

**WALKING IN LOVE:
LOVE AND PRAYER AS SOCIAL ACTIONS IN THE ST ANDREWS TOASTIE BAR**

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"And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us." (Ephesians 5:2)

How does selling 50p toasted sandwiches to predominantly drunk students on Friday nights in a small university town relate to the universal and sacrificial love Christ has for us? As a non-religious person who grew up in the UK I have had to sing hymns, say prayers, and occasionally attend church for most of my life. Yet, I had never stopped to consider what it really means from a Christian perspective to 'walk in love', or that 'Christ loved us'. This project entails my confrontation with these concepts, my attempts to engage with them, and hopefully reach a new understanding. Through examining the Christian use of prayer in the Toastie Bar and the Christian concepts of love, I will show how this shapes the experiences of the Toastie Bar members. While it is necessary to consider the theological context of Toastie Bar, this will be in relation to social action, to inform discourse analysis, and to consider the context through which Toastie Bar members attach meaning to their actions. Cannell comments that in anthropology, religious phenomena "may be described in detail, but [are always] explained on the basis that they have no foundation in reality, but are epiphenomena of [...] material causes" (Cannell 2006: 3). Instead I will not engage with the truth or rationality behind claims such as 'Christ loved us' as I believe that doing so greatly limits our ability to understand them.

During my project I volunteered at the Toastie Bar two full nights, attended a committee meeting, conducted formal interviews with three Toastie Bar committee members, one interview with a Toastie Bar volunteer, as well as countless informal chats with other committee members, past committee members, and volunteers. While I am indebted to all members of the Toastie Bar for their enthusiastic support in this project, I would particularly like to thank committee members Jessica, Fergus and Alasdair, and volunteer Shayo for informing this ethnography, as well as Matt for mediating my entry into Toastie Bar.

A night at Toastie Bar begins at 10.15pm at the Baptist Church, a two minute walk from the hub of St Andrews night life. My first night volunteering I knocked on the church door, and

was introduced to committee members and volunteers. We started by unstacking the chairs and arranging them in the familiar Toastie Bar layout, arranged in circles filling the hall. We sat in a circle and Matt, the president, ran through the plan for the night. Then we prayed as a group. Anyone who wanted to offer a prayer was able to, and each lasted a couple of minutes. Prayers generally thanked God for the opportunity to serve the town through Toastie Bar, asked that the night would go smoothly, asked that our conversations with people buying Toasties would go well, and acknowledged that we were doing Toastie Bar not for ourselves but for God. We then decided on roles, which consisted of advertising the Toastie Bar outside the Student Union, taking the Toastie orders at the church entrance, taking the orders to the kitchen, preparing the toasties in the kitchen, and serving the toasties. This last role includes another aspect which is fundamental to the Toastie Bar – engaging in conversation with the Toastie Bar’s customers. These conversations are not always, but are aimed to address ‘deeper’ questions in life, and will ideally lead to theological discussion. This element is so integral to Toastie Bar that roles such as kitchen and advertising were seen as somewhat facilitating others to be able to carry out these conversations.

The door to the Toastie Bar opens at 11pm, and the night starts off quiet, with most of the customers knowing some or many of the members, and may even be off duty volunteers themselves. As the night goes on the Toastie Bar gets increasingly busy as groups start to go to the Toastie Bar before a night out. By midnight the Toastie Bar is busy with most of the seats taken, and just before 2am, when all bars in St Andrews close, the whole church hall is filled. By 2.30am the Toastie Bar’s license has ended, the last customers have eaten their toasties and left, and the clean-up begins. The church floor at this point is littered with the numbered raffle tickets toastie orders are written on, which can reach numbers exceeding 800, but with 12 people helping the clean-up doesn’t take long. We then again form a circle, are debriefed, and pray in the same way as before, this time generally giving thanks for the opportunity to serve, asking God to look after specific people who were extremely drunk, and to ask God that people who showed interest in Christianity will continue that interest. Members are then invited to share any particularly interesting conversations they had, with an emphasis on those where people were interested in Christianity. Lastly, at around 3am,

the volunteers head home and the committee stay to finish any cleaning, to make the church ready for use Saturday morning.

As Alasdair told me, being a Christian is more than just believing the right things, “If we’re living the life we’re meant to live, then we should be showing love to people”. This implies that to understand how Christianity is experienced, we should explore not just Christian beliefs, but Christianity as social action. In order to facilitate social action, the Toastie Bar is created as an accessible space. While profit from toasties is split between two charities and the Baptist Church, who let Toastie Bar use the church. For Fergus the Toastie Bar means a “warm place” for students and less “hectic” than St Andrews’ bars according to Alasdair. This gives the Toastie Bar, as Jessica puts it, an “easy going” atmosphere. This was something I found was also felt by St Andrews students. On a shift advertising the Toastie Bar to people leaving the Student Union, I found the responses to be overwhelmingly positive.

These responses not only show that the Toastie Bar is successful in selling toasties, but also reflects their active effort to create the Toastie Bar as an accessible space, particularly for non-Christian students. Toastie Bar was seen as a place where non-Christian could engage with Christian students. Alasdair told me Toastie Bar is “a place people can talk about harder things in life [...] everyone has these big questions” and Toastie Bar creates “a context where we make it very clear we want to talk about these things”. The Toastie Bar’s openly Christian identity, and the toastie server’s willing and active engagement in conversations with non-Christian students creates an environment where Christianity is accessible to these students. Shayo described the Toastie Bar as providing “a non-judgmental environment” where people can “drop in just for a chat”. He also suggested that “Church is a bit too formal” for people first discovering Christianity suggesting that Toastie Bar provides an outlet that is more accessible for some people.

Luhrmann (2012) argues that experience of communicating with God in prayers should be understood as psychological phenomena in which the Christians “taught people to pay attention to their minds and emotions shaped something about the process of mind itself and that these changes helped people to experience God as real” (Luhrmann 2012: Chapter 5). However I will argue that viewing prayer as a psychological phenomenon is contrary to

the way Christians themselves experience prayer, and limits further analysis. Instead I will argue that prayer should be viewed in terms of social communication, firstly because this most accurately reflects how my informants viewed prayer. For them “prayer is the main way we can communicate with God” (Jessica). This was not a one way relationship, but “building up a relationship” (Alasdair). Furthermore my informants greatly emphasised the importance of prayer, Jessica describing it as “essential” and “very, very important”. Prayer was seen not just a belief or a ritual, but “a very active thing - we believe things will happen” (Alasdair). By viewing prayer as social interaction, we are able to see it in active terms, and as something that has a real impact on the world. Prayer, considered as communication, can be seen “not only as a mode of thinking but, above all, as a cultural practice, that is, as a form of action that both presupposes and at the same time brings about ways of being in the world” (Duranti [1997], cited in Ahearn 2011: 8). Here Duranti’s analysis is very similar to Luhrmann’s argument, except that it does not appeal to a change in internal psychology, and instead sees cultural practices as shaping experience.

Fergus told me that “if you don’t pray, you’re placing your actions on yourself [instead of on God]”. Prayer includes “a recognition that God is ultimately in control of what happens” (Jessica). The social context of Toastie Bar members’ Christian background motivates Toastie Bar members to pray. By reminding themselves that God is in control, Toastie Bar members reframe their experience, and therefore the context of the Toastie Bar. Shayo told me that prayer “humbles you”, and “takes away the temptation to feel big-headed about what you’re doing”. This changes the context from one of personal charity to one of serving God. Applying critical discourse analysis to Toastie Bar prayer, has shown how “social contexts and linguistic practices mutually constitute each other” (Ahearn 2011: 8). In my own life I have always joined in prayer by bowing my head and listening, whether at school, a wedding or a funeral. I have never done this out of a feeling that I was communicating with God, but instead from a mixture of respect for the people around me, and an openness to religious experiences. While I did not feel in a relationship with God in the way my informants described, praying with the Toastie Bar before and after the night, as well as at the committee meeting, I would say is what most made me realise that Toastie Bar was more than just cheap toasties, or even charity, but was a very religious experience for many members.

My informants did not only pray at Toastie Bar. Alasdair prays “all the time”, and prayer at Toastie Bar is “a continuation of that conversation”. This suggests that rather than trying to find a psychological explanation for Christian experience of communicating with God, there is a social explanation to prayer. By viewing prayer as a social act as it is communicating with God, we can analyse the way it constantly reframes Christian experience. Whether or not someone prays, and the precisely how they pray depends on a person’s social context. While the conversation with God was described as continuous, praying in Toastie Bar, praying in other Christian groups, and prayer meetings between different Christian groups will have different social contexts. Viewing prayer socially is able to explore the specific ways in which these contexts shape and are shaped by prayer. Furthermore it explains how someone such as myself, who’s mind could surely not be said to have been shaped by prayer, is still able to experience a change in context through prayer.

When working at Toastie Bar I was frequently presented with concepts of ‘God’s love’ and ‘Jesus’s love’ as well as the chosen verse for this year– “And walk in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us” (Ephesians 5:2). This verse was written on a medium sized whiteboard in the centre of the wall that you face when entering the church hall. As a non-Christian, to me love is a psychological state, or the abstract notion of this psychological state, and so I struggled at first to understand the full relevance of this verse to serving toasties. However for Toastie Bar members love, or at least God and Jesus’ love is conceived differently. For the rest of this ethnography I will explore my informant’s conceptions of love, in relation to the Toastie Bar, and will not consider other types of love, such as romantic love. While my informants were vocal in talking about God’s love, the concept is explainable, but in some ways irreducible, since God and Jesus’ love is something which they, and potentially anyone can directly experience. In order to present this concept to the reader further, I will explore love in relation to the process of serving toasties, firstly through acts of practical love, and secondly through how this facilitates the spreading of the Gospel. Lastly I will consider how these are related.

My first night volunteering at the Toastie Bar I was struck by the amount of ways they helped people in need. Besides just providing a warm place, providing cheap food and

putting out water, I was told they often walked people home if they needed help getting back. I also witnessed them looking after someone who was extremely drunk, and when it was clear he was not recovering they called an ambulance. Toastie Bar members actively look out for people who need help, either physically or emotionally. My impression after my first night was the Toastie Bar uses its status as a well-known and much loved Christian organisation to draw people who were physically unsafe or needed emotional support so they could provide help. When I was reflecting on my notes before my second week volunteering I realised that I had missed a lot of clues that showed that Toastie Bar members did not view their work solely in the terms of 'physical and emotional support' that I did.

Instead my informants viewed these as practical acts of love. This meaning has a theological background, as Jessica told me that "in the Bible it says we love because God first loved us". Alasdair described it as "not an aimless love, we have a purpose for loving and that's because we were first loved by God". As my informants identify the love shown in their actions with the theological concept of love, I will therefore explore Toastie Bar's actions by placing "the act in an intelligible and more inclusive context of meaning" (Weber 1978: 8). The love that the Toastie Bar allowed my informants to carry out followed a theological narrative. Jessica told me that "if you think about how Jesus loved us [... he] loved in a practical way – he washed the disciples' feet". This implies that she experiences the actions that I would consider solely in terms of 'physical and emotional support' as also encapsulating this concept of practical love. Jessica also told me that "the love we show to others should be sacrificial". While not on the same scale, to "walk in love as Christ loved us" means to show the same type of love that in Christian belief Jesus showed. Fergus also mentioned the universal aspect of Jesus' love in their actions in the Toastie Bar as they "show love to people, even people who are rude". By understanding the Toast Bar's theological views of Christ, we can see love as practical, universal and sacrificial. In viewing religion as people experience it, rather than as recognised in religious institutions, McGuire sees 'lived religion' as "constituted by the practices by which people remember, share, enact, adapt, and create the 'stories out of which they live'", and constituted through how these stories are enacted (McGuire 2007: 16). As my informants identify the love that's contained in their actions in Toastie Bar with their theological concept of love, we can see

how these meanings are shaped by theological narratives, and how the Toastie Bar members enact these meanings, and thus what it means for the Toastie Bar to be walking in love. It is worth remembering that for Toastie Bar members 'walking in love as Jesus loved us' is not just following a narrative, but is exercising the same love that Jesus had for us.

There is one further aspect to Toastie Bar concepts of love which is love through sharing the Gospel. While Fergus sees providing emotional and physical support as important aspects of love, for him there's another form which is "much more transformative than the toastie that you give people", which is "spreading the Gospel". For Jessica and Fergus 'walking in love' has an element of practical, Christ-like love, as well spreading the love by allowing others to enter into the same relationship they experienced with God. The emphasis that individual Toastie Bar members placed on the two forms of love varied depending on their theological background. For example where Fergus saw that "the two aims go together" but emphasised the second form of love as the more important, Alasdair saw showing God's love through actions as making "a much bigger impact". The difference between these two forms was much more a matter of emphasis than a matter of content, and as Alasdair said, Toastie Bar members "still come around the same goal – the same love". By showing the narratives through which Toastie Bar members understand their actions we have gained an understanding of these concepts. Reflecting how my informants talked about love, we have gained an understanding where Christianity is not just a matter of belief, but a matter of action. Of course we should not forget the experience of 'walking in love as Christ loved us' is accompanied by a belief that Christ really does love us, and gave himself up for us. If non-Christian readers are able to suspend their disbelief in this statement and focus on how this love is manifested through Toastie Bar member's actions, I believe the reader will be able to gain an understanding of what it means to 'walk in love as Christ loved us'.

For Christian readers I hope this ethnography will provide a new perspective on actions which form an integral part of their lives. For non-Christian readers I hope it will help to normalise Christian practices and concepts which are difficult to understand for people who have not directly experienced God's love or entered into a relationship with God. For myself this project allowed me to explore concepts which I have been exposed to my entire life, and yet had never engaged with. One potential limitation in my project was my position as a

non-Christian. While the Toastie Bar was extremely accommodating, one role I did not get to experience was delivering toasties. Due to the importance of spreading the Gospel and representing Christianity, I was unable to fill this role as I am not in a communicative relationship with God myself, and so am unable to spread this to others. To me personally the Toastie Bar's value still lies in the physical and emotional support it provides to vulnerable students on a Friday night. However through the process of this project I am able to see another side of Christian action. I am now less inclined to see prayer as a ritual, or something Christians do because they 'believe' it will have effects, but see it is a form of social action, even when done in private, as it constantly reshapes social contexts. I now understand that Jesus' love is not merely symbolic of the sort of attitude that it would be nice to have towards each other, but is something experienced by Christians that motivates their actions in ways which can be separate from religious institutions, and are not always immediately obvious. With prayer shaping the context and Jesus' love providing meaning to actions, Toastie Bar workers walk in love as Christ loved us.

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