.

Hays (1996) would have it that ethics in the New Testament demands a measure of synthesis and judgment on the part of the faithful, not a flat reading of a verse in isolation. In the case of the Old Testament, Wright (2004) puts forward much the same by situating the moral commands in the covenant life of Israel. One is left with the sense that biblical ethical reasoning is no mechanical or arbitrary affair. While Scripture sets limits on Christian moral judgment, there are areas of life, be it in one's finances, work, medicine, education, parenting or relationships, where believers have to determine how their scriptural convictions apply for want of a verse that can serve as a ready-made policy.

There is a conceptual bridge to be found in Errington's (2019) notion of practical wisdom: the ability to see what is morally pertinent in a situation and act accordingly. This is not

some alternative to biblical norms but how they are put in touch with complexity. The distinction is of value in steering clear of two extremes, the rigid moralism that would universalize a contextual application as if it were the principle of the Bible, and a relativism where application is unmoored from any firm conviction.

For these reasons the present study gives practical discernment center stage. The research looks at how values identified by participants become matters of action, not just what those values are. A person may be committed to stewardship and let that inform his or her approach to possessions, generosity, work and the like, but it does not dictate every budgetary choice. So too with the discipleship of children: a Christian family might come to different applications in respect of media or schedules while holding to the same conviction. Such an interpretive process is an aspect of ethical faithfulness.

***An intermediate framework of biblical values***

Handled with care, the idea of biblical values has its uses. They are not to be free floating preferences with a religious gloss or a substitute for Scripture. For the purposes of this study, I take a biblical value to be a succinct moral commitment, one that is in substance rooted in what the Bible teaches, whether by me or the participants. As an intermediate between a wide-ranging theological conviction and the practical decisions that recur, it puts a pattern of scriptural teaching into terms for easy recall and use.

Consider the value of God First. It is not a complete theology of vocation, worship or the family, but it reduces a broad priority of the Bible to words that can be called upon when commitments are in competition. In the same way Thoughtful Stewardship is a shorthand for all the teaching on responsibility, the use of resources, work and generosity. It is only in the generation of practical questions and the making of decisions that value takes on ethical

significance. Absent such movement, one runs the risk of value language being little more than aspirational rhetoric as opposed to something that can be put into operation.

This goes some way to accounting for the fact that the expression of biblical values will vary from one Christian or family to another; after all, it is not the wording that is authoritative. Scripture is what is normative in the theological scheme of things for this study. Values are interpretive summaries to put moral priorities for participants and must be measured by their responsible application and fidelity to Scripture. The dissertation will not be inclined to regard any value a participant puts forward with religious language as biblical on that account alone.

To conceptualize values in this fashion is to have an empirical means of examining the relation between belief and practice. A researcher can put to participants what they deem important and how they justify it biblically, what decisions are made considering those values and what practices or competing forces bolster or erode them. In so doing the concept forms an analytic bridge of sorts between qualitative inquiry and normative theology, without conflating the two. Theology is concerned with the moral framework's faithfulness, qualitative research with its understanding and enactment in the life of the subject.

**Moral Relativism, Moral Pluralism, and Competing Cultural Formation**

One will often find the current moral climate put in terms of relativism. Yet philosophical moral relativism is to be set apart from the actual experience of moral pluralism. The former has to do with the truth of moral claims, the latter with the social reality of communities where there are at variance different authorities, identities and moral traditions. A Christian can be in the throes of moral conflict with no formal philosophy of relativism in play, either in him or his neighbors.

For this study it is more exact to speak of competing moral frameworks than to characterize contemporary culture as run through and through with relativism. People come up against other versions of the good life, of success, freedom, sexuality, responsibility, justice and so forth, put before them by the media, their peers, their institutions, schools, digital spaces and the like. When these frameworks give a situation a different moral import or priority there is bound to be some ethical tension.

Then there is the matter of moral fragmentation as MacIntyre (2007) would have it, which makes sense of the intractability of some modern-day disagreements. Similar words may be used but placed in a different context of human flourishing; the meaning of love, dignity, authenticity or justice can be quite divergent. Christian ethics demands more than the recitation of virtue; it calls for moral claims to be situated in the communal practices and theological story that imbue them with Christian meaning.

Such is the difference between lived pluralism and philosophical relativism that it spares the empirical analysis from any overstatement. Those in a qualitative study might talk of conflicting expectations or pressure yet never in the idiom of moral relativism, and it would be wrong to ascribe to them a philosophical stance they have not voiced. What the research does is look at how practical moral authority is ceded to convenience, desire, social approval or cultural expectation as much as to Scripture, and in that way analyze the competition among moral authorities as it is lived rather than trying to make of the participants moral relativists.

### *Competing Formation and Desire*

Contemporary culture often shapes desire through repeated practices rather than explicit arguments. As J. K. A. Smith (2009) argues, people are formed by the cultural habits they inhabit, which teach them what kind of life is worth pursuing and what deserves their love. This

matters for Christian ethics because such practices can exert moral influence beyond what a person consciously professes. Entertainment, social media, education, consumer habits, and peer relationships may not provide formal moral instruction, but they still normalize particular views of identity, success, and desire.

In a sense, the locus of moral conflict is below where explicit debate takes place. Take the case of a Christian who is all for generosity yet is being formed by consumerism to think of the good life as a matter of acquisition. Or a parent who will say he is committed to the spiritual formation of his children, but whose activities and schedules make it plain that recreation and achievement have practical precedence. One in recovery may profess sobriety and at the same time be part of relationships that are still rewarding an older self. Such instances show that formation is something more than information.

Desire is also key to understanding the gap between what is professed and what is operative. To put forward a value is to acknowledge its importance, but that is not the same as having it hold enough sway when other desires come to the fore. What matters is how a person's behavior and priorities are governed at the point of decision. And repeated cultural practices will have their effect on that hierarchy even if the individual disavows the worldview behind them in so many words.

It follows that Christian formation is a form of counter-formation, though that is not to be confused with retreating from culture. The theological calling is to be faithfully present in the ordinary course of social life. The task is to put in place the kind of habits and relationships that will give biblical conviction the edge when other moral visions are vying for one's allegiance. Hence the importance attached in the literature to the family and the congregation: they are environments where beliefs can be embodied over and again, not just talked about.

***Moral Ecology***

For the purposes of this study, moral ecology is an analytical term for those institutional, relational and cultural milieus which either buttress or stand in competition with one's moral commitments. It is not a theory to be tested so much as a means of putting order to the fact that ethical choices are made within networks of influence. Whether in the workplace or the home, in church, among peers, in digital spaces or the wider culture, all of these have a part in shaping what comes to be seen as possible, desirable or the norm.

An ecological approach sidesteps two kinds of reductionism. It does not see ethical conduct as the straightforward result of some isolated belief, nor does it make of the individual a passive creation of his social surroundings. There is agency at work, but it is exerted in contexts where things like accountability, shame, opportunity and pressure are not handed out equally. A given value may be hard to hold onto in one setting and easy in another. Relational ambivalence is made plain by the moral ecology. There is a duality to the environments one inhabits. A family may be a source of love and yet in the same breath entrench patterns that are inimical to responsibility. One can find a sense of belonging at church without any meaningful accountability being in evidence. Peer groups will accede to a need for acceptance but in doing so make destructive practices seem unremarkable. Then again, relationships have the capacity to be an instrument of change, putting forward new narratives and expectations and a different kind of belonging. In the qualitative cases of this study, we have been careful not to take for granted the positive influence of the family or church on account of their religious nature or intimacy; the interpretation is guided by what each relational setting seems to put in place.

### *Digital, Consumer, and Everyday Cultural Formation*

It is not only moral institutions where contemporary formation is to be found. Advertising, digital media, entertainment and the like, along with consumer habits and social spaces shaped by algorithms, put before us over and again an idea of success and of the desires worth having and what should command our attention. Here J. K. A. Smith (2009) has it right in his focus on cultural practices: formation is something people partake in long before they are aware of it as instruction. Repeatedly engaging with an environment that is more amenable to certain identities and attentions than others is how one is taught to want.

That puts to question the notion of moral formation as an exercise in explicit teaching. A Christian might put in a good deal of time in formal religious instruction but then pass many hours in commercial and digital surroundings with a very different vision of the good life. It is not a matter of every platform or practice being morally wanting. What matters is cumulative formation, the habits of self-presentation, outrage, comparison and consumption that are made routine and the way they bear on the Christian's professed commitments.

Ideological disagreement does not fully capture the scope of competing moral frameworks. A framework can exert its influence in practical ways through rewards and habit without anyone having to air its philosophical underpinnings. Public self-expression is what social approval will teach is authentic; acquisition is the answer consumer culture offers to dissatisfaction; a digital platform will put a premium on reaction over patience or a charitable reading of things. The formative power is in the practice as much as in any argument.

Families are confronted with questions of formation that prohibition cannot address. Boundaries have their place, but one must go further and develop other interpretive habits and practices. There is a need for both children and adults to have reasons for seeing the moral

import of their media, consumption and relationships. Intentional values are important in this regard, giving one the language to judge what would otherwise be regarded as ethically neutral.

In the case of the church, digital and consumer formation shows the shortcomings of a discipleship based on information. Additional teaching will not of itself counteract an environment that is training desire elsewhere. Perhaps Christian formation calls for the sort of alternative rhythms of life one gets from worship, service, hospitality, rest and confession, or from relationships that are sustained. While the present study is not concerned with testing such practices, the literature would have us look to see if participants have the communities and habits to stand by their convictions in the face of so much competing formation.

**Moral Formation, Virtue, Habit, and the Development of Character**

In virtue ethics one finds a framework for comprehending the fact that moral formation is not a matter of discrete choices alone. MacIntyre (2007) would have it that virtues are put in place by practices and traditions which have an internal good to which they direct persons. The character of Christian ethics is not to be equated with Aristotelian theory, but its terminology does shed light on how one's moral capacity is molded by doing things repeatedly. One who is in the habit of being truthful or patient, or exercises self-control and generosity, will tend to be more disposed to see and act in keeping with such virtues.

Hauerwas (1981) puts this in an ecclesial context: the church's stories and practices are what form Christian character. There is more to the moral import of the church than the inculcation of rules. In worship, in service and hospitality, in confession and forgiveness, in the discipline of the community and in what is remembered together, desire and perception are trained. What results is an ethic of life acquired in community as opposed to a set of propositions held by the individual.

Then there is Sytsma (2020), whose work on Calvin is instructive in marrying virtue language to Protestant theology. He can show Augustinian and Aristotelian currents in conceptions of Christian virtue without abjuring the pre-eminence of grace. For the present study this is helpful in sidestepping any false dichotomy between theological reliance and the practice of morality. That grace is seen as the enabler of Christian character does not render teaching or community superfluous; rather they are the setting in which a Christian endeavors to live up to the convictions he takes to be from God.

Such a view of virtue underwrites the difference between reactive and formative ethics. The former is concerned with how to handle a given moral problem. The latter is interested in the habits and loyalties that will make a faithful response to the problem at hand more probable. They do not preclude each other, and Christians must still deliberate on their actions, but according to the literature the deliberator himself will put his stamp on the quality of that process. Formation has a way of determining what is compelling, what is desired and what seems like an option.

***Habit and the Process of Moral Change***

Pawl (2023) is of use in bringing the psychology of habit to bear on the Christian wisdom of character and virtue. His analysis resists a mechanistic reading of virtue and recognizes the part played by motivation and repeated practice in moral formation. To be sure, habituation will give some stability to one's responses, but Christian formation is also about the ends and loves those responses serve.

Knobel (2023) makes the case for virtuous habits co-existing with less desirable dispositions from an earlier time or conditioning. This is not an addiction model, but it is a sound

way to account for persistence during moral reformation. It can be put to work here to show why taking on new commitments does not mean every old disposition is done away with forthwith.

One sees the relevance of this to the sort of values that are professed, operative or merely aspirational. A value may be clear enough in the mind and even earnestly wanted, but an entrenched habit will have its practical sway when familiar cues are present. Not every lapse from intention to action need be called hypocrisy; there may be a lack of support from the environment or of practice, or simply the force of what has been learned.

The research on habit bears out the value of spiritual and communal repetition. Be it prayer, Scripture, accountability, or acts of service and generosity, these carry moral weight. It is not as though repetition of itself is a guarantee of virtue, but it can shape what is available to attention and create the occasion for convictions to be put into effect in the ordinary course of affairs until they come easily. While the psychological mechanisms at play do not exhaust the theological meaning of such things, they go some way to explaining why embodied practices are of consequence to one's ethics.

***Nonlinear Formation***

A nonlinear view of moral change is borne out by some of the latest philosophical writing. In their 2025 work, for instance, Caprioglio Panizza and Vaccarezza put forward a conception of moral transformation as a matter of altered possibilities. One may come to recognize options that were once thought out of reach while other ways of doing things are no longer seen as inescapable. This goes some way to supplementing the habit literature by making plain that formation is about perception in addition to what one does; with the person comes a change in what is found to be possible or unthinkable.

For Christian ethics there is value in a nonlinear approach since it is an antidote to either perfectionism or a moral minimalism. The former has a way of reading any shortcoming as proof against real growth, the latter of deeming good intentions adequate in themselves. A more realistic and exacting position is found in the literature: one's moral commitments are made formative by a steady progression towards congruence, yet this will entail its share of failure, reassessment and reliance on the support of others, not to mention renewed effort.

The second focal case of the present study would do well to have this perspective, though it is not the province of addiction alone. In families too one sees priorities being revisited and practices put up for renegotiation as they come upon a disconnect between professed values and the allocation of time or resources. Moral formation ought to be regarded as an exercise in alignment that is never done, not something to be accomplished once and for all. To make room for regression, interruption and a fresh round of discernment, the conceptual framework set out in the section ahead is deliberately cyclical.

***Moral Identity, Desire, and Repetition***

It is not only a question of behavior but of identity in moral formation. Decisions are not simply rules applied to a neutral field; often a person is acting on an unspoken notion of who he is and what he is set on becoming. Hence Christian moral formation entails an identity built on the faith's narratives and practices. Hauerwas (1981) and J. K. A. Smith (2009) come at it in different ways but agree that stories and practices are what give shape to moral agency, instructing persons in self-understanding and in what to love.

When a change calls for one to go against the grain of a personal history or social role, identity takes on added importance. For someone whose self-image has been defined by conflict, approval, achievement or addiction, a new commitment demands a new way of seeing oneself.

Slogans will not bring this about; it is the relationships and practices that lend the new identity credence. There is a parallel here with the recovery literature where Vigdal et al. (2022) note the part played by meaningful roles and a new kind of social participation in lasting change.

Then there is the matter of desire. One may be aware of the right course and yet in the moment want otherwise. It is not enough for Christian ethics to consider desire an impediment outside of moral reasoning; formation is also the ordering of desire. By dint of repetition, certain goods can be made more or less of a draw as attachments and emotional responses are fortified. That is the import of habit research: habits are the link between what is done repeatedly and what is then more easily desired.

But repetition is not to be taken as a mechanical process. Virtue is not assured by it, nor does outward compliance preclude an inner resistance. What makes repetition formative is the attention and meaning brought to it within the wider moral scheme and the relationships involved. Be it prayer, generosity, church going or accountability, these can be perfunctory or even coercive, or they can be profoundly formative, depending on the interpretation. The present study will look at practices as indicative of the values at work, but with some reserve as to what they actually show. Repeated behavior may speak to priority, but a qualitative reading has to determine how the participant makes sense of it. In the end, moral identity, desire and repetition are in a dynamic interplay: practice and identity reinforce each other, desire may underwrite or subvert them, and the whole is subject to the influence of relationships.

**Family, Parenting, and Intergenerational Transmission of Biblical Values**

In no context are religious beliefs and moral practices more aptly transmitted than in the family. C. Smith et al. (2020) would have one note that religious parenting is not limited to putting words of doctrine to a child or making sure they attend services; it is conveyed by parents

in their relationships, routines and expectations, in what they model and in the very plausibility of how the family lives. One finds with C. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) that the mark of a successful transmission is a religion made part of the everyday fabric of the home and parent-child relations of some quality.

Such results accord with what Scripture has to say on the matter of household formation. Deuteronomy 6 puts instruction where it belongs, in the ordinary rhythms of the day, and the New Testament takes for granted that faith is to be found in households as much as in the congregation. The empirical record gives this theological picture added substance: children will make sense of a parent's religion by the credibility of the example set before them and the consistency of the commitments on display, not simply by being put in its way.

J. Smith (2021) makes the case that the religious ideology of the parent influences the transmission of faith. A generic identity is not all that is passed on; parents impart a certain notion of what religion is for and its proper function. For the purposes of this study, that is of some import, since an intentional value in the family can be seen as a means of giving definition to priorities that might otherwise be left vague. To name a value does not ensure it is taken up, but it affords a family the language to articulate what they are trying to put first.

Then there are the moral priorities communicated by things other than explicit religious observance. How a family handles conflict, its work and spending patterns, media consumption, hospitality, the education of its children and even the treatment of a neighbor will speak volumes. Words about generosity may be at odds with a life built on acquisition; communal worship may be verbally held in high regard yet give way to any number of competing pursuits. In the end, a child is morally instructed by what is taught and by the hierarchy of values evident in the decisions the family makes time and again.

### *On Modeling, Practice and Internalization*

One sees in recent research an accent on internalization when it comes to intergenerational transmission. Ott and Vonk (2025), in looking at 279 U.S. adults and their recollections of Catholic religious parenting, identified internalization as a significant mediator of continuity in every one of the four parenting practices under review. While this is not proof of a universal mechanism, it is evidence that values which have been made one's own can be important to the carrying forward of certain practices from one generation to the next.

For the Christian parent there is an implication here. Rules and boundaries have their place but do not of themselves engender conviction. There is also the matter of explanation, trust, modelling and allowing a child age-appropriate responsibility and participation. It is a question of whether the child comes to see why a practice has meaning and can relate it to a broader theological vision, not just if obedience is forthcoming.

The conclusion that religious socialization has lasting moral effects well into young adulthood is borne out by the longitudinal studies of J. Smith (2023). But durable influence is not the same as deterministic reproduction. An upbringing will inform a person's moral categories and identity without assuring like behavior or belief in later years. This is a distinction the present study is loath to overstate.

Internalization is a useful concept in understanding family values. When values are put into words, they become open to discussion and parental priorities are visible; a common vocabulary is had for the rationale behind decisions. Yet they are only formative in so far as they are embodied in credible practice and come to be seen as meaningful rather than something imposed. They are best regarded as tools in the process of spiritual and relational formation, not as a formula for intergenerational faithfulness.

### *Where Transmission Is Complex and Limited*

A degree of caution is warranted by systematic and longitudinal research. A review by Rich et al. (2024) turned up only seven studies worthy of inclusion and the influences of religious beliefs on parenting were reported as both positive and negative. With such a mixed and small body of evidence, it is unwise to view ‘religious parenting’ as a uniform practice with outcomes one can predict.

Zammit and Taylor (2026) in a registered report add to the complexity. Their early childhood study showed child age to be significant while the factors thought to enhance transmission did not have the anticipated effect. Such null findings have their methodological as well as substantive worth in showing that Christian families would be mistaken to think stronger intentionality on the part of the parent will of itself be measurable in the child. The child is a developing agent whose responses are conditioned by maturation and circumstances outside the home.

The literature is thus in favor of intentionality but not of control. Parents can foster relationships and model practices that render faith credible and intelligible, but they cannot put another person’s final commitments in place. Theologically and empirically, this is an important point to make, lest one suppose from family-formation research that parental faithfulness is to be judged solely based on identical results in the offspring.

In the analysis of Case One the present study is supported by the literature on family transmission and at the same time constrained by it. The couple’s deliberate articulation of values is a formative practice to be examined. What cannot be concluded is that these will yield long-term results in their children. A more defensible position is that such values offer a framework

and a shared moral vocabulary for the parents to link their biblical convictions with the decisions that recur in the family.

### *The Limits of Parental Control: Agency and Differentiation*

Any consideration of intergenerational formation must make room for the agency of the child. One might be forgiven for reading some family-religion research as if parents were passing on values with the same ease that a device transfers information, but the empirical record is not in favor of such a model. Children are wont to reinterpret or appropriate what they are given, to resist it, and at times to put it aside altogether. This is even more apparent as they come of age and put in time in peer groups, schools, digital spaces and the congregation away from home.

There is value in the caution Zammit and Taylor (2026) sound against transmission models of a simplistic kind. In their work with 235 Roman Catholic parent-child dyads, the children being between 3 and 6, they could find no overall association of significance in religiosity between parent and child, nor any effect from the putative transmission enhancers; child age was the predictor. It is a reminder of the role development plays and that one should not see parental religiosity as something mechanically conveyed.

Nor does differentiation have to be read as a failure of the parent. For faith to be internalized in any real sense, young people will want to separate their own convictions from what has been handed down by way of expectation. Ott and Vonk (2025) would concur with their focus on identified internalization. There is a different kind of motivation in a value one has made one’s own than in compliance with an authority figure. It is a difficult balancing act for Christian families to have boundaries of substance and yet leave space for questions and explanation and for the assumption of responsibility.

How family values are put forward is part of this. To use them as a means of control may bring about behavior but not ownership; to regard them as optional preferences is to rob them of formative clarity. A better course is to be clear in articulating and living out values, to put the theological case for them, and to have each member of the family answer as a moral agent.

The first case in the present study is best seen as an example of parental intentionality, not as proof of intergenerational success writ large. A family can put in place a moral environment where biblical values are both named and put into practice, but what comes of it is open to question since the child is developing as an agent in an ever-wider range of relationships and influences. That distinction is to the study's credit, setting realistic limits on parental responsibility.

**Church, Christian Community, and Communal Moral Formation**

The church has traditionally been viewed by Christian ethics as a community that forms its members. Hauerwas (1981) makes the case that the church puts forward a moral vision in the story and practices it embodies. So, the contribution of Christian community to ethics is found in the patterns of worship, service, hospitality, discipline and mutual responsibility, not just in what is said from the pulpit or in doctrine. It is an environment where Christians are schooled in the sort of people they ought to be.

In a sample of 530 U.S. church members taken online, Byerly et al. (2022) put together the Congregational Character Questionnaire and observed a positive link between how virtuous congregants thought their congregation to be and their level of participation, life satisfaction, meaning and well-being. While the study does not prove causation, it lends itself to regarding perceived character as something that can be examined empirically in church life.

Relationships are key to communal moral formation. When under pressure, accountability and mentorship can put convictions within reach. One may be privy to a moral standard, but trusted relationships offer the wherewithal to act in keeping with it. A congregation lacking in relational ties may give religious exposure but little in the way of practical reinforcement.

For the purposes of this study the church-as-community angle is of particular note, as the two focal cases are engaged with Christian community in dissimilar ways. In one, church is an element of a value system deliberately put in place by the family; in the other there is a more mixed past where the church was not always of assistance, even if accountable Christian relationships have since taken on greater importance. The literature offers a way of looking at communal formation without the presumption that a religious community will of itself be a positive force.

***Support, Belonging and Participation***

One comes across associations with social engagement in the empirical work on religious participation. Son (2024), drawing on longitudinal data in the U.K., reports a reciprocal link between attendance at religious services and engagement with religious organizations; and while attendance was a predictor of later secular organizational involvement, the reverse was not true. It fits with the notion that being part of a congregation can put one in touch with wider networks, though not to say that attendance is the cause of every type of social involvement.

Bulbulia and colleagues (2024) have a useful perspective to offer from a longitudinal standpoint. Their estimates of the causal effects of service attendance on prosocial outcomes, based on 33,198 New Zealanders, were much more modest than what cross-sectional

associations would suggest. It is an illustration of why one should not take a simple correlation as evidence of a large causal effect.

So far as Christian ethics is concerned, the conclusion is not that attendance is of no moral consequence, but neither does it of itself engender virtue. Through participation there is exposure to teaching, to belonging and to service, but whether these are formative is a matter of how well they are done and how beliefs are lived out. The present study regards regular churchgoing as a component of communal reinforcement at best, not a surefire cause of ethical conduct.

Moral change frequently calls for an alternative social identity and in that respect belonging is significant. A community can put forward the stories and relationships to make a new way of life seem possible. But if there is no moral challenge to go with it, belonging will only perpetuate what is already there. It is when a Christian community couples belonging with truth-telling and the sort of accountability that underpins the values its participants espouse that it becomes most germane to the study.

### *Limits of Congregational Influence*

One should not assume that a congregation is synonymous with effective support; the empirical record offers ample evidence to the contrary. In a 2023 study of congregational backing for working women, Okuwobi and colleagues came across boundaries in what the congregation was able to provide its participants. While their subject matter is not the same as this one, the finding has wider import: there are times when religious communities have their gaps or put forward a kind of support at odds with the realities of the member’s situation, or one that is simply unhelpful.

For qualitative research this is a methodological consideration of some importance. It is not uncommon for a participant to express both gratitude and disappointment with and toward his or her community. The researcher would do well to let such ambivalence stand instead of forcing the story into a narrative where the church is cast as either entirely beneficial or harmful. Contrary evidence is given due weight in the present study on these grounds; even if subsequent discussion makes much of accountable Christian relationships, it is necessary to leave visible the fact that in Case Two the church was of little help at a certain point.

Theologically speaking, none of this is to be expected. What the church is supposed to be in Christian doctrine is an empirical claim only in the sense of how any given congregation happens to operate, and the two should not be conflated. Practical theology has an eye for the distinction between normative commitments and the way things are done. It follows that congregational influence is something to be put under examination, not taken for granted.

### *Accountability, Belonging, and Moral Challenge*

According to the literature, one must look at accountability and belonging in tandem. The former without the latter can be shaming or make for defensiveness and retreat; the latter in the absence of challenge is comfortable but does not form. A Christian moral community has the capacity to be formative provided its relationships are of sufficient strength for honest confrontation and yet gracious enough to see to the dignity of the person as he is changed.

In the second case of focus for this study the balance is of note. Proper accountability is more than outside oversight. It is a matter of relations where a person allows others to put hard questions to him, to call out any inconsistency and put before him commitments he might have put aside under duress. These are values the individual would have more operative and the

relationship serves as an external memory for them. There is a social cost to walking away from one's word in front of those who know you, and trust is part of the moral force at work.

Identity is shaped by belonging too. When a person can see himself as someone of consequence in a community built around a certain life, he is better able to hold to it. One sees it in the recovery literature (Vigdal et al., 2022) in the link between social recovery and the presence of trust and new ties in non-stigmatizing settings. The same resources may be had in a Christian community so long as participation affords a role of meaning and does not relegate the struggling individual to a problem requiring management.

Yet communal support is not always up to the mark or suited to the member's circumstances. Okuwobi et al. (2023) noted repeatedly the limits of what congregations offered working women, whether in being insensitive to their time or not specific enough about their concerns. The lesson for the methodology of this study is that empirical scrutiny of the fit and quality of relationships is required; the theological notion of an accountable community will not do as a substitute. In the conceptual framework of this study, accountable belonging is regarded as a mechanism for communal reinforcement that may be of some import; it is not put forward as something church participation will assuredly yield. The point of the matter is that community has an effect not on the supposition that one's conduct is altered by being in a religious setting, but because there are practices and relationships which lend greater social support to moral commitments, see to it they are recalled with more regularity and are not so easily put aside without thought.

## Religiosity, Moral Behavior, and the Professed-Operative Values Gap

### *Religiosity and Prosociality*

The dissertation puts forward an empirical question at its core: what is the nature of the link between moral behavior and religious commitment. While popular discourse in religion would have it be a simple equation of stronger faith and better behavior, the literature is less sanguine. In a review of over 811,000 participants in 237 samples spanning almost sixty years, Kelly et al. (2024) found religiosity to be positively correlated with prosociality if only in a small way on average.

That the association is small is significant. It can be taken to mean religion has a part to play in the making of morality, but it does not make religious identity a surety of ethics. There is room for the highly religious to be inconsistent or to exhibit in-group bias, self-enhancement and the like, or to be guilty of plain moral failure. For this reason, the study does not pose its research question in terms of whether the religious are 'more ethical'; that is too wide a net to discern how belief is translated into action. Bulbulia et al. (2024) would add to the caution, their work indicates causal estimates of the impact of attendance on prosociality are not as large as the associations appear. All of which calls for precision: religious commitments can inform one's moral orientation, networks and service opportunities but do not have uniform results in all areas of behavior.

### *Self-Report and Observed Behavior*

Kelly et al. (2024) make a telling distinction between prosociality as directly measured and as self-reported. The latter showed a much more pronounced association with religiosity. The authors put forward several reasons for the disparity, from the shortcomings of direct measures to

self-enhancement on the part of the subject, though the meta-analysis is inconclusive as to the right answer.

For the present study the matter is of consequence. Field notes and qualitative interviews are bound to rely on the participant's word. This is of value given that the research is about meaning and lived experience. But the study will not consider any professed value to be tantamount to practice. What a participant says tells of his or her beliefs and recollections; the analysis has to look at the decisions and contradictions as well. The literature bears out a divide between moral profession and moral operation. A profession has its place in revealing aspiration and identity, but where the gap between self-report and observation is evident, one needs the vocabulary to account for the uneven hold a sincerely held commitment has on a person's choices. Hence the study makes a distinction of professed, operative and aspirational values.

***On Professed, Aspirational and Operative Values***

In the context of this study, we define a professed value as one to which an individual is morally committed and deems of importance. An aspirational value is a commitment one genuinely wishes to have direct one's life, notwithstanding any inconsistency in present practice. Where a commitment has a tangible bearing on the priorities and decisions of an individual it is an operative value. Such are analytic distinctions for the study at hand, not psychometric constructs that have been put in place.

We find this threefold approach superior to the binary of sincerity versus hypocrisy. It is possible for someone to be sincere in his profession and aspiration yet see the operative power of a value eroded by habit, social pressures, fear or craving, or by other loyalties and a want of practice. Inconsistency of this sort calls for interpretation, not a moral label. Nor should the

notion of aspiration be invoked as a standing excuse for one's conduct; the ethical import of a value is made plain by what a person in fact does and puts first.

The framework is also of service to the qualitative researcher in putting evidence into words with some discipline. A participant's assertion of the importance of family is indicative of profession. A description of the desire to put family at the center can be taken as support for aspiration. But when one sees schedules, spending and relationships all arrayed around that priority in repeated decisions, the value is clearly operative. The categories are there to forestall any inference of behavioral change from mere statements of belief and to impose a certain evidentiary restraint.

For Christian ethics the distinction has special utility given theological traditions that will acknowledge both moral renewal and an ongoing struggle. With the language of operative values, the empirical analysis can chart practical influence without presuming to pass on the spiritual sincerity of participants, a judgment the qualitative method is not equipped to make.

### *Religion and Moral Behavior: A Matter of Measurement*

How one measures has a bearing on research into religion and moral behavior. Under the rubric of religiosity, one may find belief, identity, orthodoxy, attendance, private observance or community involvement. Prosociality might be measured in terms of self-reported generosity, volunteering, charitable giving, cooperation or wider social engagement. Where studies employ different measures, any seeming discord may well be a function of what is being measured and not a contradiction in the phenomenon itself.

By making a separation between prosociality as self-reported and as directly measured, Kelly et al. (2024) put this problem in evidence. For a qualitative study the difference is of analytical use since self-report will shed light on moral identity and recollection of experience in

a way that behavioral measures do not; the latter are a different kind of evidence as to action under given conditions. They are not to be regarded as exhaustive but as answering their own questions. And so the distinction helps to keep apart what is professed or aspired to from what the evidence indicates is in operation.

Caution is warranted with attendance figures as well. Son (2024), in an examination of U.K. longitudinal data, uncovered reciprocal ties between religious service and organizational engagement and a prospective link from the former to secular organizations. With New Zealand data suited to causal contrasts, Bulbulia and colleagues (2024) put the effects of attendance on prosocial outcomes at something less than cross-sectional associations would suggest. The point of these studies is that the significance of attendance is contingent on design and the social processes in question.

Such considerations speak to the fitness of a qualitative inquiry for the research question posed here. There is no attempt to arrive at an average effect of religiosity. Rather the study looks at how participants make sense of biblical values and relate them to their decisions, and the practices they find supportive or in competition. In showing the mechanisms and interpretations that a broad measure might miss, qualitative data are a complement to the quantitative work. One can also find in the measurement literature a bolstering of the professed-operative divide. While religious identity and morality as it is self-reported are of some import, they do not constitute a full record of how one behaves. Nor should an observed lapse be taken to negate what a person has put forward as his convictions or aspirations. To get at the whole of moral formation there must be some consideration of both practice and identity and any friction between the two.

**Addiction, Recovery, Religion, and Social Support**

In the second case under consideration, the work on addiction and recovery comes into play, not least the matter of social support. The notion of recovery capital has gained currency in current research as a way of characterizing the strengths and impediments of a community, of society and of the individual that bear on recovery. A systematic review by Bunaciu et al. (2024) of 69 studies turned up a good deal of variation in the operationalization and measurement of recovery capital; their findings are a reminder of its multidimensional nature but point to a want of more robust psychometric evidence in varied settings and among different populations.

Social recovery is likewise put forward by Vigdal et al. (2022) in their meta synthesis of qualitative substance-use studies. They make a connection between recovery and communities free of stigma, the making of new relationships, trust and responsibility, and the chance to assume a new social identity. For this study such themes are germane since they correspond with the participant's own focus on being part of a structured community and having accountable ties, without the implication that Christian involvement was the sole cause of his recovery.

Then again, the recovery-capital literature would have it that change is hard won when one goes back to an environment run along old lines. A social network can be as much a reinforcement for substance use or an old identity as for recovery, a dynamic that is akin to the moral ecology of the study. In the end the authority of any new commitment is only as good as the environment will allow in terms of supporting or subverting the life being put in place.

Such research is thus in favor of accountability and community but demands a certain restraint in matters of causality. A relationship may be a source of resources, yet recovery is an individual and multifaceted thing. It would be wrong for the present study to put down sobriety or a relapse to a single church experience or spiritual practice or relationship. What is looked at

is the way the participant came to see structure, God, Christian relations and accountability as part of the moral and relational environment he was after.

### *Community, Accountability, and Identity*

It is not uncommon for recovery to mean a reworking of behavior and of identity. According to the literature on social recovery, there is advantage to be had in relationships that see to a future identity and do not keep a person anchored to a stigmatized past. Responsibility is not thereby diminished. As Vigdal et al. (2022) put it, there is value in acceptance and in responsibility; a community can be supportive and at the same time hold out expectations for change.

There is a great deal of common ground here with the interest in accountability. It is a practice of the kind where one makes a voluntary offering of one's commitments to the challenge and reminders of those who are trusted. Its worth is in the social underpinning of a desired way of life, not in being watched from the outside. A private commitment is all too easily set aside or made over with no social cost; a shared one brings encouragement and a measure of pressure.

A Christian community can be of service in this if it affords belonging without stigma and honest relationships. But the literature in the preceding section is cautionary against putting too fine a spin on religious communities. Participation in a congregation is formative only insofar as the practices and the actual relationships are in keeping with the individual's developing sense of commitment. The present study consequently regards church attendance and Christian relationships and accountability as distinct if related things.

### *Theological Cautions in Recovery*

There is a need for theological caution when one sets about the task of combining Christian moral formation with addiction. It would be wrong to make of addiction merely an

absence of faith, of prayer or moral gravity. To do so is reductionist and runs the risk of heightening shame while blinding us to the psychological, social, relational and physiological facets of substance-use disorders. On the other hand, an account that is strictly clinical can miss the mark on matters of identity, spirit and morality which are of consequence to the participants.

An integrative approach is taken by this study. One is put in mind of the formal recovery programs and other supports at hand, but the question posed is how biblical values and the Christian community play into a participant's conception of his continued recovery. The research makes no pretense of being a substitute for professional care, nor does it set out to diagnose the participant or pass judgment on medical treatment. What it offers is more circumscribed: an examination of the way in which spiritual priorities, relationships and moral commitments have entered the life the participant has been making for himself.

The dissertation follows this methodology. Normative theology addresses self-control, truthfulness, hope, and repentance, while recovery research examines social capital and support. The qualitative case then shows how one participant understood and lived within these overlapping frameworks. These levels must be distinguished rather than conflated.

## Practical Theology and Lived Christian Experience

### *Lived Religion*

It is within the purview of practical theology to hold normative Christian conviction and the experience of living together without conflating them. In the words of Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014), lived religion is an attentiveness to the embodiment, practice and negotiation of religious meaning in the ordinary course of things. One looks past institutional pronouncements and official doctrine to see what is done with the stories, symbols and relationships at the disposal of the religious person.

For this study the concept has bearing since biblical values are found where official teaching and personal appropriation meet. A church will inculcate the value of Scripture, integrity, family, generosity or community, yet it is up to the individual to read those in light of his circumstances. Lived religion is concerned with how the tradition is inhabited, with all the inconsistency, creativity and struggle that entails.

One is led to look at the run of the mill practices as much as any crisis of a moral nature. In the way people parent, worship, converse, spend their money or use media, or in their reaction to failure, ethical formation is on display and the strength of competing influences made plain.

***An Interpretive Bridge in Practical Theology***

According to Swinton and Mowat (2016) there is a place for qualitative research in practical theology in that it allows for a disciplined regard for human experience in keeping with one's theological commitments. This is a matter of critical dialogue between the disciplines; theology is not to be used to put words in the participant's mouth any more than experience is to stand in for it. Theology puts forward the resources for interpretation and lived experience may well reveal unanticipated patterns or complexity.

In a dissertation of an explicitly evangelical Christian, such an approach is called for. I do not come to the study with the authority of Scripture as an empirical hypothesis to be demonstrated. That is a matter of theological commitment. The empirical side of the question is to find out how those of the Christian faith go about living by biblical values and what they make of them. To conflate the two would be a category error for both the research and the theology.

Practical theology has room for the contradictory too. Be it a church failing to live up to the values it preaches, or a participant who is not consistent in the practice of his convictions. While espousing their ideals, families will often come to other priorities that are in competition

with them. One could see these inconsistencies as methodological noise but practical theology is better served by regarding them as a matter for reflection. In so doing it can put in evidence the gulf between what is normatively envisioned and how things are in practice, and in turn shed light on the ways formation is left wanting or comes to fruition.

### *Theological Commitments and Researcher Interpretation*

There is a need for reflexivity in an overtly theological approach. My own convictions on moral formation, accountability, the family and church, discipleship and Scripture are what I bring to the study. They will have a bearing on the interpretation of evidence and on which questions are deemed of consequence. Practical theology has no use for feigning that such commitments do not exist; they must be put on display and any interpretations subjected to a disciplined scrutiny.

Consequently, this study draws a line between the meaning a participant conveys and my own theological evaluation. What a participant reports are taken as his or her understanding or experience. I am at liberty to read that account in terms of a professed-operative values gap or communal formation or practical wisdom, provided the reading is identified as an act of interpretation. That is even more necessary given my role as pastor and teacher in the milieu of the research.

Far from being a liability, this kind of reflexivity is a strength of the work. While an insider's vantage point affords a good deal of context, it also opens the door to confirmation bias and the like, to say nothing of role confusion. The practical theology literature would have one acknowledge and put one's position as an insider to the test, not conceal it under a pretense of neutrality.

### *Practical Theology and the Normative-Empirical Distinction*

A confessional dissertation calls for a precise delineation of where empirical research and theology meet. The former is concerned with the description and interpretation of human experience based on observable or reportable evidence. The latter puts forward normative claims in relation to God, Scripture, sin and virtue, and what constitutes faithful practice. Each can be instructive to the other, yet they are not answering the same questions.

It would not do to interview Christians who find Scripture of importance in order to prove the theological proposition of its authority over Christian life. Nor does a participant's disobedience of a biblical precept constitute empirical refutation of its authority. What the empirical work can do is indicate where that authority holds sway in practice and where it is outweighed by other considerations. Theology then has the means to appraise the significance of such patterns in the Christian tradition.

The cases here are not meant to be apologetic uses of qualitative data to make the case for the superiority of biblical values over any other moral framework; two focal cases are hardly sufficient for that. Their worth is in the processes they put on view: the articulation of conviction, the reinforcement or otherwise of community, the way decisions are made sense of and how formation plays out in failure as well as success.

One finds Swinton and Mowat (2016) to be of assistance in this regard. They show practical theology to be one that deems human experience theologically significant but does not cede to it final normative authority. Experience may put assumptions to the question or lay bare the chasm between doctrine and what is done, but it is not a substitute for Scripture or theology. In the same way, while theology can inform my interpretation, it will not be allowed to override the words and experiences of the participants.

What follows is a two-level analysis of a deliberate sort. On the empirical side one looks to the evidence for what it tells us of the participants' practices and choices and meanings. The theological side is where those patterns are considered against the backdrop of biblical ethics, formation and practical wisdom. To be both unapologetically Christian and transparent in method, the distinction is indispensable to the credibility of the dissertation.

**Integration of the Literature and Conceptual Framework**

One might say the literature in this section is united by a single issue: moral conviction is no guarantee of consistent action. In what follows, Biblical ethics is seen as the source of normative content and theological identity; wisdom literature for its call to discernment; virtue ethics for character and habituation. From family research we have an emphasis on internalization and modeling, from congregational studies on the relational support of communal settings. Prosociality research shows religiosity and behavior to be related, if not one and the same. The recovery literature would add social resources, accountability and new forms of belonging to the list of essentials. And practical theology offers a means to put these dynamics under examination in the real world.

To make sense of these various strands of scholarship, the present study puts forward a conceptual framework: Biblical Conviction -> Practical Discernment -> Intentional Application -> Communal Reinforcement -> Ongoing Moral Formation. This is not to suggest that moral development will invariably follow such a sequence or that each element is on equal display in every instance. The framework is intended to give structure to the recurrent relationships found in the literature and to see how biblical values are more or less at work in practice.

***Biblical Conviction***

By biblical conviction is meant the participant's grasp of a moral commitment rooted in Christian theology or Scripture. Wright (2004) and Hays (1996) make the case for viewing this within the wider theological vision and narrative of the Bible, not in terms of proof texts taken in isolation. While it gives one a moral identity and direction, the empirical side of things cautions against equating it with behavior; a person can sincerely hold to a standard and yet not act in accord with it. So, in our framework conviction is a necessity but not enough in itself. It is the moral source to which the Christian participant looks. What the research seeks to determine is the way this conviction is used in making decisions.

***Practical Discernment***

This is where broad conviction is interpreted and made into concrete judgment. Errington (2019) is of relevance since wisdom calls for a perceptive and apt response, not the mechanical application of rules. Discernment is a matter of ordering competing goods and deciding what is of moral import in the circumstances at hand and what a given conviction entails. It also serves to keep the framework from conflating a universal command with the way any one participant makes application of it. Two Christians of like value may differ in their approach because of circumstance. The question for analysis is whether the reasoning is in keeping with the professed conviction and can be accounted for by the participant.

***Intentional Application***

Here the discerned conviction is put into practice in the form of priorities or decisions. One can tell the difference between what is professed and what is operative. To name a value is one thing; when it begins to dictate habits, boundaries, money, schedules or relations it has become operative. There is no expectation of unblemished consistency in application. As Knobel

(2023) and Pawl (2023) note in the formation literature, old ways of doing things have a way of persisting even after new commitments are made. Intentional application is thus a series of efforts to bring practice into line with conviction, not evidence of a finished moral transformation.

### *Communal Reinforcement*

Relationships and communities have a way of either weakening or putting strength behind moral commitments, be it through challenge, memory or otherwise. Theologically Hauerwas (1981) is the foundation for this, and the significance of the social environment is borne out by the empirical work of Byerly et al. (2022), Son (2024) and Vigdal et al. (2022) on congregational and recovery matters. Under reinforcement fall things like encouragement, correction, accountability and the practices of the community. We have chosen the term reinforcement over causation for a reason. A community may be supportive without being able to vouch for results, and at times religious communities do not offer effective support (Okuwobi et al., 2023). The moral ecology is such that an individual is part of several communities with expectations that are in competition.

### *Ongoing Moral Formation*

By ongoing moral formation is meant the way in which character, identity, priorities and habits are developed over time through a series of relationships and decisions. One finds in MacIntyre (2007), Hauerwas (1981), J. K. A. Smith (2009), Pawl (2023), Knobel (2023) or Caprioglio Panizza and Vaccarezza (2025) various philosophical, theological and psychological treatments of this; yet they all make plain that ethical development is not to be found in some discrete moment of choice.

There is a feedback loop to future discernment. Some responses are made more available by dint of practice, whereas failure will show up where one's values are wanting or other commitments run deep. In that sense the framework is cyclical: what is formed today will inform how biblical convictions are seen and made to have practical force down the line.

### *A Dynamic Rather Than Linear Model*

It would be a mistake to read the five components as a staircase for participants to ascend. The literature has little patience with such a straightforward view. Family transmission is no sure thing (Rich et al., 2024; Zammit & Taylor, 2026). Nor does religiosity account for behavior (Kelly et al., 2024). The effects of being part of a congregation are only so much and depend on context (Bulbulia et al., 2024; Okuwobi et al., 2023). Knobel (2023) notes habits endure even after new commitments are made; Vigdal et al. (2022) would have it that recovery is a matter of putting one's social identity back together after setbacks.

A dynamic cycle is a truer representation of the framework, one that allows for things to be put on hold or start again. Conviction might result in discernment but not application, or the latter may falter in the absence of the community. New relationships open practices that were not before possible. For its part, the moral ecology is in flux, hence the formation is never done.

For a qualitative multiple-case study this kind of interpretation is called for. There is no intention of putting a score on the five stages for a participant. The framework serves as a sensitizing structure to see where conviction, discernment, community and the rest are in evidence and where they are not, and to hear from the participants how they interact.

## Gap in the Literature

One can put together a good deal of scholarship on biblical ethics and moral formation. Biblical scholars and Christian ethicists put forward strong normative case for scriptural

reasoning, wisdom and community. The empirical side has its studies of religious socialization, parenting, prosociality, habit and the like. Practical theologians have their ways of having lived experience speak to theology in a disciplined manner. So there is no dearth of work on religion or morality to be had.

The gap is to be found at the point where these literatures meet. A normative study will tell you how a Christian ought to live but will not put to an empirical test the believer's own account of the path from conviction to decision. With large empirical studies one can find an association between outcomes and religiosity but not the way an individual makes sense of his biblical commitments in the face of family life, ordinary choices, accountability and the rest. And while family and congregational studies shed light on socialization, they do not always get at how stated biblical values come to bear on an ethical decision.

The present study is concerned with that qualitative gap in practice: how Christians make the transition from a biblical conviction to something they do when confronted with other moral frameworks. The question is not what is believed or if the religious are better behaved overall, but how a given participant goes about articulating values, dealing with competing influences and making use of relationships.

A small qualitative multiple-case design is the right way to go about it, since what is wanted is process in depth, not statistical generalization. The study cannot say how typical a pattern is in Christianity. What it can do is bring to light the tensions and interpretive processes that elude a larger quantitative approach and in so doing pose more exacting questions for later research.

**Relationship of the Literature to the Research Questions**

In the first of the supporting research questions, one is put to the test: in what way does a participant's grasp of Scripture bear on his or her ethical reasoning and the decisions that follow. For this there is a normative background to be found in the literature on biblical ethics. Wright (2004), Hays (1996) and Errington (2019) would have it that moral reasoning from scripture is a matter of theological identity, canonical interpretation and practical wisdom. The qualitative study is thus concerned with more than an ability on the part of participants to quote from the Bible; it looks at how scriptural convictions are made into priorities, value language and decisions.

The second supporting question is one of what challenges present themselves when the cultural norms and practices of the day run counter to biblical ones. An analytic background is supplied by the work on moral ecology, habit, desire, cultural formation and moral pluralism. J. K. A. Smith (2009) makes much of the formative nature of cultural practices. And as the habit literature has it, old patterns can keep their practical authority even once new convictions have taken hold (Knobel, 2023; Pawl, 2023). In the study these are treated as relational and formative pressures of a competing kind, not simply as overt philosophical arguments with Christianity.

As for the third supporting question, the issue is the part played by Christian community and deliberate spiritual practices in upholding biblical ethics. There is the theological perspective of Hauerwas (1981) who sees the church as a community of character. Then one has the empirical studies of social engagement, recovery, congregational participation and the like which indicate that while communities are a resource they also have their limits and mixed effects (Bulbulia et al., 2024; Byerly et al., 2022; Okuwobi et al., 2023; Son, 2024; Vigdal et al., 2022)

Community is therefore approached in the study as a context that may be formative but whose function cannot be taken for granted.

All three strands of inquiry come together in the central research question: within contemporary culture, how do Christians go about understanding and putting to use biblical values in their ethical decisions? The literature would suggest no single variable will account for it. Whether a conviction becomes operative is a matter of discernment, of habit and family and church, of internalization and repeated practice. Such complexity is what underpins the qualitative design of the study and the framework set out in this section.

**Summary**

A review of the pertinent empirical and theological literature on Christian ethical decision-making and biblical values has been offered in this section. One does not find in biblical ethics a set of rules divorced from context, but something rooted in the narrative and theological identity of Scripture. Be it the covenant and wisdom of the Old Testament, the discipleship and community of the New, or Christian virtue ethics, the point is made that character, interpretation, community and practice are all part of the moral life (Hauerwas, 1981; Hays, 1996; Wright, 2004). And because broad convictions require discernment to be brought to bear on a situation, practical wisdom is of particular import (Errington, 2019).

Any straightforward link between religion and behavior is called into question by the empirical side of things. Family and upbringing are formative, to be sure, but transmission is a function of context, development, relationships and modelling (C. Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; J. Smith, 2021, 2023; Ott & Vonk, 2025; Rich et al., 2024; Zammit & Taylor, 2026). Participation in a congregation affords prosocial opportunities and networks if the effects are often modest and not always positive (Bulbulia et al., 2024; Okuwobi et al., 2023; Son, 2024). As for religiosity

and prosociality, the association is there but small, and more so in self-reporting than in what is observed (Kelly et al., 2024).

The fact that moral formation is a nonlinear and developmental process is borne out by research into recovery, virtue and habit. Supportive relationships may be needed to put down new roots in life, yet older habits have a way of persisting (Bunaciu et al., 2024; Knobel, 2023; Pawl, 2023; Vigdal et al., 2022). Practical theology offers a means of making sense of these dynamics without conflating the empirical with the normative (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; Swinton & Mowat, 2016).

This body of work lends itself to the conceptual framework of the present study: from Biblical Conviction through Practical Discernment and Intentional Application to Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation. It is a dynamic, cyclical framework and not a universal sequence. It is meant to focus on the conditions that make an aspirational belief a reality in a decision, whilst allowing for failure and other influences.

There is also the matter of the gap the dissertation sets out to fill. While there is ample scholarship on prosociality, religious participation, family transmission and moral formation, a qualitative and practice-oriented account of how Christians make sense of the step from biblical conviction to an actual ethical decision during their lives is less well developed. To explore this in two focal cases, with some descriptive material from a Family Values Seminar to supplement, the research will adopt a multiple-case methodology.

## Research Methodology

This qualitative multiple-case study was undertaken to get at how Christians in today's culture make sense of, put into effect and work to uphold biblical values in their ethical

decisions. The research looked closely at the part that contextual pressures, relationships with one's Christian community, intentional practices and a biblical worldview play in the making of such decisions. There was no effort on the part of the study to show empirically the truth of Scripture or to make the case for the superior ethics of Christians over non-Christians; it was an examination of what biblical convictions mean to certain Christian participants and whether they are applied in an inconsistent fashion or are interpreted, reinforced and challenged.

One question is at the heart of the research: in contemporary culture, how do Christians apply and understand biblical values during ethical decision-making? To give further focus three supporting questions were posed. Do participants' reading of Scripture inform their ethical reasoning and the decisions that follow? When the prevailing norms and practices of culture run counter to a biblical conviction, what sort of challenges are encountered? And in terms of upholding an ethical commitment to the Bible, what is the contribution of the Christian community and of spiritual disciplines? These are questions of process, not of causal effect or prevalence.

For a study concerned with the interpretation of experience and the path from conviction to practice, a qualitative design was called for. As Creswell and Poth (2018) note, this form of inquiry is well adapted to ascertaining how meaning is made in each context. Accordingly, the study has placed more stock in depth and close interpretation than in any statistical generalization, wanting to know how the moral weight of Scripture, habits, social pressure and so forth are described by the participants in their settings.

The focal point of the study is two cases. In Case One a married couple of Christians set out to put words to the values they would have guide their family. Case Two is an adult whose record shows the influence of peers, substance use and attempts at recovery, as well as church

involvement, accountability and the formation of character in his family life. Some descriptive material from a Family Values Seminar held in the same congregation was also drawn upon; while it offered useful evidence on the gap between what is stated and what is done, and on my own formative role in the environment, it was not considered a quantitative intervention or a third case.

What is being examined in these materials is the transition from a biblical conviction to something of an ethical practice in life. The Review of Literature put forward a conceptual framework to account for this: Biblical Conviction leading to Practical Discernment, Intentional Application, Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation. This is not a coding template to be laid on top of the data, but an interpretive lens brought to bear once patterns have been discerned. The analysis was left open to any contradiction or failure, to processes that are anything but linear.

**Subjects and Setting**

During 2023 the research was carried out in an evangelical congregation in New England. As the pastor of the church, I had pastoral ties with the participants which afforded relational access and a good deal of contextual knowledge but also presented methodological and ethical issues calling for due consideration. During this research, the congregational milieu was viewed as a ministry environment where one might find teaching and pastoral care mingling with family dynamics and the formalities of a research conversation, not some neutral laboratory. For the sake of confidentiality, the dissertation makes generic reference to the congregation; any detail that would put a participant in ready recognition is left out or made general, be it a child's name, an identifiable recovery setting, local institutions or superfluous geography. The reader is given

enough context to make sense of the research environment but no more than is called for by the questions at hand.

### *Selection and Bounding of the Focal Cases*

There was no random sampling here, nor any attempt to put together a sample of Christians that was statistically representative. I chose the focal cases from my own ministry context on the grounds that they were information rich as far as biblical values and the ethics of day-to-day decision-making are concerned. Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) would concur that case study is the way to go when the phenomenon is of a piece with its context and the researcher wants an intensive grasp of bounded cases over population figures.

The two cases in question are defined by the research period, the participants and their documented conversations, and the value-laden issues being put under a microscope. Case One has to do with a married couple and the deliberate way they have gone about putting family values into practice. In Case Two the research conversations with an adult revolve around such matters as social influence, accountability, Christian community, continuing formation and the business of addiction and recovery. What the study puts forward is not an isolated decision but the process of how convictions are put into words, interpreted, put to the test by other influences and either buttressed or eroded in relationships before being linked to practice.

### *Case One*

This case is of a young Christian couple with children who, in 2023, were giving thought to a more purposeful expression of their faith in the form of family practices and values. Some six research conversations can be accounted for in the record, held part at home and part at church. But since the documentation does not bear out a chronology for every meeting down to the day, the study will not put forward exact dates or locations where none are warranted.

Their conversations covered a good deal of ground: stewardship, health, parenting, discipleship, the making of decisions. In some instances, the Family Values Seminar gave them a common vocabulary. This is of methodological note because I was not merely an observer; having drawn on my own family as an example, I had been at pains to get the participants to think in an intentional manner about values. One should not read the analysis as if the couple arrived at their value language in isolation from the research.

In addition, there was a follow-up put together by the participant for the purposes of the dissertation. Dated after the 2023 research period and drawing on handwritten notes of the time, it spells out five family values which are central to the analysis. It is regarded as a means of clarification and supplementary documentation, not as an artifact of 2023 or as evidence that all the particulars were on the table in the original meetings. Nor can it be called formal member checking since the participant was not asked to go over my analytic interpretation in full.

***Case Two***

The participant in Case Two was an adult Christian with whom I had been acquainted from earlier ministry work. His life has seen its share of substance abuse, trouble within the family, relapse and recovery programs, and a continuing struggle to put his life back on a firm footing. For the purposes of this study, what is regarded as primary research evidence is confined to that part of his history which is documented in or bears directly on the 2023 research conversations; any prior pastoral knowledge serves for context only and will not be made into a finding on the strength of my recollection.

Over some six months from the summer of 2023 the formal research took the form of roughly monthly conversations, for the most part in the church office. There was considerable pastoral overlap in these exchanges given that I was acting as the participant's pastor while also

doing the research. The handwritten notes that have been preserved record such themes as peer pressure, one's sense of belonging and self, the family's reaction, God, accountable relationships, the church, efforts at independence and the making of new priorities, and recovery programming.

### *Family Values Seminar*

Some descriptive context for the study was provided by a Family Values Seminar of July 22, 2023. While my records show 53 registrations and 49 in attendance, those are figures for the setting of the seminar, not a means of turning the 49 present into a formal research sample. An attendee becomes a research participant only if he or she is part of one of the two focal cases.

What transpired was a teaching and reflection session under my facilitation, not an experimental intervention or a survey of the standardized type. The idea was to put before families non-negotiable values to act as a moral compass and to have them reflect on whether their lives were in keeping with their professed priorities and what should inform decisions going forward. After putting forward examples of potential values, including my own to make the researcher's influence plain, the seminar ended with an exercise for the families to come up with five of their own. It was a one-off event and no longitudinal program, nor is it a source of quantitative data. The materials are put to analysis for what they document of the congregational context and the framework of the teaching.

## Apparatus and Instrumentation

There were no formal quantitative surveys, psychological tests or standardized scales of moral development in this study. What was used were semi-structured research conversations, my field notes in handwriting, documentation from the participants and the seminar materials. These suited the exploratory nature of the work, permitting the participants to put their values, decisions and pressures in context instead of having them reduced to a number.

### *The Researcher as Qualitative Instrument*

As Creswell and Poth (2018) would have it, the researcher is the principal instrument for collecting and interpreting data in qualitative inquiry, and so it was here. I determined the topics, put questions to the participants and followed up, made my notes and in due course gave thematic order to the record and made sense of what was said. My theological commitments and position as a pastor are part of the process, not something external to it.

### *Semi-Structured Research Conversations*

One speaks of research conversations when dealing with the focal cases because the record does not bear out that a strict interview protocol was put in place at every meeting. The approach is better described as purposeful questioning with the flexibility to listen and to pursue meaning as the participant presents it (Seidman, 2019), without the pretense of a formal sequence. During these conversations there would be recurring matter for discussion: how the participant views values and the tie between faith and decision making, social pressures, relations with church and family, and where stated beliefs are or are not borne out in practice. The questions were put to the test in the case at hand. For Case One, the discussion would center on family priorities and what the values in question meant in a practical sense. With Case Two one was more likely to find the conversation turning to social pressure, accountability, relationships, recovery and consequences, as well as the values the participant wished to put in place.

### *Handwritten Field Notes*

For the focal cases the handwritten field notes served as the main contemporaneous record of events. There is some variation in how complete they are. A few entries will have a specific question or phrase intact but for the most part they are abbreviated, not always easy to

read or my own summary of what was said rather than a verbatim rendering. I made no effort in the analysis to put shorthand into quotation marks if there was any doubt as to the wording. That is a constraint which has dictated a conservative approach to quoting; unless the provenance of the source can be ascertained and the participant's words are unambiguously there, the dissertation will paraphrase the documented meaning. In that respect the notes are to be regarded as evidence from the field and not as transcripts, an important methodological point given the selection and compression inherent in them.

### *Seminar Materials*

A second documentary source is found in the teacher materials for the Family Values Seminar and what remains of the seminar annotations. These give an account of the five-value exercise, example values, reflection questions and the biblical passages employed in teaching, and in so doing preserve the intent of the seminar. They also put on record examples of my own such as Discipleship of Children and God First, pertinent to an assessment of researcher influence in Case One.

### *Participant-Generated Documentation*

Where authorship and a connection to the research could be verified, documentation from the participants was drawn upon. The follow-up document for Case One is the prime instance of this, being derived from notes of the 2023 research period. It has the merit of putting the family's five values and their practical import in the participant's own writing. But the fact that it is of a later date means there is some temporal distance and the chance that later experience colored his summary of the 2023 material.

## Data Collection Procedures

The bulk of data was gathered in 2023 during ordinary ministry and within the church. The sequence was broadly: the July Family Values Seminar, then several rounds of research conversations with the two focal cases, the making of handwritten notes at the time and eventually the culling of the surviving materials for the dissertation. The cases followed their own timelines to an extent, and the study will not put an artificial uniformity on the record where it is not warranted.

### *Family Values Seminar Procedure*

Held on 22 July 2023, the Family Values Seminar was a church event for teaching and reflection. By way of Scripture, a written exercise and other prompts, the teaching was designed to get families to put their finger on non-negotiable values. It was left to the participants to see if the priorities they put forward were evident in the way they had ordered their lives and to name five values to serve as a moral compass.

### *Case One Data Collection*

Some six research conversations were put on the books for Case One over the 2023 period, held at the church and in the home. They were exploratory in tone and sought to apply the values framework to the realities of family life. I put to the couple how they made sense of certain values, what decisions or practices might give them expression and why they were of consequence.

One cannot claim the process was free of my influence. Having been through my pastoral teaching and seminar, the couple was familiar with my example values. Indeed, the participant went on to single out God First as something he took from that example. Instead of regarding such influence as a form of contamination to be expunged, it is recorded here as context. What is

of interest to the research is the way the couple applied and adapted value language in their family, not whether the value in each instance was of independent origin.

### *A Follow-Up on Case One*

During the dissertation analysis, a document put together by the participant was made available, one that made reference to handwritten notes from the original research period. In it the participant set out five family values and how they were put into practice in the home, which in turn was useful for getting at the participant's priorities and mode of expression.

One must be careful with such a document temporally. It is not put forward as a 2023 document nor cited to show that the original meetings covered every point in this fashion; it is more properly seen as a means of clarifying the earlier process on the part of the participant. For these reasons the follow-up cannot be considered an exercise in formal member checking.

### *The Data in Case Two*

The data for Case Two come from planned conversations held at roughly monthly intervals over some six months from the summer of 2023. Most of these took place in the church office. There was something of a dual quality to them: while they were formal research discussions on moral formation and values, my ministry relationship with the participant meant they also had an element of pastoral care.

Notes from the time record discussion of God, the church, accountability and relationships, as well as self-esteem issues, substance use, the need to fit in, early peer influence and the way the family responded. There are accounts of recovery settings and of efforts to handle recovery on one's own, and of more deliberate priorities being put in place. As time went on the participant was put to the task of putting his own values into words rather than simply acceding to what I or the church might expect.

The handwriting in the record is not all of a piece. Where later notes make much of regular church attendance and accountable Christian ties as essential to the life the participant wanted, earlier ones do not give such a rosy picture of the church's influence. Both have been left in during analysis so as not to force the case into some preordained story where the Christian community is always shown to be effective.

### *Research Versus Pastoral Care*

As the pastor of the participants there was no way to draw a hard line between the research and the pastoral relationship at times. The dissertation will not feign that the roles did not overlap but will apply an evidentiary rule. What is documented in field notes as part of the 2023 research is research data; casual encounters and the like, unless they found their way into the formal record, are context drawn from pastoral history.

### *Ethical Transparency and the Participation Agreement*

All the participants in this study put forward their verbal consent for the research conversations and were willing to be part of them. In taking part, they made it plain that they were in accord with the intent of the discussions. Yet a review of what remains of the research materials has turned up no written form of consent. The documentary evidence on file is not sufficient to show that any was procured in 2023, so there is no assertion to the contrary in the dissertation. An open acknowledgement of this is made to separate the claims that are borne out by the voluntary nature of the participants' involvement from those for which the records provide no verification.

### *Pseudonymization and Confidentiality*

The final version of the work makes use of generalization and pseudonyms. The congregation is put down as an evangelical Christian church in New England, and the focal

participants are referred to by their case role. Any detail that might identify a child or school or local institution is kept to a minimum, and sensitive matters are only brought in if they bear directly on the research questions.

### *Guarding Against Overstatement*

In the analysis I have made a point of separating what I can infer from what the evidence puts forward. Every finding has been put to the test: is this what the participant means, or an observation on my part, or a matter of later interpretation? Is there an alternative reading of the evidence? And what source is there to back up the statement and how far will it take me?

### *Evidentiary Transparency, Reliability, and Credibility*

One does not get reliability from a qualitative case study in the manner of a quantitative instrument. To be credible the present study has involved going back to the cases repeatedly, comparing documentation, keeping contrary evidence and using direct quotation with restraint, and being open about what the record does not contain.

There is also a transparency to the evidence used here. The reader is informed as to whether a claim is from the researcher's later view, from pastoral knowledge of the context, from a seminar, from field notes or from something the participant has put down in a follow-up. This does not eliminate subjectivity but the path from evidence to conclusion is laid bare. With the documentary record being what it is, such transparency is essential to trustworthiness.

## Methodology

### *A Qualitative Multiple-Case Design*

A qualitative multiple-case design has been used. Stake (1995) and Yin (2018) would argue the case study method is called for when one is trying to comprehend a contemporary phenomenon in its real-life setting, and the context is part of the phenomenon. In this study the

ethical decisions could not be divorced from the realities of the family, the church, peers, the recovery environment and so forth. The case study allows for that complexity instead of making of them variables to be isolated.

With two focal cases the study can look at patterns across cases as well as meaning within them. The cases need not be identical or statistically representative; the point is to see if like processes emerge in different circumstances and where they do not. So, Case One and Case Two are taken on their own merits before any comparison of themes is made.

### *The Suitability of Qualitative Inquiry*

The questions posed are of an exploratory and interpretive nature: how do the participants read Scripture and put values into effect, what happens when cultural or relational pressures are at odds with their commitments, and in what way do practices and the Christian community help to sustain those commitments? They demand an engagement with context and language. A quantitative approach might tell you the frequency of an attitude or behavior, but it would not account for how the participant makes sense of the link between conviction and practice.

### *Unit of Analysis*

What was taken as the unit of analysis is the process that made biblical convictions operative in an ethical decision or did not. The case was not to be distilled into a catalogue of beliefs or some dramatic moral choice for the purposes of this study. One looks instead at how stated convictions relate to the rest: practical reasoning and repeated practices, relationships and competing influences, accountability and failure, and the ongoing work of formation.

### *Practical-Theological Orientation*

A practical-theological orientation underpins the study. In the words of Swinton and Mowat (2016), it is a way of putting theological commitments in disciplined dialogue with what

is experienced without letting the two runs together. For a dissertation that is overtly Christian in its normative framework yet puts forward empirical claims based on what participants have done and understood, this is fitting.

Consequently, the study makes a point of separating empirical description from theological normativity. Scripture can be held up as authoritative in a theological sense, but one cannot make an empirical proof of that authority from qualitative interviews. And while a participant's practice may be described with accuracy, that does not mean it is being put forward as the sole faithful application of the Bible. There is room in such an orientation for both empirical humility and theological evaluation.

***Strengths and Boundaries of the Design***

There are several strengths to be found in the multiple-case design. It facilitates comparison between a case of proactive family-formation and one of reconstructive recovery; it lends itself to depth within a case and keeps contextual differences intact. One is not dependent on a single type of source, as documentary evidence from the seminar and from the participants' own writing can be weighed against field notes.

At the same time the design has its boundaries. The two focal cases come from a single congregational setting so there is no question of statistically generalizing the results to Christians at large. An insider's role precludes any claim to neutrality, and the record left behind is not as complete as a prospectively planned dissertation would have. Such constraints are not an argument against the case study; they merely inform the conclusions the study can in good conscience draw.

## Data Analysis

The systematic thematic analysis was a later undertaking while writing and analyzing the dissertation, not something to be put down as a coding procedure fully documented in 2023. The timing matters. The 2023 work yielded the documentation, the seminar materials, the notes and the conversations; the dissertation process in due course made a systematic analysis of what remained.

Braun and Clarke (2022) outline a flexible thematic approach which was used here, though in the context of a multiple-case study built on documents and field notes rather than a corpus of transcripts. The intent was to put patterned meaning in relation to the research questions without losing the case's context, hence the combination of cross-case and within-case analysis as well as a descriptive pass over the seminar materials.

### *Source Organization*

Organizing the evidence by date and source was the initial step of analysis. Contemporaneous notes from Case One were set apart from the follow-up documentation put forward by the participant later, as were the notes for Case Two; then there were the Family Values Seminar materials and other contextual information that was not considered primary data. This was done to forestall any confusion of contemporaneous evidence with after the fact recollection.

Provenance was maintained in the analysis. A 2023 field note was not to be quietly conflated with a subsequent explanation from the participant. Nor was a teaching point from the seminar to be credited to a participant on the strength of his or her using like words in later telling. The source boundaries were kept in place to keep any researcher influence or temporal development on view.

### *Evidence Classification*

One then had to classify the evidence a statement put forward. This was the second step. The main types of evidence fell into one of five categories: participant statement, field-note summary or observation by the researcher, a document from the participant, an interpretation on the part of the researcher and contextual background. Such classification was called for in instances where a sentence might otherwise seem more definitive than the source would have it.

### *Familiarization With the Record*

To get to know the record and its contradictions, recurring ideas and shifts over time, I went over the extant notes and documentation from the participants and seminar materials time and again. In doing so the focus was on the documents as they are, not on putting together what I thought must have taken place. There was no making meaning of handwriting that was hard to read or filling in from memory where a passage was absent.

I made note of things that came up repeatedly: God first, the priority of family, child discipleship, stewardship, intentional values, peer pressure and the need for acceptance, how one sees oneself, the influence of family and church, accountability, failure and recovery, boundaries, community and formation. They were descriptive labels at this point, nothing more than that, not yet final themes.

### *Initial Coding*

In the initial coding I stayed with what the records and participants had to say, reserving any wider interpretation for later. Case One was coded for faith and family priority, health, education, decision categories, media boundaries, stewardship, child discipleship and researcher influence. For Case Two the codes covered substance use, independence, recovery structure,

fitting in and proving oneself, peer pressure, the way the family responded, mixed experience of the church, accountable relationships, God first and continued efforts at recovery.

This was an inductive process but also one informed by the literature. The documents yielded their own descriptive codes, and the Review made me attuned to matters of habit, practice, internalization, communal reinforcement and moral formation. Yet the conceptual framework was not imposed as a five-code straitjacket; if the evidence made a complication of it, so be it.

***Within-Case Analysis***

Before any cross-case work, the focal cases were each looked at on their own. In the case of One I was concerned to see how broad Christian belief was given voice through family values and in turn linked to the kind of decisions a family makes on a regular basis. I was particular about my formative role in this to avoid having adopted language pass off as something the subject discovered independently.

With Case Two I set out to understand how earlier exposure to Christianity stood alongside destructive patterns and the pull of social pressures, and the participant's take on his relationships with the church and family. As the conversations went on there was more of an emphasis on God, structure, accountability and values of one's own making. It was read as a process in progress, not a finished article.

***Cross-Case Comparison***

Once the within-case analyses were in hand, a comparison was made to see what meaningful contrasts and processes recurred. The question was where one would find like dynamics in such dissimilar life contexts, and conversely where similarities might be deceptive.

God-first language is to be found in both cases in the end, but in one it is in the context of proactive planning for the family, in the other it is part of a reconstruction and recovery.

From the comparison came analytic summaries of the patterns in these two bounded cases: intentionality, concrete application, relational reinforcement, competing influences and ongoing formation. These could be put in dialogue with the literature. They were not put forward as universal laws.

***Seminar Material***

In the analysis of the Family Values Seminar, I have treated it apart from the focal cases. The objective put forward by the seminar, its biblical underpinnings and example values, the reflective questions posed and the stress on measuring one's actual practices against stated priorities were all noted. In this way the formative context for value language was set. There is no attempt to derive statistical frequencies or outcomes from the seminar; the analysis is descriptive in nature. What it shows is that the original teaching context was already rife with the problem of a gap between what is professed and what is operative, a matter later given academic definition.

***Review and Development of Themes***

To arrive at candidate themes, I grouped descriptive codes of a like kind and put them to the test of the sources. A theme would be kept only where it was answerable to the research questions and had more to back it than my own inclination. Overlap was also checked; community and accountability for instance were not made distinct simply on account of different wording when they amounted to the same relational reinforcement. Then there is the question of whether a theme is hiding contrary evidence. Take the church in Case Two: to have a theme that Christian community is a support to recovery would be an overstatement of the record, as earlier

notes tell of a less positive experience. So, the theme as it stands puts the emphasis on the mixed and evolving role of relationships, not some uniformly good institutional effect.

### *Dealing with Contrary Evidence*

One does not want to undermine qualitative credibility by reporting only what fits an anticipated theological or pastoral narrative, so negative evidence has been left in. Case Two offered occasion to eschew any such selectivity, be it in the participant's ambivalence about church, the fact of continuing struggle once new commitments was put into words, or unmet needs in recovery.

### *Wording of Participants*

Quotes are used with restraint since there are no verbatim transcripts for this study. If the field notes are legible enough and the source is clear, a phrase will be quoted as is. But where the handwriting is not, or in the case of my own summaries and abbreviated notes, I have paraphrased rather than put together a direct quotation.

### *An Interpretive Framework*

The framework of Review (Biblical Conviction, Practical Discernment, Intentional Application, Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation) was brought to bear on the themes to make sense of them. It organizes the interplay of themes but does not predetermine them. Movement can be incomplete or even in reverse; a person may have conviction and yet not apply it consistently or find in the community something that erodes a commitment or be led to fresh discernment by failure. The framework is employed in a dynamic, cyclical fashion to describe the process of interpretation, not to quantify progress or put participants in a box.

### *Tying Analysis to the Research Questions*

The last step in the analysis makes explicit the link between the themes and the research questions. As to the first supporting question on ethical reasoning and Scripture, one will find evidence from Christian teaching and God-first language and how the Bible is interpreted. For the second question, which is about the conflict of norms and practice with biblical convictions, the evidence comes from media, education, desire, peer pressure and other competing priorities.

### *Causal Language and Restraint*

No causal claims are made here beyond what the design will allow. The study will not have it that family improvement was caused by the identification of values, or that church attendance brings about recovery, or that one can measure a change in behavior attributable to biblical convictions. Rather it is a description of the way in which the surviving record shows participants making their decisions in relation to certain values and relationships. The standard is straightforward: a finding must have a source to vouch for it and the source must warrant the extent of the claim. This is what gives the study in Results and Discussion its trustworthiness.

## Limitations

There are several limitations to be considered. The sample size is small to begin with. While two focal cases give one depth, they do not show how prevalent these findings are in the Christian population at large; the study is exploratory and interpretive. Its merit is in the conceptual transferability of the processes it illuminates, not in any statistical generalization. Furthermore, the two cases come from the same evangelical congregation in New England. The participants have contextual things in common and are not representative of the diversity, be it cultural, racial, denominational or otherwise, of Christianity. One might expect community and values to work differently in another tradition or setting. The third matter is the pastoral ties I had

with the focal participants before this work began. While they afforded me access and an understanding of context, they also carried risks in terms of power, social desirability and role confusion. A participant might put a response in a form he or she thought was pastorally proper; my own prior knowledge could color interpretation despite efforts to let the documentary record speak for itself.

As for the fourth point, I was more than an observer, I was a formative presence. In my capacity as teacher of the Family Values Seminar, I put forward examples from my own family and made pastoral overtures to participants. One need only look at Case One to see that some of the value language on display was a product of that instruction. The study makes no pretense that the way participants put their values was uninfluenced by me.

Then there is the incomplete nature of the documentary record. What notes remain are not all equally legible or complete, and some originals are no longer to hand. Without verbatim transcripts or audio, one is limited in how precisely to put back together what a participant said. To be conservative I have paraphrased where necessary and classified my sources, eschewing any attempt to fill in blanks from memory.

A systematic thematic analysis was done as part of the dissertation process rather than being put on paper at the time during the 2023 research. There is always a danger in such retrospective organization that one's reading of earlier material is colored by later concepts. This is mitigated by keeping descriptive codes apart from interpretive constructs and making clear the sequence of events.

In the record that has been preserved there is no written consent form to be found. The focal participants gave their verbal assent to the research conversations but without

documentation the ethical audit trail is short. Nor will I assert institutional ethics-board approval absent the papers to prove it. These are limitations I report as they stand.

My memory is of service and a hindrance. It can put context to long standing pastoral familiarity but is open to hindsight and selection. So, the rule of thumb in the analysis is that while memory may elucidate what is documented, it does not in itself make a finding. Readers are left to judge transferability given the context and limitations set out here.

**Positionality Statement**

I bring to the study certain theological commitments as an evangelical Christian pastor: on the authority of Scripture, on moral formation, accountability, the church and family, and Christian discipleship. Worldview neutrality is not something I would claim. Such commitments were at play in the selection of topic and research questions, in the seminar that preceded some case conversations and in my interest in seeing biblical convictions put into practice.

Being an insider has its benefits in the way of shared language and relational access and a grasp of the practices under study; it made for repeated conversation and a wider ministry perspective on what participants were saying. But it also raises the prospect of familiar explanations being assumed, of participants wanting to oblige, or of my reading ambiguity in a manner that suits my pastoral hopes.

My normative commitment to Scripture is not going to predetermine the empirical results. A church relationship can fall short; a participant can be inconsistent in his application of Scripture or relapse and spurn advice or espouse a value and not live up to it. That kind of evidence is not to be put aside because it gets in the way of a nice theological story.

There is a reflexive risk in the pastoral inclination to want to see people do well, which might lend itself to a narrative of success as in Case Two. Yet the evidence on hand will not be

forced into a tidy pattern of struggle, intervention and change. Recovery was a work in progress, renewed commitments were there alongside vulnerability, and one's experience of the church was not uniform. To avoid confirmation bias it was important to leave that complexity intact.

During analysis I have been asking myself if a claim is in the record, if the words are the participant's or mine, if there is another way to see it, and if negative evidence has been put aside. Whether I am conflating theological evaluation with description. The evidence matrix puts these questions in formal terms, tying the major findings to their source and limits.

Humility is called for by my theology. To hold Scripture as authoritative is not to render my reading of it infallible; I can be wrong about the text and about the experience of the participant. Conviction needs to be accompanied by reflexivity and an evidentiary discipline and a willingness to accept what runs counter to one's expectations (Swinton & Mowat, 2016) for practical theology to have any credibility.

To put it in a nutshell, my standing as an evangelical Christian pastor means I have theological convictions on the matter of scriptural authority and preexisting ties with the participants at the center of this study. Such is the nature of these relationships and commitments: they afford one considerable relational access and a good deal of contextual insight, but they also carry the potential for bias, researcher influence, role confusion or social desirability on the part of the participant. I do not put forward any pretense of neutrality; instead, I am transparent about them in a reflexive way. In my work I have been conservative with the data, separating out what is documented from my own interpretation and contextual knowledge, holding on to contrary evidence and being restrained in what I conclude from the quotations of participants.

**Summary**

The purpose of this section has been to set out the methodology for looking into the way Christians make sense of biblical values and put them to use in their ethical decision-making. A qualitative multiple-case design was put in place for the study, two focal cases and some descriptive material from a Family Values Seminar by way of supplement. With Case One the focus was on a married couple and how they would apply and give voice to their family values. The experience of an adult in Case Two was considered in terms of the church, accountability, recovery from addiction and the competing social influences that bear upon ongoing formation.

For the most part the data are to be found in repeated semi-structured conversations with researchers, which were put down in handwritten field notes, along with teaching and reflection materials from the seminar and documentation of the participants' own making. A later systematic thematic analysis of the documentary record considered the provenance of the source and the limits of memory as well as negative evidence and patterns across and within cases.

One could characterize the approach as follows: a Qualitative Multiple-Case Study underpinned by Semi-Structured Research Conversations, Documentary and Field-Note Evidence and Thematic Analysis, all informed by the context of the Seminar and a Practical-Theological Interpretation. The next section will put before the reader the findings of the two cases and the seminar, develop the themes that run through them and show how they bear on the research questions and conceptual framework.

## Results and Discussion

What follows are the results of the qualitative multiple-case study set out in this section, which looks at the way Christians in today's culture come to terms with and put into practice

biblical values for ethical decision making. Two focal cases form the structure of the Research along with some descriptive material from a Family Values Seminar by way of supplement. In the first case one finds a married Christian couple intent on putting their finger on the values that should direct family life and being able to state them. The second is the story of an adult Christian participant; his record shows an experience of peer pressure, substance use and attempts at recovery, as well as the role of church, accountability and family in his ongoing moral formation. As for the seminar, it offers a congregational context where the application of biblical values was put forward for explicit discussion.

One must be conservative in the presentation of these findings given what the research record has to offer: there are no verbatim transcripts or audio recordings, only field notes (handwritten), materials from the seminar and documentation put together by the participants. A quote from a participant is used when the field notes have a phrase down clearly, otherwise the findings are put forward in careful paraphrase. Nor does the research make much of frequency, generalize from two instances to the population of Christians, or put forward causal effects the design would not bear out.

A pattern of sorts runs through the evidence. There is a difference between holding to a Christian belief and letting it be the arbiter of a decision. While both cases were underpinned by Christian conviction, its practical authority was variable from one setting to another and with the passage of time. The analysis is thus directed at how beliefs are made operative: through discernment, habit, relationships, repeated decisions and so forth. This will be a central theme in the cross-case discussion.

The section begins with an account of the participants and the research environment and a short methodological overview before moving on to the themes of Case One and Case Two and

the seminar. Cross-case themes are then tied to the research questions at hand. In the concluding sections the findings are put in dialogue with the literature of Review and appraised against the conceptual framework the study has drawn from.

## Participants and Setting

The work was done in 2023 in an evangelical Christian congregation in New England. Being the pastor of the congregation, I had pastoral ties to the focal participants prior to the formal research. An insider's vantage point affords one relational access and an understanding of the context, but it also opens the door to researcher influence and social desirability or confusion over roles. Such limitations were dealt with in Research and Methodology and are to be borne in mind in reading these results.

For the dissertation the setting has been generalized of necessity. No name is given to the congregation and details of any consequence to the identity of the participants – be they of location, institutions, educational or family matters or recovery programs – have been left out or put in broader terms. It is enough to have the context to make sense of the cases without the participants being easily put in a box. They are described for their research value, not for biographical reasons.

### *Case One Participants*

The participants in Case One are a Christian couple with young children. The family was in search of a more purposeful approach to the values governing their lives at the time of the research. Rather than zero in on an ethical crisis, the conversations with them were about how to give expression to the wider convictions of the Christian faith so as to inform the kind of decisions that recur in a household, be they of a financial nature, of health, of resources or of the influences at large. During the Family Values Seminar, the family was part of the wider

congregational milieu. This is a relevant detail since the seminar put forth the kind of language, questions and examples that would inform subsequent discussion; one would be hard pressed to see the couple's values as having come about in isolation from any researcher influence. A more interactive picture is borne out by the evidence, one where later application, the teaching of the seminar, family reflection and pre-existing Christian convictions are all a piece.

Over the research period some six conversations were arranged with the couple, at their home and at church. But the record is not sufficiently intact for every meeting or question to be put back together. The analysis is confined to what is on paper and to a follow-up document the participant put together from notes taken during the 2023 research period; this is regarded as a way of clarifying the participant's account, not an artifact of 2023.

***Case Two Participant***

The subject of Case Two is an adult male Christian who has made repeated efforts at recovery from substance-use addiction. I was acquainted with him and his family by way of ministry prior to the research proper, and while that pastoral history gives context it does not become research data of its own accord. What serves as the case's main evidence are the 2023 conversations that were planned and set down in field notes by hand.

Held for the most part in the church office at roughly monthly intervals over a number of months, these formal conversations are noted to have covered such matters as peer pressure, self-perception, the need to fit in, substance use and how the family has responded, as well as accountability, the church, recovery programming and priorities in development. Where there was an overlap between pastoral care and the research conversation, the analysis makes a point of separating what is in the research record from general pastoral recollection.

What is put forward here is no finished recovery story. The evidence on hand shows a man in continuing struggle, making change of mind and body, going in and out of structured recovery and rethinking accountability. That is analytically speaking a good thing, for it permits moral formation to be viewed as a nonlinear affair and not a success tale written after the fact.

***Supplemental Family Values Seminar Context***

For descriptive purposes there is the matter of the Family Values Seminar of July 22, 2023. My notes show 53 had put their names down and 49 turned up. It is not considered an outcome intervention or a third focal case, nor do the attendees figure as research participants in the qualitative analysis. The materials from the day are there to document the environment in which intentional values were being put to the test.

The aim was to give families a moral compass in the form of non-negotiable values. In the teaching, (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27) was drawn on to make the distinction between merely hearing Jesus and acting on it. Those in attendance were to put forward five values of the family and ask if their conduct was in keeping with them. Examples from the material ranged from prayer and service to integrity and a health-conscious approach to life.

I offered my own for illustration: God First, Unity in Decisions, Discipleship of Children, the importance of the church and Loving Kindness. In doing so the role of the researcher is laid bare. The seminar thus provides evidence for guided Christian moral reflection, nothing to suggest the values were the unassisted work of the participants or that attendance was the cause of any behavioral shift down the line.

## Methodology

The study is a qualitative multiple-case design as put forward in the Research, with the two cases at hand furnishing the bulk of the qualitative evidence; some supplemental context was to be had from the Family Values Seminar. One finds among the data sources the like of contemporaneous field notes in hand, materials for teaching and reflection from the seminar, documentation of the participants' own making, and a follow-up piece by a Case One participant which served to put in plain terms the family's application of its values. In keeping with the documentary record and evidentiary boundaries laid out in the Research, the methodological account is derived from handwritten field notes, contextual information of a carefully bounded sort, and the rest of the available material. Such are the limits on the evidence that inform the findings presented in this section.

### *Analytic Approach*

Sources were organized and one became familiar with them before moving to an initial descriptive coding, then to within- and cross-case analysis and comparison. From there came the development of themes, their review considering the underlying evidence and interpretation vis-à-vis the literature. While Braun and Clarke (2022) have described a flexible thematic approach that would inform the more systematic analysis, it is not contended here that any transcript-based coding was done in its entirety in 2023.

### *Evidentiary Boundaries*

During the analysis three things were kept apart: what the researcher interprets, what is observed, and what the participant has to say. An interpretation arrived at later was not put forward as if it were the original words of the participant. Nor did the wording of a participant make it into a direct quotation unless the field notes made a clear enough case for it.

There was no shying away from negative or contrary evidence. The matter of church in Case Two is a case in point. A neater success story might have made much of later allusions to accountability and church. But the notes on file also have an earlier notation to the effect of "Not so much" when it comes to whether church has been of help. That called for a more qualified telling where the Christian community is not all positive.

Causal claims have been eschewed. Nothing in Case One would have it that writing down family values was the cause of better parenting, finances, marriage or spiritual growth. Case Two does not show that recovery was brought about by biblical values or church. And the seminar does not put it beyond doubt that attendees put their behavior in order. What is put forward as finding is a description of the meaning and process and perceived significance in these cases.

**Themes**

***Case One: Developing Intentional Family Values from General Christian Belief to Articulated Values***

One can see in Case One a movement from a general sense of being Christian to values that are explicitly put into words. It is not as though the couple took up new beliefs; they had not always had; the import of the process is that what was there in a broad way was now named with intention and tied to the goings on of the family. The participant went on to spell out five such values in a subsequent clarification: Faith First or God First, Discipleship of Children, Thoughtful Stewardship, Health-Conscious Living and the notion of the family as a God-Given Gift.

Some of these are of a theological nature, others pertain to resources, health and relationships. The fact that the participants do not relegate biblical values to the realm of religious practice is of some analytical moment; a Christian conviction is made part and parcel of

how ordinary family life is run. This is how a wide-ranging theological commitment becomes a practical category for decision-making.

Then there is the question of the seminar itself. I put forward my own values, God First and Discipleship of Children among them, and many examples. The participant conceded in time that my example had some bearing on the use of the phrase God First. So the finding is one of guided articulation rather than something discovered independently. The family was given language for its convictions to employ in its decisions.

**Faith First or God First.** This was the value the family put first. By the participant's reckoning it meant making time for church over other things, prayer at the table, service in ministry and having a Christian worldview inform matters of the household and children's schooling. It is more than a slogan; it is a means of ordering one's commitments.

What makes the value analytically interesting is the gap between a broad assertion and a practical one. "God First" will not answer every scheduling question but it poses one for discernment: how are time and opportunities to be ordered if God is truly first? This harks back to the emphasis on practical wisdom in the Review. Errington (2019) would have it that wisdom is about skillful action in the circumstances and not merely holding to abstract propositions.

It also puts a fine point on the difference between priority in word and in deed. A schedule may be arranged on other commitments while faith is professed to be central. The participant's explanation would have it that putting the value into words made such an inconsistency apparent. The study cannot say the family was always true to the value, but it did provide the vocabulary to measure their priorities.

**Children in Discipleship.** With the second value, that of children's discipleship, the participant put forward a wish to see them form an authentic relationship with God as opposed to

simply putting on the trappings of a religious identity. It was a value informed by the sort of things one would find in biblical teaching: stories, reading and play, music, media, the child's friendships and education, and the attention parents paid to what was making an impression on them.

One is not to take from this that there is a uniquely biblical way to run a household or set a boundary on media or schooling. The more telling finding has to do with the reasoning of the parents. They saw their everyday decisions as formative. When it came to questions of education or media, they did not view them as a matter of preference or logistics; they also weighed what such environments were likely to have the child love or shun, what they would come to see as normal.

The literature on religious transmission would be in accord with this. C. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) make the point that faith is passed on by way of modeling and the general environment of the home as much as by any explicit instruction. Yet the findings are not to be read as deterministic. There is nothing here to suggest that intentional parenting will of itself ensure a given outcome in adulthood, as Zammit and Taylor (2026) would caution. What is at issue is the intentionality of the parent, not control over the child's later commitments.

In this the case makes for a good illustration of the study's divide between reactive and formative ethics. The family was not content to wait for a crisis to see which rule was in order; they were about the business of shaping the environment where desire and judgment would take root. Formative ethics is concerned with the kind of person being made ready for the hard choices to come, and in parenting the question is even more tangible.

**A Gift from God: The Family.** The third value was the family as a gift of God. Time, residence, celebrations and struggles, vacations, those one turns to for counsel and other

relationships were all part of how the participant made sense of it. In so doing the value served to some extent as a means of establishing priorities. For the participant it was not enough to say the family was of emotional import; he was trying to make of his family relationships a commitment that would bear on other decisions.

Values have this quality. An ethical decision is often less a matter of good versus evil than of competing goods; work, finances, ministry, recreation and family can be equally valid. A value is of practical use when it tells an individual how to put those for the season. They are the lenses by which one assesses competing claims.

It cannot be said from the record that giving voice to this value has done away with conflict or brought the family closer. A more modest conclusion is warranted: the participant invoked the value to put family front and center in decisions that might have been left to convenience or outside expectation.

**Health-Conscious Living.** Then there was the fourth value, Health-Conscious Living, which the participant linked to diet, exercise, discipline and health care matters. Some of the preferences shown were of a personal nature, not something Scripture would have one regard as a command. The dissertation does not hold up any therapeutic or nutritional option as biblically mandated.

What gives the value its meaning is the interpretation of looking after one's physical health as a form of responsible stewardship. The family sought to make their broad conviction on the care of the body manifest in their daily choices. One sees the transition from value to discernment. Two Christians can agree on the responsibility for health and yet differ on the medicine or diet called for. The value provides a course, but application demands discernment.

Such a distinction keeps the study from elevating the contextual approach of one family to the level of an ethical rule for all. It is why the framework allows for practical discernment between conviction and its application. Christian ethics must have room for stable moral ground while accepting that judgment and wisdom are needed in the particulars.

**Thoughtful Stewardship.** Fifth is the value of Thoughtful Stewardship. Under this the participant subsumed work and possessions, saving and investing, the responsible use of money and generosity, service, and the like. The aim was to live within one's means and to have money be a source of freedom and responsibility, not of status. In this instance one sees a plain example of the way a broad principle can put order to all manner of everyday decisions. Stewardship was not simply a category for church giving; it offered a means of framing one's view on resources, what one owns or consumes, how one is employed and plans for the future, and the like in terms of generosity. The participant's account goes further than to establish that he holds generosity in good regard, it is an attempt to link the value to his financial habits time and again.

The study makes no case for the value being the cause of better financial results; there are no measures to that effect nor any before and after data to compare. What is at issue is a matter of moral organization: the stewardship language employed by the participant to judge the handling of resources. One must make that distinction to separate a value that informs deliberation from one that yields something measurable.

### *Case One Summary*

All told, Case One would indicate that a deliberate articulation serves to make Christian convictions of a more general sort applicable in the recurrent business of family life. The movement is one from belief to an articulated value to a practical question and finally to practice

in the home. In articulating their biblical values, the family had words with which to tie faith, health, children and relationships into their decision making.

Yet the evidence is not such as to say writing down values will of itself ensure ethical consistency, or that the family was always in full accord with its professed commitments. The case has a more modest but analytically sounder import: by being explicit about values, priorities could be discussed and ordinary choices put under review. This is of some importance when set against Case Two, where while there was Christian exposure other influences were wont to have the upper hand in practice.

### *Case Two: Values, Addiction, and Continuing Moral Formation*

#### *Peer Influence and the Need for Acceptance*

A strong theme runs through the notes from Case Two about peer influence and fitting in. The participant relates substance use in past social dealings to a need for acceptance. There are references too to self-esteem and a compulsion to prove himself. Such details point to a social milieu where the approval of one's peers has considerable bearing on what is done.

This is not to absolve the individual of responsibility for ill-advised actions. It does demonstrate that the moral action was taking place in a relational context conducive to certain behaviors. He was not an isolated moral reasoner; his identity and sense of belonging were matters of negotiation in his relationships. That is in keeping with the analytic concept of a moral ecology, wherein one's stated values may be reinforced or called into question by the social environment.

Consequently, the ethical question is enlarged. It is not sufficient to enquire as to what the participant thought was right, the analysis must determine what desires and relationships had the practical authority to dictate his conduct. Here the divide between moral knowledge and what is

in operation is key. A behavior can be known to be wrong or hazardous and yet another desire will have more immediate force.

**Self-Perception and the Desire to Prove Himself.** The notes also draw a line between the participant's story of peer influence and how he saw himself, with concerns over self-esteem and the urge to make good socially. These should be read with care. One cannot be based on the evidence put a psychological diagnosis on the participant or attribute addiction to low self-esteem alone. The conclusion is a more circumscribed one: these were part of the environment in which he made his decisions as he would have it.

It is relevant that values must contend with fear, shame, status and identity as well as with ideas. A biblical conviction might be affirmed in the mind but be overshadowed by some other need for the moment. The case thus lends weight to the dissertation's view of moral formation as a matter of habit and desire as much as belief. J. K. A. Smith (2009) would concur in stressing that people are formed by their loves and practices, not just the propositions they put forward.

**An Inconsistent Operative Framework and the Participant's Christian Beliefs.** What is on record indicates that the participant's Christian beliefs were not a reliable operative moral framework in the face of more dominant social pressures, entrenched behaviors or desire. One should not read this as an assertion that the participant was without values or any Christian belief; I had known him during ministry, and he was no stranger to Christianity. The problem lay in the practical authority his religious information carried at the time of deciding. This is a deliberate way of putting it.

The study would have us see this as a key finding: there can be a disparity between what one professes and how one is governed in practice. A person may have the language of his faith and be convinced of it yet fail to let those commitments dictate his behavior in a consistent

manner. Such a gap is not necessarily indicative of hypocrisy; it may be the result of habit, temptation, pressure, or the fact that moral formation is an ongoing process. The participant is a case in point for the difference between professed, aspirational and operative values.

Professed values are those a person deems important. Aspirational ones are what he wants to rule his life. But an operative value has a meaningful hold on one's priorities and actions. Case Two is instructive in that it shows why these should not be conflated; new commitments can be as genuine as old habits and desires are powerful.

**Ethical Choice, Habit and the Pull of Immediate Desire.** The account given by the participant bears witness to the force of immediate desire. While the longer-term consequences are understood, substance use and the like can offer a potent short-term reinforcement. We are not in the business of offering a clinical take on addiction here but rather of examining the moral authority within the environment of the participant's decisions.

There is an evident tension between reward in the moment and reflective commitment. When emotion, craving or a sense of belonging takes over, a person will opt for a destructive behavior he knows it to be. Moral knowledge does not of itself become an operative value. It is a question of whether the principle is embodied to the extent that it can withstand pressure, not if the individual can recite the right thing.

Pawl (2023) and Knobel (2023) make a good case for the part habit plays in moral formation, which is helpful in reading this case. They allow for a persistent disposition and true commitment to be present at once. The participant's struggle should not lead one to discount his later wish for different priorities as disingenuous. Nor does sincerity render the pattern of destruction of no moral consequence; both are true.

**Boundaries and the Family.** In the moral ecology of the participant, family was a factor. The notes put down some of the parental response to his recovery efforts and substance use. But the record is not sufficient to pass judgment on the parents' motives or to brand them as unsupportive or controlling unless the participant himself used such terms.

A more prudent conclusion is that the family was an element of the recovery environment whose responses could be variable. In the same vein as they might offer love and aid, the relationship could also be where frustration and boundaries were put to the test. It is a reminder of the wider point that supportive ties are not morally formative by virtue of their existence; it is the character of the tie and the boundaries it upholds that count.

**Setbacks, Structure and Independence.** The notes also show the participant making forays into greater independence in his recovery. Following a stint with structured involvement he would sometimes think he did not need the external structure. There is mention of a romantic relationship in the context of at least one occasion when he left a structured setting.

One cannot piece together the cause of every relapse from what is here. What comes through is a strain between the need for accountability and independence. Autonomy was felt as a freedom, but it also had a way of taking away the routine, connection and boundaries that supports afforded. That the participant should come back to the matter of accountability in time is indicative of a dawning awareness that one must put up with constraints of one's own volition for any change to be lasting, as opposed to seeing every outside structure as something to be overcome. The ethics of this pattern are not confined to recovery. In Christian moral formation there are practices which curtail immediate autonomy on account of a more encompassing commitment; be it in the way of worship or family duties, financial discipline, community and accountability, they can all serve that end. The case in point would seem to show that if freedom

is taken to mean nothing more than being free from external constraint it runs counter to the kind of formation needed to adhere to a value of one's choosing.

**Church as a Mixed Experience.** One must be circumspect in Case Two over the part church played. A plain reading of the notes would have Christian community as an unalloyed good in the recovery process, but the record does not bear that out. There is a field-note entry that asks if the church has been of help and appends "Not so much" to it. An account is thus called for where the participant's experience of church was mixed and not uniformly positive. Such evidence is of a piece with preventing the case from being made into a Christian success story; you will not find that attendance at church of itself yields moral consistency or accountability. Over time the relationship with the Christian community has evolved, with later talk tending to put stress on regular participation and making God a priority, and on the building of relationships that are accountable.

So, the finding is not that the church was the cause of recovery or for that matter of no consequence. What the evidence points to is that the participant has come to see regular participation and accountable Christian ties as part of the life he wishes to make for himself, despite an earlier period he would not have found especially helpful. To omit this temporal qualification would be to do the case no favors.

**From Attendance to Accountability.** In the notes from later, there is a preoccupation with relationships of accountability. This is more than a matter of appearing at Sunday service. While attendance is a practice and can open the way to some connection, what is at issue are relationships that will put encouragement where the participant's resolve is lacking, ask the hard questions and call out avoidance. It is social reinforcement in effect, and in voluntarily letting a community or another person have their say in decisions that might be kept private. Isolation or

the pull of habit can erode a professed value during this study, and a relationship serves to keep it in view when it is all too easy to let it go.

There is nothing new in this for the literature on recovery and its social dimension. Vigdal et al. (2022) have shown that it is not just an individual affair but entails trust and belonging in communities without stigma. The present case may not demonstrate that Christian accountability is what brought about recovery, but it does indicate the importance the participant has attached to such relationships in the life he is trying to put together.

**God First and Developing Priority.** The research notes also have the words "God needs to be first." Given the participant's previous exposure to Christianity the phrasing is noteworthy; it is not a question of belief springing from none. Rather it is one of priority and whether Christian conviction will hold sway when other habits or desires vie for one's attention.

And here the two cases have an unanticipated commonality. In Case One the family put forward God First proactively. In Case Two the same sort of language is to be found in the effort to put things right after a run of destructive choices. The circumstances are hardly comparable, but the practical question is when values are in competition, what takes precedence

I have been at pains in the later field notes to have the participant put his developing values in his own terms. There is a distinction between what a program or a pastor or parent tells you ought to matter and a conviction you have made your own. The case makes the difference between internalization and instruction plain.

**An Unfinished Story and the Work of Recovery.** There is an air of incompleteness to this case, which is in keeping with the later notes that put forward a plan for the participant to go back to a recovery setting of some structure. One will not find an artificial resolution here; at the end of the research period as it has been documented, the process of recovery was still under

way. It has been a matter of effort and recognition, of setback and then renewed structure and attempts to change.

For the question at hand in this research, that very fact is a strength. The case makes for a better illustration of moral formation as it happens than if one were to wait for a successful outcome to be had. The record shows the participant coming to terms with the need for accountability, Christian relationships and new commitments, and voicing a changed order of values, yet it does not bear out that such commitments have taken hold in every respect. A cautious summary of the trajectory would be conviction, decision, struggle, failure, reassessment, accountability, and on-going formation. This is offered as an analytic account of what can be seen in this instance, not as any kind of universal template for addiction recovery. The sequence also speaks to the need for the study's conceptual framework to be cyclical in nature, not linear.

**Failure as Analytic Information.** In Case Two there is information to be gleaned from failure about the values at work. A destructive choice or relapse will tell you where boundaries are wanting, which desires have immediate sway, or what relationships are still influential, or where a commitment has not become fully operative. Not that failure is to be desired, but it lays bare the mechanics of decision-making in a way aspirational pronouncements do not.

Some theological and methodological restraint is called for in making such an observation. The dissertation will not read a moral failing as proof that prior belief was spurious, nor consider sincere belief tantamount to a change in behavior. Divergence between the two is left to be examined; the gap could be down to habit, vulnerability, incomplete internalization or competing loyalties. Knobel (2023) makes the point that true moral development is compatible with old habits of disposition, an insight that serves well in interpreting Case Two. The power of earlier patterns is not denied while the participant's subsequent commitments are given their due.

### *Summary of Case Two*

What comes of Case Two is not the finding that the participant has been made whole by Christianity, or that church attendance has brought about recovery, or that a moral transformation was put to rest during the research. The evidence points to something more circumscribed: the difficulty of translating religious exposure and professed conviction into values that can stand up to social influence, habit and competing desire. In later talk there is greater stress on God as a priority, on structure and community and personally held commitments. One sees reconstructive moral formation in the attempt to put a hierarchy of values in place after the fact of having established destructive patterns, a contrast to the anticipatory way Case One went about articulating values.

### *Supplemental Seminar Findings*

**Values as a Moral Compass.** The Family Values Seminar adds to the context of the study, its formative intent being quite explicit. The aim of the teaching was to have families put in place non-negotiable values to act as a compass. Rather than pose the question of what is believed in the abstract, the seminar set about having participants name commitments for future decisions.

With the reading of (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27) the distinction was drawn between hearing and doing; in the theology of the seminar a firm foundation is found in the practice of Jesus' teaching and not knowledge per se. There is a parallel with the empirical difference between professed and operative values that was to be made later, even if the terminology was not in use in the 2023 material.

**A Tension Between Stated and Lived Values.** It was made plain in the seminar that one can hold marriage, family or health to be of importance and yet see one's life is not in accord

with those priorities. So, the dissonance between what is stated and what is done was not a post hoc invention to suit the cases. Participants were put to the test of their calendars and resources to see what they said of their priorities. While no statistics can be made of it, it is documentation of the idea that a value is only meaningful when it is more than words.

**Researcher Influence.** As for my part, I provided the examples and the biblical texts and put forward my own family values in teaching the material. That Case One should later make use of similar language is indicative of guided reflection, not detached observation. Such influence does not vitiate the case or the seminar, but it limits the claims to be made. What the seminar shows is that a framework was put before the participants to be intentional in how they articulated their values; it does not prove they arrived at them on their own or that they are more ethical for having been there.

**Seminar Evidence and its Limitations.** One cannot derive exact figures from the seminar material as to what values were put forward by those in attendance, or any quantifiable change in behavior, spiritual growth, ethical confidence or family dynamics following the event. The evidence is of a descriptive nature then, not an indicator of outcomes.

What the material does offer is a good deal of context. It makes plain that the 2023 milieu in which the focal cases were examined was one where there was talk of a moral compass and the hearing-doing divide, and where stated and lived priorities being at odds was a matter of some concern. It also bears witness to my own role as a formative presence in that setting.

### *Cross-Case Themes*

**Theme One: Intentionality gives belief a practical bearing.** The two cases would have you believe that holding a general belief is not always enough to steer a decision. With Case One, intentionality was evident in the way family values were named and made to apply to the

day to day. In Case Two it came about later as a means of putting in place some structure and commitment once damaging patterns had set in. While the process was not the same in each instance, spelling things out did make moral priorities open to discussion. There is a vagueness to “faith matters” as a statement; but with God First, Stewardship, Accountability or the Discipleship of Children one has a more pointed question to return to when priorities are in conflict. In this way intentionality is something of a bridge to practical discernment.

**Theme Two: Formative influences are in competition.** Values are not self-contained, the cases show. Case One gave deliberate thought to the likes of media, education, resources and the relationships around children. Case Two was a more vivid example of the dynamic at play with peer pressure, the need to belong, romantic ties and the lure of instant reward. When biblical convictions are wanting or do not carry the day, other forces will be formative. A person is never in a neutral state of being unformed; culture, institutions, routine and desire will impart what is to be desired and what is possible. So, the ethical issue is as much about what is strongly enough felt to move one to action as it is about what is believed.

**Theme Three: The need for concrete application of values.** It is only in connection with a firm decision that values take on analytical meaning in these cases. God First has import when it comes down to how one’s time and service are apportioned; Stewardship when it is a question of what is spent or saved; Accountability when a participant finds relationships to either underwrite or put to the test his commitments. This goes to show the difference between profession and operation. A value can be held in sincerity without having any real effect. Since wide ranging moral language will not of itself answer every question of context, some discernment is called for in making the transition from value to application. How and if a commitment is taking hold in practice is what concrete application will tell you.

**Theme Four: The formative part of relationships.** There was no shortage of relationships at work in both cases. They were integral to the family's formation in Case One, be it in marriage, church or parenting. In Case Two they could be found as the source of accountability and support but also of destructive social pressure. Community is not to be taken as an automatic good. One is justified in saying that it is through relationships that an environment is made where sustaining certain values is rendered easier or more difficult. What is of moral import is not the fact of a person's membership in a community, but what the community serves to reinforce. In this vein, Byerly and colleagues (2022) have one put it, the focus should be on the character of the congregational environment as opposed to any notion that institutional affiliation by itself accounts for formation.

**Theme Five: The Ongoing Nature of Moral Formation.** The cases at hand do not present moral formation as something that happens in an instant. There is a developmental quality to the pattern, not a static one. One sees in Case One the work of putting articulated values to use in the face of evolving family situations; in Case Two there is a cycle of struggle and recovery, of accountability and renewed commitment, and some vulnerability left unaddressed.

One must remember and put into practice one's values, to revisit and give them reinforcement. Putting them on paper does not make a family whole. Nor will the identification of a destructive pattern see to its immediate removal. Put another way, moral formation is a matter of belief, value, practice and character coming into greater or lesser congruence with time.

## Findings in Relation to the Research Questions

### *Research Question*

How are biblical values comprehended and put to work in ethical decision-making in today's culture? This was the question posed. From the two focal cases and the material from the seminar, such values are most in evidence when those involved do not stop at a general assent to Christian beliefs but make a link with their relationships and particular priorities.

Case One is an example of broad Christian convictions being made into values for repeated application to matters of stewardship, health, children and faith. It is a progression from belief to an articulated value to a practical question and then to application. The process in Case Two was not so well ordered; old habits and peer pressure were in play alongside prior Christian exposure and destructive behavior. But during later conversations God, church involvement and one's own stated commitments came more to the fore.

The 2023 seminar bears out the point: it makes a distinction between what people claim is of consequence and the way they order their lives. All told, the evidence points to Christians applying biblical values by way of conviction, discernment and concrete practice, with relational reinforcement and further formation to follow. It is no automatic or straight line.

***Research Question One: Scripture and Ethical Reasoning***

As to the first supporting question, how an understanding of Scripture shapes one's reasoning and decisions, the data show it to be the main source of moral direction, normative if you will. Yet some interpretation is called for to get from scriptural conviction to a decision. Case One is instructive here in that it shows broad biblical convictions being distilled into values and brought to bear on the ordinary run of family life.

In much the same fashion the seminar put forward Scripture as the basis for practice. With the family-values exercise participants were asked to put their finger on the commitments they felt ought to be their guide, and (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27) made the

case for hearing and doing. Scripture is not just a set of rules standing apart but where one gets one's priorities.

Case Two introduces a complication. A history of Christian teaching did not preclude bad decisions. This is not to say Scripture is of no account, only that knowledge of it does not invariably carry the day in practice. That there was a subsequent stress on God and on values put in one's own words is indicative of a deeper internalization. So, the answer to Research Question One is that Scripture has its most practical bearing on ethical reasoning once biblical convictions are personally made explicit and tied to the kind of decisions that recur.

***Research Question Two: Competing Influences and Cultural Conflict***

In putting to the test, the second of the supporting research questions, one must ask what sort of challenges are put forward when a person's biblical convictions run up against the norms or practices of the surrounding culture. What the evidence shows is that this kind of conflict is for the most part an affair of ordinary life, not of formal philosophical disputation. With Case One, for instance, the competing influences were to be found in matters of money, family priorities, time, media, education, relationships and activities. In Case Two it was the pressures of habit, desire, peer approval and the lure of immediate reward that vied for attention.

One will not find the participants characterizing these tensions in the terms of moral relativism. Yet the study's analytic interest in clashing moral frameworks allows for such an interpretation of the findings. There were occasions where convenience or social approval would in effect be the moral authority, without the participant making any conscious repudiation of objective truth. The challenge then is not just being exposed to other ideas but to a different kind of formation; environments have a way of imparting what is normal and what is to be rewarded. An answer to Research Question Two is had by appreciating that before it can be made into an

explicit argument, conflict with biblical conviction will usually manifest itself during everyday cultural and social practice.

### *Research Question Three: Christian Community and Spiritual Practices*

The third question set out to determine how much of a part Christian community, and spiritual practices of an intentional nature have in upholding biblical ethics. In Case One there was a link between stated values and such things as prayer, ministry, instruction from the Bible, the family and church involvement. They were means of giving form to one's convictions, and their import is in the repetition of them; a value ceases to be only words when it is a matter of routine and habit.

Case Two is more ambiguous in showing the relational side of this. While past experience of the church was not all good, in time the conversations turned to the need for regular participation and accountable relationships. So, the evidence would not have it that attendance at church is of itself enough to underwrite moral commitments. A better supported conclusion is that a Christian community is formative in so far as it can put in place the relationships to embody and reinforce, or even call into question, the commitments an individual is after.

With some caution, then, Research Question Three is answered. By way of accountability, belonging and repeated action, Christian community and its practices can see to it that biblical commitments are sustained. It is the quality of the community and practice that makes the difference, not simply the fact of the institution.

## Discussion

### *Operative Values versus Professed Belief*

What stands out as the principal interpretive finding is the gulf that can exist between a professed Christian belief and the moral commitment that is in operation. The evidence does not

bear out any easy equivalence whereby Christian belief yields Christian behavior of its own accord. Case Two is a case in point, whereas in Case One, one sees a deliberate effort to bring broad belief and the practice of every day closer together.

Such an interpretation accords with the work of Kelly et al. (2024). Their meta-analysis of a great deal of research turned up a relationship between religiosity and prosociality that was positive if modest. And it was a good deal stronger when the prosociality was self-reported than on direct measurement of behavior. These qualitative results do not go so far as to provide a causal account of the difference noted in the meta-analysis, but they do present a process by which to make sense of a divergence between profession and conduct. A conviction may be sincerely held by a Christian and still lack the practical authority to be the arbiter of every decision. One is not immune to the encroachment of pressures, relationships, desires and habits at odds with one another. In Case One we see a contrary dynamic, where broad convictions are given substance by means of articulated values. The seminar put participants to the test in a similar way, having them consider if their lives in practice were in keeping with the values they put forward. Thus, the professed-operative distinction is borne out in the empirical setting as well as in the literature.

### *Religious Formation Without Guaranteed Moral Performance*

In a sense the findings serve to put to rest an apparent contradiction between two bodies of literature. There is J. Smith (2023) who has shown the meaningful impact of religious upbringing on moral formation down the line; then Kelly et al. (2024) report a more modest relationship between religiosity and prosocial behavior when it is measured directly. Both can be reconciled in that religious formation may give shape to moral orientation without any assurance of consistent performance.

The cases at hand would seem to confirm this. While Christian belief provided the categories through which the participants made sense of life, action was contingent on habit, internalization, circumstances, practical judgment and relationships. So the study poses the question in a different light: less about whether the religious are ethical and more about the conditions under which a Christian's beliefs become operative values that inform decisions.

Several conditions present themselves in the cases, though no claim to causal sufficiency is made accountability, constructive relationships, repeated practice and the like, along with concrete application and intentional articulation. Such processes account for how a belief affirmed by a participant acquires a kind of practical authority.

### *Intentionality and Formative Ethics*

Intentionality is an important theme given the opposing approaches to moral formation in the two cases. With Case One there is anticipatory formation, the family trying to put values in place ahead of any conflict. Case Two is reconstructive; here the participant must deal with the need for structure and accountability after destructive habits have taken hold.

This bears out the study's division of formative and reactive ethics. The latter is concerned with what to do when faced with a dilemma, the former with what practices and convictions are being put in order before the crisis arrives. It is an analytic distinction, not an absolute one, and Christians will have need of both. Still, the cases point to moral readiness being a product of formation prior to the decision itself.

### *Practical Discernment as the Bridge Between Belief and Action*

Practical discernment is also given its due by the findings. Errington (2019) makes of practical wisdom the ability to act well in the real world as opposed to having abstract knowledge of morality. One can observe this in Case One. A value like God First gives direction

but does not dictate the resolution of every conflict involving church, work, sport, education and so on. What faithful application calls for in each instance is a matter of discernment.

That saves the study from two sorts of error. Relativism, where stable conviction is absent and application is left to preference. Or mechanical moralism, holding up one contextual choice as the only faithful option for all. The evidence points to something else, a pattern of conviction that is stable yet informed by context. Consider health-conscious living: the participant sees a link with stewardship but leaves the specifics of medical or nutritional matters to judgment. Or take two families that might make divergent educational choices while professing to disciple their children. The value is there to direct attention, but practical wisdom is needed.

### *A Formative Moral Ecology in the Family*

In Case One the family is put forward as a moral ecology. It would be a mistake to think of the household as simply where one talks about values; they are conveyed in the way money and media are handled, in education and church life, in discipline and leisure, in the relationships and schedules that make up an ordinary routine. The family puts in place an environment where some goods are given precedence and particular practices run of the mill.

Such an outcome accords with the literature on intergenerational transmission. C. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) along with J. Smith (2021) would have it that religious transmission is a matter of socialization, parental belief, relationship and modeling, not religious identification in and of itself. And Ott and Vonk (2025) point to internalization as a key to continuity from one generation to the next.

This case, however, does not show that intentional family values guarantee transmission. Children are moral agents who may receive, reinterpret, or reject what they are given. Zammit and Taylor (2026) caution against overly simplistic models of religious transmission. For parents,

then, the issue is less control than the intentional formation of a household environment in which biblical values are clearly embodied and explained.

***Modeling, Internalization and Compliance***

There is also here an underlining of the need for internalization. While external expectations will influence behavior, a lasting moral formation seems to demand a degree of personal ownership. Case Two bears this out: field notes from later show the participant being put to the task of putting his maturing values into his own words.

A pastor can put forward what ought to be of importance, parents can put boundaries in place, a recovery program will have its structures. These are no doubt helpful and at times necessary, but they do not amount to internalization. The question of substance is whether the individual has made the commitment his own to the point where it will inform his actions in the absence of anyone looking over him.

For a parent this is a distinction of consequence. One can see compliance without knowing how deeply felt the underlying commitment is. Christian formation must be more than visible conformity. What is of greater import is to see if the modelling, the explanations, the relationships and practices are making values something of personal meaning and operation.

***Communal Reinforcement, Accountability and the Church***

The cases offer a measure of support for what the Christian community can do. Hauerwas (1981) has the church as a community of shared practice and a moral narrative all its own where character is made. Our findings are in line with that sort of emphasis, but they also put in evidence why head counts do not tell the whole story.

One would be wrong to assume from Case Two that time at church is formative. The participant had a mixed history there. In time the focus became regular participation and

accountability of a relational kind. It is the quality of the practice and relationship within the institution, not the institution per se, that holds formative weight.

Byerly et al. (2022) are of like mind when it comes to the collective character of the church. This case indicates that a community acquires moral significance by offering truth and encouragement, by setting expectations and allowing for belonging and the exercise of one's commitments. Attendance opens the door, but in this instance, reinforcement is more directly tied to the engagement of relationships.

### *Belonging and Accountability*

Case Two makes tangible the tension between the two. To belong without any truth is to be indifferent. Where there is correction, but no sense of belonging, shame and alienation are compounded. During a moral struggle or recovery, one needs to be in a relationship where destructive behavior does not become morally inconsequential and yet the person is still known.

That the participant came to value accountable relationships is indicative of a community that is sustainable, one that combines moral challenge with acceptance. Social recovery is found in communities that are safe and free of stigma but also have trust and responsibility, as well as new and meaningful relationships, according to the work of Vigdal et al. (2022). A balanced picture is what one sees in the present case.

### *Competing Cultural Formation*

There is an argument to be made that culture works its way through formation no less than through ideas, and the findings bear this out. Case Two is a case in point. It was not necessary for peer relationships to put forward philosophical objections to Christianity to have their effect on behavior; they were sufficient in offering norms, identity, approval and a sense of belonging. Such influences can be more potent in practice than any abstract disagreement.

Case One had its own dynamics of a quieter sort, via education and media, by way of one's time, priorities and activities. The issue is not so much what culture has to say as what its environments are wont to reward and make desirable repeatedly. In that light it is understandable how someone might go without ever consciously adopting moral relativism yet cede to social approval or preference as a ready source of moral authority.

J. K. A. Smith (2009) would have something to add here with his focus on desire and practice in cultural formation. He would say people are made by the repeated participation in surroundings that instruct them in what to love. While the study makes no attempt to put that theory to the test, the cases do not contradict the notion that moral formation is a product of embodied environments as much as of being told what to do.

***Biblical Values as Counter-Formation***

One can view intentional biblical values as counter-formation when there is competing formation at work. This is not to say one should turn one's back on the surrounding culture or opt out of social life. Rather it is a matter of putting into practice and naming those convictions which would otherwise be put aside by more powerful forces.

In the instance of Case One, categories such as God First, Family, Health-Conscious Living, Thoughtful Stewardship and Discipleship of Children served to put cultural assumptions to the test instead of taking them on board unthinkingly. With Case Two the stress later put on church, accountability, God and constructive relationships was an effort to put in place another kind of moral and relational environment.

So the Christian ethical formation evidenced in the findings is not merely a question of knowing the teachings of Christianity. Practices and relationships must be put in order to stand

up to other forms of formation. An interpretive rather than causal conclusion, it is in keeping with both the empirical data and what has been written on community, habit and desire.

### *Recovery, Habit, and Nonlinear Formation*

The evidence from Case Two is in strong support of a nonlinear approach to formation. Knobel (2023) makes the case that one can have real moral change and still have the dispositions of old habits. That is a useful way of looking at the recovery case, for it steers clear of the twin fallacies of deeming that struggle means no change has taken place, or that new conviction renders former patterns irrelevant.

Older habits may well continue to have their say even if the participant's subsequent commitments are in earnest. And a relapse is serious morally speaking without having to mean all prior commitment was spurious. The dissertation speaks of ongoing formation for that very reason, as opposed to transformation complete.

### *Conviction Without Automatic Transformation*

Both empirically and theologically the findings call for some qualification. Biblical conviction is important, but it is not to be regarded as an automatic guarantee of a change in behavior. The cases point to a process of some complexity where conviction must be internalized and put into practice, given social reinforcement and repeated before it takes hold. Inconsistency is still to be expected.

This is in line with the modest link between religiosity and behavior put forward by Kelly et al. (2024) and the work on internalization and habit. It also keeps the theological interpretation from any hint of triumphalism. The participants are not said to have been transformed by biblical values. The more guarded conclusion is that their biblical convictions proved of practical import

when they were deliberately tied by the participants to the decisions and relationships of their continuing formation.

**An Emerging Conceptual Framework**

For the most part, the findings accord with the conceptual framework put forward in the Review and informed by the literature, yet they also put on display a number of ways the process may be complicated, reversed or interrupted. In its formulation the framework is: Biblical Conviction -> Practical Discernment -> Intentional Application -> Communal Reinforcement -> Ongoing Moral Formation.

Biblical Conviction is the participant's grasp of Christian moral or scriptural commitments; some measure of this was present in both cases. But the extent of internalization, priority and clarity was not the same, which is why one cannot consider conviction to be a binary variable.

Then there is Practical Discernment, the kind of interpretive work that puts conviction in context for a given situation. Case One has this in its decisions on family priorities, resources, health and children. In Case Two the participant shows it in a rethinking of God's priority, structure, accountability and relationships.

When a value influences what a person does, it is more visibly at work; this is Intentional Application, or concrete practice. The framework is predicated on this. Case One makes a connection between values and such things as spending, parenting, prayer and church. Case Two would link developing commitments to community, renewed structure and accountability, if only the application had been any more consistent.

Communal Reinforcement is about the relational milieu that can either bolster or undermine a commitment. Community is no sure thing, as both cases will show; it is not of itself

constructive. Whether from the church, peers or family, relationships can put different values in reinforcement. So, the framework has community as a dynamic force and not a positive stage to be taken for granted.

Over time perception, character, habit and priorities are cumulatively shaped in Ongoing Moral Formation. What the cases reveal is that the process is one of reassessment, failure, inconsistency and success as well as renewed practice. In that way formation will bear on subsequent discernment and conviction, so the framework is cyclical in nature, not linear.

### *A Model of Increasing Congruence*

One could say the findings point to moral formation as a matter of growing congruence in the professed belief, the character being developed, the value put into words and the practice behind it. There is no question of attaining moral perfection, but of a better fit between what is said to matter and what in fact has sway over a person's decisions and priorities.

A value is even more operative where these dimensions correspond. Where they do not, the divergence is of analytical interest. It might be due to fear, desire, habit, pressure, incomplete internalization or competing loyalties, or simply because formation is still underway. The model is one of understanding such inconsistency, not of condemnation.

### *Approaching the Research Problem in Two Ways*

The two cases come at the research problem from different angles. Case One is of the intentional sort, with its Christian conviction and practical discernment leading to family application before a crisis. Case Two is reconstructive, unfolding against established patterns of Christian exposure and competing formation, destructive choices and recognition, followed by a renewal of values and accountability.

**Summary**

In this section the discussion and findings of a qualitative multiple-case study have been put before the reader. The subject is the way Christians make sense of and used biblical values in their ethical decision-making today. Analysis was done on two focal cases and material from the Family Values Seminar.

Case One, a married couple of Christians wanting to be more intentional in how they live as a family, showed a progression from general Christian belief to values having to do with stewardship, faith, health and the like. The import of the case was not in the sudden adoption of new beliefs but in the language developed to tie old convictions to the decisions that keep coming up.

Case Two was of an altogether different order. The record of the participant tells of peer pressure, the want of acceptance, substance use, recovery, church and accountability. A straightforward story of Christian intervention and recovery is not borne out by the evidence. What the case makes plain is the hard work of turning religious exposure and stated conviction into something internalized enough to hold under pressure.

As for the Family Values Seminar, it provided a context in which the chasm between hearing and doing was documented, as was the fact that what one professes as a priority may not be evident in life. It also made my own influence as a researcher apparent in that I put forward examples of my family's values in teaching the material.

Five themes emerged from the cross-case analysis to address the research questions: the formative power of relationships and of moral formation; the need for values to be applied in concrete terms; the way intentionality gives direction to belief; and the fact that competing influences are at work. Scripture would inform ethical reasoning with normative convictions in

need of interpretation, while cultural conflict was to be found in the social and relational formation. When spiritual practices and the Christian community were repeated and engendered a sense of belonging and accountability, they too proved formative.

These findings were set in conversation with the literature of the Review. The evidence is in keeping with the framework of Biblical Conviction -> Practical Discernment -> Intentional Application -> Communal Reinforcement -> Ongoing Moral Formation, even as it demonstrates the process can be revisited or put in reverse. A distinction is supported between reactive and formative ethics and among values that are operative, aspirational or merely professed.

The study would not have it that biblical beliefs are an automatic recipe for biblical conduct. They are of practical significance when they are internalized to the point of shaping discernment, reinforced by habits and relationships to mean something under duress, and sustained during moral formation. In Summary and Conclusion, the focus will be on the wider import of these findings and what they imply for churches and Christian families, as well as on recommendations for research down the road.

## Summary and Conclusions

A summary of the study is presented in this section along with an account of how the principal findings bear on the literature from the Review; theoretical and practical implications are weighed and recommendations put forward for subsequent research. At the outset the study was driven by a question: in contemporary culture, how do Christians go about understanding and applying biblical values to their ethical decisions? This was a distinction that gained in importance over the course of the dissertation: one can be a Christian who in good standing affirms biblical truth, yet those convictions do not invariably serve as operative values in each

decision. Hence the problem at hand is less a matter of whether such truth is affirmed than of how it is made into a value that will guide one in environments where different forms of formation are in competition.

To look at the problem from two angles a qualitative multiple-case design was employed. In Case One there was a married couple of Christians wanting to put some articulation to the values they would rely on for family decisions. The adult participant in Case Two had a record of peer pressure, substance use and attempts at recovery, as well as church involvement, accountability and ongoing moral formation in his relationships with family. Some congregational contexts on the link between what is professed and what is done was provided by the Family Values Seminar. All told, these allowed for an examination of the interplay of environment, habit, relationship and conviction in the ethics of a Christian's life.

What the findings show is that the formation of Christian ethics is not so simple as passing on moral information. While Scripture gives the normative content for the theological framework here, knowledge of it does not in itself dictate behavior. Biblical convictions take on a more practical dimension when they are made to fit concrete circumstances, are put in terms of priorities and put into practice and are upheld by relationships and time. This is in keeping with what has been written on virtue, habit and lived religion and the gap between religious identification and behavior one can observe (Ganzevoort & Roeland, 2014; Kelly et al., 2024; Knobel, 2023; J. K. A. Smith, 2009). These are case-based results and no causal effects or generalizations for the population are to be made of them.

**Summary**

Where normative Christian ethics meets the reality of practice is the concern of this study. It is an old question in Christian ethical scholarship as to what Scripture has to say on

character, community, practical wisdom and a life of faith. Writers like Hays (1996), Hauerwas (1981) and Wright (2004) make the point that Christian ethics defies being whittled down to rules since the moral life is part of a wider theological vision of vocation, discipleship and identity. Yet empirical work on the connection between religiosity and behavior tells another story; belief and participation do not yield uniform moral results. Kelly et al. (2024) note a positive if modest association between religiosity and prosociality overall, and one that is more pronounced in self-report than in what is directly observed. Such a tension served to define the focus of the dissertation on the shift from what is professed to what is practiced.

The aim was to see how Christians come to understand and sustain biblical values in their decision-making in today's culture, and to give due regard to the role of community, intentional practice and contextual difficulties. The central question was how biblical values are understood and applied by Christians in making ethical decisions in contemporary culture. There were also questions to consider the part played by Scripture and by spiritual practices and community in upholding ethical commitments, as well as the challenges of competing norms.

Given that the issue was one of meaning and process rather than the estimation of causes, a qualitative multiple-case study was the appropriate choice. The two cases were the subject of separate and comparative analysis; the seminar was not an intervention or a third case but offered additional context. The data that remained were for the most part in the form of field notes put down by hand, materials from the participants and the seminar, and in the case of Case One a follow-up document the participant wrote from notes of the original research period. With no verbatim transcripts or audio to draw on, any quoting of the participants' words was done only where they were clearly on the record, otherwise the findings have been paraphrased. Drawing on the logic of case-study and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2022; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018),

the formal analysis that followed was shaped by these approaches. I have considered my role as teacher of the Family Values Seminar and the pastoral ties to the participants as methodological context. Such an insider vantage point is a source of access and contextual understanding, yet it also opens the door to confirmation bias, social desirability, influence and role confusion. For this reason, the conclusions are deliberately restrained.

***Case One: A Summary***

In the instance of Case One, a young Christian family put some intention behind the values they wished to see direct their lives. Of the material at hand, five stand out: Faith First or God First, Thoughtful Stewardship, Health-Conscious Living, the notion of Family as a gift from God and the Discipleship of Children. It would be wrong to read into the case an absence of prior Christian belief in the family; the import of it is found in how the articulation of values gave them words to link what they already held with the choices they made in matters of worship, time, finances, generosity, possessions, health and relations with others and their children.

The researcher's part is hard to miss in Case One. The first value can be traced to my example in the Family Values Seminar, where a structured exercise for identifying values was put forward along with the language of a moral compass. What one has here is a form of guided moral reflection, with pastoral teaching and family discussion coming to bear on earlier Christian commitments and their subsequent application. That makes for caution when using causal terms.

As an example of formative ethics, the case is instructive. The family were at pains to make their commitments plain before being put on the spot by future decisions. They did not want to let issues become a crisis; they set about defining the type of family and the governing commitments they wanted to be. This accords with the work of Ott & Vonk (2025) and others

(Rich et al., 2024; C. Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; C. Smith et al., 2020) who stress the internalization of family culture and parental modelling over simple compliance.

***Case Two: A Summary***

Case Two offers another way of approaching the research problem. While the participant had his share of Christian relationships and exposure, the record indicates that when other social forces, wants and ingrained habits took over, his beliefs were not always an operative moral framework. Peer pressure, the need to fit in or to prove oneself, self-image, substance use and behavior of a destructive nature are all noted as part of his moral environment.

One must be careful in making sense of this case to distinguish between what is professed, aspirational and operative. A person may regard a value as important (professed) or have a sincere wish to be ruled by it (aspirational), but it is the operative value that will have its say in one's practices and priorities. There is an imperfect overlap between the categories. One does not have to infer total insincerity, nor that a stated belief is fully in effect, when religious identity and moral knowledge are present alongside contrary actions.

His standing in the Christian community was not all good, at least according to the early notes. In more recent exchanges however, he has come to see accountable relationships, putting God first and regular church attendance as what he is trying to put in place. As for recovery, the evidence points to a nonlinear process of formation. There is no basis for a narrative of completed recovery or for attributing sobriety to spiritual intervention. What is documented is ongoing formation, a rethinking of relationships and renewed commitment, not without its struggles and the demands of a structured recovery. These findings are in line with literature on the persistence of old dispositions and on social and recovery capital (Bunaciu et al., 2024; Knobel, 2023; Vigdal et al., 2022).

### *A Summary of the Supplemental Seminar*

Case One and the research problem at hand were given supplemental context by the Family Values Seminar. With a biblical frame of reference from (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27), the seminar put before Christian families the question of what non-negotiable values they would make their moral compass, and in doing so underlined the chasm between simply hearing Jesus' words and acting on them. Those in attendance were to put forward their core values and reflect on the extent to which the way they lived was consonant with such commitments.

One should not regard the seminar as a third focal case; it offers no quantitative data on change. What it brings to the dissertation is a descriptive account of the congregational setting where the disparity between professed values and practice is called out. It also puts the researcher's influence on display since I was the one teaching the material and proffering examples from my own family. In this way the seminar elucidates the formative context, though it can be no support for any claims of behavioral change that has been measured.

### *The Major Findings*

There is moral direction to be had in intentional values. Specificity was of import in all the cases; a broad Christian commitment is of more use in making decisions when put into words that have purchase in the various areas of life, as Case One makes plain. Here the family's values furnished practical means of assessment for matters of stewardship, health, children, faith and the like. This is not to say writing down one's values will alter behavior, but that an intentional articulation may serve to take a general assent and make it a matter of practical discernment.

Yet other influences are formative. Moral formation is not something that happens in a vacuum. Where the operative biblical values are lacking or inconsistent, one's moral perception

and choices will be shaped by whatever else is at hand: the need for peer approval or social belonging, media, habit, fear, convenience, desire or the expectations of the family. The participants were not wont to speak of these tensions in the philosophical language of relativism; a more defensible reading is that the realities of moral life play out in the presence of competing authorities and frameworks.

A stated commitment is made more operative by way of concrete practices. Whether it is in prayer, at church, in how one parents or sets boundaries with media and spending, in accountability or in the structure of recovery, convictions are put to the test, reinforced or revised. This accords with the literature on formation (MacIntyre, 2007; Pawl, 2023; J. K. A. Smith, 2009) which would have it that habituation and embodied practice are of greater moment than moral cognition alone.

Then there are relationships. Be they of a pastoral, family, peer, church or recovery nature, they constitute morally significant environments, if not always for the better. Case Two shows how the norms of a group can draw a person to either constructive or destructive patterns of belonging. Case One is an example of family being the place for the reinforcement and shared articulation of values. In this moral agency is personal but not in isolation.

The evidence points to moral formation as an ongoing process. There is no one-time ethical change to be found in either case. Case One is characterized by the continued effort to bring family life into line with articulated commitments; in Case Two there is a persistence of old habits alongside renewed aspiration and repeated struggle. As Knobel (2023) would have it, genuine development can coexist with dispositions that linger; Caprioglio Panizza and Vaccarezza (2025) see transformation as a matter of changing possibilities. Ongoing formation

and a growing congruence are therefore better ways to describe the cases than completed transformation.

### *How the Findings Relate to the Literature*

For the most part the findings bear out the literature of the Review, but they are a caution against drawing too simple a conclusion. Hays (1996), Wright (2004) and Hauerwas (1981) would have the Christian moral life defined by character, community and faithful practice, not the application of rules. While the present study does not put those theological claims to an empirical test, the cases are in keeping with the notion that one's ethical commitments are a part of identity and relationship and do not stand as propositions apart from practice. In that respect the findings are in step with the practical-theological and lived-religion schools of thought concerned with faith as it is practiced. In the view of Ganzevoort and Roeland (2014) lived religion is a matter for practical theology, an argument Swinton and Mowat (2016) extend to call for a qualitative approach to lived experience in one's theological reflection. The dissertation has its place in this concern with the way it draws a line between operative and professed values; the question put forward is not only what participants claim to believe but in what manner those beliefs manifest themselves in their choices, relationships and priorities.

One finds an important qualification in the empirical work on behavior and religiosity. According to Kelly et al. (2024), religiosity is a predictor of prosociality yet the correlation is at best modest and more so in self-report than in behavior under direct observation. Bulbulia et al. (2024) make a similar case for the prudence of inference in looking at religious participation and its prosocial outcomes. These results are in keeping with the dissertation's main contention that while religion can be formative of moral orientation it does not ensure moral performance.

The family literature is no less balanced. C. Smith and colleagues (2020), as well as C. Smith and Adamczyk (2021) and J. Smith (2021, 2023) have put forward the considerable influence of parents in moral and religious formation, and Rich et al. (2024) have recorded the various points of contact between parenting and religious belief. Ott and Vonk (2025) draw attention to internalization, a point of particular relevance here: the object is not just to have children aware of the family's values but to give them scope to come to terms with the convictions at their root, to question and appropriate them and in time make them their own. As Zammit and Taylor (2026) would have it, transmission should not be viewed as something mechanical.

Findings are also borne out by the literature on habit and community. Hauerwas (1981) puts the church forward as a community of character. An empirical case is made by Byerly et al. (2022), Son (2024), and Okuwobi et al. (2023) for the formative if limited nature of congregational life. Then there is the force of practices and habits as stressed by J. K. A. Smith (2009), Pawl (2023) and Knobel (2023). All of this lends weight to the conceptual position of the study, namely that biblical convictions attain their greatest ethical import when they are part of ongoing formation, communal reinforcement and the intentional application and practical discernment of those convictions.

**Implications for Practice**

There are theoretical and practical implications to be drawn from this study, provided they are kept in proportion to the design. With two focal cases one cannot lay down general laws of Christian moral development. What can be done is to shed light on concepts and processes and put before pastoral caregivers and Christian families and churches some food for thought on how conviction becomes an ethical commitment in practice.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Biblical values as an intermediate moral framework. Scripture is the normative source in any Christian theological scheme, but interpretation is called for in the making of everyday decisions. The findings indicate that articulated biblical values can serve as an intermediate structure to order this work, setting out durable priorities against which to measure concrete situations. In effect the movement is from Scripture and biblical conviction to an articulated value and then to practical discernment and practice. This is not to supplant biblical interpretation, to which such values are answerable in the larger witness of Scripture.

A further implication is the value of telling apart the values a person professes from those he or she is truly intent on embodying or those that have a hold on one's choices and priorities. It is a means of being more exact in reading inconsistency without the assumption that action is always dictated by what is professed or that every instance of the contrary is hypocrisy; the gap may be accounted for by social pressures, entrenched habit, moral weakness or incomplete internalization among other things.

Finally, there is the matter of formative as opposed to reactive ethics. The latter is concerned with what to do when an ethical dilemma is upon you, the former with the character, habits and convictions that have been put in place beforehand. The distinction is an analytic one since both are part of the Christian ethical life. Case One makes the case for some moral preparation: to have family commitments in articulation ahead of any future issue is to have a firmer basis for discernment later. This is in tune with the virtue and formation traditions of Hauerwas (1981), MacIntyre (2007) and J. K. A. Smith (2009) with their focus on communities of formation and character.

A cyclical framework and moral ecology. In the context of this study, one can define moral ecology as those cultural, institutional and relational environments in which moral commitments are put to the test or find reinforcement, or with which they must compete. While it is not the case that family, work, school, the media, church, peers, recovery or the culture at large dictate every decision, they have a hand in making certain courses of action seem possible, costly, normal or desirable.

Consequently, the framework advanced by the study (Biblical Conviction to Practical Discernment to Intentional Application to Communal Reinforcement to Ongoing Moral Formation) is meant to be read as a cycle. A person is formed and will come back to Scripture to make further decisions; yet the process is subject to being derailed or put on another course by failure, new habits, competing relationships or community.

### *Practical Implications*

**For churches.** The results of the study would have churches wary of thinking that ethical formation is a matter of attendance, knowledge or words of assent. Lived formation is what comes of congregational teaching when it enables the believer to put biblical conviction into practice through discernment, ordinary decisions and accountable relationships. There is a relational dimension to the formative work of the church as well. Case Two makes the point that one needs to belong and be held to account in relationships where responsibility for one's choices is expected and where people are known and loved. The study is not vouching for any given program but for the logic of formation that ties community and practice to conviction.

Church leaders might do well to view ethical formation as an exercise in long term discipleship instead of reacting to whatever cultural controversy is de rigueur. Be it in preaching, mentoring, small groups, service, prayer, testimony or reflective teaching, there is opportunity

for believers to put their convictions to the test and act in faith. One is not after the management of behavior so much as to see Christians' lives governed by what they profess to be important.

**Christian families.** Families could take from Case One the idea of zeroing in on a few biblically sound commitments to steer the decisions that come up time and again. It is not a question of having an unyielding set of rules or slogans, but of putting things in order of priority. Then the family can look at how its use of time, its spending, education, media, hospitality and conflict are measuring up to those commitments. Values are best used in a reflective way: to ask where our practices do and do not accord with what we say matters.

Some measure of development should be anticipated, if not perfection. As circumstances and children change, so too may the application of otherwise stable values, calling for practical discernment. A commitment to the discipleship of one's children will manifest in different ways at different stages of growth; the value gives you direction, but you still need the wisdom to apply it.

**Parenting and intergenerational faith.** What the literature has to say is that parents are a factor in religious transmission but not in a mechanical sense (C. Smith & Adamczyk, 2021; C. Smith et al., 2020; J. Smith, 2023). Ott and Vonk (2025) put the emphasis on internalization. So a Christian parent's objective ought to be more than having children parrot the family's values; it is to have them grasp the why behind such commitments, to put questions to them, to see them modelled and to witness repair in the event of parental shortcoming, until the child has made the conviction his or her own.

That puts a premium on modelling. The lesson a child gets from a family's stated values may not be the same as the one learned from its practices. Children are watching to see what is put aside first, how money and conflict are dealt with, the way adults talk about one another and

what a parent does when holding to a conviction is no longer convenient. An intentional approach to parenting will take note of what is taught and what is on display.

**Pastoral care and recovery.** One cannot make a treatment claim from Case Two, but it does indicate that in dealing with addiction or other destructive patterns of a deep-seated nature, pastoral care should not be content to reduce the issue of recovery to a matter of deeper religious commitment. The results, taken in conjunction with the recovery literature of the Review, are indicative of an integrated pastoral approach. In this posture spiritual formation and Christian community are not put in place of proper professional or recovery resources but serve to complement them (Bunaciu et al., 2024; Vigdal et al., 2022).

Through pastoral care one can come to understand the moral and relational milieu of a person's recurring behavior, be it in matters of peer association, family dynamics, routine, isolation, accountability or spiritual practice. A useful exercise is to make the distinction between professed, aspirational and operative values. This allows the caregiver to be serious about what is sincerely aspired to yet insist on responsibility, making space for accountability without the notion that a relapse voids any prior commitment, and for compassion that does not let harmful choices go unexamined.

## Recommendations

What the present study has in the way of limitations is a guide for future research. The conclusions are of limited transferability and strength by virtue of the small sample size, the fact that it was confined to one congregation, the insider position of the researcher, incomplete records, no verbatim transcripts or recordings, some conflation of pastoral and research roles and a retrospective formal analysis. Any follow up work should have a more prospective design and evidentiary clarity, though the research question would remain practice focused.

A qualitative design should be put in place from the start, with a protocol that is well documented, informed consent in writing, case boundaries made clear and source material secured. Where ethics and the participant allow, semi-structured interviews ought to be recorded and transcribed to separate out analytic interpretation and pastoral interaction from contemporaneous data and after the fact reflection.

To lessen the effect of pastoral authority in the gathering of data, an interviewer with no such standing vis-a-vis the participants might be employed, or one could deliberately set insider interviews against those of an independent researcher. That would be a means of seeing how the relationship at hand bears on social desirability, disclosure, agreement and the inclination to put the researcher's assumptions to the test.

There is room for a larger multiple-case study encompassing a wider array of contexts: different ages, socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds, stages of faith and Christian traditions. Comparative analysis would be all the stronger for it, provided one does not turn qualitative findings into population estimates; cases at odds with what is expected deserve scrutiny.

Longitudinal work is called for with respect to operative values. By way of repeated interviews, decision narratives or journals, researchers could see how articulated values hold up during a weighty ethical decision and in its aftermath, inquiring into change and stability without presupposing a causal link.

One might also look at the articulation of values in families without the presumption of their efficacy. A qualitative study would do well to compare the language of biblical values a family puts forward with what their practices are down the line, and in so doing observe how

they negotiate application and conflict and make revisions over time instead of simply asking if the exercise ‘works’.

Given the mixed account of church influence in this study, it would be a mistake for future research to regard congregational participation as an unalloyed good. There is value in finding out where church involvement stigmatizes or erodes trust and offers little support, as well as in determining which aspects of the community are morally formative.

Finally, the analytic framework should be put to the test, not taken for granted. Its utility could be assessed in various settings, looking at the sequence from Biblical Conviction through Practical Discernment and Intentional Application to Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation. Researchers should be on the lookout for reverse movement, habit persistence, competing communities and the like, and for when practice comes before a value is explicitly stated. Comparison across Christian traditions or with nonreligious participants may shed light on what is uniquely Christian and what is part of a wider process of moral formation.

**Conclusion**

The purpose of this dissertation has been to look at the way in which Christians put biblical values to use in their ethical decision making and what they make of them in today’s culture. While there is much in the way of moral instruction in Christian traditions and a good deal of believers will give sincere assent to the authority of the Bible, such an assent does not in itself account for how one’s convictions come to bear on the decisions of everyday life. What the research shows is that one cannot take for granted an equivalence between the beliefs and the conduct of a Christian.

In Case One we see a Christian family working to translate a general conviction into something more deliberate to inform its ongoing choices. Case Two presents a process with more

conflict, where being a Christian was counterpointed by powerful opposing forces and habits of long standing; it involved repeated efforts at recovery and eventually an effort to reconstitute one's life on other priorities and in different relationships. The seminar setting put the issue in sharp relief, calling into question if what was professed was in keeping with what was done.

Five themes are evident in the evidence: that intentionality gives belief some practical bearing; that formative influences can be in competition; that a value needs to be tied to concrete practice to have meaning; that moral commitments are either buttressed or undermined by relationships; and that formation is an on-going affair. These points lend themselves to a distinction between what is professed, what is aspired to and what is in operation. They are in line with the framework drawn from the literature of Biblical Conviction leading to Practical Discernment and Intentional Application, then Communal Reinforcement and Ongoing Moral Formation. This is less a matter of assured progression than of the various dimensions at play in the ethics of a Christian life.

Put simply, the study offers this as its main contribution: agreement with a biblical value on the part of a Christian does not mean the value is doing its work. It is only when the conviction starts to dictate one's decisions and priorities, to put in place practices and in effect to make of the believer the person or family he or she is becoming, that it is truly formative. This is a more measured claim than to assert that people are automatically made over by biblical values; it is meant to focus on when and how a conviction becomes operative in the real world.

Viewed from the theological standpoint of this dissertation, the results put us back to the words of Jesus on the difference between hearing and doing (New King James Bible, 1982, Matthew 7:24-27). For the Christian disciple it is a matter of how truth is taken in and made manifest in the life one is living, not merely what is said to be true. Then again, all are being

formed in some measure by the stories, institutions, technologies and communities that govern desire and judgment. The issue is not if it will happen but who or what is behind the forming.

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# Appendix A

## Research Evidence Sources

This appendix summarizes the documentary sources used in the qualitative multiple-case study and clarifies the analytic role and evidentiary limits of each source. The table distinguishes primary focal-case evidence from supplemental contextual material and from background knowledge that was not treated as formal research data.

**Table A1**

*Study Data Sources, Analytic Roles, and Evidentiary Boundaries*

| Source | Date and Format | Analytic Role | Evidentiary Boundary |
|---|---|---|---|
| Case One contemporaneous field notes | 2023; handwritten researcher field notes from planned research conversations | Primary evidence for the family-values case, including the movement from broad Christian conviction toward articulated family priorities and practices. | The surviving notes are incomplete and are not verbatim transcripts. Participant wording is quoted only where the record clearly preserves the phrase; otherwise, the material is paraphrased. |
| Case One participant-authored follow-up document | Later follow-up period; participant-authored document based on contemporaneous handwritten notes from the 2023 research period | Clarification and elaboration of the five family values and the ways the participant connected those values with recurring areas of family decision-making. | This is a later document, not a 2023 research artifact. It is treated as participant clarification rather than proof of causal outcomes or as contemporaneous member checking. |
| Case Two contemporaneous field notes | Summer-fall 2023; handwritten researcher field notes from approximately | Primary evidence for the second focal case, including peer influence, desire for belonging, substance-use history, family and church | The record is incomplete and some notes are abbreviated or partially legible. The conversations also overlapped with pastoral |

| Source | Date and Format | Analytic Role | Evidentiary Boundary |
|---|---|---|---|
| | monthly planned conversations | relationships, accountability, and continuing moral formation. | care. No claim is based solely on researcher memory or on wording that cannot be read with confidence. |
| Family Values Seminar teacher materials and annotations | July 22, 2023; teacher document, written reflection materials, and contemporaneous attendance annotation | Supplemental descriptive context for the study. The materials preserve the seminar objective, biblical framing, reflection questions, example values, researcher-supplied family values, and the values-practice distinction. | The seminar is not treated as a third case or as a quantitative outcome study. Attendance records indicate 53 registered and 49 present, but seminar attendees are not counted as focal research participants and no quantitative effects are claimed. |
| Researcher contextual and pastoral knowledge | Preexisting ministry context and later recollection | Background for understanding setting, relationships, and chronology when supported by the documentary record. | Contextual knowledge is not treated as an independent data source for substantive findings. Where memory cannot be corroborated by surviving evidence, it is not used to reconstruct participant statements, events, or outcomes. |

# Appendix B

## Family Values Seminar Research-Relevant Materials

The following items reproduce the portions of the July 22, 2023, Family Values Seminar that are directly relevant to the dissertation analysis. The seminar functioned as supplemental descriptive context rather than as a third focal case or a quantitative intervention.

**Version note.** The seminar materials identify Matthew 7:24 – 27 as ESV; that designation is retained here because Appendix B reproduces the 2023 seminar framework. Elsewhere in the dissertation, theological citations of biblical passages use the New King James Version unless otherwise noted.

### Seminar Objective

Help families establish “non-negotiable” values that serve as the moral compass by which to navigate life.

### Guiding Scripture and Central Framing

Guiding Scripture: Matthew 7:24–27 (ESV).

The seminar described values as “the moral compass by which you navigate through life” and emphasized the importance of bringing lived practice into harmony with stated values.

### Reflection Questions Used in the Seminar

- If I knew that tomorrow would be the last full day of my life, how would I spend the day?
- At the end of my life, what do I want to look back and say I’ve accomplished?
- If a list of adjectives were compiled to describe my life, what words would I like on that list?
- If I were to die tomorrow, what would I want people to remember as my most important achievement?

- Am I investing myself in those things that matter most to me?
- What is vitally important to me, what has some importance, and what is a complete waste to me?
- If only a single word could be written on my tombstone, what would that word be?

The seminar then asked participants to evaluate whether their lives were in harmony with the values they identified. The teacher material states: “Our lives are not in harmony with those values. Whenever there is a separation between values and practice, things break down.”

**Researcher-Supplied Family Values Used as Examples**

- God First / Running After God — Mark 12:30
- Treat Others the Way You Want to Be Treated / Loving Kindness — Ephesians 4:2
- Unity in Decisions / Together No Matter What — Psalm 133
- Importance of Church — 1 Timothy 3:14–16
- Discipleship of Our Children / Fighting for Convictions — Deuteronomy 6:7–11

These examples are included because my teaching role became part of the analytic context. In Case One, the participant later identified at least one value, God First, as directly influenced by my example.

**Establishing Our Family Values: Top Five**

The seminar concluded with a written exercise asking families to identify five values and describe what each value meant for their family.

1. Value: _____

   Description: _____

   _____

2. Value: _____

Description: _____

_____

3. Value: _____

Description: _____

_____

4. Value: _____

Description: _____

_____

5. Value: _____

Description: _____

_____