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The Lived Experience of Divorcing Evangelicals and How Integrated, Empathetic, and Restorative Practice Can Disclose God to Them

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Abstract: Approximately seven in twenty marriages end in divorce in the UK, causing anxiety, depression, and a lasting impact on children. British evangelicals may fare better than average but are not immune from divorce. Despite a rich body of theological literature offering perspectives on divorce contributed by British evangelical scholars, there have been no related empirical studies to examine the lived experience of divorced evangelicals or the pastoral practitioners who support them. My study captures this missing empirical data, finding that evangelical divorce is a life-changing trauma that church practices sometimes compound. In contrast, those who reported integrated, empathetic, and restorative practices in their church or on the Restored Lives course say they were better able to cope, heal, and find hope. Irrespective of the pastoral environment, God was reported to act with compassion. The study employed mixed qualitative methods to capture the empirical data, which were analyzed and brought into dialog with relevant evangelical academic theology and documented practice. I concluded that in the context of complex connections and disconnections between the evangelical domains of theory and practice, integrated, empathetic, and restorative approaches toward the divorced are possible, effective, and disclose a God of grace.

Keywords: evangelical divorce; lived experience; pastoral practice; ecclesial discipline; restored lives

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Citation: Hornby, Robert. 2024. The Lived Experience of Divorcing Evangelicals and How Integrated, Empathetic, and Restorative Practice Can Disclose God to Them. *Religions* 15: 1426. https://doi.org/10.3390/rel15121426

Academic Editor: Dyron B. Daughrity

Received: 23 October 2024
Revised: 20 November 2024
Accepted: 21 November 2024
Published: 24 November 2024

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1. Introduction

Evangelicalism is a form of Christianity characterized by a focus on the Bible, personal conversion, the importance of the crucifixion of Jesus, and activism (Bebbington 1989, pp. 2–17). The movement in Britain consists of a loose coalition of para-church organizations like the Evangelical Alliance and Spring Harvest (Warner 2007, chap. 1–2), a wide variety of churches within and outside the historic denominations (Brierley 2006), and various academics within mainstream universities or specialized evangelical colleges. British evangelicalism is influenced by global institutions, churches and scholars but is distinctive from the prominent and well-documented US movement by emphasizing social justice rather than social issues (culture wars), holding diverse political affiliations rather than leaning right, and an absence of Christian nationalism (Hatcher 2017, pp. 1–43, 71–111, 147–86). For the purposes of this article, evangelicalism is broadly defined to include any person or institution that self-identifies as evangelical, regardless of their heritage or expression.

Approximately seven in twenty marriages end in divorce in the UK, causing anxiety, depression, and a lasting impact on children (Benson 2023). Despite a rich body of theological literature offering perspectives on divorce contributed by British evangelical scholars, there have been no related empirical studies that examine the lived experience of divorced British evangelicals. Some of the theological literature speculates that Christians have assimilated with a broader culture that has undermined marriage sociologically, politically, spiritually, and legally (Cornes 1993, chap. 1). However, there have been no academically rigorous data available to confirm or challenge this assumption. In the US, quantitative

data about evangelical divorce do suggest the movement mirrors American society (Pew Research Center 2014), which can be attributed to the social composition of the movement rather than any spiritual factors (Glass and Levchak 2014). No equivalent data exist for British evangelical divorce.

In this article, I will preview new empirical data from my study based on interviews with divorced British evangelicals and a focus group with pastoral volunteers from an organization called Restored Lives which specializes in divorce ministry (see below). Once collected, I placed this lived experience in dialog with relevant academic theology and documented practice to better understand the complex dynamics of evangelical divorce in Britain. I will argue that relevant academic theology, pastoral practice, ecclesial practice, and lived experience are connected and disconnected in both intended and unintended ways that cause harmful dissonance for divorcing evangelicals and the pastoral practitioners who support them. However, in situations where these domains are brought together toward empathetic and restorative practice, the effect can be transformational, and God's grace is disclosed.

Restored Lives is a charity based in Britain that helps people recover from relationship breakdown and provides courses for separating adults and children of divorced parents under thirty. It hosts online courses three times a year but also resources other organizations, mainly churches, to run them independently. The courses are provided for people of all faiths and none by design, and the material, although explicitly based on Christian principles, de-emphasizes religious language (Castenskiold 2013). Many leaders of Restored Lives are evangelical Christians, but this is not a requirement. Three optional evenings are provided on the adult course focused on men, abuse, and faith. The faith evening is Christian in content and discusses the additional dimensions of divorce experienced by people of faith.

From a reflexive perspective, I approach this article as an insider in more than one way. I have been an evangelical for almost forty years in multiple strands of the movement, most recently the Church of England as a Licensed Lay Minister (Reader). I am also divorced and remarried, with my own story of evangelical practices that took me to the brink of leaving the movement. I am, too, an insider to the Restored Lives organization cited in this study. My role as a volunteer on the adult course, and especially the optional faith evening, has given me firsthand insight into this specialized form of evangelical practice toward the divorced over many years.

2. Materials and Methods

This study adopted mixed qualitative methods, including semi-structured interviews, a focus group, and a dialogical model adapted from a proposal by Cartledge (2010, chap. 2).

The semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve divorced evangelicals. These sixty-minute conversations explored the context of each interviewee's marriage breakdown, their related lived experiences within their faith community, the practical influence of the Bible, and any perceived divine encounters. The interview cohort was recruited partly through records of previous guests of Restored Lives and from my own contacts. Efforts were made to achieve gender balance (eventually five men and seven women), and a variety of post-divorce relationship statuses. Ages ranged from 42 to 76. Ethnic diversity was also sought, but the small identifiable population made this challenging, with two interviewees registering as non-white.

To mitigate the risk of triggering emotional distress, I stipulated that interviewees must have been divorced for at least two years and made clear at the outset of each interview that the process could be paused or stopped at any point. All interviews were conducted online using either Microsoft Teams or Zoom, which avoided the complexities of balancing in-person safeguarding with privacy arrangements for such a sensitive discussion.

The focus group was conducted with six leaders from the Restored Lives program, all with evangelical backgrounds. During a one-hour session hosted on Zoom, the group explored themes and patterns of lived experience observed among course participants.

In his book *Testimony in the Spirit*, Cartledge proposes a reflective method employing a dialogical relationship between three levels of discourse (2010, chap. 2). The first is the ordinary discourse of people sharing testimonies of lived experience in non-technical terms (Astley 2002); the second is an institutional level of ecclesial discourse; and the third is academic theological discourse and social and human science discourse (see Figure 1).

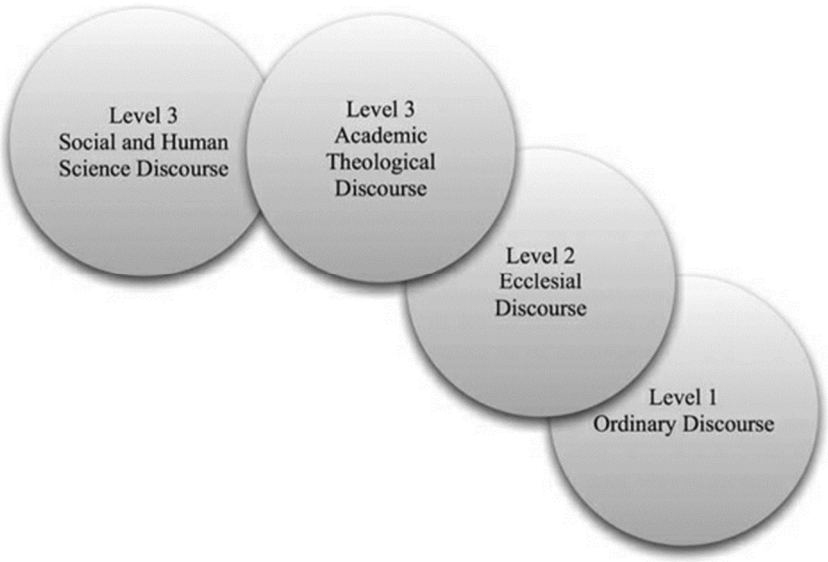

Figure 1. Cartledge's Dialogical Model.

I adapted this model to the context of my chosen domain of divorce and to clarify some features already implicit in Cartledge's approach (Figure 2). My first change was to remove the idea of *levels* of discourse, which could imply a hierarchy and suggest a lack of direct interaction between levels one and three. As such, I reconceived the levels of discourse as overlapping domains to emphasize their equal status and mutuality. In so doing, I always assume the primary source of ethical normativity is scripture, but that biblical insight can be embedded in lived experience and evangelical practice as much as in academic theology. I have also renamed the domain of ordinary discourse as *lifeworld* discourse to avoid any connotations of inferiority while retaining Cartledge's helpful definition. This domain is formed from an analysis of the semi-structured interviews.

The next two domains retain the concept of Cartledge's single ecclesial level but focus specifically on pastoral and ecclesial practice toward the divorced. The former incorporates the empirical data captured from Restored Lives leaders, augmented by assorted studies on Christian divorce recovery and other relevant pastoral literature. The latter uses works on ecclesial discipline and institutional church policy toward the divorced. The final domain of discourse retains Cartledge's academic theological theme applied to divorce theology and other relevant subjects identified in the analysis of the interview and focus group transcripts. I did not require a separate discourse covering social and human science.

The dialogical process envisaged by Cartledge is not mechanistic but rather identifies resonance and dissonance between the domains of discourse. Specifically for this research, the reflection involved developing two thematic mind maps by analyzing the interviewee and pastoral practitioner transcripts. These themes were then explored through interactions with relevant works on academic theology and divorce practice, some of which had been identified in a prior literature survey. The process was highly iterative and evolved over a period of three months. Occasional informal discussions with relevant scholars supplemented my deliberations. Repeated drafts of this paper served as a vehicle to refine the results and sharpen the related discussions.

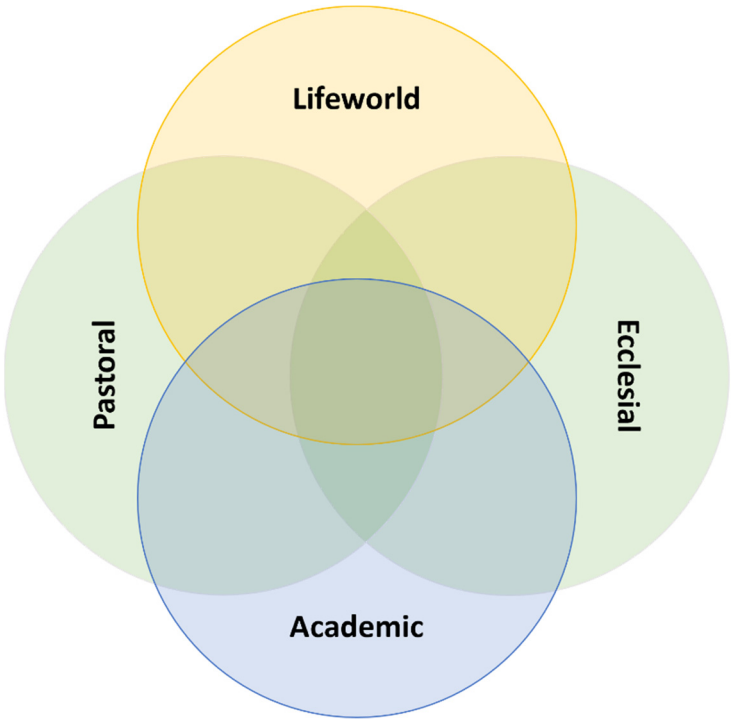

Figure 2. Adapted Model.

3. Results

On naming conventions, the divorced British evangelicals in my interview cohort will normally be referred to as "interviewees," and the pastoral volunteers from Restored Lives are described interchangeably as "focus group participants," "pastoral volunteers," or "pastoral practitioners." Material from the separate interview with the leader of Restored Lives is specifically identified as such.

3.1. The Lived Experience of Divorced British Evangelicals

The detailed experiences of each interviewee were unique, but various common themes emerged. The first is that, in all cases, the interviewees reported significant efforts to save their marriages, even if this was not always reciprocated by their former spouses. The marriage breakdown for most interviewees was protracted, and the leader of Restored Lives observed that Christians tend to delay divorce because of their high view of marriage. The range of relationship challenges faced included growing apart, verbal conflict, financial pressures, work problems, mental health issues, verbal and physical abuse, affairs, and addictions—often in combination. These issues are not unique to British evangelicals, but the data clearly show they are not immune from them either. It is possible that similar efforts by other couples have brought restoration of the marriage, but this is a self-selecting group of those who did not reconcile.

In every case, something brought the situation to a head. For many, the other partner left, or indicated an intention to divorce, with new relationships a common catalyst. In other circumstances, the interviewee initiated the crisis in response to abuse, addiction, or the discovery of an affair. Occasionally, the trigger was the realization that the marriage was "dead" and their spouse had already left the relationship emotionally. Irrespective of who brought the situation to a climax, everyone in the interview cohort experienced significant trauma. This manifested itself variously as anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, shame, hopelessness, and guilt. Financial pressures, custody battles, complex temporary arrangements, and the loss of support networks only compounded these problems. Adverse experiences were sometimes counterbalanced by supportive relationships and direct

experiences of God (see below), but not sufficiently to avoid significant and protracted emotional distress.

All the interviewees went on to recount the eventual formalization and stabilization of their situations. Divorce proceedings followed, more permanent practical arrangements were established, the severe emotional distress diminished, and contemplation of the past and future began. Contact with exes varied from no discretionary communication to regular co-parenting and even friendship. Several interviewees made the point that pragmatism was required in deciding what contact was possible and appropriate after divorce. None of the interviewees were in another relationship at this point, although several of their former spouses were. The impact of divorce on children ranged from shared trauma in the initial stages to long-term self-destructive behavior that interviewees attributed to divorce. Children were sometimes pawns in bitter conflicts between parents, especially in the immediate period after the 'crisis,' and were sometimes poisoned toward the other parent or used in hurtful ways.

Much of what has been reported so far could apply to any divorce, but the empirical data also reflect the faith of the interviewees. Many reported that in the longer term, they observed significant improvements in their character, particularly empathy. They also cited better life skills such as boundary setting, communication, and discernment of other people's intentions. Several considered their faith to have deepened and their conception of God to have expanded. Some went as far as to say they would go through the whole experience again to achieve the transformational outcomes they had experienced by God's grace. Nonetheless, some interviewees reported ongoing sadness, a sense of loss of a future they had once envisaged, long-term scars and vulnerability, plus the stigma of a divorced identity within the Christian community. This was often combined with the complexity of navigating blended families for couples with children.

Only four of the interviewees had subsequently remarried. In all cases, they reported a positive contrast to their first union and gratefulness to God for their subsequent marriage partner. None of the interviewees expressed any moral dilemmas about remarriage from a faith perspective, but some were cautious in light of their divorce experience. One noted that male divorcees sometimes try and accelerate remarriage to legitimize physical intimacy.

3.2. Some Evangelical Divorce Practices Compound the Problems of Divorcing Evangelicals

One of the pastoral focus group participants estimated that three-quarters of churches manage divorce badly, at least from the point of view of divorced Christians attending Restored Lives. Although my interview cohort is not statistically significant from a quantitative perspective, it reflects a similar split. I will cover the more positive experiences below, but first, the key themes emerging from adverse experiences.

All the British evangelical churches creating adverse outcomes from the perspective of the interviewees were described as passive in the build-up to the divorce crisis. Their involvement began once the marriage breakdown became visible, almost always prior to an actual divorce. Church engagement then had a disciplinary tone and, in one case, entailed a quasi-judicial process to establish if a "biblical divorce" was envisaged. When both spouses remained in the church, the congregation, and sometimes the leaders, tended to "pick sides." A strong complementarian culture in one church afforded priority to the man, and the woman felt marginalized, even after his abusive behavior had become known to the leaders. In several cases, the spouse whose actions had initiated the crisis had already left and was, therefore, beyond the reach of church discipline. This tended to result in censure for the remaining partner based on the prospect of divorce alone, rather than an accurate apportionment of accountability for the situation.

To that end, several interviewees reported their removal from ministry roles. In all these cases, the individual was not provided with a rationale, beyond what they felt were euphemisms, such as "You need a break." No process, criteria, or timeline for reinstatement was provided to any of the interviewees. None of the cohort were reinstated to ministry

roles in the church where their divorce crisis arose, in part because they all subsequently left their church.

Strong encouragement to reconcile was a theme for some interviewees, even in the face of reported long-term abuse. In retrospect, one interviewee raised concerns about safeguarding in this respect. A culture of keeping the situation hidden, in one case even from family and close friends, was sometimes encouraged. This had the effect of isolating the person from their primary support networks. Another interviewee said they believed the church was more concerned about their image than the divorce situation itself because it undermined their notions of "victorious living."

Isolation was a commonly cited result of the divorce itself, removal from ministry roles, and informal rejection by others in the congregation. Several women reported that couples who had previously been friends withdrew because the interviewee's newly single status was perceived as a threat to their own marriages. Another common issue was that people did not know what to say and so chose to say nothing. This was enacted through avoidance or awkward conversations that skirted around the divorce situation. Even single friends sometimes withdrew because they considered divorce to be sinful and did not want to be "contaminated" by association. This situation encompasses both the *social* and *emotional* loneliness identified by Dykstra and Fokkema (2007) in their analysis of divorce in the Netherlands.

Pastoral care was reported to be limited or non-existent in these churches, compounded for some interviewees by the pretext of prayer being used to spread gossip. Eventually, the social isolation, sense of injustice, and lack of support led all the interviewees affected adversely to leave their original church. Afterward, some found other evangelical churches, but others left evangelicalism altogether. Two went to liberal churches, which they described as positive experiences of acceptance, healing, and, in one case, "fresh air." Others left the institutional church altogether whilst retaining their individual faith. In contrast, non-Christian friends were consistently described as less judgmental, more supportive, and "didn't say stupid things." One interviewee noted, "Lesbian rugby friends brought more healing than the church."

An additional subject raised without prompting by several interviewees was the impact of evangelical purity culture on young people. This was cited as a factor in their own situation by some. Concerns were raised that an emphasis on waiting until marriage for sexual intimacy resulted in pressure to marry before those in the relationship properly knew either themselves or one another. One interviewee recounted being sent letters from each of their parents asking them to reconsider an early marriage in these circumstances. That same person described the church environment as "coercive" in this regard. There was also some irony noted by more than one interviewee that evangelical church culture is a catalyst for misguided marriages that eventually fail only for the subsequent divorces to be met with uncompromising judgment and a lack of care by the very same movement. However, no easy answers were provided about what should be taught or encouraged instead. Interviewees who raised this point suggested they were more permissive with their children on sexual matters within committed relationships whilst remaining opposed to promiscuity.

3.3. Divorcing Evangelicals Do Not Prioritize Questions of Biblical Interpretation During Divorce

Although all interviewees held a high view of both marriage and scripture, once the period of crisis began, considerations of the various biblical interpretations of divorce were not prioritized. In part, this was because they were in survival mode, lacking the time or mental resources to engage in a complex technical debate. Several interviewees reported returning to the subject after some normalization of their circumstances had taken place. Views resulting from this retrospective reflection tended to be critical, accusing scholars of lacking context, nuance, grace, objectivity, and taking positions with unintended consequences, such as on abuse.

However, when discussing forgiveness rather than the Bible directly, interviewees often expressed a real sense of moral failure, even if, in technical terms, they may have met the criteria for a "biblical divorce" in the minds of their church, friends, or even themselves. The possibility of moral justification arising from biblical grounds did not provide relief because these matters were considered secondary to the breaking of the marriage covenant. This response was also reported even when the interviewee might be considered predominantly a victim in the divorce situation.

Rather than a focus on divorce theology, interviewees reported drawing on broader biblical themes such as assurances of God's unconditional love, forgiveness, grace, and restoration. Some also cited scriptural promises, especially "All things work together for good" (Rom. 8:28). Many believed God was guiding them during the crisis period through both inner convictions, "I just knew it was right," and circumstances, "God was working all the time." Several interviewees expressed more trust in these direct experiences of God than in the contested interpretations of bible passages on divorce.

3.4. Pastoral Practitioners Make Limited Direct Use of Evangelical Divorce Theology

The focus group participants were all evangelicals with a high view of scripture, except one who had left evangelicalism because of unspecified "judgmental attitudes." Even so, their collective view on the use of scripture with divorced evangelicals was cautious. Focus group participants cited a need to recognize complexity and context in applying scripture amidst what they perceived was an evangelical cultural preference for "black and white" beliefs and a clear separation of "good from bad." A failure to do this could cause "confusion" for people whose "lives are falling apart." One said that simplistic interpretations are "lazy thinking" that lacks nuance. Another suggested that "big themes," such as God's love and grace, should be used to interpret individual texts on divorce.

Even so, in the interview with the leader of Restored Lives, he explained that it felt incomplete for the organization not to have a position on what the Bible says about divorce. He worked through a lengthy consultation process before authoring a paper and using that material to produce two videos of different lengths. This has now been moved to the optional 'faith' evening since the course is open to people of all faiths and none. He also added that for most people, the big themes of love and forgiveness are more important, but for some, these specific interpretive issues remain pressing.

3.5. Empathetic and Restorative Practices Are Transformational

For those interviewees with positive church experiences, these were themed around sustained support, empathetic engagement, careful listening, and the mediation of God's love. Some interviewees mentioned being allowed to continue serving whilst also being afforded appropriate space to deal with their situation. Another noted that the church did not take sides but found a way to listen to both parties. Pastoral support was also a feature of these more positive church experiences. Some was formal and specialist, but most was informal. One commented, "They gave me so much listening time."

Similar themes emerged for those interviewees who had attended Restored Lives. The course's impact was cited as significant and represented a turning point for some. Several who had participated as guests on the course returned as helpers, which brought the additional benefits of supporting others alongside exposure to the material at a different stage of their own divorce journey.

The Restored Lives pastoral volunteers observed a similar pattern of meaningful change in many participants. This was true of evangelicals, other Christians, and people of other faiths or none. Evangelical participants were considered to carry additional burdens of guilt, shame, and a sense of letting God down. It was also noted that evangelicals often reported additional damage from their church situations, but that Restored Lives helped to model a different Christian response.

The success of the course was put down to a mixture of "structured content, group therapy, and love." When asked about the motivation for volunteering to help on the course,

one leader said the "positive impact was infectious and addictive." It was also seen as a way to use their own painful experiences for good, and several leaders had volunteered consistently for over a decade as a result. As a ministry, some leaders suggested it was analogous to the good Samaritan or a way of continuing the work of Jesus. The very fact they were prepared to spend time with those who had experienced marriage breakdown was considered noteworthy by some guests on the course.

3.6. God Is Described as a Positive Actor in Divorce Situations

Interviewees were asked about any perceived direct experiences of God throughout the divorce period. Some wrestled with God in light of their suffering and raised typical questions about God's goodness, power, and presence. Only one interviewee reported being angry with God, while another explicitly did not blame God for their situation. One drew a sharp distinction between their positive experience of God and negative experience of the church.

Most experiences described were of God's active presence, providing peace, assurance, and support. One interviewee said, "He [my husband] moved out and God moved in." God was considered active in several of the interviewees' divorce situations, including answering prayers in very explicit ways, reducing anxiety and depression, and speaking both directly and through others. One interviewee described God as "the ultimate chameleon" who presented in whatever way was needed at the time. On this topic, several interviewees reported that their conception of God had enlarged through the divorce experience, and a deepening of personal faith often accompanied this. Theological perspectives were also described as broadening and set in a renewed and overriding context of grace.

4. Discussion

For the purposes of this discussion, I am bundling systematic, historical, and biblical theology under one heading of "academic theology." Theological works on divorce usually blend all three, so this approach has a valid basis in the structure of the dominant literature. I will also use the term "evangelical academy" to represent the wide variety of evangelical scholars distributed within the global movement. In so doing, I do not mean to imply any sense of organization, cohesion, or collaboration between them beyond the normal processes of academic peer interaction and review. I have separated the domains of pastoral and ecclesial practice partly because most interviewees did, and since they are typically distinct in the literature. The former is enhanced by data from the focus group with pastoral volunteers. The "lifeworld" relates to the lived experience of divorcing British evangelicals summarized above.

The discussion draws on the dialogical model outlined above that places these domains in "oscillation," with one another (Cartledge 2010, p. 14). After considerable reflection on this basis, my overriding observation is that the experience of divorcing evangelicals is shaped by both deliberate and unintended connections and separations between these domains. The discussion below works through each one in turn to examine its dominant themes.

Whenever possible, I have used British scholarship, but evangelicalism is a global movement, and some distinctive material comes from elsewhere, particularly the US. Evangelical pastoral theology is sparse in the literature, so I have used whatever sources are available. Similarly, studies on divorce recovery in a faith context are few and cannot be restricted to either British or evangelical sources. I have used the ecclesial practices of the Church of England for illustrative purposes, but those reported by interviewees were denominationally diverse and usually outside any formal policy.

4.1. The Self-Isolation of the Academy Has Not Yielded a Consensus on Divorce

The evangelical academy often treats pastoral and personal perspectives on moral theology with suspicion. This is grounded in a fear that reflexive locations outside the 'objective' academy may distort the real meaning of scripture and undermine its norma-

tive primacy. Equally, scholarly works often state that the pastoral implications of their conclusions need consideration by others, ending their contribution with only exegesis or some brief comments on the application. On this basis, pastoral and lived perspectives are neither an input to nor an output of academic theology. Cornes expresses this situation explicitly in the opening chapter of his substantial work on divorce, writing:

> Some address in careful detail the biblical, or later theological, material. They examine and comment on the relevant texts. They come to carefully judged conclusions. Yet hardly any of these more scholarly works make any attempt to flesh out what their conclusions will mean in pastoral practice today [...]. The other group of books is clearly written out of intimate encounter with other people's, and often their own, divorce (and remarriage). Many are very sensitive and compassionate; most are full of pastoral wisdom. Almost all seek to come to terms with the biblical material but, for the most part, do so in a woefully inadequate way, with their previously held convictions often clearly manipulating the biblical texts. (Cornes 1993, pp. 44–45)

However, even after avoiding the risk of hermeneutical "manipulation" by pastoral and personal perspectives, evangelical scholars have failed to reach an interpretive consensus on what the Bible says about divorce. Attempts to do so have now tapered into occasional contributions, often by those wishing to revise their previous positions (Heth 2006; Grudem 2019; Wenham 2019). The enduring differences include such fundamentals as whether divorce is ever permitted, if so on what grounds (usually a combination of adultery, abandonment, and other issues such as abuse), and whether remarriage is permissible afterward. Notable evangelical scholars represent every permutation of these possibilities (Gushee and Stassen 2016, pp. 278–79). In contrast, Cornes asserts that an "overwhelming majority" agree on the main points, except for remarriage, and shifts the focus to divorcing evangelicals, suggesting some willfully use differing interpretations to justify whatever "appeals" (Cornes 1993, p. 39). I consider him simultaneously too generous to the scholarly community and too critical of divorced evangelicals on this point.

To find an evangelical "consensus" on divorce requires a return to the roots of Reformed theology. Calvin and Luther both accepted divorce on grounds of adultery, abandonment, and potentially other situations such as cruelty (Calvin) or sexual incapacity (Luther), and both accepted remarriage for the "innocent" party (Luther 1956, vol. 21; Calvin 1950, 4.19.34). Wenham cites a similar "twentieth-century Protestant" consensus restricted to the grounds of adultery and abandonment, but also with the right to remarriage (2019, ix). However, Cornes and Wenham each argue against the respective consensus they have cited, and it is, therefore, problematic for Cornes to expect divorced evangelicals to accept a consensus that he rejects.

The second part of Cornes' claim, that evangelicals use interpretive differences to justify their preferred actions, is not evident in my empirical data. There is no doubt that interviewees were confused by the diversity of views and considered the normative force of any particular interpretation to be diminished as a result, but no exploitation of this situation was discernible. Instead, in the absence of interpretive clarity, interviewees felt compelled to find their own way forward based on broader scriptural principles and direct guidance from God. This is not the hermeneutical opportunism Cornes describes.

Regrettably, there is little reflection on why no evangelical consensus has existed for decades. Smith (2012, chap. 1) uses the term "pervasive interpretive pluralism" for such a situation and suggests that methodological problems are to blame. However, most evangelical scholars have responded instead by doubling down on a particular view rather than reflecting on whether there is something wrong with the approach. Even this entrenchment would be tolerable if academic theology were truly disconnected, and its effects contained within academic discourse. However, as Gushee notes:

> The difficulty of interpreting the [divorce] passages [in the gospels], together with the varied perceptual lenses brought to the texts by interpreters, has led to a stun-

> ning range of positions which have had real pastoral and human consequences. (Gushee and Stassen 2016, p. 378)

Gushee rightly observes that methodological isolationism has not prevented interpretive issues from creating a wider contagion of pastoral practice and lived experience. This situation is exacerbated by an asymmetry between finely balanced interpretive decisions in the academy and their life-changing implications for the divorced. For example, some differences in view hinge on highly contested semantic nuances in terms typically translated as "sexual immorality" (porneia) in Matt. 5:32, and 19:9, and "is not bound" (dedoulotai) in 1 Cor. 7:15, which are used to decide whether adultery is legitimate grounds for divorce, and abandonment allows for the possibility of remarriage, respectively (Heth 2006, pp. 43–46). Similarly, the lack of an explicit scriptural reference to abuse as grounds for divorce leads some to suggest it should be "accepted and forgiven" at least for a period (Cornes 1993, p. 304). Gushee again:

> [Some scholars] demonstrate little sensitivity to the human context in which all Christian ethics is done and the chaos that is out there. What results is moral teaching torn asunder from contact with human experience [. . .], sometimes culminating in irrelevance or even cruelty, as when women and children are sent back into abusive families. (Gushee and Stassen 2016, p. 272)

The empirical data clearly capture this "human context" and "chaos," diverging sharply from the controllable linearity of decision-making assumed in most academic theology covering divorce. Real divorces begin with at least one spouse exhausting options to reconcile, as most theologians assume, but the marriage is then plunged into a crisis in which survival rather than exegesis is the priority. Only when the situation has normalized is there the possibility of reflection on academic theology.

However, a small number of scholars have challenged the norm and placed their academic work firmly in the context of pastoral and lived perspectives. Shelly (2007), in an American setting, seeds pastoral vignettes from his own ministry experience into the discussion of key divorce passages, which serve to complexify them and expose simplistic and formulaic practices. He also provides a useful set of practical questions and answers, ending with pastoral letters to those going through divorce and their church leaders. He writes:

> Sometimes our penchant to be right and certain in our doctrine has led us to boil down the complex matrix of Scripture to a series of bullet points, propositions for debate, and systems of thought that grind up people. While trying to be correct, we have sometimes been unmerciful. In our sincere efforts to follow the words of God, we may have abandoned the heart of God for his people. (Shelly 2007, p. 20)

Instone-Brewer has provided a detailed academic treatment of the subject (Instone-Brewer 2002) but also a more accessible and practical version of the same content for pastoral practitioners and church leaders (Instone-Brewer 2003). This latter perspective is derived from a considerable body of correspondence he has received from people experiencing divorce over many years and, like Shelly, is structured around frequent questions. Restored Lives has adopted Instone-Brewer's work as the basis for its theological teaching on the subject.

Cornes, already cited above, follows his exegesis through to its practical and pastoral outworking and provides an excellent contribution on "caring" with the best treatment of church discipline in divorce cases that I have found in my literature survey (Cornes 1993, chap. 10). However, his views on abuse at the time of writing are concerning, with Roberts (2008) an important female voice that should be heard urgently as a counterbalance.

Finally, Keener (1991) has contributed a substantial academic work on remarriage explicitly written from a pastoral perspective. He is a rare self-declared divorced and remarried scholar who has written about his lived experiences in a separate biographical work (Keener and Keener 2016). The density of his contribution makes it difficult to level a

charge of "inadequacy" in dealing with the biblical material, whether his conclusions are accepted or not.

In summary, despite (or perhaps even because of) the rejection of pastoral and lived perspectives, the evangelical academy has failed to produce a normative consensus on what the Bible says about divorce. This interpretive pluralism has undermined pastoral and ecclesial practice and confused divorcing evangelicals. Scholars have shown little self-awareness of this problem, but a few have sought to reconnect their work to pastoral and lived perspectives, which have enriched their contributions. Sadly, Gushee's assertion of irrelevance and Shelly's of unmerciful reductionism are both validated by this study.

4.2. Pastoral Practitioners Retain a Christian Anthropology but Minimize the Academy and the Language of Sin

Notwithstanding the rejection of pastoral perspectives by the evangelical academy, the move toward the separation of the two has not all been one way. Oden (1984, chap. 1) documents a fundamental shift in pastoral practice away from classical Christianity and toward secular psychology as early as the 1980s. By way of illustration, he conducted a literature survey of seven then-contemporary Christian writers on pastoral practice and noted no mention in their work of the classical theologians of the first millennium of Christianity in the tradition of the "care of souls," but instead 330 references to modern psychotherapists. He concluded, with some justification, that Christian pastoral practice had moved away from classical theological anthropology.

In this context, McMinn notes a corresponding loss of the language of sin and grace:

> There was once a time when the language of sin and grace was understood, both in private and public discourse, but that era has largely been supplanted by a therapeutic culture that emphasizes symptoms more than sin and unconditional acceptance more than grace. (McMinn 2008, p. 18)

The Christian divorce recovery literature also illustrates this adoption of therapeutic concepts and the associated shift in language away from theological language. Hille (2017) provides an excellent analysis of the interpretive issues in academic divorce theology as context to his empirical thesis and returns thoughtfully to this topic at the end. However, the divorce recovery course at the heart of his study is founded overtly on therapeutic ideas. Similarly, other studies that show faith improves outcomes for those experiencing divorce, assume this is grounded in the psychological idea of "religious coping" rather than Christian anthropology (Simonič and Klobučar 2017; Webb et al. 2010).

However, whilst the focus group with Restored Lives pastoral volunteers also confirms some reliance on therapeutic assumptions and the avoidance of the language of sin, the participants talked clearly about moral accountability using alternative terms such as "damaging behavior" and broader scriptural themes of forgiveness, hope, and restoration, sometimes with biblical references. Also, while making limited direct use of academic divorce theology with individuals, the optional faith evening provides an extended treatment of the subject with follow ups in discussion groups.

There was also a repeated sense that helping on the course was an incarnational act, showing the love of Jesus to people and continuing his ministry. It is notable that recent attempts to reconnect academic theology and pastoral practice have adopted a similar incarnational model (Anderson 2001; Root 2014; Akin and Pace 2017). Another related theme from the focus group is that of empathy. As noted above, the pastoral volunteers, themselves mostly divorced, have sought to use their experiences to come alongside others.

These dynamics are reminiscent of the pastoral model outlined in Gal. 6:1–3:

> [1] Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should restore that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. [2] Carry each other's burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ. [3] If anyone thinks they are something when they are not, they deceive themselves.

Galatians stresses mutuality and gentleness in restoring those who have sinned, based on the pervasiveness of temptation and the risk of a sense of superiority. McMinn makes a similar point, suggesting that true empathy is rooted in our mutual sinfulness and dependence on God's grace:

> This [empathetic attitude] is not merely empathy for an offender, it is empathy with the human condition. All of us are born in a sinful state, all are sinners by choice and habit, and all have been wounded by the sinfulness and sins of others. (McMinn 2008, pp. 33–48)

As such, whilst the theoretical disciplines of academic and pastoral theology may have drifted apart in settings like ministerial training as Oden suggests, the Restored Lives volunteers demonstrated a deep embrace of Christian anthropology and biblical models of care during their focus group. This is not always expressed in traditional terms, not because of a rejection of the underlying concepts, but rather that the language of sin and grace is not understood in modern culture. A deep sense of empathy and incarnational ministry pervades their approach.

4.3. Ecclesial Discipline Has an Ambiguous Relationship to the Atonement

As noted above, the most common example of an ecclesial practice toward the divorced arising from the interviews was removal from ministry roles, which all the interviewees considered unjustified. As such, it is relevant to explore the basis of ecclesial discipline and its limits.

Although the theological divorce literature generally avoids application, it sometimes recommends ecclesial practices. Wenham represents one end of the spectrum when he suggests:

> The issue of remarried church officers may come up, and in the course of time it may be thought improper to appoint them to positions of leadership in the church. First Timothy 3:2, 12 insist that overseers and deacons in the church must be married only once. At some stage in the process, it may seem right to exclude from fellowship those whom the Anglican Book of Common Prayer calls "open and notorious evil livers." (Wenham 2006, p. 41)

It is not clear from the final sub-quote whether Wenham advocates the removal of the divorced and remarried from the church entirely, but his call for their progressive and permanent removal from leadership is plain. He is also the only scholar identified in my literature survey who advocates this interpretation of 1 Tim. 3 with respect to the divorced. Wenham's position does not appear to be altered by repentance, whereas Cornes, in many ways holding a similar interpretive position, writes, "So, the severity of discipline must be determined primarily by the extent of willful disobedience to Christ's command, and discipline must be lifted where there is repentance" (Cornes 1993, p. 415). In contrast and arguing that 1 Tim. 3 is about faithfulness in a present marriage, Keener asserts that divorce does not debar anyone from Christian service *per se*, unless there was ungodly conduct during the process (Keener 1991, chap. 7). However, he does not cover the effect of repentance if there was. Many theological works on divorce do not even discuss the role and effect of repentance at all.

This question of forgiveness brings the discussion to the very heart of the gospel. In Bebbington's widely adopted definition of evangelicalism cited above, "crucicentrism" is one of its defining features (Bebbington 1989, p. 2). It is no surprise, therefore, to find a rich body of literature on the atonement by evangelical scholars (Greggs 2020; Lane 2020; Pugh 2020). However, these studies tend to focus on initial conversion, often describing a singular event for each believer, with the treatment of subsequent sin something of an afterword. There is collective agreement that the atonement was "once and for all" and covers future sin (Heb. 7:27), but there is little clarity on how this forgiveness is accessed. My literature survey on the topic identified no dedicated work by an evangelical on post-conversion repentance after Spurgeon in 1855 (2024). It is, therefore, necessary to consult commentaries

to find a scholarly exposition of passages such as 1 John 1–2, which anticipates ongoing forgiveness for sins.

In contrast, Catholic theology is noticeably clearer on the matter. The sacrament of baptism covers all past sins, while the ongoing sacrament of confession enables the forgiveness of sins committed afterward (Hahn 2003). Evangelicals may have reservations about a sacramental approach to confession, but their alternatives are typically highly truncated and lack clarity. For example, forgiveness after repentance is usually presented as an absolute of the atonement in theory but with an array of potential prerequisites to forgiveness in practice, such as confession (1 John 19), the forgiveness of others (Matt. 6:14–15), and reconciliation (Matt. 5:24–24). It is usually left unclear whether these criteria must be met in full, although Piper (2015) considers only a "settled position" against performing these things "destroys us". Also, no practices are offered to enact repentance outside the denominational liturgy.

Therefore, assuming true repentance, a willingness to meet the biblical requisites and a mechanism to enact the process, most scholars would agree that the atonement should be considered just as effective in dealing with sin after conversation as before. In this context, it is notable from the empirical data how many interviewees had taken responsibility for their failings in marriage, sought and offered forgiveness, and achieved reconciliation when possible. These actions lie at the heart of the Restored Lives course, which, for many, provided a practical vehicle to work out their repentance and forgiveness of others.

However, how does this position reconcile with "unbiblical" divorces? Setting aside the fact that there is no agreement on what these are, for situations where the failure is historical, such as causing a divorce by committing adultery, the principles of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration apply precisely as described above, as they do for all other serious sins. The challenge comes from divorce situations in which there is considered to be an ongoing sinful state. This is restricted to those who believe in the indissolubility of marriage and assert the original marriage remains in force after remarriage, such that any new relationship is forever adulterous. Since no scholar in my literature survey advocates the breakup of these second marriages, the parties are condemned to a life of continuous adultery. Piper (1986) suggests the adulterous status of the second marriage can be removed by repentance but offers no explanation of how this is achieved theologically. Whatever the merits of this stance, it does at least provide a coherent reason to keep divorced evangelicals out of ministry positions indefinitely, as Wenham proposes above.

For the majority of evangelicals who do not believe in indissolubility, the only justifications for long-term exclusion from Christian leadership for the divorced could be unrepentance or posing an ongoing safeguarding risk. A lack of repentance would constitute a valid reason for church discipline and is the basis of the approach advocated in Matthew 18 (Leeman 2012). However, even these measures are designed to be temporal and restorative. On the question of ongoing risk, divorce itself poses no such threat unless an aspect of past or current behavior does, which is not specific to the divorced. As such, outside indissolubility, it is difficult to justify any unique sanctions for the divorced. As Shelly summarizes:

> Is divorce somehow different than other sins? Is the adultery or covenant-breaking element somehow unpardonable? No sin is beyond the reach of God's grace! Any sin repented of and offered to God for pardon will be forgiven by the limitless efficacy of Christ's blood. (Shelly 2007, p. 149)

This same logic is seen clearly in the approach of the Church of England to leadership roles, particularly ordination. Divorce itself is not seen as an impairment to ordination, but for those who are remarried, there is a special measure required usually referred to as "Canon C4" (National Assembly of the Church of England 1964). Since 1990, the previous total ban on ordination for those who have either remarried themselves with a former spouse still living or who had married someone in that position was amended to allow an archbishop to grant a "faculty" on a case-by-case basis (General Synod of the Church of England 1990). This was linked to the official position of the Church of England that

marriage was indissoluble, which was revised in 1999 (Holmes 2017, pp. 185–86). Since then, and given that in 2024, approximately one in six ordinations require the Canon C4 procedure, a proposal to devolve it to Bishops or abandon it entirely has followed (Nye 2024). No equivalent requirement applies to lay ministries, even those requiring a formal license, although it should be noted that no remarried person could even partake in holy communion in the Church of England without special permission from the bishop before 1981.

In summary, except for those who believe in indissolubility, the breadth and depth of the atonement removes any basis for ongoing sanctions against the remarried after appropriate repentance. Similarly, no long-term exclusions from ministry can be justified for those who are divorced and remain unmarried irrespective of indissolubility, again assuming appropriate repentance has taken place. As such, most of the punitive ecclesial practices in British evangelical churches reported by the interviewees cannot be reconciled with the evangelical gospel.

4.4. Restored Lives Is a Working Model of Integrated, Empathetic, and Restorative Practice

As noted above, Restored Lives is not a direct model of evangelical practice toward divorced members in a church context. However, it is a working example of a practice that is derived from evangelical principles and attempts to provide an integrated experience to its participants of all faiths and none. It can be examined fruitfully in terms of academic theology, pastoral practice, ecclesial discipline, and lived experience even in this alternative setting. Indeed, the context in which it operates brings a new insight into evangelical divorce practice.

The first point to note is that Restored Lives has developed and integrated an academic position on divorce theology. This is offered with an acknowledgment of disagreements amongst scholars but reaches a specific interpretive conclusion based on the work of Instone-Brewer (2002, 2003). The content is encoded in long- and short-form videos for use in the faith evening curriculum. Participants often pose specific theological questions in real-time during this event, and other resources are offered in response. These are selected to match the individual's faith tradition as far as possible.

None of the volunteers on Restored Lives are assumed to be trained pastoral practitioners. However, the course has been designed by professionals to use a facilitation model of structured content and group therapy. If serious issues arise, participants are referred to more specialist advisors or encouraged to see a doctor. One part of the adult course is focused on access to this kind of professional help, and while most specialists connected with the course are Christians, Restored Lives does not seek to mandate their methods or assumptions. As such, Restored Lives is built around a highly effective pastoral-therapeutic model explicitly based on Christian principles, but without the use of religious language.

Since Restored Lives is a charity and the courses are attended voluntarily by a wide variety of people, there is little scope for ecclesial discipline. However, the core material encourages participants to take moral responsibility for what has happened to them, forgive themselves and others, learn to communicate respectfully with ex-partners while observing appropriate boundaries, and make positive decisions about the future. Participants are encouraged to work all this out for themselves, and the course is not advisory beyond its core content. Even so, it is common to find a degree of peer accountability emerging on the course as participants encourage and sometimes challenge one another. Nonetheless, the formal role of the course leaders with respect to discipline is restricted to managing the discussions and safeguarding matters.

The lived experiences of participants are a primary component of the course. Videos are used to offer the testimonies of others, and a personal story concludes every evening, sometimes offered live by a volunteer. Regular opportunities are provided for participants to share their own experiences, reflect on them, and learn from one another. The leaders never challenge the validity of these narratives but instead, provide an opportunity for participants to be heard through active and empathetic listening.

In addition to the four dimensions of evangelical theology and practice examined in the dialogical analysis, it is evident that Restored Lives also provides a missional component. This is not explicitly evangelistic in nature but rather incarnational; what one Restored Lives volunteer described as "soft evangelism." The course provides a channel for God's general grace to believers and non-believers alike as an extension of the ministry of Jesus, which is often recognized in some way by participants on the course.

Finally, it is entirely feasible to adapt Restored Lives into a specific church setting, as some have already achieved (including one of the focus group participants). The material can then be more overtly Christian, pastoral practice can articulate a clear Christian anthropology, and elements of restorative ecclesial discipline can be added to the process. The missional focus could also be more overtly evangelistic if desired. This model would be a more comprehensive and integrated response to divorce than any outlined in the empirical interviews.

5. Conclusions

The divorced British evangelicals in my study have a high view of marriage and scripture but cannot always save their relationships. In these cases, a period of crisis ensues in which they are in most need of the evangelical community to provide an integrated, empathetic, and restorative experience. Even afterward, the effects of divorce leave emotional scars, practical complexity, and spiritual questions, requiring ongoing support. Unfortunately, many interviewees in my study were subjected to practices that were disconnected, judgmental, and condemnatory. In these situations, evangelicals took responsibility for their own welfare and often left their original church, instead relying on friends, family, sometimes a new church, and God. However, for those with a more positive experience in their churches or on the Restored Lives course, the support they received was often life-changing, and they remained rooted in the Christian community.

Evangelical academic theology on divorce has self-consciously separated itself from pastoral perspectives and lived experience to avoid the risk of their undue influence on exegesis. Nonetheless, its moral conclusions have an impact on real lives and are not limited to academic discourse. Methodological isolation has not prevented a plurality of interpretations that left interviewees confused and often angry. In the empirical data, it was found that divorcing evangelicals temporarily ignore academic perspectives on divorce until they can reflect at a later stage. The academy is thus deemed irrelevant at the critical moment. Some scholars have attempted to integrate pastoral perspectives and lived experience within their examination of the biblical texts in ways that support and illuminate rather than undermine the primacy of scripture.

Pastoral practice may have disconnected from academic theology and drifted away from a Christian anthropology in theory, but the Restored Lives pastoral volunteers maintained a clear Christian worldview and sense of incarnational mission in their work, even if they were reluctant to adopt the language of sin or use academic theology on divorce directly with individuals. Their frequent references to broad salvific themes in the Bible were mixed with concepts from group therapy without any sense of contradiction. The empathetic and restorative approach outlined in the focus group is similar to the pastoral model encouraged in Gal. 6:1–3.

Ecclesial practice was most often experienced as a removal from ministry roles by interviewees. This was considered inappropriate, poorly communicated, and conducted without clarity on future restoration. All those who experienced this sanction left their church, and some never sought a new one. However, a brief examination of post-conversion sin and grace through the atonement confirms that divorce can be fully forgiven and does not uniquely warrant lifelong sanctions. However, the minority theory of marital indissolubility is an exception that creates a pastorally incongruous situation of perpetual adultery for the remarried. Outside this view, I conclude there is no biblical basis for the adverse actions taken by the churches in the empirical interviews.

Restored Lives provides a working model of integrated, empathetic, and restorative practice. It has a clear but respectful theological position on divorce, integrates a facilitated therapeutic model based on Christian values, and includes content encouraging moral accountability, and forgiveness of others. The interviewees who had been participants in the course, and in some cases also volunteered to lead it afterward, described it consistently as life-changing. Adaptions to this model for an evangelical church setting already exist and would be a good starting point for other churches seeking to improve their provision for divorcing members.

Finally, can an integrated, empathetic, and restorative practice toward divorcing evangelicals amount to a disclosure of God in action? Firstly, such practice is aligned with the subjective divine experiences reported by the interviewees, in which God was revealed as a compassionate and salvific actor in their situations. Secondly, the Restored Lives pastoral volunteers self-consciously saw themselves in an incarnational role continuing the ministry of Jesus. Lastly, several of the interviewees who experienced positive practice described it as a disclosure of God, one explaining, "People alongside me were like God to me." As such, rather than consider divorce only as a human failure that discredits Christians, British evangelicals should also see it as an opportunity for God's grace to be demonstrated at a time of acute need so that "Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more" (Rom. 5:20b).

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was approved by the Ethics Committee of The University of Roehampton reference HSS 23/ 007 on 14 August 2023.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: Data are unavailable due to privacy restrictions.

Acknowledgments: Thank you to John Moxon and David Clark for their invaluable supervision of this research.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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