

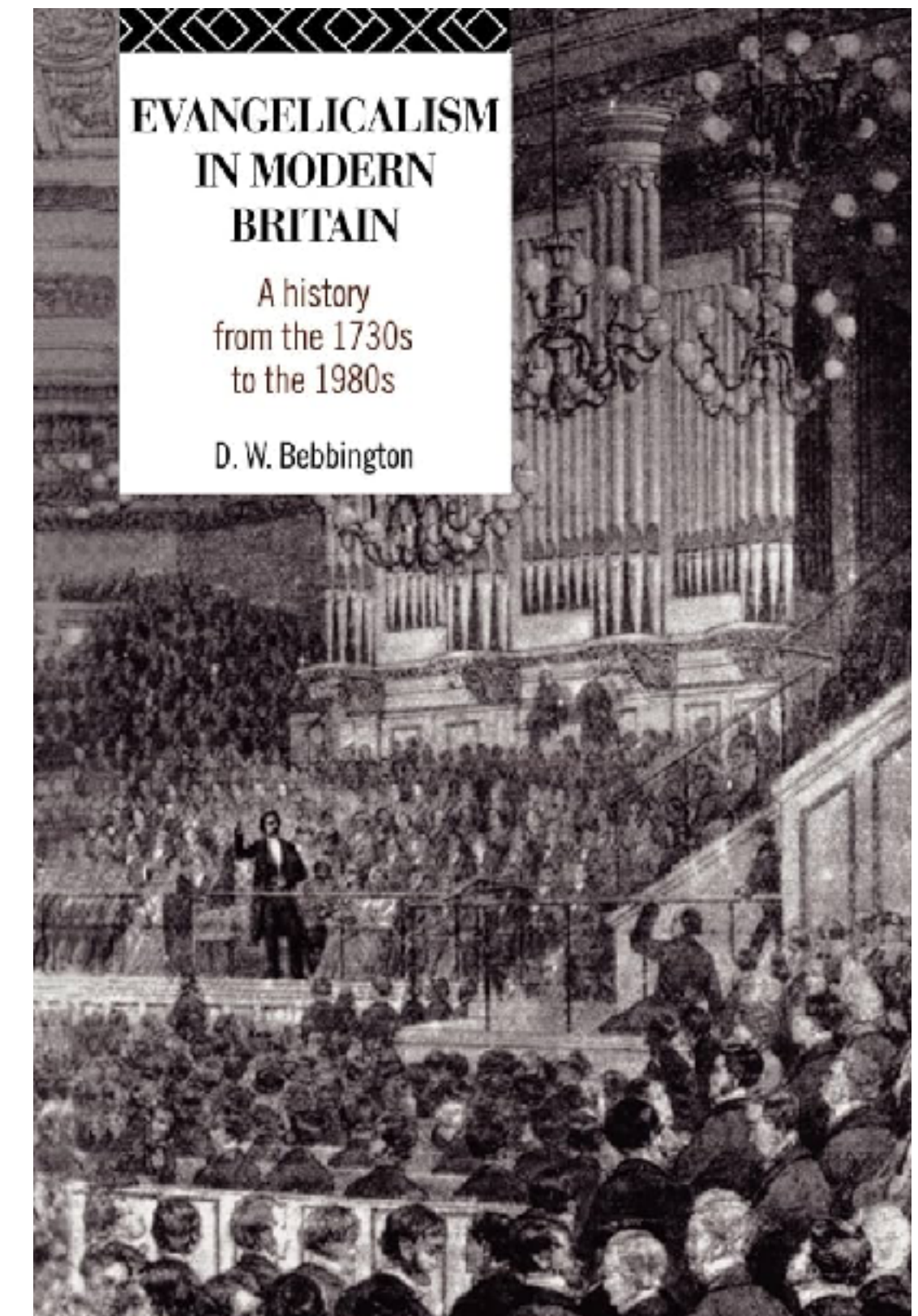
# Would Wesley Do Alpha?

Discipleship Goals in the Holy Trinity Brompton [HTB] Network of Churches.  
An exploration of the theological trajectories of the movement and their implications for the future of the network.

**Richard Moy, Visting Lecturer**

# Comparison One: W&W with HTB

- Renewal movements within Anglicanism?
- A denomination within a denomination
- ‘Enthusiasm’ - ‘fostering an embodied experience of the Holy Spirit’ [Matthew Guest].
- Style honed for maximum impact
- Innovative use of technologies
- Celebrity leaders
- Adept at marketing



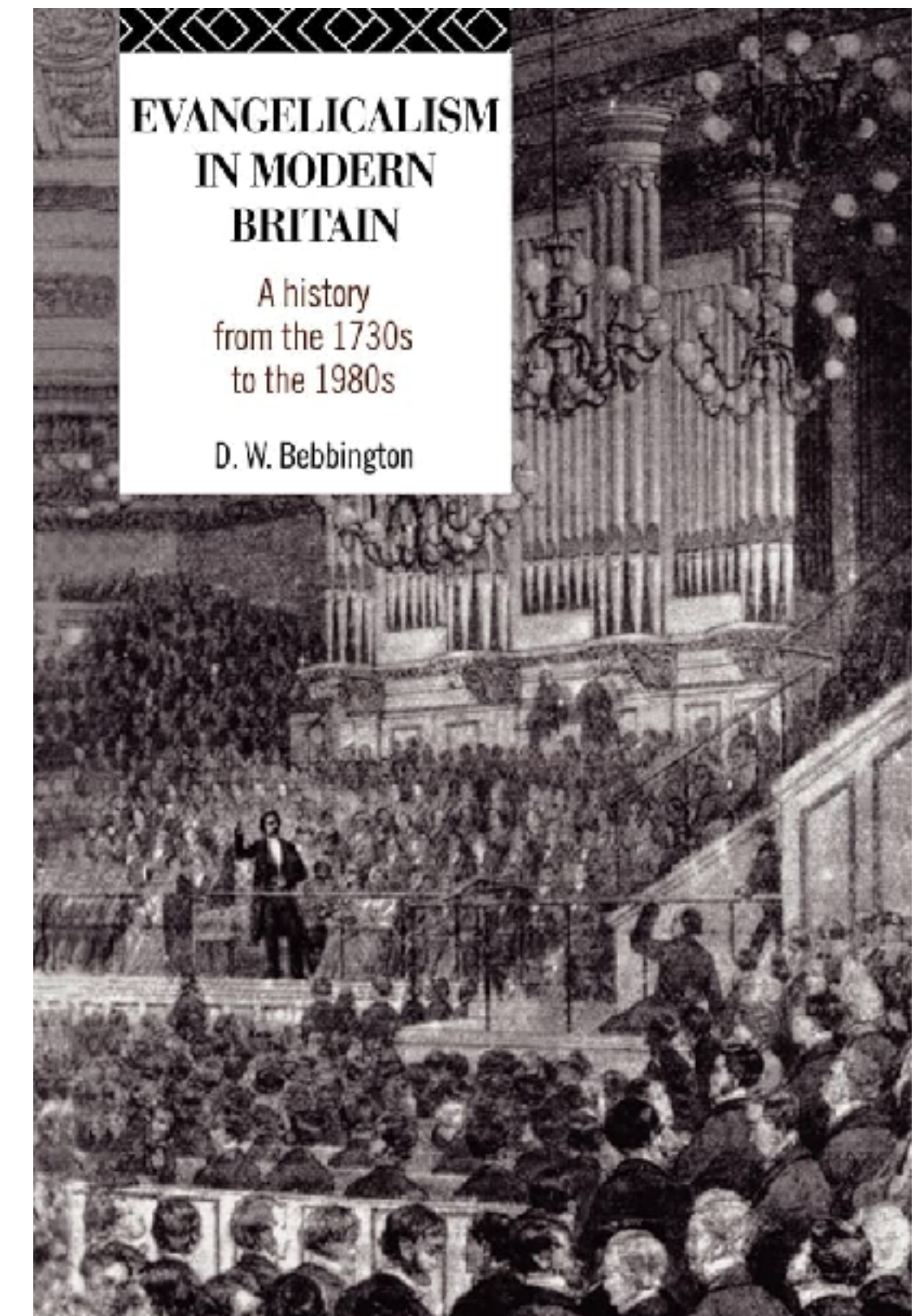


# “...as if in a mirror dimly”

## Comparison: W&W with HTB

- BUT: HTB eschews controversy (vs Whitefield eg).
- HTB closer to power in CoE (until 2023)
- Nevertheless HTB writings assume continuity with W&W

“So for their Anglicanism, their impact, their offer of an experience of the Spirit, their savvy use of technology, their leadership and their birthing of a movement, despite being separated by 250 years of history Wesley and Whitefield make very interesting conversation partners for our review of the contemporary charismatic church exemplified in the HTB network.



# Men of One Book - Maddock

Ian Maddock has emphasised similarities between W&W

“when their theological scheme is contrasted with the espoused theology in parts of the contemporary charismatic church the similarities between the two seem clearer than when pitted against each other.”

**“A holy people for a holy God”**





# John Wesley's core theology summarised

## [Skevington Wood].

- i. scripture as 'the only standard of truth' <sup>532</sup>;
- ii. salvation by faith as '*the standing topic*' <sup>533</sup>;
- iii. sin as 'loathsome leprosy' <sup>534</sup>;
- iv. the regeneration through the Spirit by which we may be '*properly said to live*' <sup>535</sup>;
- v. assurance as 'an inward impression on the soul' <sup>536</sup>;
- vi. holiness, 'the grand depositum' <sup>537</sup>;
- vii. a desire to '*flee from the wrath to come*' as the 'one condition' required of those wanting admission to the societies. <sup>538</sup>

# **John Wesley's core theology summarised**

**[Outler].**

- i) original sin,
- ii) justification by faith alone
- iii) holiness of heart in those who have been born again



# **George Whitefield's core theology summarised**

**[Maddock].**

- i) original sin,
- ii) justification by faith
- iii) the new birth

# **Wesley and Whitefield synthesised**

## **[Maddock].**

- 1) They both proclaimed the doctrine of original sin and the Bible's depiction of the fallen human condition. They insisted that according to the Scriptures, apart from divine intervention, every person, without exception, is deserving of God's just condemnation.
- 2) God's response to this dire diagnosis, is the good news of God's unmerited kingdom towards undeserving sinners. They insisted that by God's grace, individuals can have their sins forgiven and stand justified in God's sight, only through faith in the merits of Jesus's substitutionary sacrifice.
- 3) The necessity of spiritual regeneration, and that this experience of the “new birth” marked the entry point to a life of expectant progressive sanctification



# Wesley and Whitefield synthesised

... and additionally...

- 4) Both men are clear that scripture is the book of truth, <sup>562</sup> the only standard of truth.
- 5) Their doctrine of sin and theological anthropology that ‘we are all dead in sin and trespasses’ <sup>563</sup>, has eternal consequences. For both, humanity needs rescuing from original sin. Sin is a loathsome leprosy, not easy to shake off, and not simply a sickness to recover from. As we have seen both share an eschatology that compels their discipleship goals. They are clear that there is a judgment to come, and a desire to flee the wrath to come is necessary for those who seek new birth.

# **Holiness - the ‘chief reason the people called Methodists were raised up’ [Wesley].**

The overall contention is that early Methodism had a clear, compelling discipleship goal of a ‘holy people for a holy God,’ Birthed in the spiritual furnace of the Oxford Holy Club, this focus on sanctification had for them a compelling theological rationale and was a clear focus of teaching and espoused theology. In his 1783 sermon, *The General Spread of the Gospel*, John Wesley recounted the whole purpose of his life’s work as:

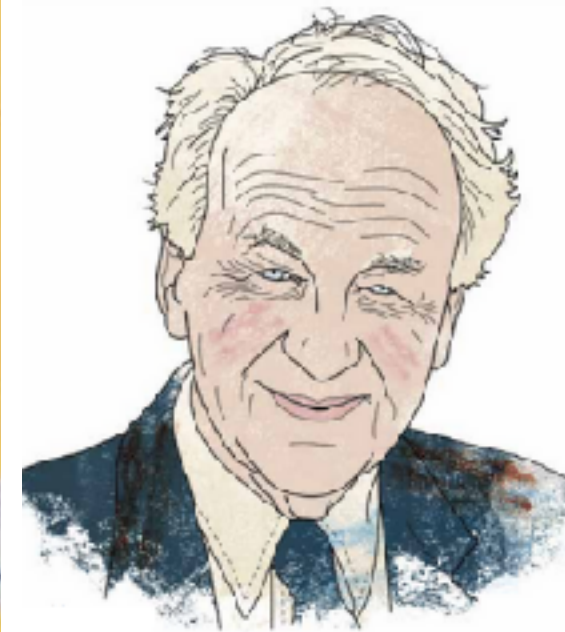
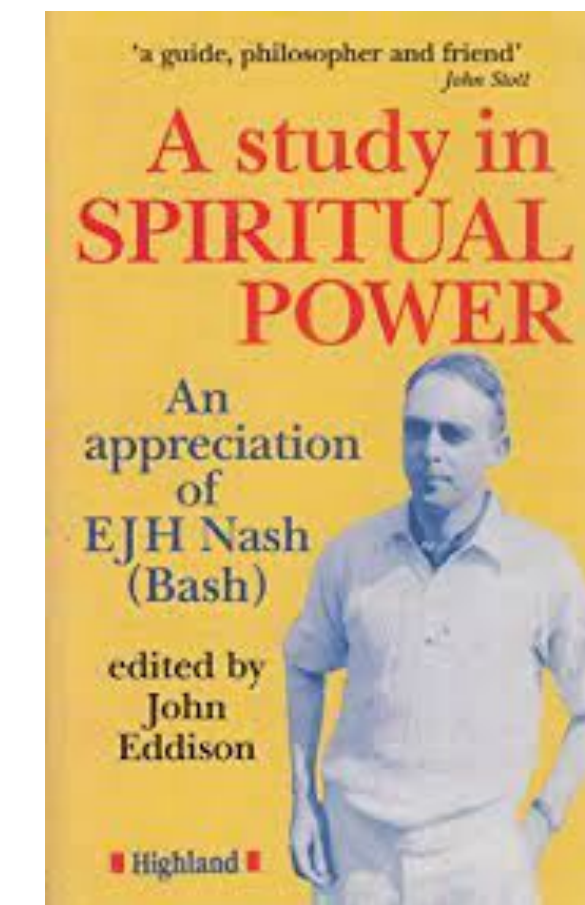
*‘Between fifty and sixty years ago, God raised up a few young men, in the University of Oxford, to testify those grand truths: That without holiness no man shall see the Lord; that this holiness is the work of God... that this holiness was the mind that is in Christ.’*

Whitefield likewise, despite his Calvinist stance and aversion to perfectionism, also maintained the goal of holiness. Holiness is rooted for both men in their theological scheme that begins with original sin and ends with eschatology and eternity.



# Comparison Two: Eclectics & HTB

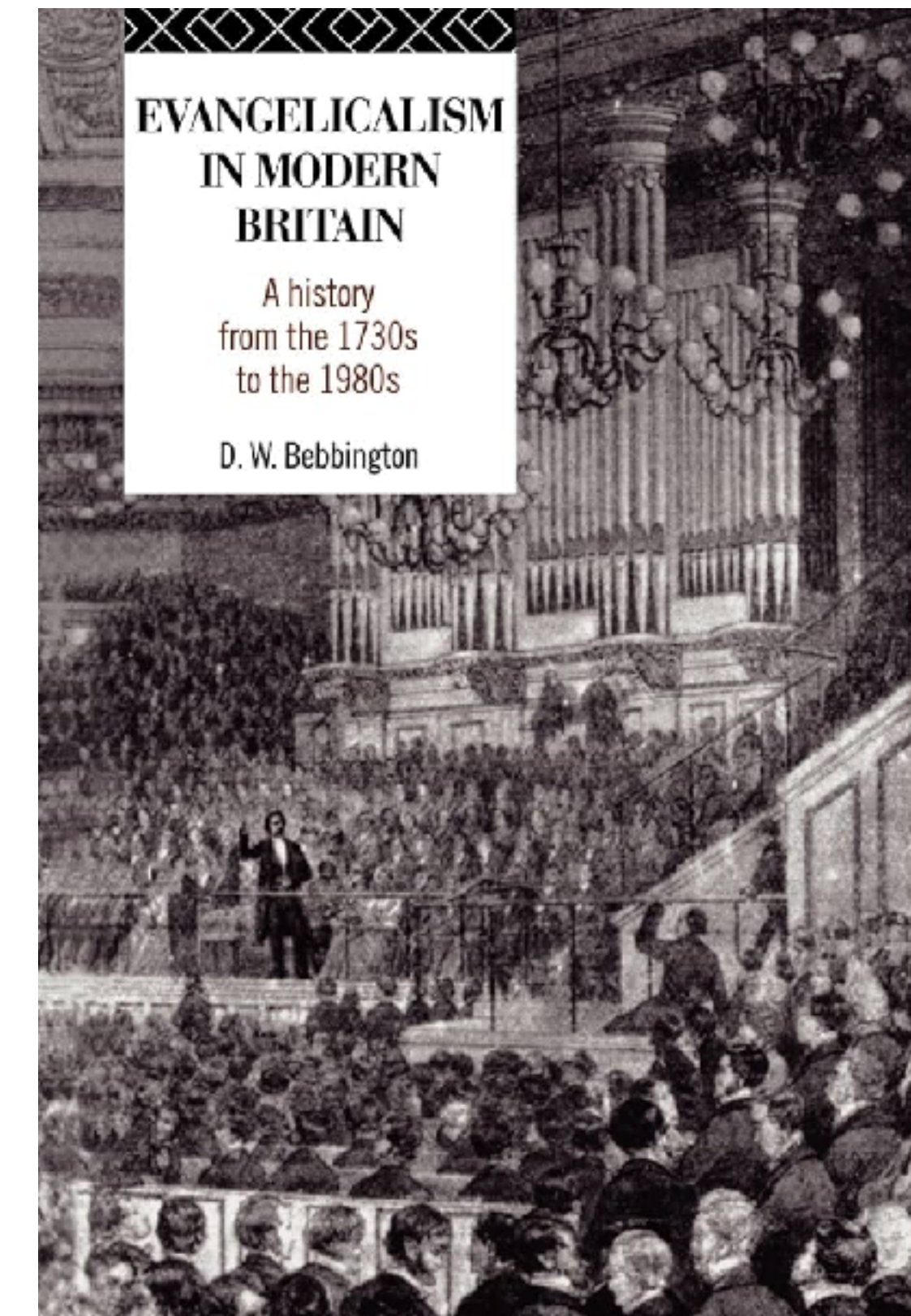
- Key figure by the 1980s was John Stott
- Key background... Iwerne Camp System (EJH Nash)



Key link: John Collins (Stott's first senior Curate at All Souls Langham Place 1951-57 and Vicar HTB 1980-1985 + curate 1985-1989), who said "all my theology is Stott's".

- Self-conscious inheritors of the Wesley/ Whitefield traditions...
  - According to David Fletcher, Nash used to pray for 'another Wesley to stalk this land'.
  - Michael Green recalls that Nash had his soul 'lit up' by the same doctrine of 'New Birth' that had made 'Whitefield a tireless preacher'
  - Collins had busts of both men on his preaching desk...
  - "Means of Grace" advocated by W&W echoed in Iwerne camp disciplines

"HTB network has emerged from a particular dominant school of upper-middle class Anglican Evangelicalism that was historically rooted in the 'activist, conversionist, biblicist, crucicentric' movement Bebbington describes"





# HTB: Then and Now

If you attended Holy Trinity Brompton in the 1980s you would have had regular expository teaching, with a clear link back to John Stott.

November 1980 edition of the Brompton Magazine carries a portrait of a young merchant banker, Ken Costa, who had been at HTB for four years, following his conversion in Cambridge 6 years previously. Although never having been a member at All Souls he still considers John Stott as the Christian who has most influenced him.

John Collins' teaching focused on dying to our old life and rising with Christ (see his Diagram of God's Love' - a holy people for a holy God, prepared for eternity and rescued from the ancient problem of original sin.

Yet by 2019: Mark Cartledge's study of Megachurches and Social Engagement sees HTB and All Souls as '**two different types of mega church**, even though they belong to the same denomination.' Cartledge summarised HTB as now '**reflecting pietistic and in particular Pentecostal impulses.**' [vs 'Puritan' ASLP]



# Why the shifts?

1. **Weaknesses in the inherited Anglican Evangelicalism** that HTB practitioners were keen to move on from - especially around Iwerne system/holiness.

2. **Three waves of charismatic renewal.**

While the 1960s/70s renewal could be largely accommodated in the Evangelical Anglican system epitomised by Stott's 'Eclectics', John Wimber, was a paradigm breaker with some unintended consequences in the long-term for discipleship goals. Then 'The Toronto Blessing' provided the initial fuel for HTB achieving mega-church status, propelling the rapid growth of the Alpha Course, but also contributed further to both moving discipleship goals in a pietistic direction and the need to sustain expansion.

3. **Success and marketing culture**

Successfully marketing an experiential religion epitomised in the Toronto Blessing/Alpha Holy Spirit Away Day, as 'a life worth living' [now]. Through 'preaching the positives', branded church and various marketing tools it has created a religious product that has appeal in a late modern consumer age.

# 1. Shift: Weaknesses to break from

As a charismatic revolution took place at HTB the new experiences of the Holy Spirit led those at HTB increasingly to believe that it was the Spirit who changed behaviour.

There was a sense, particularly for those drilled in ethics at Iwerne and University Christian Fellowships, that this this was a new improved way to achieve the same discipleship goals. As one interviewee put it: ***‘It became clear that we saw the Holy Spirit working in people’s lives to change people from the inside - rather than because we say “you’ve got to live like this”’***. The old ethical code was described as a heavy burden that could now be taken off in a metaphor commonly used:

‘Imagine carrying a backpack called Law for many years, then taking it off, eating the heavy food inside it and finding that what had been a burden on your back sustains you when eaten inside you.’

... All in the context of what we know now about ‘heavy-shepherding/abuse at Iwerne

# A model to break



Nicky Gumbel explains how intensely he was mentored through the Iwerne system when he was a new convert aged 19. As recently as 2016 he wrote:

*I am so grateful to Jonathan Fletcher. When I first encountered Jesus in 1974, Jonathan met with me for three hours every week for a year, and regularly thereafter until I left university. He became a great friend. He taught me the Christian faith. He explained to me how to read the Bible and how to pray. He recommended Christian books and answered my questions. Even though I had only just encountered Jesus myself, he encouraged me to lead others to faith in Jesus and to straight away pass on what I was learning.*

When Millar replaced Fletcher as Gumbel's mentor after university Gumbel perhaps understates the difference between them in this testimonial:

*Sandy Millar did the same as Jonathan had done, in a different way. He showed me a model of how to live the Christian life, to which I still aspire.*



## 2. Shift: From Renewal to Wimber (to Toronto)

At least initially, Wimber's teaching and praxis were an add on to, rather than an alteration, of the biblical, historical Anglican Evangelical faith as distilled by Stott. However, there was also something perhaps inherent in this more experiential, feelings orientated and pragmatic approach to Christianity that would exacerbate a divergence between them within two decades.

Wimber brings: 'a theological, pastoral and tactical revolution in many British charismatic churches.' Cartledge

One reason Wimber's influence was so disturbing to the status quo was because this 'non-liturgical' worship pattern was introduced by Millar into the main services. Renewal had already played a part in taking Evangelical Anglicans away from the 'Protestant' anchorage in the Book of Common Prayer as new patterns of worship and liturgies had been devised and simple choruses written. Wimber offered a solution to the problems some of the younger team were perceiving with Anglican liturgy.

# From Wimber to Toronto (via Kansas)

“During the period of the ‘prophetic era’ [Kansas City Prophets] and on into the ‘new renewal’ [TTB] our people quit starting small groups, they quit prophesying, they quit healing the sick, they quit casting out demons, because they were waiting for the Big Bang, the Big Revival, the Big Thing... I thought, My God, we’ve made an audience out of them. And they were an army!” [Wimber]

“Their Jesus is deeply human and playful, magically supernatural... [their God is] a deeply human, even vulnerable God, who loves us unconditionally and wants nothing more than to be our friend, our best friend, as loving and personal and responsive as a best friend in America should be; ... a God who is supernaturally present, it is as if he does magic and if our friendship with him gives us magic too. God retains his majesty but he has become a compulsion, even a buddy to play with, and the most ordinary man can go to the corner church and learn how to hear him speak...” [Luhrmann on Vineyard churches].

# From Wimber to Toronto (via Kansas)

“The contrast is dramatic. In earlier years, powerful, supernatural experiences of the Spirit were a requirement of group membership and highly valued by the community.

By 2002, however, [five years after Wimber’s death, and eight years after ‘The Toronto Blessing’] the fervour had subsided, the costs have lowered, and the requirements of group membership had mellowed... at the same time, growth had stalled, group identity was hazier, and the denomination had splintered... it is remarkable to see the correlation between the cessation of costly behaviours and the decline in group flourishing.

The price of admission, so to speak, in the early years, would have been allowing oneself to be physically and emotionally bowled over, to lose oneself in that communal/personal upheaval. The price of admission in 2002 was rest.”

[Joel Daniel (reflecting on Martyn Percy)].

# Toronto and Alpha....

“TTB released a ‘vast amount of energy’ and gave HTB an increased profile in the UK. As has been regularly noted it is a highly convincing hypothesis that **HTB’s prominence in hosting TTB phenomena left it primed and ready to spread this ‘revival’** through the mechanism of Alpha. Indeed Stephen Hunt argues it is hard to explain the growth of Alpha and HTB’s influence without factoring in TTB. HTB’s adoption of TTB was initially helped by Wimber describing TTB as a ‘time of refreshing’.

James Heard concludes that not only does there seem to be a strong link between TTB and the rise of Alpha, but that the **‘experiential dimension’ of the Alpha Weekend was ‘pitched perfectly’ for the 4000-5500 churches affected by TTB.** Gumbel made an explicit link between Alpha and TTB in 1995 in his article The Impact of Toronto, but in the wake of controversy and criticism has been more circumspect now. In 2000 he commented

*‘I don’t talk about it now, it divides people. It splits churches. It is very controversial. But I’ll tell you – **I think the Toronto Blessing was a wonderful, wonderful thing.**’*

**In 1993 the course had 4,600 guests on 200 courses, and this jumped in 1995 to 100,000 guests on 2500 courses and in 1998 to 1.3 million guests on 10,500 courses**



# 3. Shift: Success and Marketing Culture

“While HTB as a network has been birthed out of an evangelical heritage , and midwifed and nannied through three successive waves of the Spirit, it has also breathed the air of ‘success culture’ as it has grown up.”

**This sets up discussion about how a ‘success culture’ may have put pressure on how discipleship goals are described, packaged, branded and marketed, and the corresponding impact on espoused and operant theology.**

**It shows the gap that can develop between normative, operant and espoused theologies, from what was once a self-evident normative theology in the early 1980s when John Collins could say ‘all my theology is Stott’s’, or even from the mid-1980s when Wimber’s theology and praxis was becoming normative (even when a praxis or ‘value’ like ‘intimacy’ in worship might put some people off), with an operant theology increasingly focused on reducing barriers to entry into the church/Alpha, and an espoused theology that deliberately self-edits to achieve the same goal.**

This shift in operant and espoused theology shifts normative theology away from Stott and Wimber as well and has happened in a largely unconscious, unrealised and unacknowledged manner.

# Insatiable?

*I genuinely feel like I am a bad steward because I see this amazing gift [Alpha] and only 18 million people around the world have done it and you think what a big world we live in. What I see on our own course is that so many people, not everybody, but so many people: cynics, sceptics, agnostics, atheists, lapsed church goers, nominal church goers, have an encounter with Jesus, they are filled with the Holy Spirit, their lives are changed and they start doing amazing things and I think “**how come only 18 million people have done this?** How do we accelerate this, get this to as many people as possible?” And the same in the UK... [Nicky Gumbel]*

*‘The expectation will be for each City Centre Resource Church [CCRC] to grow and plant onwards within three years, and subsequently to then further plant every three years. Following this model, we could see 15 new churches by Year Three, 30 by Year Six, and 45 by Year Nine. This has been shown from experience to be an ambitious but realistic target. **Assuming that each CCRC will eventually grow their congregation to 1,000, and that each ‘2nd generation’ plant will grow to 500, this will result in around 30,000 additional churchgoers by 2025.** [Ric Thorpe (2017)]*

# ANALYSING THE

success and failure – the two imposters



# NETWORK



Theological Action Research [TAR] derives from an awareness of the complexity of how theology is developed, oftentimes without the awareness of key practitioners. It utilises the four voices ‘formal’, ‘espoused’, ‘operant’ and ‘normative’ to provide TAR practitioners with a cyclical way of analysing Christian practice as ‘faith seeking understanding’, and a ‘kind of theology’ in itself which is committed to all research into faith practices ‘being theological all the way through’. It rightly asserts that our practices bear theology as much as our statements of faith. So our ‘faith-full’ actions have a voice – our ‘**operant**’ theology, as much as our articulated ‘espoused’ theology. **Espoused** theology derives (to some degree at least) from our ‘**normative**’ theology – the theology that ‘the practicing group names as its theological authority.’

# ANALYSING THE

success and failure – the two imposters



# NETWORK



‘Formal’ theology completes the quartet of voices. This is a privileged academic or intellectual voice able to articulate faith seeking understanding reflectively, by both shining a light on the other voices and at times creating modes of thought that enable reflection in practice.

Part of formal theology is dialogue with other disciplines, which Cameron et al suggest may involve engaging with a ‘second cycle’ such as the pastoral cycle, to get the benefit of this outside voice. With that in mind this thesis interacts with the historical mirror of the discipleship goals of John Wesley and George Whitefield as a helpful evaluative tool.



# ANALYSING THE

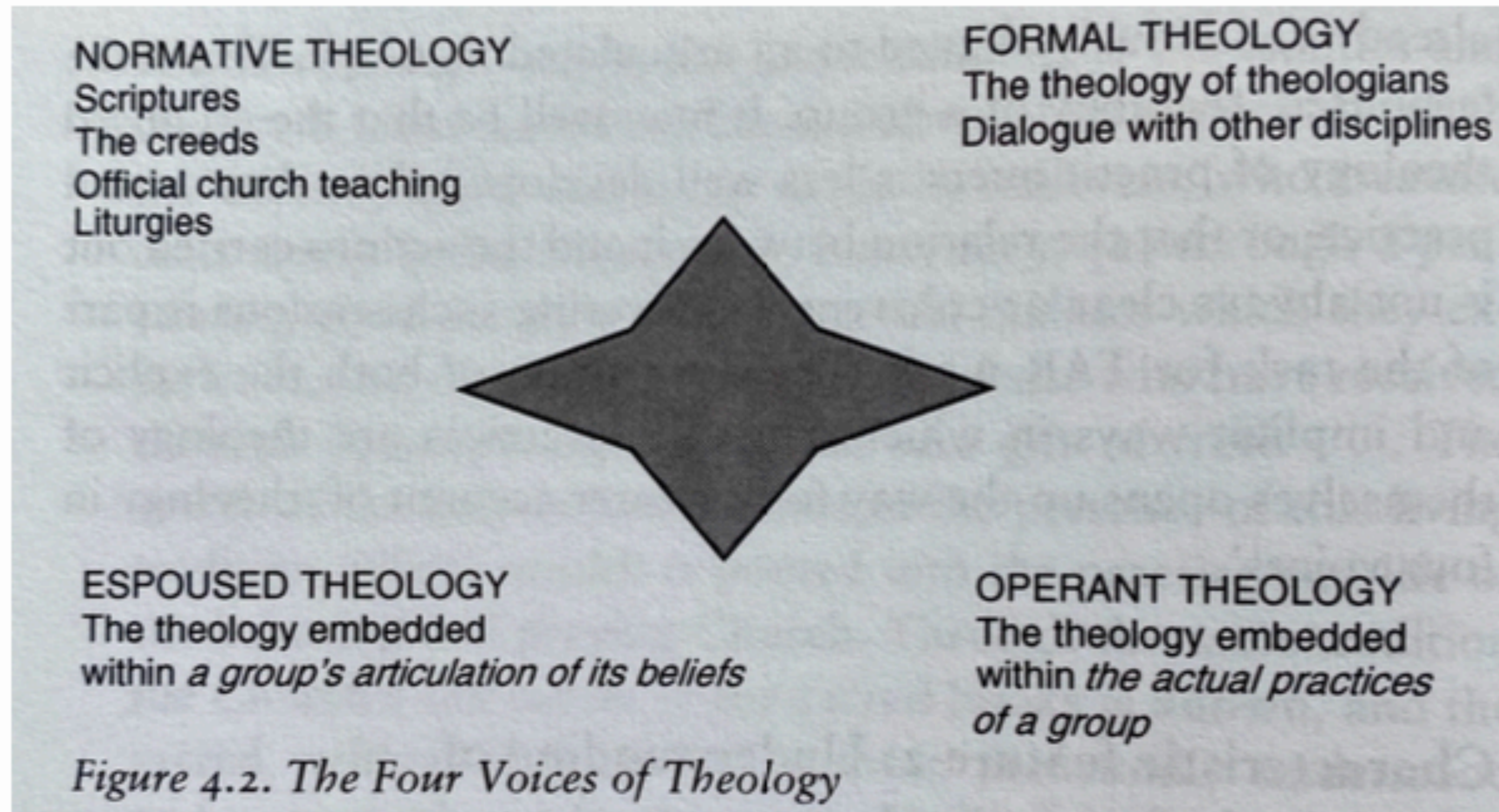
success and failure – the two imposters



# NETWORK



## Diagram One: The Four Voices of Theology:<sup>51</sup>





# 6 success stories

stBarnabas  
KENSINGTON





# St Barnabas Kensington





# St Mark's Battersea Rise





# St Paul's Shadwell





# St Paul's Hammersmith





# St Peter's Brighton



Brighton's parish church, St Peter's was built in the 1820s and is now a listed building, although its future in its present form is currently in doubt, on account of the extraordinary sums needed to repair and maintain it. The hurricane of 1987 decimated the majestic trees seen here in the spring of 1961, with Corporation AEC/Weymann trolleybus 23 (FUF 23) bound for the Old Steine on route 26. Behind is an unidentified Corporation AEC Regent III, while

in the distance another trolleybus is emerging into the Richmond Terrace from St Peter's Place. Impeding No 23 is locally registered Dennis lorry; just visible on the left is a Morris J van of the Initial laundry, ahead of which is a Lambretta scooter with helmet-less rider — a reminder of a more relaxed era. *E. C. Bennett & Martin Jenkins' Online Transport Archive*





# St Swithun's Bournemouth





# method

- 6 in depth semi structured interviews with key planters
- Participant observation
- Church visits
- Web/sermon analysis

- 1) Can you briefly summarise the story of the first seven years of the church plant?
- what were your highlights
- what were your low lights?
- 
- 2) How might those on your staff team describe your main gifts for ministry?
- (a) Are these different to when you began the plant?



- 3. What were the main factors that caused you to start the church plant?
- circumstantial opportunities – push/pull factors (e.g. invitation / encouragement, missional need)...
- personal motivations
- 4. Who or what kept you going in the initial stages?



- 5. What did / do you most want to see happen through the church plant in terms of: a) vision for individuals; b) vision for the surrounding community?
- 
- 6. Who or what do you turn to for inspiration? – in terms of models of ministry, bible resources etc...

## Qs 7-9

- 7. How would you define success in church planting?
- a) To what extent has success galvanised your work?
- b) When (if) you have had to how do you cope with failure?
- 8. If you had the chance to rewind the clock and begin again would you?
- 9. If so what would you do differently?

# Round Two: A wider range of interviewees

## **The original six and the three most recent vicars:**

- Spanned the classic – pragmatic evangelical age categories.
- Had all worked at HTB as clergy in key roles.
- Had led Anglican churches (including HTB) of 500-5000 people.
- Had all continued in long ministries, most often in the same one or two churches.
- Two had gone on to take up senior positions in Dioceses.
- All were white and male.
- Almost all came from a boarding school/'upper-middle class' background.

## **Out of the additional 14 interviewees:**

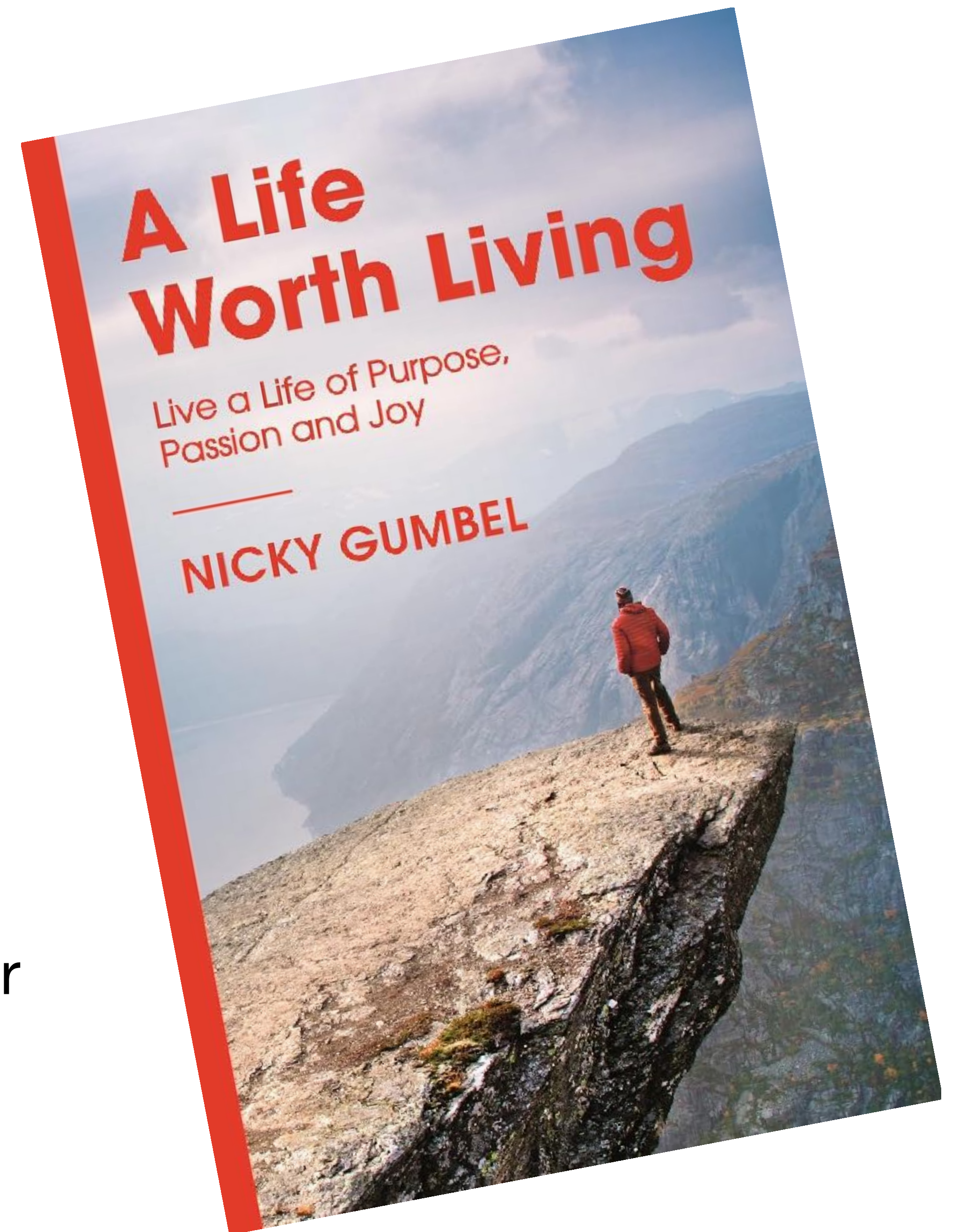
- 12 would be in the 'younger evangelical' age category.
- 11 had worked at HTB itself at some point prior to planting/revitalising a church of their own.
- 8 were leading a church/plant with more than 200 people,
- 4 were leading 'larger' evangelical/charismatic Anglican churches.
- 5 had finished their first 'solo' ministry more prematurely than planned.<sup>478</sup>
- One had left the network entirely.
- 13 of the 14 were white.
- 13 were male.
- The British class system is hard to assess but most were broadly middle-class, although the group was more varied than the 'upper-middle class' senior clergy at HTB.



# A life worth living (now)

Live a life of purpose, passion and joy

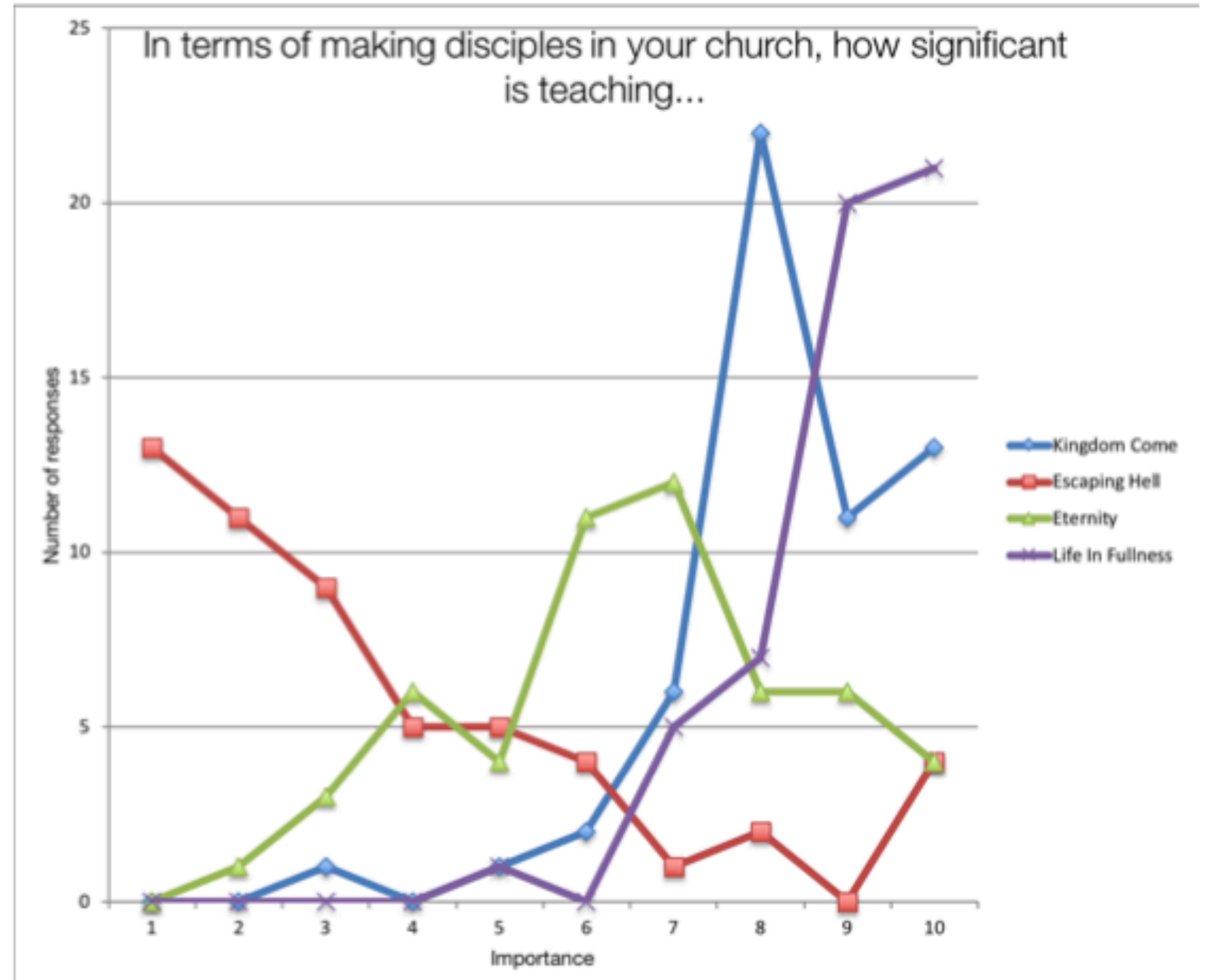
- Preach the positives (caged birds)
- The 'telos' is life right here, right now...
- Person centred (not God-centred)
- Fulfillment > holiness.
- And as 'Healthy things grow' you can be assessed by how many people come to your church ...





## In terms of making disciples in your church how significant is: (where 10 is highest)

- a) seeing the Kingdom come on earth as in heaven
- b) fleeing the wrath to come/escaping hell
- c) preparing people for heaven/eternity
- d) enabling life in all its fullness now
- Very few thought that fleeing wrath and hell was a significant motivating factor and eternity generally was only of middling importance. There was a significant number of participants (44) who scored Kingdom Come 8 and above, but the biggest concentration of those (22) scored it 8. By contrast 48 participants scored Life in all its fulness 8 and above, but 41 of these scored it 9+ and the highest category scored was for life in all its fulness was 10 out of 10.

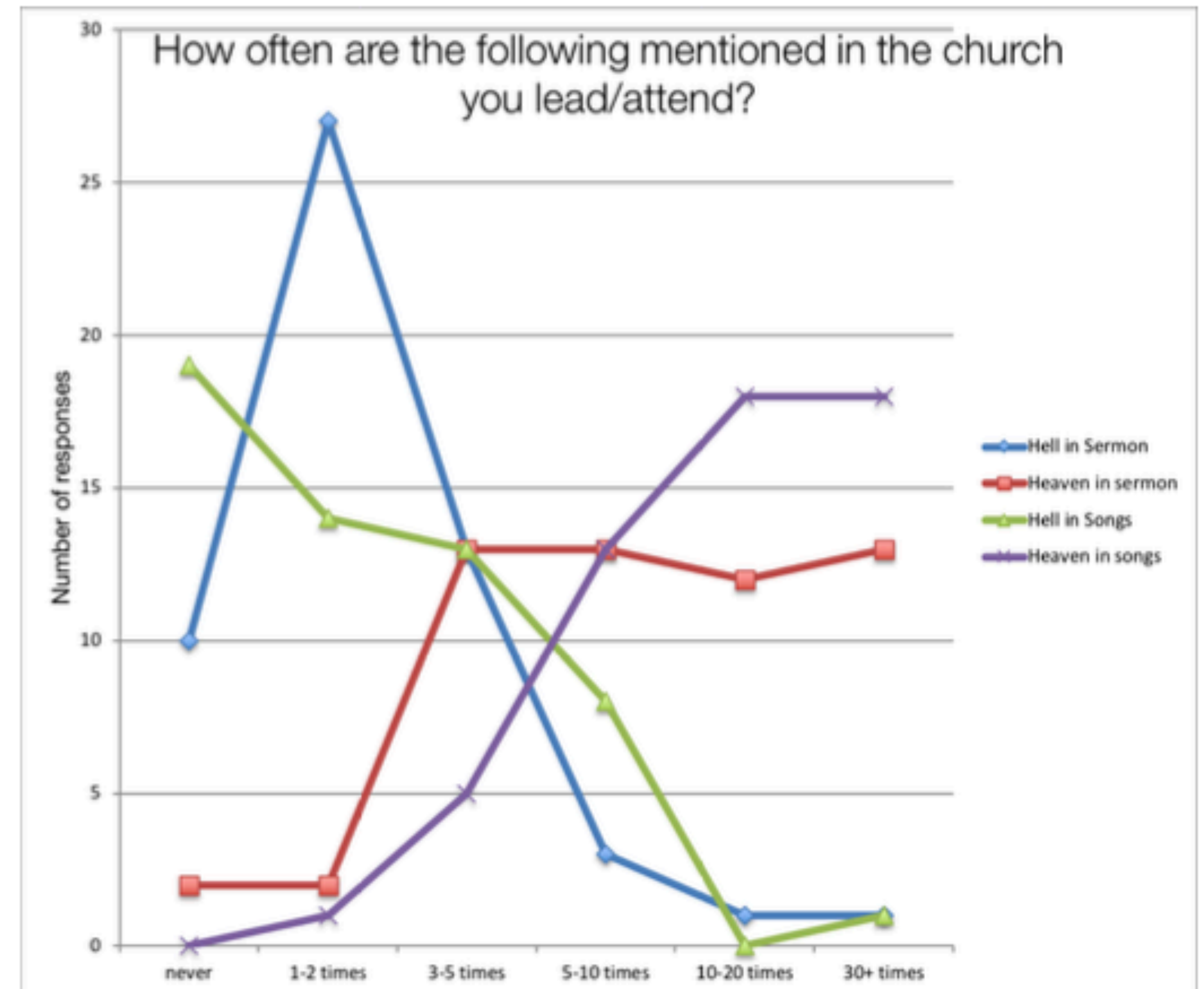


# How often are the following mentioned in the church you lead?

## Heaven/Hell in Sermons/Songs.

Only five felt that hell had been mentioned more than 5 times in the past year, and a majority believed that heaven had been mentioned less than 10 times in that same time period.

13 out of 55 thought that the hope of heaven had been mentioned more than 20 times, but in a 52-week year with often several worship services per week 20 mentions is not a very high result.

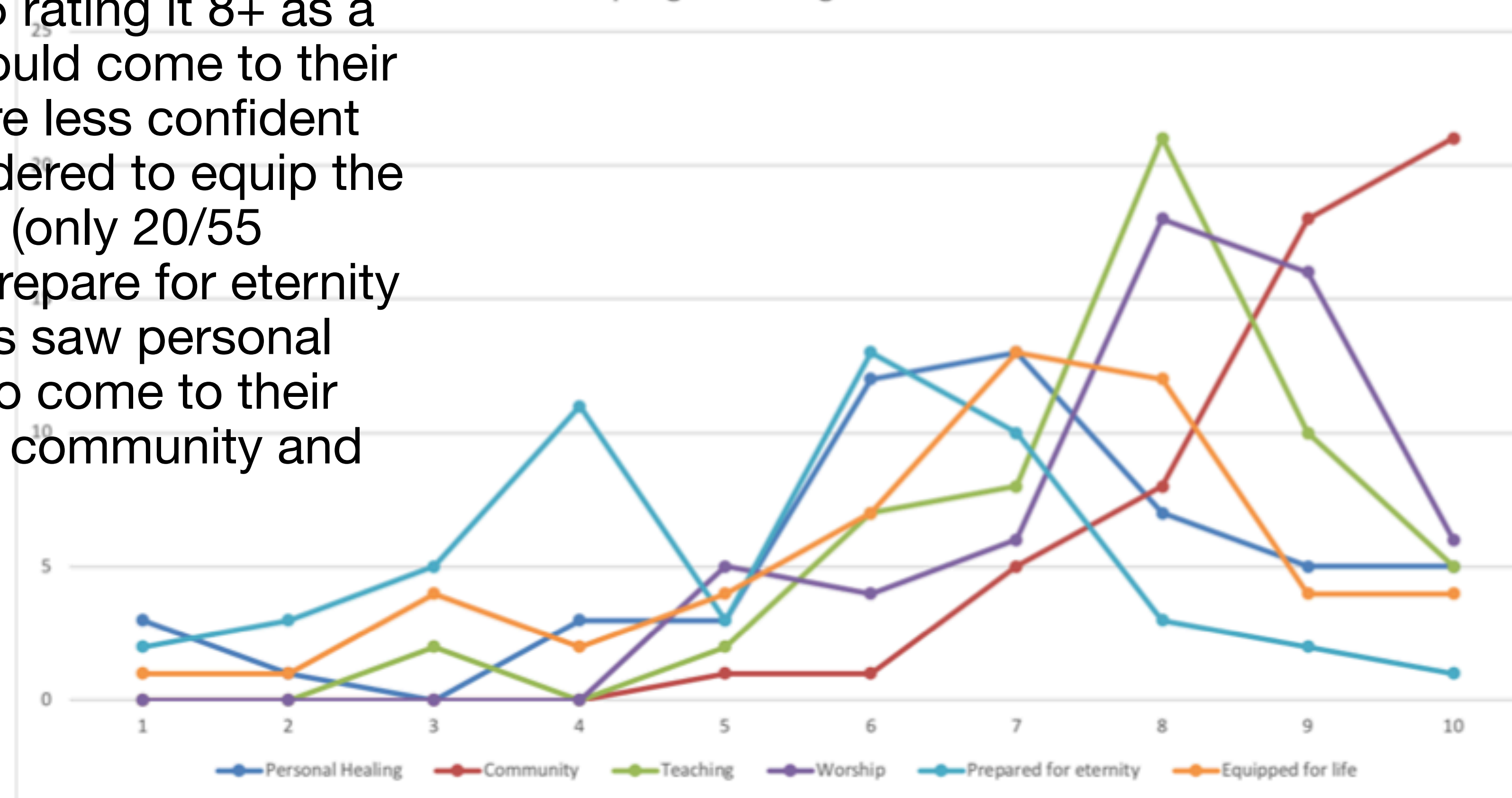




# Why would an Alpha graduate come to your church?

Meaningful community (47/55) and Worship (40/55) both scored high numbers of 8+ out of 10, with community scoring almost 4 times as many 10/10 ratings as any other category (21/55 scored 10/10). Teaching came in third with 36/55 rating it 8+ as a reason that an Alpha graduate would come to their church. But interestingly they were less confident that the teaching would be considered to equip the graduates for life and evangelism (only 20/55 scoring 8+) and even less so to prepare for eternity (6/55). About half the respondents saw personal healing as a fairly strong reason to come to their services, but less significant than community and worship.

Reasons an Alpha graduate might come to their church





## **The final section sought to tease out espoused and operant theologies**

### **Complete these sentences in 50 words or less:**

If someone came to our church for five years I would like them to.... When someone in our church is on their deathbed I would like them to...

While the first set of answers were quite activist in response: 'be serving on a team', 'be sharing their faith', 'inviting people to Alpha', the deathbed version of the question elicited more reflective theology with typical answers including 'be assured of their faith', 'to know that they have been forgiven', 'to look back and have no regrets'.

But the most striking thing about all the answers to each version of the question is how person-centred the responses were.

**“At HTB I heard ‘fullness of life’ a lot. It frustrated me, sometimes we sell the honey of the earth, rather than the requirement of salt to know Christ. We can be seeker friendly so much that we’re not necessarily developing sacrificial understanding. It’s easy to have a lack of fear of God/awesomeness of God. We’re not [supposed to be] surrounded by a nice bubble, but by a love that helps us endure. If we set the bar really low to gather as many as we can, if we attract by being different [to expectations], but oversell too much, we lose our identity in consumerism. We don’t have to bend always to culture.”**

# A normative theology?

This historical perspective invites us to consider the differences between the theological voices evident in Wesley and Whitefield and those of the HTB network.

In particular questions have been raised by holding up this historical mirror regarding the place of 'lived out holiness' teaching and the need for 'means of grace', whether Sin (and hell) is a fundamental problem we need resucing from, whether focusing on felt-needs now truncates theology cutting out both 'fall' and 'eschatology', whether the motivation for ministry is human flourishing or 'the glory of God' and whether the 'born again' experience of the eighteenth-century is in fact a more demanding conversion (involving dying to self/the cross) than simply beginning a 'relationship with Jesus' through an encounter with the Spirit.

It is noteworthy that there is a much more profound continuity of discipleship goals between the eighteenth-century revivalists and the twentieth-century evangelicals outlined in Chapter One (Nash/Stott/Collins), and even between the eighteenth-century revivalists and the 1980s HTB/Vineyard churches under John Collins and John Wimber in Chapter Two, than between the eighteenth-century revivalists and the mid-1990s to twenty-first century HTB network as described in Chapters Three and Four.

Seen with the advantage of this historical interlocuter the shift in discipleship goals and praxis in the network is highly evident, as is the sense of theological distance from Wesley and Whitefield and a historic evangelicalism that Collins et al would have assumed to be a key part of their normative theological inheritance as Anglican Evangelicals filled with the Spirit.





# A normative theology?



Five questions that enable us to consider the degree to which these evangelical ordained Anglican evangelists and revivalists still provide a normative theology for the network in the 2020s.

1. Whether their normative theology telos of 'lived out holiness' remains integral to the HTB network in the operant or espoused voices.
2. Whether original sin, and 'Sin' generally is a problem for which the network is seeking a solution.
3. Whether the eschatological breadth of their theological scheme (from original sin to eternity), remains within the network teaching, or whether the emphasis on a 'life worth living' leads to a truncated scheme focused on the here and now.
4. Building on this, whether the end-goal of discipleship within the network is orientated towards human flourishing (now) rather than the glory of God (for all eternity).
5. Perhaps most controversially, whether what Wesley and Whitefield meant by 'conversion' is synonymous with the network's invitation into 'a relationship with Jesus Christ?' Or is the contemporary invitation more limited than the eighteenth- century challenge to be 'born again'?

# Bebbington

**Conversionist | Crucicentric | Biblicist | Activist** [cf Pneumatist - Maiden et al]

With regards to ‘biblicist’ a church network that has inspired 3 million people to download a daily bible app might be assumed to take the Scripture very seriously. Indeed, any attempt at a summary of almost any member of the network’s normative theology would include a very high regard for Scripture.

But we have seen the positivity prism through which the BLOY commentary is filtered, sermon series that seem to pick and choose scripture to fit the message, and a theological college whose self-descriptor does not include reference to the Bible.

Some of those interviewed were evidently deeply grounded in person bible reading, some saw a key part of their responsibility as teaching the whole counsel of God. But others clearly saw facilitating an encounter with the Spirit as the crux of their ministry, and it was interesting to see how learning communication skills from a prosperity teacher like Joel Osteen might be prized over deeper biblical study.



# Bebbington

**Conversionist** | Crucicentric | Biblicist | **Activist** [cf Pneumatist - Maiden et al]

It is not at all apparent that the cross is at the centre of the Christian faith within the network. I am much more persuaded that the epi- centre of faith has become pneumatological encounters, exemplified by the simple prayer ‘Come, Holy Spirit.’ This is repeated in every worship service, often numerous times, and a strong argument can be made from structure and experience that it is the core of the Alpha Course as well. As Millar put it, ‘many people date their conversion from their experience with the Spirit on the Alpha Course.

However much we tell them it’s from when they prayed the prayer for Jesus to come into their life, it’s the experience they have on the Holy Spirit Day or Weekend that they always refer to.’<sup>630</sup> Whilst the course is fully Trinitarian the process holds participants on an emotional journey towards an encounter with the Spirit on that weekend. The cross is taught, and clearly, but it is not by any means a climatic centre of the course.

# Bebbington

Conversionist | Crucicentric | Biblicist | **Activist** [cf Pneumatist - Maiden et al]

Finally, ‘conversionist’. Without having explored Wesley and Whitefield in the previous chapter I might be derided for questioning if the HTB network are conversionist. If ‘recruitment-ist’ was substituted for ‘conversionist’ there could be no argument. One of the key aims of the network is to expand. A key goal for someone going on Alpha is get them to bring their friends to the next event and for them to integrate into the church family. It is highly ‘recruitmentist’. But is it conversionist? Wesley and Whitefield had varying definitions of conversion but one common thread was that it drove them on in pursuit of holiness.

A key question in understanding conversion is ‘from what, to what’.<sup>632</sup> If, as in Chapter Five, Stout and Dein are correct that Alpha’s methodology is ‘embodying the Holy Spirit and developing a personal relationship with Christ’, is that an add on, or a conversion from something? Can it be equated with Whitefield’s preaching of the ‘New Birth’. Does it demand like Wesley and Whitefield both did ‘victory over the dominion and power of sin, and the pursuit of inward and outward holiness’?<sup>633</sup> ***In other words, is becoming a ‘friend of Jesus’ through a warm ‘encounter with the Spirit’ a conversion in the historical sense of the word, or still a wonderful and positive, but less secure and potentially less lasting, experience that will need much deeper grounding (and repentance) before it is a real conversion?***

If it is the later, it may explain the drop off rates network churches talk about among Alpha graduates. When a relationship with Jesus has been tried and found difficult someone who has ‘tasted the Spirit’ but not been truly converted may still walk away.



# Thesis - Abstract

“The Holy Trinity Brompton Network is comprised of some of the most influential and well-funded churches within the Church of England, closely linked to the Archbishop of Canterbury, Justin Welby, and known internationally for the Alpha Course which originated at Holy Trinity Brompton [HTB] in the 1980s. As a network it provides a window into contemporary charismatic Christianity in the UK and beyond.

This thesis details HTB's roots in an Upper-Middle Class Anglican Evangelicalism prevalent in the 1950s-1980s showing how those roots shaped its future trajectory. It then explores the impact of three waves of the charismatic renewal movement on discipleship goals in the church, paying attention to unconscious by-products of shifts in praxis, including substantive liturgical changes as John Wimber's 'Worship - Teaching - Ministry' service structure refocused worship. It then considers the impact of a pragmatic consumerism and managerial approach on discipleship goals from developing the network into what Pete Ward calls 'branded church'.”

# Thesis - Abstract

“Using the **Theological Action Research** framework and ethnographic study to build a thick description which draws from interview data and other interactions with the network, it argues that these influences have caused an unacknowledged drift in ‘**normative**’, ‘**espoused**’ and ‘**operant**’ theology as the network has reorientated, and that a widening gap has emerged between what classic HTB network leaders would still see as their normative theology and the operant and espoused theologies evident in many network churches and leaders today.

A conversation partner of the 18th Century revivalists John Wesley and George Whitefield is introduced to show the full extent of this shift on discipleship goals when contrasted with the start of the evangelical era. This leads to a reflection on how the HTB network, as a case study in contemporary charismatic Christianity, has unintentionally vacated its evangelical Anglican heritage and how out of David Bebbington’s quadrilateral definition of evangelicals as ‘crucicentric, biblicist, conversionist and activist’, the HTB network can only fully claim to be ‘activist’. This is explored in relation to discipleship goals, and concludes with ways in which the network could reconnect with its evangelical heritage to bring normative, espoused and operant theologies into closer harmony.