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Breaking Evangelical: an Attachment-Focused Framework for Healing Spiritual Trauma

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GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY

BREAKING EVANGELICAL:
AN ATTACHMENT-FOCUSED FRAMEWORK
FOR HEALING SPIRITUAL TRAUMA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF PORTLAND SEMINARY
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY

BY

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PORTLAND, OREGON

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Portland Seminary
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CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

DMin Dissertation

This is to certify that the DMin Dissertation of

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has been approved by
the Dissertation Committee on February 12, 2019
for the degree of Doctor of Ministry in Semiotics and Future Studies

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DEDICATION

This work is dedicated to the women who shared with me their stories of trauma and healing, as they seek wholeness, beauty, and truth.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Special thanks to Colleen Butcher and Leonard Sweet, without whom I would not have had the strength to complete this work. Thank you also to my friends and family on my “dissertation launch team,” for your support, prayers, and encouragement.

Named individuals in illustrations and stories throughout this work are fictional, though based on actual people’s experiences and statements. Every effort has been made to remove all identifying information.

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GLOSSARY

abuse. The exploitation of someone with less power or control.

attachment. Holistic, healthy interpersonal bonding. Not to be confused with codependency.

Body of Christ. The collective expression of those who are embodying Jesus, regardless of community type or size.

codependency. Unhealthy personal boundaries; self-worth and self-concept dependent on another human relationship.

church. Traditional understanding of faith communities.

God concepts. Cognitive beliefs about God.

God images. Internalized metaphors that form the blueprints for our relationship to God.

interoception. Latin for “looking inside.”

mindfulness. Mental focus on the present experience, sensations, and emotions.

patina. The semiotic memory of a place or thing.

perichoresis. Mutual indwelling; divine dance.

reciprocal self. Self-disclosure and investment in relationship within healthy personal boundaries.

Trinity. God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

ABSTRACT

About 25 percent of the US population is religiously unaffiliated, and about 70 percent of these individuals are former Christians (Pew Research, PRRI, Gallup, Barna). Included in this phenomenon is the spiritual traumatization of women within evangelical churches, which has been revealed partially through the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements on social media.

At the core of spiritual abuse is the issue of broken attachments (human bonding and communion with God). God created people for community, and abuse is direct injury to this vital aspect of our humanity. This work explores theories and concepts of perichoresis, God attachment, and interpersonal attachment through a trinitarian lens, with the aim of offering a holistic healing framework for spiritually traumatized women who want to pursue a fruitful spiritual life inside or outside institutional church. Many spiritually traumatized women choose to stay in their churches. This still exposes an underlying attachment failure within churches, as well as a potential type of Stockholm syndrome within evangelical circles.

Women frequently leave churches with spiritual trauma that has injured their God attachment. They need holistic healing toward secure God attachment, which can take place outside traditional church contexts. God attachment can be more secure by healing one's God images, internalized metaphors from which all relationship attachment originates. Both implicit images and explicit concepts of God play important roles in God attachment. Fully acknowledging and addressing spiritual trauma is of utmost importance to move toward any kind of healing and reconciliation. I propose an attachment-focused healing framework, which is trauma-informed and healing-centered, partially drawing

from Esther Lightcap Meek's covenant epistemology (inspired by Michael Polanyi's subsidiary-focal integration) and James Fowler's stages of faith development. I hypothesize this framework can not only provide hope, healing, and growth for spiritual trauma survivors, but can also prevent spiritual abuse.

CHAPTER 1:

BROKEN ATTACHMENTS

Problem

Many formerly evangelical Christian women experienced spiritual trauma in church and are now detached from orthodox Christian faith and fellowship. While some women claim to be agnostic, atheist, or pagan, many still maintain some degree of Christian faith and may still seek to follow in the ways of Jesus Christ. However, many of these women are struggling to find communities within which they can recover from their trauma and reconstruct their faith.

Spiritually abusive practices in evangelical churches are nuanced and deeply embedded within the evangelical Christian subculture. While most of the current media attention is focused on the political power of evangelicals, and rightly so, there are many more factors to take into consideration. Based on my personal observations and reading of culture, overall research and trends, evangelical systems of power have evolved over the past several decades, creating a culture in which a) narcissistic personalities thrive in leadership, among both clergy and lay leaders; b) patriarchal dynamics oppress women and minorities in families, churches, and workplaces; c) suspicion of science, especially psychology, propagates trauma cycles; d) basic human sexuality is shamed or even exploited; and e) colonizing approaches to discipleship are normalized. For the Body of Christ to heal from such an environment, these power constructs must be dismantled, and the hard work of repair must be done.

Argument

About 25 percent of the US population is religiously unaffiliated, and about 70 percent of these individuals are former Christians.¹ Included in this phenomenon is the spiritual traumatization of women within evangelical churches, which has come to light partially through the #MeToo, #ChurchToo, and #EmptythePews movements on social media. While the volume of these women's voices is being amplified and rightly so, hearing only the pain could lead to discouragement and a lack of hope both inside and outside the Body of Christ. However, there are small pockets of followers of Christ where progress is being made toward reconstruction and repair (for instance, the Parish Collective²). There is a growing need for even more healing resources that can be utilized in a variety of settings.

Research shows women leave church for various reasons, most of which can be classified into one or more of the following categories, and all of which point to a broken connection to God and broken interpersonal attachments: spiritual trauma, disenchantment, lack of emotional connection, change in beliefs, and prioritization of

¹ Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," May 12, 2015; "PRRI, "America's Changing Religious Identity," September 6, 2017; PRRI, "Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back," September 22, 2016; Gallup, "Five Key Findings on Religion in the U.S.," December 23, 2016; Barna, "Meet Those Who Love Jesus but Not the Church," March 30, 2017.

² The Parish Collective is "at the center of the growing Parish Movement that is refounding the local church in the everyday life of the neighborhood and learning to join in with the redemptive work God is already doing there." Parish Collective website, "About," <https://parishcollective.org/about-us/>. See especially Paul Sparks, Tim Sorens, and Dwight J. Friesen, *The New Parish: How Neighborhood Churches Are Transforming Mission, Discipleship and Community* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014).

self-freedom.³ Social media groups and movements, such as Exvangelical,⁴ reveal a growing number of former evangelicals attempting to overcome emotional damage from narcissistic church leaders, recover from abusive parenting practices fueled by evangelical thought leaders, and repair sexual identity and sex education distorted by evangelical purity culture. Some are looking to Jesus for healing. But in general, since their experience of church was so damaging, many will not consider looking to the Body of Christ for help healing from trauma. It is still imperative for followers of Jesus to partner with him and seek reconciliation with those who are hurting, in ways that are respectful and will truly be helpful.

Healing from spiritual trauma, or any trauma, requires a holistic approach to tend the whole person. Healing the connection with God is of utmost importance, and neuroscience and psychology offer insight that can be applied to the process of spiritual development, which might best be seen simply as human development. Both implicit images and explicit concepts of God play important roles in attachment to God. God images are metaphors that are deeply imbedded in latent memory, forming from infancy

³ These categories are my synthesis of research and writing from Elizabeth Drescher, Linda Mercadante, Julia Duin, Kathy Escobar, Barbara Brown Taylor, Jim Henderson, CBS, Reba Riley, Drew Dyck, Ashleigh Hope, Josh Packard, Rachel Held Evans, and others. See Elizabeth Drescher (*Choosing Our Religion: The Spiritual Lives of America's Nones*), Linda Mercadante (*Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but not Religious*), Julia Duin (*Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do About It*), Kathy Escobar (*Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart*), Barbara Brown Taylor (*Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith*), Jim Henderson (*The Resignation of Eve: What if Adam's Rib Is No Longer Willing to Be the Church's Backbone?*), Reba Riley (*Post-Traumatic Church Syndrome: One Woman's Desperate, Funny, and Healing Journey to Explore 30 Religions by Her 30th Birthday*), Drew Dyck (*Generation Ex-Christian: Why Young Adults Are Leaving the Faith... and How to Bring Them Back*), and Rachel Held Evans (*Searching for Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*).

⁴ "Exvangelical" is a podcast and social media movement among people who have left evangelical subculture. They have a Facebook group of several thousand members, and are partially the subject of the CBS Religion documentary "Deconstructing My Religion" (<https://www.cbsnews.com/video/deconstructing-my-religion/>). Their website is <https://exvangelicalpodcast.com/>.

within the context of relationships with caregivers. God concepts begin to form when the brain develops the ability to form outward symbols of these metaphors, usually through language and behavior, and are often the outward focus of most church indoctrination. However, behavior modification does not always lead to internal motivation and moral foundations; the human spirit develops from the inside out,⁵ and perhaps even from right brain to left brain and back, creating an ongoing process of growth. Emotional attachments lead to stronger and more resilient bonds with caregivers, family, friends, and God, which in turn enables healthier beliefs and behaviors.

Biblical support for an attachment-focused framework is exegeted from the vine and branches metaphor in John 15, and theological support from Trinitarian theology and the concept of perichoresis. The First and Second testaments are full of the language of attachment, and John 15 is no exception. Abiding in Jesus is the key to abundant life, so it stands to reason that remaining attached to God is vital to healing from trauma. God, as our primary attachment figure, serves as our safe haven and a secure base from which to explore and serve the world. His Spirit within us keeps us connected to him and to the Body of Christ. By being in Christ, joined in perichoresis, we participate in God's ongoing divine dance in the world.

Key Qualifications

In my observations of and participation in conversations around abuse of power and control in churches, some Evangelical Christians may object to addressing these

⁵ See James Fowler (*Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning*) and Gordon Kaufman (*The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God*).

issues within evangelicalism, claiming that either all things should be forgiven under grace or that admitting such issues exist is divisive to the Body of Christ. It is my understanding that followers of Jesus, evangelical or not, must do the hard work of facing the truth about the systems in which the Body of Christ operates, and must hold each other accountable to living in ways that honor Christ. This means dismantling systems of power that have marginalized and oppressed some while benefitting others.

Many women have shared with me their experiences of trauma within evangelical churches, but they choose to stay in those churches for various complex reasons. This still exposes the underlying attachment failure within these churches, as well as a potential type of trauma bond among women in evangelical circles. It is not uncommon for abused people to defend their abusers as a survival mechanism.

Depending on where a person is along her path of spiritual/human development, it is possible that offering a spiritually traumatized woman a holistic healing framework may make little difference for reattaching her to Christ and/or the Body. Regardless, fully acknowledging and addressing spiritual trauma is of utmost importance to move toward any kind of healing and reconciliation. There can be no agenda when it comes to healing, apart from the care and growth of the survivor.

Even with adequate biblical and theological support, objections to a holistic healing framework that exists outside institutional church will include reference to a lack of centralized authority and doctrine. However, as the work of dismantling abusive power systems continues, it will become more crucial for a new framework to be in place.

Hypothesis

Women who have experienced spiritual trauma in evangelical churches need a holistic healing framework outside of institutional church that cultivates God attachment and healthy interpersonal attachments. Within an attachment-focused paradigm, they can heal from spiritual trauma, reattach to the Body of Christ, pursue fruitful spiritual lives, and know the Holy Spirit in meaningful ways, regardless of their faith community type.

Research Summary

As previously stated, various research indicates that about 25 percent of the US population is religiously unaffiliated, and about 70 percent of these individuals are former Christians. Included in this phenomenon is the spiritual traumatization of women within evangelical churches. While the end of “White Christian America,” a phrase coined by Robert Jones,⁶ appeared imminent at the 2016 elections, the rise of the Trump administration and other Republican politicians revealed the enduring influence of evangelicals as a voting bloc, regardless of the lack of Christlike values represented among these politicians.⁷ The effects of the 2018 midterm elections, with the House

⁶ Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2017).

⁷ Philip Gorski, a sociology professor at Yale, writes that, even though many Evangelicals viewed Trump as the “lesser of two evils,” they voted for him mainly “Because they are white Christian nationalists. As such, they were attracted by Trump’s racialized, apocalyptic, and blood-drenched rhetoric. It recalled an earlier version of American religious nationalism, one that antedated the softened tones of modern-day ‘American exceptionalism’ first introduced by Ronald Reagan. At the same time, Trumpism was stripped of the explicit allusions to Christian scripture that traditionally tethered American religious nationalism to Christian political theology. One way of reading Trumpism, then, is as a reactionary and secularized version of white Christian nationalism. I conclude by arguing that the proper response to Trumpism is not to double down on radical secularism but to recover America’s civil religious tradition.” “Why Evangelicals Voted for Trump: A Critical Cultural Sociology,” abstract, *American Journal of Cultural Sociology* 5, no. 3 (2017): 338.

majority taken by the Democratic party but a Republican Senate still in place, will be critical for progressive Christians who see social justice as imperative to the practice of Christian faith. The evangelical movement is at a major crossroads as more evangelicals reject a Christian subculture that has become synonymous with Republican power.

As previously noted, research shows women leave church for various reasons, most of which point to broken God attachments and broken interpersonal attachments. In my own experience and as I have listened to the stories of others, it appears that the tactics of spiritually abusive people tend to be very similar to the tactics described in narcissistic abuse, and while literature about healing from narcissistic abuse does not always necessarily examine the spiritual impact, there are many parallels. Much of the attention from authors and leaders is currently geared toward eradicating sexual abuse within the church, which is extremely important work (for instance, the ongoing work of Mary DeMuth⁸ and especially the landmark 2019 Houston Chronicle series on their investigation into sex abuse in Southern Baptist churches).⁹ However, there is opportunity for research into healing from spiritual abuse that does not necessarily involve sexual abuse, and there are people researching solutions.¹⁰

⁸ See DeMuth's website www.marydemuth.com, as well as her books, especially *Not Marked: Finding Hope and Healing After Sexual Abuse* (Rockwall, TX: Uncaged Publishing, 2013).

⁹ Jay R. Jordan, "Abuse of Faith Series Concludes by Shedding Light on Southern Baptist Sex Crimes," *HoustonChronicle.com*, February 13, 2019, <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/investigations/article/Abuse-of-Faith-series-concludes-shedding-by-light-13611623.php>.

¹⁰ For instance, see Barbara Orlowski's website www.churchexiters.com and her dissertation, *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010). See also Marlene Winell, "Understanding Religious Trauma Syndrome: Trauma from Leaving Religion," *British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies*, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://www.babcp.com/Review/RTS-Trauma-from-Leaving-Religion.aspx>.

Both implicit images and explicit concepts of God play important roles in God attachment. Some researchers argue that people attach to God in ways that correspond to their attachment style, and others argue that people attach to God in ways that compensate for inadequate human attachments.¹¹ There is a growing body of literature on the topic of God attachment, though there is an opportunity for more research and exploration of how to repair injured attachments.¹² Processing trauma is important to bringing healing, and an attachment-focused approach to that processing is important; this approach can be well informed by attachment-focused EMDR therapy¹³ and the work of Bessel Van der Kolk¹⁴ and other trauma researchers.

Trinitarian theology and the concept of perichoresis provide insight into a healing framework that focuses on active participation with the divine.¹⁵ The language of attachment is used throughout the First and Second Testaments, and the Spirit of God is

¹¹ See especially Lucas A. Keefer, Mark J. Landau, and Daniel Sullivan, “Non-Human Support: Broadening the Scope of Attachment Theory,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 524. Others who have written on the topic include Todd W. Hall, Victor Counted, Gordon Kaufman, Glendon Moriarty, Jaqueline Noffke, Louis Hoffman, and Edward Davis.

¹² See Joshua J. Knabb and Joseph Pelletier, “‘A Cord of Three Strands Is Not Easily Broken’: An Empirical Investigation of Attachment-based Small Group Functioning in the Christian Church,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 42, no. 4 (2014): 343. See also Cassidy and Shaver (*Handbook of Attachment: Theory, Research, and Clinical Applications*), Clinton and Straub (*God Attachment: Why You Believe, Act, and Feel the Way You Do about God*), Monroe and Jankowski (“The Effectiveness of a Prayer Intervention in Promoting Change in Perceived Attachment to God, Positive Affect, and Psychological Distress,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice*).

¹³ See Laurel Parnell, *Attachment-Focused EMDR: Healing Relational Trauma* (New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Co., 2013).

¹⁴ Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015).

¹⁵ See Augustine (*On the Trinity*), Rohr and Morrell (*The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation*), Charles Twombly (*Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus*), Esther Lightcap Meek (*A Little Manual for Knowing*), Cynthia Bourgeault (*The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity*), Donald Fairbairn (*Life in the Trinity: An Introduction to Theology with the Help of the Church Fathers*), Graham Hill (*Salt, Light, and a City: Introducing Missional Ecclesiology*), Balswick, King, and Reimer (*The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*).

what connects us to the Body of Christ. We see perichoresis in the language of the Second Testament writers' use of "in Christ;" understanding this position and identity is central to healing from spiritual trauma, repairing God attachments, and establishing healthy interpersonal connections.

Proposal for Solution

A framework for healing spiritual trauma among women needs to be a) attachment-focused, which in turn needs to be b) trauma-informed and c) healing-centered. This framework can be informed by Esther Lightcap Meek's covenant epistemology¹⁶ (inspired by Michael Polanyi's subsidiary-focal integration¹⁷) and James Fowler's stages of faith development,¹⁸ building a paradigm within which injured God attachments can be mended. I hypothesize this framework can not only provide hope, healing, and growth for spiritual trauma survivors, but can also prevent spiritual abuse.

The work of the framework will include deconstructing many theological concepts that, for some, have been embedded into evangelical subculture and wielded abusively. This holistic healing paradigm will reframe the Bible within its historical contexts, repositioning Jesus Christ as the object of worship, rather than the Bible and

¹⁶ See her book *A Little Manual for Knowing* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014) as well as her lecture at Dallas Theological Seminary on their YouTube channel (posted October 2015), "Loving to Know: Covenant Epistemology for Artists and other Knowers," <https://youtu.be/oaANEqMWJk>.

¹⁷ See his book *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy* (London, UK: Routledge, 1998), pages 60-61 and following.

¹⁸ While there is undoubtedly a large volume of work available from more recent authors on the topic of spiritual development, I chose Fowler because a) his work was foundational, and b) his framework of spiritual development includes a semiotic lens, as he frequently references symbolic and subsymbolic processes. I utilize his book *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1995).

doctrines. Perichoresis offers an invitation into the beautiful divine dance that God has initiated with humanity, bidding humans to join him as sub-creators and midwives to his redemptive work in the world. This can begin to redeem evangelical missiology that often implements colonization rather than reestablishing communion with God and others.

Additionally, incorporating a growing understanding of current neuroscience and research findings provides crucial insight into the way God created the human mind. Within this part of the healing framework, human sexuality must be addressed in a semiotic way that holds Scripture in one hand and scientific findings in the other, redeeming the damage of evangelical purity culture. A language of attachment is foundational for this healing framework, as it focuses on healing the bond between self and God, self and self, and self and others. With these connections repaired, women can be further unleashed as agents of healing for others.

Dismantling power structures will liberate all people as we take on the task of peacemaking. “It is about a revolution of love that is big enough to set both the oppressed and the oppressors free.”¹⁹ Within an attachment-focused framework, the work of peacemaking does not destroy any person—even the abuser. The goal is redemption for every person through the work of the Holy Spirit. One way to move the Body of Christ forward in her original purpose is to prevent spiritual abuse in the first place. This can be done by a) listening to people who have been abused and oppressed within evangelicalism and taking very seriously what they have to say; b) simplifying leadership structures and redefining what makes a good leader (see Leonard Sweet’s *I Am a*

¹⁹ Shane Claiborne, Jonathan Wilson-Hartgrove, and Enuma Okoro, *Common Prayer: A Liturgy for Ordinary Radicals* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2010), 382.

Follower); c) putting women and minorities in those places of leadership; and d) redefining church success.

An attachment-focused framework for healing spiritual abuse will lead to a rich, fulfilling life for women who have survived spiritual trauma, furthering the work of dismantling abusive systems and reconstructing the Body of Christ to thrive in healthier ways.

Spiritual Trauma Among Women in Evangelical Churches

Samantha is a former Southern Baptist missionary who is 39 years old. She was sexually and spiritually abused by church leaders as a youth and recently shared her story on social media through the #MeToo and #ChurchToo movements. After spending most of her twenties teaching and leading in conservative evangelical circles, she grew tired of being told she could not be ordained and of being denied the same opportunities to preach as her male counterparts had. She finally left evangelicalism after the 2016 election and believes most evangelicals embrace misogyny, white supremacy, and American nationalism rather than Jesus. Her beliefs have evolved to no longer view Jesus as a savior, but rather the example of the perfect human. She feels more at home at her yoga studio than she ever did at church.

Samantha is passionate about healing and miracles, so she still reads the Bible, particularly the Psalms and Gospels, but also is learning more about the practices of Buddhism and Reiki. She has found the healing power of crystals and stones to be grounding for her as a spiritual practice. She is also passionate about environmental conservation and caring for Mother Earth, so she has begun to research Native American rituals and traditions. Samantha's friends, family, and pets are incredibly important to

her, and she loves cooking large meals for fellowship with her neighbors. She recently completed training in mindfulness meditation and plans to lead groups to help others who have been traumatized within churches to find peace, healing, and community.

We need look no further than headline news to see that the body of Christ is at war with itself. At the time of this writing, research was released concerning the recent confirmation of Brett Kavanaugh to the Supreme Court, showing that white evangelicals are the only major religious group to have a favorable opinion of President Trump—and that seven in ten (72%) do.²⁰

We are seeing people disconnect from each other more than ever as the United States, and the church within it, becomes ever more divided. This sort of detachment is dangerous. Neurologist Jay Lombard describes the biological concept of apoptosis, “an embedded genetic code of programmed cell death”²¹ and how it can be useful in some ways (prevents webbed feet in the womb, for instance) but also destructive ways that can be physically observed in brain cells:

[Researchers] discovered a clear connection between biological death messages and the presence of severe emotional turmoil. The cells that are chosen to die are those that have failed to establish meaningful connections; their detachment, a form of miscarried relationship, causes them to lose their purpose. It’s as if the brain concludes that life isn’t worth living; ultimately, these harmful messages get communicated to the genetic and biological machinery in tandem, resulting in a disconnect in vital pathways.²²

²⁰ Alex Vandermaas-Peeler, Daniel Cox, Maxine Najle, Molly Fisch-Friedman, Rob Griffin, and Robert P. Jones, “Partisanship Trumps Gender: Sexual Harassment, Woman Candidates, Access to Contraception, and Key Issues in 2018 Midterms,” *PRRI*, last modified October 3, 2018, <https://www.prri.org/research/abortion-reproductive-health-midterms-trump-kavanaugh/>.

²¹ Jay Lombard, *The Mind of God: Neuroscience, Faith, and a Search for the Soul* (New York, NY: Harmony Books, 2017), 96-97.

²² Ibid.

Perhaps what we are observing is a spiritual, communal apoptosis within the Body of Christ. The thought of this is highly disturbing. But periods of darkness and uncertainty can offer us much opportunity for healing,

And yet regardless of the culture we are born into, we all begin life in darkness, and we do our most substantial growth within it. Our first contact with existence is enclosed within the vibrations of our mother's heartbeat, the tide of her breathing, and the music of her voice, its melody and rhythm, even without our knowing the meaning of her words. Such longing as this engenders remains with us forever.²³

Encoded within us is our desire for connection to God and to each other, and God's original intention for us as humans was to live within this living and breathing connection. But these vital relational connections are being severed within churches.

Misogyny and the fall of male megachurch leaders is one example of how these relational connections are being severed in churches. While Mark Driscoll was not accused of sexual misconduct, he was accused of misogyny, plagiarism, and a toxic leadership style.²⁴ Eventually he resigned, and his Mars Hill megachurch empire collapsed in 2014. In more recent news, the pastors and entire elder board of Willow Creek resigned in the wake of founding pastor Bill Hybels' sexual misconduct, and the failure of the church leadership to take his victims' allegations seriously.²⁵ If sexual misconduct and other forms of misogyny are happening in churches of this caliber and influence, it stands to reason that abuse of all kinds is not an uncommon reality for other

²³ Norman Doidge, *The Brain's Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 352.

²⁴ Ruth Graham, "How a Megachurch Melts Down," *The Atlantic*, Atlantic Media Company, November 7, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2014/11/houston-mark-driscoll-megachurch-meltdown/382487/>.

²⁵ Bob Smietana, "Willow Creek Elders and Pastor Heather Larson Resign over Bill Hybels," *Christianity Today*, August 8, 2018, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/news/2018/august/willow-creek-bill-hybels-heather-larson-elders-resign-inves.html>.

evangelical churches. A recent major investigative report uncovered the stories of over 200 people who were sexually abused in fundamental Baptist churches.²⁶ The Southern Baptist Convention's new president, J.D. Greear, recently announced he is forming a special committee to investigate abuse allegations in SBC churches.²⁷ While this is an encouraging development in the overall fight against misogyny and other forms of spiritual abuse, it is discouraging that it has taken this long and that it is so rampant in churches.

According to my experience and the stories of many other women, some church leaders utterly fail to acknowledge let alone validate the painful experiences of women, resorting to victim-blaming and gaslighting to attempt to convince them to stay in their churches. Some also do whatever they can to silence the victims. They do this in the guise of preventing division within the church body. When they reach out to the victims, sometimes long after they've left the church, and the women refuse to communicate with them or do not react the way the church leaders desire, the church leaders create a self-fulfilling prophecy that reinforces their version of reality: that the women were to blame in the first place, that they were scheming to divide the church, that they were complainers, and so forth. These church leaders appear to have no interest in really learning about how to reconcile relationships.

²⁶ Sarah Smith, "Hundreds of Sex Abuse Allegations Found in Fundamental Baptist Churches Across US," *Star-Telegram*, December 9, 2018, <https://www.star-telegram.com/living/religion/article222576310.html>.

²⁷ David Roach, "Greear Announces Sexual Abuse Study Group," *Baptist Press*, last modified July 26, 2018, <http://www.bpnews.net/51332/greear-announces-sexual-abuse-study-group>.

What Is Spiritual Abuse?

All abuse has a spiritual component, because humans are holistic beings with our minds, bodies, and emotions intertwined. It is impossible for abuse of any sort to leave the spirit of a person untouched. Spiritual abuse could follow the characteristics of narcissistic abuse, and it could be possible some degree of narcissism or even Narcissistic Personality Disorder (NPD) is present in the abuser. The *DSM-5® Guidebook* estimates that 6.2% of the population is affected with NPD, which is part of the cluster B personality disorders.²⁸ The diagnostic criteria are:

A pervasive pattern of grandiosity (in fantasy or behavior), need for admiration, and lack of empathy, beginning by early adulthood and present in a variety of contexts, as indicated by five (or more) of the following:

1. Has a grandiose sense of self-importance (e.g., exaggerates achievements and talents, expects to be recognized as superior without commensurate achievements).
2. Is preoccupied with fantasies of unlimited success, power, brilliance, beauty, or ideal love.
3. Believes that he or she is “special” and unique and can only be understood by, or should associate with, other special or high-status people (or institutions).
4. Requires excessive admiration.
5. Has a sense of entitlement (i.e., unreasonable expectations of especially favorable treatment or automatic compliance with his or her expectations).
6. Is interpersonally exploitative (i.e., takes advantage of others to achieve his or her own ends).
7. Lacks empathy: is unwilling to recognize or identify with the feelings and needs of others.
8. Is often envious of others or believes that others are envious of him or her.
9. Shows arrogant, haughty behaviors or attitudes.²⁹

²⁸ “Narcissistic Personality Disorder,” in Donald W. Black and Jon E. Grant, *DSM-5® Guidebook: The Essential Companion to the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition* (Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Publishing, 2014), 341.

²⁹ Ibid.

Additionally, many times the narcissist claims he or she is the “real victim” in an abuse situation. It is not uncommon for people with NPD to reject the notion that they have a problem and they frequently refuse treatment.

Some narcissists are charismatic leaders who draw people to admire and follow them. It would not be surprising if, given the typical evangelical church leadership structure and the cultural obsession with celebrity preachers, many churches attract leaders who are looking for admiration, validation, and followers, and who fall somewhere on the spectrum of narcissism; in fact, “research indicates that there may be significant levels of narcissism among those in religious leadership.”³⁰ Narcissistic church leaders are not limited to megachurches; they likely can be found leading small churches, teaching Sunday school classes, or heading Christian households.

Spiritual abuse may involve overt abuse such as sexual or physical abuse, but it may be more covert through verbal or emotional abuse. Spiritual abuse happens when perpetrators demand respect regardless of their own behavior; use manipulative tactics to keep people under their influence; propagate an exclusive, “us versus them” mentality; cultivate environments of fear and shame; and/or curate a group of “leaders” who ignore the perpetrators’ faults and serve them unquestioningly.³¹ Classic behaviors of narcissistic abuse are usually present in spiritual abuse: projection, gaslighting,

³⁰ Elizabeth G. Ruffing, David R. Paine, Nancy G. Devor, and Steven J. Sandage, “Humility and Narcissism in Clergy: A Relational Spirituality Framework,” abstract, *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 5 (July 23, 2018).

³¹ Christine Hammond, “15 Narcissistic Religious Abuse Tactics,” *Psych Central Professional*, last modified October 12, 2017, <https://pro.psychcentral.com/exhausted-woman/2015/05/15-narcissistic-religious-abuse-tactics/>.

triangulation, smear campaigns, stonewalling, victim-blaming, or even favoritism.³² All these behaviors are tactics for coercing and controlling victims. Spiritual abuse can be a one-time event; but it is more often a series of increasingly abusive behaviors that can eventually permeate an entire family, church, ministry, or organization, as seen in the examples of Mars Hill, Willow Creek, and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Who Are Spiritual Abusers?

Spiritual abusers may hold official positions of leadership in churches or ministries, but this is not always the case. They may be of any gender, marital status, economic status, race, or religious background. Spiritual abusers lack empathy, and while they often may be able to recite scripted phrases that give the appearance of understanding, in reality they lack the ability to truly appreciate another person's emotions or point of view. Perpetrators are often very charismatic, and their manipulation tactics may not be immediately observed; often it is over time that their abusive behavior comes to light. Spiritual abusers are often narcissists who have learned how to use their spiritual insight, leadership giftings, religious education, or entrepreneurial spirit, for personal gain.³³

³² Athena Staik, "Narcissistic Abuse and the Symptoms of Narcissistic Abuse Syndrome," *Psych Central.com*, last modified November 19, 2017, <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/relationships/2017/03/narcissistic-abuse-and-the-symptoms-of-narcissist-victim-syndrome/>.

³³ Mary DeMuth, "10 Ways to Spot Spiritual Abuse," *Mary DeMuth*, last modified September 6, 2016, <https://www.marydemuth.com/spiritual-abuse-10-ways-to-spot-it/>.

What Do Spiritual Abusers Have to Gain from their Abuse?

Perpetrators may or may not be consciously aware of their actions, so identifying their motives is challenging. But overall, spiritual abuse has mainly to do with seeking power and control.³⁴ Perpetrators have deep brokenness within them that they attempt to heal by manipulating others into meeting their needs and by placing themselves in a position of power within any given relationship. Church leadership provides a wide avenue for control and “hoovering,” a term used of narcissists when they are using another person to make themselves feel validated, worthy, loved, respected, and wanted.³⁵

Who Are the Victims of Spiritual Abuse?

The cause of spiritual abuse is the perpetrator; therefore, anyone can be a victim of spiritual abuse. Frequently, victims have had a history of trauma that made them more vulnerable to the coercion of spiritual abusers. But even those who have not previously had adverse experiences are still susceptible; some may have been looking for a spiritual parent or for spiritual guidance and authority in their lives, and unfortunately spiritual abusers have a keen sense for potential victims in this position, especially if they have markers of Narcissistic Personality Disorder.³⁶

³⁴ Hammond, “15 Narcissistic Religious Abuse Tactics.”

³⁵ Shahida Arabi, “Five Powerful Ways Abusive Narcissists Get Inside Your Head,” Self-Care Haven, last modified March 21, 2018, <https://selfcarehaven.wordpress.com/2014/07/21/five-powerful-ways-abusive-narcissists-get-inside-your-head/>.

³⁶ Steve Bressert, “Narcissistic Personality Disorder,” Psych Central, last modified December 17, 2017, <https://psychcentral.com/disorders/narcissistic-personality-disorder/>.

Descriptions, Examples, and Results of Spiritual Abuse

When people choose to leave a ministry or church, frequently church leadership do not fully communicate the reasons to those who remain in the church or ministry. It could be because of the complexities of spiritual abuse if the leadership is never called into question, and especially if those who leave are consistently portrayed as the problem.³⁷

The effects of spiritual abuse may or may not be immediately noticeable in victims. Some people may internalize the abuse, which expresses through depression and suicide attempts. Others might dissociate to the point that they are emotionally numb. Van der Kolk notes signs of trauma include “crushing sensations in your chest that you may label as anxiety or depression; the fear of losing control; always being on alert for danger or rejection; the self-loathing; the nightmares and flashbacks.”³⁸ Some victims might exhibit behaviors such as withdrawing from a community that previously had been very important to them; sudden outbursts of anger, frustration, or sadness on social media or in person; inability to make decisions due to being led to believe they cannot trust their own instincts; ignoring their own physical needs or the needs of their dependents; chronic health issues; or even protecting abusers.³⁹ There are some who, regardless of how they are processing trauma, maintain relationship with spiritual abusers by staying in their

³⁷ Barbara M. Orlowski, “Church Exiters FAQ,” Church Exiters, accessed August 2, 2018, <https://www.churchexiters.com/faq/>.

³⁸ Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 205.

³⁹ Shahida Arabi, “11 Signs You’re the Victim of Narcissistic Abuse,” Thought Catalog, last modified May 6, 2018, <https://thoughtcatalog.com/shahida-arabi/2017/11/11-devastating-signs-youve-been-abused-by-a-malignant-narcissist/>.

churches or small groups; this could indicate there is a trauma bond⁴⁰ (sometimes colloquially called Stockholm syndrome) in these cases.

Survivors of spiritual abuse can heal and be empowered to help others in their healing journeys.⁴¹ However, survivors cannot heal by themselves and recovery can be a difficult process. Bessel Van der Kolk observes,

While human contact and attunement are the wellspring of physiological self-regulation, the promise of closeness often evokes fear of getting hurt, betrayed, and abandoned. This poses a real challenge for recovery. Once you recognize that post-traumatic reactions started off as efforts to save your life, you may gather the courage to face your inner music (or cacophony), but you will need help to do so. You need a guide who is not afraid of your terror and who can contain your darkest rage, someone who can safeguard the wholeness of you while you explore the fragmented experiences that you had to keep secret from yourself for so long.⁴²

As the Source of all life and healing, Jesus perfectly fits the description of this kind of guide. However, other Christians have failed to embody Jesus for many survivors of spiritual abuse. Their churches have failed to provide a healing environment and have instead been settings of injury. Their attachments to God and other Christians have been badly injured. Survivors can and need to experience Jesus outside of these institutions.

Reasons Women Detach from Churches

Some spiritually traumatized women I have talked with report leaving abusive churches but may not cite spiritual abuse as a reason why. They may give other reasons such as their beliefs have changed, or they no longer have time for church. It could be

⁴⁰ Sharie Stines, “What Is Trauma Bonding?” Psych Central Professional, last modified October 24, 2015, <https://pro.psychcentral.com/recovery-expert/2015/10/what-is-trauma-bonding/>.

⁴¹ Kim Saeed, “The Spirituality of Narcissistic Abuse,” Psych Central.com, last modified February 25, 2018, <https://blogs.psychcentral.com/liberation/2018/02/the-spirituality-of-narcissistic-abuse/>.

⁴² Van der Kolk, 213.

that they are not aware they have been victims of spiritual abuse, or it may be that they are too overwhelmed with hopelessness and shame to recognize what has occurred. Many spiritually traumatized women I know cannot return to environments that trigger post-traumatic responses. This means that for many women, they will not return to any church, even if it is one where abuse has not taken place. A traditional church environment may be too triggering for them, activating a chain reaction of various internal or external responses to their trauma; for some, even a small group Bible study may be too triggering. “Research on religious coping and trauma emphasizes the search for meanings but does not pay as much attention to the role of spiritual practices.”⁴³ The fact remains that they still need healing within relational frameworks that validate the reality of what has happened and that offer truthful hope of new ways of living.

Breaking Church Attachments

A Pew Religious Landscape study reveals that members of Christian faiths fell by almost eight percent from 2007 to 2014. Rapid growth in unaffiliation reveals that about five million people went from reporting that they were Christian to reporting as unaffiliated in that period, bringing the estimated total of unaffiliated adults to 56 million. All age groups have a growing share in this number, though the younger generations (born after 1980) have higher percentages of unaffiliation. The study notes that historically, black churches have remained relatively stable in their member retention, and that religious Nones tend to be white. The survey discovered that

⁴³ Carrie Doehring, “Searching for Wholeness Amidst Traumatic Grief: The Role of Spiritual Practices That Reveal Compassion in Embodied, Relational, and Transcendent Ways,” abstract, *Pastoral Psychology*, December 19, 2018.

the atheist and agnostic share of the “nones” has grown to 31%. Those identifying as “nothing in particular” and describing religion as unimportant in their lives continue to account for 39% of all “nones.” But the share identifying as “nothing in particular” while also affirming that religion is either “very” or “somewhat” important to them has fallen to 30% of all “nones.”⁴⁴

The demographic characteristics of Unattached Believers (18% of all religiously unaffiliated Nones) as noted in PRRI research includes: 50% white, 27% black (largest black representation of all religiously unaffiliated), more likely to live in the South (53%), more likely to be female (58%), less likely to have received higher education (65% have high school education or less), fewer than one-quarter (24%) are under age 30, and very few (22%) are looking to rejoin a congregation even though many (61%) attend religious services a few times a year and most (77%) say they still feel a cultural connection to religion.⁴⁵ In stark contrast to other Nones, they are quite likely to contemplate God and religion regularly (66%), they hold a personal view of God (54%), and only a small minority (6%) no longer believe in God at all.⁴⁶ This indicates that Unattached Believers still have strong interest in, and even devotion to, a personal God but still do not choose to identify with any religion or denomination. These statistics reveal why it is important to understand the reasons that women, perhaps white women over age 30 in particular, are leaving their churches.

Many Unattached Believers still desire a connection to the divine, perhaps even still to Jesus, but there could be levels of spiritual trauma that have gone unnoticed or

⁴⁴ Pew Research Center, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” Pew Research Center, Religious and Public Life, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>.

⁴⁵ Betsy Cooper, et al., “Exodus: Why Americans Are Leaving Religion—and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” PRRI, September 22, 2016, <http://www.prri.org/research/prri-rns-2016-religiously-unaffiliated-americans/>.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

unaddressed for these women, especially those who grew up in church. The British Association for Behavioural and Cognitive Psychotherapies recognizes Religious Trauma Syndrome as a viable condition, and holds that leaving an abusive religious system can compound the effects of PTSD:

Religious Trauma Syndrome (RTS) is a function of both the chronic abuses of harmful religion and the impact of severing one's connection with one's faith and faith community. ... With PTSD, a traumatic event is one in which a person experiences or witnesses actual or threatened death or serious injury, or a threat to the physical integrity of self or others. Losing one's faith, or leaving one's religion, is an analogous event because it essentially means the death of one's previous life—the end of reality as it was understood. It is a huge shock to the system, and one that needs to be recognized as trauma.⁴⁷

Women's reasons for leaving religion are complex, nuanced, and not easily categorized. Stereotyping them would be a mistake, although they do share some commonalities.

Church leaders cannot assume that all Unattached Believers are disillusioned, angry at God, or backsliding, and eventually returning. In fact, most will not return to a traditional church but will instead seek out alternative forms of faith community, if at all.⁴⁸ It cannot be assumed that they left their churches for selfish reasons such as disliking the style of worship music. People who leave organized religion, Christianity especially, appear to leave for reasons that often fall into one or more of the following categories: disenchantment, lack of emotional connection, prioritization of self-freedom,

⁴⁷ Marlene Winell, "Religious Trauma Syndrome: Understanding Religious Trauma Syndrome: Trauma from Leaving Religion," British Association for Behavioural & Cognitive Psychotherapies, accessed October 9, 2018, <https://www.babcp.com/Review/RTS-Trauma-from-Leaving-Religion.aspx>.

⁴⁸ Linda Mercadante writes, "These interviewees seem less concerned than people in earlier eras to find a common theological narrative that can be held by a whole society. Nevertheless, they did search for a comprehensible and comprehensive meaning in which to situate themselves. ... a large percentage of my conversation partners held out a wistful hope of finding a group that believed as they did. ... Spirituality, for them, may have become more a commodity than a lifeboat, but they were shopping for meaning nevertheless." Linda Mercadante, *Belief without Borders: Inside the Minds of the Spiritual but Not Religious* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 228-229.

and/or change in beliefs. These reasons could point to some degree of spiritual trauma or PTSD.

Most people did not casually or impulsively make the decision to disaffiliate; rather there seems to be a process of disaffiliation. Linda Mercadante observes that “the factors contributing to the Spiritual but not Religious ethos include: a prioritizing of personal growth over group identity, a relocation of authority from external to internal, a belief that all religions teach the same things, and an abhorrence of the triple religious ‘sins’ of judgmentalism, dogmatism, and exclusivism.”⁴⁹

Disenchantment

One of the most difficult categories to define is that of disenchantment. Some level of disenchantment with church appears to be a significant reason for nearly all those who disaffiliate, whether it is a lack of personal fulfillment, lack of opportunity to use one’s gifts, fatigue from volunteering, or general dissatisfaction from the business-like nature of many churches.

Some Christians feel they have outgrown their churches; they feel as though they have spiritually matured to a certain point and the church cannot support or facilitate their further growth. Julia Duin quotes from her interview with popular Christian author John Eldredge, “‘Church is immature,’ said Eldredge in our interview, ‘and the overall experience doesn’t nourish someone who is fairly mature. People do it for their kids, but as soon as the kids are gone, they are out of there because it wasn’t meeting their

⁴⁹ Ibid., 192.

needs.”⁵⁰ This could indicate a consumer mentality, which many who leave church are assumed to have, but more importantly it reveals a deeper attachment issue.

Other Christians feel they have outgrown church because they are tired of “going through the motions” of church activity without experiencing much personal growth, change, or benefit. Drescher observes:

Becoming None, it seems, is a relatively untroubled passage for many Mainline Protestants. They seem to shed denominational identity like an old coat—maybe one they used to like a great deal, but which no longer fits into their adult lives. They become bored with the repetitiveness of the church experiences, even if they appreciated the ethical grounding these experiences gave them. They graduate into what feels like a better fitting spiritual identity—hence retired Episcopal bishop John Shelby Spong’s characterization of former Mainliners as “the church alumni association.”⁵¹

This mindset could be the result of an increasingly egocentric approach to religion, but could also point to deficiencies in attachments to both God and other Christians.

Some Christians who disaffiliate, especially women, feel that there was no space for them to serve within their passions at their church. In some evangelical churches, women are unable to serve in roles outside of ministry to children or other women. This leaves very little opportunity for women with strong leadership skills, teaching talents, and higher education to utilize their gifts within church settings, calling attention to what has been called the “glass steeple.” For some, eventually, this leads to disenchantment with church entirely. Duin writes about her interview with Carolyn Custis James, who told her,

⁵⁰ Julia Duin, *Quitting Church: Why the Faithful Are Fleeing and What to Do About It* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2008), 177.

⁵¹ Drescher, 69.

“Generally, I am hearing women don’t feel there is a place for them at the church,” [James] said. ... “I know one woman who approached church elders to form a support group for women in crisis, but they turned her down. They said, ‘Women will gossip.’ Women are sent to either help at Sunday school, with mercy ministries or the women’s ministry. That’s like telling men they can just be handymen, ushers, or help with the Boys Club.” So, seminary educated women are taking their ministries elsewhere.⁵²

Not only are women frequently not allowed to serve based solely on gender, sometimes, as we see in the example above, they are belittled simply for being female. This sort of misogyny is spiritually traumatic and damaging to one’s attachments to God and other Christians.

Not all women are restricted from serving in churches; of those who disaffiliate, many are simply exhausted. They have served in roles without much support, or they have carried the weight of volunteer work in their churches for too long without rest or sabbatical. Barbara Brown Taylor notes how tired and conflicted she was as a priest. She writes, “I began to feel like a defense attorney for those who could not square their love of God and neighbor with the terms of the Nicene Creed, while my flagging attempt to be all things to all people was turning into a bad case of amnesia about my own Christian identity. My role and my soul were eating each other alive.”⁵³ Even in churches where women are not allowed to lead with spiritual authority, they are heavily relied upon for the logistical functioning of the church—hospitality, reception, janitorial, support staff, nursery work, and so forth. Many churches are short on volunteers for these areas, so the same small group of people carry most of the work. Burnout is inevitable in these situations without some sort of intervention.

⁵² Duin, 143-144.

⁵³ Barbara Brown Taylor, *Leaving Church: A Memoir of Faith* (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 2006), 111.

Many Christians who disaffiliate grow weary of fundraising campaigns, business meetings, and other structures that present church as a corporation rather than the family of God. Duin notes of a documentary she viewed:

All the “dropouts” in the video said church was mainly gatherings and programs but not a strengthener of their relationship with God. David Frederickson, the narrator for the film, said many people who leave are tired of the never-ending religious obligations. “Church is too patterned after corporate America,” he said. “Church is a business and the congregation is its customers.”⁵⁴

Though egocentrism could be a contributing factor, churches that exist within business-like paradigms can hardly be surprised when their parishioners leave for reasons that appear consumeristic.

Other notable reasons women have for disenchantment with church develop from a perceived lack of compassion toward vulnerable minorities. PRRI research reveals:

Among those who left their childhood religion, women are twice as likely as men to say negative religious teachings about or treatment of gay and lesbian individuals was a major reason they chose to leave their religion (40% vs. 20%, respectively). Women are also about twice as likely as men to cite the clergy sexual-abuse scandal as an important reason they left their childhood faith (26% vs. 13%, respectively).⁵⁵

There are many who leave churches because of scandals among leadership or abuse within the congregation. Others leave for personal reasons that might be considered selfish, but the majority become disenchanted for reasons that deserve adequate consideration. People bring high expectations to church community, as they should. It is painful to be disappointed. Somewhere along the way, for disaffected women, being part of the Body of Christ lost its appeal, along with its meaning and mystery.

⁵⁴ Duin, 113.

⁵⁵ Cooper, et al.

Lack of Emotional Connection

Closely tied to disenchantment is a lack of lasting emotional connection with Christ and other Christians. Many come away from their experience with God and Christians carrying an overwhelming sense of shame, because for them, church was not a safe place to discuss questions, doubts, or negative feelings. In their church experience, vulnerability and uncertainty were not welcome, leading to a breakdown of trust. Kathy Escobar writes:

Most of us feel heavy guilt during Unraveling as we shed beliefs and practices that used to be important to us and are still important to others. But what often underlies our guilt is a huge heap of shame—pervasive, distressing feelings that we weren't faithful enough, strong enough, good enough, or special enough to hold on to God and/or church in the same way other people could.⁵⁶

This could indicate that women disaffiliate because churches have not provided holistic discipleship experiences that facilitate attachment to Jesus Christ and other Christians, based on love and grace. This can be traumatizing for some women.

Some who have been a part of church change churches due to relocation or other factors, and eventually give up on finding a faith community like one they enjoyed in the past. Duin notes:

As I've talked with people about why they have left church, I've found one unspoken undercurrent in several conversations. It lies somewhere between disappointment and detachment, a remembrance of things past that are no more. These are the people who say they joined at a time when they would merely walk into a church and their lives would be drastically changed by the Holy Spirit. The scene is so different now that for some, it hurts too much to go back.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Kathy Escobar, *Faith Shift: Finding Your Way Forward When Everything You Believe Is Coming Apart* (New York, NY: Convergent, 2014), 74.

⁵⁷ Duin, 152.

Notice the language of disappointment and detachment. Those who disaffiliate might be idealizing the past, but it is also possible that churches are failing to offer dynamic, genuine connections to Christ and his Body.

Other reasons some people might not form long-term emotional connections with other Christians could be attributed to the average Sunday worship service atmosphere. In many churches, before the service there is a lot of preparation activity, which can provide a sense of belonging for volunteers but is not conducive to conversations that move a relationship into a deeper realm. This atmosphere continues during and after the service, especially for large churches with multiple services, ushering in and out large groups of people on a strict time schedule. Additionally, most parishioners desire a certain level of familiarity and relationship with the pastor or other key leaders, and most churches are simply too large for one person, or even a small group of people, to heavily invest relationally in all its members. Some small groups ministries address relational deficiencies but are not necessarily guaranteed to create long-lasting emotional connections. Drescher offers a story from Ellen, a woman who left church:

“I think I felt lonely in church. I think I was really trying, but I missed a real sense of connection. ... there was truly some kind of spiritual hole. But I came to see that what was missing wasn’t God. It was time with the people I love and care about, doing things we enjoy together or that we think are important. When I got reconnected to that, the hole in my heart went away.” ... Indeed, in Ellen’s case, churchgoing interrupted her spiritual intimacy with family and friends to the extent that she felt lonely in church. For her, religion took away from interpersonal, spiritual intimacy rather than contributing to it.⁵⁸

For Ellen and many like her, church does not offer fulfilling interpersonal attachments.

⁵⁸ Drescher, 137-138.

Prioritization of Self-Freedom

There is an overarching aversion to commitment among many people. We see this in the delay of culturally accepted rites of passage, such as financial independence, marriage, and having children. It extends to faith, as well. Many people who are religiously unaffiliated resist labels vehemently and view committing to one religious ideology as negative. Mercadante wrote of her “spiritual but not religious” population, “What distinguishes these interviewees is their firm belief in the rightness—even righteousness—of this lack of loyalty to any particular spiritual group. While they might be a contributing member, for a time... the reality was more ‘revolving door’ than lifetime commitment.”⁵⁹

Equally important in our culture is the desire to be “true to oneself” by resisting conformity. Mobility and personal customization seem to be perceived as two of the keys to self-actualization.⁶⁰ From this perspective, “commitment” means ruling out all other options as possibilities. “As Dan Li, a 33-year-old None from Waimea, Hawaii, put it, ‘There’s something about selecting one religion, one path, in the narrow way that I was brought up that seems so wrong, so unhelpful. The world is filled with wisdom. Why would I close myself off to that?’”⁶¹ Commitment appears to indicate an unacceptable loss of freedom and choice.

⁵⁹ Mercadante, 164.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 29-30; 242-243.

⁶¹ Drescher, 25.

For some, other personal needs must be prioritized over church involvement, such as family and work commitments. Duin discusses Arthur Farnsley's observations of merchants at Indiana's flea markets, saying,

The people who are not in church are often "traditional, Bible-believing Christians," wrote Arthur Farnsley, a fellow at the Center for the Study of Religion and American Culture at Purdue University. ... They also work two jobs, don't have a lot of free time on their hands, and find church to be a time waster on the one day of the week they do take off. In other words, "They simply do not like church," Farnsley wrote. They are noninstitutional, he said, the gypsies living on the edges of American society.⁶²

This is an example, not only of the importance of self-freedom, but also of the lack of fulfilling emotional connection to believers in a church setting. Many women in this situation can replace face-to-face discipleship with the Internet through on-demand sermon podcasts, online Bible study groups, and streaming worship music.

Another important aspect to note is the change in locus of moral authority from "church" to "self." Mercadante writes,

Authority is not seen as derived from community, but from the self. They were assuming that spiritual authority resides within the individual, in the privacy and self-deliberation of their own soul. ... Many people spoke about not finding "the" truth, but finding "your" truth, indicating that truth is something relative and personal.⁶³

This reflects the postmodern beliefs embedded into American society. It also raises the question of whether these individuals were ever encouraged to view the Holy Spirit as indwelling them or to view themselves as being in Christ, and whether that made any difference in the locus of authority.

⁶² Duin, 39.

⁶³ Mercadante, 183.

Change in Beliefs

One of the main reasons many people disaffiliate is that they stop believing one or more of the tenets of Christian faith. Escobar recounts the story of Sophia, who

felt something essential in her was “flawed, defective, hopeless, and irrevocably broken.” The hope of her Christian life for many years was that she could give her “old, yucky, shame-filled existence to Jesus, and in exchange, he would make me everything I ever wanted to be: clean, accepted, whole, righteous, without blame, and somehow superior.” This felt like salvation to her for decades—then some of her foundational beliefs about Jesus began to unravel. She was left with this reality: she had built an entire faith system upon a belief that she was inherently bad and needed to be freed from her shame. When that belief unraveled, what was left?⁶⁴

Many people who disaffiliate change their beliefs about Jesus, including their understanding of his nature, origins, and even whether he existed. Most who disaffiliate also change their beliefs about the Bible; some assert it is fictional or unreliable, and may conclude that its contents are unhelpful, erroneous, or even dangerous. Others adopt a philosophy of humanity that rejects a concept of sin, and therefore nullifies the need for a savior or redemption. Many maintain belief in a higher power and may participate in rituals that would be considered spiritual in nature, but no longer embrace the core beliefs of Christianity.

Drescher writes that formerly conservative Christian Nones reported feelings of frustration and anger with the religious teachings and practices of their youth. “Unlike Mainline Protestants who shared their stories with me, the process of becoming None for these former Christians (whom I generally characterize here as ‘Evangelical’ or ‘conservative’) was often precipitated by a specific crisis or conflict.”⁶⁵ Some note anger

⁶⁴ Escobar, 75.

⁶⁵ Drescher, 69.

at being taught biblical beliefs that science contradicts or disproves. Others cite anger at how minority groups are presented in the Bible as sinful, primarily homosexuals, and this contributes to their leaving church. Others encounter crises such as job loss, death in the family, abuse, or divorce, and their experiences with God and church in the wake of disaster are unsatisfactory, thus undermining their belief system.

PRRI research proposes that the main reason people choose to disaffiliate with the religion of their youth is that they stop believing the religion's teachings (60%).⁶⁶ The same study also found that the majority (62%) of people who leave their childhood faith do so before the age of 18.⁶⁷

Of those who have left church because they simply stopped believing, the question I am exploring is whether they experienced an emotional as well as an intellectual attachment to the person of Jesus Christ. It would be imprudent to claim that every person who leaves church did so because of lack of bonding to Christ, but for many it could be the case. I hypothesize this points to a broader issue within discipleship paradigms that either have not existed for these individuals or that have failed to incorporate a holistic approach to spiritual development.

People taking a holistic, attachment-focused discipleship approach will show initiative toward reconciliation. The mandate for moving toward pain lies within Christ's example of seeking out those in need of healing. Huckins and Swigart discuss the story of the Good Samaritan and note that,

⁶⁶ Cooper, et al.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

On the beautiful and broken paths of life, we will inevitably come upon pain and conflict. In that moment we are faced with the decision to ignore the pain or immerse into the center of it. We can act like the dying man doesn't exist, we can convince ourselves he is not our responsibility, or we can make the intentional choice to move deeper into his broken story seeking to understand rather than be understood.⁶⁸

In much the same way, we cannot expect spiritually traumatized, church-severed women to seek out sources for healing from churches; this is expecting them to return to the context of their abuse. We must instead be the ones to cross the divide and seek holistic restoration.

⁶⁸ Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart, *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 95.

CHAPTER 2: BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

I Am the Vine, You Are the Branches

Jessica is a 32-year-old mom of three young children. She grew up in an evangelical Christian home and church but has vocally rejected Christianity in a process she calls “shifting and unraveling.”¹ Her faith shift began at 14 years of age, when her stepfather began sexually abusing her when he thought she was asleep. When she told her Sunday school teacher what he had done, she was accused of lying because her stepfather was a deacon in the church. Eventually Jessica came to question her entire belief system and rejected it, totally disenchanted with church and lacking any emotional connection to God or other Christians.

However, Jessica maintains several daily spiritual rituals, including reading tarot cards, mindful meditation, burning sage throughout her home, and creating art of the Goddess. Like most spiritual but not religious individuals, her lifestyle is oriented around friends, family, food, and pets,² which feature prominently in her daily social media posts and conversations.

Jessica has completely changed all her religious and spiritual beliefs and prioritizes her self-freedom especially in the areas of spirituality and sexuality. She has completely severed herself from her understanding of the Bible, the Christian God, and

¹ Kathy Escobar’s book *Faith Shift* is where I first saw these terms used; however, it is not uncommon for those in former evangelical communities on social media to use the terms “shifting faith” and “unraveling faith.”

² Drescher, 119.

Christians, and finds any patriarchal system entirely offensive and abusive. She chooses to refer to her concept of God with only female pronouns and pursues various spiritual practices from across many faith traditions.

For some who have severed connections with church, they have done so as a reaction to evangelical teachings and because of feelings of shame experienced within Christianity. The theology of many evangelical churches emphasizes separation from God—original sin, total depravity, penal substitutionary atonement, and other theological ideas that are not malicious in and of themselves. In fact, many of these theological concepts are important and biblical. But some churches fail to provide the other side of the coin: oneness with Christ. Many evangelical churches do not help believers move toward theological maturity that includes original blessing, Imago Dei, common grace, Spirit-empowered living, finding identity in Christ, and other concepts that hinge on attachment with God. Some churches are bringing people only halfway to health, failing to curate environments that stimulate true healing, community, and peacemaking. It should be no surprise when people leave an environment like this in favor of other things that seem to bring more life.

Jessica has chosen to forego any one attachment in favor of a multiplicity of them, whether attachments to beliefs, spiritual practices, or relationships. One could argue that it can be beneficial to have multiple attachments to form a healthy support system, but the support system is strongest when these attachments stem from a single source. Jesus gave us a metaphor about attachment in John 15.



A cluster of grapes on my family's grapevine in Los Lunas, NM.

John 15 Exegesis

John chapters 13 through 17 provide us with a picture of attachment. Jesus and the disciples are at Passover, and he has just washed their feet, sent Judas on his errand, given the new commandment, and predicted Peter's denial. Everything is centering around relationships in these scenes; we see a contrast between those who will sever themselves from Jesus, wholly or partially, and those who remain faithfully attached to him. Jesus teaches that remaining connected to him happens through relationship—by abiding in him through love. These scenes climax with Jesus' high priestly prayer for

unity in relationship among the Godhead and his people, and the story catapults toward the Passion from there.

Jesus chose the metaphor of a vine in John 15:1-17, when he could have chosen any image. Investigating the key words John chose to use in this passage and envisioning the physical vine and branches of which Jesus spoke illuminates the meaning within this metaphor and offers a beautiful image of God attachment.

Vine—ἄμπελος: *a vine*. Jesus is not just any vine, but the true vine—the only real source of life, nourishment, connection, strength, and power. Any other root attachment will ultimately come up short. The vine moves nutrients through sap to the branches. The vine connects the branches to the root system and supports the growth of all the branches and their fruit. Matthew Henry points out that the vine is a spreading plant, and Christ’s church spreads to the ends of the earth.³

Vinedresser—γεωργός: *vine-grower, farmer*. God is the one who plants, tends, watches over, prunes, and harvests the vine and branches. As the creator of all, God is aware and attuned to the needs of the branch. The branch is a receiver and producer. It soaks up rain, sun, and the vinedresser’s tending, and focuses its energy on producing fruit. A branch doesn’t worry about where its care comes from or whether it will exist from day to day. The vinedresser’s return on investment is the fruit, which brings glory to God.

Branch—κλῆμα: *a tender, flexible sprout or branch*. Branches are unable to support themselves and require constant care in order to maintain ideal conditions for

³ Matthew Henry, “Commentary on John 15 by Matthew Henry,” Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 10, 2019, https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/mhc/Jhn/Jhn_015.cfm?a=1012001.

producing fruit. They are unable to stay alive if severed from the vine. Disciples of Jesus are connected to the same vine, and as Matthew Henry eloquently writes, “though in place and opinion distant from each other, yet meet in Christ, the centre of their unity.”⁴

Fruit—καρπός: *fruit, crops, results, profit, praises*. The Holy Spirit within us is what connects us to the Vine, and the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These are the identification marks of a Christian, and a person can tell a tree by its fruit. Christians who profess to be followers of Jesus, but do not exemplify these traits in their lives, could be seen as fruitless, dead branches, and these the Vinedresser will prune away. Matthew Henry notes that some commentators believe John 15:2 referred in the immediate sense to Judas, but this verse could also apply to those who proclaim to be Christians but who fail to live in communion with him. Those who remain in the Vine and bear fruit bring glory to God the Father and Vinedresser.

Prune—καθαίρω: *cleanse, purge, prune*. The word in verb form appears only twice in the New Testament: John 15:2 and Hebrews 10:2.⁵ In John 15:3, it is καθαρός, meaning pure and undefiled, which would have both physical and spiritual connotations and be especially meaningful in the Levitical sense. Jesus said we are clean branches already because of the word (*logos*) which he has spoken to us. This concept of being ritually pure before God could have been surprising to his disciples, who were accustomed to a way of life that revolved around ongoing cleansing rituals. Some commentators write that Jesus also could have been saying his inner circle of disciples

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Strong's New Testament number G2508.

was now cleansed since Judas had been sent out.⁶ Matthew Henry also writes, “Perhaps here is an allusion to the law concerning vineyards in Canaan; the fruit of them was as unclean, and uncircumcised, the first three years after it was planted, and the fourth year it was to be holiness of praise unto the Lord; and then it was clean (Lev. 19:23, 24). The disciples had now been three years under Christ’s instruction; and now [they] are clean.”⁷ From an agricultural perspective, fruit-bearing plants need regular pruning to encourage further growth and to increase in fruit production. It is also worth noting that pruning is a very targeted practice. The vinedresser prunes judiciously and with great care and attention to the desired outcome and avoids pruning away more than absolutely necessary.

Abide—μένω: *to remain in place, to abide, to be held and kept, to not perish, to endure, to stay in a certain condition, to wait.* In the immediate context, Judas had just left to betray Jesus, the ultimate example of not abiding in him. Branches that remain attached to the vine receive everything they need in order to stay alive and to bear fruit. Followers of Jesus must nurture their attachment to him frequently and consistently, through prayer and meditation. Apart from him we can do nothing; he is our source of grace and strength, and “in him we live, move, and have our being” (Acts 17:28). Abiding in him also requires staying connected to the Body in unity, since no branch is growing alone. John 15:6 gives us a very grim picture of what happens to those who sever themselves from the vine.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

Abiding in Jesus' love and words comes by following his command to love.

Abiding in Jesus' love and words leads to an intimate attachment relationship in which his disciples can ask for "whatever [they] wish and it will be done for [them]." The branch will seek what the vine seeks—when we are attached to Jesus and his Spirit is coursing through us, we will ask for things that flow with his desires. Jesus told us these things so we would have fullness of joy, which comes from the intimate relationship between branch and vine.

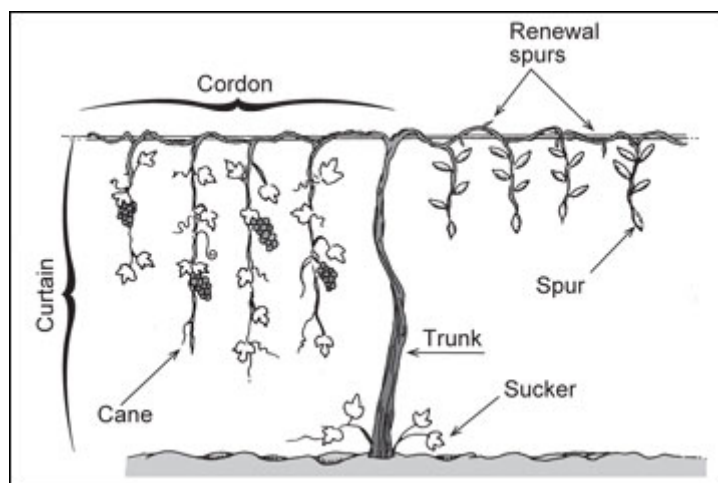
Metaphor Exegesis

Abiding in Jesus is the key to abundant life, so it stands to reason that remaining attached to God is vital to healing from trauma. Jesus could have used one of any number of agricultural metaphors but he chose a vine. How are fruit-bearing vines different than, for example, fruit-bearing trees? Vine branches often are much more flexible, and require more consistent attention, intervention, and care from the farmer. Jesus most likely had in mind a grape vine. Their growing conditions need to be quite specific in order to produce the best fruit, and it can take years for the fruit to become ideal.

The grape species Jesus had in mind probably was *vitis vinifera*, the common grape vine native to the Mediterranean and Middle East and first-century Palestine.⁸ The fruit is obviously used for eating fresh, making wine, or drying for raisins. Other parts of the plant, such as the sap and leaves, are also used medicinally in some cultures. Current

⁸ Asaph Goor, "The History of the Grape-Vine in the Holy Land," *Economic Botany* 20, no. 1 (January 1966): 46–64.

research is finding that the seeds of grapes have numerous health benefits also. Pruned branches were used for feeding sheep and goats.⁹



Grape vine. Branches are often called cordons.¹⁰

What are the parts of a grape plant? Jesus says he is the vine, or trunk, and his disciples are the branches, or cordons. Cordons can grow in two directions at once, which is intriguing when I consider the variety of opinions that can exist in the church while remaining connected to the Vine. The leaf buds on the branches grow with the future in mind, and from these buds the structures grow that eventually bear fruit. Buds are tightly compressed leaves, and they have a highly complex structure. “The structure of these buds is quite complex. One part of it grows immediately (the summer lateral), while other parts remain as the compressed, multi-branched system that make up the overwintering

⁹ “Vitis Vinifera,” Wikipedia, Wikimedia Foundation, last modified December 16, 2018, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Vitis_vinifera.

¹⁰ University of Missouri, <http://extension.missouri.edu/explore/images/g06090art01.jpg>.

compound bud or ‘eye.’ This latter structure bears next season’s crop.”¹¹ Other notable features are tendrils, canes, leaves, and flowers.

A defining feature of grape vines are the tendrils, which provide support for the plant. Tendrils will wind around anything with which they come into contact and continue growing until the fruit is ready for harvest. After the harvest, tendrils harden into a more wooden texture.¹² It is interesting to note that tendrils are very sensitive and responsive to touch.¹³ They will wind around the source of stimulation, and as time goes on become wooden around the structure. I wonder if the application here could have to do with our cultural surroundings and contexts. As believers attached to Christ, our “tendrils” could indicate the sensitivity we should have to our surroundings. Instead of being damaged by culture, we can wrap around it and make it beautiful, eventually using it to support us rather than allowing it to tear us down.

Another interesting feature of grapevines is the canes. Canes form from shoots that are about a year old, and after dropping their leaves they form an outer bark layer that may flake off from the cork beneath. Canes might be referred to as “older wood,” and the cane “is the principal structure of concern in the dormant season, when pruning is employed to manage vine size and shape, and to control the quantity of potential crop in the coming season.”¹⁴ God is the perfect gardener, so he knows which branches can

¹¹ Ted Goldammer, “Grape Grower’s Handbook: A Guide to Viticulture for Wine Production,” last modified March 2018, http://www.wine-grape-growing.com/wine_grape_growing/grapevine_growth/grapevine_structure_function.htm.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ “Tendril,” *Encyclopædia Britannica*, Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., August 23, 2016, <https://www.britannica.com/science/tendril>.

¹⁴ Goldammer, “Grape Grower’s Handbook.”

handle pruning. He knows when we need to be handled gently, and he knows which areas of our lives need to be trimmed. “A bruised reed he will not break” (Isaiah 42:3).

It is interesting to consider the stage of growth or harvest the grape vines would have been in when Jesus was using this metaphor. If Passover was toward the end of April and Jesus’ conversation was taking place in that time frame, the local grape vines would be nearing the end of their pruning period, coming out of dormancy, and just about to bloom leaves and flowers that would later become fruit—a period called budburst. “In springtime, when air temperatures rise to optimal levels, the buds swell and become fuzzy, and then new green leaf tissue pushes out of the protective scales. This pushing forth of new growth gives the appearance of the buds bursting, thus the term bud burst or bud break. This new tissue emerging from a bud becomes both leaves on the vine and flowers that produce grapes.”¹⁵ Within this context, the deep-rooted hope in Jesus’ death and resurrection is quite beautiful. What appears to be dead bursts forth with life.

We know God likes threes, and unsurprisingly, these buds have three parts to them—primary, secondary, and tertiary buds—and they grow with the future in mind. Some buds are dormant, waiting a full year before becoming a shoot.

The dormant bud initiates the year prior to its growth as a shoot. During the current season, the dormant bud undergoes considerable development forming the cluster primordia. The dormant bud is of major concern at dormant pruning since it contains cluster primordia (the fruit-producing potential for the next season). Shoot growth begins with budburst and initially the growth is slow, but soon it enters a phase of rapid growth called the ‘grand period of growth,’ which typically continues until just after fruit set.¹⁶

¹⁵ Diana K. Williams, “The Definition of Bud Burst for Grapes,” Home Guides | SF Gate, last modified November 21, 2017, <http://homeguides.sfgate.com/definition-bud-burst-grapes-98280.html>.

¹⁶ Goldammer, “Grape Grower’s Handbook.”

Every Christian has seasons in his or her life, periods of dormancy and periods of rapid growth. Followers of Jesus take time to mature and produce observable fruit in their lives. We need to be patient with each other and become adept at recognizing the seasons in which our brothers and sisters, and we ourselves, might be. Women who have left church may actually be in a season of dormancy. It is important for well-intentioned Christians to recognize that what appears to be rebellion could actually be a period of internal growth that might not look like what we expect. We must take care to not “prune their buds,” because doing so could further delay their fruit. This fruit is a rich, fulfilling life for women who have survived spiritual trauma, furthering the work of dismantling abusive systems and reconstructing the Body of Christ to thrive in healthier ways.

“In Christ”

The language of attachment is used throughout the First and Second Testaments, and the Spirit of God is what attaches us to the Body of Christ. Woven throughout the New Testament is the language of being “in Christ,” which indicates a very important positional identity for those who trust and follow Him. The phrase “in Christ” occurs 90 times in 87 verses in the NASB translation.¹⁷ Understanding this position and identity is central to healing from spiritual trauma, repairing God attachments, and establishing healthy interpersonal connections.

Confusion about one’s positional identity of being either in Christ or not can create an “us versus them” duality. This presents an obstacle for many people who have left traditional, evangelical churches. There is currently a strong cultural shift in the

¹⁷ BlueLetterBible.org search yield.

United States toward non-binary categories for identity, which we see most clearly in the fluidity of gender identity and sexual expression. When it comes to healing for traumatized individuals, we must handle with care what appears to be a scriptural delineation of being either in Christ or not in Christ. Being in Christ is a *relational* positional identity. Being in Christ is like being a part of a family. Adoption is a metaphor the New Testament writers utilize to help explain this identity.

There is evidence throughout the Bible that God intends (and has always intended) to grow his family to include any and every person who has ever lived—more than the number of the stars in the heavens. One researcher estimates there are about one septillion stars, or 10 to the 24th power, in the observable universe.¹⁸ The Population Reference Bureau estimates that about 108 billion people have lived throughout history on planet Earth.¹⁹ Whether every human in existence is in Christ or not, God is not about to close the books on his family line. He wills that none would perish.

Nearly all scriptural references to God as shelter, refuge, and protection provide adequate support for God as an attachment figure, whether a male or female one. For women who have been spiritually abused primarily by one gender, this perspective can provide relief and healing; if their abusers were primarily male, which is likely in most traditional evangelical churches, shifting to include a view of God as having feminine characteristics, and as Mother in particular, can be very beneficial.

¹⁸ Elizabeth Howell, “How Many Stars Are In The Universe?” Space.com, last modified May 17, 2017, <https://www.space.com/26078-how-many-stars-are-there.html>.

¹⁹ Toshiko Kaneda and Carl Haub, “How Many People Have Ever Lived on Earth?” Population Reference Bureau, last modified March 9, 2018, <https://www.prb.org/howmanypeoplehaveeverlivedonearth/>.

Throughout Scripture, being in Christ means to have a multifaceted relationship with Him that encompasses parent, sibling, and spouse. For women who have been spiritually traumatized in the context of one or more of these relationships, looking to the blameless and co-suffering Christ as healer in those areas can be very beneficial.

Christ as Parent

Perhaps the most well-known verse that establishes our relationship to God as parent is, “Our Father, who is in heaven, hallowed be your name.” In addition to this call to relationship, there are several other places in the New Testament that designate God as our Father.²⁰

In Luke 13, Jesus could have chosen any number of metaphors for himself, but he chose that of a mother. “Jerusalem, Jerusalem, you who kill the prophets and stone those sent to you, how often I have longed to gather your children together, as a hen gathers her chicks under her wings, and you were not willing.”²¹ Jesus chose not a mighty eagle (as God did in Deuteronomy 32:11) nor even a male rooster, but a mother hen. Jesus frequently showed his vulnerability and emotion and connected these to his protection and provision.

We see metaphors throughout the Old Testament that reveal the mothering, nurturing nature of God, and by extension, of Jesus. God is described as giving birth and

²⁰ See 1 Corinthians 1:3, 2 Corinthians 1:2, Galatians 1:3, Ephesians 1:2, Philippians 1:2, Colossians 1:2, 2 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2:16, Philemon 1:3.

²¹ Luke 13:34, NIV.

laboring,²² breastfeeding,²³ and nurturing and protecting children.²⁴ Some scholars propose that *El Shaddai* instead of “God Almighty” should be literally interpreted “God of Sustenance” or even as “God of Mountains” or “God of Breasts.”²⁵

“Righteous Father, though the world does not know you, I know you, and they know that you have sent me. I have made you known to them, and will continue to make you known in order that the love you have for me may be in them and that I myself may be in them.”²⁶ Jesus is a kind yet authoritative parent—he is a gentle provider and a fierce protector. “As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world.”²⁷ He sends us out into the world with our heartstrings tied to his—he doesn’t send us out alone: “And I will ask the Father, and he will give you another advocate to help you and be with you forever.”²⁸

Women who have been traumatized in evangelical settings often have had this image of God as a benevolent, kind parent destroyed. This can happen partially due to the misapplication of evangelical theology that focuses on original sin rather than original blessing. Many women were raised in environments in which their caregivers used

²² Deuteronomy 32:18, Job 38:29, Isaiah 42:14 and 46:3-4; perhaps most memorably in John 3 when Jesus describes the need for all people to be born again, born of the Spirit.

²³ Numbers 11:12 (Moses is indicating it is God who gave birth to the nation and nursed them at the breast), Isaiah 49:15; in 1 Peter 2:1-3 the kindness and Word of the Lord are compared to breastmilk.

²⁴ Deuteronomy 32:11, Isaiah 66:13, Hosea 11:3-4 and 13:8.

²⁵ Especially since the first usage of *El Shaddai* is in Genesis 17:1-2 when God is telling Abram he will give him innumerable descendants; Hebrew *shad* is “breast,” and Akkadian *shadu* is “mountain.” See Chris Poblete, “The Names of God: El Shaddai,” The BLB Blog, Blue Letter Bible, June 28, 2012, <http://blogs.blueletterbible.org/blb/2012/06/28/the-names-of-god-el-shaddai/>.

²⁶ John 17:25-26, NIV.

²⁷ John 17:18, NASB.

²⁸ John 14:16, NIV.

concepts of sin and eternal damnation as scare tactics to manipulate and control behavior, and their caregivers may not have had easy access to education in typical child development. Combined with a patriarchal approach to family systems, this resulted in shame-based, physically abusive parenting within evangelical circles, especially in the 1980s and 1990s with the rise of the teachings of James Dobson, Focus on the Family, and other groups that propagated punitive parenting practices.²⁹

Christ as Sibling

The image of Jesus as our brother is significant, in that he was like us in every way. He embodied both human and deity. His human death broke the power of spiritual death that the devil holds over humanity.³⁰

In bringing many sons and daughters to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the pioneer of their salvation perfect through what he suffered. Both the one who makes people holy and those who are made holy are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers and sisters.³¹

Jesus as our brother shows that we will join him as co-heirs to the inheritance of God.³²

“So you are no longer a slave, but God’s child; and since you are his child, God has made you also an heir.”³³ Jesus as our brother encourages us to view one another as family. As

²⁹ James Dobson writes, “Corporal punishment, when used lovingly and properly, is beneficial to a child because it is in harmony with nature itself” (<https://drjamesdobson.org/blogs/dr-dobson-blog/dr-dobson-blog/2014/06/09/is-spanking-healthy-discipline->). In 2012, a press release from the American Academy of Pediatrics cited research that reveals spanking leads to mental illness and a range of other mental health problems in children. See <https://www.aap.org/en-us/about-the-aap/aap-press-room/pages/Spanking-Linked-to-Mental-Illness.aspx>.

³⁰ See Hebrews 2:14-18.

³¹ Hebrews 2:10-11, NIV.

³² Ephesians 1:10-14.

³³ Galatians 4:7, NIV.

I wrote in *Inseparable*, “Our inheritance is a family priority. It is meant to be experienced in community.”³⁴ But as we know, this will be very difficult for those who have experienced spiritual trauma, especially when that trauma occurred in the context of church small groups. Special consideration needs to be given to these individuals.

Siblings are expected to bear the likeness of their parents.

For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers and sisters. And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. What, then, shall we say in response to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?³⁵

Jesus Christ is of course our greatest example, and since he is accessible to us in his humanity and through his indwelling Spirit, we know we have not been set up for failure but for success (though defining that success must be based in attachment rather than measurements). As functioning members of the family, we will follow his example in seeking and saving those who have been marginalized and abused.

Christ as Spouse

Most evangelical churches espouse complementarian beliefs about marriage, partially based on beliefs that Jesus is eternally submissive to God the Father. Many evangelical church leaders take this line of thought to teach that women are eternally submissive to men, and many church leaders even advise women to remain in abusive

³⁴ Ashley Linne, *Inseparable: Who I Am, Was, and Will Be in Christ* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 2014), 177.

³⁵ Romans 8:29-31, NIV.

marriages.³⁶ Complementarian theology is deeply embedded into evangelical teachings and culture, which has traumatized countless women to varying degrees. In an attachment-focused paradigm, the concept of submission is redeemed by looking at the metaphor of Christ as Spouse.

“I have revealed you to those whom you gave me out of the world. They were yours; you gave them to me and they have obeyed your word.”³⁷ This verse uses language that could call to mind the metaphor of a bride being given to a groom.

Now as the church submits to Christ... just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her... feed and care for their body, just as Christ does the church—we are members of his body. “For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh.” This is a profound mystery—but I am talking about Christ and the church.³⁸

These verses show a profound unity with Christ, likened unto marriage to indicate an important attachment. “I in them and You in Me, that they may be perfected in unity, so that the world may know that You sent Me, and loved them, even as You have loved Me.”³⁹ Perichoresis, which will be discussed further in Chapter 3, provides a beautiful picture of mutual indwelling that reframes the concept of submission; as Christ is in us, we are in Christ, so we follow his lead in the divine dance even as he interacts with us in it.

³⁶ For example, in early 2018, news spread about how Paige Patterson, a highly influential Southern Baptist leader, repeatedly advised women to stay in abusive relationships and to even protect their abusers. See the *Newsweek* article “Who is Paige Patterson? Evangelical women outraged at Southern Baptist leader’s ‘unbiblical’ remarks,” by Sofia Lotto Persio, <https://www.newsweek.com/who-paige-patterson-evangelical-women-outraged-southern-baptist-leaders-914000>.

³⁷ John 17:6, NIV.

³⁸ Ephesians 5:24-32, NIV.

³⁹ John 17:23, NASB.

The marriage of the Lamb in Revelation 19 is another metaphor that reveals the deep attachment we have in Christ.

“Let us be glad and rejoice, and let us give honor to him. For the time has come for the wedding feast of the Lamb, and his bride has prepared herself. She has been given the finest of pure white linen to wear.” For the fine linen represents the good deeds of God’s holy people.⁴⁰

Another way of translating “good deeds” is “righteous acts” or “acts of justice.” Our relationship in Christ means that we will be outwardly involved in seeking justice in the world. We are his body, his hands and feet in the spaces we physically occupy. Those who have been spiritually traumatized need to be sought and found.

How does Scripture teach we become “in Christ?” How do we attach to God? In very simple terms, we have a change of heart and mind (*metanoia*, “repent”). We see that we are dead in our ways and opt instead to follow the Way. We recognize that the original breath with which God infused us has been smothered by sin (our own and the sin done to us by others) and allow his Spirit to fill us and resuscitate us. We become the dwelling place of the Spirit, the body of Christ. We enter the beautiful, divine dance (perichoresis) into which God has invited us to participate.

Relevance for Practical Ministry

Cultivating a fruitful life is much like cultivating a fruitful vineyard. With Jesus as the Vine and root system, those who are connected to him have everything they need to flourish and thrive. Each branch has unfettered access to what it needs as long as it is attached to the Vine. The Gardener tends the vineyard by not only supplying it but also

⁴⁰ Revelation 19:7-8, NLT.

by pruning it. In gardening, dead branches must be cut off, since they divert resources from living branches. Similarly, God “prunes” his people of behaviors that cause destruction. Pruning does not indicate a loss of salvation, but instead a tending toward fruitfulness. While natural consequences are a part of life, “pruning” is a difficult area for many people to explore, especially for those who have a dualistic core belief that good behavior brings good results, and bad behavior brings bad results. Life is not so simple, and Scripture does not support this perspective when read in context. When it comes to abuse, some people want to forgive and forget; others want revenge. What is more helpful is somewhere in between—God desires the restoration and healing of both the abused and the abuser, but frequently in order for this to happen they cannot be connected to each other to any degree.

Women leave church for many reasons, but one that seems to run throughout most of their experiences is feeling emotionally and relationally disconnected from God and other Christians. This disconnect happens for a wide variety of reasons. Conflicts between themselves and others, or simply observing conflicts between church members, have wounded them, triggered old wounds, and created a snowball effect for many of them.

Men of course also leave churches, and sometimes for similar reasons as women. Men are just as relational as women, but women are often accused of being too sensitive. This sort of mindset from church leadership especially damages the relationships women have with the church, even when they aren’t in an already precarious state of attachment with the body. To prevent spiritual abuse and to heal existing trauma, church leaders need

to be attentive to what women have to say about the condition of their churches and include their voices, especially at the table of leadership.⁴¹

Jesus' metaphor indicates that life depends on being attached to him, and that abundant life comes from being a part of a network of others who are also connected to him. We can view Jesus' love as the lifeblood sap that runs throughout the entire vineyard. This concept perhaps has been lost for many women who leave church out of discontent, but especially for those who leave due to changes in beliefs. Women who reject Christianity as a religious system often change their beliefs about Jesus and other foundational tenets of Christian faith.⁴²

I question whether it is possible to love someone you do not know, and it is impossible to truly love someone you fear. Many women who grew up in evangelical churches have God images that are framed by fear. The escape of eternal judgement, damnation, and hell fire is what undergirds their interior dialogue with God, and this extends to their interaction with the Body of Christ. Love as the frame for every relationship and every interaction creates a much different atmosphere than fear does. It provides the nourishment people need in order to grow, thrive, and produce fruit.

Pruning as a church congregation can happen when members of the body are removed from the fellowship. "Pruning is one of the most important cultural operations carried out in the vineyard and, following harvesting is the most expensive and labor

⁴¹ See research on Muted Group Theory; for example, Linda Lee Smith Barkman, "Muted Group Theory: A Tool for Hearing Marginalized Voices," *Priscilla Papers* 32, no. 4 (October 31, 2018): 3–7, <https://www.cbeinternational.org/sites/default/files/PP324-2-Barkman.pdf>.

⁴² Mercadante writes, "Some are 'structural nones,' critical of religious organization in general and some are 'marginal nones,' people who choose to be socially detached. But many leave because they have theological difficulties with particular beliefs and values. These are 'cultural nones' that is, those who disagree with some or all of the core principles of a particular religion or religion in general" (229).

consuming. Training positions the fruit-bearing wood and other vine parts on a trellis or other support so as to shape the vine.”⁴³ Abiding in Jesus through love is what discipleship is primarily about, and church life should exemplify this. It could be that church discipline needs to be primarily directed toward members who are not producing fruit that creates an atmosphere of healing and growth for everyone. Women who leave churches with hostile environments often do so for their own self-preservation.

Abusers within the church should be “pruned” immediately. Vinedressers sometimes come across suckers, sprouts coming out of the vine in the wrong places. “Suckering is the removal of undesirable shoots that originate from the trunk and below the ground.”⁴⁴ The tragedy is when women who have been victimized are asked to leave the congregation instead of their abusers. Many women have been perceived to be troublemakers or as causing division when they call out damaging behavior in the church. This is an area in which many church leaders might need more education and help to navigate. As we saw in the introduction, Jessica’s stepfather was allowed to continue serving in the church when no one believed her account of abuse. Sometimes the branches are pruned in order to affect the conditions for the surrounding branches’ fruit production. What affects one church member affects the entire Body.⁴⁵

⁴³ Goldammer, “Grape Grower’s Handbook.”

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ “Among those who left their childhood religion, women are twice as likely as men to say negative religious teachings about or treatment of gay and lesbian individuals was a major reason they chose to leave their religion (40% vs. 20%, respectively). Women are also about twice as likely as men to cite the clergy sexual-abuse scandal as an important reason they left their childhood faith (26% vs. 13%, respectively).” Cooper, et al.

A local body of faith could take into consideration the vine's microclimate as a metaphor for their ministry. A vineyard's microclimate includes things such as "solar radiation, temperature, wind speed, humidity, and evaporation."⁴⁶ Parish and neighborhood ministry is on the rise as an option for people who have left organized religion, but who still believe in the mission of the Body of Christ. Churches have the opportunity to affect the culture of their neighborhoods.

The vine metaphor and Jesus' teaching in John 15 could have some relevant applications for those who want to follow the call to make disciples throughout the world. The foundation of modern mission work was colonization, a paradigm in which missionaries entered into an unfamiliar culture (oftentimes uninvited) with the intent to share the Gospel. No matter how good the intention, the impact of such mission work was often catastrophic to those cultures—anywhere from introducing foreign pathogens, to expecting the people to conform not just to biblical teachings but to the white Western way of living. When we view "missions" through the lens of the vine and branches, we begin to see the importance of joining in with God's work in humility, counting the cost not just to ourselves but to the people we claim to love. This lens shows us that God is already at work everywhere we can possibly go.

Vineyards are extremely expensive to plant and maintain, and must be planned carefully. "Some cultural practices can be changed as a wine grape grower accumulates experience, but many pre-planting decisions are permanent, and so should be carefully considered when establishing a vineyard."⁴⁷ In many similar ways, starting a ministry in a

⁴⁶ Goldammer, "Grape Grower's Handbook."

⁴⁷ Ibid.

neighborhood, city, or new culture is a very involved decision. If church planters considered the local culture and investigated how they can join God in how he is already “working the vineyard” in that area, they could end up with much better fruit than if they came in with their own agenda. It is important to recognize not only the intent but the impact of “mission” work, and to have healing practices rather than ones that will add to trauma.

Focusing on relationships is vital for the survival of the church today. It can be easy for churches to get caught up in score cards that major on numbers—membership numbers, financial numbers, and the like. Reenchanted church within attachment language and metaphors could go a long way for women who are thinking about leaving church, and could possibly even encourage some who have left to reenter the fold. So many people today have no family, nobody with whom they have the security of a permanent relationship and attachment. The church can provide this, but it requires so much more than lip service. Real life gets messier by the day, both for individuals and communities. Many people live in a state of anxiety as they watch unfolding world events, and destruction seems imminent and inevitable to them. Many grew up in homes where safety was nonexistent; they were not safe to feel, to be genuine, or to be authentic. Some individuals cannot even imagine or conceptualize what an intimate family relationship would be like, because they have never experienced it. They may not even know that it is what they’re seeking.

Jesus gave us hope of a permanent, intimate attachment through his vine and branches metaphor in John 15, and he offers the hope of a church body that desires to be

permanently present in its members' lives. We know that Jesus will never leave us, and that we can abide in him.

CHAPTER 3:

THEOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

Amy is a 40-year-old preacher's wife. She was raised in an evangelical church during 1990s purity culture and the True Love Waits movement. Her church was led entirely by men; women were only allowed to teach children or other women in Bible study. Throughout her years in youth group, instead of theological training, Amy was taught that as a female she needed to be very attentive to her actions and choices and how they affected the boys around her. She was taught that her father owned her body and would transfer that ownership to her husband at the right time. Amy entered Bible college with the understanding that she needed the spiritual leadership of a man to be a good Christian, and married Mark, who is now a pastor, when she was 19 years old. Amy believes that women cannot trust themselves and that they need the spiritual headship of men to guide them. She votes straight party line Republican and vocally speaks out on social media about her support for Donald Trump and other Republicans, regardless of their treatment of women, because she believes God placed them in leadership. With each new sexual harassment allegation in the news, she posts long status updates saying women are liars and habitually falsely accuse men. She has started encouraging Christian women to post social media updates in praise of their husbands to encourage them, because she believes men face an increasingly hostile culture.

Some evangelical theology has perpetuated the belief that women are unreliable yet responsible for men's temptation and especially men's sexual behavior. Many evangelical women vocally support this kind of patriarchal society and church tradition.

These women may be suffering from spiritual trauma, but for various reasons may not realize this and choose to stay in abusive church contexts and relationships.

Authors Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell note the history of how the Trinity has been misunderstood and leveraged inappropriately. They write,

When we built on Aristotle's belief that substance is a higher and preferred category to relationship (to put it another way, that nouns are better than verbs), we inherited an absolutely non-Trinitarian notion of the human person that was autonomous, static, and without a metaphysical capacity for union with our own beings, much less the divine nature of God. In this metaphysically hamstrung version of reality, we were not created in "the image and likeness of God," after all!¹

Many church leaders, unintentionally or not, reinforce this erroneous concept as they teach women are responsible for men's sin and the fall of humanity, and thus are not truly equal in the Body of Christ. Rohr and Morrell assert, "A Trinitarian theology would have told us that human personhood is a *subsistent relation* at its core, generating, in fact, relationships of unconditional love with the same standing as the persons of the Trinity."²

When women recognize their spiritual trauma, they can begin to shift away from these abusive worldviews and move toward building healthier foundations based on Scripture. A crucial step to healing from spiritual trauma is to develop a more complete understanding of the way God has wired the human heart, mind, and spirit. Theology rooted in an attachment-focused framework can help them safeguard against heresy and bring healing. Concepts such as the Trinity and perichoresis provide an interesting starting point.

¹ Richard Rohr and Mike Morrell, *The Divine Dance: The Trinity and Your Transformation* (London, UK: SPCK Publishing, 2016), 74.

² Ibid.

Trinitarian Theology and Perichoresis

The concept of the Trinity requires a level of comfort with paradox. Many spiritually traumatized women have been victimized by church leaders who twist Scripture and doctrines to gain control and power. The doctrine of the Trinity reveals that all power belongs to God, and in Christ all people are on equal ground, leaving no room for narcissism or power plays in the Body of Christ. Further investigating some of the thoughts of trinitarian theologians provides interesting insight into the concept of God attachment.

I prefer a relatively simple approach to the Trinity and our relationship to God as humans. In college, my friend Scott described to me the best metaphor for the Trinity. He said to imagine a two-dimensional world in which everything, including people, are flat. This gives them a very limited perspective. Now he said to imagine a three-dimensional being taking his hand and placing three fingertips on the “page” of this “flatland.” What would those people see? They would see three individual points in their world, not realizing that they were connected to a reality outside of and encompassing their own, in which there was more than two dimensions and things they had yet to discover.³ We can easily draw the parallels here; Jesus, the Son of the Trinity Godhead, entered our Flatland as a singular manifestation of God, while still being the same substance he always had been and would be.

Where this metaphor breaks down of course is that the people in the flat land don’t become three-dimensional themselves. As I argued in Chapter 2, once someone is

³ I didn’t discover until later that his metaphor was loosely based on concepts from Edwin Abbott’s novella *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*, first published in 1884.

in Christ they are a new creation and relate to God in new ways. They can attach to God mentally and emotionally. We are one with Christ in his humanity but not his divinity; he remains other in that regard, and we are not absorbed into a universal deity. The Bible teaches that the Spirit of God indwells us as these new creations; the breath with which God first imbued us, the breath sin had snuffed out of us, is restored and resonates within us, bringing life everlasting and abundant.

Thus, the paradox of the Trinity lives within us. Jesus said that when two or more are gathered in his name, he is there with them—a Trinity of sorts. We can be a part of these “lowercase t” trinities through many dyadic relationships that produce a “third,” where $1+1=3$. We see the clearest metaphor of this in the physical world in the father-mother union that results in a child. But joining our spirits together with another in prayer also reveals a mysterious Third.

There are varying descriptions and beliefs about the Trinity, the nature of the Godhead, and the relationship between the Father, Son, and Spirit. Charles Twombly explores the trinitarian views of John of Damascus, a Syrian monk who lived in the late 7th century AD and was a famous defender of icons:

The *Father*, as Father, has no prior cause. But the Father, in order to be a father, must have an offspring. That offspring is the Son. The Father is therefore in some sense superior (because ontologically prior) to the Son. If the Father existed before the Son, then there was an interval in which the Father was not yet a father. If such an interval existed, then the begetting of the Son brought about some alteration of the Father, which is impossible given the immutability necessarily entailed in divine perfection. The Son must therefore be co-eternal with the Father.⁴

⁴ Charles C. Twombly, *Perichoresis and Personhood: God, Christ, and Salvation in John of Damascus* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publishers, 2015), 38.

This view contrasts with the theological view of eternal subordination, the belief that Jesus' will is always subjugated in submission to the Father, not just while he was on earth. This theological view could be leveraged in spiritually abusive churches to compel women to submit to male authority; women are taught that if they are to truly be Christlike, they need to submit to the hierarchy God has established, which in many oppressive churches' interpretation is based on male headship and power.

The *Son*, as Son of the Father, does have a cause. As offspring, he is begotten, not created. Since he shares the one substance of the Father, along with one will and operation, he is equal in these and every other respect except in the manner of his origin. His relationship to the Father is not reversible, nor can he assume the role of Father in relation to the Spirit. That is, he is begotten, but he cannot in turn beget or cause to proceed.⁵

Twombly writes about the dual nature of the Son, the Logos, and how John of Damascus viewed these to coexist when he wrote,

“[Christ] did not perform the human actions in a human way, because He was not a mere man, nor did He perform the divine actions in a divine way only, because He was not just God, but God and man together. And just as we understand both the union of natures and their natural difference, so also do we understand that of the natural wills and operations.” ... All of these moves toward clarification are themselves clarified by the concept of mutual indwelling.⁶

If Jesus is the *logos* as described in John 1, one can assert that he was the *logos* by which reality came into being, as described in Genesis 1. When Jesus “tabernacled among us” he became the begotten singularity.

⁵ Ibid., 38-39.

⁶ Ibid., 86-87.

The *Spirit*, as that *hypostasis* which proceeds from the Father, can neither beget nor be begotten. If he were begotten, he too would be a Son. Proceeding, then, is distinct from generation and gives the Spirit a unique relationship to the Father. The Spirit's relationship to the Son is also unique: unlike the Latin West, from Augustine onwards, John Damascene and the Greek tradition generally understood the Spirit as proceeding from the Father and through the Son. He is communicated or imparted (*metadidomenon*) by the Son. If he were to proceed from the Son (as the *filioque* clause added to the creed asserts), then he has two sources of origin and the Father is not the sole source (*monarche*) of the Godhead.⁷

In other words, each member of the Godhead is the same but different; they are same in substance and nature, but different in their relationship to one another. Here is where the comfort with paradox and “both/and” comes in to play. This is how Christians can claim to be monotheists yet also recognize the uniqueness of Father, Son, and Spirit. Twombly quotes John of Damascus,

The abiding and resting of the Persons in one another is not in such a manner that they coalesce or become confused, but, rather, so that they adhere to one another, for they are without interval between them and inseparable and their mutual indwelling [*en allais perichoresin*] is without confusion. For the Son is in the Father and the Spirit, and the Spirit is in the Father and the Son, and Father is in the Son and the Spirit, and there is no merging or blending or confusion. And there is one surge and one movement of the three Persons. It is impossible for this to be found in any created nature.⁸

The mystery is that the Spirit dwells within us when we are in Christ the God-Human—we are one with Christ by being found in him, although we remain distinct in our otherness as merely human. We are conduits and dwelling places rather than being extensions of or absorbed into God as deity. The term *perichoresis* is helpful to describe this concept.

⁷ Ibid., 39.

⁸ Ibid., 8.

Perichoresis

Perichoresis is a mutual indwelling relationship in which both parties are simultaneously becoming more One and more Individual. The dance of perichoresis highlights and enhances individuality in ways that draw the two ever closer together in a process that grows both parties and transforms their reality.

Twombly defines perichoresis as “mutual indwelling, interpenetration” and notes that the writings of John of Damascus greatly influenced renowned theologians Karl Barth and Jurgen Moltmann.⁹ Twombly writes,

Intrinsic to any theological use of the term *perichoresis*, regardless of the context, is some sort of relationship. The very words used in the search to find English equivalents (e.g., mutual indwelling, interpenetration, coinherence, and so on) imply a connection between at least two terms. Whether we are dealing with two natures or three *hypostaseis*, *perichoresis* is one of the available words that can be used to identify the particular relationship involved.¹⁰

Twombly claims that with perichoresis John of Damascus advanced the concept and doctrine of the Trinity to a

higher level of conceptual refinement... What was needed was a way to give intelligibility to the relationship of oneness and Threeness, identity and difference, so that the mystery could be affirmed without reducing one or the other of the two poles to its opposite.¹¹

Twombly notes the importance metaphor (he uses the term *analogy*) can play in communicating the trinitarian relationship, and notes how John Damascene

⁹ Ibid., xi-1.

¹⁰ Ibid., 11-12.

¹¹ Ibid., 9-10.

argues that Adam, Eve, and Seth each had an individual manner of origin (*alla toi tas hyparxeos*) and yet each shared a common nature. Both Adam and Eve were unbegotten, Adam having been formed from the ground by God and Eve having been created from Adam's rib. Only Seth was created in the now-ordinary human way. So each came into existence in a way that was different from the other two but at no sacrifice to his or her essential humanness.¹²

This account clearly indicates an otherness of humanity—beings God fashioned from the earth, not merely as extensions of other creations or even of the Godhead, but unique in their own way being in the likeness of God and imbued with his breath or Spirit. While a trinitarian view of relationship is very important to understanding who we are in Christ, it also requires distinct otherness of the Trinity.

I recently had the pleasure of hearing Esther Lightcap Meek speak.¹³ She came to Seattle for a small, intimate gathering at a local coffee shop that serves as an anchor of identity and fellowship for its neighborhood. Esther spoke about covenant epistemology, which illustrates perichoresis beautifully. She outlined steps to knowing, which she has covered in her written works: beauty, pledge, invitation, indwelling, encounter, transformation, dance, and shalom. She noted that sin, and our culture, commodifies power and does away with both risk and responsibility. But God (or Reality), through beauty, makes the first move, wooing us into possibilities. Beauty attunes us to being able to love as we anticipate the yet-to-be-known. Our first response is delight, followed by consent, in which we surrender to the journey. Out of love for what we do not yet know, we move toward it, and pledge a covenant solidarity with it. When God (or Reality, or even another person) self-discloses, it transforms us and our existence. Perichoresis (good

¹² Ibid., 39.

¹³ Live event on November 3, 2018.

power) brings balance instead of the tension of power between the one or the many (corruptive power).

Esther described perichoresis as a dance in which two individuals are so connected it isn't a fight or a struggle to maintain power, but rather a mutual sharing of individuality in which those unique attributes are paradoxically and simultaneously feeding relationship and furthering individuality. The movement of the Spirit as we abide in Christ brings perichoresis in the God-individual relationship as well as the human-human relationship. This brings true shalom, continual communion with the Real.¹⁴

In reattaching spiritually traumatized women to the Body of Christ, a trinitarian view of God is helpful because it bypasses a binary system of theology that has often been a source of injury. Cynthia Bourgeault observes,

A ternary system envisions a distinctly different mix. In place of paired opposites, the interplay of the two polarities calls forth a third, which is the “mediating” or “reconciling” principle between them. In contrast to a binary system, which finds stability in the balance of opposites, the ternary system stipulates a third force that emerges as the necessary mediation of these opposites and that in turn (and this is the really crucial point) generates a synthesis at a whole new level. It is a dialectic whose resolution simultaneously creates a new realm of possibility.¹⁵

Adopting a trinitarian approach to life can bring relief and healing to women who have been trapped within a binary system, especially binary views of gender roles and the limitations of complementarian theology.

Rohr and Morrell write, “The magic of three breaks us out of our dualistic impasses, and always invites a fourth world for us to enter into.”¹⁶ The Law of Three has

¹⁴ During her talk, Esther defined reality as “God and his stuff.”

¹⁵ Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Holy Trinity and the Law of Three: Discovering the Radical Truth at the Heart of Christianity* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2013), 16.

¹⁶ Rohr and Morrell, 93.

its limitations of course, like any metaphor. But it does provide an interesting way of thinking and communicating about abstract concepts. Rohr and Morell write, “Against this backdrop, sin is elegantly simple to understand: sin is whatever stops the flow. ... God is essentially saying, ‘It is *you* who cannot afford to be unloving; you just can’t.’ ... We are not punished *for* our sins—we are punished *by* our sins!”¹⁷ The indwelling of the Holy Spirit is what brings us back to life, attaches us to the Vine, and invites us into perichoresis as the “divine dance.” Being in Christ is what unifies us with him and restarts the original flow of his Spirit within us.

Attachment Theory

John Bowlby and Mary Ainsworth are two of the primary names we see associated with the development of attachment theory. Attachment theory is widely accepted among psychologists, researchers, and other practitioners to describe the way people interact with attachment figures when they are in distress. Attachment theory primarily explores how infants form emotional bonds with their caregivers out of their need for survival, but the theory also can be expanded to explain how and why people develop patterns in relationships across the lifespan.

¹⁷ Ibid., 160-161.

Attachment theory distinguishes two forms of security afforded by close relationships. First, attachment figures provide security by offering assistance with an imminent threat to one's safety or survival. If you trip on a rock and twist your ankle, it is advantageous to seek a caregiver who will provide care. This is referred to as the *safe haven* function of attachment figures. Second, people derive security simply from believing that a caregiver would be available if support were necessary. This form of reassurance is referred to as a *secure base*: a retreat that remains available, even if currently unnecessary (Feeney & Collins, 2004).¹⁸

The main categories of attachment are secure and insecure, with insecure attachment subcategories of anxious-avoidant, anxious-ambivalent, and disorganized. Reactive attachment disorder, or RAD, is a psychiatric disorder that is diagnosed usually in young children.¹⁹

Bowlby saw an evolutionary survival mechanism in attachment. He saw humans as hardwired with the motive for security, and that this security was found in proximity to caregivers. "Individuals who detected threats to survival, experienced distress at the absence of caregivers, and attempted to reunite with them were more likely, all else being equal, to survive and eventually reproduce than individuals lacking these characteristics."²⁰ In other words, the need for survival is intertwined with the need for the other. People were created for relationship and caretaking.

An attachment figure provides a safe haven in times of distress and a secure base from which to explore the world.

¹⁸ Lucas A. Keefer, Mark J. Landau, and Daniel Sullivan, "Non-Human Support: Broadening the Scope of Attachment Theory," *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 525.

¹⁹ Jeanne Bereiter, "Trauma, Attachment and DSM 5 Diagnoses," *IHS Trauma Informed Care & Historical Trauma Informed Care Webinar Series*, lecture, July 6, 2017, https://www.ihs.gov/telebehavioral/includes/themes/newihstheme/display_objects/documents/slides/trauma_informedcare/traumaattachmentdsm0717.pdf.

²⁰ Keefer, Landau, and Sullivan, 525.

First, attachment figures provide security by offering assistance with an imminent threat to one's safety or survival. ... This is referred to as the *safe haven* function of attachment figures. Second, people derive security simply from believing that a caregiver would be available if support were necessary. This form of reassurance is referred to as a *secure base*: a retreat that remains available, even if currently unnecessary (Feeney & Collins, 2004).²¹

We can see the practical benefit of having this sort of attachment figure across the lifespan. For women who have been traumatized by caregivers, family members, or church leaders who filled some sort of attachment figure role, the damage to their development cannot be underestimated.

Human bonding involves many brain chemicals and processes that become blueprints for how we interact with others throughout life. For infants this happens at nonconscious, pre-symbolic levels often called implicit memory.

In other words, a pattern of neuronal activation recruits similar patterns in the future. Thus, this nonconscious knowledge of what it is like to be with a specific other becomes encoded in implicit memory as a relational expectation, what we are referring to as an "implicit relational representation" (see Hall, 2004). ... Mental models of attachment thus enable infants to establish coherent strategies for regulating their emotions following internal and external stressors by providing a template for predicting caregivers' degrees of emotional availability and responsiveness to specific signals of distress.²²

How a caregiver responds to an infant's distress sets the stage for how the infant will relate to both self and the caregiver in the future. The writing of the blueprint for human interaction is complex and can feel like a very weighty responsibility to parents who are aware of attachment bonding.

²¹ Ibid., 525.

²² Jacqueline L. Noffke and Todd W. Hall, "Attachment Psychotherapy and God Image," in Moriarty, Glendon, and Louis Hoffman, eds., *God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy: Research, Theory, and Practice* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2007), 61-62.

The attachment bond has been thought to be connected to dopamine, which raises the question of how the individual might respond to trauma as she matures. Traumatic experiences and insecure attachments can be indicators of future attempts to self-medicate, leading to addictions and other coping mechanisms.²³

Together, these data indicate that dopamine is involved in human bonding. Compared with other mammals, humans have an unusually complex social life. The complexity of human bonding cannot be fully captured in nonhuman animal models, particularly in pathological bonding, such as that in autistic spectrum disorder or postpartum depression. Thus, investigations of the neurochemistry of social bonding in humans, for which this study provides initial evidence, are warranted.²⁴

It is likely that all responses to trauma, whether healthy or unhealthy, are tied to our attachment blueprints.

Those who want to help women heal from spiritual trauma stand to benefit from knowledge of these psychological theories and neuroscience developments. While some pastors and church leaders fully disregard any and all science, especially psychology, they would be wise to take into consideration the vast amounts of research regarding human attachment and bonding. In Chapters 4 and 5 we will begin to see how our attachments with our first caregivers affect our relationship to God as our primary attachment figure. Church leaders need to be aware of this as they minister to others, especially those who have experienced any sort of trauma.

²³ Bereiter, 49.

²⁴ Shir Atzil, Alexandra Touroutoglou, Tali Rudy, Stephanie Salcedo, Ruth Feldman, Jacob M. Hooker, Bradford C. Dickerson, Ciprian Catana, and Lisa Feldman Barrett, "Dopamine in the Medial Amygdala Network Mediates Human Bonding," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* (2017): 201612233.

Stages of Spiritual Development

It is helpful to consider the stages of spiritual development, which I would prefer to call simply human development. In Chapter 4 I will explore how one might relate to the triune God as an attachment figure in each stage.

James Fowler, in his famous and foundational book *Stages of Faith*,²⁵ provides readers with a thorough explanation of six different stages a person may go through in her lifetime as she relates to God.

This process of getting to know God is, of course, one that takes a lifetime and is a task that, being in its nature relational, will never be “finished.” All individuals, including those of world religions other than Christianity and atheists, are somewhere along a faith journey and are somewhere in relationship to the unknown and mysterious, whether they have a label for that force or not. Additionally, every person has some sort of “ultimate concern,” as Fowler calls it. He states,

Our real worship, our true devotion directs itself toward the objects of our ultimate concern. ... Ultimate concern is a much more powerful matter than claimed belief in a creed or a set of doctrinal propositions. Faith as a state of being ultimately concerned may or may not find its expression in institutional or cultic religious forms. Faith so understood is very serious business. It involves how we make our life wagers. It shapes the ways we invest our deepest loves and our most costly loyalties.²⁶

All persons are in some state of spiritual development, which revolves around the concepts, objects, or people that are their ultimate concern.

²⁵ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (New York: HarperOne, 1995).

²⁶ Ibid., 4-5.

Fowler details six stages of faith development: Stage 1, Intuitive-Projective; Stage 2, Mythic-Literal; Stage 3, Synthetic-Conventional; Stage 4, Individuative-Reflective; Stage 5, Conjunctive; and Stage 6, Universalizing.²⁷ I will give a description and my own summarizing terms for each stage in this section.

We can briefly compare the “ideal” spiritual progression to physical growth. The spiritual journey begins much like organic life does—in infancy. As infants, we have the important task of building trust. As very young children, our fused fact, fantasy, and feeling, makes relating to God somewhat *magical* (Stage 1). Once we begin to develop concrete operational thinking, we transition into a time of *exploration*, sorting out what is real from what is make-believe, and often relate to God based on reciprocity (Stage 2). As our childhood period grows toward adolescence, we develop formal operational thinking and transition into a much more complicated area of spiritual life. We begin to see God as our lives’ significant “decisive other,”²⁸ as Fowler puts it, relating to God on a much more intimate and mysterious level, while defining ourselves by the *allegiances* we form with groups (Stage 3). As we develop critical thinking skills and upon leaving home for college or career, we often experience a crisis of faith that leads us to *deconstruct* and examine our beliefs while we relate to God in ways that are demythologizing (Stage 4). Eventually a deeper longing for the mysterious draws us into a period of *reconstructing* beliefs, openness to conversation and exploration, and increasing comfort with paradox; we enter into what Fowler calls a “second naiveté”²⁹ (Stage 5). As we begin to see the

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid., 154.

²⁹ Ibid., 197.

world for what it is, we will often feel tension between whether we should spend our energy on attempting to change the world or not. The ultimate goal for all followers of Christ is to live a life in which beliefs and love run so far in our beings that we become *incarnations* of Christ and live in “redemptive subversiveness,”³⁰ as Fowler puts it (Stage 6).

It is important to note that while these paradigms of spiritual development are enormously helpful in gaining an understanding of how God has wired human beings for relationship with the divine, they are observations and not prescriptive in nature. Spiritual development and attachment-building is a nuanced and layered process rather than a simple linear one.

Stage 1: The Magical

Most of us can remember our favorite make-believe games from when we were very young, the story lines we created for our toys, and imaginary friends. For those who were raised in homes where church was a priority, some of us probably remember our favorite Bible story or a part of the church service we found interesting—what did the fish look like that swallowed Jonah? Why do we drink grape juice some Sundays but not others? What does God look like? We collect imagery and ideas—God imagery—along the way that will form a basis for much of our spiritual development later. Fowler cites,

Dr. Rizzuto finds that despite our secularization and religious fragmentation, religious symbols and language are so widely present in this society that virtually no child reaches school age without having constructed—with or without religious instruction—an image or images of God.³¹

³⁰ Ibid., 203.

³¹ Ibid., 129.

For adults who become followers of Christ later in life and who have had relatively little exposure to the Bible and religious symbolism, they will go through some of the same discovery that a young child will. Stage 1 may not last as long for an adult of course, since he or she has already developed concrete operational thinking. But in some sense, adults must grapple with the “magical” side of faith. In essence, faith is the most important step learned in Stage 1. Depending on the person’s development in the area of trust (which can be influenced by any number of factors), developing initial faith may be quite a long process.

Stage 2: Exploration

During Stage 2, children begin to sift through what is real and what is imaginary, begin perspective taking, and increase in their capacity for empathy. Religious symbols will be completely tied to the meaning they represent, and those in this stage do not have the ability to step outside of this paradigm to examine beliefs. This is an extremely critical point of development for children emotionally, psychologically, and physically. Parents and adults must take care in what they expect from children spiritually during the school-age years. Fowler writes,

Because the child’s appropriations of and personal constructions of meaning with these symbolic elements is unpredictable and because insisting on conceptual orthodoxy at this age is both premature and dangerous, parents and teachers should create an atmosphere in which the child can freely express, verbally and nonverbally, the images she or he is forming. Where this expression is allowed and encouraged, the child is taken seriously and adults can provide appropriate help in dealing with crippling, distorted or destructive images the child has formed.³²

³² Ibid., 132-133.

In other words, rather than attempting to force children to adhere to the same expectations as adult believers, parents and faith leaders should focus on creating environments in which children can process their spiritual formation on levels that are appropriate for them. Parents need a working understanding of God images (to be discussed at length in Chapter 4) and the parental role in their formation. They can then go about the work of helping the child formulate ideas and foundations that are more accurately based on Scriptural teachings that have been crafted for his or her level of understanding and learning.

Fowler warns of the potential consequences of failing to allow children to grow spiritually at their own pace.

There are religious groups who subject Intuitive-Projective children to the kind of preaching and teaching that vividly emphasize the pervasiveness and power of the devil, the sinfulness of all people without Christ and the hell of fiery torments that await the unrepentant. This kind of faith formation—and its equivalent in other religious traditions—can ensure a dramatic ‘conversion experience’ by the time the child is seven or eight. It runs the grave risk, however, of leading to what Philip Helfaer calls ‘precocious identity formation’ in which the child, at conversion, takes on the adult faith identity called for by the religious group. This often results when the child is an adult in the emergence of a very rigid, brittle and authoritarian personality.³³

We can see how doctrines presented through these sorts of images and metaphors at this stage of development can be a hindrance to developing a full sense of God, and can impede healthy God attachment.

During this stage of development, children (and some adults) will often relate to God based on “cosmic reciprocity.”³⁴ If you behave well, God will bless you. If you

³³ Ibid., 132.

³⁴ Ibid., 107.

behave poorly, God will punish you. Many adults live in a similar stage of faith development, believing that if they store up good deeds, God will overlook it when they sin or will bless them in some particularly special way. Or, they live in fear of making any mistakes in effort to avoid judgement. It is important for parents and church leaders to recognize the process of forming God attachments and to assist children and adults along the path of understanding concepts such as sin and grace on the levels at which they function.

Stage 3: Allegiances

The adolescent years are focused on identity formation, gaining acceptance, and deciding with which “group” one will align. We see this within spiritual formation as well. As teens explore their growing independence, they begin to decide who will take the role of the “significant decisive other.” Fowler writes,

Previous literalism breaks down; new ‘cognitive conceit’ (Elkind) leads to disillusionment with previous teachers and teachings. Conflicts between authoritative stories (Genesis on creation versus evolutionary theory) must be faced. The emergence of mutual interpersonal perspective taking ... creates the need for a more personal relationship with the unifying power of the ultimate environment.³⁵

The significant decisive other is the one to whom the teen looks for ultimate advice on important moral decisions but also for everyday concerns, whether consciously or unconsciously. For many this ends up being a peer group, parents, or clergy, and for some this role will be filled by the Holy Spirit. However, the cultural expectation for the adult locus of authority is the self (see Chapter 1, Prioritization of Self-Freedom), which

³⁵ Ibid., 150.

adds another layer of complication to the inevitable process of disillusionment for young people.

Marks of Stage 3 are a desire for a more intimate, personal way of relating to God, reflection on the meaning behind religious symbols (although they are still unable to be separated from one another), and developing one's story of faith, or "testimony." Teens in Stage 3 are developing self-consciousness, and thus are quite egocentric. Adolescents begin to learn how to accept others' opinions and will be forced to investigate why they believe what they believe. We see this focus among adults in Stage 3 as they place stressed importance on apologetics and taking a firm stance on political and social issues.

We see marks of Stage 3 in the modern church power structure through church membership, business meetings, and expected political alignment (whether spoken or unspoken). We also see marks of Stage 3 in the stress of the importance of a "personal relationship" with God. Perhaps the most obvious mark of Stage 3 in the modern church is the importance placed on the role of clergy and the wide difference of expectations between clergy and laity. Fowler points out,

there is always the danger of becoming permanently dependent upon and subject to what Sharon Parks calls the 'tyranny of the they'. For Stage 3, with its beginnings in adolescence, authority is located externally to the self. It resides in the interpersonally available 'they' or in the certified incumbents of leadership roles in institutions.³⁶

We can see that Amy, the woman described in the beginning of this chapter, has chosen to align herself completely with one political party and worldview without questioning them; this is a hallmark of Stage 3 spiritual development. While the self needs to be

³⁶ Ibid., 154.

empowered, especially for spiritually traumatized women, the locus of authority can still be God when the goal is healthy God attachment and not rigid conformity to certain guidelines for behavior.

Some catalysts that may move a Stage 3 believer toward Stage 4 include the crisis of faith and self-examination that often accompany “leaving home.” For teenagers, graduating from high school and leaving home for college, military, family, or career is a very critical time in their development. This crucial time often includes questioning and rejection of the “significant decisive other” and authority figures and precedes an investigation of one’s beliefs. For those who have already been spiritually traumatized in these previous stages of development, coming out of Stage 4 with any faith intact will be a difficult task indeed.

Stage 4: Deconstruction

Stage 4 faith can be a very uncomfortable, difficult stage. This stage includes much questioning and analyzing of oneself and one’s faith. The faith symbols that an individual has grown accustomed to are examined from an objective point of view. The meaning of the symbols is separated from the symbols themselves in a process Fowler calls “demythologizing.” He writes,

Instead of the symbol or symbolic act having the initiative and exerting its power on the participant, now the participant-questioner has the initiative over against the symbol. For those who have previously enjoyed an unquestioning relation to the transcendent and to their fellow worshipers through a set of religious symbols, Stage 4’s translations of their meanings into conceptual prose can bring a sense of loss, dislocation, grief and even guilt.³⁷

³⁷ Ibid., 180.

Persons in Stage 4 may feel that they are walking the line of orthodoxy and may often feel quite alone during their demythologizing process. Or, they may develop what Fowler calls the “executive ego” and will take more initiative in his or her faith development.

For individuals in Stage 4, the “either/or” becomes very important. The Stage 4 believer can often come across to others as critical or harsh as she draws conclusions that are, for her, revolutionary and new. Some individuals in this stage can run the risk of reverting to a form of intolerance and pride that places dogmatic emphasis on their own being right about certain subjects or aspects of faith and religious practice while at the same time claiming to be very open-minded.

While Stage 4 can be a challenge, there are positive results of this analytical search, such as the ability to communicate one’s faith journey in a way that reveals deeper critical thinking and reflection or a renewed passion for truth. If one is to successfully transition from Stage 4 to Stage 5, she must have the diligence to work through the discomfort and find a way to reassemble a new way of living out faith on the other side.

Stage 4 deconstruction is where we often see traumatized people suffer the most. They are in desperate need of healing but often find it nowhere within the organized church environment. Some will find refuge in groups on social media that exist for those who have fled toxic church culture. Others will align with atheism or another faith practice such as Buddhism. For all spiritually traumatized people, the God attachment is in a unique position for unraveling or strengthening.

Stage 5: Reconstruction

The path to Stage 5 and reconstructing one's faith begins with a deeper longing for the mysterious. Perhaps the individual remembers the "simpler times" of her childhood when relating to God was magical. Perhaps she begins to realize that not all questions must have answers, that God can be both intimately knowable and mysterious at the same time. She will move slowly away from the either/or mindset of Stage 4 and into one that embraces paradox—the "both/and." Persons in this stage begin to foster a deep appreciation for dialogue and conversational exploration, even if no conclusions are drawn or no particular "destination" is reached.

Another mark of a person in this faith stage is tolerance and acceptance of others as people. The Stage 5 believer has done the hard work of firming her foundational beliefs and will not waver on core issues she feels are worth dying for. But while she may completely disagree with another on issues such as lifestyle choice, religious belief, or denominational preference, the Stage 5 individual is able to discover nuggets of God's truth in nearly any situation or group of people. As Fowler writes, Stage 5 faith

suspects that things are organically related to each other; it attends to the pattern of interrelatedness in things, trying to avoid force-fitting to its own prior mind set. ... In a mutual 'speaking' and 'hearing,' knower and known converse in an I-Thou relationship. The knower seeks to accommodate her or his knowing to the structure of that which is being known before imposing her or his own categories upon it.³⁸

This will have a significant impact on how the Stage 5 follower of Christ approaches God and other people in his or her life mission. She is more interested in the journey of conversation that can occur between dissenting individuals.

³⁸ Ibid., 185.

As Stage 5 believers begin to again embrace more symbolic or mysterious aspects of faith, they may be considered idealistic or naïve by others. But the Stage 5 believer often has, whether consciously or unconsciously, chosen the “second naiveté.” Fowler writes,

With its attention to the organic and interconnected character of things Stage 5 distrusts the separation of symbol and symbolized, sensing that when we neutralize the initiative of the symbolic, we make a pale idol of any meaning we honor. ... Ricoeur’s term ‘second naiveté’ or ‘willed naiveté’ begins to describe Conjunctive faith’s postcritical desire to resubmit to the initiative of the symbolic.³⁹

This presents a beautiful opportunity for God attachment to strengthen and for fresh metaphors to come to life for the individual.

As the Stage 5 believer develops, she will encounter a dilemma—the reality of the world. In one’s “naïve” desire to embrace others as beloved creatures of God, he or she will be exposed to the harsh reality of a sinful and fallen world and faced with decisions about how to intervene, or whether to intervene at all. This is part of the transition toward Stage 6 faith.

Stage 6: Incarnation/Embodiment

People in this stage of faith are, as Fowler writes,

exceedingly rare. ... They have become incarnators and actualizers of the spirit of an inclusive and fulfilled human community. They are ‘contagious’ in the sense that they create zones of liberation from the social, political, economic and ideological shackles we place and endure on human futurity. ... Life is both loved and held to loosely. Such persons are ready for fellowship with persons at any of the other stages and from any other faith tradition.⁴⁰

³⁹ Ibid., 187.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 200-201.

The most obvious example of Stage 6 faith is, of course, Jesus Christ himself. It stands to reason that at the heart of any of his followers is the desire to be like him. However, Stage 6 faith does not come easily. Fowler states,

It is my conviction that persons who come to embody Universalizing faith are drawn into those patterns of commitment and leadership by the providence of God and the exigencies of history. It is as though they are selected by the great Blacksmith of history, heated in the fires of turmoil and trouble and then hammered into usable shape on the hard anvil of conflict and struggle.⁴¹

This perspective can provide hope and healing for spiritual trauma survivors, instilling meaning into the tragic experiences they have endured. Perhaps the secret superpower trauma survivors hold is the potential to conclude, as Joseph in Genesis did, “Even though you intended to harm me, God intended it only for good, and through me, He preserved the lives of countless people, as He is still doing today.”⁴²

As white American evangelical culture continues to devolve, many women are eager to discover what comes next in this sort of spiritual landscape, regardless of their relationship to the evangelical church. Women need to be leading the Body of Christ into the future, one in which men and women alike are liberated from the constraints of oppressive systems and free to repair their attachments to God and others. Religious organizations may or may not be the best place for this to happen, but regardless, people who are investing in the healing of traumatized women need to take initiative. It will take a lot of courage and without a doubt they will face fierce opposition from both human and spiritual forces, but they stand to lose even more if they do not at least try.

⁴¹ Ibid., 201.

⁴² Genesis 50:20, *The Voice* translation.

CHAPTER 4:

GOD ATTACHMENT

Given Bowlby's widely accepted attachment theory, current interdisciplinary concerns about adult attachments, and the rates at which people are becoming religiously unaffiliated potentially due to spiritual trauma, adults manifest secure or insecure attachments to God in various ways. Exploring the features of a secure God attachment, manifestations of insecure God attachment, and the images and concepts of God that undergird these experiences can take us toward a holistic, attachment-focused healing paradigm.

There are many approaches to healing, whether spiritual or physical, that could be considered pagan, such as crystal energy healing, ThetaHealing,¹ and Reiki.² Some of these approaches have a measurable result beyond the personal experience of the patient. Many studies show the power of prayer and meditation for healing. In my observations of "faith healing," either within or outside of evangelical churches, there seems to be an imbalance of responsibility for the healing, implying that if the healing technique (such as

¹ ThetaHealing is not thoroughly researched but is a healing technique based on harnessing certain brain waves in order to influence one's situation and reality.

² Reiki seems to be a somewhat secretive practice passed down from masters to apprentices. There are many clinical studies on Reiki and it seems to be effective from a medical standpoint. I have heard of Christians getting trained in Reiki but the people I know personally who practice it are former Christians who have rejected Christ. My concern with practices such as Reiki is that there is an undeniable spiritual force involved, and I'm unsure whether it is of God or of some demonic origin. It seems that anything that brings healing is of God, but it would not surprise me if demonic healing also exists and comes at a price of which recipients might not be fully aware. The abstract of one peer-reviewed article states, "The measurements showed that energy is indeed transferred from the hands of healers to the patients, but surprisingly after hand healing not only was the energy of the patients higher and better balanced, the energy of the healers was always higher and better balanced, which proves involvement of a third source of energy." Maria Kuman, "Measuring Reiki Healing: Mystery, Placebo, Or Real Energy Healing?" *Acupuncture & Electro-Therapeutics Research* 42, no. 3 (2017): 163–173.

prayer, fasting, etc.) doesn't work, it is the fault of the patient for not having enough faith or not performing some ritual correctly. This is not a holistic approach to healing and it does not relate to God attachment. Or does it?

When I was in Thailand, I had the pleasure of forming friendships with several Thai Christians who had converted from Buddhism. They explained to me the spiritual power of Buddhism as a religion and especially the power of the monks. One man explained to me that whenever a person prays to the Buddha, or one of the other entities appropriate for Buddhist worship, the person is forming soul attachments to the demonic force behind that entity. He explained that nearly always when a Thai Buddhist comes to faith in Christ, it involves an element of breaking spiritual attachments with demonic forces. I have heard stories of this process and a bit of what it entails—almost always a more mature follower of Christ needs to be present to help facilitate the process of prayer to break the bonds. Not long after this, I had a personal prayer session to ask God to break the power of lies I had internalized into beliefs. Although I didn't have the language for it at the time, I felt an enormous sense of freedom, my God attachment began to heal, and I finally was able to reassess and reform my God images.

Detachment

Some religious approaches, Christian or otherwise, aim to eliminate or avoid suffering. This can go several different ways: for some people it leads them to a life of compassion and service as they seek to be a part of the solution to suffering, but others go the direction of apathy and indifference, glorifying detachment. There is a gift to be found in the harmony between accepting the existence of suffering yet also believing humans were made for more than suffering. In John 16:33 Jesus said, "I've told you these

things so that *in me* you will have peace. In this existence you will have pressure, distress, and affliction, but have courage; I have overcome it all” (translation and emphasis mine). Jesus indicates that attachment to him is necessary for having peace and victory, and this happens not in the absence of suffering but through it.

With the growing popularity of some forms of Buddhism and mindfulness meditation, there is a misunderstanding about the concept of detachment, or non-attachment. Some may believe the goal is to not be attached to anyone or anything by eliminating all desire and thus removing all suffering. However, there are nuances to this concept that have more to do with healthy attachment rather than total detachment.

A relational attachment approach has also been applied to Buddhism. Maintaining that (contrary to many popular understandings) Buddhist conceptions of mindfulness are often socially embedded, Shaver, Lavy, Saron, and Mikulincer (2007, p. 268) draw upon both personal discussions with and writings from the Dalai Lama (2002), who indicated that one of the most frequently spoken Buddhist prayers is “I take refuge in the Buddha, the Dharma, and the Sangha.” The researchers note the striking similarity of “taking refuge” with the notion of the attachment figure as a “safe haven” or a “secure base.”³

Clinging attachment is unhealthy; it leads to codependency and stems from a lack of trust and self-worth. However, healthy attachment allows for closeness in relationship, and reciprocity rather than codependency. Having an attachment figure as a source of security and safety is considered healthy attachment because it leads to a higher sense of self and compassion.

³ Brian D. Augustyn, Todd W. Hall, David C. Wang, and Peter C. Hill, “Relational Spirituality: An Attachment-Based Model of Spiritual Development and Psychological Well-Being,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* (2016): 2.

Psychology, Semiotics, and the “Soul”

Some church leaders are extremely suspicious of psychology and refuse to see any good in it, but this is to the detriment of their congregants and themselves. “Research has demonstrated that psychological and spiritual development are linked and that a relationship between the two are necessary in conceptualization.”⁴ Following Jesus is about being in Christ and Christ in us, an inseparable, perichoretic attachment. This attachment encompasses mind, body, and spirit.

There is much room for research in the interdisciplinary study of attachment metaphors and discipleship. “Given that most scholars within the discipline of Practical Theology discuss the subject of God images from cultural and theological perspectives, this article has discussed God images from an attachment perspective, which is a popular framework in psychology of religion. This is rare.”⁵ A bit like trifocal lenses, the intersection of *somatic* manifestations of trauma and the *psychological* effects of trauma can reveal the *spiritual* impact of trauma, and metaphor is the thread that runs through all of them. Study of semiotics illuminates the psychological implications of God images and God concepts, which will be discussed later in this chapter.

Leonard Sweet and I once talked about our mutual desire to see the idea of “spiritual” development replaced by simply “human” development. A more holistic approach to human development can greatly benefit individuals and the Body of Christ. I

⁴ Ibid., 3.

⁵ Victor Counted, “Understanding God Images and God Concepts: Towards a Pastoral Hermeneutics of the God Attachment Experience,” *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36, no. 1 (2015): 1.

see a shift in this direction happening among researchers of psychology of religion, since some researchers have written,

The present study confirmed our model and hypotheses that attachment predicted both spiritual and psychological outcomes and that spiritual outcomes predicted psychological outcomes. This provides a foundation that promotes affect and relationships as a core of spiritual development and advances our understanding of the processes involved in spiritual development. The consistency of the results across various spiritual engagement moderator variables seems to indicate that there is a robust trend that warrants further investigation.⁶

Since there is an undeniable link among the various aspects of a person (mind, body, spirit), it is important for church leaders—especially those who are wanting to heal trauma—to have a growing understanding of the holistic interplay between these aspects.

This is where the Jewish concept of the soul is especially helpful. My classmate Jonathan Esterman and I recently communicated about the Kabbalistic Jewish understanding of the soul. I was curious about the different Hebrew words used in the *shema* (Deuteronomy 6:5), which seem to indicate nuances in the meanings for the English renderings of “heart” and “mind.” He helped me understand that the indication is the *shema*, loving God, should be a part of one’s core being and identity, a commitment of will and essence. The soul is seen as having three parts (*nefesh*, *ruach*, *neschama*) and five levels (*nefesh*, *ruach*, *neschama*; *chaya*, *yechida* ’*h*). *Nefesh* can be seen as the most basic part of the soul, the body. *Ruach* is literally “breath, wind,” the life force. *Neschama* encompasses discernment between good and evil, conscience, and higher awareness. *Chaya* is more ethereal and associated with higher consciousness, and *yechida* ’*h* is a high

⁶ Augustyn, Hall, Wang, and Hill, 11.

state of unity with HaShem (God).⁷ There is an opportunity for research in this area, to connect the Kabbalistic views of the soul with theories of God attachment.

God as Attachment Figure

Theories of God attachment are not new, but there is a growing body of literature and research around God attachment, especially in the field of psychology of religion.

“Theologian Gordon Kaufman was the first to connect attachment theory to our relationship with God. He observed, ‘The idea of God is the idea of an absolutely adequate attachment figure. ... God is thought of as a protective parent who is always reliable and always available to its children when they are in need.’”⁸ Interestingly, Kaufman was not a Christian—he could perhaps be labeled as agnostic.

Again, even though attachment to God is attachment to a symbol, difficulties and failures here may be affected by transformation and healing of one’s relationships to other human beings, as well as by new and deeper understandings of who God is (i.e., by changes in one’s ideas and images).⁹

Some researchers claim God attachment is based in one of two models: correspondence or compensation. A person whose God attachment corresponds to the way they attached to primary caregivers as children might have internalized images of God that are based on their attachment to their father or mother; additionally, their attachment to God might fluctuate between secure and insecure across the lifespan. Other researchers note that some people attach to God (or other entities such as pets, TV show characters, imaginary

⁷ Rabbi Yirmiyahu Ullman, “Soul,” *Ohr Somayach*, accessed March 9, 2019, <https://ohr.edu/744>.

⁸ Tim Clinton and Joshua Straub, *God Attachment: Why You Believe, Act, and Feel the Way You Do about God* (New York: Howard Books, 2010), 92.

⁹ Gordon D. Kaufman, *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the Concept of God* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1981), 77.

friends, or even ‘security blankets’) as a way to compensate for inadequate human attachment figures. Some researchers note,

[P]eople are surprisingly resourceful. Recent research shows that people sometimes seek (and find) feelings of security from a diverse array of non-human targets—things that are not human (e.g., pets), not alive (e.g., landmarks), and indeed may not exist at all (e.g., fictional characters). Although these relationships may not operate in precisely the same manner as close interpersonal attachments, studies show that they provide the person with many of the same psychological benefits, in particular the comforting assurance that someone or something will support them in times of need.¹⁰

However, if only compensation theory were correct then most adults with traumatic childhoods would be religious and many are not. A blend of compensation and correspondence theory makes more sense: “Research has provided evidence that both of these patterns may play a role in explaining attachment to God, in that people utilize compensation in explicit spirituality [God concepts], but employ correspondence at implicit levels of spirituality [God images].”¹¹ It is vital to explore the root metaphors that undergird a person’s beliefs and actions. These metaphors are woven throughout implicit memory.

The central idea is that repeated relational experiences with primary caregivers (attachment figures) are encoded in implicit memory as implicit relational representations—a gut level sense of ‘how to be with’ significant others. These implicit relational representations then function as an ‘attachment filter’ with God as one becomes attached to God, biasing an individual’s experiences of God toward that of human attachment relationships. We proposed a model of transformation of the God image that involves both nonverbal relational information from the therapist and an integration of this code with the symbolic, verbal code.¹²

¹⁰ Lucas A. Keefer, Mark J. Landau, and Daniel Sullivan, “Non-Human Support: Broadening the Scope of Attachment Theory,” *Social and Personality Psychology Compass* 8, no. 9 (2014): 524.

¹¹ Augustyn, Hall, Wang, and Hill, 3.

¹² Jacqueline L. Noffke and Todd W. Hall, “Attachment Psychotherapy and God Image” in Moriarty, Glendon, and Louis Hoffman, eds., *God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy: Research, Theory, and Practice* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2007), 77.

Semiotic understanding is important in this process to distinguish that which is being signified and what are the signifiers (metaphors) that communicate that meaning. Again we see here the somatic/behavioral, the psychological, and the spiritual converging.

Throughout Scripture we see references to God as a dependable refuge in times of trouble and a trustworthy source of life and sustenance. These are the basic ingredients for an attachment figure. When God is our attachment figure, he serves as our secure base from which we can explore the world.

To bring healing for women who have been spiritually traumatized, it could be helpful for them to discover where they are along the faith journey of spiritual, or simply human, development. While idealizing a direct path of spiritual development can be a hindrance for healing, normalizing the non-linear progression of faith can be helpful in ascertaining one's current stage of development and the condition of one's God attachment, and give a reference point for evaluation.

Stage 1: The Magical and God Attachment

Children relate to God almost entirely through their parents. In fact, I propose that a child's primary caregivers are "symbols" or stand-ins for God in their early years, especially as children's brains are writing those early attachment blueprints. God images are imprinted from birth. "For instance, based on their mental model that their distress will be comforted, securely-attached infants develop the capacity for autoregulation of emotion, freeing them to seek intimacy as an end in itself."¹³ This can correlate to intimacy with God later in life.

¹³ Ibid., 62.

Stage 2: Exploration and God Attachment

As children grow cognitively, God images continue to develop and God concepts come into play as well. They may begin to transfer some God attachment from their caregivers to God, depending on their understanding of God. Especially for children who enter school away from home, God as attachment figure can provide safe haven for them as they face inevitable challenges among peers and academics.

Stage 3: Allegiances and God Attachment

Teenagers and young adults have a great capacity for attachment to God. They are detaching more and more from their caregivers and are exploring identity. God images become more important than ever, especially since many churches by this time focus only on God concepts and may have no awareness of God images.

Stage 4: Deconstruction and God Attachment

Many spiritually traumatized women are residing within the deconstruction phase. They are completely disillusioned and no longer trust the sources of security that once were part of their reality. They may describe themselves as stuck or unraveling. While deconstruction is necessary for setting the stage for the next phases of spiritual development and healing, it is a difficult existence to remain in this stage long term. Taking the brave steps toward reconstruction needs to be especially celebrated for spiritually traumatized individuals.

Stage 5: Reconstruction and God Attachment

If a person emerges from Deconstruction with any level of faith intact, this stage frequently requires a leap in that faith, which proves to be too risky and painful for some. It requires what is sometimes called a second naïveté. Linards Jansons exegetes Paul Ricoeur's eloquent metaphor, "Beyond the desert of criticism, we long to be called again."¹⁴ Jansons describes three stages many people experience as they travel through this "desert:" pre-critical ("innocent, naïve realism"), critical ("hermeneutic of suspicion"), and post-critical ("accepts the genuine insights of the critical disciplines—no matter where they lead—but still continues in the path of faith").¹⁵ Jansons goes on to state,

Criticism does not just *reduce* these privileged texts to products of human myth-making, but also *restores* to them their power to symbolize. No longer do these stories elicit belief (in the everyday sense of the world), but as symbols they generate faith in God, and propose to our imaginations a certain way of being in the world.¹⁶

For some, they are comfortable finding a place of faith that is aware of and alive to the mystery of God found in science, quantum physics, and art, but not in concrete Christian religious beliefs. Jansons quotes John McQuiston II,

This Christianity does not insist that we believe that Jesus rose bodily from the dead, but it does ask us to become fully conscious that we, and all living beings, inexplicably arose from the dead, inert detritus of exploded stars. It asks us to become aware that we live in a ceaseless miracle that is ultimately unfathomable.¹⁷

¹⁴ Linards Jansons, "What Is the Second Naïveté? Engaging with Paul Ricoeur, Post-Critical Theology, and Progressive Christianity," Academia.edu, October 30, 2014, www.academia.edu/14690650/What_is_the_Second_Naivet%C3%A9_Engaging_with_Paul_Ricoeur_Post-Critical_Theology_and_Progressive_Christianity, 1.

¹⁵ Ibid., 1-2.

¹⁶ Ibid., 3.

¹⁷ Ibid., 7.

Those who come through Reconstruction holding the Bible as divinely inspired, even if not inerrant, could be uncomfortable with this claim since Scripture does indicate there is importance to the element of belief in Christ as historically and bodily raised from the dead.¹⁸

From a framework point of view, this is where a non-linear progression of spiritual growth and attachment becomes particularly useful. Finding one's metaphor(s) for their current state of God attachment can be enlightening.

Stage 6: Incarnation/Embodiment and God Attachment

Jansons provides a thought-provoking take on the second naivete and how a person can move forward in a post-critical, progressive Christianity. He explores the symbolism of Christianity and describes what he sees as the three W's: a worldview, a way, and a wager. He says,

The world is imagined according to the paradigm provided by the Scriptures and creeds, keeping in mind that imagination does not simply refer to that which is illusory, but is the 'organ' by which we make sense of all reality. ... But more than just a worldview, Christianity is also a way, something that engages the whole person and the living of their life. ... At heart, symbols are less about information, and more about transformation, less about believing certain things about the world, and more about engaging it in a way that is consistent with those symbols. ... Finally, the second naiveté defines Christian faith as a wager. Faith is the wager, the 'bet', that certain core symbols are worth living by, even when you know they are 'only' symbols. Faith is the confidence, the trust, that certain symbols can in fact open one's inmost being to the mystery of God, to the world, to oneself and to each other.¹⁹

While these ideas are helpful to an extent, there is danger in divorcing the signified and the signifier and wagering on "only symbols." The missing piece I see here, especially if

¹⁸ John 2:22; Acts 3:14-21; Romans 6:4-9; Romans 10:9; 1 Corinthians 15:12.

¹⁹ Jansons, 13-14.

this is the widely accepted view of progressive Christianity, is the relationship. Again, this is where God attachment is so important. Wagering on something that is mostly conditional upon your own self seems very risky to me; when the wager is on God and not yourself, that seems to provide a much more secure base.

Setting the Stage for Secure Attachment

Some researchers indicate that a person's earliest attachments—those with their parents or other primary caregivers—wire the brain for future interpersonal attachments.²⁰ Developmental trauma undermines an infant's sense of self and detrimentally affects his or her attachments in future relationships. The attachment between mother and infant is one of the most determining relationships a person has, and its influence extends to God attachment. Adults who were securely attached to their parents, especially their mothers, as infants and young children could be better prepared for a healthy God attachment.

For infants, the mother is the first and foundational relationship for all future interactions with beings other than self. In this way, mothers are the first metaphor for God that people have—she is the giver of life, the creator of the world, the spring of all sustenance, the source of all comfort, the maker of identity. Ideally, as a child or young person makes the decision to follow Jesus and as she grows in her relationship with God, these functions are gradually transferred from the mother to God. An individual's other relationships are vital as well—one cannot overlook the role of her father or other

²⁰ Milan Yerkovich and Kay Yerkovich, *How We Love: Discover Your Love Style, Enhance Your Marriage* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 13-36.

primary caregivers. But I suggest that /mother/ is the root metaphor, or God image, for the developing brain. “For instance, based on their mental model that their distress will be comforted, securely-attached infants develop the capacity for autoregulation of emotion, freeing them to seek intimacy as an end in itself.”²¹ We can see how having this approach to God would be extremely beneficial; deeply ingrained knowledge that you are never alone and that he is always there is a very healthy way to go through life. In this way, intimacy becomes the goal of relationships, rather than existing in an economy of exchange.

There is strong evidence that an infant’s right hemisphere bonds significantly with the right hemisphere of the caregiver, to the point that she patterns brain development after the caregiver’s. Researchers indicate

the infant’s right hemisphere is psychobiologically attuned to the output of the caregiver’s right hemisphere as a means of organizing and regulating immature mental and bodily states. This linking of the infant’s and caregiver’s minds occurs through affective interactions, which are primarily communicated through nonverbal social signals. ... This affective synchrony enables the infant’s mind to regulate itself in the moment and to use the output of the caregiver’s right cortex as a template for the hard-wiring of its expanding cognitive-affective capacities for attending to, appraising, and responding to variations in both external and internal information.²²

In other words, the infant’s mind is linked to the mother’s, and the infant operates out of that connection. It influences all her thoughts and actions to a great degree. We can see here how a secure attachment early in life sets the stage for later taking on the mind and attitude of Christ.²³

²¹ Noffke and Hall, 62.

²² Ibid., 60.

²³ Rom. 12:2; 1 Cor. 2:16; 2 Cor. 10:4-5; Eph. 4:23; Phil. 2:5; Col. 3:2; 1 Peter 1:13.

Those with secure God attachments tend to have an accurate view of themselves, a healthy estimation of their strengths and weaknesses, and take responsibility for their mistakes without losing their sense of worth.²⁴ The messages deeply ingrained within them—their core beliefs—are rooted in value, worth, dignity, and love. “Secure attachment describes those who hold a positive view of their self and others. Because they believe they are worthy of love, and that others are capable and accessible when they need them, secure people are comfortable with both closeness and independence.”²⁵ This balance of interdependence translates to the God attachment in those with secure attachments, and of course to their other relationships as well.

God Images and God Concepts

The quality and nature of one’s God attachment largely depends on her God images and God concepts. Some researchers do not differentiate between the two. I see distinctions in both, and I see also how they overlap. God images can be described as unconscious, implicit beliefs about God; subsymbolic emotional processing or “heart knowledge.”²⁶ God concepts can be described as conscious beliefs about God; symbolic emotional processing or “head knowledge.”²⁷ Garzon writes, “God concept and God image may be predominantly mediated through different neurophysiological pathways. God concept may be more left brain, hippocampally mediated and explicit memory

²⁴ Clinton and Straub, 67.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Michael J. Thomas, Glendon L. Moriarty, Edward B. Davis, and Elizabeth L. Anderson, “The Effects of a Manualized Group-Psychotherapy Intervention on Client God Images and Attachment to God: A Pilot Study,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 39, no. 1 (2011): 45.

²⁷ Ibid., 45.

dominant, and God image more right brain, amygdala-mediated, and implicit memory dominant.”²⁸ Some researchers state that “these two modes ‘are assumed to operate in parallel and to interact with each other’ (Epstein, 1994, p. 713).”²⁹

Based on my research, I hold that /parallel/ might not be the best metaphor for how God images and God concepts interact. Perhaps a better metaphor for the way God images and God concepts interact could be that of a spiral staircase. The God images are the foundation and handrail of the staircase, the space within which God concepts are built upward. God concepts can be built upon that base but ultimately conform to the initial structure in order to maintain homeostasis. Examining, healing, and growing the foundation and handrail—the God images—will lead to a more secure foundation for upward movement and maturity in God concepts.

God Images

God images are formed in infancy through early interactions with caregivers. We again see the significance of the mother-child attachment. These early years of interactions wire neural pathways that dictate how we relate to those who are other than self in the future. Davis, Moriarty, and Mauch write,

²⁸ Fernando Garzon, “A Neuroscientific Approach and the God Image” in Glendon Moriarty and Louis Hoffman, eds., *God Image Handbook for Spiritual Counseling and Psychotherapy: Research, Theory, and Practice* (Binghamton, NY: Haworth Press, 2007), 152.

²⁹ Edward B. Davis, Glendon L. Moriarty, and Joseph C. Mauch, “God Images and God Concepts: Definitions, Development, and Dynamics,” *Psychology of Religion and Spirituality* 5, no. 1 (2013): 53.

In essence, god images are context-sensitive, affect-laden mental/neural representations ... that are mediated primarily by implicit thoughts, memories, and knowledge, particularly implicit relational knowing (i.e., “gut-level procedural knowledge of how to perceive and be in relationship with a general or specific relational partner”...). They are learned chiefly via implicit, emotional, and incidental learning..., and are encoded mainly in subsymbolic and nonverbal-symbolic representational code... ³⁰

In other words, God images are stored in implicit, emotional, subsymbolic neural pathways. These pathways are flexible, but the older the neural pathway the potentially more difficult it is to modify. A professional therapist trained in attachment theory is often the best equipped person to help modify unhealthy God images. But there is massive potential for both healing and preventing trauma if pastors and church leaders were adequately trained in this area and had adequate resources for addressing these issues.

The processes involved with God image are also called the “low road brain circuit,” the implicit knowledge ingrained from infancy.

The right, low road brain circuits process information in rapid, parallel, holistic fashion, producing nonverbal representations of sensations and images, as opposed to the sequentially-processed, semantic representations of objects that dominate the “high road” brain circuits, particularly in the left hemisphere (LeDoux, 1996). ... In other words, in infancy and throughout the lifespan, the right hemisphere nonverbally depicts the “gist” or social meaning of events, rapidly producing a “gut-level” sense of the self in relation to others and initiating mechanisms for regulating affective homeostasis.³¹

In other words, God images are the “heart knowledge” of our attachment to God. They act as “a type of *attachment filter*... through which embodied, emotional experiences with a [Divine Attachment Figure] are mediated.”³² They provide a steady foundation for

³⁰ Ibid., 52.

³¹ Noffke and Hall, 59-60.

³² Thomas, et al., 45.

our attachment to Him. They may, however, be at odds with our high road brain circuits, our “head knowledge” God concepts, creating inconsistency and distress. At the core, our brains function on God images—signifieds that may not yet have signifiers. They are subsymbolic.

God Concepts

God concepts “may be thought of as a type of *doctrinal filter*, through which theological, abstract thoughts and discussions about a [Divine Attachment Figure] are mediated.”³³ God concepts are the neural representations that are most often targeted in today’s church discipleship programs. Scripture memory, Bible study, and seminary education are examples of ways we form God concepts. It is possible that these approaches affect God images but unless it is an explicit goal it is unlikely. God concepts are easier to address because they are “high road brain functions” and reside at the symbolic level of processing; we have things like words and pictures to signify God concepts. Davis, Moriarty, and Mauch write,

In essence, god concepts are context-sensitive, belief-laden mental/neural representations ... that are mediated primarily by explicit thoughts, memories, and knowledge, particularly semantic memory... They are learned chiefly via explicit and intentional learning..., and are encoded mainly in verbal-symbolic representational code...³⁴

These are different neural pathways, much like those in which God images are formed, but in a more concrete operational way. When we consider the construction of God concepts, we again see the vital significance of early attachments in their formation.

³³ Ibid., 45.

³⁴ Davis, Moriarty, and Mauch, 52.

To a large degree, the transmission of religious belief and practice occurs at the symbolic level of information processing. *Yet these externally-fashioned understandings and interactions with God are reshaped according to individuals' implicit relational representations.*³⁵

These researchers note that a person's God concepts are restructured to conform to her God images. This evidence fits well within our spiral staircase metaphor. Victor Counted writes that God concepts are "linguistic and verbal indicators that suggest a relationship with God and therefore not necessarily how an individual experience[s] God," and that God images are vital for attachment bonds.³⁶

We see how a person's God images and God concepts influence her thought processes, emotions, behavior, and decisions, whether she consciously realizes it or not. Ideally one's God images and God concepts will be congruent, rooted in Scripture, and consciously explored. The more harmonious these are, and the larger the mandorla between the two, the more secure the God attachment and thus the more secure all other relationships will be. Exploring God images, God concepts, and the nurturing of their mandorla, perhaps utilizing the spiral staircase metaphor to convey this, could be some of the defining features of an attachment-focused discipleship paradigm.

Secure God Attachment

Researchers have found that people's moral foundations are greatly influenced by whether they have a secure or insecure attachment to God; in one study, the researchers found God attachment to be more influential on moral foundations than even the

³⁵ Noffke and Hall, 62. Italics mine.

³⁶ Counted, 2.

attachments to a romantic partner or best friend.³⁷ Attachment theory holds that an attachment figure functions as both a safe haven (a reliable source of comfort) and a secure base (a dependable relationship from which to explore the world), someone to whom proximity is sought for comfort and guidance. Clinton and Straub note,

Our ability to seek proximity to God, turn to him as a safe haven, experience him as a secure base so we are free to explore, and grieve over perceived loss or brokenness in our relationship with God can be the difference between cognitively believing in God, as many of us do, and emotionally connecting, trusting, and walking with him every day.³⁸

Many followers of Jesus would agree they desire to have a close relationship with God, but may not always know how to achieve it. They may drift between churches in a search for the missing parts of their peace with God and for connections with other believers.

Individuals with a secure God attachment are functioning daily from healthy, biblically based core messages, even if they are not necessarily conscious of their God images and God concepts. They will likely display the fruit of the Spirit in their lives and exhibit strong, healthy attachments to others in the Body. Their spiral staircase of God images and God concepts is strong and can bear the weight of challenges and crises. Augustyn, et al. write, “secure attachments with God, others and one’s community are associated with, and likely contribute to, higher levels of spiritual development because they are more emotionally available and capable of coping with relational stress with God and their spiritual peers.”³⁹ Researchers have found that older individuals with a secure God attachment were more likely to see prayer have a positive effect on their

³⁷ David Njus and Katrina Okerstrom, “Anxious and Avoidant Attachment to God Predict Moral Foundations Beyond Adult Attachment,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 44, no. 3 (2016): 230-243.

³⁸ Clinton and Straub, 89.

³⁹ Augustyn, Hall, Wang, and Hill, 8.

psychological well-being, but insecurely attached individuals did not report prayer as making any difference for them; the quality of their attachment to God seems to make the difference.⁴⁰

There is a strong biblical base for an attachment-focused discipleship paradigm; Scripture is full of God attachment imagery and metaphors. “Coping with stress and troubling times in life is much easier when Christians speak of Jesus being ‘by one’s side,’ ‘holding one’s hand,’ or ‘holding one in his arms,’”⁴¹ not to mention numerous verses describing God as a strong tower, a solid rock, and other refuge metaphors. As discussed in previous chapters, we also see throughout the Gospels Jesus speak in attachment metaphors such as vine and branches (John 15), bread and wine (John 6), and at one point he even compares himself to a mother hen (Luke 13:34). God created us with the view of being attached to us.

Important to our discussion, especially considering the growing population of religiously unaffiliated, are the interpersonal attachments people form within churches. “It seems likely that the development of a secure attachment to God, in the midst of continued operation of insecure relational representations, is mediated at least to some extent by affiliative human relationships with a therapist, members of one’s spiritual community, and spiritual leaders.”⁴² In other words, God intends for his people to function together. God has indicated through Scripture that his followers are each a vital

⁴⁰ Matt Bradshaw and Blake Victor Kent, “Prayer, Attachment to God, and Changes in Psychological Well-Being in Later Life,” *Journal of Aging and Health* (2017): 898264316688116.

⁴¹ Clinton and Straub, 89.

⁴² Noffke and Hall, 69.

part of the Body of Christ. This metaphor provides many opportunities for describing secure attachment.

A secure God attachment eradicates idolatry by harmonizing all other relationships in light of one's relationship with God. Kaufman⁴³ writes,

Attachment to God, through relativizing all other attachments, can free the self from idolatrous bondage to them. God, thus, is finally the only appropriate counterpart to the self-conscious self. ... For the self in a godless world, human existence, and the most characteristic and cherished human values—loyalty, love, truth, justice, beauty, meaning—have no secure grounding or foundation in the ultimate scheme of things.⁴⁴

When one's God attachment is healthy and thriving, all other relationships can't help but be positively affected.

Insecure God Attachment

Those who are suffering from insecure attachment often have negative core beliefs about themselves. Many have internalized messages and wounds from their parents or other caregivers in childhood that have led them to believe they are unworthy of love. Those who had insecure attachments as infants

experience a chronic, implicit concern with achieving felt security and rely on alternative, maladaptive mechanisms to compensate for their deficits in autoregulation. ... In this way, implicit memory is the means by which past events affect future interpersonal perceptions and responses, creating stable patterns of relationship.⁴⁵

⁴³ Kaufman holds that there is not only one "concept/image" of God, but many; that there is no concrete experience of God. "God" is a symbol. I imagine he would reject the idea of Jesus and/or claims of a God incarnate.

⁴⁴ Kaufman, 75.

⁴⁵ Noffke and Hall, 62.

This influences their internal dialogue, their relationship to God, and the way they believe God views them. Unfortunately, some churches reinforce these negative messages through an imbalanced focus on sin, the worthlessness of humanity, and the wrath of God, whether they do so intentionally or not. Insecurely attached individuals' God images and God concepts are not congruent or harmonized. Their spiral staircases are damaged—the handrails might have come off, some steps might be missing, or the foundation might be crumbling. Augustyn, et al. discovered “that attachment style played a more important role in understanding the spiritual outcomes of those in the low spiritual practices group compared to the high spiritual practices group. ... The weight of how their spirituality is lived out may fall predominantly on their attachment history.”⁴⁶

An additional challenge to healing broken God attachments is that many people are largely unaware of the attachment process.

For instance, some insecurely attached believers remain unconscious of their negative God images or do not experience the painful affect associated with their conscious, negative beliefs. In other words, their painful, gut-level experiences of God are dissociated from awareness.⁴⁷

Part of the work that needs to be done for spiritually traumatized individuals is to become more aware of their own pasts, to explore the ways they interacted with their primary caregivers as children, and to investigate how God was misrepresented in their trauma.

This work of repairing dissociation may often need the help of a professional psychotherapist.

⁴⁶ Augustyn, et al., 8-9.

⁴⁷ Noffke and Hall, 63.

What are some ways an insecure God attachment might manifest? I propose that nearly all ministry problems stem from some degree of an insecure God attachment. Many patterns of negative behavior can be traced back to attachment style and attachment issues. The God images (subsymbolic level) and God concepts (symbolic level) people hold will influence their thoughts, motivations, and actions in ways that many individuals may not understand and of which they may not be aware. Helping people to connect behaviors to these inner beliefs is a vital way to address not just behavior, but the underlying attachment patterns that are feeding into thought processes and cyclical patterns of resulting behavior.

Many people could be unaware of their attachment style or the quality of their attachment to God. Indeed, many churches do not address attachment or use the language of attachment at all. It is a painful process to face one's negative core beliefs, and unless this happens within a trusting relationship these beliefs are unlikely to be addressed; instead mere behavior modification will likely be the goal. Perhaps we see this dynamic at play in people who chronically move from church to church, or "get saved" over and over yet never seem to find peace with God. It could be that they have dissociated parts of themselves in order to protect themselves from pain.

Bucci (2003) asserts that maladaptive mental models of the self and others inherently involve a level of dissociation, which is nonconsciously but deliberately maintained in order to avoid the disorganizing affect elicited when divergent images of the self and/or others are experienced simultaneously.⁴⁸

This sort of disintegration can stem from developmental trauma, and can contribute to unhelpful dualistic thinking and create a resistance to paradox. For instance, dissociation

⁴⁸ Ibid., 63.

could be at the root for people who can't reconcile the "God of the Old Testament" with the "God of the New Testament," who perhaps cannot accept God as having multiple facets of character. For these individuals, God must be either all "love" or all "wrath." People with insecure God attachments are likely unable to integrate their lives in Christ, perhaps more drawn to metaphors of prioritizing, categorizing, and compartmentalizing their relationships with God and others. They also could be more likely to categorize and rank sin, viewing some behaviors as more sinful than others. These individuals might relationally operate on an economy of exchange rather than pursuing intimacy for intimacy's sake.

"This 'cutting of the subsymbolic cord' that occurs in dissociation results in implicit appraisal and response patterns that continue to organize interpersonal relationships along maladaptive lines despite maintenance of contrary, symbolic beliefs (Bucci, 2003)."⁴⁹ In other words, outward actions alone may not be sufficient to reconstruct implicit God images. We can see that people with insecure God attachments, no matter how good or bad their behavior might seem, are fractured at their cores. Church leaders need resources and training to support these individuals and to address these realities.

Insecure God attachment can be further described using the standard attachment theory categories: anxious-preoccupied, dismissive-avoidant, and disorganized. These terms further describe the nature of the insecure attachment style and usually extend to most of the individual's relationships; however, in an attachment-focused discipleship paradigm care should be taken not to oversimplify persons and their unique challenges.

⁴⁹ Noffke and Hall, 64.

Anxious-Preoccupied

Linda is a mother of four children in her late 40's. She recalls that as a teen and young adult, she "got saved" on a regular basis by praying the sinner's prayer at nearly every church service altar call. She was constantly in a state of unsettled anxiety about her salvation and position with God. Linda has been baptized four times in four different denominations on her search for spiritual, emotional, and mental security.

"Ambivalent/preoccupied individuals respond to their caregivers' inconsistent availability by hyperactivating their attachment system as a strategy aimed at ensuring receipt of comfort (Main, Kaplan, & Cassidy, 1985)."⁵⁰

Clinton and Straub write, "Anxious people hold to a negative view of their self and an unrealistically positive view of others. As a result they are usually anxious in relationships and have an unhealthy fear of abandonment because they believe they are not worthy of love."⁵¹ These individuals are probably those who come across to others as clingy, or could also be those who are overextended by volunteering for too much at church. Noffke and Hall note that those with this insecure attachment pursue a relationship with God not for intimacy's sake, but "as a means to self-regulation" and taking away anxiety.⁵² However, this only serves to reinforce the idea that they are "unlovable and that nurturance is not reliably available, rendering them overly-dependent on emotionally intense religious experiences to achieve a sense of security with God."⁵³

⁵⁰ Ibid., 62.

⁵¹ Clinton and Straub, 67.

⁵² Noffke and Hall, 65-66.

⁵³ Ibid., 65-66.

Further, we see these individuals may be more likely to interact with God not for intimacy, but perhaps just for help. Noffke and Hall note,

research indicates that preoccupied believers primarily engage in help-seeking prayer, evincing their implicit mistrust of God's reliability and their attempts to maintain the perceived fragile bond by approaching Him in a clingy manner (Byrd & Boe, 2001). In addition, ... [anxious-preoccupied attachment] is associated with sudden conversion and increases in religious belief and activity following attachment disruptions.⁵⁴

Some ways we may see this manifest are in a need to do every new Bible study, go to every church event, or to seek emotional highs and mountaintop experiences.

As parents, these caregivers are insecure about their own attachment figures' ability to soothe them. "Preoccupied caregivers... become flooded with anxiety, rendering them inconsistently sensitive to their infants' actual signals. This causes them to intrude on their infants' states with their own needs."⁵⁵ We begin to see here how unhealthy generational attachment patterns come to exist and perpetuate within families.

Dismissive-Avoidant

Rachel is a married woman in her mid-20's. She frequently leads women at her church in Bible verse memorization groups, and writes a blog dedicated to reformed theology and complementarian views of marriage. She also believes emotions are the enemy of spiritual growth, and writes posts critiquing the teaching of prominent women teachers who are too "touchy feely." She prides herself in being logical. Rachel is an example of a dismissive-avoidant attachment style. "Avoidant/dismissive individuals accommodate to their attachment figures' consistent rebuffs of their bids for nurturance

⁵⁴ Ibid., 65-66.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 65.

by deactivating their attachment system activation as a strategy for modulating their distress and increasing their sense of felt security.”⁵⁶ Rachel has shut down large parts of herself in an effort to survive.

Clinton and Straub note, “Avoidant people are the opposite of anxious people, in that avoidants have an overly positive view of their self, but an excessively negative view of others. People who are avoidant are uncomfortable with closeness and tend to become overly self-reliant because they do not believe others will be there for them.”⁵⁷ These individuals may appear cold or angry to others, as though they do not desire any depth of relationship, or they could be those who focus on intellectual assent and prefer to pursue doctrinal issues rather than address emotions. They might come across as legalistic or be obsessed with overcoming sin.

When these individuals were young children, they probably internalized the lack of a consistent attachment figure in ways that convinced them they were on their own and responsible for their own well-being. This primed them to distrust their own feelings and to distrust others in general. Nofke and Hall note,

Over time, this emotionally barren and noncooperative pattern of communication establishes an implicit representation of the attachment figure as nonresponsive in the infant’s mind, rendering emotional closeness uncomfortable.⁵⁸

Some of the ways we see this attachment style manifest are in an avoidance of intimacy and instead they have relationships with God in which they

⁵⁶ Ibid., 62.

⁵⁷ Clinton and Straub, 67-68.

⁵⁸ Noffke and Hall, 64.

tend to use forms of prayer that minimize a sense of closeness with God, dissociating their attachment arousal from a more rational relationship with God. In other words, avoidant believers experience a more distant, intellectualized relationship with God and remain defensively self-sufficient from Him, replicating their early experiences of feeling completely responsible for their care and of interacting with a caregiver who is removed and unmoved by their needs.⁵⁹

We can see how this type of attachment can be disruptive to a person's holistic spiritual growth and development, and how avoiding the potential pain of intimacy seems to give these persons a false sense of safety. Independence is rewarded in our society; sometimes it is even glamorized. But as we see here, this is not a healthy way to relate with God and it does not nurture strong attachments with God and others.

Disorganized

Emma is a single woman in her early 50's. She has struggled with various addictions for most of her life. She has been divorced twice and her children live far away. She drifts from church to church hoping to find a family of people to help support her but finds that most of the church leadership and members do not understand the nuances of her situations, so she constantly feels rejected. Even when people in churches try to reach out to Emma, she is unable to accept their help and usually fears they have an ulterior motive. "This 'cutting of the subsymbolic cord' that occurs in dissociation results in implicit appraisal and response patterns that continue to organize interpersonal relationships along maladaptive lines despite maintenance of contrary, symbolic beliefs."⁶⁰ For many people who have experienced spiritual trauma, their daily survival depends on a level of dissociation.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 64.

Clinton and Straub write, “Fearful people have a negative view of both their self and others. These adults have a very difficult time with intimacy and closeness, and they often avoid relationships altogether.”⁶¹ These individuals may deal with mental illnesses, addictions, homelessness, or deep identity issues. However, they could also manifest in some subtle combination of the anxious-preoccupied and the dismissive-avoidant, or even cycle between them. These individuals have likely experienced abuse or neglect from their childhood caregivers, compounding the fracture of dissociation.

Perhaps the most common trait we would see among these persons is an overwhelming sense of shame.

Those of us who endured abuse and abandonment as children have many hurdles to overcome ... They didn’t believe they were worthy of love, and they were sure no one really loved them. They internalized all the twisted, evil messages, and they may have concluded, “When I’m abused, it makes perfect sense—because I deserve it.”⁶²

We can see the deep compassion people with disorganized attachments need.

Unfortunately, many churches are not equipped to help, or even worse, compound their attachment fractures by asking them to leave their congregations.

Healing God Attachments

For those with insecure God attachments, the severing of the subsymbolic and the symbolic must be reattached; “new neural networks” must be formed. “Thus, structural change of the maladaptive schema occurs through referential activity or the process of

⁶¹ Clinton and Straub, 68.

⁶² Ibid., 190.

linking subsymbolic experience to images and words.”⁶³ Change takes place as we repair our spiral staircases—as we address our God images and God concepts. It takes time, patience, and a safe relationship with a trusted healing companion, a relationship in which individuals can explore their core beliefs and God images, the wounds they’ve experienced, their coping mechanisms, and bring all of this to Jesus for healing and momentum. In other words, it takes discipleship.

As Clinton and Straub point out,

We have to be wise about whom to trust, but we simply won’t make progress if we don’t find someone who is secure and trustworthy. When we find a friend, a counselor, a pastor, or a group that is committed to authentic relationships, we find something beautiful.⁶⁴

The group psychotherapy study from Thomas, et al. revealed that the interpersonal input and output, universality, cohesiveness, and catharsis found in the group experience had a positive effect on the group participants’ God images.⁶⁵ These interpersonal dynamics often can exist in a church’s small groups. Could discipleship relationships that are focused on repairing God images, God concepts, and building healthy attachments with God and others begin to meet this need, or is this work best left to psychotherapists? Victor Counted states, “Given the reality of the God image experience amongst Christians, hermeneutical figures have a responsibility to address God-image-related cases in a constructive way.”⁶⁶

⁶³ Noffke and Hall, 66.

⁶⁴ Clinton and Straub, 192-193.

⁶⁵ Thomas, et al., 54.

⁶⁶ Counted, 12.

It seems likely that churches' discipleship attempts that center on intellectual growth and behavior modification are falling short in creating deep, lasting attachments to God and the Body of Christ. It could be that these sorts of "spiral staircase" changes are not likely to happen outside of a therapeutic relationship. Nofke and Hall note,

Lasting therapeutic change in believers' images of and relational patterns with God, thus, requires therapists to use the power of emotion, metaphor, and the therapeutic bond to access clients' subsymbolic experience of God. Providing more accurate explicit theological beliefs, in and of itself, will not lead to lasting change in clients' experiences of, and relational patterns, with God.⁶⁷

Is it possible for church leaders, clergy and laity alike, to be trained in and oriented toward secure God attachment and to have resources to help the people in their care? Is there a way to prevent the levels of dysfunction we are currently experiencing in churches across the United States, dysfunction which could be tied to insecure God attachment? A holistic, attachment-focused approach to discipleship could be the key to creating churches made up of more stable and healthy people.

⁶⁷ Noffke and Hall, 69.

CHAPTER 5:

HOLISTIC HEALING OF BROKEN GOD ATTACHMENTS

Fabienne is 35 years old and a woman of color. Her father died when she was young and her mother was abusive to her throughout childhood. She frequently experiences panic attacks and depression. As a young person, she saw beauty and spirituality in science. She pursued a career in physics and eventually started attending an evangelical church. However, the women leaders of the church vocally scorned her for her belief in science. Fabienne held to her relationship with Jesus Christ but turned away from the institutional church and to the teachings of Dharma instead. Through mindfulness meditation, Fabienne discovered her God images were of an angry white man trying to lynch her, and an angry mother who punished her for being sad. She sought out spiritual healing and through that process, began to imagine God as a beautiful dancing woman, then as a mother nursing a baby. As she spiritually matured and meditated on the teachings of Jesus, she began to also imagine God as the wind in the sails of a boat, as a campfire warming the people around it, as a table of choice foods, and as a farmer sowing seed. Fabienne began to envision herself in each of Jesus' parables and to see herself sitting at his feet with the disciples. She recently began to see her panic attacks happen less frequently and when they do occur, they are brief and lessening in intensity because she envisions the Spirit of God breathing in and out with her to help her find a sense of calm. Fabienne is seeing her God attachments healed.

All healing involves Jesus, the Source of all life and restoration. We join Him in his restorative work. Each individual follower of Christ embodies Jesus in his or her unique manifestations. We can think of the body metaphor in this simplified way: bones

provide structure and stability; muscles provide movement and power; skin protects and expresses. A person's spiritual body works in much the same way, and injury can happen at any or all levels.

We take the body metaphor a step further when we consider the collective body of Christ—certain denominations or tribes might emphasize “bones” (e.g., God concepts, doctrine), others might emphasize “muscles” (e.g., social justice), and others might emphasize “skin” (e.g., spiritual gifts, charismatic experiences). Again, we can see the benefit of a holistic, whole-body approach to the collective faith expression as well—all the systems of the body working together to produce fruit.

Where does Jesus fit into the body metaphor, for both the individual and the collective? Jesus is the head (Ephesians 4:15-16). He is the source, the authority, the vital connection that keeps everything growing and active. All regeneration and restoration flows from him. Those who seek to embody Christ are to have his mind within them (1 Corinthians 2:16). Jesus as the head and mind of the body provides the necessary unity, which in turn allows for and produces diversity in embodiment.

As we've established, embodying Jesus is both simple and complex, and the body is prone to injury. Repairing those injuries is also both simple and complex, and the vine and branches metaphor provides a container for the healing process.

The seed goes through a type of death, but that dying process is the catalyst for new growth. The growth takes place underground as the root system develops. This may take a very long time and it can feel impossible to observe what is happening. But with proper tending, the sprout will eventually push through the ground, grow branches that can reach out and take in more sources of nourishment, and grow into new spaces. These

branches might provide protection or nourishment for other life as well. Through time and maturity, the plant can produce fruit, which has the capability to reproduce into new plants.

In healing, there is a “Trinity” of people involved: Jesus, the wounded, and the tender. Jesus of course is, as we’ve established, the Healer: the source of all restoration that occurs. But he does this work through his Body—those who are embodying him. These people become tenders, people who tend the soil, water the seed, remove weeds, and provide witness to the healing process of the wounded. The wounded is responsible for her own work of healing; she must do the labor, but she does not do it alone or without adequate resources. She will bond with Jesus first and foremost, and in an ideal situation she will also have a tender, a healing companion, along the way.

The healing process is very much the same as the plant’s growth process. Wounded individuals must allow themselves to fully face and accept the truth of what has happened to them, along with all the negative emotions and memories that accompany trauma. In many ways, this is a death.¹ There is not a lot of reciprocal human interaction within this specific space; it is the wounded and Jesus. Within the context of a healing relationship, those tending the wounds can provide hope of what is to come.

Once the wounded has experienced some degree of healing in her roots, she will be able to start branching out into other areas of life in a reciprocal way.

Eventually, the wounded begins interacting with the larger network, the collective expression of the Body. She grafts into the existing Vine. She grows into being a tender.

¹ Romans 6:8; Colossians 2:20; Colossians 3:3; Galatians 2:20.

She tends the soil of her environment to make room for other seeds to go through their planting and growth, providing empathy and encouragement.

We all are both wounded and tender. It is a part of the beautiful paradox of being humans in Christ.

Researchers have found that there “are 20 states in which no religious group comprises a greater share of residents than the religiously unaffiliated. These states tend to be more concentrated in the Western US, although they include a couple of New England states, as well.”² Women are leaving evangelicalism in the United States due to many factors. One of these is the prioritization of self-freedom. Nick Spencer describes it as “moral self-authorization,” saying,

wherever one turns, ‘moral self-authorization’ dominates, a state in which ever more people believe that authentic self-expression is the only right way to live. In some regards this is the antipathy to the disciplined self of the post-Reformation period. We are undergoing an ‘expressive revolution’ in which ‘choice’ is deemed an ‘all-trumping argument.’ The result is that when individuals do react against the constraints of exclusive humanism, they do so in a now bewildering range of diffuse, individuated, disembedded ways, creating an unprecedented ‘new spiritual landscape.’³

This wandering commitment to non-commitment reveals an issue with attachment, both with God and between Christians. While many are detaching from evangelicalism, some are searching for ways to maintain a relationship with God and the Body of Christ, though not within traditional structures and strategies. These believers are seeking an authentic personal faith that can withstand the loneliness of our disconnected culture,

² Daniel Cox and Robert P. Jones, “America’s Changing Religious Identity,” PRRI, last modified September 6, 2017, <https://www.prri.org/research/american-religious-landscape-christian-religiously-unaffiliated/>.

³ Nick Spencer, *The Evolution of the West: How Christianity Has Shaped Our Values* (London, UK: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2016), 149.

while simultaneously following human instincts for belonging to a group of likeminded people. Brené Brown defines true belonging as

the spiritual practice of believing in and belong to yourself so deeply that you can share your most authentic self with the world and find sacredness in both being a part of something and standing alone in the wilderness. ... The only thing we know for certain is that on this quest we'll need to learn how to navigate the tension of many paradoxes along the way, including the importance of *being with* and *being alone*.⁴

This paradox of “being with and being alone” is one with which many believers struggle. We live in a time when God is unfolding opportunities for a new discipleship framework to emerge and embrace this paradox.

We can learn much from psychology and neuroscience about practices that have for too long been discarded as unacceptable to Christians. This new research may provide the very tools God has given us for creating a new paradigm in the rubble of the collapsed white evangelical empire.

Roots: Stabilizing Rhythms and Neuroplastic Healing

As discussed in Chapter 2, Jesus’ metaphor of the vine and branches provides a helpful picture of the healing process, especially when attachment with God is the goal.

Individual healing work begins with drawing nutrients through the roots of Jesus—joining him by dying to sin (in the case of the wounded, the sin done against her and any damaging coping mechanisms she has inherited along the way). This involves a change and renewing of the mind, forming new neural pathways, and replacing lies with Truth.

⁴ Brené Brown, *Braving the Wilderness: The Quest for True Belonging and the Courage to Stand Alone* (New York: Random House, 2017), 40-41. Italics in original.

Truth (Jesus) brings healing. The truth of pain must be fully acknowledged. Dignity must be restored. The death that occurs must be fully experienced; all the fear must be faced. Jesus said, “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears much fruit” (John 12:24, NASB).⁵ The way to abide in Jesus, to have a true bond with him (and then others), is to die. We die to sin—not just our own sin but the sins of others that have injured us. We must go with Jesus into and through the depths, knowing that he will never leave us and that resurrection is coming.

Researcher Keith Edwards describes the “triune brain” first identified by neuroscientist Paul McLean in the 1970s, noting that each subsystem of the Triune Brain “makes a unique and important contribution to human consciousness. Understanding these three subsystems can inform our approach to spiritual formation practices.”⁶

Edwards describes the three parts as a) the somatic/emotion/survival brain (implicit memory and God images; body movement important in healing traumas); b) the perceiving/feeling/relational brain (episodic, relational memories; requires experiential learning to heal traumas); and c) the symbolizing/reasoning/transcending brain (God concepts and problem-solving). He notes that “bodily sensations and emotions are the product of out-of-awareness mental processes. Distributed and interconnected neural

⁵ Another way to translate this, especially given that John goes into the vine and branches “abiding” metaphor in chapter 15, is that unless the seed dies it “abides alone.”

⁶ Keith Edwards, “When Word Meets Flesh: A Neuroscience Perspective on Embodied Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34, no. 3 (2015): 232-233.

circuits of the brain process stimuli and activate sensations, emotions, images, and thoughts.”⁷ Edwards discusses the importance of the “doing” and “being” states of mind;

The being state of mind is also referred to as meta-consciousness or awareness-of-awareness. The being state of mind is a dual mode of consciousness in which we are simultaneously the person having the experience (me) and the person observing the person having the experience (I).⁸

As Edwards goes on to discuss, mindfulness meditation is focusing on one’s current real-life experience. The “I” and “me” interact as the individual reflects on her current emotions, bodily sensations, and thoughts to focus attention. With time and practice, she can regulate her reactions to different situations and maintain a sense of wellbeing regardless of the outward circumstances. More will be said on this topic in a later section on mindfulness practices. Healing spiritual trauma requires the integration of the “triune brain” and a high level of self-awareness as well as God-awareness. More will be said on this subject later in the chapter.

Stabilizing Rhythms

Connecting with rituals and traditions may seem counterintuitive for those who have left organized religion, but for someone who has been destabilized by trauma it can be re-stabilizing to connect to a rhythm that is already in place. There are various “ancient” spiritual disciplines, but some that can be especially helpful for those who have been spiritually traumatized are prayer/meditation, solitude, and fasting. For some, the labyrinth can combine all of these spiritual practices.

⁷ Ibid., 234.

⁸ Ibid., 234.

Labyrinths provide a beautiful symbol of an inward spiritual journey (they also frequently look a bit like a brain). Labyrinths provide “walking meditation, a path of prayer and an archetypal blueprint where psyche meets Spirit” as the person focuses on releasing on the way in, receiving at the center, and returning to the world to offer that which she has received.⁹ There is an entire website, the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator sponsored by the Labyrinth Society and Veriditas,¹⁰ available to help people find ones near them. There also are individual “finger labyrinths” that some artisans make from wood, or even for printing on paper. This outward symbol of an inward journey can be taken alone or with others.

One of the most freeing experiences a Christian person can have is being alone. Without a human other, an individual can come to face self in its varying forms, embracing both positive and negative traits and feelings, and find freedom to be unique, particular, even strange, knowing she is fully acceptable to Christ. The individual finds herself steady on her own two feet, firmly rooted in her identity in Christ, saturated with the confidence of possessing eternal significance. Paradoxically, she has found herself most free when she is most committed to Christ. We find that

⁹ Veriditas, “New to the Labyrinth?”, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://www.veriditas.org/New-to-the-Labyrinth>.

¹⁰ Worldwide Labyrinth Locator, accessed January 7, 2019, <https://labyrinthlocator.com/>.

differentiated faith occurs when an individual's relationship with God is balanced by unity and uniqueness. Such faith does not lead to enmeshment with or detachment from God. This is important. Some faith traditions emphasize unity with God to the extent that the unique will, gifts and interests of an individual are subjugated to the perceived will of God. . . . At the same time, neither are we to emphasize uniqueness to the extent of losing our intimacy with God or God's family.¹¹

We see the benefit of a focus on perichoresis in this as well.

The path of coming to a place of such freedom is wrought with pain and hardship, which is a large part of why so many individuals abandon the pursuit, if they are aware of it at all, and get stuck on the sidelines. Another reason so many believers are codependent or disconnected is that for the most part, the church has proved entirely incapable of journeying with or leading people on the path to recovered solitude. People's attachments with others are inadequate at best and obliterated at worst, until and unless they can be truly comfortable in their own skin apart from anyone else but God.

One of the most difficult aspects of developing sense of self is that for so long, many Christians have been unaware of how important attachment in infancy is to the process of self-concept development. As discussed in previous chapters, this attachment blueprint takes us through our subsequent relationships. "Through adolescence and into adulthood it is the individual's ongoing catalog of experiences with others that shapes the reciprocating self, growing into maturity measured by the ability to love and care for others."¹² The labyrinth of life requires that we attend to the injuries to our attachments to God and others. Bessel Van der Kolk notes that,

¹¹ Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstye King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016), 334.

¹² Balswick, Ebstye King, and Reimer, 93.

Our relationship maps are implicit, etched into the emotional brain and not reversible simply by understanding how they were created. . . . Being in synch with oneself and with others requires the integration of our body-based senses—vision, hearing, touch, and balance.¹³

More will be said on being in sync with self and others, along with integration of senses.

The far-reaching implications of the attachment process need to be incorporated into post-evangelical discipleship. Parenting is one of the most crucial reciprocal relationships God has given us, and for far too long Christian parenting has been approached without enough thought to the psychological sides of child development. “Despite the increased interest in the relationship between the sciences and faith, there is a relatively small, albeit growing, body of research and theory on spiritual and religious development and a lack of theologically informed understanding of human development.”¹⁴ The prepositional approach¹⁵ to parenting that has been the hallmark of evangelicalism must be replaced with an incarnational approach. This will set the stage for building a church of healthier humans.

Broken or unhealthy attachments are at the root of many psychological problems. Tragically, many individuals, whether they have left church yet or not, have been traumatized to some degree. This leads to innumerable hardships in daily life and

¹³ Bessel Van der Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2015), 124.

¹⁴ Balswick, Ebstyne King, and Reimer, 31-32.

¹⁵ I use this term to describe parenting frameworks that focus on behavior—total compliance and obedience versus morality development, and punishment/reward versus developing empathy and personal responsibility. Some evangelical parents tend to view children primarily as sinners in need of redemption, rather than as complex, immature human beings. Many Christian pastors perpetuate this viewpoint with parenting advice that is largely given from the perspective of Neo-Calvinist reformed theology, and promotes physical punishment of children (for example, in this interview John Piper states he believes Jesus would spank children and that people who don’t spank have “a wrong view of God”: <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/would-jesus-spank-a-child>). This teaching tends to lack any information on the development of the human brain and fails to consider the longterm neurobiological and neuropsychological effects of punitive parenting approaches.

functioning for these individuals. It is no wonder that for decades people have turned to church for help; church is supposed to be a place of healing. But for so many this has failed to be their experience and the church becomes a source of injury rather than healing. To be fair, “Nobody can ‘treat’ a war, or abuse, rape, molestation, or any other horrendous event, for that matter; what has happened cannot be undone. But what *can* be dealt with are the imprints of the trauma on body, mind, and soul...”¹⁶ In other words, the church needs to consider the weight of being a place of refuge and repair for those who have been victimized, a safe space in which the imprints of trauma can be examined and healed. Spiritual disciplines and connecting to shared liturgy can provide a dependable rhythm for such healing.

A healing relationship with Christ requires another paradox: both surrender and action. The believer is an active participant in her healing, empowered by the Holy Spirit. We see the need for a move toward an interweaving of both intellect and emotion, both the letter of the law and the Spirit of the law.

The rational, executive brain is good at helping us understand where feelings come from ... However, the rational brain cannot *abolish* emotions, sensations, or thoughts ... Understanding *why* you feel a certain way does not change *how* you feel. But it can keep you from surrendering to intense reactions ... However, the more frazzled we are, the more our rational brains take a backseat to our emotions.¹⁷

More will be discussed about the various parts of the thinking and feeling brain and how they interact in a later section.

¹⁶ Van der Kolk, 205.

¹⁷ Ibid., 207. Italics in original.

If we want to experience true healing and see the people in our lives walk in freedom with Christ, followers of Christ must explore our roles as healers. There is so much at stake and so much to gain. “Recovery from trauma involves the restoration of executive functioning and, with it, self-confidence and the capacity for playfulness and creativity.”¹⁸ Post-evangelical discipleship must encompass restoration of executive function, “for God is not a God of confusion, but of peace” (1 Corinthians 14:33); it also must encompass restoration of creative joy. Spiritual disciplines, liturgy, and labyrinths can create space for security and a dependable rhythm toward the reintegration of the self, which can lead to a reciprocal self.

Reintegration of Self

As the Christian interfaces with others, she finds old wounds revisited or triggered. She needs to be equipped with tools to restore her to optimal functioning. This requires time and discipline in internal reflection and reintegration of self.

There are many people who cannot afford therapeutic services, or they live in areas that do not attract well-qualified Christian therapists. Thankfully, mindfulness is an integrating and therapeutic practice that is not unlike prayer and Scripture meditation, and more and more Christians are becoming open to the concept. There are many trainings available from Buddhist or secular humanist perspectives. Christian Mindfulness, an organization in the UK, provides online courses and other trainings in mindfulness from a Christian viewpoint.¹⁹

¹⁸ Ibid., 207.

¹⁹ See <https://christianmindfulness.co.uk/>.

The Creator of the universe shows off his handiwork with the human brain. The prefrontal cortex is the part of the brain that houses higher level thinking, inhibition, advance planning, decision making, and delay of gratification. It doesn't fully develop until age 18 to 21. It is always overridden by the limbic system, which processes emotions. The limbic system can be in threat mode or reward mode; in threat mode, it releases cortisol into the bloodstream (activating the fight, flight, or freeze reaction), and in reward mode, it releases dopamine. Cortisol lasts in the body much longer than dopamine; in fact, our brains have what is called the negativity bias—people process negative experiences nine times more strongly than positive ones in order to survive.²⁰ But dopamine leads to much better prefrontal cortex functioning. Over time, all these interactions between our limbic system and prefrontal cortex become experience, which feeds the basal ganglia system—intuitive wisdom. When you've invested a lot of time and experience into something, the basal ganglia can take over in a stressful situation and do an even better job than the prefrontal cortex.²¹ Tapping into that “gut feeling” or trained instinct can be very powerful. This is what we develop over time in our relationship with God.

When it comes to learning, our mirror neurons lead us to mirror actions more strongly than words. Mirror neurons enable empathy and communication; we're born with this constant ability to feel what others feel. When we view someone as a leader, our mirror neurons are in high gear to replicate what that person does and says.²² That leader

²⁰ Hans Hagemann, “Friederike Fabritius Presenting to Top Executives in Barcelona,” 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zuTyq3lcl8g>.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid.

creates the culture for a group, whether she is aware of that fact or not. Parents, teachers, church leaders, or even friend group leaders need to be aware of their influence. If they are imitating Christ, their influence can be very powerful for good, but if not, their influence can be quite damaging.

Van der Kolk notes that the only way to

consciously access the emotional brain is through self-awareness, i.e. by activating the medial prefrontal cortex, the part of the brain that notices what is going on inside us and thus allows us to feel what we're feeling. (The technical term for this is 'interoception'—Latin for 'looking inside.')

Most of our conscious brain is dedicated to focusing on the outside world... However, that does not help us manage ourselves.²³

Knowing what we do about the brain and its Maker, it stands to reason that God's Spirit can be acknowledged and followed in the process of interoception, through Scripture and self-reflection.

So how can one train her arousal system to live in a state of peace and calm?

Prolonged, focused attention releases a brain chemical called acetylcholine, which leads us to a balanced flow of productivity—neither hyperaroused nor bored. Mindfulness is this skill to give prolonged attention to the present moment, becoming fully aware of what is going on in mind, body, and soul. Van der Kolk acknowledges that medication can be helpful but that people have “a host of inbuilt skills to keep us on an even keel. ... This means that we can directly train our arousal system by the way we breathe, chant, and move.”²⁴ There is no inherent harm in medication and it is necessary for some people

²³ Van der Kolk, 208.

²⁴ Ibid., 209.

to utilize these life-saving substances, but on the whole many people could be helped by simply understanding the way they have been created to function.

Research has shown that mindfulness practices have a positive effect on many of the somatic and psychological symptoms of trauma such as chronic pain and depression, and have shown to improve immune function and emotional regulation, decreasing “reactivity to potential triggers.”²⁵

Followers of the Creator of existence can easily see that we are fashioned with this ability to self-regulate through prayer and meditation. We see evidence of this throughout Scripture, especially the Psalms. We also see through Scripture the value of sharing joy together, which can serve as a point of stabilizing security. “Learning to become attuned provides parents (and their kids) with the visceral experience of reciprocity. ... When we play together, we feel physically attuned and experience a sense of connection and joy.”²⁶ This playfulness can apply to anybody, not just parents and their children.

One of the challenges we will face in the post-evangelical approach to discipleship is the past. We will need to be aware of how we may trigger the other’s past traumas.

While human contact and attunement are the wellspring of physiological self-regulation, the promise of closeness often evokes fear of getting hurt, betrayed, and abandoned. This poses a real challenge for recovery. Once you recognize that post-traumatic reactions started off as efforts to save your life, you may gather the courage to face your inner music (or cacophony), but you will need help to do so.²⁷

²⁵ Ibid., 211-212.

²⁶ Ibid., 217.

²⁷ Ibid., 213.

The new discipleship framework will need to highlight this aspect of relating and find ways to equip followers of Jesus in supporting one another through the recovery process, knowing how to help instead of hurt, and when to refer a person for more professional help. This quote also highlights an opportunity for current church ministers to redefine and reshape their definition of what it means to pastor. Stepping into roles of healing as a holistic “trinitarian third” to preaching and teaching can open the floodgates of love and kindness to a hurting world and especially to those who have been damaged within evangelical church contexts.

The reintegration of self leads to reciprocation of self, making community possible and redemptive.

Healing Energy

Fascination with spiritual energy, some might call it the soul, is not limited to people of a certain religious mindset or to certain fields of study. Neurologist Jay Lombard writes,

The soul, then, is our connection with God, our conduit to a deeper reality that is otherwise unknown to us. Believing in the soul means believing that there is an immaterial drive analogous to the material drive (that is, to the brain and mind’s drive) for connection that is deeply embedded within our makeup. That there are parallel forces of energy, if you will. This drive for connection is what leads us to seek our intrinsic unity and attachment.²⁸

Lombard writes and speaks about the importance of connecting science and the soul and even about the power of faith in his medical practice. “It struck me then, for the first time in my medical career, how important the power of faith is to sustaining life—the very

²⁸ Lombard, 65.

potent but invisible forces we cannot measure or quantify, yet which are essential to the very core of our being.”²⁹ Even though many church leaders are wary, skeptical, or even totally distrusting of science, they actually stand to gain from exploring what the scientific community has to say about faith and the soul. There appears to be a growing body of research around the role of prayer and meditation in physical healing especially, but also in the areas of psychological well-being.

White evangelical church leaders can stand to learn from the wealth of knowledge among churches internationally, as well as those churches in the United States that affirm women and people of color in leadership. Frequently these congregations have more emphasis on the healing work and power of the Holy Spirit. For instance, African religious healing exhibits a holistic understanding of health which is not limited to the physical condition, but vitally also encompasses relationships with other people and the invisible world around us: “There is a connection to the physical, social, and spiritual when life goes out of balance. The idea of ill-health also involves the unseen and/or spiritual matters.”³⁰ It seems there is a natural connection between all spheres of life in these communities, that perhaps white evangelical Americans have not yet sufficiently explored or embraced. More will be said on the concept of communal healing later in this chapter.

It is a widely accepted theory that our thoughts shape our behavior and even have a drastic effect on our physical wellbeing. I have frequently wondered if thoughts can be

²⁹ Ibid., 16.

³⁰ Tapiwa N. Mucherera and Emmanuel Yartekwei Lartey, *Pastoral Care, Health, Healing, and Wholeness in African Contexts: Methodology, Context, and Issues*, African Practical Theology Vol. 1 (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2017), 37.

physically measured. However, this still appears to be a mystery. Neuroscientists have not yet been able to discern how exactly thoughts are encoded in the neural networks of the brain, although it has been proposed that “learning and skills are encoded not ‘in’ specific neurons, or even ‘in’ the connections between neurons, but ‘in’ the cumulative electrical wave patterns that are the result of all the neurons firing together.”³¹ Norman Doidge, a Canadian psychiatrist, calls attention to these wave patterns that could make up our thoughts. He uses the metaphor of a musical piece, with neurons being the musicians playing the piece, and notes that if some neurons are lost to death or disease it would not necessarily mean that the “music” (mental function) entirely disappears. He writes, “So much of ‘who we are’ is related to our encoded experience, which is carried in the patterns of energy that our brain generates. The coded patterns of experience can often survive structural damage to the brain.”³² There are some interesting applications semiotically when we view thoughts, perceptions, and memories as patterns of music. It stands to reason that if we change the song we’re playing, we can change just about anything about our lives. Romans 12:2 comes to mind for me—what if we looked at the way God renews our minds as replacing broken records and changing our tunes? This could be extremely healing for injured individuals, if communicated in a way that empowers and that is not victim-blaming or dismissive of their pain.

Neuroplastic healing is an interesting concept to consider in a ministry context.

Doidge discusses stages of neuroplastic healing: 1) neurostimulation, 2)

³¹ Norman Doidge, *The Brain’s Way of Healing: Remarkable Discoveries and Recoveries from the Frontiers of Neuroplasticity* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2016), 107.

³² Ibid., 107-108.

neuromodulation, 3) neurorelaxation, and 4) neurodifferentiation and learning.³³

Neurostimulation has to do with energy activating neurons. Neuromodulation has to do with regulation and balance, including the autonomic nervous system (finding a state of calm and turning off the fight-flight-freeze reaction). Neurorelaxation has almost entirely to do with sleep and the way the brain heals during sleep. Neurodifferentiation and learning involves a quieter, rested brain that can make fine distinctions and learn. He writes, “Some forms of neurostimulation begin from an external source, but other forms are internal. Everyday thought, especially when used systematically, is a potent way to stimulate neurons.”³⁴ There is a strong connection here with our thought-wave patterns. Our thoughts can provide healing neurostimulation!

Interestingly, Doidge discusses a small device called a Portable Neuromodulation Stimulator that was being used in a therapeutic clinic to vibrate patient’s tongues.

But why stimulate the tongue? Because the tongue, the team has discovered, is a royal road to activating the entire human brain. The tongue is one of the most sensitive organs in the body. ... There are forty-eight different kinds of sensory receptors on the tongue, fourteen on the tip alone, to sense touch, pain, taste, and so on. ... there are 15,000 to 50,000 nerve fibers on the tip of the tongue, which create a huge information highway. ... “But our tongue stimulation,” says Yuri, “activates the whole brain, so even if I can’t see where the damage is, I know the device is turning on the whole brain.”³⁵

There may not be an immediately apparent ministry application here, but I don’t think God wired the human body in this manner without a reason. Babies in particular experience the world through their mouths—perhaps this intense neurostimulation is part of why?

³³ Ibid., 109-113.

³⁴ Ibid., 109.

³⁵ Ibid., 231-232.

At any rate, these four steps of neuroplastic healing are fascinating and merit further investigation. It would be very worthwhile to consider ways to apply them in a ministry context for healing spiritual trauma.

Neuroplasticity and Memory

Neuroplasticity and memory play into God images specifically, in nuanced and complex ways as revealed by neuroscience and neuropsychology. Accessing latent memory, where God images are stored, is a process that is probably best done with the help of trained EMDR specialists, and attachment-focused EMDR (AF-EMDR) specialists in particular. As more research is done in these areas, an attachment-focused framework for healing spiritual trauma can continue to be expanded and developed. Our brains store memory in very powerful ways.

Penfield concluded from these experiments that areas of the brain were able to enfold memory in a holographic way, providing a dimension of perceptual reality that allows us to re-animate, and thus re-experience remnants of our prior experience. ... When the brain was externally stimulated, it produced a compelling reproduction of prior experience. That reproduction represented the remembered event in its full multidimensionality.³⁶

This means that things like pieces of art, songs, rituals, or aromas can trigger memory in very powerful ways. We can see that this brings a new dimension to church practices like liturgical readings, singing hymns, burning incense, and the like. Researchers have found evidence that intergenerational memories, and especially trauma, could be stored in our DNA and have measurable effects.³⁷ Throughout Scripture, we are exhorted to

³⁶ Lombard, 61-62.

³⁷ Rachel Yehuda, Nikolaos P. Daskalakis, Linda M. Bierer, Heather N. Bader, Torsten Klengel, Florian Holsboer, and Elisabeth B. Binder, "Holocaust Exposure Induced Intergenerational Effects on FKBP5 Methylation," *Biological Psychiatry* 80, no. 5 (2016): 372–380.

remember—to remember God’s promises and the ways he has been faithful to not only us but our ancestors in the past. Again, these practices can bring a stabilizing force of healing to survivors of spiritual trauma.

Neuroplasticity needs to matter to church leaders because of the inherent power that existing church leadership structure tends to carry.

Indeed, the primary function of brain plasticity is that it is generally behaviorally useful. Neural circuits are created and reshaped to respond in ways that promote survival. But the brain can be negatively affected, too. We can think of the brain as a muscle that needs to be strengthened for its primary job of interacting with other brains. Starting on day one, if you don’t use it, you lose it.³⁸

The damage being done in our churches extends to a greater degree than perhaps most church leaders realize. People’s brain structure can be negatively impacted by harmful thought patterns—especially children’s. The prefrontal cortex doesn’t fully develop until age 25, and I do not think it is a coincidence that a lot of the pain my formerly Christian friends endured in church happened before age 25. Neural networks can be affected (negatively or positively) by repetitive thought patterns, utilizing techniques such as scripture memory or mantras. What people memorize, especially what they memorize as children, becomes internalized into the neural framework.

Branches: Reciprocating Self and Mindfulness Practices

As the healing process continues, wounded individuals begin branching out into the world by keeping connected to Jesus as the Source.

For generations, mindfulness meditation has been a center of countless people’s lives around the world; it is rooted in Buddhist philosophy but also embraced by many

³⁸ Lombard, 93.

world religions, some even predating Buddhism. Much like other spiritual practices, researchers are finding psychoneurological evidence for the effectiveness of meditation. Researcher Keith Edwards writes of three specific mindfulness meditation practices as they relate to spiritual formation and the “triune brain.” He writes of the Body Scan, which “focuses the meditator’s consciousness on bodily sensation” to increase awareness and to regulate physical arousal such as the fight-flight-freeze response; the Mindful Meditation, which focuses the consciousness on “subjective awareness and facilitates emotional regulation;” and the Loving Kindness Meditation, which “uses the symbolic capacities of our conceptual mind to develop compassion toward others in one’s imagination.”³⁹ He writes, “They are all mental processes. They become part of spiritual formation practices when they are used in the context of metaphysical beliefs that provide conceptual meaning for the self-in-the-world.”⁴⁰ These types of meditation and mental stimulation may be able to serve as healing neurostimulation for furthering neuroplastic healing. People who are healing from spiritual trauma could summarize Jesus’ teachings into easy-to-remember “mantras” to apply in each of these areas or memorize verses or stories of Scripture. We can see the benefit of these practices as the individual branches out into relationship with other people.

The self is not fully human until she is in community with a human other. She spends time walking the tension of the belonging paradox, holding on to her sense of self in redeemed solitude while also weaving interpersonal attachments with others. The nature of these attachments is reciprocating instead of emptying. Some relationships of

³⁹ Keith Edwards, “When Word Meets Flesh: A Neuroscience Perspective on Embodied Spiritual Formation,” *Journal of Psychology and Christianity* 34, no. 3 (2015): 237.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 237.

course will merit and deserve more sacrifice than others, but when the goal is reciprocity, unhealthy attachments are less likely.

Authors Balswick, Ebstyne King, and Reimer discuss Philip Cushman's critique of therapeutic approaches that are "promoting the existence of an *empty self*."⁴¹ They go on to note that Cushman believes the

American values of independence and self-fulfillment have led to the American psychotherapeutic culture that nurtures individuals who are focused on self-care and personal fulfillment. He critiques the American therapeutic community for promoting individuals who are preoccupied and in perpetual need of filling and fulfilling themselves. Despite Cushman's harangue, he gives no alternative, no teleology to cure this empty self. ... This empty self is a product of the modern project—the pursuit of truth, universals, freedom and control.⁴²

It should be noted that the current cultural connotation of "self-care" has varied meanings depending on the context. For some it has come to take on a negative connotation, as seen in the quote above when viewed in the context of obsession with self-fulfillment.

However, for many, especially abuse survivors, self-care means simply to pursue and maintain wholeness through practical means such as building healthy personal boundaries in relationships, eating and exercising, creating art, and the like. An alternative to the obsession with self-fulfillment is pursuing inner personal healing by abiding in Christ, as discussed in previous chapters in this work. "Christian theology and social science theory converge to suggest that the self does not need to be viewed from the perspective of being empty but rather as a reciprocating self."⁴³ The reciprocating self is one that focuses on mutuality and could even be seen in a trinitarian light. A reciprocal self seeks communion

⁴¹ Balswick, Ebstyne King, and Reimer, 20.

⁴² Ibid., 20.

⁴³ Ibid., 21.

with another for the sake of intimacy and mutual edification. Even though they do not use the term perichoresis, we see hints of it here as Balswick, Ebstyne King, and Reimer go on to write,

In mutually reciprocating relationships we encounter the other and ourselves most fully as we become more like Christ. ... This not only enables us to more fully image God, but allows humankind to participate more fully in God's ongoing activity in this world.⁴⁴

Trauma happens within the context of relationship, and so does healing. It can be intimidating for survivors to be vulnerable and enter into the space of rebuilding attachments. Since the reciprocating self is one that stands already filled by Christ, she is ready to pour out into another. If the other is also a reciprocating self, the exchange can be lifegiving instead of emptying, and attachment bonds can be developed. These attachments protect us and heal us. Van der Kolk writes that attachment bonds in relationships that bring healing are “our greatest protection against threat,” and that they “provide physical and emotional safety, including safety from feeling shamed, admonished, or judged, and to bolster the courage to tolerate, face, and process the reality of what has happened.”⁴⁵ And yet, how many existing evangelical churches are actually equipped to fill this sort of role? Unless some of the leadership happened to receive more than one counseling class in seminary, chances are traumatized people won't find refuge in a church. In fact, a church can do more harm than good if the people become a source of shame and judgment instead of providing protection.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 55.

⁴⁵ Van der Kolk, 212.

Pentecostal churches seem to have an increased understanding of healing intercessory prayer that centers around attachment to God. One study investigated receptive prayer, the Sozo⁴⁶ prayer method in particular, and found that individuals reported increased closeness to God as well as a reduction in their psychological stress after receptive prayer.⁴⁷ The researchers concluded, “Results therefore advance theorized change processes in the literature on Pentecostal/Charismatic (P/C) spirituality and theology, attachment to God, and mindfulness-based practices.”⁴⁸ For those who are comfortable in a church setting the Sozo prayer method appears to have much to offer in the way of healing, but further research is needed to ascertain whether Sozo is available outside of church settings. Regardless, we see here that research is affirming the validity of a holistic approach to healing that includes addressing theological beliefs, God attachment, and mindfulness.

Milan and Kay Yerkovich provide a practical resource for reciprocal, bond-building conversations called the Comfort Circle. The steps of the Comfort Circle are 1) seek awareness; 2) engage; 3) explore and find out more; and 4) resolution brings relief and comfort. There is a clearly defined speaker and listener for the duration of the Circle steps.⁴⁹ The Yerkovich’s “How We Love” seminar is highly informative and gives participants practical tools that can yield immediate improvements in their relationships.

⁴⁶ Sozo is a healing and deliverance ministry based out of Bethel Church in Redding, CA.

⁴⁷ Natasha Monroe and Peter J. Jankowski, “The Effectiveness of a Prayer Intervention in Promoting Change in Perceived Attachment to God, Positive Affect, and Psychological Distress,” *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* (2016).

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Milan Yerkovich and Kay Yerkovich, *How We Love: Discover Your Love Style, Enhance Your Marriage* (Colorado Springs, CO: WaterBrook Press, 2008), 191-208.

Their material has applications outside of marriage relationships, and could inform a post-evangelical discipleship.

A post-evangelical discipleship that is focused on healing attachments between God, self, and others can learn from the therapeutic relationship. In addition to meditative Scripture recitation, people can look to redemptive relationships to help facilitate healing of God attachments. Christopher Kam describes a therapeutic process that many pastors, church leaders, or other healing companions could learn and benefit from. He writes that redemptive communities intentionally build an environment of safety and acceptance, one in which clients can be guided to use their imaginations around Scripture passages about the love of God. He effectively describes ways to heal injured God attachments by imagining concrete ways God shows his love, customizing “right-brain spiritual exercises to the client’s personality and lifestyle so that space for regular right-brain encounters with God can be woven into the person’s unique rhythm of life.”⁵⁰ I hypothesize that it is also important for clients to be encouraged to address core beliefs as a part of this process as well, to further rewrite neural pathways that need healing. Kam concludes that “clients should expect to grow in more positive self-concepts and higher self-esteem as a by-product of cultivating a more positive God image by regularly exercising their scriptural imagination on appropriate passages.”⁵¹ We cannot underestimate the power of the mind.

Many who have broken God attachments may not be able to find a therapist or may not have the resources for one. However, with some intentionality, coming alongside another in their healing journey is something any follower of Jesus is able to do. There is

⁵⁰ Christopher Kam, “Integrating Divine Attachment Theory and the Enneagram to Help Clients of Abuse Heal in Their Images of Self, Others, and God,” *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 4 (May 28, 2018): 347.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 347.

a need for training resources in this particular area to equip laypersons and those who are embodying Christ outside the traditional church context.

Sound and Healing

Part of a holistic approach to the reciprocating self and mindfulness practices is somatic. God wired the universe to vibrate, and that includes our bodies. Doidge discusses visiting a monastery that had recently started forbidding the monks from singing. “The monastery had just been taken over by a zealous young abbot who, though Vatican II did not forbid Gregorian chant, decided that the singing the monks did from six to eight hours a day served no useful purpose, and he ended it. A collective nervous breakdown ensued. ... They were starved not for meat, vitamins, or sleep, but for the energy of sound.”⁵²

The monks were allowed to begin singing again, and those who were too depressed to sing were encouraged to sing into “electronic ears” that allowed them to adjust the sound of their own voices in such a way that the higher frequencies of their voices (higher frequencies are more energizing by nature) were emphasized. “Their slumping posture changed almost immediately, and they became more upright. By November, almost all were restored.... The Benedictines, Tomatis said, ‘had been chanting in order to ‘charge’ themselves, but hadn’t realized what they were doing.’”⁵³ This example makes it easy to see the healing energy work of the vibration of sound through music.

⁵² Doidge, 343.

⁵³ Ibid., 343-344.

We can also see the way thought patterns come into play through sound in that music can change the rhythms of the brain. Doidge recounts an experiment that psychologist Ulman Lindenberger and his colleagues conducted in 2009, in which nine pairs of guitarists were connected to EEGs while they played jazz together.

The brain waves of each pair began to entrain together, to synchronize their dominant neuronal firing rates. No doubt this is part of what musicians' "getting into a groove" is all about. ... Not only were the musicians playing together in an ensemble; the coordinated ensembles of the neurons within each player's brain were playing together with the ensembles of neurons in their fellow musicians' brains.⁵⁴

We can see why people love to go to live concerts and sing together in groups. In keeping with our music metaphor for neurological wave patterns, it seems that not only do our thought patterns have an effect on us individually, but they have measurable ripple effects throughout all our relationships and the environments around us. Our voices, our music, our machines, any vibrations that we produce, induce change in the world, for better or worse.

Bilateral Stimulation and AF-EMDR

Bilateral stimulation (BLS) is a method utilized by eye movement desensitization and reprocessing (EMDR) therapists, and especially attachment-focused EMDR (AF-EMDR) therapists, primarily to treat PTSD. It is "the use of alternating right, left stimulation such as tapping on the knees, legs or shoulders, tapping toes or feet on the floor, or eye movements. Bilateral stimulation is used to activate and integrate

⁵⁴ Ibid., 345-347.

information from the brain's two hemispheres.”⁵⁵ Laurel Parnell is the developer of AF-EMDR, and the institute she founded trains licensed professionals in AF-EMDR. “New techniques and therapies that use bilateral stimulation are being developed. These therapies work within the neuro-network system, either by facilitating the processing of traumatic memories, or in the case of Resource Tapping, by the purposeful activation and integration of healthy resource.”⁵⁶ Used in tandem with the re-imaginings of God images, this can provide a powerful tool for repairing broken God attachments.

AF-EMDR combines utilizing the imagination (and in particular, imagery) with the neuropsychological approach of bilateral stimulation, much like yoga and other physical exercises that combine internal meditation with body movements. It also focuses on the right-brain to right-brain interaction between therapist and client. “In this model the therapist may utilize him- or herself as a ‘resource’ implicitly or explicitly to help increase clients’ feelings of safety and affect tolerance, which can then be integrated directly into the client’s neural circuitry using bilateral stimulation.”⁵⁷ I have personally experienced AF-EMDR and have found it to be extremely effective. AF-EMDR training could be very beneficial for those wanting to assist in healing God images. There could be room for other practitioners outside of psychotherapy to consider training in types of bilateral stimulation to serve as healing companions to survivors but would likely need to be done with ample caution and supervision.

⁵⁵ “Definition of Terms,” Parnell Institute, accessed October 9, 2018, <http://parnellemdr.com/definition-of-terms/>.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Laurel Parnell, *Attachment-Focused EMDR: Healing Relational Trauma* (New York, NY: Ww Norton & Co, 2013), 5.

Soil: Patina of Place, Creation, and Built Environment

As the healing journey continues, wounded individuals remain in Jesus for the power to practice presence in place. When we are growing our reciprocal selves and focus our energy, we take on the flavor of the ground in which we are planted. “While everyday peacemaking gives our immediate families the sacred opportunity to reflect the Prince of Peace locally, it also lets us identify ourselves as part of an interdependent kingdom family that extends from our doorstep to the other side of the world and back again.”⁵⁸ Our God attachment has the power to bring healing and peace to others—those in our particular place, to the body of Christ, and to the world.

Many women utilize the internet for most if not all their spiritual growth. Does having a physical connection matter? I argue that it does matter, and potentially more than any of us have realized. (Recall the jazz musicians and their neurons firing in unison while playing.) Some women who have stopped attending church in a physical space continue their discipleship through digital means—online Bible studies, streaming sermon podcasts, and Facebook group interaction. All of these avenues can certainly enhance the discipleship experience, but something beautiful and meaningful happens when followers of Jesus are in the same room together (Matthew 18:20).

Digital technology is rapidly synthesizing nearly every human interaction, but digital cannot replace a full sensory experience. Even if someone discovers a way to synthesize touch, perhaps we will see more of a “sixth sense” emerge—vibes, aura, or other vibrations that get to the point of bringing people together in physical space.

⁵⁸ Jon Huckins and Jer Swigart, *Mending the Divides: Creative Love in a Conflicted World* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2017), 66.

Leonard Sweet has, in some of his courses, suggested that in a future where holograms become an option for everyday use there may be the development of touch rituals.

“‘Where are you?’ This question spans the distance between alienation and reconciliation, between turning away and turning toward, between living a reduced life under the shadow of a curse and living a whole life within the freedom of *shalom*.”⁵⁹ Our presence in a particular place matters.

Studies have shown that a person’s electrocardiogram outputs, or heart energy waves, are physically detectable through electrodes on the surface of another when they hold hands; the energy is also measurable across space when they are within about three feet of each other, though not as strongly.⁶⁰ Physical space matters on many levels. Eric Jacobsen laments,

We live in a culture that has become convinced that there is no longer any connection between *geography* (where one lives and the distinctive qualities of that place) and our experience of *community*. ‘Community is about relationships’ has become almost a truism in certain circles. Questions of location simply don’t matter anymore.⁶¹

There are volumes written about the re-emergence of parish ministry, which views one’s neighborhood as a home base and birthing space of God’s work. Rather than “church planting,” the metaphor is midwifing.⁶² The new discipleship in a post-evangelical world must find a way to restore physical connections at a micro and macro level. This would

⁵⁹ Eric O. Jacobsen, *The Space Between: A Christian Engagement with the Built Environment* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 26.

⁶⁰ Debra Fulghum Bruce, *Miracle Touch: A Complete Guide to Hands-on Therapies That Have the Amazing Ability to Heal* (New York: Three Rivers Press), 2003.

⁶¹ Jacobsen, 12. Italics in original.

⁶² Christiana Rice gave an incredible talk on this metaphor at the Inhabit Conference in Seattle, WA in 2017. See her book coauthored with Michael Frost, *To Alter Your World: Partnering with God to Rebirth Our Communities* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2017).

call for resuscitating everything from healthy physical affection among believers to the way the church interacts incarnationally with the larger community.

Jacobsen discusses the various critiques that the suburban movement has received since its postwar inception, critiques from both the left and the right. He notes that the current conversation about built environment did not originate among academics or from an oppressed minority. “Rather, it came out of a relatively well-to-do group of practitioners whose primary motive, prior to entering the public spotlight with questions about the built environment, was to make money. . . . New Urbanism rose quickly” and is often associated with Seaside, Florida (the set for *The Truman Show*) and Celebration, Florida (Disney’s town). “Both of these well-known projects have helped to give New Urbanism a reputation for building nostalgic ‘pretend’ neighborhoods for rich people.”⁶³ To many who have left evangelicalism, this is largely what the church has become—a country club and source of injury instead of a change agent and environment for effective trauma treatment.

Post-evangelical discipleship could see a resurgence of building-centered ministry, though perhaps not through church buildings, but homes, restaurants, museums, coffee shops, or other important buildings in one’s neighborhood. Jacobsen writes, “We remember the houses in which we grew up through the associative memories that are placed there. . . . Buildings can also hold memories in a *semiotic* way—that is, buildings put us in contact with symbols that can potentially carry meaning for anyone in our

⁶³ Jacobsen, 23.

culture.”⁶⁴ Jacobsen calls this concept “patina.”⁶⁵ Many places are sanitized of meaning, but there are some that hold this semiotic sense of patina, and they would make the perfect place for believers to share life.

Throughout Scripture we see the patina of place, both natural and built—piles of stones, rivers, cities, wells. We cannot neglect the vital importance both the built environment and the natural world play in healing spiritual trauma. Some researchers have argued that “attachment to significant places depends on the reciprocal relationship between behaviors and experiences,” and that we see this supported in the works of various theologians in the past.⁶⁶

The history of the Triune God, as Moltmann (1991) describes it, points to God’s creation of the world and his invitation for his creatures to partake in this creative activity and have dominion over the earth (Gen. 1:28) through the agencies of the Son and his Spirit.⁶⁷

The ability to practice presence in a particular place enables us to connect to the universal; there is a Trinity of sorts when two or more are gathered together in the same physical space. The stories of those who have gone before us are attached to and ingrained in places with patina.

Communal Healing

When one part heals, healing happens for the entire Body. The soil in which we’re planted carries the nutrients of those who have gone before us and those who are planted

⁶⁴ Ibid., 74. Italics in original.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 74.

⁶⁶ Victor Counted and Fraser Watts, “Place Attachment in the Bible: The Role of Attachment to Sacred Places in Religious Life,” *Journal of Psychology and Theology* 45, no. 3 (2017): 220.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 220.

there with us. “The traditional African healing practices were not normally a private affair. If someone became sick it was the immediate/extended families and/or community’s role to help find a cure. The issue was never just between the medicine person and the patient.”⁶⁸ When it comes to healing an individual body, we are wise to acknowledge that we are in turn healing a communal body through the relationships that connect the injured person to others.

There are many layers of communal healing, including family, church, society and systems, and creation. As we saw in the prior example of the musicians finding their groove, our thought wave patterns have power beyond ourselves. When “a human stands, a group of muscles—the antigravity muscles of the back and the quadriceps—holds a person up. ... ‘No part of the body can be moved without all the others being affected,’ Feldenkrais wrote. This holistic insight would later distinguish his approach from other forms of bodywork.”⁶⁹ This statement in context is about physical therapy and applies to not only the individual, but also metaphorically to the Body of Christ.

The stories of our communities, whether that community is limited to immediate family members or extends to an entire nation or the world, are more powerful than most church leaders imagine. “The past cannot be undone or repaired, but it can be used to understand the present and provide insights for the work that needs to be done for a better future, freed from the influences of a grossly traumatic past. It is such knowledge that will help transform ... collective consciousness.”⁷⁰ Church leaders who are aware of this

⁶⁸ Mucherera and Lartey, 50.

⁶⁹ Doidge, 166.

⁷⁰ Mucherera and Lartey, 97.

fact might be more likely to make efforts toward reconciliation and healing among church members and with their community, though sadly such efforts are unlikely to bring back those who have already decisively left the congregation or the faith.

Barbara M. Orlowski's research among the spiritually traumatized provided helpful insight into the importance of recovering within the context of community. Her study confirmed that participants needed confidants, most often found 1) among others who had traumatic church experiences and 2) among those who could offer wisdom and empathy based on God's grace and Scripture. Also vital to recovery were friend groups of supportive, trustworthy individuals. Orlowski's research also confirmed many traumatized individuals dedicated efforts toward self-education through reading, research, websites, and online support groups.⁷¹ She notes,

Although assistance through specified church support groups was also presented as a potential help, this means to aid recovery was not the experience of these participants. ... focus groups that specifically dealt with the topic of grief from exiting distressing church situations was not apparently available... It may be difficult to predict if they would have found the availability of such a group appealing or not. Possibly in the future some churches or groups will take this on as a ministry.⁷²

From my own experiences and conversations, I would hypothesize that many women who have left churches would not find a support group based in a church appealing. If they are intent on maintaining a connection to Jesus, then perhaps it would be a greater possibility, especially if the group were independent of a church brand. Nevertheless, the

⁷¹ Barbara M. Orlowski, *Spiritual Abuse Recovery: Dynamic Research on Finding a Place of Wholeness* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010), 204-207.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 207.

need for community in recovery is paramount and many spiritually traumatized people find avenues for fulfilling this need.⁷³

The Enneagram

The Enneagram is thought to be quite ancient, providing insight into the balance of the universe and human personality. The Enneagram is growing in popularity among Christians and non-Christians alike. Kam notes in his article that the Enneagram can provide healing insight into the way individuals reflect God's personality and can give valuable insight into their abusers.

the framework of divine attachment theory as well as the Enneagram can be useful tools for helping clients who have been abused experience healing in their images of themselves, others, and God. ... Enneagram can help clients grow in extending compassion and empathy towards their abuser, which can, in turn, help with forgiveness.⁷⁴

Many people, especially post-evangelical women, have a fascination with the Enneagram. Kathy Escobar has written about the Enneagram and shifting faith on her website, even including a helpful PDF diagram of how each type might process deconstruction.⁷⁵ The Enneagram's focus on trauma response to childhood wounds is especially enlightening. There is an opportunity for further research in this area to see how the Enneagram might provide an approach for healing God attachments.

⁷³ I have found and/or joined several Facebook groups dedicated to those who have left church, evangelicalism, and/or fundamentalist Christianity. Some of the names of the Facebook groups and their numbers of members (as of August 13, 2018): Raising Children Unfundamentalist (12,873); Unchurching Group (4,601); Exvangelical (3,101); FaithShift: Healing and Hope (306); I Kissed Toxic Church Culture Goodbye (201). There are more that exist waiting to be found.

⁷⁴ Christopher Kam, "Integrating Divine Attachment Theory and the Enneagram to Help Clients of Abuse Heal in Their Images of Self, Others, and God," *Pastoral Psychology* 67, no. 4 (May 28, 2018): 354.

⁷⁵ Kathy Escobar, "Faith Shifts and the Enneagram," Kathy Escobar, July 2, 2018, <https://www.kathyesobar.com/2018/07/02/faith-shifts-and-the-enneagram/>.

Fruit: Trinitarian Relationships

As spiritually traumatized people heal and transform into spiritual trauma survivors, they are nudging the world to Jesus with the fruit of the Spirit. In trinitarian relationships, survivors can begin contending for healing; they begin the hard work of ascertaining how we are called to contend with oppression. “Contending requires that we neither run from conflict nor enter into it violently, but that we move toward it transformatively. In the face of violence—whatever form that may take—we don’t get even; we get creative in love.”⁷⁶ A new framework for discipleship will dismantle abusive systems of power and replace them with structures that bring freedom. True liberation and justice will restore not only the oppressed, but the oppressor.

It is here that the idea of perichoresis comes full circle. As women respond to the invitation to enter the divine dance with God, they become more fully human and are conduits of God’s healing power. This brings the potential for truly reciprocal relationships with others, serving to invite them into the beauty of perichoresis with God. Abiding in Jesus in this way bears the fruit of loving God and loving others as the Spirit fills us to overflowing. Self, God, and Other are tuned together to bring a resonance of harmony. These trinitarian relationships become a reflection of the Trinity in reciprocity and perichoresis and serve as an invitation to the world to enter the flow.

In light of this, the hierarchical approach to church leadership needs to be replaced with an incarnational ecclesiology, and it must prioritize healing. The time is come for the Body of Christ to allow the Spirit to inhabit us in ways that lead to healing,

⁷⁶ Huckins and Swigart, 131.

because people are looking for it everywhere. Reiki and other energy healing practices are delivering in ways people believe are healthy, but the spiritual impact can be difficult to unravel in terms of whether it connects to Jesus. We need to equip all followers of Jesus to do the work of healing—mind, body, and soul—rather than relying on church leaders to provide it. There needs to be a set of criteria to help us know what needs to be referred to a professional therapist, and we need to be trained in what we can do ourselves.

Even people who are committed to following Jesus and a healthy God attachment can find themselves frustrated with the lack of connection they find in churches. Large churches, even those who are proactive in groups ministries, may not provide opportunities for the intimacy trauma survivors are seeking. But some churches, whatever form they happen to take, could be looking for resources to help them move away from a prepositional approach to ministry and toward a more incarnational one.

An opportunity exists for an organization to step up to the plate to create opportunities for trauma survivors to convene, whether online or in person and preferably both, for the purposes of exchanging ideas on God attachment, dismantling abusive church systems, and rebuilding in a new paradigm. This organization could be a clearinghouse of information and provide support and training for these individuals. If such an organization existed, it would need an online presence that equipped people no matter their occupation and would empower them to follow the Spirit's lead to incarnate in everyday moments and places. This approach could facilitate a healthy God attachment and interpersonal attachments would be more likely to flourish. As Dr. Shawn Ginwright notes, "A healing centered approach to addressing trauma requires a different question

that moves beyond ‘what happened to you’ to ‘what’s right with you’ and views those exposed to trauma as agents in the creation of their own well-being rather than victims of traumatic events.”⁷⁷

On an individual level there are the obstacles of time, trauma, and physical space, which within an attachment-focused framework can actually be turned into opportunities for growth, intimacy, and reciprocity. This framework must encompass a Spirit-infused approach to healing that is both enchanted and practical. Many who have left church still seek spiritual experiences and practices that ignite their souls’ passion and bring a sense of connection, awe, and wonder, particularly with nature. A great opportunity exists here for those who know the Creator to reconnect those who have left evangelicalism with him and his creation. This framework should also include a redemptive and practical trinitarian approach to God attachment and interpersonal attachment. Orlowski noted of her research,

Support of Others + The Passing of Time + Access to Knowledge = RECOVERY. There was a need for some to take their time in finding a new church fellowship. ... The majority of participants needed to take the time to reassess their ecclesiological paradigm. For a number of participants this time of reflection served to affirm that they ought to meet with Christians outside of the institutional church setting. Some now consider themselves to be post-church.⁷⁸

Perhaps now is the perfect time for a paradigm focused on healing God attachments to be offered for individuals who are in this post-church place on their journey of recovery.

⁷⁷ Shawn Ginwright, “The Future of Healing: Shifting From Trauma Informed Care to Healing Centered Engagement,” Medium, last modified May 31, 2018, <https://medium.com/@ginwright/the-future-of-healing-shifting-from-trauma-informed-care-to-healing-centered-engagement-634f557ce69c>.

⁷⁸ Orlowski, 208.

Healing Artifacts

People who are healing can create artifacts—physical representations of the healing that has taken place: memory markers. These artifacts are metaphors and semiotically vital for communal expression as we participate in the divine dance of healing.

For those who have been traumatized spiritually, facing the truth of violence is a difficult but necessary part of the process. Many seek peace from the residue left from that violence, whether it was verbal, physical, sexual, or emotional in nature. “Peace is the holistic repair of severed relationships. When it is realized, our relationships are stronger and more beautiful than before they were broken.”⁷⁹ The primary relationship that must be repaired is with God. It may take time for a survivor of abuse to internalize the truth that God does not desire anyone to be abused and that he never intended for them to be abused—it is not “a part of God’s plan” and it is not his will.

As survivors of trauma move through the healing process, their relationships with others will change. Personal boundaries must be evaluated while prioritizing holistic health in mind, body, and spirit. Many who were traumatized in church may have to sever relationships with church members, friends, and even family as they seek safety. It could be that after some time, survivors can reestablish relationships with certain individuals, but for many that may not be possible.

The task of reconciliation falls primarily with the abusers and not the abused—abusers need to face the truth of what they have done and who they have become, and

⁷⁹ Huckins and Swigart, 33.

must take responsibility for the hard work of repairing their own wounds out of which they live. Leaders who have been complicit in abusive church systems do well to seek professional therapy and to seek God's guidance in publicly repenting in ways that take responsibility for their actions. Only through true repentance will we see peace and restoration.

Depending on the depth of the wound, some survivors may be able to restore relationship with people who have hurt them. "What's the evidence that proves that the friendship is stronger and more beautiful than before it was broken? We've found that there are two constant and critical realities that help us recognize interpersonal restoration: (1) deepened intimacy and (2) reintegration into a co-creating community."⁸⁰ Of course this is ideal, but for many women who have been traumatized in church, reintegrating into a Christian community may be extremely difficult. If the challenging work of reconciliation is done within the Body of Christ, perhaps we can begin to function as Christ intends. Those who have been complicit and enabled abusive practices within churches need to repent of their role in the abusive system, and instead advocate for restoration and peace.

Peace is waged when, after a relationship has been fractured and repaired, we who were once enemies choose to stand together as friends, allies, advocates, even family, committed to co-creating a more beautiful, just, mutually beneficial future. ... our pursuit of peace is simply the embodiment of the peacemaking priority and practice of God.⁸¹

An attachment-focused framework for healing spiritual trauma can bring peace to everyone, oppressed and oppressor, who has been immersed in systems of abusive power,

⁸⁰ Ibid., 140.

⁸¹ Ibid., 34.

and especially the system of abusive power that has become acceptable within evangelical churches. A shift toward healthy, secure God attachment and reciprocal human relationships can create an environment in which repentance and restoration are ongoing practices. This healing process can result in the outward expression of artifacts—music, art, films, theater, dance, meals, websites, organizations, even sidewalks and cities—that point the way to Beauty, Truth, and Love: Jesus.

CHAPTER 6:

CONCLUSION: ATTACHMENT-FOCUSED HEALING FRAMEWORK

A framework for healing spiritual trauma among women needs to be a) attachment-focused, which in turn needs to be b) trauma-informed and c) healing-centered.

A healing framework will deconstruct theological concepts that have been embedded into evangelical subculture and wielded abusively. This holistic healing paradigm can reframe the Bible within its historical contexts, repositioning Jesus Christ as the object of worship, rather than the Bible and doctrines. Perichoresis offers an invitation into the beautiful divine dance that God has initiated with humanity, bidding humans to join him as sub-creators and midwives to his redemptive work in the world. This can begin to redeem evangelical missiology that often implements colonization rather than reestablishing communion with God and others.

Additionally, incorporating a growing understanding of current neuroscience and research findings provides crucial insight into the way God created the human mind. Within this part of the healing framework, human sexuality can be addressed in a semiotic way that holds Scripture in one hand and scientific findings in the other, redeeming the damage of evangelical purity culture. A language of attachment is foundational for this healing framework, as it focuses on healing the bond between self and God, self and self, and self and others. With these connections repaired, women can be further unleashed as agents of healing for others.

Dismantling power structures will liberate not only the oppressed but also the oppressors. Within an attachment-focused framework, the work of peacemaking does not

destroy any person—even the abuser. The goal is redemption for every person through the work of the Holy Spirit.

One way to move the Body of Christ forward in her original purpose is to prevent spiritual abuse in the first place. This can be done by a) listening to people who have been abused and oppressed within evangelicalism; b) taking very seriously what they have to say; c) simplifying leadership structures and redefining what makes a good leader (see Leonard Sweet's *I Am a Follower*); d) putting women and minorities in those places of leadership; and e) redefining church success.

An attachment-focused framework for healing spiritual abuse will lead to a rich, fulfilling life for women who have survived spiritual trauma, furthering the work of dismantling abusive systems and reconstructing the Body of Christ to thrive in healthier ways.

If women are properly equipped through their own healing process, they can in turn become some of the most effective healing companion-advocates for others who are suffering from spiritual trauma. It would also be helpful for professional therapists, especially Christian ones, to have supplemental training in healing God attachments.

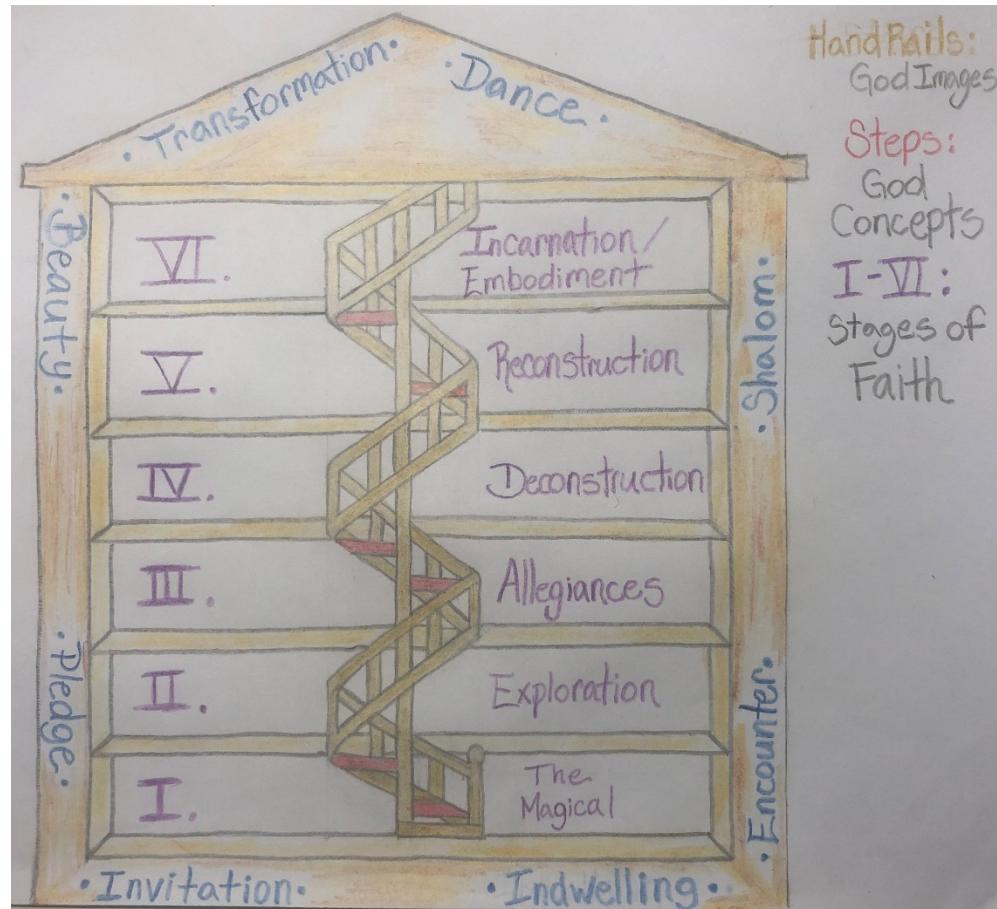
Changing one's life metaphors is a critical task for everyone, especially those who are healing from trauma. It would be helpful for those who are healing to produce artifacts of their healing journeys that can be shared with others along the way. Music, film, mixed media art, food, tattoos, paintings, stories, plays, musicals—anything and everything is possible. Having a physical representation of one's healing journey provides a very powerful metaphor that will reinforce the healing that has taken place and can facilitate further growth and fruit.

Breaking Evangelical

Sometimes when a broken bone is not healing properly, an orthopedic surgeon will perform an osteotomy—they rebreak the bone in order to align it correctly for proper healing. It could be that evangelicalism is undergoing an osteotomy. Perhaps the word “evangelical” can be redeemed and restored in American culture to its original meaning, but even better would be a future-minded meaning or a new word altogether, to overcome being synonymous with a particular political ideology. It is more likely that an entirely different paradigm for church is needed.

Spiritually traumatized women are breaking with evangelicalism. The challenge is to support these women in healing their attachments to God, recognizing the non-linear characteristics of such healing and encouraging a holistic approach to it. New expressions of the Body of Christ can form out of their detachment from unhealthy organizations and toxic people. In this way, their breaking away can become a multiplication rather than a severing.

I propose an attachment-focused healing framework, which is trauma-informed and healing-centered, partially drawing from Esther Lightcap Meek’s covenant epistemology (inspired by Michael Polanyi’s subsidiary-focal integration) and James Fowler’s stages of faith development. I hypothesize such a framework can not only provide hope, healing, and growth for spiritual trauma survivors, but can also prevent spiritual abuse.



A visual image of an Attachment-Focused Healing Framework. The concepts of covenant epistemology form the frame and building materials of the house. The spiral staircase of God attachment shows our God images (hand-rails) and God concepts (steps) interacting as they move a person through the stages of faith. Special thanks to Erik C. Gavila for his artwork.

Covenant Epistemology: Philosophical Framework

Healing is a non-linear process. When a person has been traumatized, the first step toward healing is recognizing the trauma that has occurred. Processing the emotions that pour from such a wound can take quite some time and is best processed within the context of a safe healing companion relationship, with an AF-EMDR specialist if possible. Resourcing and reinforcing the mind with images of security can be done

through bilateral stimulation and mindful meditation. Post-traumatic growth¹ can happen at any point within these points in the process and can continue throughout life for survivors.

When it comes to healing the spiritual injuries of trauma, and especially healing injuries to one's God attachment, I propose that a good starting point is to rediscover God—to open oneself to Jesus from the very point she is here and now. Looking for Jesus and opening oneself to him can be intimidating since it requires vulnerability, and vulnerability to a Person that she may have assumed condoned the abuse done to her. Depending on how far the woman has deconstructed (Stage 4), there may be further deconstruction and unlearning that occurs within this framework. The promise of growth, healing, and perichoresis is worth the risk. The philosophical basis for an attachment-focused framework can be greatly informed by Esther Lightcap Meek's covenant epistemology process in *A Little Manual for Knowing*, and readers are directed to this work. My summary follows and describes the venture of healing God attachment specifically, for women who have left church. I am of the opinion that the Bible, especially and at least the Gospels, should be a part of this process, but if the Bible was wielded as a weapon of shame in abuse, it may be wise to wait until further into the knowing journey for some individuals.

¹ The Post-Traumatic Growth Research Group of the Department of Psychology at UNC Charlotte first coined the term "post-traumatic growth," though the concept of positive change stemming from trauma is not new. See their webpage: <https://ptgi.uncc.edu/what-is-ptg/>.

*Beauty*²

As we are embarking on our pilgrimage, something sparks us deep within—a divine attraction that bids us into the unknown. Maybe we are unsure what to call this unfathomable, mysterious force. Some have called it Universe, Magic, Nature, or Reality; maybe we called it God in the past. We begin to crave to know whatever Name this force reveals to us and begin to wonder if perhaps “it” could actually be a Person. It might feel a bit scary to dare to hope for this. We are rapt with wonder at possibility of knowing God again, perhaps even for the first time. This begins the rooted phase of healing (Chapter 5), as new neural pathways begin to form.

Pledge

We take small steps of rebuilding trust in this Real Beauty. We commit ourselves to the yet-to-be-known with anticipation of revelation—we seek to understand God and bravely open ourselves to whatever ways he chooses to pursue us. We also need a healing companion and healing community to pledge alongside the pilgrimage in mutually beneficial relationship. This community aspect may present a challenge for women outside of traditional church contexts but is not impossible if others who have been through a healing process are seeking them out.

² In *A Little Manual for Knowing* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2014), this first step is called “Love.” When Esther spoke at the live event, referenced in Chapter 3 of this work, she clarified that beauty tends to be the first “step” of loving, and love is threaded through all knowing.

Invitation

As we continue to build trust in the Real, we follow the signs that begin to reveal themselves. These divine invitations continue to draw us into Beauty. We begin to repair our God images, seeing ourselves primarily in his (or her) loving gaze. Through this basis metaphor of child/parent, we begin to mend and create subsequent God images. New neural pathways are formed as we restore and rebuild the “hand-railings” of our spiral staircase. We begin to believe in our own strength, seeing the way God has enabled us to endure thus far, and see that trauma does not have to be a death sentence or a grave but instead can serve as potting soil for our growth.

Indwelling

We begin to see perichoresis here. We are becoming one with Jesus, while simultaneously becoming more individual. God concepts are forming within the newly repaired God images, enabling us to further process the truth of trauma and heal its damage. Paradoxically, we will likely have to reembrace pain and give it space to propel us further in the journey. We are on the verge of breakthrough and the discomfort can be palpable, much like birth pain. This is when the branches of healing (Chapter 5), especially mindful meditation, become helpful.

Encounter

Reintegration results in epiphany and encounter with the reality of God. There is a previously unexperienced depth and richness to the encounter. We likely begin to embody new God images and God concepts and existing ones are further strengthened.

This mountaintop experience may be short-lived, but the momentum can take us into transformation.

Transformation

We may have more answers, but likely we have new and more plentiful questions. We are beckoned further into the Beauty of Reality. Perichoresis takes on a fuller space, leading our God images and God concepts to work themselves out of us in more practical ways. Love for God, self, and other grows deeper. We may begin to see more evidence of healing fruit (Chapter 5) in this season. We may also uncover more layers of woundedness that need healing.

Dance

We are partners with Jesus in his play in the world around us. Delight mingles with empathy as we further our healing pilgrimage and invite others into the divine healing dance. We have a posture of openness to people who perhaps we may have avoided or judged in the past. Possibilities for reconciliation may begin to present themselves in this space. The covenant community can be especially helpful in confirming the Spirit's lead, since many survivors may need to be freed from the expectation of reconciliation with their abusers. The importance is increasing freedom from the residue of trauma, rebuilding trust within the redemptive community that brings healing.

Shalom

Oneness with Jesus enables us to embody peace, healing, and communion with God, self, others, and creation. As new God images and God concepts form and solidify, healing companion work can take fuller embodiment. Survivors are unleashed to full potential within the dance of the Spirit's lead. Trinitarian relationships embody Jesus to a hurting world, leading to an invitation for others to enter into the knowing process. There is no colonizing nature to this mission—the goal is intimacy for intimacy's sake.

Recovery Café

There is an organization that understands trauma and healing and has beautifully and effectively put healing into practice through redemptive community. Killian Noe, founding director of the Recovery Café, chronicles the journey in her book, *Descent into Love: How Recovery Café Came to Be*. The café exists to be refuge of healing and transformation, a place for anyone who has experienced trauma. Recovery Café members might have a variety of symptoms of their trauma: addiction, homelessness, or mental health challenges. But the focus is not on their trauma, rather it is on their triumph. The café serves meals and coffee thanks to the members, who all volunteer for various roles at the café. Members are committed to Recovery Circles, weekly meetings where they have the opportunity, along with Ministers of Presence, to put into practice healthy ways of communicating and living. Reciprocal relationships are prioritized across the organization, from Member to CEO. Stability, hope, and healing are woven into the fabric of their organization. Their model of recovery has been nationally recognized, and

Recovery Cafes are now springing up all over the country thanks to work of the Recovery Café Network.

The Recovery Café model is the closest thing I have seen to an attachment-based discipleship framework. While it was founded in the teachings of Jesus, the Café leaves the table open to anyone along the faith journey, without any religious agenda.

Stages of Faith: Practical Framework

While healing is a non-linear process, human faith development is somewhat more linear by comparison. There are some practical applications for healing God attachments and addressing one's God images. Ideally a person will be doing personal work in tandem with healing companion work.

Stage 1: The Magical and Healing God Attachments

Parents and caregivers need to be educated in how people form attachments to God, and particularly about God images and God concepts. The more they are equipped, the better their own attachments can be with their children, and the better the stage is set for healthy, secure God attachment when the child is older. Family systems can begin to heal ruptures in attachment and communication styles.

Stage 2: Exploration and Healing God Attachments

Others in the child's faith community can come alongside parents and caregivers in age-appropriate ways to show examples of secure God attachment and to nurture a sense of belonging in the Body of Christ. God concepts and doctrine can begin to be

introduced within the framework of God attachment, while taking into consideration the concrete operational cognitive development of the child.

Stage 3: Allegiances and Healing God Attachments

Teenagers and young adults in this stage of spiritual development will need positive examples of secure God attachment more than ever, especially as they are forming and expressing their identities. Clear, concrete discussion about God images and God concepts can be beneficial for these individuals and attention can be made to recognizing and repairing internalized God images. Learning stabilizing rhythms and mindfulness practices can help them navigate the challenges of young adulthood, helping them understand the way brains work and how to live in the fullness of the fruit of the Spirit.

Stage 4: Deconstruction and Healing God Attachments

This stage is the one at which God attachment healing work is perhaps most critical. As people move from Stage 3 and begin to experience disillusionment, having a strong, unconditional relationship with the people who have invested heavily in their spiritual development to this point can be very healing. Broadening God concepts can be appropriate at this stage, but the God images must continue to be examined and repaired in order for them to flourish.

Stage 5: Reconstruction and Healing God Attachments

Reconstruction is a stage in which perhaps the most healing occurs for an individual. As previously discussed, it can be distressing for many people to be stuck in

between Deconstruction and Reconstruction. There is an enormous opportunity for God images to be repaired and restored, and the focus at this stage likely needs to be almost entirely on these internalized God images and the relationship with God that they facilitate (second naivete).

Stage 6: Incarnation/Embodiment and Healing God Attachments

While any individual at any stage of spiritual development has opportunities to bring healing to other people, perhaps that honor is seen most during Stage 6 Incarnation/Embodiment. These individuals are able to take their past experiences, pain, and trauma and channel them into walking alongside others as healing companions in their healing journeys.

Individual Healing Work

- Explore the emotions of wounds
- Get educated about trauma, post-traumatic stress, and post-traumatic growth
- Explore Scripture passages related to healing
- Meditate on Scripture passages while practicing centering prayer
- Pay attention to metaphors and ask the Spirit to reveal ones that need healing
- Create personal mantras based on the Scripture passages and especially metaphors to begin creating new neural pathways
- Identify weak personal boundaries and begin work to repair them
- Celebrate all progress
- Create artifacts for marking the journey

- Work with AF-EMDR specialist

Healing Companion Work

- Create protected space and set clear boundaries
- Refrain from sharing details of your own woundedness; focus on the healing aspects that bring hope
- Seek the Spirit as Healer; recognize your role as a companion and not rescuer
- Talk through emotions from wounds; help hold the burden but do not take it on yourself
- Explore the metaphors that are coming to the forefront and identify which ones need healing
- Through conversation, break, realign, extract, or implant metaphors as needed
- Celebrate all progress together
- Organically educate on trauma and post-traumatic growth

Restorative Community Work

- Create safe, collaborative space
- Showcase stories and artifacts
- Celebrate all progress communally
- Recognize and call attention to strengths; set people up for leading out of them
- Implement recovery-oriented system of care
- Organic accountability for health of the body

Preventing Spiritual Abuse

Rediscover the Body of Christ

We need to work together to rediscover the Body of Christ as a reflection of the Imago Dei, one that provides equality and equity for men and women. Diverse and creative expressions of the Body are needed now more than ever. New ways of organizing structure are needed—ways that do not limit power to a select few and that reflect the Body as a family of believers. Doctrines that have perpetuated white patriarchal supremacy need to be dismantled and replaced with biblically sound teachings.

Reinforce Survivors

Churches, regardless of their size or leadership structure, become places of healing when they begin to believe trauma survivors. They need to take seriously every allegation by conducting thorough investigations and involving local law enforcement and removing abusive people from leadership. Advocate for adequate rehabilitation of abusers and vote for judges and officials who will seek true justice for victims and perpetrators. Adequate access to individual healing through therapy, especially AF-EMDR, should be provided.

(Re)sign Church Leadership

Church leadership that includes men and women, equal in numbers, function, status, title, and pay if applicable models a healing approach. Potential leaders should be vetted thoroughly for fitness based on psychological factors as well as spiritual. All

leaders should be equipped for aiding in spiritual healing and care. Ordination and seminary education could require training in trauma prevention and care. Consider flat organizational structures that are not dependent on hierarchy.

Redefine Church Success

The Body of Christ's goal is to embody Christ, and the main standard for "success" is embodying him in their zip code: practicing the Presence in place. Take a trauma-informed, healing-centered, attachment-based approach to all church ministries. Investigate and incorporate concepts from Asset-Based Community Development³ to see how your local Body can invest in what God is already doing in your neighborhood.

Personal Goals

One of my personal goals for action is to create a non-profit organization to educate people about God attachment, spiritual trauma, and healing God images—a center for trauma-informed, attachment-focused discipleship and spiritual care. The organization would provide online courses related to these topics, as well as publish resources for personal healing, healing companions, and restorative communities. It will host healing seminars for those who are healing from spiritual trauma, host training seminars for those who are ready to move into healing companion work, and create resources for preventive education. It will also host a conference for likeminded researchers and practitioners to network and share best practices.

³ See the web page for the Asset-Based Community Development Institute at DePaul University: <https://resources.depaul.edu/abcd-institute/about/Pages/default.aspx>.

Conclusion

The time is come for evangelicals, and white evangelicals especially, to take responsibility for the damage we have personally caused and the abusive systems within which we have simply been complicit. We need to repent and lament our obsessions with power and control that have contributed to the colonization and oppression of women, minorities, and entire people groups in the name of Jesus. This requires more humility and discomfort than we may realize, but lives are at stake and the story we leave behind is pivotal.

While the Body of Christ may be suffering, it by no means will die. Jesus is the Head of his Body, and by abiding in him a remnant will always thrive. The Body of Christ is beautiful beyond our imagination, and God is working in ways we cannot fathom to heal the Body from within and from the outside. This communal healing mirrors the internal healing that can happen at the individual level when done within an attachment-focused framework that is trauma-informed and healing-centered. The Body of Christ can survive these broken bones, and thrive from the healing, if they are set with truth and love.



*They restore the crushed branches halfheartedly.
 "Peace, peace," they say,
 When there is no peace.*

*They whet the appetite for restoration but end up injuring further.
 "Peace, peace," they say,
 When there is no peace.*

*They heal the brokenness of my people with band-aids.
 "Peace, peace," they say,
 When there is no peace.*

*They dress the wound as though it were not serious.
 "Peace, peace," they say,
 When there is no peace.*

*They offer superficial treatments for my people's mortal wound.
 "Peace, peace," they say,
 When there is no peace.*

*Were they ashamed because of the abomination they had done?
 They certainly were not ashamed,
 And they did not know how to blush.*

*We can do better.
 We must do better.
 (Adaptations of Jeremiah 8:11-12)*

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